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SINO-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS: DISTURBANCE, DEPENDENCY OR DEVELOPMENT?

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Abstract: *Over time, China has emerged as one of the leading economic partners in Central Asia. After the disintegration of the USSR, China spread its influence and replenished the power vacuum left. The five Central Asian states embraced a partnership with the Belt and Road Initiative. Economic and connectivity opportunities were prioritized. However, these states faced socio-economic and political challenges during the pandemic due to weak internal structures. In the post-Covid era, China's presence in the region has once again spurred due to their dependence on Beijing. The paper will examine the Chinese footprint in Central Asia through border and trade relations, Xinjiang politics, and BRI policy. Second, implications of the economic, geopolitical, and social order after the pandemic. Third, how Central Asia is rebuilding itself from the domestic crisis, dependency theory will be used to investigate the multifaceted relations. The attempt is to answer if the Chinese presence brings sustainable development or increases dependence. The study shall conclude that Chinese presence requires a redefinition of the "status quo, sovereignty, and development" beyond economic interaction and cooperation.*

Keywords: *China; Central Asia; Dependency Theory; Covid-19; Development*

INTRODUCTION

Over the decades, the metaphorical expression "The Great Game" has been used significantly or interchangeably to describe the power dynamic between Tsarist Russia and Great Britain in the 19th century over the anticipation of Central Asia's future. The region became an extremity of colonial rivalry in the early nineteenth century. The fight for control over a vast stretch of land, which was strategically important for control of resources and existing colonies between the Eurasian powers, reasoned from the early 19th century, which became known as "The Great Game". Sergeev (2013) argued that the Great Game was a multifaceted conflict, "a complex, multilevel decision-making, and decision-implementing activity directed by the ruling elites" of Britain and Russia (pp. 5-13). After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War, Central Asia rose to significance. It established itself as a key determinant in the security arena for the People's Republic of China. There exists an establishment of scope between China's internal and external security, which has developed gradually from the point of agency and privilege. The independence of new republics in the Central Asian region brought out a phase of pragmatic reconstruction of developments in the international community.

Global powers can take advantage of Central Asia due to its strategic importance in connectivity, energy resources, trade markets, and proximity to other major countries and markets. Considering its security, political, and economic interests, China cannot overlook this

region; likewise, the United States cannot downplay or dismiss the significance of Central Asia. The Chinese presence and vision in the -stan nations can be called highly ambitious and powerful. China quickly escalated to position itself in the Central Asian market in the first half of the 2000s, focusing specifically on hydrocarbons, extractive industries, infrastructure, and communications. Lastly and most importantly, Beijing has been working extensively to develop strategies for promoting its language and culture and training Central Asian elites following the Chinese model since 2005. In terms of economic clout, it surpasses Russia but does not rank higher than in terms of strategic or cultural clout. It can be anticipated that the ever-increasing dominance of China politically, economically, and militarily in Central Asia, a region that Russia considered as its backyard historically, could give birth to tensions between the two nations for influence in the new world order. Another important phenomenon is that China and Russia appear to work together without many areas of contention, but this could alter in the post-Covid-19 era.

THE DEPENDENCY THEORY AND PERSPECTIVES

The Dependency theory comes from the term *la dependencia*, which means dependence. The theory was developed in the late 1960s post World War II, in a quest to identify and analyze the lack of development in Latin America. One of the pioneers of Dependency theory, Theotonio Dos Santos, defines dependence as “a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected” (Santos 1970, 231-236). This theory broadly asserts the limitations imposed by the international political and economic structures to analyze economic underdevelopment. The hypothesis suggests that resources move from a periphery of undeveloped and poorer nations to a core of developed states, benefiting the latter at the expense of the former. Various perspectives can be derived from different schools of thought in understanding the increasing Chinese presence and growing dependency in Central Asia.

