

# China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies



Marlène Laruelle  
Sébastien Peyrouse



*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute  
Silk Road Studies Program*



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Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, 1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036  
Institute for Security and Development Policy, V. Finnbodav. 2, Stockholm-Nacka 13130, Sweden  
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Tel. +1-202-663-7723; Fax. +1-202-663-7785  
E-mail: [caciz@jhuadig.admin.jhu.edu](mailto:caciz@jhuadig.admin.jhu.edu)

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Email: [info@silkroadstudies.org](mailto:info@silkroadstudies.org)

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Svante E. Cornell, Research and Publications Director, at either of the addresses above. (preferably by email)

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## Executive Summary

Since 2000, China has gained significantly in importance in Central Asia and is now in a position to pose a threat to traditional Russian domination in the region. Exactly how China will intensify its presence in Central Asia and how this alliance/competition with Russia will play itself out is going to depend partly on the approaches and attitudes of the Central Asian states themselves. For this reason, it is essential to comprehend not only Chinese and Russian objectives in the region, but also to look at the indigenous viewpoints of Central Asian governments, their visions of the world, and their room for initiative on political and geopolitical issues.

Existing publications on the topic of China-Central Asian relations are generally limited to discussing energy issues (collaboration on hydrocarbons) and security questions (the collective management of terrorist threats), and for the most part only present Russian and Chinese viewpoints. The objective of this *Silk Road Monograph* is to go beyond this first level of analysis by giving a voice to those most concerned by these issues, namely the Central Asians, paying special attention to their views of the “Chinese question”. Studying domestic Central Asian views about China will enable us to deepen geopolitical reflection, insofar as the rise of either Sinophilia or Sinophobia in Central Asia will most probably have a significant political, geo-strategic, and cultural impact on the situation in the region, and work either to speed up or to slow down Chinese expansion in it.

A more comprehensive knowledge of the views of Central Asian actors toward both China and its alliance/competition with Russia could influence the strategic agenda of other actors in the region, especially that of the United States. This is the case for three main reasons. The first is that American foreign policy is still based on the assumption that Russia is the principal power with which to negotiate on Central Asia, thus ignoring the fact that China is starting to play a major part in the region and is promoting a containment of the West outside of the Central Asian arena. The second is

that in the eventuality of a conflict of interest between Moscow and Beijing, whether in Central Asia or the Far East, a new pole of tension would arise that may well have a determining geopolitical impact on the global development of the Eurasian space. The third is that a long-term Sino-Russian-Central Asian alliance would undermine the West's objectives in the region. This is most obviously the case in the domains of energy and geopolitics, but is also the case for the goal of democratizing post-communist societies. Without any knowledge of the Central Asian strategies and perspectives on such a vital question, the western understanding of the objectives and strategies of Eurasia's largest competitors is likely to remain fractured and incomplete.

In the first chapter, we draw up a precise overview of the sectors in which Russia and China are cooperating and those in which competition between them is starting to develop. However, the recent nature of this phenomenon of collaboration/competition means that it is still too early to tell whether the old power and the new one will succeed in reaching an agreement on jointly controlling Central Asia, or instead whether the region will serve as a field of confrontation between them. In the second chapter, we analyze how Central Asia perceives China by examining local political debate and expertise on China. By contrast to Russia, the arrival of China in the Central Asian political and intellectual landscape is rather new and the perceptions of it among heads of state, opposition members, economic circles, academia, and institutions of expertise have elicited divergent discourses, which usually correspond not only to their specific agenda, but also to their degree of knowledge about China. In the third chapter, we study the complex discourse about China's role in the region that Central Asian expertise has developed. While some key figures are on record for expressing their unilateral critiques of the Chinese presence, others do not conceal their sympathy, and even admiration, for Beijing's dynamism. However, the majority of experts tend to advance both pro- and anti-Chinese arguments. A feeling of mistrust about Beijing's "hidden" objectives prevails: Despite its currently positive effects, in the long term it is suspected that China's presence will cause huge problems for Central Asian nations.

## Introduction

Since 2000, China has gained significantly in importance in Central Asia and is now in a position to pose a threat to traditional Russian domination in the region. Exactly how China will intensify its presence in Central Asia and how this alliance/competition with Russia will play itself out is going to depend partly on the approaches and attitudes of the Central Asian states themselves. For this reason, it is essential to comprehend not only Chinese and Russian objectives in the region, but also to look at the indigenous viewpoints of Central Asian governments, their visions of the world, and their room for initiative on political and geopolitical issues. Existing publications on the topic of China-Central Asian relations are generally limited to discussing energy issues (collaboration on hydrocarbons) and security questions (the collective management of terrorist threats), and mostly only present Russian and Chinese viewpoints. The objective of this *Silk Road Monograph* is to go beyond this first level of analysis by giving a voice to those most concerned by these issues, namely the Central Asians, paying special attention to their views of the “Chinese question”. Studying domestic Central Asian views about China will enable us to deepen geopolitical reflection, insofar as the rise of either Sinophilia or Sinophobia in Central Asia will most probably have a significant political, geo-strategic, and cultural impact on the situation in the region, and work either to speed up or to slow down Chinese expansion in it.<sup>1</sup>

### **Soviet Legacy, Russian Influence, and the “Chinese Question” in Central Asia**

For more than a century and a half, Central Asia has been under Russian domination, first under the Tsarist Empire, and then within the Soviet Union. For Central Asian societies, modernity arrived through the prism of

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Alec Forss and Nicklas Norling for their comments and editing of this paper.

Russia and the political and social experience of communism, including mass alphabetization, sedentarization of the nomads, industrial and agricultural development, constitution of modern nations, of the administrative borders of republics, etc. Still today, almost twenty years after independence, the states of Central Asia live within a system of largely Russian/Soviet reference points: the language permitting access to the world is Russian; Russia remains the country whose model of development is most often evoked; social and economic relations are still focused on Moscow; and cultural fashions come from the Russian Federation. Turkey and Iran, which many commentators at the beginning of the 1990s thought would replace Russia in the region, have not succeeded in deposing the old colonial power. Similarly, the West, with whom the region has become rather disillusioned, is perceived as being too remote to be a real partner.

Paradoxically, until recently Moscow had “forgotten” to cultivate this Soviet legacy. In fact, after the disappearance of the Soviet Union the Kremlin sought neither to make sure that it had internal support inside the established regimes, nor to maintain a coherent policy of economic domination. In the 1990s, Russia ceased to think of itself as a motor of integration: it roundly dismissed that idea endorsed by Nursultan Nazarbaev in 1994 of creating a Eurasian Union, remaining satisfied with its observer status in the Central Asian Union (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan), and it only half-heartedly reacted to the constitution of the GUAM (Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova) anti-Russian axis in 1996. The human and cultural potential created by the Soviet regime was no longer valorized and Moscow’s chaotic and contradictory foreign policy seemed fated to “lose” Central Asia despite the fact that anti-Russian discourse in the Central Asian states, forceful at the time of independence, rapidly subsided again around 1994-1995.<sup>2</sup> Not until the second half of the 1990s, when Yevgeni Primakov became head of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, did Moscow endeavor to bring the region back under its control. In the meanwhile, new actors established themselves and Moscow lost numerous opportunities, incontrovertibly so with the exception of the areas of energy and security.

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<sup>2</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin, “Central Asia between the Gravitational Poles of Russia and China”, in Boris Rumer (ed.), *Central Asia. A Gathering Storm?*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002, p. 171.

Since Vladimir Putin's coming to power in 2000, Moscow has sought to build strategies of cooperation with Central Asian states. Russia's "return" is not solely political: it is accompanied by a military, strategic, and economic rapprochement that has taken the form of bilateral and regional cooperation. But even though Russian policy today has become more flexible and pragmatic, for Central Asian states Russia's ambiguous policy and economic inconsistencies make it a somewhat complex partner. The Central Asian regimes do not refrain from publicly criticizing Russian discourses for the grand ideas that they canvass but rarely translate into practical action, an accusation they also direct at the West. Moreover, Russia still has practically no long-term vision of the relations it would like to maintain with its "South", nor does it have any strategy that would give Central Asia equal partner status, but rather considers it a simple geographical and political appendage. Indeed, the Kremlin regards Central Asia as only one element in its foreign policy strategy to reassert the Russian nation as a great power. Russian influence in the region is considered obvious, an established fact that is not worth insisting on, and for which, by contrast to the western fringes, does not need to be fought for.

Central Asia is caught in just as paradoxical a situation in its relation to China. Chinese strategy vis-à-vis Central Asia is in fact informed by very pragmatic objectives, based on a long tradition of adopting a *wait and see* approach. Beijing regards Central Asia as a buffer zone: the USSR's collapse, instability in Afghanistan, and a strengthened U.S. presence offer both opportunities and dangers. However, promoting precise objectives, and using economic and political tactics, is insufficient for the purposes of building a strategy in the full sense of the term.<sup>3</sup> China's geographical proximity and ethnic contiguity with Central Asia, though an asset from some perspectives, simultaneously involves problems, or at least challenges: geographical proximity is restricted by the high altitude and extreme isolation of the border regions, making trade development more costly than sea freight; and the ethnic contiguity with the Uyghur world is perceived more as a danger than an opportunity. Despite these challenges and its initially negative

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<sup>3</sup> Huasheng Zhao, "Central Asia in China's Diplomacy", in Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, Huasheng Zhao, *Central Asia. Views from Washington, Moscow and Beijing*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2007, p. 137.

overall image in Central Asia, China has succeeded in improving its reputation with its soft-power diplomacy. Since the USSR's collapse, Chinese diplomatic relations with Central Asia have taken their course slowly: in the first half of the 1990s, Beijing's main aim was to resolve its border disputes with the post-Soviet world and bring the painful subject of "unequal treaties" to an end. In the second half of the decade, it sought to promote the stability and security of the Central Asian regimes in order to avoid aggravating an already difficult Uyghur problem. At the beginning of the 2000s, China launched a diversification strategy for energy resources, and finally, since 2005, has sought to establish itself not only in the Central Asian economic market but also in its political and educational scene.<sup>4</sup>

Here again, Central Asia has found it difficult to gain recognition as Beijing's equal partner rather than as one element among others in a more global Chinese strategy. Beijing does not actually consider Central Asia to be a fundamental zone of interest comparable to its relations with the West and the Asian world. Only Kazakhstan enjoys a particular status: the China-Kazakhstan partnership is termed "strategic" – the highest of diplomatic epithets – confirming that Astana is one of Beijing's major political allies in the post-Soviet space. If Chinese diplomacy in the region still remains peripheral, the area is nonetheless highly complex because it is intrinsically linked to domestic Chinese issues via the Uyghur question. Central Asia also forms an intermediary area in a new axis of Chinese foreign policy that includes Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East. From this perspective, Russia is seen as a partner and not as a competitor. Beijing does not seek, in the short term, to call Moscow's political and security control over Central Asia into question. Quite to the contrary, the Chinese authorities have encouraged both the reinforcement of Russian activities in the region and the dynamism that came with Putin's power politics, since this consolidates their own objectives. However, despite China's goodwill toward Russia, Moscow will be compelled to adopt a position in relation to its new ally/competitor, especially seeing as it is at risk of losing its perceived "right" to oversee Central Asia, which could force it into fierce

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<sup>4</sup> Richard W. Hu, "China's Central Asia Policy: Making Sense of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", in Boris Rumer (ed.), *Central Asia at the End of the Transition*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2005, pp. 130-151.

competition with Beijing, an eventuality with potentially significant geopolitical consequences.

The Central Asian states, for their part, have only relatively little room for foreign policy initiative. Some such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are far too economically weak and politically unstable to be able to develop an autonomous foreign policy: for Bishkek and Dushanbe, any international partnership at all with a great power is an additional guarantee of aid and stability. The only Central Asian state in a position to formulate an ambitious foreign policy is Kazakhstan. Nursultan Nazarbaev's decision to adopt a "multivectorial" approach enjoys a large consensus in the country. Astana has nonetheless had to accept a certain order of priorities: as the saying goes, "partnership (*partnerstvo*) with Russia and good neighborly relations (*dobrososedstvo*) with China". Russia comes a clear first on the list of priorities, followed by China. The West comes in third place, but this placing is itself subject to internal prioritization: The 2008 Kazakhstan Presidential address, for example, privileged the European Union over the United States, in part because of Kazakhstan's desire to obtain the presidency of the OSCE for 2010. In Uzbekistan, the geopolitical U-turns of Islam Karimov's regime means that Tashkent's foreign policy has not exhibited the same stability, although it has recently tried to achieve more of a balance between Russia, China, and the West. Lastly, Turkmenistan's policy of isolationism under Saparmurat Niazov can hardly be considered a serious foreign policy from a long-term perspective. The country's partial geopolitical opening since Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov's coming to power appears to indicate exactly the same desire to achieve a balance in its foreign relations.

Over both the short and long term, there is no Central Asian state that can afford to adopt overtly anti-Russian policies, and anti-Chinese ones even less so: the regimes and their societies have no other choice but to deal with their two neighbours and to seek to benefit as much as possible both from the alliance between Moscow and Beijing and from their growing rivalry. All that remains therefore is to inquire into the local strategies being adopted by Central Asian states to manage both the question of the Chinese presence in the region and of the Russia-China alliance/competition.

### Central Asian Strategies and Perspectives on the “Chinese Question”

The “Chinese question” in Central Asia is a multidimensional issue. First, it is an integral part of their international relations and geopolitics, since it involves the global balance of power between the former Russo-Soviet superpower and the emergent Chinese power, as well as the role that each of them allocate to Central Asia, not to mention Central Asia’s disposition to each of its two large partners. Second, the “Chinese question” is also operative in the domestic issues of each of the states concerned: In China an intrinsic link connects Beijing’s analysis of Central Asia to its handling of the Uyghur question. In Russia, policy toward Central Asia is related to important debates on the Steppes and Turkistan’s “inner” place in the national geopolitical imaginary. Lastly, this question reveals the internal evolutions which have affected Central Asian societies for two decades. In this monograph we attempt to foreground the importance of this relatively unknown latter dimension by demonstrating the extent to which China has become a catalyst of political and social debate in Central Asia.

The aim of this *Silk Road Monograph* is thus to develop a better picture of the opportunities/constraints to Chinese expansion in Central Asia by answering the following central question: is the reaction of the Central Asian states to growing Chinese presence positive or negative? The working hypothesis is that the Central Asian states are at once desirous of the growing Chinese presence, wanting to take advantage of its economic dynamism and geo-strategic influence, but also fearful of its potential demographic and cultural clout. In fact, in Central Asian societies China is often regarded as an object of scorn: fears of “invasion” by Chinese migrants are widespread, as is the conviction that China is concealing its imperialist ambitions for control of the region. Our main lines of inquiry focus on this paradoxical attitude in relation to China by developing a comparison between Central Asian strategies toward China in the areas of energy, trade, security, migration, politics, and culture. Analyzing the local strategies and perspectives on the growing Chinese presence in Central Asia entails two main sub-questions.

The first of these concerns the Chinese alliance/competition with the dominant power in the region, namely Russia. By contrast to China, Russia still benefits from its historical presence in the region. On the political level,



the elites of the five Central Asian states highly respect the model developed by Vladimir Putin (authoritarianism, “vertical power”, and his bringing of oligarchs and large companies back under control). On the cultural level, the Russian language and culture still remain dominant in Central Asia. And on the geo-strategic level, Russian domination, although it is considered oppressive, is also seen as a guarantee against Islamic extremism and foreign attack. How does China fit in to this picture of Central Asian thinking? Do Central Asian states prefer to have Russia or China as their main political, geopolitical, cultural, and economic partner? Do they think that Moscow and Beijing will seek to join forces in the region, or, on the contrary, that they will come into conflict? And on which points is conflict or cooperation more likely to develop? Is the competition for influence between Moscow and Beijing an advantage or a disadvantage for Central Asian states?

The second of these sub-questions concerns the divisions within Central Asian societies themselves over the Chinese question. This requires first and foremost a consideration of the existence in Central Asia of structured academic and political knowledge on China. Is the general lack of knowledge about China in Central Asia, both in intellectual milieus and public opinion, to be regarded as an element that will favor a rise of Sinophobia? At issue here is to ascertain which groups are Sinophile and which Sinophobe, and what their respective power of influence is. Are there social and political groups that advocate Sino-Central Asian rapprochement and others who campaign for a “cooling” of relations with Beijing? Is the growing Sinophobia, for instance among Central Asian petty traders, considered to be a serious political risk? How do Sinophobe and Sinophile groups approach such thorny issues as economic competition, water sharing, border disputes, migratory flows, and domestic security? And how do they view the points of comparison between the Xinjiang conflict and the Islamic threat in Central Asia?

To ascertain a precise picture of Central Asian reactions vis-à-vis China entails overcoming several challenges related to the authoritarian character of Central Asian regimes. First, the limited nature of political life in Central Asia makes it difficult to identify opposition circles expressing divergent opinions from those espoused by the ruling elites. No political dissension is permitted in either Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan, while in Tajikistan it is

reserved for the Party of Islamic Rebirth, which has no real formed opinion on foreign policy. And a similar thing is happening in Kazakhstan, where the opposition also concentrates on questions of domestic political and social affairs more than on those concerning international relations. In addition, the only place in which the opposition has succeeded in attaining power, namely Kyrgyzstan, shows that changes in political personnel have no effect on foreign policy choices – so limited is the room for maneuver in such countries. In addition, as the survey institutes in these countries are rather underdeveloped, it would be futile to hope for detailed works to appear on public opinion in Central Asia of the sort to be found in Russia and the Ukraine. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, a certain amount of sociological examination of public opinion takes place, though being still rather limited, while in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan it is impossible to conduct such surveys. In addition, the Chinese question brings the diversity of Central Asia spectacularly to light: indeed each of the five states in fact has its own specific “Chinese question”, none of which can be systematically generalized.

Lacking such quantitative material, only a qualitative analysis, one based on a restricted, i.e. elite, milieu can provide us with a way of analyzing Central Asian society’s reactions to the evolutions underway. As a way of responding to this objective, we will examine the points of view of think tanks, which, although they are well known in the Anglo-Saxon world,<sup>5</sup> have not yet been ascribed their real value in the post-Soviet context. Indeed, think tanks in Central Asia are the places *par excellence* of knowledge production in relation to China and will enable us to provide an at least partial response to the above questions. They also indirectly stimulate reflection on the decision-making mechanisms in states reputed for their opacity, authoritarianism, and

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<sup>5</sup> There is an abundant literature on this subject. See, for example: Donald E. Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002; James McGann, R. Kent Weaver (ed.), *Think Tanks and Civil Societies: Catalysts for Ideas and Action*, New York: Free Press, 1993; David M. Ricci, *The Transformation of American Politics: The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1994; Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; James A. Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks And The Rise Of The New Policy Elite*, New York: Free Press, 1993; Diane Stone, Andrew Denham, *Think Tank Traditions: Policy Analysis Across Nations*, Manchester: Manchester, University Press, 2004.

centralism. Despite the restricted conditions for the existence of genuine political opposition, a diversity of points of view exists and is expressed inside official institutions albeit through more indirect and discrete routes than with frontal public opposition. As we will see below, Central Asian think tanks have much more variegated and critical considerations of the Chinese question than do official political circles, making possible a qualitative and reasoned analysis of the local elite's concerns in this regard.

In the first part of this work, we attempt to shed light on the paradoxes of the competition/alliance between Russia and China in Central Asia in the geopolitical, political, economic, cultural, and demographic domains. At the present moment Moscow and Beijing may well be talking up their honeymoon, but the potential elements of tension have not disappeared and are likely to re-emerge in the coming years. In the second part, we draw up a cartography of China in Central Asia by investigating China as an object both of political and scientific analysis. In Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, China does not yet act as a catalyst for the social and geopolitical issues that these countries face. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, the "Chinese question" has already become an indirect motor of social and political debate. China has also become an object of scientific examination throughout the region, as can be seen in the evolution of academic Sinology and the expertise on foreign relations generated by think tanks. The third part examines the arguments put forward by think tanks and university academics about China so as to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the connections between Sinophobe and Sinophile viewpoints, as well as their respective weight in the structuration of Central Asian societies.

## I. Russo-Chinese Cooperation/Competition in Central Asia

In the first instance, it is appropriate to draw up a precise overview of the sectors in which Russia and China are cooperating and those in which competition between them is starting to develop. However, the recent nature of this phenomenon of collaboration/competition means that it is still too early to tell whether the old power and the new one will succeed in reaching an agreement on jointly controlling Central Asia, or instead whether the region will serve as a field of confrontation between them. Their capacity to develop an alliance will depend not only on the evolving situation in Central Asia but also on the future of the Russo-Chinese partnership outside of the region. Both powers complement one another in the energy domain, as the construction agreement for a new branch of the Oriental Siberian-Pacific pipeline signed by Transneft and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) at the end of October 2008 confirms. New original bilateral experiences are also being fostered in the Far East, such as in the Blagoveshchensk/Heihe free-trade zone. Moreover, Beijing needs Russian military technology and Moscow needs Chinese financial and banking funds. However, Russia's reactions to the "Sinicization" of its economy and its feelings of impending geopolitical competition with Beijing could well have a negative impact on the evolution of the Russo-Chinese condominium in Central Asia.

The two powers each have totally different historical legacies in the five Central Asian states, giving each specific advantages and disadvantages, the respective weight of which will depend on their capacity to play to their own strengths. The geopolitical sector is the key area in which Moscow and Beijing's aims have converged: both of them call for a multipolar world which would challenge so-called U.S.-led unipolarity. They also want to make sure that the Central Asian states remain in their political fold, away from western interference. Though the geopolitical logic of both powers is

similar, their interests could diverge in the near future over issues to do with the exploitation of Central Asian resources. For the moment, Central Asian states (save Kazakhstan) lack the financial clout to exploit the great potential of their energy reserves, and the market is so vast that Russian and Chinese firms are setting up in the region without having to compete with one another. Even so, the future seems to herald conflict in domains such as hydrocarbons, precious minerals, and especially uranium. Last, social evolutions on the old continent, notably the development of South to North migration flows (from Asia to Russia), might cause the two powers to differ in their relations to Central Asia. While Central Asian states are experiencing significant migration flows toward Russia, for Chinese migrants Central Asia is likely to become a transit or settlement zone.

### **The Differing Historical Legacies of Russia and China in Central Asia**

In 1991, the Soviet Union's collapse reshaped the East/West problematic as it had emerged after the Second World War. Inside Soviet space, a number of cultural elements distinguished the five states from the rest of the former Russian empire, namely their shared cultural traits with the Near or Middle East. The populations of Central Asian countries are composed of either Turkic- (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) or Persian-speaking peoples (Tajikistan and parts of Uzbekistan); in addition, a majority of their populations adhere to Sunni Hanafi Islam, and they share with Persian culture, and, to a lesser degree with the Ottoman empire and the Indo-Pakistani world, numerous historical moments stretching from Antiquity through to Babur in the 16th century. In the beginning of the 1990s these cultural traits were perceived by many observers to be indicators that Central Asia would "rightfully" return to its allegedly natural space, that of Islam. However, after two decades of independence Central Asia's purported "return" to the Muslim world must be relativized. In fact, in the domains of politics, geopolitics, economics and culture, the continuance of a Russo-Soviet framework of thought remains rather striking. In addition, China has now also entered the fray in Central Asia, and is pulling it toward the Asia-Pacific region.

Central Asia future is dependent on its relations with Russia and China, with the exception of to the region's Islamic roots, which rather ties the five states

to the vicissitudes of the Middle-Eastern and Afghan-Pakistani worlds. However, the Russo-Soviet and Chinese legacies in Central Asia are largely divergent, and even opposed. Russia, the ex-colonial power of the last two centuries, has significant strengths in the areas of politics and the economy not to mention culture; China, on the other hand, has had to create relationships with the five states virtually from scratch. Since its reputation was that of a former colonial center and keeping it at distance was the order of the day, Russia initially faced many disadvantages; by contrast, Central Asia perceived China to be a major asset in its attempt to “de-Russify” itself, but the Chinese first had to allay Central Asian suspicions about their regional ambitions. However, in less than two decades, both these legacies have been reshaped in a rather positive way: Russia has partially succeeded in inverting its Soviet legacy, turning it into an asset of shared proximity, while the still relatively unknown China has managed to set itself up as a reliable partner of Central Asian governments.

*Russia: Advantages and Disadvantages of Post-Soviet Continuities*

Russia benefits from a considerable heritage in Central Asia. Contemporary Central Asia is above all a post-Soviet space heir to a Russian colonial legacy of more than one and a half centuries. Though a certain number of reforms are underway (some of which however were initiated during perestroika by the center and not the peripheries), the eighteen years of independence have seemingly been insufficient to “undo” the politico-economic system that prevailed for several decades. And this is the case regardless of the will, real or merely declared, of heads of state and governments to engage in reform. In the 1990s, the Central Asian governments officially declared their willingness to break with this Russian heritage, and present themselves as victims of the Soviet regime. This was a totally understandable stance for states in the process of national construction, states that, along with those of ex-Yugoslavia, were the newest entries to the international arena. But one ought not to be deceived by their resolute declarations of change and renewal, and by their discourses about pursuing a “specific” national development.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On this question, see Sébastien Peyrouse, “Introduction”, in *Gestion de l'indépendance et legs soviétique en Asie centrale. Les Cahiers d'Asie centrale*, no. 13-14, 2004, pp. 9-19.

