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Fabio Indeo

CHINA AS SECURITY PROVIDER IN CENTRAL ASIA POST 2014: A REALISTIC PERSPECTIVE?

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CHINA AS SECURITY PROVIDER IN CENTRAL ASIA POST 2014: A REALISTIC PERSPECTIVE?

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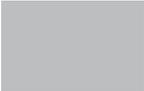
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KEY POINTS

- The upcoming withdrawal of NATO military forces from and significant reduction of U.S. presence in Afghanistan in 2014 is destined to have a serious impact on regional security, leading to a condition of potential instability which could affect both the secular states of Central Asia and the external geopolitical players involved in the region.
- For China the pacification of Afghanistan and the achievement of regional stability represent necessary preconditions in order to realise its strategic goals focused on security, energy, trade as well as to preserve its huge investments in the region, also comprising Afghanistan where China aims to develop the Aynak copper mine.
- The potential engagement of China in Central Asian security should focus on the enhancement of the military cooperation with Central Asian republics, both bilaterally and multilaterally, in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). However, China could play the role of regional security provider only after undertaking a geostrategic reassessment of its security and foreign policy, based on the principle of non-intervention and non-interference in internal affairs.
- Geopolitical competition with Russia and the profound mistrust of Central Asian public opinion, which is fiercely opposed to the deployment of Chinese military troops in their countries, appears to hinder any foreseeable Chinese role in terms of security provision in the region after 2014.



INTRODUCTION

Central Asian republics, international and regional security organizations, and external state actors involved in Central Asia share the same concern linked to the security scenario after NATO's disengagement: they fear that the region will be potentially exposed to the spread of dangerous instability, a condition borne out of the withdrawal but compounded by unsolved domestic problems.

The lack of regional cooperation among Central Asian countries will push the external geopolitical actors involved in the region to take charge of preserving the regional security environment in the coming decades, in order to better achieve their economic, energy and geopolitical aims.

Among these actors, China could be one of the international players able to play a significant role as regional security provider, in order to protect its strategic interests and the security of western China, mainly its Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Since 1991 the main aim of the Chinese strategy toward the new post-Soviet independent republics has been to ensure stability in their borders shared with Xinjiang: following NATO's withdrawal, it will be necessary to prevent extremist incursions and destabilizing threats which could affect the Chinese western provinces. In recent years, Central Asian countries have become strategic partners for Beijing, mainly in the energy sector through the implementation of profitable energy cooperation with Central Asia's energy rich republics (Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan). Furthermore, Beijing has become the largest trade partner for all Central Asian countries apart from Uzbekistan.

The aim of this policy brief is to analyse the potential and future role for China as a security provider in the region, which Beijing could play by enhancing military cooperation with Central Asian republics both bilaterally and multilaterally,

through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Any direct engagement in the regional security environment on China's part is likely to be strictly linked to the level of strategic relevance it accords its interests in the region, and would also depend on a revision of its foreign policy doctrine based on non-interference. Following this scenario, China's success will also depend on its capacity to overcome some existing geopolitical hindrances: rivalry with Russia – which has traditionally played the role of security provider in the region – and the profound mistrust of Central Asian public opinion about the rising Chinese military presence in the region.



CHINESE STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIA AND AFGHANISTAN

The Chinese government looks at NATO's departure from the region with growing concern, fearing that a condition of dangerous instability could spread through the whole region, undermining its strategic interests. China's primary goal in Central Asia and Afghanistan after 2014 is stability, which could allow Beijing to preserve security in Xinjiang, to protect Central Asian energy supplies and economic relations.¹ According to Beijing's strategy, Central Asia's stability is closely linked to internal security in western China.

However, Central Asia and Afghanistan appear vulnerable and not able to fight against the serious threats represented by transnational terrorism and radical Islamist insurgencies that might target the borders the countries share, seriously affecting China's Western region.

1 Sebastien Peyrouse, Jos Boonstra and Marlene Laruelle, "Security and Development Approaches to Central Asia. The EU Compared to China and Russia", EUCAM Working Paper, 11, May 2012, p. 11.

Allegedly, Central Asian militants are coming back to their homelands, representing a serious threat to the domestic stability of their countries. Any risk they pose to the region's security architecture would be amplified by a lack of solutions to endogenous problems - ethnic and border conflicts, water and resource management, authoritarianism – which have traditionally affected these countries.

