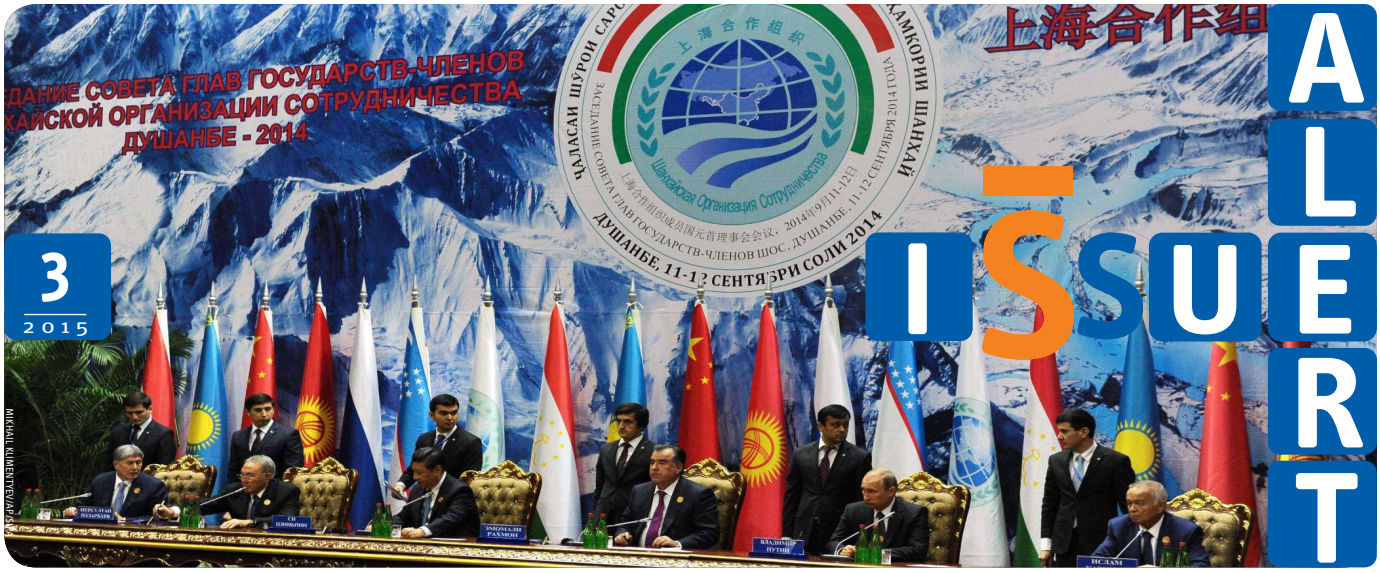

Central Asia: the view from China

by Raffaello Pantucci

China's rise in Central Asia is not a new phenomenon. For the past decade, Beijing has gradually moved to become the most significant and consequential actor on the ground in a region that was previously considered Russia's backyard. In September last year, President Xi Jinping announced the creation of a 'Silk Road Economic Belt' running through the region. Although this declaration is the closest thing seen so far in terms of an articulation of a Chinese strategy for Central Asia, it nevertheless offered more questions than answers.

To understand China's approach to Central Asia, a wider lens needs to be applied to explore both the detail of what is going on and how this fits into a broader foreign policy strategy that is slowly becoming clearer under Xi Jinping's stewardship.

The Long March westward

It is in the first instance important to look at the geographical link that exists between China and Central Asia. This flows principally through Xinjiang, China's westernmost province which is home to a disgruntled Uighur population, some of whom are currently locked in a painful struggle with the Chinese state. An ethnic minority in China (though almost 10 million strong, with a substantial diaspora in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkey), the Uighurs are closer in terms of culture and language to Central Asian peoples like the Uzbeks. Stemming from Xinjiang (a region that covers a sixth of China's landmass but contains roughly 1-2% of its population), Uighurs have long complained that their identity is slowly being eroded by Beijing-sponsored Han Chinese immigrants. This alienation has resulted in protests, as well as violence directed against the authorities, the resident Han population, and local Uighurs seen to be collaborating with the central government. The most recent bout of serious civil unrest can be traced back to 2009, when roughly 200 people were killed during riots in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital. In the wake of this event, Beijing's attention was drawn towards the troubled region, and a subsequent work plan laid out in May 2010 signaled a new push towards fostering development in the province.