The most obvious element of continuity with the Soviet Union is in the political field. As has often been noted, most of the political elites have remained largely unchanged since 1991. The Soviet regime did not disappear because of war, foreign occupation, or military defeat; it simply self-imploded. The political elites passed without much difficulty from the discourse of perestroika about sovereignty to one about independence. And this was the case whether they themselves helped to dismantle the regime (i.e. Baltic States, Ukraine), or just passively adapted to the changes such as Central Asia which was reluctant to abandon the Muscovite center. Yet in spite of their discourses of independence, which vaunted the people's and their leaders' struggle for a much-deserved and historically justified nation-state, the Central Asian leaders only narrowly escaped from being seen as remnants of a by-gone era, especially after the events that occurred in the western republics of the Soviet Union and Russia, events that took place without them, and even against them.<sup>7</sup>

Today's political elites in Central Asia are mostly the same as those that were in place during communist times. Three of the first presidents were erstwhile First Secretaries of the Communist Parties of their republics. In Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev held an important position in the official structures of the Academy of Sciences. In Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmon was a former deputy and the director of a sovkhos. And the majority of current ministers and deputies have careers as apparatchiks behind them. Today they are vacating their places which are being taken up by their children, who themselves have been educated in cadre-training institutions linked to the presidential apparatus similar to the former Party's schools. The point here is not to make any a priori negative judgment about this continuity: a number of the cadres have considerable technical or bureaucratic training, and a good knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of their countries. However, this elite's overwhelming continuity from the Soviet period raises numerous long-term problems, which are exacerbated by

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<sup>7</sup> The announcement of the USSR's dissolution on December 8, 1991 by the three presidents of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus provoked the indignation of the Central Asian Republics, who were not consulted.

their enduring paternalistic conceptions of power and by the widespread system of patronage.<sup>8</sup>

If the Central Asian elites reveal broad patterns of continuity, this nevertheless does not mean that significant developments have not occurred throughout the years 1990-2000. For example, those former members of the elite who rallied to opposition parties or took up the leadership of nationalist or Islamic organizations were rapidly eliminated from the establishment's ranks. Also, new public figures have emerged thanks to the economic liberalization, in particular in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The waves of privatization have enabled some individuals to amass enough wealth to embark on political careers. Yet, such cases are still rare and the majority of members of the political, economic, and cultural elite are the same as those established under the Soviet regime, or their children. Indeed, the reforms (or lack thereof in the cases of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) have enabled former apparatchiks to seize control of large national companies: primary resources like cotton, gas, and oil, whether privatized or still state-owned, have remained in the hands of the same groups. Similarly, leaders of *kolkhozes* have become elected presidents or owners of privatized agricultural firms.

As a result, the current regimes in the five states have – to very different degrees but which nonetheless belong to the same lineage – inherited ideological characteristics from the USSR that have in turn been transformed by the new conditions of independence. Despite the few years of “western-style” democracy in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and more moderately in Tajikistan, all five states have adopted an authoritarian structure and endorse Putin's notion of “vertical power”. They have retained numerous traits from

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<sup>8</sup> On the clan and patronage systems, see Kathleen Collins, *The Logic of Clan Politics in Central Asia: Its Impact on Regime Transformation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Edward Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of “Blood” in Kazakhstan and beyond*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004; Frederick Starr, “Clans, Authoritarian Rulers, and Parliaments in Central Asia”, *Silk Road Papers*, Washington DC: The Central Asia and Caucasus Institute, June 2006, <<http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/srp/06/fso6clansauthoritarian.pdf>>; Erica Marat, “The State-Crime Nexus in Central Asia: State Weakness, Organized Crime, and Corruption in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan”, *Silk Road Papers*, Washington DC: The Central Asia and Caucasus Institute, October 2006, <[www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/0610EMarat.pdf](http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/0610EMarat.pdf)>. All internet references were verified on 23 December 2008.



the former regime such as a belief in the need to disseminate a strong ideology among the people, an oversensitivity, or indeed a hostility, toward any uncontrolled association or non-conformist persons, an ethno-nationalism like the one that was prominent in the last decades of the Soviet regime, and, last, national pride, the inflation of which seems to be in disproportion to the declining standards of living.

Thanks to the post-Soviet continuities, Russia has the upper hand in its competition with China for influence in the region. These continuities are underpinned by the following features: that the political and intellectual Central Asian elites were either educated in Moscow or in Leningrad; that the Russian and Central Asian military circles and secret services all belonged to the same administrative entity prior to 1991; that the corporatist strategies of the economic groups were all formed in the same Soviet mould; and that the personnel networks of the Central Asian leaders have had a lot of experience working with their Russian colleagues. It is true that after the implosion of the Soviet Union, resounding critiques rang out throughout Central Asia about Russia and its “colonialism”. But these lasted for a brief period only. Since 2000, Russia has once again become a respected power in Central Asia, admired for its economic and geopolitical revival. Moreover, the onset of social difficulties in the independent states quickly attenuated their criticisms of Moscow. Nostalgia for the Brezhnev years became an increasingly popular leitmotiv, and Russians were soon no longer being blamed for all evils.

On the cultural level, the advantage is also clearly with Russia. Russian still remains the most spoken international language in the region, and even has an official status in three states, namely Kyrgyzstan (officially bilingual), and Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (language of interethnic communication). For the moment, English has not yet managed to unseat the predominance of Russian, still less has Turkish, Arabic, or Chinese. Russian culture remains very present, in particular through the television and cable channels that Moscow broadcasts to Central Asia, but also due to its pop music, and the many imported Russian books. As a whole, the Central Asian populations continue to look at the world through the prism of Russia, which they perceive as more familiar to that of Western Europe and the United States.

*China: Developing Good Neighborly Relations and Settling Border Disputes*

China, for its part, has come to Central Asia with much fewer assets than Russia. Until the beginning of the 1990s, the direct relations between these two spaces were impeded by the generally bad state of Sino-Soviet relations, but also because international relations were regarded as a space “reserved” for the Russians. The federated republics, therefore, did not engage in any relations with foreign countries that were not first decided in Moscow. An example of this was the decision to promote Uzbekistan as a leading light of “Soviet Islam” in the socialist countries of the Near and Middle East. For the Central Asian states, the establishing of direct bilateral relations with Beijing has necessitated overcoming the old and extremely negative clichés of Soviet propaganda, clichés which worked to reinforce the already long-standing apprehensions of Central Asian societies about China. Indeed, in the collective memory preserved in the oral epics of Central Asian peoples, in particular among the Kazakh and the Kyrgyz, traditionally the Middle Kingdom is presented as the historical enemy of peoples of the Steppe and an opponent of Islam’s eastward expansion.

The Chinese authorities, aware of their negative image in Central Asia, decided as of 1992 to play the role of good neighbor. They immediately recognized the independence of the new states and welcomed their diplomatic delegations with full honors.<sup>9</sup> Ever since, Beijing has strived to dissociate itself from a Russia accused of harboring haughty and scornful attitudes by emphasizing, by contrast, that it considers the Central Asian states as its equals. However, in order to gain the confidence of the local elites, China first had to settle the unresolved border disputes from the Soviet period. Beijing considered that it had been a victim of the “unequal treaties” signed in the nineteenth century with European empires, in particular the Tsarist empire. In Soviet times, China had hoped to recover some 1,500,000 km<sup>2</sup>, of which nearly two-thirds, that is 910,000 km<sup>2</sup>, were in Central Asia. For many decades, the tense relations between the Soviet and Chinese communist parties prevented any settlement of these disputes,

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<sup>9</sup> On the diplomatic relations between the PRC and Central Asia, see Thierry Kellner, *L’Occident de la Chine, Pékin et la nouvelle Asie centrale (1991-2001)*, Paris: PUF, 2008.

which were thus bequeathed to the newly independent states.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of the 1990s, the Chinese authorities, still under international sanction after the violent repression in Tiananmen in June 1989, accepted to reduce their territorial claims to “only” 34,000 km<sup>2</sup>, chiefly out of a desire to secure political allies in Central Asia.<sup>11</sup>

By comparison with its highly-charged dispute with the Soviet regime, the ten-year period it took China to resolve its border disputes with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan seemed relatively short and peaceful. Initially, the Chinese authorities, no longer having to negotiate with an ultra-powerful Soviet Union, had thought that their economic and geopolitical differential over the new states would make negotiations easier and procure them greater advantage – especially as the Central Asian governments were in search of partners and needed to find alternatives for the loss of Soviet subsidies. The negotiations, however, turned out to be more complicated than Beijing had expected. This was so for many reasons. The Central Asian governments, concerned about a future Chinese hegemony after more than a century of Russo-Soviet domination, were not to yield easily. The pride of their newly acquired independence could not be persuaded to give up territories lightly, especially as Sinophobe feelings ran particularly high. Last, the threat of international terrorism impeded negotiations concerning the border demilitarization and retarded the idea of future joint border surveillance.

Beijing thus remained content with the cession of territories far smaller than those stipulated in its original claims. But the territorial areas it has now acquired nonetheless do have a real economic and strategic viability, including access to rivers, subsoil resources, and high mountain passes. Beijing first managed to obtain symbolic recognition of the illegality of the nineteenth-century treaties, rendered ineffective by the new treaties signed with Kazakhstan in 1994 (zones still in dispute were settled in 1999),

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<sup>10</sup> E. D. Stepanov, *Politika nachinaetsia s granitsy. Nekotorye voprosy pogranichnoi politiki KNR vtoroi poloviny XX v.* [Politics begin with Borders. Some Questions about the PRC's border policy in the second half of the twentieth century], Moscow: Institut Dal'nego Vostoka RAN, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> China claimed 2,235 km<sup>2</sup> of territory in Kazakhstan divided in eleven zones, some of which comprised only tens of km<sup>2</sup>. In Kyrgyzstan it claimed 3,728 km<sup>2</sup> divided in five zones, but originally continued to insist on nearly all of its claims in Tajikistan, from which it demanded a large part of the Pamir (28,430 km<sup>2</sup>) equal to one fifth of the country's overall surface area.

Kyrgyzstan in 1996 (here also, resolutions over disputed areas were settled in 1999), and with Tajikistan in 2002.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the cession of territory was viewed negatively by the populations of the two first states, who saw their governments as capitulators and suspected that the Chinese would soon lay additional claims. Indeed, at the same time, China has not hesitated to exert political pressure at the highest levels to block solidarity from developing between Central Asia's Uyghur diaspora and Xinjiang, a move which raised suspicions as to its real intentions. With the border issues resolved and the Uyghur question crushed, China launched a trade offensive in Central Asia and reinforced its presence in the region by investing massively in security and strategy matters within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In less than two decades, China has succeeded in creating an image for itself as a serious diplomatic partner as well as a respected and reliable, if somewhat troublesome, ally.

Russia and China thus have vastly differing legacies on which to base their activities in Central Asia, each legacy having its own advantages and disadvantages. Moscow has partly managed to circumvent the negativity associated with its colonial past and has used it to instill a sentiment of shared proximity. That said, the Kremlin is still too inclined to think of Central Asia as an acquired sphere of influence, and the Central Asian governments feel this is disrespectful. China, for its part, knows that it must first gain the trust of the new states if it wants to be viewed as a reliable partner with no ulterior motives of conquest, which is not yet the case. As a result of their paradoxical relationships to Central Asia, Moscow and Beijing have not had to compete against one another: on the contrary, for the moment, the two powers have succeeded in making their mutual interests converge.

### **Russia and China: Sharing of Geopolitical Influence in Central Asia**

Russia and China seem to have similar geopolitical and geostrategic objectives in Central Asia: both of them desire stability on their borders, are concerned about the ability of the Central Asian states to withstand

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<sup>12</sup> For the Kazakhstan case, see Zulfiiia A. Amanzholova, Murat M. Atanov, Bigalii Sh. Turarbekov, *Pravda o gosudarstvennoi granitse respubliki Kazakhstan* [The Truth About the State Borders of the Republic of Kazakhstan], Almaty: Zhibek Zholy, 2006.

destabilization (whether from civil war, Islamist insurrection, popular uprising, or palace revolution), and consider the region as the main transit zone for drug-trafficking from Afghanistan. They have therefore coordinated their regional surveillance activities through measures designed to control military aid to the five states, to shape their chief security policies, to give the regimes political support, and to coax the local governments into anti-western mindsets.

### *Common Political Objectives*

In respect of their political objectives, both Moscow and Beijing are on the same wavelength, insofar as both reject the notion that the West ought to have any right to oversee Eurasian space. Before 2001, the United States' economic presence in Central Asia was viewed with lesser concern in Beijing, but the installation of military bases after September 11 was perceived as a direct threat to Chinese interests.<sup>13</sup> The increasingly authoritarian turn taken by the Central Asian regimes throughout the 1990s and the 2000s have negatively impacted upon diplomatic relations with the West. The Central Asian governments have criticized the West's constant reproaches about democratization, civil society, good governance, and human rights. They have argued that their societies do not have the right conditions to import political criteria which they see as specific to western countries. Their anti-western arguments received the support of both Russia and China. For instance, the Russian/CIS and Chinese envoys that have been sent to act as observers of legislative and presidential elections in Central Asia always declare them to be above-board; by contrast, western organizations like the OSCE tend to denounce what they see as flagrant violations of the minimal conditions for political diversity.<sup>14</sup>

This political rapprochement between Russia, China, and Central Asia was facilitated by the common struggle against the Islamist threat. Beijing established itself in the region chiefly by its will to fight against the Islamist movements, for which it received positive approval from all the Central

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<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Paramonov, Oleg Stolpovski, *Chinese Security Interests in Central Asia*, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Central Asian Series Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 08/20, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Marlène Laruelle, Sébastien Peyrouse, *Asie centrale, la dérive autoritaire. Cinq républiques entre héritage soviétique, dictature et islam*, Paris: Autrement/CERI, 2006.

Asian capitals. A Sino-Central Asian geo-strategic rapprochement is also materializing on the Afghan question. For the Central Asian states, Afghanistan remains an “open wound” which feeds Islamism, drugs, and arms networks, and prevents the development of relations with the South. So long as there is no stability in Kabul, it will be difficult for the Central Asian states to develop economic relations with India or Pakistan (in the form of pipelines, export of electricity, or business relations).<sup>15</sup> China shares Central Asia’s concerns and wants to see stability on its short Sino-Afghan border. Beijing is thus financing a growing number of projects in Afghanistan, thus meriting recognition from Central Asian states as one of their essential strategic partners.<sup>16</sup> This alliance permits all domestic political opposition to be bracketed, and indeed conflated, with the perceived threat of Islamism: China, for example, has backed the Kremlin in its wars in Chechnya, while Russia and the Central Asian states have supported the Chinese policy on Xinjiang, and Moscow and Beijing have contributed technological and military know-how to help the Central Asian regimes fight not only the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Hizb ut-Tahrir, but also the broader secular political opposition.

This triangular cooperation intensified after the “colored revolutions” in Georgia in 2003, the Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005: Moscow refused to accept that such vitally strategic neighboring countries could wind up in the hands of pro-western political forces. Beijing, for its part, grew wary of the United States’ advance towards its borders. President Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, and President Emomali Rakhmon of Tajikistan understood that they faced the same kind of danger, so they sought the support of forces that would enable them to hold onto power. In this climate, they all fell in line behind Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao, echoing their accusations of unacceptable western interference, and arguing that strong regimes were needed to avoid Islamist destabilization. This political rapprochement has had a significant impact on

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<sup>15</sup> Frederick Starr (ed.), *The New Silk Roads. Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia*, Washington DC: The Central Asia and Caucasus Institute, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Ramakant Dwivedi, “China’s Central Asia Policy in Recent Times”, *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2006, p. 158; Thierry Kellner, “Le ‘dragon’ et la ‘tulipe’ : les relations sino-afghanes dans la période post-11 septembre”, *Asia Papers*, Institute of Contemporary China Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Bruxelles, Winter 2008/2009, January 2009, <http://www.vub.ac.be/biccs/>.

Central Asian societies: political reforms for democratization have been impeded; the activities of NGOs and civil society are being increasingly curtailed; and obtaining access to new technologies and to media such as the Internet has become more difficult. The Kremlin is admired for its capacity to control its political opposition and is held up as a model for emulation, while China is appreciated for providing technology that restricts access to the Internet and software that can block dissident sites.<sup>17</sup>

This alliance between Russia, China, and the Central Asian regimes reached its apogee during the Andijan insurrection of May 13, 2005, which the Uzbek authorities came down hard upon. Western countries condemned Islam Karimov's regime for its disproportional use of force and massacring of civilians, rejecting Tashkent's official explanation that there had been an attempted Islamist *coup d'état*; however, both the Kremlin and China came to the rescue of the Uzbek regime.<sup>18</sup> In November 2005, the United States was asked to leave the military base at Karshi-Khanabad, a symbol of Tashkent's strategic turnaround back toward Moscow and Beijing.<sup>19</sup> The basis of this political rapprochement is essentially a common condemnation of western influence in the region: it was not without reluctance that the Central Asian regimes returned to the fold of their Russian "big brother", but they did so because they appreciated the Kremlin's pragmatic stance. Russia's desire to promote strategic cooperation and common economic development without appeals to Central Asian regimes bent on maintaining the Putin principle of "vertical power" and on repudiating political alternation.

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, when the second Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov reopened internet cafes in February 2007, his act was accompanied by the signing of contracts with Chinese companies for software designed to control access to sites.

<sup>18</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, "Le tournant ouzbek de 2005. Eléments d'interprétation de l'insurrection d'Andijan", *La Revue internationale et stratégique*, no. 64, 2006, pp. 78-87. On the differing viewpoints in this polemic see: Fiona Hill, Kevin Jones, "Fear of Democracy or Revolution: The Reaction to Andijan", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2006, pp. 111-125; Martha Brill Olcott, Marina Barnett, *The Andijan Uprising, Akramiya and Akram Yuldashev*, June 22, 2006, <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=18453&prog=zru>>; Shirin Akiner, "Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment", *Silk Road Papers*, Washington DC: The Central Asia and Caucasus Institute, July 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Gleason, "The Uzbek Expulsion of U.S. Forces and Realignment in Central Asia", *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2006, pp. 49-60.

Nevertheless, this alliance was tested by Moscow's recognition in summer 2008 of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit held in Dushanbe at the end of August, the four Central Asian member states instead endorsed China's stance, referring to the fact that the Organization's charter prescribes respect for the inviolability of state borders. They declared their formal support for the Russian intervention and denounced American arm-twisting in favor of Tbilisi, but refused to go along with Russia and recognize independence. At a meeting of the CIS's Collective Security Treaty Organization at the beginning of September, their discourse remained much the same: they issued a positive declaration about Moscow's pacifying role, and a denunciation of the Georgian military intervention, but maintained an awkward silence on the question of recognizing independence. Moscow's instrumentalization of Central Asia's Russian minorities and declaration that it would come to the defense of its "compatriots" elicited disapproval from the Central Asian regimes. On this question, then, China managed to score points by remaining faithful to its policy of refusing all separatism.<sup>20</sup>

*Russia: the Primary Strategic and Military Partner*

Russia's return to Central Asia is not solely political, but also military and strategic. Even today, the five states are politically incapable of developing military cooperation between themselves. Russia has thus managed, without too many difficulties, to remain their principal military partner. The Central Asian states require a lot of aid in this sector: their armies are badly trained, they lack quality equipment and materials, are undermined by corruption, and the mediocre living conditions mean that their military personnel is small in number and unmotivated.<sup>21</sup> In the 1990s, Russia helped patrol the former Soviet Union borders of Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan with Iran, Afghanistan, and China, and continued to patrol those of Tajikistan until 2005. Moreover, in most Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, which is very reluctant to permit any Russian interference, Russia either has

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<sup>20</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, "Facing the Challenge of Separatism: The EU, Central Asia and the Uyghur Issue", *EUCAM Brief Paper*, no. 4, January 2009, <[shop.ceps.eu/download.php?item\\_id=1787](http://shop.ceps.eu/download.php?item_id=1787)>.

<sup>21</sup> Erica Marat, "Soviet Military Legacy and Regional Security Cooperation in Central Asia", *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2007, pp. 83-114.



military bases, rents strategic sites, or participates in joint military exercises.<sup>22</sup> Last, Moscow continues to train the majority of Central Asia's military cadres, and remains the primary partner of the five states with respect to purchases of military equipment.

Since 2000, the Kremlin has launched a series of multilateral security initiatives with the Central Asian regimes. The stated aim of these initiatives is the joint struggle against the terrorist threat. Although its military relations with Kazakhstan are very close, Moscow considers that its priorities lie with the weakest links of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Both countries benefit from Russian support and the more the Central Asian governments show that they are favorable to Russia's stabilizing presence, the more substantial that support is.<sup>23</sup> The CIS Anti-Terrorist Center, based in Moscow, provides for the training of elite forces and secret services through its collective "Anti-Terror" operations and the aid given by the Russian security services. As for the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), its success can be put down to the many collective actions undertaken under its guidance.<sup>24</sup> The Collective Rapid Deployment Force's (CRDF) principal mission is to fight terrorism and drug-trafficking in Central Asia.<sup>25</sup> It holds annual joint military exercises called "Rubezh" to simulate terrorist attacks. The CSTO also includes a provision for the preferential sale of Russian military equipment to member states. This is of great interest to Central Asia, especially because all five states increased

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<sup>22</sup> In 2005, the first joint antiterrorist exercises between Russia and Uzbekistan were organized on the Forish military firing range. Moscow also desires to acquire the right to use the Ustyurt Plateau to enable Roskosmos to conduct space tests.

<sup>23</sup> Leszek Buszynski, "Russia's New Role in Central Asia", *Asian Survey*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2005, pp. 546-565.

<sup>24</sup> In May 2002, Russia transformed the CIS Collective Security Treaty, originally agreed upon in Tashkent in 1992, into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which, in the first place, gathered together Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia and Belarus, followed in 2006 by Uzbekistan.

<sup>25</sup> This force is comprised by Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian, and Tajik units, which form 10 battalions totalling around 4,000 persons. In 2009 Moscow proposed to increase it to 15,000 men.

military expenditure by an average of 50 percent in 2007, the highest increase being in Kazakhstan.<sup>26</sup>

Moscow is aiming to regain ground in the military sphere in order to counter the Central Asian states' cooperation with NATO. It wants to stop the flow of western aid to Central Asian states whether in the form of military personnel training or donations of military equipment.<sup>27</sup> The Kremlin hopes to transform the CSTO into a force on a par with NATO, so that it can speak to the latter as an equal, and oblige the Central Asian regimes to go through Moscow before engaging in any common military initiatives with the West.<sup>28</sup> Russia's political and geopolitical return to Central Asia is thus confirming Moscow's wishes to maintain its control over the former post-Soviet republics and to continue to wield influence on the evolving situation in Central Asia. So, after many years of rapprochement with the West, whose influence is in decline throughout the region, the five Central Asian states have partly returned back to Russia's fold.

At the level of military cooperation, China is far behind Russia, of whom it is also an important client.<sup>29</sup> It has had to develop the People's Liberation Army's international relations from scratch, since after the Cultural Revolution its cadres had been forbidden from engaging in training abroad, a

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<sup>26</sup> "Strany TsentrAsii rezko uvelichivaiut voennye raskhody" [The countries of Central Asia are dramatically increasing their military expenditure], *CentrAsia*, January 23, 2007, <<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1169551200>>.

<sup>27</sup> Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan joined the Partnership for Peace when it was founded in 1994. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan joined in 1995, and Tajikistan, delayed by its civil war (1992-1997) only in 2002. In 1995, Turkmenistan reached an agreement with NATO on its first Individual Partnership Programme (IPP), while Uzbekistan followed suit in 1996. Kazakhstan did not enter into its first IPP until 2006, while neither Kyrgyzstan nor Tajikistan have yet joined the program. A new hurdle was overcome in 2005, when Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan acquired their first Planning and Review Process (PARP), whose main objective is to ensure the interoperability of national forces with NATO forces. Kyrgyzstan adopted its first PARP in 2007, while both Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are still in the preparatory phase.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Nikitin, "Post-Soviet Military-Political Integration: The Collective Security Treaty Organization and its Relations with the EU and NATO", *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2007, pp. 35-44.