China fears that the weaknesses of the Afghan central authority as well as of the Central Asian governments could lead to the creation of safe bases for Uyghur separatists and foreign terrorists aiming to operate in Xinjiang.²

These Chinese concerns are motivated by the fact that Central Asian countries host a sizable Uyghur diaspora - 300,000 people - and Xinjiang shares a long border of 3,700 km with Central Asian states, particularly with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the Ferghana Valley, considered a potential focal point for instability in the region.³

This security dimension is strictly correlated to economic and development issues: from the Chinese perspective, economic growth in Central Asia will strengthen stability in both China and the region, because close commercial relations with Central Asian countries will ensure prosperity, also preventing potential political instability and spillover into its western territory.⁴

Xinjiang's stability is a priority for China, considering that this region holds large deposits of oil, natural gas (both conventional and unconventional) and coal, all vital energy resources, which could contribute to ensuring national

- 2 Richard Weitz, "China and Afghanistan – Time of Decision", Central Asia Caucasus Institute Analyst, 3 September 2014, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13035-china-and-afghanistan-%E2%80%93-time-of-decision.html> (accessed 6 September 2014)
- 3 European Council of Foreign Relations, "The New Great Game in Central Asia", China Analysis, ECFR-Asia Center, 2011, p. 3, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/China%20Analysis_The%20new%20Great%20Game%20in%20Central%20Asia_September2011.pdf (accessed 28 August 2014)
- 4 International Crisis Group, "China's Central Asia Problem", ICG Asia Report, 244, 27 February 2013, p. 11.

energy security. As a matter of fact, Xinjiang is estimated to have 30 per cent of the country's oil reserves, 34 per cent of the country's natural gas reserves, and 40 per cent of the country's total coal reserves. Moreover, the region has significant reserves of nonferrous metals, such as copper and nickel.⁵

In addition to its energy reserves, Xinjiang benefits from a strategic geographic position, as exclusive gateway for Central Asian oil and gas imports as well as for trade and commercial relations, to be developed through the "Silk Road Economic Belt" concept and the Western Europe-Western China International Transit Corridor connecting Chinese production with European markets. Since 2010, China has become the main trade partner for four of five Central Asian states, undermining the traditional role of Russia. The Chinese government has heavily engaged itself in the region, financing the construction and the upgrade of extraction and transport infrastructures, including the Caspian Sea-Xinjiang pipeline for Kazakh oil, the Sino-Central Asian gas pipeline, roads, railways, bridges.⁶

Central Asian oil and gas supplies play a significant role in Chinese energy security: Kazakh oil contributes to the diversification of import sources and to the implementation of alternative territorial energy routes, considering that over 80 per cent of Chinese oil imports are delivered through oil tankers.⁷ Central Asian deliveries do not depend on maritime security. Another significant aspect of Chinese-Kazakh energy cooperation is represented by the fact that Beijing is the main purchaser of Kazakh uranium. At present Turkmenistan is China's main partner in the Central Asian

5 Andrew Scobell, Ely Ratner, Michael Beckley, "China's Strategy Toward South and Central Asia. An Empty Fortress", RAND Corporation, 2014, p. 15 http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR500/RR525/RAND_RR525.pdf (accessed 6 September 2014)

6 Peyrouse, Boonstra and Laruelle, 2012, p. 14.

7 U.S. Energy Information Administration, China, Country Analysis Brief, EIA, 4 February 2014, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=ch> (accessed 28 August 2014)

gas sector: since 2012, half of Beijing's total gas imports have been covered by Turkmen gas, delivered to China through the Central Asia-China gas pipeline (CAGP), which also crosses Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and, by 2016-2017, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, following the expected realization of Line D. The Chinese government strongly invested in the Turkmen energy sector, granting an \$8 billion loan (for the period 2010-2011) to bring the giant Galkynysh gas field online.

Energy and trade cooperation between China and the Central Asian republics was further boosted during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Central Asia in September 2013. Xi promoted the idea of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and signed an estimated \$48 billion worth of investment and loan agreements (\$15 billion with Uzbekistan, US\$30 billion with Kazakhstan, US\$3 billion with Kyrgyzstan and an undisclosed sum with Turkmenistan) with a focus on energy, trade, and infrastructure.