To begin with, the Prebischian school of thought under Raul Prebisch contented and theorized that, firstly, most of the dependent countries are the core producers of essential and primary commodities, the prices of which are highly dependent on the fluctuating international market. For example, Kazakhstan produces oil that contributes to most of its exports. A fall in the price of these products makes these countries dependent on the “core”, China. Over and above that, these countries do not possess any economic advantage for producing primary products since they are not the only producers in the global market.

Secondly, the inability of periphery nations to disintegrate their dependence on imported goods is also because they utilize their basic and primary resources to purchase manufactured and primary goods for consumption. For example, without the required industrial infrastructure in Kazakhstan, oil exports to China are low-grade, imported by China to cater to the needs of the country’s refined domestic oil and petrochemical manufacturing industry instead of for direct consumer use. This also implies that -stan countries depend on China for finished goods. In 2012, China and Kazakhstan formalized this with a duty-free deal for Kazakhstan to export crude oil to China for processing, which is then returned to the domestic market in Kazakhstan.

On the other hand, the Structuralists had a different view on analyzing the Dependency theory. The faction headed by Celso Furtado, Henrique Cardoso, investigated the shortcoming in the structure of the dependent on the periphery economies, in contrast to the Prebischians who emphasized external causes. The school studied the dependence of Latin American economies. It opined that their dependence resulted from their polity being controlled by the landed oligarchy, the military, and the nationalist bourgeoisie. For in-depth understanding, an example can be cited from the growing resistance in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan against China's growing hegemony. During the Covid-19 outbreak, the government focused on consolidating authoritarian power and regressive legal measures while neglecting the escalating economic and health crisis which hit the middle- and lower-income groups.

In addition, the Marxists, under the German sociologist Andre Gunder Frank, conflicted with the opinions of both the Prebischians and the Structuralists and propounded that dependency in emerging nations is a product of capitalism rather than any internal or external reasons as believed by the other two schools. Marxists use the center-satellite linkages to explain the core and periphery dependency. The states that make up the centers are the major economic powers, while the satellites are on the perimeter and orbit the center. For their economic survival, satellites are reliant and sometimes can also depend on centers, resulting in a dense web of dependency. For instance, in the capitalist environment today, China acts as a center for various Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan which further act as the center for Turkmenistan and then act as a center for Tajikistan, creating a dense web of dependency among countries.

CHINESE CAPITALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA: DISTURBANCE, DEVELOPMENT OR DEPENDENCY?

The relations between China and Central Asia have been conditioned and nurtured with intense probes and research. Chinese presence can be seen and felt in every sense in Central Asia, and it has gradually emerged as one of the leading economic partners in the region. After the collapse of the USSR, China increased its influence in the region and replenished the power vacuum left by the Soviets like never before. China has not turned back regarding its presence and omnipresence in the region. There have been significant efforts from academia, the media, non-profitable organizations, and democratic nations to analyze the pros and cons of the Chinese capitalistic presence in Central Asia. Various perspectives have been put forth, accompanied by conjectures and assertions, regarding the Chinese presence in Central Asia, with some suggesting it as a form of "neo-colonization". In light of the contrasting optimistic and pessimistic perceptions surrounding China's engagement in Central Asia, it is essential to examine this phenomenon through the lens of Dependency theory critically. The analysis will encompass three key factors to ascertain the nature of Sino-Central Asia relations in terms of "disturbance, development, or dependency". While theorizing about China's presence in the region, careful consideration will be given to the numerous subtleties involved in this complex dynamic. Disturbance in the given context signifies the questions related to sovereignty and security.

The threat to weaker nations' security and sovereignty is in jeopardy in the current international order of sovereign states. The idea of sovereignty is not absolute or undivided.

Rather, an isolated, autarchic state never existed, surviving independently. The exercise of sovereignty is limited by international law and by the differential in the power of states. According to Robert Keohane, sovereignty was always treated and tweaked as a “bargainable resource” (Keohane 2002, 743-765).