<sup>29</sup> In 2003, China accounted for practically half of all Russia's military exports. Leila M. Muzaparova (ed.), *Sovremennyi Kitai. Ekonomika, demografiia, vneshniaia politika* [Contemporary China. Economy, Demographics and Foreign Policy], Almaty: IWEP, 2007, p. 561.

state of affairs which lasted until 1996.<sup>30</sup> As a result, Chinese military aid to Central Asia remains limited and is mostly directed to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, although Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan have also benefited from occasional aid (e.g. in the donations of equipment and training of military personnel). Its military relations with Ashgabat took off in 2007, although it is hard to obtain accurate information on this matter. A delegation of Turkmen officers directed by the Defense Ministry was sent to China in 2007 and it seems that as of 2008, Beijing will be partly responsible for supplying the Turkmen army with material, including modern equipment and uniforms, and is about to offer the country a loan of US\$ 3 million for its military needs.<sup>31</sup>

In Kazakhstan, the Chinese are simply unable to rival Russia. Even though Kazakhstan since 1997 has received more than 50 million RMB (more than US\$ 7 million) of Chinese aid in communications technology and jeeps, and also still hopes to obtain free transfers of its decommissioned military assets, it continues overwhelmingly to buy its weaponry from Russia. Moreover, most of Kazakhstan's military cadres are trained in Russian academies; by comparison, from around 1990 to 2005, Beijing had trained no more than a total of 15 Kazakh officers.<sup>32</sup> Considering the relations between the countries, this is a bare minimum, but their poor level of proficiency in Chinese makes training larger numbers of Kazakhstani officers in China rather difficult. Moreover, Astana's military modernization program is designed to meet Russian criteria, and to improve prospects of interoperability with NATO in line with the Planning and Review Process, all of which leaves little room for China.

On the bilateral level, information suggests that the Kazakhstan National Security Service has stepped up the monitoring of Uyghur militants based in

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<sup>30</sup> Bulat K. Sultanov (ed.), *Politika i interesy mirovykh derzhav v Kazakhstane* [The Policies and Interests of World Powers in Kazakhstan], Almaty: Friedrich Erbert Stiftung, 2002, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, "Sino-Kazakh Relations: A Nascent Strategic Partnership", *China Brief*, November 7, 2008, <[http://www.jamestown.org/china\\_brief/article.php?articleid=2374523](http://www.jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2374523)>.

<sup>32</sup> To facilitate reading, we have chosen to retain the adjectives "Kazakh", "Kyrgyz", etc., to speak not only of the titular populations, but of all a country's citizens independent of their ethnic origin, even though scientifically it would have been correct to write "Kazakhstani", "Kyrgyzstani", etc.

Kazakhstan, and has increased intelligence exchanges with China on this issue. It also seems that the Kazakhstan Defense Ministry is particularly interested in the Chinese Special Forces, which are trained for antiterrorist operations,<sup>33</sup> even though Russia's FSB also provides Astana with specialized training in this area. Sino-Kazakhstan strategic cooperation seems destined to increase in another sector, that of cross-border security cooperation. Within the next few years, both countries hope to put into place a bilateral system for border control to facilitate cooperation between Chinese and Kazakhstan customs officers. Although not the main point of passage for opium coming from Afghanistan, which mostly passes through Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, the China-Kazakhstan border posts are significant points of passage for large amounts of acetic anhydride, the chemical precursor used to turn opium into heroin.<sup>34</sup> Sino-Central Asian strategic cooperation therefore still has many challenges ahead of it, principally due to the weak relations between Central Asia and China in modern history, but also due to Russia's continuing dominance, which has made good use of its historical legacy to shore up military partnerships.

*Is the SCO an Instrument of Chinese Interests or an Impediment to them?*

The SCO is the only multilateral tool that China has at its disposal to influence the geopolitical positioning, military stances, and domestic policy choices of the Central Asian states. It is the only regional organization to which both China and four of the five Central Asian states belong.<sup>35</sup> In the space of only ten years, the SCO and its precursor, the Shanghai Group established in 1996, have had undeniable success: they have worked to attenuate old historical tensions between the Russian and Chinese spheres of influence, established mechanisms of cooperation enabling the states of the former USSR to become more familiar with their Chinese neighbor, and also

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<sup>33</sup> Roger N. McDermott, "Kazakhstan's Emerging Security Ties With China", *The Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst*, September 5, 2007, <[www.cacianalyst.org/newsite/files/070905Analyst.pdf](http://www.cacianalyst.org/newsite/files/070905Analyst.pdf)>.

<sup>34</sup> *Precursor Control on Central Asia's Borders with China*, Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Regional Office for Central Asia, no date of publication.

<sup>35</sup> Turkmenistan has refused to participate in any regional organization except the UN Special Program for the Central Asian Economies (SPECA), which includes the five countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan, and the Organization of Economic Cooperation (OEC), created in 1985 to promote economic cooperation between Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey.

to establish a common discourse on the menaces that the region's states judge to be threatening, the foremost being Islamism. The SCO enjoys the international recognition that all the members states had been seeking. Now, having attained a crucial level of development and institutionalization, the organization is facing new challenges and is far from being an instrument of China's interests solely.<sup>36</sup>

On the strictly geopolitical level, the SCO has no clearly defined common objectives. Both China and Russia claim to have been the victims of Washington's policies of containment; China because of the United States' activism in the Pacific, and Russia because of the regime changes in the post-Soviet space. Although the SCO is undeniably an attempt to counter western influence in the heart of the Eurasian continent, there is no member state that wants to implement aggressive policies clearly aimed at negating U.S. interests.<sup>37</sup> China cannot afford to be declared as one of Washington's enemy countries since its economy is very dependent on its relations with the United States. As for the Central Asian states, they want to maintain relations with the West to balance the influence of both Moscow and Beijing, as well as to reach out of their international isolation. For its part, Russia's aim is rather to signal to the West that it has geopolitical alternatives should the European Union and the United States decide to actively oppose its revived great power ambitions. Although its membership is comprised of authoritarian regimes distrustful of the West, the SCO has not managed to develop a stance with respect to other regional and international organizations. Only recently created, it lacks both a long-term project and the effectiveness of better established structures such as the CSTO. Its regional influence remains weak, due not only to the conflicts of interest between its member states, but also to the existence of generally preferred alternative structures.

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<sup>36</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, "China's Central Asian Strategy and the Xinjiang Connection: Predicaments and Medicaments in a Contemporary Perspective", *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2008, pp. 109-130.

<sup>37</sup> Akihiro Iwashita, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Its Implications for Eurasian Security: A New Dimension of 'Partnership' after the Post-Cold War Period", *Slavic Eurasia's Integration into the World Economy and Community*, Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2004, pp. 259-281.

This is the case, for example, with military cooperation. The multilateral exercises that the SCO has carried out for several years are not at all illustrative of its capacity to confront common threats: while the SCO has been important in defusing potential border conflicts, it has not succeeded in organizing multilateral peace operations either within or outside of its zone. Unlike the Collective Security Treaty Organization, it has no solidly constituted military structure, does not present itself as a military defense alliance analogous to NATO, and has not tried to form multilateral military or police units. Russia has refused on several occasions to participate in exercises in which China is also involved. Notwithstanding the cooperation agreement signed in 2007 between the SCO and the CSTO, Moscow clearly prefers to give priority to the latter, which it dominates, rather than share its know-how with a rival like China.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the idea of having to divulge sensitive information about new technologies and the nuclear sector is still not well-viewed by either Russian or Chinese military staff. Though both capitals do not officially consider each other as potential enemies, traditional mistrust and feelings of rivalry inevitably still prevail.

At the strategic level, the SCO's activities are numerous but remain mostly at the declaratory level. Despite the speeches of the General Secretary and the implementation of a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent, the multilateral security dynamic remains embryonic.<sup>39</sup> The absence of coordination between member states is patent, the willingness to exchange information restrained, the financial means way too few, and the bureaucratic structure weak. In addition, the lack of real common jurisdiction in most of the domains and the lack of intermediaries for important affairs relating to this type of dossier considerably weakens the potential for action. In key sectors, the RATS can hardly be considered as a sort of regional "Interpol": its activities are confined to coordinating the various national agencies involved in the struggle against terrorism. The SCO nevertheless

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<sup>38</sup> Adiljan Umarov, Dmitri Pashkhun, *Tensions in Sino-Central-Asian Relations and their Implications for Regional Security*, Central Asian Series, Conflict Studies Research Center, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 06/02, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Alyson J. K. Bailes, Pal Dunay, Pan Guang, Mikhail Troitskiy, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 17, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, May 2007.

facilitates information exchanges and doctrinal dialogue, thus allowing for a more comprehensive understanding between security structures.

The widening of the SCO's competencies in the economic domain has also aroused debates between member states, revealing divergences, and even contradictions, of interest. China is quite obviously the motor of the SCO's economic reorientation, since it sees in it an opportunity for the development of the "Far West" and the conquest of new markets. But China's dynamic in favor of a common market has not garnered unanimous support and is perceived as hegemonic. Indeed, in view of the growth differential, Russia and the Central Asian states are all fearful of becoming Chinese economic protectorates. As a result, Moscow is keen on underscoring the differences in economic levels between the states, and argues that a free-trade zone is only possible between countries with similar rhythms of development. In a post-Soviet space where the industrial sector is yet to recover after the USSR's collapse, the existing enterprises are unable to match either the efficiency or the profitability of their Chinese competitors. In addition, trade between member states is considerably impeded by the absence of any payment agreements, not to mention by transport problems, the complexity of border and customs procedures, and the refusal of some states, like Uzbekistan, to facilitate the circulation of goods and people.<sup>40</sup>

In the economic sector Moscow has more effective institutional mechanisms than the SCO at its disposal. Recently it succeeded in tightening its influence over Central Asia's broad economic orientation by merging the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO)<sup>41</sup> and the Eurasian Economic Community, although this will not curb the exponential development of Sino-Central Asian trade.<sup>42</sup> At any rate, the SCO is as yet unable to rival the

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<sup>40</sup> To date only China and Kyrgyzstan are members of the World Trade Organization, the other states being only candidates (except Turkmenistan).

<sup>41</sup> Including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the CACO was established in 1994 and restructured in 2001, but it has proven ineffective in unifying the economic policies of its member states. However, in October 2008, Uzbekistan withdrew from the Eurasian Economic Community because of its doubts over the entity's efficiency.

<sup>42</sup> For more details, see Sébastien Peyrouse, "The Economic Aspects of the Chinese-Central-Asia Rapprochement", *Silk Road Papers*, Washington DC: The Central Asia and Caucasus Institute, September 2007, <[http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/2007/0709ChinaCentral\\_Asia.pdf](http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/2007/0709ChinaCentral_Asia.pdf)>.

Eurasian Economic Community, to the great displeasure of the Chinese authorities. However, some economic sectors are becoming increasingly developed within the SCO multilateral framework: Moscow and the Central Asian capitals are pushing to have collective negotiations with Beijing in the energy sector (e.g. on the transport corridor between China and the Caspian Sea via Russia and Central Asia) in order to facilitate the realization of costly projects, and to diversify exports in case of disagreement with their western partners.<sup>43</sup> Beijing, then, is not encouraged to intervene economically except when solicited by its Russian and Central Asian partners to provide financial assistance.

Russia and China have to date succeeded, then, in sharing their Central Asian sphere of influence. Both have the same overall geopolitical objectives, wanting to avoid all domestic destabilization of the Central Asian regimes and to forestall the development of western influence in the region. Their respective roles have thus been allocated in accordance with each power's specific spheres of competence. Russia is unrivalled in the military sector, since China is lagging behind its technological means and know-how. Besides, the Central Asian governments are concerned about infiltration from the Chinese secret services. Beijing has thus had difficulties in transforming the SCO into a security-oriented organization like the CSTO. Notwithstanding, it seems quite satisfied to leave Moscow in charge of the main security questions, which are difficult and costly, preferring to concentrate on economic development and on stabilizing sensitive domestic zones such as Xinjiang and Tibet. But Beijing has also been compelled to curb its desires to use the SCO as the major instrument of its economic development: so long as Russia remains opposed to the project of a common economic space, it will find it difficult to impose this idea on the Central Asian states. However, China's economic strength does not require a multilateral framework in order to assert itself in Central Asia; it can impose itself in bilateral frameworks over which Moscow can have no influence.

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<sup>43</sup> Huasheng Zhao, "Kitai, Tsentral'naia Aziia i Shankhaiskaia Organizatsiia sotrudnichestva" [China, Central Asia and the SCO], *Carnegie Working Papers*, no. 5, Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005.



### **Russia/China: Economic Competition or Collaboration?**

The economic question is the central issue in the debate over Russo-Chinese collaboration/competition in Central Asia. Although geopolitically speaking Russia's and China's interests are broadly in line with one another, their economic power differential is a potential source of great tension. Like Central Asia, Russia is a producer of primary resources. However, it cannot do without Central Asian reserves, because it gets part of its revenues from transit rights and resale of Central Asian production with a significant price mark-up on the European market. China, for its part, is in need of primary resources and is seeking to diversify imports by expanding its overland trade with landlocked Eurasia to mitigate the geopolitical vulnerabilities of relying one-sidedly on sea-borne imports. Both powers therefore have motives for collaborating in Central Asia, but also concerns that may create competition in the longer term.

#### *Russia/Central Asia and China/Central Asia: Comparable Commercial Flows?*

In the 1990s, Russo-Central Asian trade and Sino-Central Asian trade was difficult to compare inasmuch as the latter was still very undeveloped. Between 1992 and 1998, and despite its geopolitical decline in Central Asia, Russia's trade volume with the five states remained steady at around US\$ 6-7 billion per year. China's trade figures, however, which stood at US\$ 350 million in 1992, doubled to US\$ 700 million by 1998. Since 2000 the situation has rapidly evolved. Between 2000 and 2003, Central Asian trade with Russia stagnated at its 1990s levels, but the trade between China and Central Asia increased by more than 200 percent, from about one billion dollars to more than three billion annually.<sup>44</sup> An exponential increase of 150 percent followed between 2004 and 2006, with Sino-Central Asian trade reaching a value of more than ten billion dollars. In 2007, Russian-Central Asian trade was US\$ 21 billion, while that of Sino-Central Asian trade was between US\$ 14 and 18 billion.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Vladimir Paramonov, Aleksei Stokov, *Ekonomicheskoe prisutstvie Rossii i Kitaia v Tsentral'noi Azii* [The economic presence of Russia and China in Central Asia], Central Asian Series, Conflict Studies Research Center, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 07/12, 2007, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to obtain a precise assessment of China-Central Asia trade figures because the Central Asian official statistics take little account of the extent of cross-

The trade gap between the two countries is thus reducing to the advantage of China, whose commercial development indeed seems exponential. Taking the shuttle trade into account, China's economic presence in bordering countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is already greater than Russia's.<sup>46</sup> This dynamic was previously more or less limited to those two states, but now affects the entire region. For example, since the opening of the Kulma/Kalasu border post in 2004 shuttle trade with Tajikistan has taken off, as it has in Uzbekistan post-2005 following its geopolitical U-turn after the events in Andijan. The death of President Saparmurat Niazov of Turkmenistan in December 2006 had similar effects on bringing Turkmenistan back into the regional arena and opening it to Chinese economic influence. The disproportion of both Russia's and China's economic size in comparison with Central Asia remains striking: Central Asia represents only 3 percent of Russia's foreign trade, and less than 1 percent of China's. *A contrario*, the states of Central Asia have China and Russia as their principal trading partners, with a 2006 average of 17 percent for Russia, and 12 percent for China. However, there are significant differences in trade levels for each country:

	Russian share of country's foreign trade, in percent	Chinese share of country's foreign trade, in percent
Kazakhstan	18.87	15.5
Kyrgyzstan	27.24	34.25
Tajikistan	12.22	10.77
Uzbekistan	16.39	5.71
Turkmenistan	9.76	1.37

Table extracted from: Vladimir Paramonov, Aleksei Stokov, *Ekonomicheskoe prisutstvie Rossii i Kitaia v Tsentral'noi Azii* [The Economic Presence of Russia and China in Central Asia], Central Asian Series, Conflict Studies Research Center, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 07/12, 2007, p. 4.

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border trade, and cannot measure the amount of illegal trade, particularly in metals. Gaël Raballand, Bartłomiej Kaminski, "La déferlante économique chinoise et ses conséquences en Asie centrale", *Monde chinois*, no. 11, 2007, pp. 129-134.

<sup>46</sup> Gaël Raballand, Agnès Andréysy, "Why should Trade between Central Asia and China Continue to Expand?", *Asia Europe Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2007, pp. 235-252.

Central Asia's foreign economic relations with Russia and China follow the same logic. The five states are increasing the amount of raw materials (energy, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, and minerals) that they export to Russia and China. This accounts for two-thirds of their exports, the rest being made up of services but not a single finished product. Conversely, they import a massive amount of Russian and Chinese finished products, which account for 65 percent of Russian imports, and 92 percent of Chinese imports, to Central Asia.<sup>47</sup> Whatever the future holds for Russo-Chinese competition in Central Asia, the region is bound to experience a reinforcement of its economic specialization. As almost all Central Asian states exclusively are exporters of raw materials, their last transformation industries are at risk of becoming completely extinct. This restrictive specialization, coupled with continuing deindustrialization, might then expose it to social destabilization, insofar as it will accelerate the declining living standards of certain strata of the population, and reduce Central Asia's stock of human resources and labor skills in an increasingly globalized world.

#### *Energy Resources – the Primary Stake of Russia's and China's Presence in Central Asia*

In the 1990s, the major Russian companies followed their own policies, often in contradiction to those of the Kremlin. Under Putin, however, state interests and those of the major companies have been made to coincide.<sup>48</sup> Since 2003, the numerous western companies that invested in the region in the 1990s have faced Russian companies' growing competition. These companies have managed to win long-term preferential agreements enabling them to retain quasi-monopolies over the export of Central Asian energy resources.<sup>49</sup> In 2006, Russia became the main trading partner of both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan when the value of Kazakh-Russian trade topped US\$ 10 billion and Russian-Uzbek trade reached close to US\$ 3 billion – representing more than a quarter of Tashkent's total foreign trade. These

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<sup>47</sup> Vladimir Paramonov, Aleksei Stokov, *Ekonomicheskoe prisutstvie Rossii i Kitaia v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Keith Crane, D. J. Peterson, Olga Olikier, "Russian Investment in the Commonwealth of Independent States", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 46, no. 6, 2005, pp. 405-444.

<sup>49</sup> Sally N. Cummings, "Happier Bedfellows? Russia and Central Asia under Putin", *Asian Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2001, pp. 142-152.

increases are mostly due to increased gas and oil exports by both states. The proportion of hydrocarbons in the total volume of exports from the Central Asian region to Russia grew from 34 percent in 2003 to 56 percent in 2006.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the failure of Russian companies to acquire the rights to exploit the Tengiz and Kashagan sites, Moscow remains Kazakhstan's privileged oil partner.<sup>51</sup> In recent years Russia has visibly succeeded in making a comeback on the Kazakhstani market. In 2003, it concluded an agreement with the state company KazMunayGas for the joint exploitation of three sites – Kurmangazy (Rosneft), Tsentralnoye (Gazprom), and Khvalinskoye (Lukoil). In January 2004, Lukoil outbid many large western companies by securing an exploitation contract with KazMunayGas to develop the Tiyyub-Karagan structure, a contract that will ensure Russia's influence in the Kazakh energy sector for the next forty years.<sup>52</sup> In 2005, Gazprom and KazMunayGas also agreed to a joint venture to exploit the Imashevskoye gas fields in the Caspian Sea on the border between both countries. In the same year, the Russo-Kazakh joint venture KazRosGas set up the Orenburg gas processing plant, which will process around 15 bcm per year of Kazakh gas from Karachaganak.<sup>53</sup>

Russian companies have also managed to set themselves up for the long term in the other Central Asian states. In 2002, Gazprom signed an agreement with Uzbekneftegas in which Russia committed to buying about 10 bcm of Uzbek gas per year until 2012. In 2004, it signed another contract to participate in the development of gas resources on the Ustyurt Plateau. In 2006, a 25-year production sharing agreement (PSA) between Gazprom and Uzbekneftegas was signed for the Urga, Kuanysh, and Akchalak deposits.<sup>54</sup> Lukoil, for its part, has obtained a contract for oil exploration in

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<sup>50</sup> Vladimir Paramonov, Aleksei Stokov, *Ekonomicheskoe prisutstvie Rossii i Kitaia v Tsentral'noi Azii*, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> Pavel Baev, "Assessing Russia's Cards: Three Petty Games in Central Asia", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2004, pp. 269-283.

<sup>52</sup> Jeronym Perovic, "From Disengagement to Active Economic Competition: Russia's return to the South Caucasus and Central Asia", *Demokratizatsiya*, no. 1, 2005, pp. 61-85.

<sup>53</sup> Sergei Blagov, "New Deal Will Process Kazakh Gas at Nearby Russian Facility", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 6, 2006, <[http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2371524](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2371524)>.

<sup>54</sup> "Gazprom, Uzbekistan to sign 2nd Ustyurt PSA in 2007", *New Europe*, May 19, 2007, <[http://www.neurope.eu/view\\_news.php?id=73923](http://www.neurope.eu/view_news.php?id=73923)>.

Uzbekistan.<sup>55</sup> In 2004, Lukoil and Uzbekneftegas confirmed the birth of a joint venture whose mission for the next 35 years will be to exploit the gas fields of Khauzak, Shady, and Kandym, which have estimated reserves of 280 bcm. In February 2007, Uzbekneftegas and the Russian company Soyuzneftegas reached an agreement jointly to exploit fields located in Ustyurt and in the Hissar region in the country's southeast, also for a period of 35 years. In August 2006, Lukoil joined in an international consortium including Uzbekneftegas, Petronas (Malaysia), the CNPC (China) and Korea National Oil Corporation (South Korea) to conclude a production sharing agreement concerning the Aral Sea deposits.<sup>56</sup>

In 2003, Gazprom signed important agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, permitting its involvement in the exploitation of local energy resources and the maintenance of transport pipelines for the next 25 years.<sup>57</sup> In 2008, it announced its involvement in the geological exploration of gas and oil deposits in Kyrgyzstan. Gazprom also signed another contract in 2003 with Turkmenistan for the purchase of Turkmen gas (around 80 bcm in 2008) and its export to Europe.<sup>58</sup> Through this agreement, Russia has become the obligatory intermediary between Ashgabat and its traditional Ukrainian client. As the 2005-2006 winter crisis showed, Moscow is now able to pass Central Asia's price increases on to Kiev, and, in so doing, to put pressure on the Ukraine, not to mention Western Europe. In 2007, Moscow claimed victory after signing a three-way agreement with Astana and Ashgabat for the construction of a new branch in the Central Asian-Center pipeline that will run south to north alongside the shores of the Caspian. However, the project is advancing only slowly: Moscow has not yet managed to make this new route a reality as quickly as it would have liked due to the reluctance of the Central Asian governments.

China, for its part, is driven by its "thirst for energy": the country imports more than 40 percent of its energy consumption, a figure that could rise to 85

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<sup>55</sup> Vladimir Saprykin, "Gazprom of Russia in the Central Asian Countries", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, no. 5, 2004, pp. 81-93.

<sup>56</sup> "PSA for Development of Hydrocarbon Fields in Uzbek Section of Aral Sea Signed", August 31, 2006, <<http://www.gov.uz/en/content.scm?contentId=22437>>.

<sup>57</sup> Marika S. Karayianni, "Russia's Foreign Policy for Central Asia passes through Energy Agreements", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, no. 4, 2003, pp. 90-96.

<sup>58</sup> Rauf Guseynov, "Russian Energy Companies in Central Asia", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, no. 5, 2004, pp. 60-69.

percent by 2030.<sup>59</sup> Over the last few years, China has also overtaken Japan's position as the second-largest consumer of energy in the world after the United States. Chinese oil consumption could reach 11 million bpd by 2020,<sup>60</sup> while natural gas consumption is forecast to triple to 3.6 bcm per year in the same period.<sup>61</sup> This "thirst for energy" obliges China to develop paradoxical commercial logics. As large western companies already control the majority of exploitable oil fields, Chinese companies must specialize in old fields which are considered technically difficult to exploit, or set up in countries seen as unstable or under international sanctions, such as Sudan. In addition, they do not have the same level of technical skills as the large western firms, and prefer to minimize the risks of exploration by exploiting already-known but not very profitable extraction sites. However, Chinese firms have Beijing's diplomatic and financial clout on their side, enabling them to outbid competitors during negotiations and propose complementary "good neighbor" measures. These strategies elicit angry reactions from competitors, who often perceive Chinese energy policy as aggressive and market distortive.

Beijing has succeeded in making considerable advances in the sector of Central Asian hydrocarbons. Seeking to ensure its investments in Kazakhstan, China's investment strategies – the purchase of fields and the construction of pipelines – mutually reinforce one another. The Chinese strategy for the purchase of oil and gas fields is influenced by the fact that Beijing arrived late on the Kazakh market, and can thus only acquire sites of relatively marginal importance. In spite of this negative initial condition, China has tried to develop a sense of logic in its acquisitions. In order to compete for Central Asian supplies, it has invested in fields in the Aktobe region and near the Caspian Sea (AktobeMunayGas and the offshore Darkhan site), but is also involved in more isolated fields that have the advantage of being located along the route of the Sino-Kazakh pipeline (North Buzachi, North Kumkol, and Karazhanbas). In less than a decade, Chinese companies have successfully launched themselves in the Kazakh market (in 2006, China was managing approximately 24 percent of Kazakh

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<sup>59</sup> *China's Thirst For Oil*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report, no. 153, June 2008.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Sharif Shuja, "China's Energy Needs and Central Asia", *National Observer*, Melbourne: Council for the National Interest, no. 67, 2006, pp. 56-65.

production),<sup>62</sup> mainly by accepting the authorities' requirement that the state firm KazMunayGas be systematically associated with all activities.