The implementation of the CAGP – with the realization of Line C and the new Line D – will allow China to commit Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as additional and alternative transit routes to deliver higher volumes of Turkmen gas to China, thanks to the rise of production ensured by exploitation at Galkynysh. In this way, all five Central Asian republics are included in the Chinese energy strategy, stressing the importance of regional security provision. Furthermore, the China National Petroleum Corporation's (CNPC) purchase of an 8 per cent share in the Kashagan oil project will strengthen the Kazakh share of China's total crude import.⁸

Beijing's Afghan policy is also based on similar concerns: to

8 Tavis Rejepova, "Turkmenistan, China Reach New Energy Deals", Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst, 16 October 2013, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/12834-turkmenistan-china-reach-new-energy-deals.html> (accessed 28 August 2014); Temuri Yakobashvili, "A Chinese Marshall Plan for Central Asia?", Central Asia Caucasus Institute Analyst, 16 October 2013, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12838-a-chinese-marshall-plan-for-central-asia?.html> (accessed 3 September 2014)

protect Chinese territory from the threat of Islamic extremism and to foster conditions for outbound investments. In spite of limited military engagement, China has established itself as the largest investor in Afghanistan, financing and realizing several infrastructure projects throughout the country. Nevertheless, the main focus of China's Afghan policy is to protect its massive investment (US\$ 4.4 billion), the Aynak copper mine - considered the world's second-largest unexploited copper deposit - which represents the single largest foreign investment in Afghanistan's history.⁹

CHINA'S POTENTIAL MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN SECURITY SCENARIO

The worsening of the regional security scenario could compel China to play a more active role in order to protect its borders, its investments and its strategic interests in the region.

In the Central Asian scenario post-2014 neither Russia (and CSTO) nor the U.S. (and NATO) seem to be able to ensure regional stability and to handle existing threats. Concerning Russia, after the invasion of Crimea and the explosive crisis with Ukraine Moscow's ambitions to play a role of security provider in Central Asia have been heavily damaged, spreading serious concerns about Russian integration projects in the security (CSTO) and political-economic field (Common Economic Space and Eurasian Union).¹⁰

Moreover, China fears that economic intervention and financial support to Central Asian governments may not be

9 Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014, pp. 56-57.

10 Fabio Indeo, "Central Asia beyond 2014: building regional security architecture", ISPI Analysis, 262, 18 June 2014, p. 7.

sufficient to prevent a potentially explosive crisis which will have an impact on its border security, dangerously affecting energy and trade corridors.

However, China could play the role of security provider in the region only after undertaking a geostrategic reassessment of its security and foreign policy, based on the principle of non-intervention and non-interference in internal affairs. Any change would need to allow for either bilateral or multilateral military alliances, or at the most extreme, deployment of its troops in the region.¹¹

The potential engagement of China in the Central Asian security scenario should be focused on the enhancement of military cooperation with Central Asian republics, both bilaterally and multilaterally, in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

China has implemented bilateral military cooperation with all five Central Asian countries, even if Beijing focuses its efforts on neighbouring Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan - which share borders with China in the Xinjiang region - in order to preserve national security.

In recent years China and Kazakhstan have developed a security partnership, aimed to fight against non-traditional threats (such as terrorism, drug trafficking) and to manage humanitarian crises and border security.¹²

The frail stability of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan represents a main concern for China, which worries that these countries will be too weak to counter terrorist incursions along their borders or to manage potential domestic crises, which could be fuelled by a combination of internal distortions (unemployment, poverty, lack of energy resources). China has provided over \$2 million of military assistance and

11 International Crisis Group, 2013, pp.1-2, 7.

12 Dmitry Gorenburg, "External Support for Central Asian Military and Security Forces", SIPRI Working Paper, Open Society Foundation, January 2014, p. 78, <http://www.sipri.org/research/security/afghanistan/central-asia-security/publications/SIPRI-OSFno1Wp.pdf> (accessed 20 September 2014)

equipment to Kyrgyzstan over the last decade, while \$15 million in military aid was granted to Tajikistan between 1993 and 2008: in April 2009 Beijing promised an additional \$1.5 million to Dushanbe.¹³ These symbolic contributions demonstrate China's commitment and assistance.

In order to prevent potential instability linked to NATO's withdrawal, China has recently increased its military aid to these republics, building officers quarters in both countries, promising to grant \$16 million in military aid to the Bishkek government - which should be used to purchase modern weapons and equipment, and transport vehicles – and announcing future military aid for Dushanbe as well.¹⁴

Chinese military aid to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan has been more limited: in 2007 Beijing provided precision equipment and uniforms to the Turkmen army, also offering \$3 million loan for military needs. In 2000 Uzbekistan received Chinese sniper rifles, becoming the first country in the region to obtain weapons from Beijing. Furthermore, China has allocated \$4.4 million to upgrade equipment to monitor border crossings.¹⁵

Furthermore, China has concluded strategic partnerships with all five Central Asian states, aiming to enhance cooperation and build mutual support on issues concerning sovereignty, territorial integrity and security. Through these frameworks of cooperation, China could progressively extend its role in the regional security field. However, the development of bilateral military cooperation is limited by the fears of Central Asian governments about the potential domination of China in the region, worrying that any military presence on Beijing's part could hide long-term intentions of territorial expansionism and interference with their internal

13 Sebastian Peyrouse, "Military Cooperation between China and Central Asia: Breakthrough, Limits, and Prospects", The Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, 10,(5), 5 March 2010. p. 12.