Regarding sovereignty and security, Central Asian nations have not been significantly possessive or protective about their boundaries. Infrastructural advancement and expansion in the name of progress in the region have led to immense suspicion about the very existence of sovereignty in Central Asia. Murat Auezov, a Kazakh intellectual and politician, questions the credibility and legitimacy of Central Asian nations being sovereign and is highly skeptical over infringement on Kazakhstan’s sovereignty if security is enshrined in the ambit of Chinese enterprises rather than the domestic structures of law and order. Dan Burghart (2018), in his book “Central Asia in the Era of Sovereignty: The Return of Tamerlane?” talks about sovereignty in contrast with cooperation and writes:

We see most of the world becoming more centered on its individuals, and with a decline in globalization, Central Asia seems to have discovered the benefits of cooperation. But it seems, even though we’re talking about the Central Asian states in the era of sovereignty, to a surprising degree, they’ve been willing not to give up their sovereignty but to bend a little bit to achieve the benefits of cooperation within the region. That could be something interesting to watch in the near future.

Development is the most used and heard in our day-to-day lives, whether political or technological. It means a process of getting bigger and better. It also emphasizes evolving for the better. In the given context, it fits into the phenomena wherein Central Asian nations strive for betterment. China uses a bilateral framework to protect its economic interests, ensure energy security, and progress the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are more financially dependent on Chinese investments than other Central Asian nations, which Beijing might use to assert its power and presence. For the advancement of trade and investment cooperation between the states, China has by far concluded double tax treaties with these five Central Asian nations.

Dependency, as the term implies, denotes a state of reliance on something or someone for existence. It encompasses the act of relying on and the gradual erosion of self-sufficiency and autonomy. It systematically allows the “other” to shape or influence one’s state of being. Within the context of Sino-Central Asian relations, there is a discernible pattern of promoting development while fostering a sense of dependence. The essential question to be raised here is whether China’s presence in Central Asia can be viewed as detrimental to Central Asian advancement, “a manifestation of neocolonialism and dependency?”.

Through a critical lens of the dependency theory, the fundamental cause of disparity between the Global North and the Global South continues to exist and flourish because of their historical experiences, specifically colonialism and imperial forces that endured after decolonization. Two concrete linkages between China and Central Asia support the above claim. First, China did not interact with colonial forces, whereas Central Asia existed under Soviet colonialism; rather, they share a common past with -stan nations as it, too, faced several

challenges under Western imperialism. Second, China's relationship with Central Asia is of solidarity with -stan nations in recognizing their independence which essentially helped establish a new and thriving presence in today's extremely capitalist sense.

Dependency theory also points out the highly brutal trade interactions in the North-South and how the semi-periphery and periphery have been reduced to mere suppliers of resources, curbing each spark for industrialization. In the context of Sino-Central Asian relations, taking -stan nations in confidence is a significant Chinese move in its economic endeavor to shift its trade and energy sources from sea to land. On the contrary, such restricted and finite participation in Central Asia, narrow specialization, and vicious de-industrialization could destabilize society. Not only a turbulent social structure, but it would also gradually accelerate impoverishment and trigger exploitation of the lower and middle class.

Another connotation attached to the dependency of Central Asia on China in the name of advancement is the conflicting and contradictory nature of developmental projects, which do not necessarily promote the production of knowledge and skills but minimal wealth circulation to conceal any source of resistance. In addition, such developmental avenues provide a much-needed boost to corrupt classes and oligarchs who manage the revenue and forces facilitating cross-border trade and its wrongdoings. It is highly uncertain about coming to a stance and conclusion that might be paradoxical and confusing regarding state and being. However, whatever the pros and cons of the capitalist presence, China is Central Asia's most powerful and significant player. The sheer problem in solving the problem is the constant clashes between development and dependence and the blurred line between right and wrong.

CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA

Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, China was among the first countries to recognize Central Asian independence. In the early week of January 1992, Beijing began establishing its diplomatic alliance with the Central Asian countries; Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan and expanded its geopolitical and geo-economics influence among the Central Asia Republic (CARs) nations (Woods and Baker 2022). Soon after the 2001 China-Russia friendship treaty, Beijing gained an impetus to become one of Central Asia's stakeholders in economic and political development (Khan 2020).

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative during his visit to Kazakhstan. This project, reminiscent of the historic Silk Road, encompasses land and maritime routes connecting China, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe. It aims to enhance regional integration, boost trade, and foster economic growth (Jle and Wallace 2021). China partly or fully funds the flagship projects in building ports, railway projects, power plants, 5G network plants, fiber optic cable, infrastructure, etc. Currently, the project is engaged in more than 144 countries. In 2021 a cumulative financial investment and contractual cooperation of USD 59.5 billion was made, out of which USD 13.9 billion was made through direct investments and USD 45.6 billion through contracts, which are partly financed by Chinese loans which have outrageously increased the dependence on China (Wang 2022).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a significant aspect of Chinese foreign policy, positioning China as a major player in the global market. China's keen interest in Eurasia

stems from the region's abundant raw materials and its role as a transit route for vital resources such as oil, gas, minerals, and rare-earth minerals. This includes the transportation of resources from the Middle East, rare-earth minerals from Afghanistan, natural gas from Turkmenistan, and oil and uranium deposits from Kazakhstan. The escalating tensions in the US-China trade war prompted Beijing to establish alternative avenues to access these crucial assets. Through substantial investments, Beijing has emerged as Central Asia's primary external partner, effectively addressing the region's political, social, and economic challenges. As a testament to its growing influence, President Xi Jinping recently hosted a gathering of five Central Asian leaders to commemorate the "30th anniversary of diplomatic relations" between China and Central Asia (Sidana 2022).

Regarding economic dependency, Beijing has adopted a hegemonic approach towards the developing nations of Central Asia, channeling billions of USD into their economies through infrastructure projects. With its deepening relationships with the five Central Asian countries, there has been a concerted effort to align projects and investments with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) soon after its launch. For instance, in Kazakhstan, China has invested approximately USD 19 billion between 2005 and 2020, with around 56 projects worth USD 24.5 billion slated for completion by 2023. China is Turkmenistan's largest trading partner in imports, and for Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, it is the largest trading partner in exports. Notably, China has emerged as the primary source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for the region, and trade volume between China and Central Asia has witnessed a remarkable increase of over 100 times in the past three decades. Furthermore, significant investments in landlocked regions have enhanced trade connectivity (China Briefing 2021).

Central Asia also plays a critical role in Beijing's pivot to Europe under the BRI. While Central Asia is a strategic priority for China, its economic interactions are guided by three main interests. First, the region's rich reserves of hydrocarbons and uranium. Second, a land bridge to European markets, cheap wages, and the government's willingness to give tax breaks. Before 2012, Beijing invested in transport infrastructure and fossil fuels. Trade in hydrocarbons increased rapidly while trade in other items remained moderate. Investments were focused on hydrocarbon extraction and pipeline construction. Policy banks like EXIM and CDB invested in transportation and power generation. However, around 2013-14 Chinese companies and investment agencies shifted their priorities in developing the export industry of the Central Asian countries.

Investments by Chinese companies prioritized capacity building in Central Asia, primarily driven by the relative ease of doing business in the region and the unexplored market potential. More recently, such a strategy has found renewed interest in an attempt to cull the local resistance against Chinese economic interactions. Beijing has also emerged as a major manufacturer and exporter of arms, providing services to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In the case of Turkmenistan, Beijing supplies ground-based missiles, man-portable air defense systems, and armored and patrol vehicles. Additionally, Tajikistan has also benefited from Beijing's arms supply. According to the American Enterprise Institute, there has been a significant increase in Chinese investments and contracts with the -stan nations between 2013 and 2019. Beijing actively pursued strategic economic partnerships by trading and investing in neighboring countries.

