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RESHAPING CENTRAL ASIA: THE DYNAMICS OF CHINA'S INFLUENCE AND REGIONAL LANDSCAPE TRANSFORMATION

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In the post-1991 global order, Central Asia is undergoing profound transformations and has become an arena where the interests of various powers intersect, leading to simultaneous processes of cooperation and competition among global and regional actors. As early as the beginning of the last century, British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder, often regarded as the founder of geopolitics, foresaw the end of European dominance and emphasized the growing significance of the central part of Eurasia in the new era, referring to this zone as the "geographical pivot of history." In his article "The Geographical Pivot of History," published in *The Geographical Journal* in April 1904, Mackinder outlined that the world is divided into distinct zones, each fulfilling its functions, and whoever controls the Heartland controls the World Island, and subsequently the entire world [1]. According to this theory, in the context of global geopolitical processes, the Eurasian continent lies at the heart of the world, with the Heartland being the part of Eurasia where vast land masses are concentrated [2]. Amidst the escalating

rivalry among regional and global powers, including Russia, China, Turkey, the EU, and the USA, it becomes evident that there is a Great Game redux or Great Game 2.0 in the Central Asian region.

In light of China's increasing influence in all directions, particularly in Latin America, Africa, and Central Asia, shifts in the global balance of power and geopolitical dynamics are observed. China's economic prowess has enabled the country to enhance its political, economic, and cultural influence worldwide [3]. Undoubtedly, China's rise as one of the major powers in the 21st century brings about significant changes in the regional political landscape across all of Eurasia. Central Asia, historically linked to China through the ancient Silk Road and sharing common geographic boundaries, is most keenly experiencing the intensification of Chinese foreign policy and the growth of its presence in the region amidst the current dynamic geopolitical developments.

China's Influence in Central Asia. Starting from the mid-2010s, China began to escalate its economic presence, thereby making the volumes of investment from China increasingly significant. An analysis of China's influence on Central Asia naturally entails a detailed examination of the "Chinese mega-project of the 21st century," the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was launched following President Xi Jinping's announcement of the creation of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" [4]. On one hand, the Belt and Road Initiative aims to link China's market with other parts of the continent, such as Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and South Asia; on the other hand, it serves as a tool to meet China's geopolitical interests. Investment and trade flows through infrastructure projects and connectivity within this initiative directly impact the strengthening of China's strategic role and position in the region. In this context, considering the crucial role of Central Asia within the Belt and Road Initiative, China rapidly and actively expands its presence in the region across all spheres.

The gradual but steady rise of China's economic power leads to China displacing Russia from the top positions in trade with Central Asian countries. According to official statistical agencies of three countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan—over the past two years, China has become the primary trading partner of these states. In the context of Western economic sanctions against Russia, the growth of trade in the region with China leads to an increase in China's economic influence in these countries. Despite the significant asymmetry in mutual trade with China, trade volumes are increasing year by year. None of the Central Asian countries are among China's major trading partners, however China occupies the first and second positions in almost all countries in the region. In the midst of intense competition for influence across the vast expanses of Central Asia, a noticeable trend is the increase in Chinese economic influence, primarily because none of the regional or global powers have the capacity to attract similarly massive sums as China.

China's political involvement in Central Asia began in the late 1990s when three young Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—alongside Russia and China, formed the "Shanghai Five". Within this initiative, China engaged in a series of diplomatic initiatives with the region's countries aimed at strengthening bilateral and multilateral ties. As a result, this format of regional cooperation proved successful, culminating in the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, formed after Uzbekistan's accession to the initial five in the early 21st century. Another significant format of multilateral cooperation between China and the region's countries is the Central Asia-China summit, which, for the first time in an offline format, took place in May of last year in the city of Xi'an, symbolically chosen due to the historical significance of this city as the starting point of the ancient Silk Road. It is worth noting that President Xi Jinping's first foreign visit after the pandemic was to Kazakhstan, further emphasizing the growing geopolitical and geo-economic importance of Central Asia for China. Despite global powers often preferring bilateral contacts to multilateral ones, China has managed to engage with the region on various levels. The military conflict between Russia and Ukraine in recent years inevitably influenced the perception of regional and global powers in the eyes of the region's public. As a result, a political vacuum is created in the region, which China has been actively trying to fill. Considering that China's economic might acts as a catalyst for cooperation with

the region's countries, all these investments within the Belt and Road Initiative and trade flows contribute to China's ascent to the role of the primary external force in the region, thereby altering the established status quo.