The general Chinese strategy is to connect all the acquired fields with the gigantic Sino-Kazakh pipeline, which is presently under construction, and which will connect the shores of the Caspian to Dostyk/Alashankou border post. The first section, which became operational in 2003, connects the Kenkiyak field to Atyrau; the second connects the pumping station and railway terminal in Atasu in the Karaganda region to the Dostyk/Alashankou station and was opened in May 2006. The third and last section is to be completed in 2011, and will increase the pipeline's overall export capacity to twenty million tons per year. On the Chinese side, this pipeline is connected to an intra-Chinese pipeline, namely the Alashankou-Dushanzi Crude Oil Pipeline, which connects the border-post refinery at Dushanzi to Xinjiang.<sup>63</sup> The strategy of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in Kazakhstan can be understood only when placed in its intra-Chinese context: the objective of these acquisitions is not simply to provide energy to Xinjiang, but also to densely populated maritime East China. But Kazakhstan is in no position to supply a massive amount of China's energy needs: the pipeline will secure around 5 percent of the total volume of Chinese imports, a figure that could double (40 million tonnes out of the 400 that China will require in about a decade) after work is completed to increase the flows.

Secondly, China is interested in the gas deposits in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In spite of the challenging regional situation, China has succeeded in convincing Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan of the idea of building a shared pipeline and jointly selling gas resources to Beijing. In 2006, the Kazakh government signed an initial gas pipeline construction agreement with the CNPC, while Turkmenistan signed an energy agreement with China according to which Ashgabat will deliver 30 bcm of gas in 2009,

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<sup>62</sup> But China's proportional share of total Kazakh oil production will decrease in the forthcoming years with the exploitation of the Tengiz and Kashagan fields, in which there is no Chinese involvement.

<sup>63</sup> "Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline opens to commercial operation", *People's Daily Online*, July 12, 2006, <[http://english.people.com.cn/200607/12/eng20060712\\_282194.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200607/12/eng20060712_282194.html)>.

with expectations of around 50 bcm by 2010.<sup>64</sup> The CNPC is the first foreign gas company in Turkmenistan to gain the right to carry out onshore gas extraction activities on a production sharing agreement (PSA) basis.<sup>65</sup> In April 2007 Beijing and Uzbekneftegas signed an accord on the construction of the Uzbek section of the gas pipeline, and in July 2008, Beijing and KazMunayGas signed an agreement for construction and operation of its Kazakh section.<sup>66</sup> The pipeline will start at the Samandeppe well, located near Bagtiyarlyk, on the right bank of the Amu-Daria. It will stretch 180 km on Turkmen soil before crossing the Uzbekistan border at Gedaim. Then it will extend for more than 500 km across Uzbekistan and for nearly 1,300 km across Kazakhstan, before reaching Xinjiang via Shymkent and Khorgos. Scheduled to be operational by the end of 2009, it will have a capacity of 30 bcm per annum, with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan supplying about a third each.<sup>67</sup> The overall cost of the project is US\$ 7 billion, a demonstration, as if one were needed, that Beijing has no hesitation in raising the bidding when it comes to energy matters.

China has thus unquestionably established itself as one of the leaders in the Central Asian energy game together with the United States and the European Union. But it is still behind Russia, which largely dominates the Central Asian market for hydrocarbon exports. In the gas sector, 100 percent of Kazakh and Uzbek production is still currently exported via Russia through the Soviet-era Central Asia-Centre gas pipeline which currently is being repaired and extended by Gazprom. But this Russian monopoly will soon be brought to an end by the Chinese-Central Asian gas pipeline, while Turkmen gas already has its “escape door” to Iran. In the petroleum sector, Russia dominates export routes through the Atyrau-Samara and Kenyiak-Orsk pipelines, and, above all, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium. However, it no longer enjoys a monopoly. Kazakhstan now has an alternative pipeline to

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<sup>64</sup> “Turkmenistan: gas pipeline to China is ready”, *Asia News*, August 22, 2006, <<http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=6997>>.

<sup>65</sup> Jan Šír, Slavomír Horák, “China as an Emerging Superpower in Central Asia: The View from Ashkhabad”, *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2008, pp. 75-88.

<sup>66</sup> “KazMunayGas, CNPC ink contract for Kazakhstan-China gas pipeline”, *Interfax China*, August 4, 2008, <<http://www.interfax.cn/news/4545/>>.

<sup>67</sup> “Kazakhstan”, Country Brief Analysis, Energy Information Administration, <<http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Kazakhstan/pdf>>.



China and it exports oil by tankers across the Caspian Sea to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and – like Turkmenistan – to Iran. In addition, Russia seems to have definitively lost its price monopoly: at the end of 2007, PetroChina outstripped its rivals, announcing that it had reached an agreement with the Turkmen government on the sensitive issue of prices, accepting to pay US\$ 195 per 1,000 cm of gas. Beijing's decision to escalate prices encouraged the Kazakh, Uzbek, and Turkmen central governments to form a common front against Gazprom and demand that as of January 2009 the Russian company pay European-market prices for Central Asian gas (in reality, about US\$ 250 for 1,000 cm).<sup>68</sup> Moscow, then, no longer totally controls the Central Asian hydrocarbon sector, not only because new competitors are establishing themselves, but also because the governments are asserting their rights against Gazprom's stranglehold.

#### *Hydroelectricity, Minerals and Transport Infrastructures*

Russian and Chinese companies are also investing in the very promising electricity sector. The Russian state-run Unified Energy System of Russia (RAO-UES), headed by Anatoli Chubais, hopes to take advantage of Central Asian production with a view to developing export capacities. To generate worthwhile profit, the Russian company is seeking to reduce production, export, and distribution costs by creating a unified "Eurasian Electricity Market".<sup>69</sup> To achieve this, RAO-UES has projected the development of a North-South bridge which would unify the electricity companies of the five Central Asian republics. Together they have 80 electricity plants with a total capacity of 92 billion kw/h at their disposal, which would also give Moscow access to the very promising South Asian market. In 2006, RAO-UES confirmed the construction of a new electricity power plant on the Ekibastuz site close to Pavlodar (Kazakhstan), and implemented the Ekibastuz-Barnaul high-tension line. The Russian firm has also set itself up in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the second and the third largest producers of hydroelectricity in

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<sup>68</sup> "Price Maneuvering Begins For Uzbek And Turkmen Natural Gas Exports To Russia", *Eurasianet*, April 21, 2008, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eavo42108.shtml>>.

<sup>69</sup> Gregory Gleason, "Russia and the Politics of the Central Asian Electricity Grid", *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2003, pp. 42-52.

the CIS after Russia.<sup>70</sup> Tajikistan has benefited from RAO-UES's investments in the Sangtuda-1 hydropower station, which is the second largest in the country (670 MW capacity),<sup>71</sup> and in January 2008, its first reactor was opened amid much fanfare. In Kyrgyzstan, RAO-UES has committed itself to overseeing the construction of the Kambarata-2 station and has said it will invest heavily in Kambarata-1. This project is mostly to be financed by RusAl, which is headed by Russian aluminum oligarch Oleg Deripaska, who is interested in the aluminum factory attached to it.<sup>72</sup>

Beijing is also interested in the Central Asian hydroelectricity sector. It eyes the region as a possible cheap supply of electricity that could make up for the energy shortfall in Xinjiang. Many China-Central Asian projects also play a very important role in local economic development. In Kazakhstan, Chinese companies are constructing the Dostyk hydroelectric station on the Khorgos river, a tributary of the Ili which serves as an international border between the two countries. They are also constructing the Moinak hydroelectric station on the Charyn river, located approximately 200 km from the former capital Almaty. The Moinak hydroelectric station constitutes the first "turnkey" construction project for a new station since Kazakhstan's independence (other projects have hitherto involved upgrading stations built in the Soviet era). Astana and Beijing are currently discussing the construction of an electrical coal power station on the Irtysh near the city of Ekibastuz. In Tajikistan, the Chinese company Sinohydro Corporation is constructing the Zaravshan station near Pendzhikent, but Uzbekistan's opposition has stalled the project for the time being. It is also constructing several electric lines in the South heading toward Afghanistan. In Kyrgyzstan, a series of hydroelectric stations has been planned for Tian-Shan on the border with Xinjiang. And negotiations are currently underway for Chinese financing for the construction of three stations on three cross-border

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<sup>70</sup> Gennadi Petrov, "Tajikistan's hydropower resources", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, no. 3, 2003, pp. 153-161.

<sup>71</sup> Gennadi Petrov, "Tajikistan's Energy Projects: Past, Present, and Future", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, no. 5, 2004, pp. 93-103.

<sup>72</sup> Theresa Sabonis-Helf, "Notes for Russia/Kazakhstan: The Energy Issues", *TOSCCA Workshop: Kazakhstan Between East and West*, Oxford: St. Anthony's College, November 28, 2005, <<http://www.toscca.co.uk/lecturepercent20notes/SabonisKazRusEnergy.doc>>.

rivers – the Sarydzhaz, the Enilchek and the Akshirak – which run from the Kyrgyz glaciers toward China.<sup>73</sup>

As it did in the hydrocarbon sector, China has arrived somewhat late on the Central Asian hydroelectricity market. The largest projects for hydroelectric stations were already launched during Soviet times and are today in the hands of Russian companies, in particular the RAO-UES. In addition, the existence of electricity grids connected to Russia facilitates cooperation between Russia and Central Asia and the preservation of preferential flows between post-Soviet countries. China, for its part, must first of all invest in new electric lines if it hopes to take advantage of potential imports from Central Asia to Xinjiang, Afghanistan, and South Asia. Beijing is mostly concentrating on projects of a small- to medium-size. It can therefore take advantage of this situation to establish itself in the market alongside Iran, but it remains a long way behind Russia. At any rate, China does not pretend to be able to stitch up the rest of the Central Asian market alone: Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's financial weakness often means that these costly projects only become feasible through alliances with several foreign investors. The potential being immense and largely unexploited, relations between Russian and Chinese companies will be geared toward strengthening cooperation and task-sharing rather than toward competition.

Russia and China are also becoming more and more present in the mineral industry. Central Asia has significant reserves of gold, uranium, copper, zinc, iron, tungsten, and molybdenum. Various Russian firms have managed to establish themselves in this industry, despite facing stiff competition both from European and American companies, as well as from state-run Central Asian companies with political backing. Cooperation in the area of uranium is the most crucial, since it is the most strategic. Here, too, Russia has recently gained ground in the Central Asian market. In 2006, Putin proposed to establish a “Eurasian Nuclear Bloc” to unify the countries of the region, particularly Kazakhstan – which seeks to become one of the world's main producers by 2015 by increasing annual production from 3,000 to 12,000 tonnes – and Uzbekistan, which produced a large part of the uranium used for the

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<sup>73</sup> Sebastien Peyrouse, “The Hydroelectric Sector in Central Asia and the Growing Role of China”, *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2007, pp. 131-148.

Soviet military-industrial complex.<sup>74</sup> In 2006, the Russo-Kazakh nuclear rapprochement was concretized with the creation of three joint projects worth US\$ 10 billion. The first involves the establishing of a joint venture for Kazakh uranium enrichment in the Angarsk plant, located in Eastern Siberia near Irkutsk; the second, the construction and export of new atomic reactors of low and medium power, one of which will be installed in the first nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan; and the third joint venture involves the exploitation of the uranium deposits in Yuzhnoe Zarechnoe and Budenovsk in the southern part of the country.<sup>75</sup>

Beijing, for its part, is very interested in Kazakh and Kyrgyz gold. In 2005, the China National Gold Group Association and the metallurgic complex Kazakhaltyn Mining signed a contract for a joint-venture to exploit Kazakhstan's gold deposits.<sup>76</sup> In June 2006, China proposed to Bishkek the formation of a Sino-Kyrgyz joint venture to extract Kyrgyz gold deposits, 10-20 tonnes of which would be held at the Chinese Development Bank as a credit guarantee. The offer, however, was rejected by Kyrgyzstan.<sup>77</sup> In May 2008, China followed in Russia's tracks by establishing itself in the development of the Tursunzade aluminium smelter, Tajikistan's main industry. The Tajik Aluminum Company and the Chinese National Corporation for Heavy Machinery (CHMC) signed an agreement for the construction of two factories in the Yavan district that will supply TALCO with raw aluminum for further refinement. China also needs uranium, chiefly to complete the construction of tens of nuclear power plants. Several agreements have been signed with Kazakhstan, notably that between the

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<sup>74</sup> Mukhtar Dzhakishev, "Uranium Production in Kazakhstan as a Potential Source for Covering the World Uranium Shortage", World Nuclear Association Annual Symposium 2004, <[www.world-nuclear.org/sym/2004/dzhakishev.htm](http://www.world-nuclear.org/sym/2004/dzhakishev.htm)>.

<sup>75</sup> "Russia, Kazakhstan sign Deal on Uranium Enrichment Center", *Global Security*, May 10, 2007, <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/russia/2007/russia-070510-rianovostio3.htm>>; "Uranium and Nuclear Power in Kazakhstan," <<http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/inf89.html>>.

<sup>76</sup> "Kitaiskaia i kazakhstanskaia kompanii sozdali SP po dobyche zolota v Kazakhstane" [Chinese and Kazakh companies create a joint-venture for the extraction of gold in Kazakhstan], *RosInvest*, September 7, 2005, <<http://www.rosinvest.com/news/126039/>>.

<sup>77</sup> "Kitai gotov investirovat' 900 millionov dollarov v Kyrgyzstane v obmen na resursy i stroitel'stvo zh.d." [China is ready to invest 900 million dollars in Kyrgyzstan in exchange for resources and the construction of a railway], *CentrAsia*, January 29, 2005, <<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1106979480>>.

China Guangdong Nuclear Power Holding (CGNPC) and Kazatomprom for the supply of nuclear fuel. The 2005 strategic cooperation treaty fosters the strengthening of ties between the two countries in the atomic energy sector and mentions “the unification of more segments of the industrial cycle for the production of enriched uranium.”<sup>78</sup> Kazatomprom will therefore be the sole foreign supplier to the Chinese nuclear market, and the ruling elites in Astana are especially proud of this strategic recognition.

Chinese presence is also important in the infrastructure sector, where Beijing is implementing a two-pronged strategy: first, improve the border-bound routes in order to increase cross-border transactions; and, second, open up the most isolated regions in order to facilitate internal communication. Thus, Chinese companies are having a noticeable impact in the road sector. They are currently restoring the road from Irkeshtam to the large town of Osh, as well as a section of the Osh-Dushanbe road. They are also constructing two tunnels in Tajikistan, namely the Char-Char tunnel between Dushanbe and Kuliab, and the Shakhristan tunnel on the road connecting the Tajik capital to Khodzhent.<sup>79</sup> In addition, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are buying more and more railway equipment from China, including locomotives, passenger wagons, and goods wagons. In the road sector, Russian companies are much less active than their Chinese competitors, but remain very active in supplying railway equipment to the Central Asian states, taking full advantage of the region’s integration in the former unified Soviet system.

The telecommunications market is booming in Central Asia, and Russian and Chinese companies are establishing themselves in it. The region not only needs to modernize the telephone networks it inherited from the Soviet era but also to respond to the demand for the internet and the rapidly expanding mobile phone market. The chief Chinese companies in Central Asia are China Telecom, Shanghai Bell-Alcatel, ZTE (Shenzhen Zhongxing Telecom Equipment Corporation), and Huawei Technologies, which are all well

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<sup>78</sup> Aleksander Shmidke, “Atomnaia promyshlennost’ Kazakhstana: sovremennoe sostoianie i perspektivy razvitiia”, <[http://www.pircenter.org/data/publications/06-05-31Shmidke\\_Article.pdf](http://www.pircenter.org/data/publications/06-05-31Shmidke_Article.pdf)>.

<sup>79</sup> For more details, see Sébastien Peyrouse, “The Economic Aspects of the Chinese-Central-Asia Rapprochement”, *op. cit.*

established in the technology domain, while the market for services is dominated by the main Russian companies MTS, BeeLine, and Megafon.

For the time being, China finds itself more or less in agreement with Russian firms. The two powers are not in competition with one another, since each has its own sphere of activity. But this situation could quickly change in coming years, as the conflict between the CNPC and Lukoil in Kazakhstan has already demonstrated. Both have a paradoxical vision of the Central Asian energy market: it is important for them politically and commercially, but it does not affect their vital economic and strategic interests. Indeed, China will not be able to eliminate its dependence on the Middle East through Central Asian oil and gas, and Moscow has its own hydrocarbon riches, which it seeks to preserve by controlling Central Asian exports. However, Moscow and Beijing are on the same page when it comes to gaining economic and political influence. Both are trying to reinforce their political leverage over weak Central Asian states pragmatically through their growing economic presence. Such a strategy is made easier by the two countries' large, state-run energy companies, which function as instruments of official political interests. For the moment Russia remains more present in Central Asia than China, but recently this dominance has been somewhat attenuated and will come under increasing challenge in the near future.

### **Are the Russian and Chinese Migration Flows in Central Asia Complementary?**

The collaboration/competition between Russia and China in Central Asia is also staked on a little known factor, namely migration flows. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Central Asia entered into globalization by means of the transnational flows of women and men seeking work. The region is in fact situated at an important migration crossroads: it is the site of annual transit for thousands of citizens from Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and various third-world countries, who come seeking work in Kazakhstan or are just passing through on their way to Russia or Western Europe. As well as a host region, it is also a region of departure, having recently experienced massive flows of emigration: in the 1990s, millions of people of European decent (Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Poles, and Germans) left Central Asia permanently. Moreover, since 2000, there has been an exodus of

millions of Central Asian citizens belonging to the titular nationalities, who temporarily leave their countries of origin in search of work. As a result of this northward population movement, the Russia/China relation in Central Asia is being recomposed: the Central Asian states are concerned about Chinese migrants settling on their territories, all the more so because their own citizens are emigrating to Russia.

*Central Asia and its Re-entry into Russia's Orbit via Migration*

The post-Soviet space is one of the areas most subject to large-scale internal migration and transit flows towards other countries. In the space of a few years, Russia has become second only to the United States in terms of the number of migrants it absorbs.<sup>80</sup> The Russian comeback in Central Asia can thus be partially explained as a result of this new and somewhat understudied migratory phenomenon.

During the first half of the 1990s, these migratory flows were mostly comprised of national minorities, above all “ethnic” Russians, “Russophones”,<sup>81</sup> and Germans.<sup>82</sup> At the turn of the 2000s, this emigration began to lose its importance in comparison with the rapid development of migratory flows of Central Asian titular nationalities. Nowadays, these flows are the most dynamic migratory movements in the Commonwealth of Independent States as a whole. By their very nature, figures for illegal immigration are particularly prone to fluctuation. Exploiting this fact, Russian politicians, including former President Vladimir Putin, have not desisted from speculating on figures of between 12 and 15 million persons. According to the more modest estimates of the Federal Migration Service,

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<sup>80</sup> See Ali Mansoor, Brice Quillin (ed.) *Migration and Remittances. Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, Washington DC: The World Bank, 2006.

<sup>81</sup> The term “Russophone” makes it possible to encompass populations that recognize themselves as belonging culturally to the Russian world without being classified in their passports as “ethnically” Russian, such as for example the Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Tatars, etc.

<sup>82</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, “The Russian Minority in Central Asia: Migration, Politics, and Language”, *Kennan Occasional Papers*, Washington DC: Kennan Institute, no. 297, 2008, <<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/OP297.pdf>>.

there are about 10 million people working illegally in Russia.<sup>83</sup> Within the CIS, Central Asia remains the main source of migrants.<sup>84</sup>

Despite the difficulties encountered in measuring these informal flows, the majority of experts agree that the actual number of seasonal workers in Russia from Central Asia is around 3 million. This figure includes approximately 1 million Tajiks, and sometimes more due to seasonal variation, at least 500,000 Kyrgyz, and more than 1 million Uzbeks.<sup>85</sup> It is no coincidence that the countries now experiencing the biggest migratory flows – Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan – are also the countries with the smallest GDP, the highest rates of unemployment, and the highest birth rates. The choice of Russia for migration seems natural, since the Russian Federation has the most dynamic economy in the region and it is possible to earn salaries that are five to twenty times higher than in Central Asia. In addition, with the exception of the citizens of Georgia and Turkmenistan, Russia does not require entry visas for post-Soviet citizens. The latter's Russian language skills and their shared Soviet past means that they can move to Russia and still live in a familiar cultural space. The networks facilitating emigration are also more developed than elsewhere, due to the fact that the Russian market for Central Asian and Caucasian produce was already established in Soviet times.

The labor market reserved for illegal migrants is separate from that reserved for citizens and legal migrants. Low wages, difficult working conditions, and jobs with little prestige do not attract Russian citizens. Neither can these vacancies be filled through official immigration quotas, which are not large

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<sup>83</sup> "Les Migrants en Russie. Des populations fragilisées, premières victimes des crises politiques internes et externes", Paris: International Federation for Human Rights, no. 472, April 2007, p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> Of the 8 million individuals who moved to Russia from CIS republics between 1991 and 2004, half of them came from one of the five Central Asian states. In 2004, migrants from Kazakhstan accounted for 35 percent of all migrants coming from the CIS to Russia, while those from the other states of Central Asia accounted for 28 percent. Vladimir Mukomel, *Migratsionnaia politika Rossii. Postsovetskie konteksty* [Russian Migratory Politics. Post-Soviet Contexts], Moscow: Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2005, p. 53.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted by Alisher Ilkhamov, "Geographic Mobility of Uzbeks: the Emergence of Crossnational Communities vs. Nation-State Control", Paper Prepared for NBR Conference on *Generational Change and Leadership Succession in Uzbekistan*, Washington DC, March 2, 2006, <[www.nbr.org/programs/eurasia/Ilkhamov.pdf](http://www.nbr.org/programs/eurasia/Ilkhamov.pdf)>, p. 7.



enough to compensate for labor shortages. Indeed, without migration almost one-third of Russian firms would face such shortages, particularly in industrial regions in crisis like the Urals.<sup>86</sup> As a result, they recruit many illegal migrants, especially during the spring and summer months, when open-air sites are at peak production. More than half of the migrants coming from Central Asia work on building sites in the construction sector, and have to endure particularly difficult living and working conditions. One-third of them have jobs in “ethnic businesses” like transportation and trade – for example in produce from Central Asia, or everyday goods, textiles, and tools from China, all of which pass through Central Asia *en route* to Russia. The sphere of activity least favored by migrants is agriculture, although it remains the favorite sector for Uzbeks and Kyrgyz working in Kazakhstan. It is also developing in southern Russia due to the increasing numbers of Uzbeks. As for the Tajiks, they seem to have made a niche for themselves in the business services industry, particularly in the field of oil production.

In Central Asia, the social transformations caused by these massive migrations are significant. Among other potential benefits, money transfers ensure a regular source of income for families. They create a rise in domestic demand for goods, support economic growth, and broaden investment possibilities. The Tajik and Kyrgyz governments admit that migration also enables improvements in human capital. Migrants return with much better training and linguistic competencies than they can acquire in their home countries. This also indirectly compensates for the disappearance of an efficient Russian language learning system in the rural regions of Central Asia. Among the negative aspects, the “brain drain” should be mentioned. These massive migrations are having a large impact upon a shrinking workforce. From April to November, villages empty, market trade declines, prices fall, and marriages are postponed until the fall. Also notable is the absence of students that have received training in technical schools.<sup>87</sup> The massive disappearance of men from villages and small towns creates labor

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<sup>86</sup> I. Ivankhniuk, R. Daurov, “Nezakonnaia migratsiia i bezopasnost' Rossii: ugrozy, vyzovy, riski”, [Illegal migration and Russian security: threats, issues and risks], in *Migratsia i natsional'naia bezopasnost'* [Migration and National Security], Moscow: Maks Press, 2003, p. 34.

<sup>87</sup> Davud Sulaiman, “Sezon nachalsia: uzbekskie trudovye migranty otpravilis' za rubezh” [The season began: Uzbek migrants depart for abroad], Ferghana.ru, May 31, 2007, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5160>>.

shortages, further reduces the number of small businesses, and has a detrimental impact on the agricultural industry, especially since the migratory flows are the most intense during the harvest months, and, lastly, it has a complex impact upon the position of women in society.