Table 1: Chinese Investment in -Stan Nations (Source: American Enterprise Institute n.d)

Countries	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Kazakhstan	5300 M	3220 M	2620 M	350 M	3100 M	420 M	1850 M	16.86 B
Kyrgyzstan		3790 M	550 M					4.34 B
Uzbekistan	460 M	890 M		150 M	570 M	200 M	630 M	2.9 B
Tajikistan				170 M			540 M	710 M
Turkmenistan		600 M						600 M

With China’s expanding relations, several multilateral projects have been proposed to connect the Central Asian republics. Additionally, Central Asia serves as a transit route for Beijing to establish connections with Europe through new rail and pipeline networks. Notable examples of these transnational projects include the Kyrgyz-Uzbek-China railway and the KazTransGas line between Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and China. The latter is designed to deliver up to 1.0 billion cubic feet per day of natural gas to China for five years.

Political crossroads - China’s priorities include promoting political and social stability in the region. Following the Soviet era, China faced challenges regarding unsettled borders with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, contributing to a tense relationship between Beijing and Moscow. Currently, China shares a land border of 1,700 km with Kazakhstan, 1,063 km with Kyrgyzstan in the western region of Xinjiang, and 1,300 km with Tajikistan, which shares its southern border with Afghanistan. Importantly, these countries have no major border disputes (Prashar, Sen, and Aripaka 2020). China has sought to develop its relations with Central Asia through cooperation on various aspects of common interest, including infrastructure, connectivity, trade, investment, and resources. Between 2000 and 2017, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) made 722 official visits to provincial and republican authorities in the region. However, due to changing political discourses in the -stan nations, intermittent bouts of upheaval have been observed, which have impacted the bilateral ties with some of these countries.

Kazakhstan - In 2016, the Kazakh government amended the code, allowing foreigners to rent land for 25 years. According to the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms, Kazakhstan’s trade turnover in January 2016 reached USD 1.4 billion, a significant increase of 53.4 percent compared to the previous year. Out of this, Beijing accounted for 16.1 percent (Assaniyaz 2022). The relationship between China and Kazakhstan is also considered crucial for Beijing’s positioning in the region, with over 1,500 Chinese operating units present in the country as of March 2019 (Grant 2019).

As Chinese investment increased, social unrest grew, leading the government to ban foreign land sales in 2021 due to strong public opposition. There have been widespread protests regarding the increasing presence of Chinese workers in the job market and concerns over the Xinjiang issue, revealing opposing political inclinations towards China among Kazakh nationals. Last year, protests in Oral, Shymkent, and Aktobe erupted in response to the mass incarceration of Turkic-speaking communities in Xinjiang, causing significant unrest. On the 300th day of the protests, demonstrators gathered outside the Chinese consulate, demanding freedom for the Turks in Xinjiang.

Kyrgyzstan - was among the earliest supporters of China’s initiative. In 1992, Beijing and Kyrgyzstan established diplomatic ties amid contestation over the border demarcation. The

border agreement was formulated in 1999 and ratified in 2002. Based on the deal, Kyrgyzstan lost around 32 percent of the land to Beijing, with a continuous dispute which lasted till 2009. Both Sino-Kyrgyz signed a new treaty by which Beijing ceded Khan Tengri mountain, whereas Kyrgyz had to let go of the Uzengi-Kush region (China Briefing 2021).

Uzbekistan - In 1992, China and Uzbekistan signed an Economic and Trade Agreement, granting each other the Most-Favored Nation (MFN) status. Following the rise of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to power, there has been a notable increase in Chinese investments in Uzbekistan, a departure from the policies of former leader Islam Karimov. Unlike Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan does not share a border with China. However, despite the increasing investments, there has been a growing social skepticism towards China. In 2020, the percentage of Uzbeks expressing strong support for China declined from 65 percent to 48 percent (Sajjanhar 2021).