Regional Dynamics and Responses. The increasing influence of China in Central Asia is bringing about significant changes in the regional political landscape, eliciting diverse reactions and generating both hopes and concerns, as it entails substantial opportunities as well as significant risks for the region [5]. Under the influence of China, substantial transformations are occurring in the regional dynamics of Central Asia, primarily reflected in the creation of new and modernization of existing transportation infrastructure, thereby enhancing regional cooperation and connectivity. Given the development of transportation corridors and infrastructure, the region's pivotal importance to China becomes evident, serving as a link between the Chinese market and the markets of European countries. Undoubtedly, the countries of the region benefit from this situation as the modernization of railways and highways requires substantial resources. In the context of its growing global ambitions, China will continue to allocate investments and develop transportation links in the region, as these actions positively correlate with its own regional and global ambitions.

As China's presence and influence in Central Asia intensify, a shift in regional dynamics occurs, reflected in changes in the political environment. The increase in Chinese presence allows regional countries to balance and reduce Russian influence, thereby promoting the multi-vector diplomacy of these nations. By significantly improving regional and international connections in Central Asia, China contributes to the geopolitical significance of the region's countries, ultimately leading to diversification of relations with all interested parties. In particular, new pipelines built with Chinese investment enable regional countries to utilize alternative routes for exporting oil and gas from the region [6].

As China's influence in the region grows, a reformation of regional dynamics is observed, manifesting in a change in China's perception among the public in the region. For over 30 years, there has been a noticeable duality in China's perception in the region, described by David Kerr as "warm politics, cold public" [7]. Indeed, given China's significant assistance, the political leadership of the region's countries enthusiastically welcomes Chinese investments and aid [8]. However, while China is viewed by the political elite of the region as a reliable economic partner, a different perception of China exists among the society. With the increasing geopolitical weight of China, Sinophobia in the region is growing, influenced by historical complexities between nations, environmental concerns, and worries about job losses and reduced employment opportunities. However, amidst the growing economic and political influence of China in the region, new cultural and social dynamics are emerging. In pursuit of its global ambitions, China employs soft power strategies to promote its positive image worldwide. In Central Asia, China uses soft power to showcase its language and culture, emphasizing its principles of friendliness and non-interference in the internal affairs of neighboring countries. It is noteworthy that there are significant doubts about the effectiveness of China's soft power in Central Asia; however, the influence of this process on the transformation of regional dynamics cannot be overlooked.

Challenges and Opportunities. Under the influence of China, significant transformations are occurring in the regional dynamics, posing challenges that may lead to adverse consequences. Given that the primary instrument of Chinese influence in the region is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the main challenge for participating countries is the risk of falling into a debt trap [9]. Amidst rapidly changing geopolitical circumstances in the region, a security dilemma arises as virtually all interested powers in the region have convergent interests and divergent strategies, necessitating concerted efforts from regional countries to maintain stability. Regarding the challenges for further strengthening China's role and influence in the region, one of the main obstacles is Sinophobia [10]. Consequently, China's growing presence in Central Asia is met with less favorable social reactions, however due to Chinese soft power and increasing investment volumes, the situation may turn positive.

As China's role in the Central Asian arena continues to grow and consolidate, prospects for the region also expand. The intensification of Chinese efforts in the region has provided Central Asian

countries with opportunities such as deeper regional cooperation, ‘cheap’ Chinese credits, infrastructure modernization, and significant investments. Additionally, increased interaction between China and Central Asian countries provides the opportunity to balance the influence of other regional and global powers, such as Russia, the US, and the EU. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) leads to the emergence of new opportunities for countries in the region, including access to the different markets and the development of transportation infrastructure. However, maintaining their autonomy and avoiding falling into a debt trap will be crucial for the future of the entire region in the current century.

Conclusion. In conclusion, it can be concluded that the intensification of Chinese initiatives in the Central Asian direction confirms the strategic importance of these countries for China and indicates the necessity for these countries to continue their strategy of balancing external influence. Based on the response mechanisms and strategies employed by the countries of the region, it can be inferred that the Central Asian republics are not passive observers in the unfolding Great Game 2.0. Each of these countries actively participates by promoting bilateral and multilateral relations in all directions, striving to maintain their sovereignty, maximize potential benefits, and minimize possible risks. In the context of the new Great Game, Central Asian countries must actively leverage their advantageous geographical location, strategic transit significance, and abundant natural resources to develop their own long-term agenda. Based on China's growing global ambitions, it can be inferred that China will continue to take active steps in the Central Asian direction, emphasizing the need for these countries to develop a long-term strategy for interacting with China.

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