These migratory flows have important consequences for Russian and Central Asian societies. The economic development of the Russian Federation benefits from these migratory flows, since they compensate for its ageing population and increasing labor shortages. Yet, xenophobic tensions are emerging that may result in a serious destabilization, since the large-scale arrival of migrants – whether from the former Soviet republics or the “far abroad” – are being exploited by Russian nationalist movements in order to radicalize the population.<sup>88</sup> The stakes of these massive migration flows are even higher for the three states of Central Asia. In impoverished societies, for which the Soviet Union’s demise has chiefly meant decreased living standards, the possibility of going abroad to find a job constitutes a veritable “safety valve.” Indeed, labor-out migration acts to forestall unemployment-fueled social tension and socio-political instability, especially in places like the Ferghana Valley. In any case, these flows will have positive as well as negative consequences on Central Asian economies and societies, and possibly political repercussions: the populations that travel to Russia regularly have access to a society which, though far from being democratic, nonetheless constitutes a model of development for the countries of Central Asia. Despite their double-edged nature, these migratory flows confirm the emergence of new kinds of interaction between Russia and Central Asia. Their consequences could conceivably include risks of confrontation, but also the maintenance of cultural exchange, and the preservation of ethnic mixing.

#### *Central Asia’s Concern over Chinese Migration Flows*

The migration flows from China into Central Asia are relatively different. Since the start of the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have been the two states most affected by this migration. In 1988, the Soviet Union and the PRC signed an accord enabling citizens living in border areas to travel

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<sup>88</sup> Marlène Laruelle, “Russian Policy on Central Asia and the Role of Russian Nationalism”, *Silk Road Papers*, Washington DC: The Central Asia and Caucasus Institute, April 2008, <<http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/srp/o8/mlo8russia-central.pdf>>.

without visas. The Soviet republics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were opened to Xinjiang and the first cross-border flows began, mostly comprised of small businessmen of Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Dungan or Uyghur nationality. But cross-border travel without a visa was revoked by Kazakhstan in 1994, when the government, which was concerned about its incapacity in regulating migration flows, decided to curtail the presence of the Chinese. In Kyrgyzstan the system of travel without visa was only abolished in 2003, up until which Chinese citizens were able to move freely across the Kyrgyz border, and from there proceed to Kazakhstan or Russia. In Tajikistan, where the first small Chinese community is now developing, simplified procedures for border crossing have only been recently put in place in order to vitalize the cross-border exchanges at Kulma/Kalasu pass. The two other states, namely Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, have particularly restrictive entry policies and so have not yet experienced any significant Chinese migration.

These migration flows are very difficult to measure in any reliable way since they are, for the most part, illegal. The official figures provided by the customs services of the Interior Ministry each year only register the official crossing of some tens of thousands of Chinese citizens over the border (for instance 30,000 in Kazakhstan in 2006<sup>89</sup>). These migrants can be classified into several ethnic and professional categories. In Kazakhstan, the majority of these official migrants are *Oralman*, that is to say Kazakhs from China who are taking advantage of the repatriation program offered by Astana to come and live in the country permanently. In Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz formerly living in China also comprise a significant percentage of this migration, but to a lesser degree given the relative unattractiveness of its economic situation. These “returners”, as they are called, have had great difficulties adapting to their new environment, in particular because of their almost total lack of Russian language skills.

The Han Chinese that reside legally in Central Asia constitute only a small percentage of official migration. In the case of Kazakhstan, the 5,000 Han Chinese registered as working in the country can be divided into three groups: first, salaried employees of the large Chinese companies established

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<sup>89</sup> Svetlana Kozhirova, “Vnutrennie i vneshnie aspekty sovremennoi kitaiskoi migratsii” [Domestic and Foreign Aspects of Contemporary Chinese Migration], *Analytic*, no. 6, 2008, p. 51.

there, in particular companies in the energy sector; second, construction sector employees (Kazakhstan is the country of the CIS that registers the most Chinese in this domain); and, third, retailers.<sup>90</sup> They are for the most part situated in two of China's large border regions, that of Almaty and that of the North-East (Ust-Kamenogorsk), as well as in the country's large towns such as Astana, Aktobe, and also Atyrau, Kzyl-Orda, and Mangystau, but to a lesser extent. Those situated in the two border regions work chiefly in the trade sector (small or large import-export businesses), while those of the large towns are employed by Chinese companies or by Sino-Kazakh joint-ventures. In Kyrgyzstan, relatively few Han Chinese work in large companies, which are practically non-existent in the Kyrgyz market; instead they have invested massively in the export sector for Chinese products.<sup>91</sup>

These official migrants for the most part are urban dwellers prior to their departure with average or above-average levels of professional qualification and do not belong to the most impoverished rural populations of Central China.<sup>92</sup> Very few of them wish to establish themselves permanently in Central Asia, so they do not make applications for permanent work visas or nationalization procedures. The length of their stays in the country is generally only a few years, their sole aim being to accumulate enough capital so that they can start up a company or further their activities in China or Western Europe. Most of them live in closed communities in Central Asia, lodging in hotels belonging to the company that employs them, or renting out entire buildings. Their rates of marriage with Central Asians are extremely modest, a sign of the low-levels of integration in the host country. However, there has been a notably quick development of infrastructure to manage this diaspora: tourist agencies to organize administrative formalities, specific banks catering for Chinese citizens, restaurants, medical centers,

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<sup>90</sup> Elena Sadovskaia, "Chinese Migration to Kazakhstan: A Silk Road for Cooperation or a Thorny Road of Prejudice?", *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2007, pp. 147-170.

<sup>91</sup> Amantur Zhaparov, "Chinese migrants in Kyrgyzstan", *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2009, pp. 79-92.

<sup>92</sup> Svetlana Kozhirova, "Sotsiologicheskii portret kitaiskoi migratsii v Kazakhstane" [Sociological Portrait of Chinese migration in Kazakhstan], in Bulat Sultanov, Marlène Laruelle (ed.), *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kitai: sostoianie i perspektivy sotrudnichestva* [Central Asia-China: Current Status and Prospects for Cooperation], Almaty: KISI/IFEAC, pp. 170-184.

hotels, dry-cleaners etc., all of which seems to suggest that the number of migrants who decide to remain in Central Asia for a long period will rapidly increase.<sup>93</sup>

The principal migration problem that Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan face is that of illegal migration. Russian experts have often declared the figures to be around 300,000 Chinese for Kazakhstan and a similar number for Kyrgyzstan, but this figure appears to be inflated and seems improbable. In Kazakhstan, the customs service of the Committee of National Defense estimates that the flow is around 170,000 people per year, a figure that will rise rapidly.<sup>94</sup> The migrants come either on tourist visas, or on 30-day work invitations, which they obtain from Central Asian or Chinese companies that specialize in this type of service. Once there, they extend their stays for 90 days with the competent authorities. Some then choose to stay on and work illegally, while others leave for Russia. But the majority returns to China to start the administrative procedures again so they can return. These illegal migrants work in Chinese and Kazakh companies, chiefly in the construction industry (in cement and brick works), as well as in small businesses, which precisely requires territorial mobility and numerous trips back and forth between country of origin and host country to buy and sell goods. They are a central focus of the Central Asian press and the security organs, who view them as a source of potential criminal or mafia activities.

These migration flows will probably continue to develop, especially if Kazakhstan's economy continues to grow at its present rate, since it would soon need to make up for labor shortfalls. Han Chinese migrants, both legal and illegal, occupy specific professional niches and do not present any competition for the titular populations. The engineers and technicians invited to work by Chinese companies or joint-ventures have competencies that the Central Asians do not have, while the illegal migrants work in very poorly paid positions – in particular in construction – positions that are

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<sup>93</sup> Elena Sadovskaia, "Kitaiskaia migratsiia v Kazakhstane: sovremennye tendentsii i perspektivy" [The Chinese Migration in Kazakhstan: Contemporary Tendencies and Perspectives], *Analitic*, no. 6, 2007, pp. 33-44.

<sup>94</sup> Elena Sadovskaia, "Sovremennaia kitaiskaia migratsiia v Kazakhstane: osnovnye tendentsii, problemy i perspektivy" [The Current Chinese Migration in Kazakhstan: Main Tendencies, Problems and Perspectives], in Bulat Sultanov, Marlène Laruelle (ed.), *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kitai: sostoianie i perspektivy sotrudnichestva*, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-156.

disregarded by the locals. The Han Chinese retailers in Kyrgyzstan are the only ones to be involved in an economic niche that is already occupied by Kyrgyz petty traders. Central Asia thus finds itself in a paradoxical situation since it has both labor surpluses and shortages, yet finds that its own population is emigrating to look for better working opportunities in Russia. Though figures for the two flows are greatly disproportionate (Chinese migration is really not nearly as large as Central Asian migration to Russia), this two-way flow has elicited alarmist discourses on China's westward expansion: Central Asia, it is alleged, is losing its national population only to be repopulated by Chinese. The issue of finding a balance in migration flows in Central Asia between Russia and China is thus set to play an important role in the collaboration/competition between the region's two powers and in structuring social fears of China among Central Asian populations.

## Conclusion

The benign relations between Russia and China in Central Asia are based on a certain number of economic and geopolitical realities, but also on several unstated issues.

Moscow continues broadly to influence the authoritarian political logics of the Central Asian regimes and to orient their economies toward specializing in the exportation of primary resources, which in the long-term will prove a detrimental strategy. Russia seems thus to have found a single solution for its multiple objectives: first, to maintain political influence over the Central Asian regimes through the control of resources; second, to continue to collect considerable transit revenues from these landlocked countries; third, to slow down the emergence of competing export routes to China, Iran, Afghanistan, and Turkey; and finally, to meet the West's growing energy demands. Since 2000, income from oil and gas has provided Russia with a leverage of influence that it did not previously have, but that it might lose if the financial crisis, compounded by the fall in the price of hydrocarbons, continues. Moscow has been trying to redefine its influence according to the principles of *soft power* and, at least in Central Asia, has proven its capacity to use more complex tactics instead of issuing military threats and applying direct political pressure. Strategic cooperation, hitherto fundamental, is seemingly being complemented by new logics of economic settlement. In this

way, Moscow has managed to turn today's continuities with processes of Soviet integration to its advantage, as much at the level of economic infrastructure and institutional mechanisms as at that of the long-standing cultural relations between Russia and Central Asia.

Beijing, for its part, is seeking to establish itself in as many sectors as possible with an eye to occupying the economic vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Chinese authorities have understood just what key elements poverty and the disappearance of basic infrastructure are for the potential destabilization of Central Asia, an eventuality that would have serious repercussions on China's economic development in general, and that of Xinjiang in particular. China is therefore counting on its investment funds in certain strategic sectors, according to a logic of economic consolidation that is highly appreciated by the Central Asian governments. Indeed, the long-term implications of China's engagement for landlocked Central Asia in terms of transit and transport will partially determine the future of the region. Chinese investments in infrastructure will enable the Central Asian states to escape from the increased isolation they have suffered from following the disappearance of Soviet-era infrastructure networks. They benefit from consumer products that are appropriate to their low standard of living, but which are also capable of satisfying the growing technology consumption needs of the middle classes, in particular in Kazakhstan. The massive influx of Chinese products will also give the peoples of Central Asia the opportunity to reassume their traditional role as a transit culture exporting goods as far as Russia, something that the Kyrgyz and Uzbek migrants situated in Russia are already starting to do.

On the geopolitical level, Beijing and Moscow both agree in their view of the dangers faced in Central Asia but also of maintaining Russia's military and strategic supremacy: Moscow's military presence in Central Asia does not raise any problems for China because it limits American impingement and ensures that Beijing will have stability on its borders.<sup>95</sup> On the economic level, China's growing presence in Central Asia is liable to run into direct competition with Moscow's intentions in the region. For the time being, however, both powers seem to have fulfilled their objectives without any

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<sup>95</sup> Niklas Swanström, "China and Central Asia: a New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 14, 2005, pp. 569-584.

head-to-head confrontation, but in all likelihood this situation will change rather quickly. China is experiencing exponential growth and devouring primary resources, while Russia is using its economic revival to specialize in primary resources and heavy industry. Central Asia is therefore going to be an important element in the economic strategy of its two neighbors. The current state of Sino-Russian commercial relations might lead to competition for the control of Central Asia's subsoil resources, since China is beginning to establish itself to an extent that Moscow will soon be obliged to consider it a necessary partner and competitor. Whether Russia wants it or not, over the medium term China seems destined to dominate the Central Asian market in many sectors, in particular thanks to its financial and banking clout, something that Moscow lacks. The only things that will remain mostly under the Kremlin's control for some time to come are the hydrocarbon export routes, as well as some of the large nuclear and hydroelectric projects.

Lines of competition between the Russian and Chinese powers are slowly starting to take shape, as indeed both are in fact seeking to obtain recognition as great powers. The Kremlin knows that Beijing's growing international importance will weigh against it should the two states' geopolitical interests diverge. Their international entente has been based on a mutual rejection of the so-called unipolar world under American domination, not on any substantive agreement. Moreover, the historical rifts between the Russian empire and the Middle Kingdom have not vanished from people's minds. Neither has the fact that these two worlds will become rivals for influence in the coming years, when China starts to assert itself as a cultural power. This competition might become rather hostile, especially if exacerbated by Russian fears of the "yellow peril." In Central Asia, the Russo-Chinese entente has been made possible thanks to Beijing's desires to have Moscow's support in the region. It is in fact in China's interests to keep Central Asia under Russia's political and security shelter. But if the Chinese authorities were to consider, for whatever reasons, that they ought to modify their activities in Central Asia, and involve themselves in political issues, and not just in economic ones, then Chinese interests would come into conflict with Moscow's.



## II. Political Debate and Expertise on China in Central Asia

Despite the increasing competition/cooperation between Russia and China in Central Asia, the opinions of those primarily concerned by it, the five states of Central Asia, are not well-known. However, they are independent actors in the international arena, and, although their capacity to influence phenomena over which they are not in control remains weak, they have formed their own opinions on the various aspects of this problematique. In order to explore how Central Asia perceives China, it is first necessary to examine local political debate and expertise on China. Central Asia still considers its relationship to Russia as fundamental, regardless of its good or bad sides, and Moscow constitutes a familiar element of its political and intellectual landscape. By contrast, the arrival of China is rather new and the perceptions of it among heads of state, opposition members, economic circles, academic milieus, and institutions of expertise have elicited divergent discourses, which usually correspond not only to the specific agenda that govern their respective relationships to Beijing, but also to their level of knowledge about China.

### **China as Political Object: the Chinese Question in Central Asian Political Life**

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the foreign policy declarations of the five Central Asian states have emphasized the need to develop good neighborly relations with Beijing. As early as 1995, Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbaev argued that relations with China were a crucial focus of Kazakhstan's foreign policy.<sup>96</sup> Around 2000, with the border issues resolved and the SCO established, the question of China came to focus on developing

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<sup>96</sup> Kubanychbek Dzhusaev, "Perspektivy sotrudnichestva stran Tsentral'noi Azii s Kitaem" [The Prospects in Central Asian Countries for Cooperation with China], *Tsentrāl'naia Aziia i kul'tura mira*, no. 1, 1998, <<http://www.freenet.kg/journal/n4/JRNAL407.htm>>.

a privileged economic and strategic relationship with the Middle Kingdom. From 2005 onwards, the official friendship between China and Central Asia has developed to the extent that all Central Asian heads of state now make pointed statements about the major role that they reserve for China in their foreign policy and economic development. In May 2005, Uzbek President Islam Karimov underlined his positive appreciation of the Chinese authorities by visiting Beijing immediately after the suppression of the armed uprising in Andijan. In 2006, Turkmen president Saparmurat Niazov also visited Beijing amid great fanfare and signed far-reaching gas agreements. In 2007, Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbaev stated in his annual address to the nation that he considered the partnership with China second in importance only to that with Russia.<sup>97</sup> In the same year, Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev stated to the media at the SCO summit in Bishkek that China was a close second to Russia in terms of foreign policy priority, a point that in principle had already been laid out in the Kyrgyzstan Foreign Policy Blueprint adopted in January 2007.<sup>98</sup> The Tajik president Emomali Rakhmon, for his part, regularly boasts of the friendship between the Chinese and Tajik peoples.

Notwithstanding these official discourses, since independence the two most liberal countries in the region, namely Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have been subject to spirited debates regarding China's influence on Central Asian societies while government opponents regularly try to instrumentalize the question of China to discredit the ruling governments. While in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan there can be no question of having a genuinely plural debate on China or any other foreign or domestic policy issues, political life in the other three states does allow for a greater expression of differences of opinion which thus gives media room to discuss most topics, apart from those directly involving the presidential family. Of these three Tajikistan stands out on account of its relative absence of almost any public discussion about China, but in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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<sup>97</sup> Nursultan Nazarbaev, "Poslanie k narodu Kazakhstana [Address to the Kazakh Nation], March 2007, <[http://www.akorda.kz/www/www\\_akorda\\_kz.nsf/sections?OpenForm&id\\_doc=BC3DF7C6FB65732E46257291002A9331&lang=ru&L1=L2&L2=L2-22](http://www.akorda.kz/www/www_akorda_kz.nsf/sections?OpenForm&id_doc=BC3DF7C6FB65732E46257291002A9331&lang=ru&L1=L2&L2=L2-22)>.

<sup>98</sup> "V Kyrgyzstane utverzhdena Kontseptsii vneshnei politiki" [Kyrgyzstan Passes its Foreign Policy Bill], *Kazakhstan Segodnia*, January 13, 2007, <<http://www.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=85637>>.

the debate has been virulent. The controversies about their respective relations with China have ranged from issues of national integrity to economic questions. Both Sinophile and Sinophobe groups rapidly formed, but it was the economic issues that soon became the principal driving force behind them. Whereas groups have appeared whose commercial interests coincide with China's growing presence in the region, other milieus are also starting to organize themselves to resist the competition posed by Beijing. This structuration is only in its initial phases but it is already possible to single out the aspects of this issue that are the most problematic and that will concern the political sphere over the coming years.

The political stakes are difficult to address in their entirety due to the different domestic situations in each of the five Central Asian states.<sup>99</sup> With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, loyalty to the president is a precondition for participation in public life, meaning that severe restrictions are placed on the public expression of divergent opinions. However, if politics in Central Asia is not so much marked by ideological struggles, there are other structuring faultlines in governing circles, for instance, struggles for control over resources and in the division of property. Conflicts are thus emerging between pressure groups seeking, for the most part, to defend their own corporatist and regional, or occasionally clan, interests. These economic groups have no small influence over domestic policy choices. They also play key roles in the development of foreign policy, since they tend to prioritize those states whose economic interests correspond to their own private interests, sometimes to the detriment of those of their own nation.

After considering the notion of pro-Chinese lobbies, we will engage in a detailed examination of the debates arising from the Chinese presence in Kazakhstan and in Kyrgyzstan. Before that, however, we have to take a look at the relationship of Islamist currents in China. All the local specialists surveyed agree that the Islamist movements, be they official such as the Party of Islamic Rebirth in Tajikistan, or illegal such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir and the splinter groups that have formed from the dissolution of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, have a very negative vision of China. However, China still does not provoke as much hatred as Russia or the West, who are

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<sup>99</sup> Marlène Laruelle, Sébastien Peyrouse, *Asie centrale, la dérive autoritaire. Cinq républiques entre héritage soviétique, dictature et islam*, Paris, Autrement/CERI, 2006.

the traditional enemies of Central Asian Islamists. Moreover it remains marginal in their daily preoccupations and publications. The impossibility of conducting direct interviews led us to leave the opinions of Islamist leaders aside – not being as accessible as the opinions of the ruling elites, they could not be treated with the same degree of scientificity.

*Are there any pro-Chinese Economic and Political Lobbies?*

The question of China's increasing political influence in Central Asia is a sensitive one and no one has an unequivocal response to it. In Central Asia the phenomenon of pressure groups is actually looked down upon and considered dangerous, largely because of the risk that it will discredit sections of the elite, and even taint heads of government, who may be suspected of pursuing their own interests rather than those of their country. The Kazakh and Kyrgyz media, in addition to sections of local analysts and political opponents, regularly mention the existence of a "Chinese lobby", and thereby attempt to denounce the economic woes and policy errors of the moment. Rarely, however, are they in a position to be able to name the persons or groups that they consider to be Beijing's lobbyists. But if one is to take the question of a Chinese lobby in Central Asia seriously, three criteria must be fulfilled: first, one must be able to define the notion of a pressure group in the region; second, to indicate public figures or circles that present pro-Chinese positions; and third, to analyze the influence they may have in contrast to the circles that are indifferent, or indeed opposed, to China. But it is complex to find evidence of these three criteria being fulfilled.

First of all, the notion of "lobby" defined as an established pressure group that defends choices based on ideological convictions is rather incongruous with the functioning of Central Asian political life. Although local politicians hold discourses that are classifiable in terms of doctrinal elements (some are more pro-western, others more nationalist, etc.), such a classification would be misleading insofar as political opinions do not determine party affiliation. In fact, the members of the presidential parties are not to be defined in terms of their ideological stances but in terms of their loyalty to the established powers. And although there are political figures who are reputed to be pro-western or pro-Russian, and whom Central Asian and western experts on Asia can identify, to degrees that vary for each state,

it is difficult to identify a coherent pro-Chinese lobby. It seems in fact that no one thinks that China should receive more encouragement to establish itself in the region than it is already getting from the ruling elites. Indeed, over the course of the 1990s-2000s, as the Central Asian states oscillated between rapprochement with the West and returning to Russia's fold, China was viewed favorably as a way of breaking out of this "Great Game".

When Central Asia acquired independence in 1991, the Chinese authorities immediately established close relations with the top of the political pyramid – i.e. with the presidents. This enabled them to convey their interests first-hand to political leaders without having to finance institutional go-betweens or individual mediators. To date, all Central Asian heads of state have spoken very positively about their "excellent relations" with Beijing. They have encouraged Chinese companies to settle in the country and declined to comment on contentious issues publicly. Nevertheless, although Central Asian leaders seem to speak with one voice on the question of China, we should not be deceived. Beijing's capacity to influence, which is difficult to measure but perceptible with regard to many issues, allows us to suppose that the heads of state and their close aides are not necessarily Sinophile by conviction, but instead because they do not have other alternatives. In fact, having a positive attitude toward China is not necessarily founded on an ideological conviction (i.e. sympathy for the country, considering its political regime a good role model, or an embrace of Chinese civilization, etc.). It seems instead to be driven by a logic that also has a Sinophobe dimension: a desire to build closer ties with China because it is better to maintain healthy relations with a large and feared neighbor.

In spite of this, some political figures are indeed more pro-China than others, although this by no means implies that they form an established lobby. Such is the case, for example, of Karim Masimov, who has been Kazakhstan's Prime Minister since January 2007. Of Uyghur origin, he studied in Beijing and is fluent in Chinese. He is the former representative of the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Urumqi, a former director of a Kazakh business house in Hong Kong, and considered by some western experts to be *the* representative of the Chinese lobby. One of the goals of this lobby is supposedly to help Kazakhstan obtain a place in the World Trade Organization (WTO), a goal that China is allegedly supporting so that it can

more easily invest in the Kazakh market. Central Asian experts, however, reject the notion that either Masimov, or for that matter his predecessor, Kasymzhomart Tokaev (a Sinologist by training, Foreign Affairs Minister from 1994 to 1999 and Prime Minister from 1999 to 2002), form any kind of Chinese lobby in the usual meaning of the term. These experts argue instead that Kazakhstan's pro-Chinese policies are not initiated by specific Prime Ministers: The issue of China arises at the level of the state itself and has nothing to do with the personality of its leaders.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, never have any of the country's Prime Ministers declared themselves to be anti-Chinese, nor sought to modify the country's pro-Chinese policies. A similar situation can be found in Kyrgyzstan with Daniar Usenov, the deputy Prime Minister from 2005 to 2007 and thereafter the mayor of Bishkek, who is famous for having played an important role in the negotiations with Beijing concerning the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, while favoritism for either the West or Russia is perceived to be partly an ideological choice, China is often viewed in an exclusively pragmatic fashion. Central Asian economic leaders with interests centered on Beijing therefore turn out to be the supporters of the pro-Chinese policies of the government. In Kazakhstan, for instance, two main groups are favorable to Sino-Kazakh rapprochement for the simply pragmatic reason that China is one of the major export markets for Kazakh metallurgy. The first is Alexander Mashkevich's "Eurasian Group" (Eurasian National Resources Corporation), which controls a third of the Kazakh economy and is valued at over five billion dollars; the second is Vladimir Kim's company Kazakhmys, which is the country's largest copper producer. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, one family is quite clearly involved in fostering friendly relations between Kyrgyzstan and China, namely the Salymbekov family, which possesses the largest market – the "Dordoi" market – in Bishkek, and controls the trade flows from China that pass through Naryn, the region whence the family hails. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, there are many heads of large national companies, in particular in the energy, precious minerals and

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Dosym Satpaev, Almaty, 6 March 2008, and with Nikolai Kuz'min, Almaty, 7 June 2008.

<sup>101</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, "The Growing Trade Stakes Of The Chinese-Kyrgyz-Uzbek Railway Project," *Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst*, March 11, 2009, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5058>>.

railway sectors, who also have personal interests in maintaining good Sino-Uzbek and Sino-Turkmen relations.