This focus was not in fact completely new. Chinese officials had long worried about Xinjiang and the underdeveloped nature of China's western frontiers. While coastal provinces like Shanghai and Guangzhou were booming, some regions in the centre and west were left behind economically. In addition, China's foreign policy was almost exclusively focused on maritime disputes and the country's relationship with the US.

The reality is that if Xinjiang is to be developed, China needs a more prosperous region in its vicinity to trade with – and through. Far from the coast, Xinjiang's southern markets are closer to Europe or the Indian subcontinent than they are

to China's mighty eastern seaports. The result is an approach towards Xinjiang that is focused on economic development and improving its links through Pakistan and the countries of Central Asia.

A Chinese pivot?

The outcome of this approach is the development of the Silk Road Economic Belt, a corridor that (eventually) will connect Xinjiang to Europe. A project that is being implemented by Chinese companies with funding provided by the country's policy banks, it seeks to help (re)connect Central Asia to China. The region is consequently being transformed from one which is wired to Moscow to one which is increasingly wired to Urumqi – and Beijing.

Unlike the US plan to forge a 'New Silk Road', China has devoted substantial financial resources to its Silk Road Economic Belt – some $40 billion has been allocated for external aspects, and $17 billion for projects within China. Beyond this, new international financial institutions created and funded by China – such as the BRICS Bank or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank – all point to a Chinese desire to help and fund the development of its immediate neighbourhood.

There are clearly selfish motivations for China's investments – from Turkmenbashi to Khorgos, Chinese traders are often the most dynamic players on the ground. But while the overall project is designed to help improve China's undeveloped regions, there are also clear ancillary benefits for Central Asia.

A grander vision

China is, however, not solely an economic giant: it has demonstrated a growing willingness to engage in security matters in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (perceived by Beijing to be the most unstable of the Central Asian states) through bilateral military support and training. Beijing might not want to take full responsibility for the region's security, but with every visit by a Chinese leader resulting in greater economic connectivity between these countries and one of China's most sensitive provinces, it is becoming increasingly difficult for its government to simply ignore its place as a regional stakeholder.

That said, Beijing remains uncertain of how exactly to exert its power. And it is here that the EU might step in and play a role in influencing China's posture. For example, Chinese officials and businessmen often fall into the same corruption traps as their European counterparts active in Central Asia. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and other European entities, however, effectively operate in the region, and their lessons learned are ones that Chinese enterprises could benefit from. China has likewise little experience in resolving border disputes, while European bodies like the OSCE or projects like the EU's Border Management Programme for Central Asia (BOMCA) have an extensive history of being deployed in the region. If China's wish to build a trade corridor through Central Asia is to become a reality, Beijing's policymakers will have to establish ways to deal with the region's complicated dynamics. Europe can help China with this aim, while also helping to promote greater regional stability. For example, joint training and capability building missions, cooperative security strategies, and efforts to counter drug trafficking and criminality in the region would advance both Chinese and European interests.

At a more strategic level, there is an opportunity in the Silk Road Economic Belt for Europe to develop its relations with China. It is not only part of Beijing's vision for Central Asia, but has formed the contours of China's foreign policy towards a raft of regional partners: economic corridors similar to the Belt are now are sprouting from every direction to and from China (including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor, and the Maritime Silk Road). This increases the importance of the Silk Road Economic Belt and offers a chance for Europe to play a role in a project that is both key for the Chinese leadership personally and important to a strategically significant region which Europe has expressed a keen interest in.

The Belt already effectively exists. It has (under different auspices) been a reality for almost a decade or more. China's leadership has decided this is a cornerstone project which ultimately should stretch all the way to Europe. If Europe were to reach back and thereby improve its relationship with China, there would be significant benefits for all actors involved.

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