14 Joshua Kucera, "China Boosts Military Aid To Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan", Eurasianet The Bug Pit, 4 September 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69846> (accessed 28 September 2014)

15 Peyrouse, 2010, pp. 11-12; Gorenburg, 2014, p. 73.

affairs.¹⁶

In addition to the mistrust of local governments, the current geostrategic background hampers the deployment of Chinese military bases in Central Asia. As a matter of fact, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – as members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – cannot host a foreign military base on their territory without the full consent of all other members of the organization: Moscow could easily use its de facto veto to prevent any other foreign bases opening in the region, whether connected to China or US/NATO.¹⁷

The deployment of a military base in Turkmenistan could be the best option to protect Chinese energy interests, considering the increasing importance of Turkmen gas supplies in China's domestic energy security puzzle, but Ashgabat's policy of positive neutrality, prevents this eventuality.

Even though Uzbekistan withdrew from the CSTO in 2012, the adoption of a new foreign policy doctrine – according to which Tashkent rejects the deployment of foreign military bases on its territory as well as participation in any military bloc - excludes possibilities of establishing a Chinese military base. Nevertheless, the strategic partnership between Beijing and Tashkent is producing significant geopolitical results: in September 2013, the two signed a Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation and a Joint Declaration "On Further Development and Deepening Bilateral Relations of Strategic Partnership", which stated that the two countries would not adhere to any alliances or blocs which would damage the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of

16 Gorenburg, 2014, p. 82.

17 Alexander Sodiqov, "CSTO Agreement on Foreign Bases Frustrates Tajikistan's Ambitions", Eurasia Daily Monitor, 9, (10), 16 January 2012, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=38889#.VC11OldtMRI](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=38889#.VC11OldtMRI) (accessed 3 September 2014)

the other side.¹⁸

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation represents the multilateral framework which could allow China to protect its security and energy interests in the region, through cooperation with Russia and the Central Asian republics (except Turkmenistan) is aimed at fighting the so-called “three evils” (extremism, separatism and terrorism) and narcotics trafficking, as well as promoting regional security and economic cooperation.¹⁹ Along with the other SCO members, China annually participates at joint military exercises – so-called “peace missions” – targeting potential threats. In spite of these ambitious aims, the SCO has not played a significant role to promote security and stability, mainly because of the Sino-Russian geopolitical rivalry and of its inability to act as a military defence alliance.

Within the SCO framework, China and Russia have traditionally represented different approaches: Russia privileges military cooperation and security issues, while Beijing appears more oriented to promote economic cooperation and its trade interests, granting generous investments and loans to the Central Asian SCO members, mainly focused on the three countries it shares borders with.²⁰ In June 2012, former Chinese President Hu Jintao pledged to provide a \$10 billion loan to SCO member states in the form of economic development fund.²¹ Russia prefers

18 Farkhod Tolipov, “What Does It Mean for Uzbekistan and China to be Strategic Partners?”, Central Asia Caucasus Analyst Institute, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12858-what-does-it-mean-for-uzbekistan-and-china-to-be-strategic-partners?.html> 13 November 2013 (accessed 4 September 2014)

19 SCO Official Website, www.sectesco.org. (accessed 2 September 2014)

20 Maryia V. Danilovich, “Approaches to SCO: China and Russia”, in Anatoliy A. Rozanov (ed.), *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia’s security challenges*, DCAF Regional Programmes Series, 16, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces and Foreign Policy and Security Research Centre, Almaty-Minsk and Geneva, 2013, p. 23.

21 “China to offer \$10 billion in loans to SCO member states”, Reuters, 6 June 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/07/us-china-sco-loans-idUSBRE85602920120607> (accessed 2 September 2014)

to promote regional military cooperation through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) - which does not include China - rather than the SCO.