The members of presidential families are often directly concerned: for example, the spouse of the former Kyrgyz president, Mairam Akaeva, was known for overseeing the export of metal for recycling to China, and the eldest daughter of Uzbek president, Gulnara Karimova, a famous businesswoman, is also active in the sale of metal to China.<sup>102</sup> In Tajikistan, one of President Emomali Rakhmon's sons-in-law, Hassan Saidullaev, president of the holding company "Ismaili Somoni XXI Century", is personally involved in establishing warm relations between Dushanbe and Beijing.<sup>103</sup> His interest stems from his partnership with a Chinese businessman of Uyghur origin, whose business affairs in Tajikistan he facilitates in exchange for a cut of the profits.<sup>104</sup> But these pro-Chinese interests are by no means unique. Russian companies, for instance, have also been busy in Central Asia working this same conjunction between national interests and the personal networks of leaders. Moreover, although the number of big economic groups focused on China is growing, the latter cannot yet be said to form an organized pro-Chinese lobby: if their economic interests were to develop in an opposite direction, they would not continue to maintain their loyalty to Beijing for the sake of it.

It is nevertheless true that China knows how to buy, in the proper sense of the word, its partners. At the end of the 1990s, several corruption scandals came to light in the press concerning the establishment of China National Petroleum Corporation on Kazakh territory.<sup>105</sup> In 2001, the director of the Customs Committee of Kazakhstan, Maratkali Nukenov, spoke openly and without hesitation about the supposed existence of a Chinese lobby in the government that was going to provide Chinese companies with an export duties exemption on metallurgic products from the former military-

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<sup>102</sup> The very nature of this information makes the identification of their sources difficult to verify, but it is backed up by numerous local and international experts who have gathered this information from multiple sources.

<sup>103</sup> Marlène Laruelle, Sébastien Peyrouse, "Cross-Border Minorities As Cultural And Economic Mediators Between China And Central Asia," *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2009, pp. 93-119.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with a Chinese businessman of Uyghur origin, Dushanbe, 27 March 2008.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Dosym Satpaev, Almaty, 6 March 2008, and with Nikolai Kuz'min, Almaty, 7 June 2008.

industrial complex.<sup>106</sup> Certain newspapers also regularly express their doubts about the China-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee – established in 2004 and headed by the Chinese and Kazakh Prime Ministers – claiming that it can be easily “bought”. This committee comprises around a dozen specialist sub-committees in areas such as finance, biotechnology, petroleum and gas, and the use of nuclear energy for civilian purposes, all strategic sectors in which Chinese companies would not hesitate for one instant to invest black money so as to secure markets. In 2007, the company AktobeMunayGas, owned by China National Petroleum Corporation, had findings brought against it in the Aktiubinsk Court of Justice for the possession of documents relating to oil reserves in the Caspian which were classified state secrets and had been bought from Kazakh state employees.<sup>107</sup>

Once more, however, there is nothing at all particular about these cases of corruption involving Chinese companies in Central Asia, for Russian products enter Central Asian territory by comparable methods. All that these cases confirm is that corruption is a widespread practice in Central Asian societies, one in which foreign companies participate voluntarily or otherwise. Corruption in foreign economic activity is particularly acute. Chinese businessmen make regular complaints about the high degree of corruption of the customs services and administrations in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which sometimes forces them to halt their commercial activities.<sup>108</sup> Many articles published in the Kazakh press in 2006-2007 denounced the situation at the customs border of Khorgos where, according to the secret services (KNB), the shadow turnover amounts to about US\$ 3-4 million per month.<sup>109</sup> The Central Asian criminal groups specialized in

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<sup>106</sup> M. Brazhnikov, “Eksport kazakhstanskoi nefti: Tengiz-Novorossiisk, dalee vezde?” [Exporting Kazakh Oil: Tengiz-Novorossiisk, and then everywhere?], *Kontinent*, no. 7, April 11-24, 2001, p. 11.

<sup>107</sup> “Shpionskii skandal v Kazakhstane” [Spy Scandal in Kazakhstan], *Muslim Uzbekistan*, April 18, 2007, <<http://muslimuzbekistan.net/ru/centralasia/headlines/news.php?ID=10213>>.

<sup>108</sup> Amantur Zhaparov, “The Chinese Migrants Issue in Kyrgyzstan”, *op. cit.*.

<sup>109</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin, “Social Perceptions of China and the Chinese: A View From Kazakhstan”, *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2009, pp. 29-46.



import/export with China are not only transnationally organized, but also have very close relations with the political authorities.<sup>110</sup>

In each of these cases, the corrupt funding practices cannot be simply likened to the formation of a lobby which consistently promotes pro-Chinese policies over many years since they are temporally circumscribed and product dependent. The black money spent by Beijing in Central Asia may help to formalize a contract or to facilitate a specific project, but it does not provide a level of influence that could sway high-ranking political decisions. Therefore, there are no lobbies financed by China that have developed independently of political power, and none that could counter high-level decisions. This phenomenon is strengthened by the current collusion in Central Asia between decision-making circles, high-level functionaries, and private- and public-sector oligarchs.

It is therefore not possible to identify “Chinese lobbies” in Central Asian political life such as they exist, for example, in the United States. Beijing has no need to finance institutional mediators capable of conveying its viewpoint to decision-making circles, and any overt formalization of a pro-Chinese lobby would have the counter effect of inducing the organization of an anti-Chinese lobby. It is nevertheless likely that such a situation is provisional, for several reasons. First, historically Beijing has always fostered Sinophile circles in neighboring countries, and so it seems likely that what happened in South Asia, where China has managed to co-opt sections of the intellectual and political elite, will also occur in the post-Soviet space. Second, there are Sinophile circles currently being formed in Russia, where ideological commitments tend to be more openly proclaimed than in Central Asia.<sup>111</sup> It may be supposed, then, that developments in Russia will also have an impact on the situation in Central Asia. Last, economic stakes over the division of the region’s wealth and the conflicts of interest between the great powers in the region will lead to the formation of pro-Chinese lobbies to counteract the already extant pro-Russian and pro-western lobbies. So, despite the fact that

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<sup>110</sup> See the many disclosed cases in Sadykzhan Ibraimov, “China-Central Asia Trade Relations: Economic and Social Patterns”, *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2009, pp. 47-60.

<sup>111</sup> “Kitaiskie gruppy vliianiia v Rossii” [The Chinese groups of influence in Russia], *Informatsionno-analiticheskii biulleten’*, no. 13, Moscow: Tsentr politicheskoi informatsii, 2006, 32 p.

heads of states themselves appear to be more Sinophile than their fellow citizens, in a few years it is possible that political and economic circles with interests centered on China will also form so that they can defend their own particular points of view.

*Political Tensions in Kazakhstan over the “Chinese Question”*

Although the Sinophile lobbies are not yet very structured, China’s presence is not a matter of indifference to wider political and social circles. In addition to Kyrgyzstan, political debate over the “Chinese question” is also very virulent in Kazakhstan. There are indeed numerous grounds for tension, which include the dynamism of the Uyghur diaspora, border disputes, the difficulty of resolving issues connected to cross-border rivers, growing tensions over Chinese activity in the energy sector, the setting up of Chinese firms, and fears about unchecked migration flows.

Kazakhstan’s brand of presidentialism, which was instituted in the first Constitution of 1993 and strengthened in the 1995 Constitution, has impeded the development of democratic politics. The opposition parties have been ousted and the independent press gagged. However, attempts at the end of the 1990s by former Prime Minister Alexander Kazhegeldin to unite the opposition forces, and the creation of political parties like the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan and the Ak Zhol party in the 2000s, unambiguously demonstrate that the struggle for power is not unfolding within the public sphere, but within the circles of power themselves. The regime’s authoritarian intensification is effectively leading to a redoubling of intra-elite conflicts: struggles are becoming increasingly intense between “family” members, technocrats, and oligarchs around the ageing president, who stands as a symbol of national harmony. In actual fact, the supremacy of the Nazarbaev clan is regularly put into question by the various elite members who desire to take a greater share in the country’s wealth. Kazakh presidentialism indeed seems inseparable from the patrimonial dimension of the system and, as a result, lines of political conflict are forming over access to resources and the legitimacy of accumulated wealth. This raises acute

questions relating to property transfers at the time of the next presidential succession.<sup>112</sup>

In the early 1990s, Beijing, concerned about the political commitments of the Central Asian Uyghur diaspora, especially in Kazakhstan, asked local authorities to bring this dissidence under control. In 1995, the Friendship Declaration between Kazakhstan and the PRC spoke of their common struggle against separatism. Each state committed to denying access to its territory to any forces that threatened to undermine the territorial integrity of its partner. In 1996, with tensions running high in Xinjiang, Beijing demanded that the Central Asian states close down all of the most pro-independence associations. These pressures seem to have been applied at the highest level, i.e., directly on the presidents. Both Almaty and Bishkek acted quickly to liquidate the most hostile associations, and tried to infiltrate those that remained in order to create schisms between dissident leaders and leaders co-opted by the authorities. The Chinese secret services are alleged to have entered Kazakh territory with the more or less voluntary consent of the authorities in order to track down Uyghur dissidents and, if possible, to have them deported to China.<sup>113</sup> In Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov's authoritarian regime has effectively prevented Uyghur activists from organizing militant associations.

By submitting to China, the Central Asian governments wanted to avoid annoying their big neighbor, with whom many crucial problems remained unresolved. However, in Kazakhstan, the aim was also to thwart the possibility of a potentially destabilizing Uyghur separatist movement developing within the country. This act of abandoning the Uyghur diaspora to Beijing's interests was legitimated in the name of the Central Asia's independence: the authorities argued that if they had refused to yield to Chinese pressure, then China would have simply sent in its secret services to deal with the situation, and that this would have weakened state control over

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<sup>112</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, "Logiques et acteurs du présidentielisme au Kazakhstan: la 'Famille', les technocrates et les oligarques", *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, no. 2, 2008, pp. 149-172.

<sup>113</sup> Evgeni V. Savkovich, "Uigurskaia problema v ramkakh SHOS (Kazakhstan i Kitai, 1990-nachalo 2000kh gg.)" [The Uyghur Problem in the Framework of the SCO (Kazakhstan and China, the 1990s and the starts of the 2000s)], *Analytica*, January 11, 2006, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20060111220552543](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20060111220552543)>.

territory and population.<sup>114</sup> With the exception of those concerned, the crisis between China and Central Asia over the Uyghur question was hardly remarked upon: in Central Asia there were almost no broadcasts about it, and the ruling elites had no problems co-opting local politicians and public opinion, neither of which was desirous of seeing a potentially threatening Uyghur minority being granted special rights.

There was not the same unanimity over the border settlements, even if in 1999 Nursultan Nazarbaev did eventually manage to have the final agreement ratified by parliament (*Mazhilis*) with a large majority. To convince the public, the Kazakh authorities launched an intense propaganda campaign to justify the cession of territories to Beijing. They argued that the tracts of land being ceded were worthless, that they were uncultivable, and contained no deposits of precious minerals, nor any strategic value. In spite of this campaign, there was a component of public opinion supported by political opponents at the time which interpreted the border agreement as a betrayal, accusing the authorities of compromising the country's territorial integrity – and that only a few years after attaining independence. The opposition was united in rejecting the arguments put forward by the government to justify the agreement. Murat Auezov, in particular, used his familial and personal prestige skillfully to draw public attention to the “Chinese question”.

Son of the great writer Mukhtar Auezov<sup>115</sup> (1897-1961), Murat Auezov is an essayist known for his works on the cultures of the Steppes. He is also a Sinologist by training and worked for many years at the Institute of Oriental Studies before taking up a position in the diplomatic service. In 1992, he was sent to Beijing in his capacity as the first ambassador of independent Kazakhstan to China. Returning to Almaty in 1995, he became involved in politics, creating a democratic platform called Azamat, which was transformed into a political party in time for the 1999 legislative elections. He then also took up the directorship of the Soros-Kazakhstan Foundation from 1999 to 2002. Auezov, who was a key leader of the opposition against

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<sup>114</sup> Interview with Hamid Khamraev, member of the Association of Uyghur writers of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 15 March 2008.

<sup>115</sup> Mukhtar Auezov is regarded as one of the greatest Kazakh writers of the 20th century. His most famous book *The Path of Abay*, published in the 1950s, rehabilitated Abay's work (1845-1904) as part of the national patrimony. This earned Auezov an important notoriety in the Soviet literary world.

President Nursultan Nazarbaev, has been a constant critic of the authorities' handling of the "Chinese question", from the first Sino-Kazakh treaty in 1994 to the 1999 agreements over outstanding land disputes. In fact, he personally participated in some of the commissions presiding over issues of border demarcation and this experience, he claims, enabled him to witness Chinese pressures first-hand. Indeed, he accuses the government of having knowingly sold off the nation's territory cheaply, and of simply yielding to nearly half of Beijing's territorial demands.<sup>116</sup>

In addition to the support of his own party, Azamat, Murat Auezov was also backed by another great nationalist literary figure, namely Olzhas Suleimenov. In 1993, Suleimenov, the former president of the ecological and anti-nuclear Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement and the then leader of the People's Congress of Kazakhstan, argued that such a small amount of land would not content the Chinese. This point, he stated, was betrayed by Chinese textbooks, which he reproached for persistently depicting large tracts of Kazakh land within the borders of the Empire.<sup>117</sup> Auezov also received the full support of the opposition movements of the 1990s, including the ecological movement Tabigat led by Mels Eleusizov, the Kazakh nationalist circles of the Azat party, and the groups comprised of Russian opposition such as the Lad party headed by Yakob Belousov,<sup>118</sup> the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, and the Pokolenie Retiree Movement directed by Irina Savostina.<sup>119</sup> Auezov sharply criticized the "disinformation campaign led by the organs of power to deceive public opinion" and claimed that official discourses "bordered on state crime".<sup>120</sup> This intensified his

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<sup>116</sup> Interview with Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

<sup>117</sup> Comments reported in *Narodnyi Kongress*, no. 5, June 1993, cited by Andrei Grozin, "Kazakhstan: problemy natsional'noi bezopasnosti" [Kazakhstan: National Security Problems], *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kavkaz*, no. 4, 1999, <[http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-04-1999/st\\_11\\_grosin.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-04-1999/st_11_grosin.shtml)>.

<sup>118</sup> On the political life of the Russian minority in Kazakhstan, see Marlène Laruelle, Sébastien Peyrouse, *Les Russes du Kazakhstan. Identités nationales et nouveaux États dans l'espace post-soviétique*, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose/IFEAC, 2004.

<sup>119</sup> Vitalii Khliupin, *Geopoliticheskii treugol'nik. Kazakhstan-Kitai-Rossia. Proshloe i nastoiashchee pograničnoi problemy* [The Geopolitical Triangle Kazakhstan-China-Russia: Past and Present of the Border Disputes], Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi evraziiskii institut ekonomicheskikh i politicheskikh issledovaniï, 1999, <[http://www.iicas.org/AIBOLIT/publ\\_VX\\_Tr.htm](http://www.iicas.org/AIBOLIT/publ_VX_Tr.htm)>.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

personal conflict with President Nazarbaev and obliged him to quit politics in the early 2000s.

No sooner was the border question settled than Kazakh public debate again focused on China, but this time in relation to the question of cross-border rivers. Here again, Murat Auezov tried to galvanize public opinion, accusing the authorities, not of having yielded to Chinese pressure, but for having missed the chance to ally themselves with Kyrgyzstan and Russia in order to stand up to Beijing and force it to accept a post-Soviet point of view.<sup>121</sup> In his view, China was seeking for no more than to gain time. It knew that sooner or later it would be compelled to sign an agreement on the use of cross-border rivers, but was delaying this so that it could modify the status quo in its favor as much as possible by canalizing the Ili and the Irtysh upstream. Once this became an accomplished fact, Astana would no longer be able to demand a return to the status quo.<sup>122</sup> In Auezov's eyes, this failure was a failure of Central Asian cooperation in general: China had succeeded in gaining territories from Bishkek containing both glaciers and the sources of several rivers that flow into the Tarim basin without having to cede anything to Kazakhstan in return. The reason for this, he argues, was that it was able to exploit Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's incapacity to form a common front. On this issue, Auezov, once again, enjoyed the support of the entire political opposition, in particular that of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan.

The question of cross-border rivers no longer dominates either the political scene or the Kazakh media. However, it is bound to take center stage again in years to come because no equitable solution has yet been found. In the meantime, however, the "Chinese question" has become more of an economic one. At the 2004 legislative elections a new block was formed called the Agricultural and Industrial Workers' Union (AIST). This Union was the offspring of the rapprochement between the Agrarian Party and the Civic Party, and it worked in close collaboration with the Enbek (Labor) faction in Parliament. The AIST block defended the interests of large Kazakhstani industrial groups from the metallurgy and agriculture sectors, whereas

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<sup>121</sup> See, for example, "Murat Auezov rassuzhdaet ob ekologicheskikh problemakh, i ne tol'ko o nikh" [Murat Auezov Comments on Ecological Problems, amongst others], *Megalopolis*, no. 3, November 22, 2000.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

Enbek, which was close to the unions, worked to promote the rights of workers and state employees. To this end, Enbek has been involved in drafting legislation for a new labor code and advocating policies to regulate industrial relations.<sup>123</sup> These two political factions rivaled the official party Otan, as well as the Asar party headed by the president's eldest daughter, Dariga Nazarbaeva, by positioning themselves in an electoral niche promoting social and corporatist demands. But this competition with the presidential family warranted their being brought back under the sway of the presidential party at the 2007 elections. Both these groups were particularly sensitive to Beijing's advances in the industrial sector and to the social questions raised by Chinese companies, which have a reputation for not respecting Kazakhstani workers' rights. Their influence had reached such levels that in December 2004, the Chinese ambassador to Kazakhstan, Chou Siaopei, who was on a visit to the parliament, made a point of meeting with members of both factions.<sup>124</sup>

Indeed Chinese companies based in Kazakhstan have had to confront growing discontent among some of their workers. The internal functioning of the CNPC, which brings all its extraction equipment from China, pleases neither Kazakhstani entrepreneurs, who receive no benefits in terms of increased sales, nor the trade unions, which criticize the foreign company's right to bring its own labor instead of providing employment to local workers. In 2007, many hundreds of workers from a branch of the CNPC, the China Petroleum Engineering and Construction Corp. (CPEEC), succeeded in organizing a union to protest against their working conditions.<sup>125</sup> The regional administration, concerned by the distribution of leaflets and the articles published in local newspapers denouncing the "Chinese as exploiters

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<sup>123</sup> "V Parlamente Kazakhstana sformirovana novaia deputatskaia gruppy Enbek/Trud" [A New Groups of MPs forms in the Kazakh Parliament, Enbek/Labor], *CentrAsia*, November 27, 2004, <[www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1101557580](http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1101557580)>.

<sup>124</sup> "Posol Kitaia vstretilsia v Mazhilise s liderami bloka AIST i gruppy Enbek" [The Chinese Ambassador meets the Leaders of the AIST Block and of the Enbek Group in Mazhilis], *Kazakhstan Today*, December 15, 2004, <<http://www.inform.kz/showarticle.php?lang=rus&id=104411>>.

<sup>125</sup> For example, see the site of the communist-leaning Revolutionary Party of Kazakhstan for the facts: <[http://www.revkom.com/index.htm?/za\\_rubezom/rabochie\\_v\\_mire/20071024Kazakhstan.htm](http://www.revkom.com/index.htm?/za_rubezom/rabochie_v_mire/20071024Kazakhstan.htm)>.

of the Kazakh people”,<sup>126</sup> opened an official inquiry, while the CNPC announced it was willing to ameliorate the workers’ working conditions and improve salaries. Moreover, the possibility that some regions could become economic enclaves entirely dependent on Chinese businesses is also a concern: 90 percent of the budget of the Kzyl-Orda region, for example, is reportedly funded by taxes levied from the petroleum sector, which is mainly dominated by Beijing.<sup>127</sup> The President of the Association of Companies of Light Industry of Kazakhstan, Liubov Khudova, has, for her part, expressed concern for the future of the textile and weaving industry, which will in all likelihood be quickly wiped out by the arrival of Chinese products.<sup>128</sup> The Kazakh Chamber of Commerce and Industry is said to have recognized its inability to compete against Chinese products. Cognizant of the problems in selling Kazakh products to the West, it considers that the only markets left open to it are those of Xinjiang, which is less developed than the rest of China, and those of a few third-world countries.<sup>129</sup>

Even if it is rather unstructured in institutional terms, it is possible to observe the emergence of anti-Chinese lobbies supported by some middle-working classes concerned about the deterioration of the labor market and Chinese competition. Beijing’s offensive in the national energy sector is also eliciting a growing number of reactions, even among officials. In the fall of 2006, several members of parliament, including MPs Valeri Kotovich and Viktor Egorov, both of whom are current members of the presidential party Otan, censured “China’s aggressive expansion in the oil sector” and its new acquisitions.<sup>130</sup> Then, after the CITIC group purchased Nations Energy and the KarazhanbasMunay site, Kotovich asserted that the country was about to

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<sup>126</sup> “Kitaiskie ekspluatatory kazakhskogo naroda” [The Chinese exploiters of the Kazakh People], *Delo no. 0001*, August 14, 2007, <<http://www.del0001.ru/kz/399.htm>>.

<sup>127</sup> “Prisutstvie Kitaia v Kazakhstane: ‘dostizheniia’ i ‘perspektivy’” [China’s Presence in Kazakhstan: ‘Success’ and ‘Perspectives’], *PostBackUSSR*, February 10, 2006, <[http://www.pbussr.ru/index.php?razdel=5&condition=show\\_news&id=8992](http://www.pbussr.ru/index.php?razdel=5&condition=show_news&id=8992)>.

<sup>128</sup> Liubov Khudova, cited in “Kitaiskaia ekspansiia v Sredniuiu Aziuu. Igra na operezhenie ili nastuplenie (mnenie ekspertov)” [Chinese Expansion in Central Asia. A Game of Anticipation or a Flood (the opinions of experts)], *CentrAsia*, August 8, 2007, <[www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1186517400](http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1186517400)>.

<sup>129</sup> Alida Ashimbaeva, “Starye problemy novoi ekonomiki Kazakhstana”, *op. cit.*

<sup>130</sup> “Kitaem vedetsia bol’shaia rabota po priobreteniiu riada neftianykh kompanii, rabotaiushchikh v Kazakhstane” [China Furthers its Acquisitions of Oil Companies in Kazakhstan], *Nomad*, November 2, 2006, <<http://www.nomad.su/?a=3-200611020217>>.



lose its energy independence, declaring that China already controlled 28 percent of Kazakh oil production and could acquire as much as 40 percent of the market share if it were to purchase MangistauMunayGas. The polemic that arose was such that the Energy Minister Bakhytkozha Izmukhambetov himself was obliged to intervene by saying he would do everything in his power to block the purchase plans, which turned out not to be the case. The lack of transparency in oil transactions indeed constitutes one of the great topics of debate in the Kazakh parliament and features regularly in the media. Every transaction with China provokes more reactions than those with western companies, even though the majority today believes that the Kazakh state ought to remain in control of its natural resources.

Throughout the 1990s Kazakhstan experienced large-scale migration out of the country, but in the last few years it has become an immigration zone. This issue is very present in the Kazakh press, which is keen to emphasize the increasing dangers of the “yellow peril” threatening the country, and it has also been raised in parliament. According to official estimates, there are around (and in reality probably more) 500,000 migrants from other Central Asian republics in Kazakhstan. At the CIS summit in October 2007, the Kazakh government took the remarkable step of adopting a series of legal and social measures to protect them with the aim of off-setting the country’s diminishing population and labor force. Astana’s open migration policy has also included the naturalization of certain migrant groups. However, not all political circles support this strategy. Valeri Kotovich, once again, attacked it, expressing his concern that too many not only Central Asian but also Chinese migrants were being let in.<sup>131</sup> Similar to Russia, which has a two-fold policy of letting in legal migrants while tightening controls on illegal migrants, Kazakhstan will no doubt soon have parliamentary debates about introducing legislation to regulate migrant intake. However, the country’s labor shortage, exacerbated by its present economic dynamism, necessitates a generous and non-restrictive migration policy. The arguments put forward by political groups, such as the former AIST and Enbek, to the effect that

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<sup>131</sup> “Kazakhstanskii deputat ob initsiative Kirgizii: Migratsiiu nuzhno regulirovat’, ni v koem sluchae ne otkryvaia granitsy EvrazES” [A Kazakh MP comments on Kyrgyzstan’s Initiative: in no case must migrations be resolved by opening up the borders of the Eurasian Economic Community], *UpMonitor*, April 18, 2007, <<http://www.upmonitor.ru/news/russia/100730a/o/print/>>.

migrants steal work from Kazakhstani citizens are likely to prove difficult to justify inasmuch as these migrants occupy economic niches that citizens refuse because of the meager salaries.