Turkmenistan - seen as a long-term strategic partner by China, maintains a mutually supportive relationship to advance bilateral ties. Turkmenistan has followed a development path based on the Soviet model, relying on its vast reserves of energy, oil, and gas fields. China has emerged as the primary trade and economic partner for Central Asia. The General Agreement on Gas Cooperation (2006) solidified the gas transit connection, breaking the Russian monopoly on Turkmen exports (Meena 2022). Except for Turkmenistan, China maintains a positive trade balance with all Central Asian nations. This is primarily due to Turkmenistan's high level of self-sufficiency in meeting basic daily requirements, energy, and food, and its relatively limited import volume, resulting in minimal involvement in the global supply chain. Furthermore, over 90 percent of Turkmenistan's exports stem from its abundant mineral and energy resources.

Tajikistan - was one of the first countries to sign a cooperation memorandum with China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). In early 2011, Sino-Tajik border issues were resolved through an agreement involving Tajikistan ceding 1100 square km of land in the Pamir mountains to Beijing. According to the Central Asia Barometer (CAB) survey, conducted bi-annually to measure the socio-economic and political impact of foreign countries in Central Asian nations, public sentiment towards China has been growing increasingly negative from 2017 to 2021. Concerns have arisen due to the expanding energy infrastructure and competition for jobs. Countries in the region also fear falling into a "debt trap" as China's funding lacks transparency (Baker 2022).

POST-PANDEMIC RESILIENCE: A REVIVAL IN THE SINO-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

Central Asia countries faced new challenges at socioeconomic and political levels after the spread of Covid-19. Initially, Central Asia remained virus-free, but in March 2020, Kazakhstan reported its first cases, followed by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and, lastly, Tajikistan. For a long time, Turkmenistan remained off the chart, "occupying a state of complete denial regarding Covid-19" (Putz 2022). Central Asian countries lacked basic healthcare and testing capacity. Covid-19 took a toll on the longstanding governance and structural issues. Its weak governing structure and the political problems before the pandemic amplified. The authoritarian levers of power proved to be weak and incapable of enforcing safety measures for the public amid the pandemic.

Remittances are a big part of Central Asian economies. Russian remittances account for 30 percent, 28 percent, and 12 percent of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan's GDP (Khan 2020). However, remittances fell amid pandemic-induced travel restrictions, lockdowns, and disruption of trade, diminishing household incomes. With the disruption of trade and economic activity due to the pandemic, energy exports fell as demand tanked. In the first half of 2020, trade from Kazakhstan declined by 7.4 percent compared to 2019. Economic slowdown decreased the natural gas trade from Central Asian nations, and China issued a forced majeure in March 2020 to its suppliers in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. While economic activity slowed down, the oil-dependent economies of Central Asia, with little diversification, were weakened.

Further, oil prices fell as agreements between OPEC+ faltered, plummeting revenues from oil and dragging down the revenues from other commodities. The mounting challenges of the pandemic pushed ill-equipped Central Asian nations further into China's sphere of influence. China extended short- and long-term economic assistance to help Central Asian nations face the pandemic and its economic consequences.

With the spread of the Covid-19 virus, Beijing released a White Paper on China's battle with Covid-19. The document said the world faces an "unknown, unexpected, and devastating disease" against which China's measures to prevent and control its spread proved efficient. Beijing shared knowledge from its early successes in handling Covid-19 and advised Central Asian states. The White Paper also highlighted China's transparency and containment efforts against the pandemic (National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China 2020). Beijing's "Covid-19 diplomacy" provided monetary aid, medical and financial assistance to these Central Asia states. Chinese humanitarian aid to Kazakhstan amounted to \$10 million in 2020 and delivered thermometers, test kits, protective equipment, and other critical care medical equipment, including ventilators. China also used regional organizations and international companies to extend Covid-19 relief. China's Alibaba sent several rounds of medical cargo aid to countries in Central Asia. SCO and Alibaba co-hosted a medical seminar that connected Chinese doctors with SCO counterparts amid the pandemic and promoted "the digital response to Covid-19" (Zhiyenbayev 2022).