The strategic alignment between Moscow and Beijing has progressively edged towards a growing rivalry fuelled by several factors such as the Chinese economic domination in Central Asia, Russia's aggressive foreign policy (Georgia 2008 and Ukraine 2014), and Beijing's deep energy cooperation with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Even if these two main regional powers share the aim of preserving regional security, they pursue colliding interests: for example, the Chinese proposal to establish a free trade zone within the SCO framework is clearly in contrast with Russian attempts to promote the regional economic integration under the Russian-led Eurasian Union.²²

The upcoming disengagement of NATO and the existing threats to regional security have pushed China to focus more attention on security issues. During the June 2012 SCO summit in Beijing, China highlighted the need to strengthen the role of the organisation in order to preserve regional security.²³ Furthermore, the high participation of Chinese soldiers (5,000 of 7000) during the last SCO joint military exercises (e.g. Peace Mission 2014) clearly reflects Beijing's rising concerns and its will to implement military cooperation at multilateral level.²⁴

However, the SCO could not exercise military influence in the security field because the organization lacks a significant military component (no special rapid reaction forces or peacekeeping forces have been created) and members have not undertaken concrete shared initiatives such as the CSTO

22 Yu Xichao, "China's Rise in Central Asia Implications for EU Interests", European Institute for Asian Studies, March 2014, p.5, http://www.eias.org/sites/default/files/EU-Asia-at-a-glance-Yu_Xichao-China-Central-Asia.pdf (accessed 26 September 2014)

23 International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 17.

24 Joshua Kucera, "SCO Exercises To Be Biggest In Ten Years", Eurasianet The Bug Pit, 11 August 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69486> (accessed 18 September 2014)

(for instance, collective counter-narcotics operations or joint border controls).²⁵

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) - created in 2002 and based in Tashkent – is tasked with coordinating actions to counter terrorism, separatism, and extremism, acting as an information-sharing centre and contributing to the SCO's joint anti-terrorist initiatives. However, its main output thus far has been the realization of an updated database of suspected terrorists, without further concrete actions.²⁶

Furthermore, the SCO appears unable to deal with domestic crises in the region: during the 2010 ethnic unrest in Kyrgyzstan as well as in 2012 violence in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region on the Afghan border, the SCO failed to intervene, highlighting institutional weakness as a security provider.²⁷

CONCLUSIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Even if China does not appear interested in a concrete military engagement in the region, the future potential spread of instability along its western borders and in Central Asia could lead the Chinese government to adapt its foreign and security policy to fit a new scenario. This geostrategic rethink will be linked to the relevance of the threatened interests:

25 Anatoliy A. Rozanov, "The issue of security in the SCO", in Anatoliy A. Rozanov (ed.), *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia's security challenges*, DCAF Regional Programmes Series, 16, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces and Foreign Policy and Security Research Centre, Almaty-Minsk and Geneva, 2013, pp. 42, 46.

26 Alyson J.K. Bailes, Pal Dunay, Pan Guang and Mikhail Troitskiy, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization", SIPRI Policy Paper, 17 May 2007, p. 24.

27 Indeo, 2014, p. 6.

a long-term interruption of Turkmen gas supplies (which currently cover half of China's gas imports), destabilizing activities of both terrorists and separatists in Xinjiang as well as in bordering Central Asian countries represent the vital interests which could push China to deploy military troops in order to defend national security.

Following NATO's withdrawal, China could have the opportunity to boost security and to promote itself as a regional force for stability through the SCO, which is better placed to play the role of regional security provider than the CSTO, given the ongoing involvement of countries both inside and outside the CSTO in its multilateral initiatives. Moreover, the aggressive foreign policy adopted by Russia in the Ukrainian crisis and the consequent worsening of relations with the West as well as the growing mistrust of Central Asian countries have severely undermined Russian ambitions to become the regional security provider after 2014. In this scenario, the SCO could become the main dialogue partner with NATO in a broad framework of cooperation, allowing China, the United States, Russia and the Central Asian countries to work together in order to achieve shared goals to prevent instability in the region. However, the SCO will be able to play a more active role in the security field if Beijing succeeds in overcoming its principle of non-interference, which thwarts the implementation of effective cooperation in the security and military field. In the future, China and Russia should redefine the targets of the organization, allowing the SCO to deal also with internal security issues or conflicts between member-states, to better intervene in the specific realities of post-Soviet Central Asia.

Afghanistan's inclusion in the SCO as observer country in 2012 and a deeper involvement of the country in this multilateral framework of regional cooperation could allow China to better protect its interests, drawing up tailored strategies and policies to handle the threats coming from the perceived main source of regional instability.

The strategic partnership between China and the five

Central Asian republics should be tailored so as to cover sensitive issues such as military and security cooperation to help achieve the shared aims of stability and prosperity. This evolution could be profitable for all parties, considering that China could support local governments' needs to boost domestic and regional security through the delivery of modern military equipment and weapons, lessening Russia's traditional influence.

Even if opposition towards the deployment of foreign military bases in their countries remains a feature of many policy-makers in Central Asia, China could still play a more active role in the security and military field promoting the realization of joint military training centers and strengthening cooperation to counter existing destabilizing threats.

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