But insofar as the myth of the “yellow peril” has no rational basis, it appears likely to remain a politically potent topic in Kazakhstan. Murat Auezov, for instance, continues to head the debate on this question. Although he abandoned politics under pressure from the authorities and returned to do research, first in his position as director of the Kazakhstan National Library (2003-2006) and then as that of The Mukhtar Auezov Foundation (2007-), he has retained a prominent media presence, especially on the topic of the “yellow peril”. These political and media debates have been intensified by fears that parcels of agricultural land will be sold to China. In fact, in spring 2004, the Kazakh autonomous region of Ili in Xinjiang obtained permission to rent 7,000 hectares of agricultural land – which had been abandoned since the 1990s – for ten years from the Kazakhstan governor of the border district of Lake Alakol. The lands were rented to about 3,000 Chinese colonists who now grow soya beans and wheat on them.<sup>132</sup> This transaction provoked scathing attacks in the media against the government, apparently out of concern that the country was being carved up at Beijing’s behest. The media recalled that the Russian Far East was also becoming increasingly fragmented through the sale of parcels of agricultural lands and wooded areas to China. Such deals have, however, not been repeated, precisely because Sinophobe social pressures, which are quite palpable on the issue of land possession, have quelled the ambitions of local politicians.

The so-called Chinese threat is therefore bound to re-appear in Kazakh media and political spheres at regular intervals. The traditional protagonists of this threat are made up of oppositional groups of diverse political sensibility: pro-westerners close to the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, who criticize China’s influence on the Central Asian governments’ authoritarian orientation; Kazakh nationalist circles, for example the Alash party of the 1990s and the youth patriotic movement Aibat of the 2000s, for whom China

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<sup>132</sup> “Kitaitsy reshili osvaivat’ zemli v Kazakhstane” [The Chinese have decided to colonize lands in Kazakhstan], *Altaiskaia pravda*, January 30, 2004, <<http://www.ap.altairegion.ru/023-04/14.html>>.

is a major demographic concern;<sup>133</sup> and associations of the Russian diaspora, who are anxious about the strengthening of ties between Astana and Beijing and who raise the specter of Kazakhstan becoming like a future Russian Far East in Chinese hands. For instance, the Cossack ataman of the Semirechie region, Yuri Zakharov, maintains that the country will disappear beneath a flood of Chinese immigrants unless the authorities do not impede Russian emigration by implementing policies that are more favorable toward Russophones.<sup>134</sup> However, a few years ago, the question of China started to shake up more than just the political opposition. It has also become a recurrent preoccupation of certain circles that are entirely integrated in the current political game. These groups are representative of the specific industrial and commercial interests that have been threatened – or that feel themselves to have been – by the rise of China’s economic influence in the country. Indeed, over the long term it is this “economics-based” Sinophobia, and not the more ideologically based opposition, that the government will have more trouble in managing since it is developing in social groups central to Nazarbaev’s support base.

#### *Political Tensions in Kyrgyzstan over the “Chinese Question”*

Traditionally considered Central Asia’s most democratic country, Kyrgyzstan is plagued by the persistent weakness of its state apparatus, which prevents those in power from exercising their prerogatives in as authoritarian a manner as their neighbors. The Akaev years (1991-2005) were marked by a strategy of political containment, whose effect was that the presidential family developed a stranglehold over the country through a number of questionable procedures, consciously designed to enable the president to retain his position.<sup>135</sup> After the “Tulip revolution” in March 2005, the country was plunged into chronic instability, generating an overall negative perception of the state, no longer seen as the site where the public

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<sup>133</sup> See the open letter that Akim Gadil’bek, president of youth movement Aibat, addressed to the President of the Republic, *Informatsionno-analiticheskii tsentr po izucheniiu obshchestvenno-politicheskikh protsessov na postsovetskom prostranstve*, December 12, 2006, <[http://www.ia-centr.ru/archive/public\\_details76b3.html?id=256](http://www.ia-centr.ru/archive/public_details76b3.html?id=256)>.

<sup>134</sup> Iuri Zakharov, cited in “Kitaiskaia ekspansia v Sredniuiu Aziiu”, *op. cit.*

<sup>135</sup> For example, the 1996 referendum as a result of which Akaev’s mandate was extended, and also the 2003 referendum which approved a new Constitution extending presidential powers.

good is equitably shared out, but as an instrument by means of which various political clans, whose basis is partly regional, could appropriate resources. The criminalization of public space has today reached record heights, including the assassinations of public figures, the quasi-public purchases of parliamentary membership and high-ranking functionary posts, and the infiltration of state structures by the mafia, who now benefit from high-level protection.<sup>136</sup> Since 2007-2008, President Kurmanbek Bakiev has attempted to establish some sort of “vertical power” structure, along the lines of Russia and Kazakhstan. This attempt, which has been detrimental to democratic initiatives, is aimed at stabilizing the country, promoting investments, and reasserting state authority, but thus far it has had rather limited results.

More than in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz political life has been profoundly structured by the process of settling border issues with China, an issue that provoked the largest popular demonstrations seen in the country since independence. The first border agreement, in which approximately 30,000 hectares were ceded to China, was signed by the president in 1996 and ratified by the parliament (*Jogorku Kenesh*) two years later in 1998. In the second, signed in 1999, more than 90,000 hectares of the Uzengi-Kuush region were ceded to China. This provoked the opposition’s wrath. Tapping into national sentiment, it used the settlement to try to topple the government. In fall 2001, some MPs refused to ratify the treaty, arguing that the final text of the agreement had not been made known to them, that no maps with precise geographical boundaries had been attached, and that it did not have any assessment of the value of the lands.<sup>137</sup> A parliamentary commission visited the Uzengi-Kuush area to report on the ceded territory and confirmed that the new border was being demarcated even prior to ratification. Standing before the accomplished fact, the MPs revolted. General Ismail Isakov, who became Defense Minister after the “Tulip revolution”, was key among the opposition party leaders calling for the president’s resignation on grounds that only the parliament, and not the president, is empowered to alter state

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<sup>136</sup> Erica Marat, “Criminalization of the Kyrgyz State before and after the Tulip Revolution”, *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2008, pp. 15-22.

<sup>137</sup> Arkadii Dubnov, “Kirgizskie palki v kitaiskie koleasa” [A Kyrgyz Spoke in Chinese Wheels], *Vremia*, June 22, 2001, <<http://www.vremya.ru/2001/108/5/11015.html>>.

borders.<sup>138</sup> The opposition launched a petition calling for a popular referendum over the matter, but it was unable to collect the 300,000 signatures required, largely because the authorities maintained a tight control over the use of “administrative resources”.<sup>139</sup>

MP Azimbek Beknazarov, who is an important political figure in his natal region of Djalalabad, was also a key leader behind the vociferous criticisms of Askar Akaev’s handling of the “Chinese question”. At the time, Beknazarov was president of the Parliamentary Committee for Judiciary Affairs and Constitutional Reform and regularly threatened the president with impeachment.<sup>140</sup> In early 2002, he had legal charges brought against him by the authorities, who were moving to quash protest, but this gave rise to pro-Beknazarov demonstrations in his home village of Aksy. Demonstrators and hunger-strikers turned out to demand his freedom along with that of the political opponent and leader of the Ar-Namysh party, Felix Kulov (who had been sentenced to ten years in a prison camp) not to mention the president’s resignation. The protests, however, were violently suppressed by the police: a March 17 confrontation between police and protestors in the small town of Kerben left five dead and close to a hundred wounded, with a sixth person dying as a result of his hunger strike. Confronted with this scandal, Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev was obliged to hand in his resignation, but the police officers responsible for the violence were never arrested.<sup>141</sup>

Far from being totally subordinate to the president, the Kyrgyz parliament even entertained the idea of annulling the 1996 and 1999 agreements. Some MPs claimed that Beijing had not contested the territories ceded and would

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<sup>138</sup> Vitalii Volkov, “Kirgiziia: sud’by spornykh territorii dolzhen reshat’ referendum” [Kyrgyzstan: the fate of the contested territories must be decided by referendum], *Info House*, December 22, 2002, <<http://www.ricnews.com/map/vgw.html>>.

<sup>139</sup> By ‘administrative resources’ is to be understood the use by the established bureaucratic apparatus of multiple state and private resources (state- or municipality-funded publicity campaigns, public companies putting large financial means at the disposal of the authorities, etc.) to prevent political opponents from influencing public opinion.

<sup>140</sup> “Kyrgyzzeit. Deputat A. Beknazarov nachal protiv prezidenta A. Akaeva protseduru impichmenta” [Kyrgyzgate: MP Beknazarov initiates impeachment proceedings against president Akaev], *CentrAsia*, May 18, 2002, <<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1020802560>>.

<sup>141</sup> Damir Usenbaev, “Roman vo imia...” [A Novel in the name of ...], *Oasis*, no. 16, August 2007, <<http://www.ca-oasis.info/oasis/?jrn=61&id=469>>.

have recognized Kyrgyzstan's borders upon the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992.<sup>142</sup> However, in May 2002, Askar Akaev took a sterner approach and formally asked the parliament to ratify the agreement, arguing that China had forgone 70 percent of the contested territories and that no more could be expected.<sup>143</sup> Despite renewed demonstrations involving many thousands of persons in Aksy, the agreement was ratified in parliament with a large majority (30 votes for, 1 against, and 4 abstentions).<sup>144</sup> Officially closed, the debate is nevertheless reactivated on occasion in media and political spheres. For example, in 2005, after the peaceful overthrow of the president, several people demanded the country revoke the border agreements on grounds that Akaev's acts were unconstitutional, but the idea was quickly forgotten.<sup>145</sup> The successive governments of the second president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, have seen no interest in provoking a diplomatic crisis with China. So, despite the anti-Chinese remarks that many politicians uttered while in opposition to Akaev, the "Tulip revolution" has not caused the least change in Bishkek's Chinese policy. Bakiev himself has even enthused over the cordial relations that the two countries have enjoyed for more than fifteen years.<sup>146</sup>

Like in Kazakhstan, the "China issue" is also very much part of domestic debate in Kyrgyzstan. The issue rapidly became central to the political struggle between the opposition and former president. Indeed, Akaev misunderstood the symbolic significance of the crisis provoked by the loss of territorial integrity and had no way of countering the feelings of betrayal being fomented. In addition, this conflict broke out at a time when public

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<sup>142</sup> "Vernite nashu zemliu! Kirgiziiu zakhlestnui antikitaiskii protest. Beknazarov prisoedinilsia k golodovke" [Give us back our land! Kyrgyzstan rocked by Anti-Chinese protests. Beknazarov joins the hunger strikers], *CentrAsia*, May 14, 2002, <<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1021355040>>.

<sup>143</sup> "RSE-RS novosti ot Kyrgyzstana" [RFE-RF. News from Kyrgyzstan], *Ferghana.ru*, May 7, 2002, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=288>>.

<sup>144</sup> "Kirgiziiia ratifitsirovala pogranichnoe soglashenie s Kitaem" [Kyrgyzstan ratified Border Agreement with China], *Prima-News*, May 17, 2002, <<http://www.prima-news.ru/news/news/2002/5/17/10315.html>>.

<sup>145</sup> Abdan Shukenov, "Novaia vlast': zemli svoei ne otdadim ni piadi" [The New Power: We will not yield an Inch of our Land], *Oasis*, no. 12, August 2005, <<http://www.ca-oasis.info/oasis/?jrn=13&id=86>>.

<sup>146</sup> Erlan Abdyl'daev, "Kitaiskii vektor vneshnei politiki Kurmanbeka Bakieva" [The Chinese Vector of Kurmanbek Bakiev's Foreign Policy], *Analytica*, June 2006, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20060621024111739](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20060621024111739)>.

opinion was beginning to look negatively upon the Akaev family's political and economic stranglehold over the country. Tensions with Uzbekistan further aggravated the situation, since Bishkek was in the middle of negotiations over its borders with Tashkent. In 2001, under pressure from the parliament, Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev was struck by a scandal that forced him to revoke a secret memorandum of territorial exchange that he had recently signed with Uzbekistan. Fears that their Uzbek neighbor would demand as much territory as Beijing seems to have led the parliament to take a more hard-line approach. Moreover, rumors, which have since been proved false, about a rent deal leasing agricultural land to Chinese farmers in the Issyk-Kul region to form enclaves under Chinese rule, fuelled the population's phobias.<sup>147</sup> Popular resentment against Akaev over the "Chinese issue" thus crystallized because the political opposition, and in particular Azimbek Beknazarov, could successfully exploit the Kyrgyz clientelist system.

With the border question at last resolved – although traces of it exist in the collective memory, and its long-term impact on Sinophobe feelings remains obscure – the debate has shifted to the issue of migration. By contrast to Kazakhstan, where a labor shortage has meant that such Sinophobic arguments are less widespread, in Kyrgyzstan the presence of Chinese migrants at labor markets has raised much concern. The country is in quite a quandary: more than half a million of its citizens have left to work abroad, with half going to Russia, and half to Kazakhstan. As a result, the countryside and small towns are emptied of men and labor, but thereby receive remittances worth more than the entire 500 million-dollar state budget.<sup>148</sup> Further, at the same time as emigration is increasing, more and more Chinese migrants are establishing themselves in the small-business sector and in abandoned social niches (road and rail construction, cement- and brickworks, etc.). This has caused acute social and interethnic problems, since, with the exception of gold and a few precious metals, Kyrgyzstan has

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<sup>147</sup> "Kitaiskie migranty prodolzhaiut ugrozhat' Kirgizii (anonimnoe pis'mo v redaktsiiu)" [Chinese migrants continue to threaten Kyrgyzstan (anonymous letter to the editors)], *CentrAsia*, July 26, 2004, <<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1090786200>>.

<sup>148</sup> Rafis Abazov, "Economic Migration in Post-Soviet Central Asia: The Case of Kyrgyzstan", *Post-Communist Economies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1999, pp. 237-252.

no special resources and relies on a trade-based economy. Bazaars thus constitute the vertebral column of the Kyrgyz economic system and comprise particularly politically reactive milieus.

Kyrgyzstan has two main bazaars, Dordoi in Bishkek, from which goods are re-exported to Kazakhstan, and the Karasuu bazaar on the Kyrgyz side of the Ferghana valley, which is the largest in Central Asia and functions as a transit area for goods from the Irkeshtam border post, three-quarters of which end up in Uzbekistan. The owners of these bazaars have all entered politics in order to obtain parliamentary immunity. The Dordoi bazaar owner, Askar Salymbekov, is also the former mayor of Bishkek and the former governor of Naryn. Parliamentary seats have been won by his brother, Mamytbay, and his brother's son, Dzhumabek. At the same time, the family's other sons organize the sale of land parcels and market boutiques through the Dordoi Corporation. The construction of this family business was largely guaranteed through the family's success in securing control of the Naryn road, which links the capital to the Torugart border. In the country's south, the chief owners of Karasuu, Bayaman Erkinbaev (who was assassinated in 2005) and Alisher Sabirov, both managed to get elected to parliament, as well as members of their families to the municipal council. This circle is highly criminalized: since 2005 about ten Kyrgyz businessmen working in the bazaar sector who have also held administrative posts have been assassinated, which stands as confirmation of the high degree of collusion extant between the mafia economy and political engagement in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>149</sup>

Internal conflicts between the bazaar's main owners regularly threaten the country's stability at a local and regional level. The government is also particularly sensitive to demands made by small groups of sellers. This was shown, for example, in early 2007, when the Kyrgyz government announced that it would introduce bills similar to Russia's recent adoption of legislation clamping down on foreign citizens working in wholesale and retail, first limiting them through quota restrictions, and then altogether banning

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<sup>149</sup> On the functioning of Kyrgyz markets, see Regine A. Spector, "Securing Property in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2008, pp. 149-176.



them.<sup>150</sup> While the Russian legislation principally aims at Caucasians and Central Asians, and was drafted by the Kremlin in response to the rise in xenophobia in Russia, in Kyrgyzstan this situation was used as an opportunity to curtail the commercial activities of the Chinese. In January 2007, an official directive entitled “On the establishment of an authorized quota of foreign citizens and of apatrides maintaining commercial activities in wholesaling and retailing in the Kyrgyz republic” was adopted and due to come into force in April 2007, specifying that only 4,500 foreigners were to be allowed to work at Kyrgyz markets. However, the Kyrgyz authorities were only a few months away from a SCO summit to be held in Bishkek in August, so they grew concerned about the negative impact this decision might have on their relations with Beijing, initially delaying implementation until January 1, 2008, and then indefinitely.<sup>151</sup>

The director of the State Committee for Work and Migration, Aigul Ryskulova, who was the bill’s main instigator, tried to alleviate the concerns of Chinese entrepreneurs. She explained that this law did not target either investors or company heads but rather those who undertake individual entrepreneurial activities.<sup>152</sup> The official reason for the decision was a response to a threefold challenge: to reduce the competition from Chinese traders to the Kyrgyz; to decrease pressures at markets where conflicts between groups have intensified ever since the “Tulip revolution”; and to facilitate the return of Kyrgyz workers from Russia. According to the State Committee for Work and Migration, Kyrgyzstan’s membership to the WTO means it cannot impose new customs duties on Chinese products, and so must employ other measures such as imposing quotas on foreign traders and increasing the cost of rental licenses, which until then had actually been relatively small (600 soms or around US\$ 15 per month). Aigul Ryskulova

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<sup>150</sup> For more details about this law, its motivations, and its impact cf. Marlène Laruelle, “Russian Policy on Central Asia and the Role of Russian Nationalism”, *Silk Road Papers*, Washington DC: The Central Asia and Caucasus Institute, April 2008, <<http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/srp/o8/mlo8russiacentral.pdf>>.

<sup>151</sup> Daniyar Karimov, “Pravitel’stvo Kyrgyzstana otmenilo postanovlenie, zapreshchaiushchee inostrannym grazhdanam rabotat’ na mestnykh rynkakh”, *24.kg*, March 3, 2007, <<http://www.24.kg/community/2007/03/03/46216.html>>.

<sup>152</sup> “Pravitel’stvo Kyrgyzstana v blizhaishee vremia uporiadochit deiatel’nost’ inostrannykh predprinimatelei na rynkakh strany” [The Kyrgyz Government will soon regulate activities of foreign entrepreneurs in the country’s markets], *For.kg*, January 12, 2007, <<http://www.for.kg/goid.php?id=21677>>.

nevertheless concedes that the pressures being exercised from the two chief organizations of Kyrgyz entrepreneurs convinced the State Committee to pass this law.

The first, the Dordoi association, is headed by Sergey Ponomarev, and unites 1,500 sellers from the Bishkek bazaar. This association lodged formal complaints about dumping from Chinese traders, claiming that they buy cheaper Chinese products than their Kyrgyz counterparts and are even given fiscal relief for exports by their government. The allegedly inferior quality of Chinese products is also an argument often employed by unions. The Dordoi association, for example, has complained that Chinese fabrics, which are not certified, give fashion designers illnesses.<sup>153</sup> The second largest association, Ishker, is a union of 10,000 entrepreneurs and sellers from Karasuu which formed in early 2006 and is run by Sharapat Mazhitova. Committed to reducing investment costs and improving sanitary and security conditions, Ishker also regularly decries so-called “Chinese competition.”<sup>154</sup> These two powerful economic lobbies have thus tried to convince the government that certain labor sectors should be officially reserved for nationals. Ishker even orchestrated demonstrations in support of the authorities against Chinese traders.<sup>155</sup>

Nevertheless, the government’s decision to introduce quotas for Chinese traders did not receive unanimous support from the Kyrgyz economic and political worlds. In fact, the governor of the town of Osh, Zhantoro Satybaldiev, supported by the Secretary of State Adakhan Madumarov, has argued that the introduction of quotas will by no means induce those migrants settled in Russia and Kazakhstan to return, but instead will lead to a great loss of money for the region, since more than two-thirds of Chinese

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<sup>153</sup> “Biudzheth poluchal mizer ot prisutstviia inostrannykh torgovtsev na rynkakh Kyrgyzstana” [Foreign traders at Kyrgyzstan markets account for only a negligible amount of the state budget], *For.kg*, February 6, 2007, <<http://www.for.kg/goid.php?id=24646>>.

<sup>154</sup> “Aigul’ Ryskulova poiasnila kitaitسام Postanovlenie Pravitel’stva o doliakh inostrannykh grazhdan na rynkakh” [Aigul Ryskulova explained to the Chinese the governmental decree concerning the quota of foreign traders at markets], *For.kg*, February 17, 2007, <<http://www.for.kg/goid.php?id=26232>>.

<sup>155</sup> “Mestnye prodavtsy Karasuiskogo rynka trebuiut ochistit’ rynek ot inostrannykh torgovtsev” [The local sellers of the Karasuu market demand that bazaars be cleansed of foreign traders], *AkiPress*, January 2007, <<http://business.akipress.org/news/1510>>.

products are actually re-exported.<sup>156</sup> Tursuntay Salimov, director of the Madina bazaar, specialized in sanitary and construction materials, 90 percent of which come from China, was also opposed to this idea. He argued that Chinese traders bring money into Kyrgyzstan by paying license fees for their boutiques and rents for their apartments. He has called attention to the fact that many Kyrgyz traders actually make profits by reselling cheaply bought Chinese products at higher prices in Russia and Kazakhstan.<sup>157</sup> In addition, several businessmen have stated that, since competition between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for the transit of Chinese products is growing, Astana will be able to acquire for itself the Chinese wholesale bazaars that were obliged to leave Kyrgyzstan.<sup>158</sup> Others also mention the possibility of reprisals against Kyrgyz traders established in China.

The press has also remained rather reserved, interpreting this decision as a judgment in favor of Kyrgyz commercial lobbies to the detriment of ordinary citizens. It has argued that the weak consumer capacity of the latter will be unable to respond to the price increases resulting from the partial disappearance of Chinese traders. The Kyrgyzstan Association of Chinese Businessmen, run by Ian Li Lo, reacted with alarm to the announcement. Chinese businessmen formed this association as a way of asserting their rights, and have also established a regional association in the strategic region of Osh in Southern Kyrgyzstan to make themselves heard.<sup>159</sup> The association has officially suggested opening up wholesale markets in the poorest regions

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<sup>156</sup> “V Oshe obsudili ispolnenie pravitel’stvennogo postanovleniia o kvotirovanii inostrannoi rabochei sily” [The implementation of the governmental decree on quotas on foreign work commented in Osh], February 5, 2007, <<http://www.for.kg/goid.php?id=24501>>.

<sup>157</sup> “Kommentarii i mneniia o postanovlenii pravitel’stva KP o kvotakh dlia inostrannykh grazhdan, osushchestvliaiushchikh trgovliu v Kyrgyzstane” [Commentaries and opinions on the Kyrgyz government decree for a quota limiting the numbers of foreign citizens trading in Kyrgyzstan], *Tazar*, February 23, 2007, <<http://www.tazar.kg/news.php?i=3335>>.

<sup>158</sup> Tat’iana Popova, “Postanovlenie no. 13: eshche raz ob ugrozakh i riskakh” [Decree no. 13: a recapitulation of the dangers and the risks], *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, February 28, 2007, p. 1.

<sup>159</sup> “Assotsiatsiia kitaiskikh biznesmenov s ponimaniem otneslas’ k meram po ogranicheniiu prisutstviia inostrannykh torgovtsev na rynkakh Kyrgyzstana” [The association of Chinese businessmen appreciative in their understanding of the measures limiting the presence of foreign traders at Kyrgyz markets], *For.kg*, February 16, 2007, <<http://www.for.kg/goid.php?id=26104>>.

of the country – principally Djalalabad and Batken, which happen to be near the Chinese border – to make it clear that the only way the country will develop is by trading with China.<sup>160</sup> For the time being, the Kyrgyz government has left the question hanging and has not introduced the quotas announced. Indeed, the figures evoked in 2007 – less than 5,000 foreign traders throughout the country – cannot not be regarded as a plausible way of regulating the labor market: the impact can only be negative inasmuch as it will force Chinese traders to work illegally, thereby increasing police corruption and rental conflicts at bazaars.

The “Chinese question” is thus becoming increasingly central to political debate in Central Asia. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in particular, political life has come to be characterized by crises and public debates involving their relations with their great neighbor. Nevertheless, this is a situation that remains specific to these two republics alone, for neither Uzbekistan nor Turkmenistan have had any pluralistic debates. Nor is China a major topic of debate in Tajikistan, where the media and politicians are much more focused on domestic problems, and questions of corruption and of drug-trafficking from Afghanistan. It is nevertheless likely that the “Chinese question” will become an important one for the authorities in Dushanbe, and in a way that is rather similar to what has happened in Kyrgyzstan over the last decade.

If one had to define a “Chinese lobby”, then the heads of state themselves would be the most obvious candidates, insofar as they would appear to have taken on the role as heralds of Sino-Central Asian friendship. They are in turn backed up by some powerful economic circles with interests in seeing further development in trade relations with Beijing. And it is inevitable that in due course these circles will become much more organized. However, anti-Chinese lobbies also seem to be taking shape. They tend to criticize the government for having too often subordinated themselves to Beijing’s political demands and denounce the economic impact of that subordination.