In order to improve its geopolitical foothold and growing influence in the region China continued its proactive policy in Central Asia. China's early recovery enabled the country to largely resume purchases of Central Asian energy exports. Beijing and its AIIB have also negotiated billions of loans to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Moreover, amid Covid-19, China's connectivity projects like BRI offered opportunities for trading and overcoming internal issues of the states. In a conference, Arne Elias Corneliussen said: "Covid-19 does not change China's rationale for the BRI. In fact, Covid-19 will only cement and strengthen China's willingness to push forward with the BRI in the long term" (Institute for War and Peace Reporting 2020).

In a demonstration of the significance of Central Asia in China's strategic considerations, President Xi Jinping made his first foreign trip in two years since the outbreak of the pandemic in September 2022. He visited Kazakhstan before the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's annual summit in Uzbekistan (Putz 2022). Prior to Xi's visit, Aibek Smadiyarov, spokesperson for the Kazakh Foreign Ministry, stated: "The uniqueness of this visit is that Kazakhstan is the first country that the Chinese leader will visit since the start of the pandemic. For us, for Kazakhstan,

this is a great honor. We hope the visit will be held at a very good and high level” (Kazakhstan explains the uniqueness of Xi Jinping’s visit to Nur-Sultan 2022).

China’s relationship with Central Asia has emerged stronger in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, as it counterbalances the interests of other major powers in its strategic backyard. On the one hand, China views Central Asia as a platform for reestablishing its influence in the region after the setbacks experienced during the pandemic. It also showcases its commitment to global initiatives. On the other hand, the United States has taken a less active role in Central Asia, offering limited alternatives to the Central Asian republics and redirecting its focus towards addressing domestic issues. The US foreign policy has also shifted towards the great power competition in the Indo-Pacific region.

The post-pandemic challenges faced by Central Asian states are the great power competition between powers like China, the US, and Russia that see Central Asia as a strategic backyard. This has provided the region with a conducive environment for geopolitical competition. Further, the Russia-Ukraine war and China’s tacit alliance with Moscow are newer geopolitical realities of international politics with ramifications for Central Asian nations’ foreign policy agenda. Despite changing dynamics, post-pandemic Central Asian nations seek continuous support across sectors, including energy and infrastructure, and economic headwinds of contemporary geopolitics push Central Asian nations closer to the look for relief in China.

CONCLUSION

It is insufficient to conclude by singling out only one aspect among disturbance, dependency, or development when examining the evolving dynamics of contemporary Sino-Asia relations. This association is highly complex and dynamic, continuously influencing and being influenced by the parties involved. Following the two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world has undergone significant changes, with emerging geopolitical and economic realities. The weakened socio-economic conditions have once again intensified countries’ dependency on China, further accumulating diverse debts in the -stan nations. As the lending approach binds them to the exploitation of natural resources, the Belt and Road Initiative assume a significant role in establishing China’s strategic foothold and influence in the region compared to Russia and the United States. In the forthcoming years, Beijing’s involvement is expected to expand as it further seeks to develop the BRI in Central Asia. Moreover, the ongoing relations in Central Asia continue to assist Beijing in addressing challenges related to Islamic extremism and countering support for Uyghur extremist groups, facilitated by the region’s geographical connectivity with these -stan nations.

China’s timely increase in post-Covid-19 engagement with Central Asia, to counter both Russia and the US engagement, was significant to safeguard its influence as great powers look at Central Asia as a major enabler in their economy due to its geographical positioning and energy reserves. Moreover, with Beijing’s increasing economic influence in the region, it is not easy to imagine development or economic recovery without China’s cooperation.

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