As a political object, China has thus become a major topic of debate in Central Asian societies, especially in relation to the main national problems. Indeed with the “Chinese question”, public opinion has found a means to

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<sup>160</sup> “Kitaitsy gotovy osvivaivat’ bednye regiony” [The Chinese are prepared to establish in the poorest regions], *Moia stolitsa*, February 16, 2007, <<http://www.msn.kg/page.shtml?option=item&year=7&mon=2&id=17313>>.

express its concerns over issues including whether the authorities are justified in exercising regal rights, such as the cession of sections of territory, without calling for a national referendum; whether leaders who sell economic wealth to foreign actors ought not be suspected of seeking personal gain; and what migration and labor policies the region needs to implement in order to address its own demographic weaknesses vis-a-vis its over-populated Chinese neighbor.

It is impossible not to remark upon the fact that changes in the nature of the “Chinese question” move apace with shifting political and economic stakes. In Kazakhstan, this question was chiefly raised in conjunction with the highly symbolic issue of territorial integrity and the Uyghur problem – which the Kazakh government had no qualms in settling in Beijing’s favor – and later replaced by economic issues, in particular energy-related ones. The as yet unresolved question of cross-border rivers is likely to recur regularly in political debate, especially as it will have many long-term repercussions; and doubtless the migration question will also become more important in coming years. Debates on the Chinese question in Kyrgyzstan have also shifted from border issues, which played a fundamental role in the demise of Askar Akaev, to migration and bazaar-related economic issues. Four major aspects of the “Chinese question” are thereby likely to remain in play in Central Asia: first, the transparency of transactions in the energy and mineral sector, which is one of the largest contributors to the state budget for all Central Asian states; second, the settlement of non-energy sector Chinese companies, which raises issues of competition for work and of due respect for labor regulations; third, the stake of land ownership, which has long been a particularly sensitive topic for Central Asians; and last, the control of goods flows from China, in particular to the bazaars, which are the driving forces of the Central Asian economies, and especially of Kyrgyzstan’s.

### **China as an Object of Scientific Inquiry: the Development of Sinology in Central Asian Expert Milieus**

China is not just a political but also an object of scientific inquiry. Indeed, part of the process of constructing national identities involves acquiring knowledge of the “other”: a society elaborates representations of its neighbors that are never anodyne and form part of complex identity and

political strategies, the stakes of which exceed the desire for any simple knowledge of the other's differences. Both the political and scientific aspects are intrinsically linked: power is supposed to ground its decisions in a correct understanding of national interest, an interest formulated by specialized intellectual milieus which legitimate their work by disseminating information to the rest of society. Although political decision-making as practiced in Central Asia is often determined by personal rather than national interests, the interaction between science and power cannot be ignored. The structuration of intellectual milieus and think tanks specializing in China in fact forms a basis for future Sino-Central Asian relations. They are assigned the task of making sense of the relationship, and, to this end, of formulating their own state's political and economic interests with respect to China. But they are also called upon to provide rational interpretations of complex phenomena such as migration, political pressures, and cultural influence, which are bound to impact upon Central Asian concerns of China in one way or another.

Generally speaking, the notion of think tanks encompasses a diverse range of organs (e.g. independent research institutes, pressure groups, consulting agencies, political parties' think tanks, NGOs, etc.) and varies widely across countries. However, in Central Asia the field of expertise is greatly reduced due to the restrictions placed on political expression and the weakness of "civil society." Central Asian intellectual circles specializing on China may be divided into three broad categories: first, the academic milieus in which the official discipline of Sinology emerged with independence, even though it had also been part of Russo-Soviet science; second, the state-financed institutes for strategic studies, whose degree of intellectual autonomy in large part depends on the level of freedom of expression in their country; and third, the private consulting groups that emerged during the 1990s in response to foreign policy needs, but also because individuals wanted to take advantage of the new economic conditions so they could sell their intellectual skills outside state organs.

#### *The Difficulties of Launching Sinology in Academia*

The Soviet regime traditionally relied very heavily for its expertise on university professors and scholars at the Academy of Sciences, in particular

in the domains of both international relations (The Institute of World Economy and International Relations, the Institute of North-American Studies, etc.) and nationalities policy (The Institute of Ethnology). For many decades Moscow relied on the Far East Institute for its expertise and policy advice on communist China. Soviet Sinology was based on a long Orientalist tradition that had been formed in Tsarist times and was generally inspired by the western model of Sinology. A national Sinology, one partially independent of references to Western Europe and based on research conducted first-hand by Russian scholars in China, only emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>161</sup> During Soviet times, Sinology was deeply politicized and subject to the twists and turns of Sino-Soviet relations. It was represented by two main institutions: the Institute of Oriental Studies, which adhered to a classical definition of Orientalism (language, culture, literature, and ancient history), and the Far East Institute, which dealt with contemporary topics.

In Central Asia, the difficulties that academia has experienced since the dissolution of the USSR have been accentuated by the enduring impact of the former Soviet division of knowledge, within which Moscow and Leningrad alone were permitted to formulate discourses about the external world. The reason for this situation was not only due to the fact that Russia's two cultural capitals were also those of political power, but also because the study of cultural spheres external to the Soviet world was conventionally understood to be a domain reserved for Russians. The national minorities of the federated republics or of the autonomous subjects of Russia (then the Soviet Federative Socialist Republic of Russia), and also Russian provinces, were all limited to studying their own national or regional culture. They were not supposed to access the exterior world other than through the Moscow or Leningrad prisms.<sup>162</sup> This logic was even more marked in the case of Sinology, such that relations with communist China, whether amicable or conflictual, were always highly political. The Communist Party was thus intimately involved in the shaping of scientific discourse. In Russia, the only city that was able to create a school of Sinology with some degree of

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<sup>161</sup> N. L. Mamaev, *Obraz Kitaia v sovremennoi Rossii* [The Image of China in Contemporary Russia], Moscow: Institut Dal'nego Vostoka RAN, 2007.

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Ablat Khodzhaev, Tashkent, 22 March 2008, and with Klara Khafizova, Almaty, 6 June 2008.

autonomy from Moscow and Leningrad was Vladivostok. In Central Asia, the departments of Oriental Studies were modeled on the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, and therefore focused on historical, linguistic, and cultural questions. But nowhere in the region did there exist a center specialized on contemporary issues on a par with the Far East Institute.

In addition, the departments of Oriental Studies in Central Asia did not furnish any knowledge on zones external to the Soviet Union, but reproduced the Russian prism in which their very own culture was classified as “Oriental”. Oriental Studies, then, was principally understood to involve the ancient history of Central Asia, including the relevant written and oral sources, and the history of Islam, but not Asia outside of the Soviet Union. However, the regionalization of Soviet sciences meant that these departments were allotted a specialization in studies on the Uyghur and Dungan minorities extant in the border areas of these republics. As a result, the Kyrgyz Soviet Republic established a department of Dungan Studies (*dunganovedenie*) at the end of the 1930s, when Russian folklorists, exiled in the region as a result of Stalinist repression, began to take an interest in the local cultures. From the 1940s on, the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh Soviet Republic set up a department of Uyghur Studies (*uigurovedenie*) within its Linguistics Institute.<sup>163</sup> Although their researchers were confined to the disciplines of philology, history, folklore, and ethnology, a minority among them were allowed to learn Chinese so they could carry out their research.<sup>164</sup> A modest milieu of Central Asian Sinologists thus formed in the 1960s-1970s among the specialists of these two minorities. Due to the system of regional studies promoted by Soviet ideology, these specialists were able to take an interest in their Chinese neighbor without provoking Moscow or Leningrad.

This first Soviet-born attempt at establishing Sinology in Central Asia nonetheless remained limited. It was distinguished by only a handful of personalities, whose personal and professional trajectories illustrate well the chaotic nature of Sino-Soviet relations. Ablat Khodzhaev, for example, is a founding father of Sinology in Central Asia. Of Uyghur origin, he spent

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<sup>163</sup> Interview with Risamet Karimova, the director of the section of Uyghur Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences, Almaty, 25 February 2008.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Zhon Ali, a researcher in the section of Dungan Studies at the Academy of Sciences, Bishkek, 22 February 2008.



some of his childhood years (1955-1959) in China with his father, who was among the very few non-Russian Soviet citizens permitted to take part in the specialists groups sent by the CPSU to help build Chinese communism.<sup>165</sup> Actually, between Mao's seizure of power in 1949 and the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, communist China enjoyed significant amounts of Soviet aid, particularly in the form of technicians, engineers, and political and military advisors. But with the rupture in Sino-Soviet relations, Central Asian scholars with an interest in China were no longer permitted to go to the People's Republic until the beginning of perestroika. The Faculty of Oriental Studies at Tashkent University, which had the only Sinology chair in all Central Asia (created in 1958 on the basis of the former Uyghur language chair) provided an opportunity to students with an interest in China to graduate in Sinology. The chair was, however, abolished during the most difficult periods of Sino-Soviet conflict, i.e., from 1964 to 1977, at which time students were obliged to do their Sinology masters and doctorates either at Leningrad University's Far East Institute or at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow.

It was only at the end of the 1970s when relations with Beijing began to normalize that Moscow decided to re-open the Sinology chair in Tashkent, which serves as an illustration of the highly political character of Soviet Sinology. The chair was initially renamed the "History of Cultural Relations between Central Asia and China", and then the "Department of Central Asia and the Far East." The chair was first assigned to Ablat Khodzhaev, a disciple of famous Russian Sinologist Sergey L. Tikhvinsky. Tikhvinsky was a member of the Study Commission of Diplomatic Documents of the Foreign Affairs Ministry in 1963 and again between 1975 and 1980, as well as the director of the Historico-Diplomatic Section of the same ministry.<sup>166</sup> In this function he was entrusted with the mission of gathering archival evidence to justify the Soviet borders with China. When Ablat Khodzhaev took up his post he was given the task of drafting a paper to provide

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<sup>165</sup> Interviews with Ablat Khodzhaev, Tashkent, 22 March 2008, and Almaty, 5 June 2008.

<sup>166</sup> For a biography of Sergei Tikhvinsky, see "Sergei Tikhvinskii, akademik RAN, byvshii rektor Diplomaticheskoi akademii MID RF" [Sergei Tikhvinsky, member of the Academy of Sciences, former rector of the Academy of Diplomacy at the Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Russian Federation], <[http://www.dipacademy.ru/tixvinskyi\\_doc.shtml](http://www.dipacademy.ru/tixvinskyi_doc.shtml)>.

justification for the Central Asian borders, using Chinese sources from the 18th and 19th centuries in which this zone was perceived to lie outside the Qing Empire's borders.<sup>167</sup> Historical research on China undertaken in Central Asia has thus always had strong political underpinnings and responded to urgent political demands.

With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, Central Asia lacked an established discipline of Sinology. Khodzhaev was practically the only one to bridge the great Russian Sinologists of the 1960s-1970s and the post-Soviet Sinology. With the exception of the chair in Tashkent, there were some trained specialists, in particular in Kazakhstan, where Klara Khafizova was working, but with no other appointed chairs they have found it difficult to institutionalize the transmission of knowledge. The brutal collapse of state budgets in the 1990s aggravated this already precarious situation. In addition, in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, researchers interested in foreign countries were accustomed to studying culturally similar countries, such as Iran and Afghanistan, rather than China. By contrast to the Kazakh and Kyrgyz Soviet Republics, the Tajik Soviet Republic was never considered by Moscow as being close to China, partly due to the inaccessibility of the Sino-Tajik border, and therefore never had any Sinologists or any departments of Uyghur or Dungan Studies. In addition, the 1992-1997 civil war caused many researchers to flee, in particular those of Russian origin, thereby breaking the chain of intellectual transmission. Today, the Institute of Oriental Studies in Dushanbe includes a rather developed section of Iranian and Afghan studies, which is sure to further expand, but as yet it has no researcher working on China. In Ashgabat, the closing of the Academy of Sciences in 1997 by President Saparmurat Niazov meant that the knowledge accumulated during Soviet times was dramatically lost.<sup>168</sup> The Institute re-opened, at least on paper, at the start of the academic year in 2007 but it does not yet constitute an established academic milieu. Even when this does eventually occur it is likely that it initially will be limited to the study of Turkmenistan.

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<sup>167</sup> See her latest work, Klara Khafizova, *Kazakhskaiia strategiia tsinskoi imperii* [The Qing Empire's Kazakh Strategy], Almaty: Institut ekonomicheskikh strategii - Tsentral'naia Aziia, 2007.

<sup>168</sup> On Turkmenistan, see Sébastien Peyrouse, *Le Turkménistan, un destin au carrefour des empires*, Paris: Belin, 2007.

A section of Uyghur and Dungan Studies did survive in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but they have been forced to operate under rather complex conditions. The lack of state funding for the Academy of Sciences as a whole has forced some of the last remaining specialists to leave Bishkek, a loss of knowledge further exacerbated by the retirement of the older generation of Sinologists. The section of Dungan Studies today includes only eight researchers, all of whom specialize in historical, ethnological, and linguistic questions (following the tradition of the main founding father of Dungan Studies, Muhamed Sushanlo), but few of whom speak Chinese. In addition to a few scattered publications, the Dungan Studies Department, reeling from a lack of both financial and human resources, has its main *raison d'être* in writing textbooks of Dungan language and literature for Dungan-speaking schools in the country upon the request of the Ministry of Education. Almost no sponsorship from Dungan businessmen has been forthcoming to make up for the state's withdrawal.<sup>169</sup>

In Kazakhstan, the difficulties confronting specialists in Uyghur studies are more political than economic in nature. In fact, in 1986, before Mikhail Gorbachev visited Beijing to make the reconciliation with China official, the political authorities deemed it necessary to re-instate Uyghur Studies, and so had the section transformed into an autonomous institute directly linked to the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh Soviet Republic. In the first years of independence, this Institute was highly coveted by Uyghur activists, who sought to politicize the institution by transforming it into a flagship of independentist militantism. Sanctions were not long in coming. In 1996, Beijing pressured the Kazakh government into merging the Institute of Uyghur Studies together with the small Center for Oriental Studies, the result of which was the Institute of Oriental Studies, which carefully avoided embroiling itself in any political issues connected to the Uyghur question. Today, the Institute's Uyghur section includes a dozen researchers, all of whom work on apolitical historical, ethnological, and linguistic topics. With the exception of Ablet Kamalov, who is a specialist in Chinese medieval sources on Xinjiang, none of them are Sinologists.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Interview with Zhon Ali, Bishkek, 22 February 2008.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Risamet Karimova, and with Ablet Kamalov, Institute of Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences, Almaty, 4 March 2008.

Similar to their colleagues in Dungan studies, the Uyghur studies specialists have been assigned the task of writing language and literature textbooks for Uyghur-speaking schools, at the request of the Education Ministry. However, these specialists have managed to diversify their funding sources and get some private funding. The section thus entertains low-profile relations with Uyghur businessmen, who agree to act as sponsors for publications, conferences, and fieldwork research. Uyghur and Dungan Studies comprise specific domains of research that are marked by methods of intellectual work dating from Soviet times (including, for example, the idea that a native is more competent to study his or her own culture than a non-native, which explains why the majority of scholars in Uyghur and Dungan studies are of Uyghur and Dungan origin) and that are having difficulties adapting to contemporary practices of research. Rarely are the scholars in these departments actual Sinologists, and, even when they are, they focus on the Dungan and Uyghur populations residing in their own countries or in Xinjiang, rather than on China proper.

It thus so happens that the study of China in the Academies of Sciences in Central Asia is confined to two states, namely Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Between these two countries, in both the domain of Sinology and in numerous other spheres of intellectual life, there is a longstanding rivalry. But the status quo changed as of the early 2000s: while Tashkent still rides on its legacy as the cultural capital of Soviet Central Asia and has been unable to take advantage of the new political situation to increase its knowledge on China, Almaty, regarded as a provincial town during Soviet times, is trying to institute mechanisms for the renewal of its intellectual elite. Although the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences is particularly competent on questions of Islamology and Middle Eastern studies, the Chinese section is moribund, and has had to call Ablat Khodzhaev out of retirement to take up its leadership. However, despite his prestige Khodzhaev has had difficulties attracting new disciples, save for a few researchers working on topics in linguistics and ancient history. The meager salaries (less than US\$ 100 per month for a higher doctorate degree – i.e. a *doktor nauk*), the difficulties of doing fieldwork in China, the political pressures, and

the lack of publication prospects drive young researchers away to work in the private sector.<sup>171</sup>

It turns out, then, that, for want of rivals, the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences in Kazakhstan is the driving force of academic Sinology in Central Asia. Apart from the section of Uyghur studies, it includes a department named “Complex questions of International Relations”, which is headed by Gulnara Mendikulova, who does work on the Kazakh diaspora throughout the world, and especially in China.<sup>172</sup> The Far East Department, directed by Bakhyt Enzhenkhanuly, is the only one that studies contemporary developments in China, Japan, and the two Koreas, but as it has half a dozen researchers to cover these four countries, it is unable to carry out any in-depth research on China. Its main Chinese focus, Xinjiang, is looked at from the point of view of its being a neighbor of Central Asia, and chiefly from that of trade relations between Kazakhstan and China.<sup>173</sup> Thus, of a total of the more than sixty scholars working at the Institute of Oriental Studies, only half a dozen deal principally with China, and even then they deal with the topics that link China to Kazakhstan, not with China as such. Moreover, the few existing Chinese-speaking scholars are mostly Kazakhs from China who have settled in Kazakhstan. Despite this glaring shortage of cadres, the Institute’s direction is trying to expand its Sinology section, in particular in the domains of historical interactions between the Steppes and the Middle Kingdom, and that of contemporary questions. As a result, it attempts to set up mechanisms to train and recruit Sinologists, but has not yet been able to counteract competition from the private sector and the strategic institutes, which offer far more attractive terms.<sup>174</sup>

Outside the Academy of Sciences, Sinology is being developed within the universities, but here again the results have been modest. After enduring

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<sup>171</sup> Interview with Ablat Khodzhaev, Tashkent, 22 March 2008.

<sup>172</sup> Interview with Gulnara Mendikulova, director of the Department of Complex Questions of International Relations at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences, Almaty, 4 March 2008.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Bakhyt Enzhenkhanuly, director of the Far East Department at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences, and with Gul’zhakhan Khadzhieva, a researcher on Sino-Kazakh economic relations in the same department, Almaty, 26 February 2008.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with Meruert Abuseitova, director of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences, Almaty, 2 March 2008.

massive difficulties throughout the 1990s, Central Asian universities have started to see slow improvements in their financial situations: they can now provide professors with salaries slightly above those of researchers in the Academy of Sciences; they can more easily obtain external funding; and they can also charge more expensive tuition fees to boost revenues. However, except for the teaching of Chinese, which cannot be considered as part of Sinology proper *qua* knowledge on China, there are very few universities that can claim to have a Sinology department. Kyrgyzstan, for example, does not have one, since none of its numerous Chinese language teaching sections includes any scholars who publish research on China. The rector of the American University of Central Asia, Bakyt Beshimov, is a China specialist, but his official functions (he is also an MP) do not leave him any time for research. In Tajikistan, only the Center for Geopolitical Studies, which is part of the Slavic Russo-Tajik University created in 1996, produces any knowledge on China. It is headed by Guzel Maitdinova, who is of Uyghur origin and a specialist in international relations with a particular interest in China.<sup>175</sup> The second-in-charge, Viktor Dubovitski, is a historian by training and presently vice-director of the History Institute of the Academy of Sciences, where he works on geopolitical questions that, thanks to his Eurasianist convictions,<sup>176</sup> induce him to focus partially on China.<sup>177</sup>

In Uzbekistan, the faculty of Far East and South Asian Languages of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the National University includes some scholars specialized in questions of the ancient history and linguistics of China, for instance Akramzhan Karimov, but it does not really generate expertise on contemporary questions. The Uyghur language section at the National University has been closed since the beginning of the 1990s. In Kazakhstan, some study sections in Sinology exist in the universities. The most prominent among them is that in the National University Al-Farabi (KAZNU), where the first China chair was established by Klara Khafizova in 1989. But, here again, little research is undertaken, save in ancient history

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<sup>175</sup> Interview with Guzel Maitdinova, director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies, Dushanbe, 27 March 2008.

<sup>176</sup> For more on Eurasianism, see Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism. An Ideology of Empire*, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press/Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with Viktor Dubovitski, vice-director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies, Dushanbe, 20 March 2008.

and linguistics, and publications mostly consist of language textbooks. Klara Khafizova, who today teaches at the Kainar private university and undertakes research on the history of Qing China, worked for some years on more contemporary topics at the Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies. It is also worth mentioning the Center of Practical Sinology of the Kazakh Academy of Work and Social Relations headed by Fatima Dauletova. For its part, the Lev Gumilev Eurasian University in Astana, which is often presented as one of the most prestigious (but also one of the most connected to the government) higher education institutions in the country, has a small Chinese section but it only gives language courses, producing no expert knowledge.<sup>178</sup> The other universities in Kazakhstan are in the same situation. Even in the most dynamic university system in Central Asia, namely Kazakhstan's, there is almost no expert knowledge on contemporary China produced in the universities.

Hence, the position of the academic sector is paradoxical. Historically, academia has been the main site for knowledge formation on China. But over the last two decades it has not been able to overcome the Soviet division of labor, which limited Central Asian scholars to being specialists of their own culture, their national minorities, and their diasporas, but disqualified them from being internationalists. The Academies of Sciences have paid a heavy price for their specialization in disciplines such as linguistics, folklore, and ancient history, since they are thus unable to present themselves to political power as centers of expert knowledge on contemporary issues. Moreover, they only have very limited access to decision-making circles: when such links do exist, they are not based on institutional mechanisms, but rather on a particular individual's personal influence. In addition, the Academies of Sciences continue to be at the mercy of small government budgets, which impedes generational renewal and makes it impossible to compete with the new institutions, since the latter can exploit alternative sources of funding. However, this disinterest in academic Sinology presents a long-term danger: no applied research can develop if no knowledge is generated independently of political and economic contingencies.

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<sup>178</sup> Interview with Duken Masimkhan, head of the Sinology Chair of the Lev Gumilev Eurasian University, Astana, 27 March 2008.

*Public Research: The Institutes for Strategic Studies*

In 1991, the new states of Central Asia were catapulted into the international arena with no experience in foreign policy and no established diplomatic corps. Neither did they have any tradition of expertise on international topics, since international relations had always been a domain reserved for Moscow and Russians. During the first years of independence, no foreign policy knowledge on China was available, and so university academics were solicited to enter the diplomatic service: this was the case, for example, with Murat Auezov, Kazakhstan's first ambassador to China (1992-1995), as well as with Muratbek Imanaliev, Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to China (1993-1996), and with Ablat Khodzhaev, the political advisor at the Uzbek Embassy in China (1996-1999).<sup>179</sup> Creating a field of expertise from scratch has proved especially difficult, since the Central Asian states are still currently either undergoing a long social and economic crisis, and are thereby deprived of resources, or they have an authoritarian political regime and the intellectual circles are thereby denied the autonomy necessary to generate objective knowledge. In addition, in the 1990s many university academics left these countries, whether for Russia or the West, or abandoned academic research to establish themselves in the private sector.

Apart from the schools of the Communist Party, which the new states transformed into superior cadre-training schools, the first official think tanks to appear were the Institutes for Strategic Studies. These institutes were created in the years following independence (1992 for Uzbekistan, 1993 for Kazakhstan, and 1994 for Kyrgyzstan) and have direct links to the office of the president. In addition, all ministries, in particular the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Defense, have their own internal centers of analysis, which furnish reports on demand. This is also true for the Presidential Administrations, each of which has its own Center for Foreign Relations, which themselves produce papers, but they are kept confidential. In Kazakhstan, the principal foreign policy think tank remains the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies (KISI). However, in the early 2000s, the authorities understood that if Kazakhstan is to retain its status as a regional power, they have to promote the field of expert knowledge. Nursultan

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<sup>179</sup> Interviews with these three individuals were held on 14 February 2008 in Bishkek, on 10 March 2008 in Almaty, and on 22 March 2008 in Tashkent respectively.



Nazarbaev's private foundation (called the "Foundation of the First President of Kazakhstan") thus undertook to finance two other think tanks, both created in 2003: the Institute for World Economics and Politics (IWEP), run by Marat Shaikhutdinov; and the International Institute for Modern Politics (IIMP), headed by Bektas Mukhamedzhanov.

Official Kazakh expertise on contemporary China remains in the hands of those three institutions. At the Institute for Strategic Studies there are some China-oriented researchers, such as Murat Laumulin, known for his work in international relations, and the vice-director Sanat Kushkumbaev, a specialist in regional organizations including the SCO. It also has as its key researcher one of the great names in Central Asian Sinology, Konstantin Syroezhkin, for a long time employed in the Uyghur section of the Institute of Oriental Studies.<sup>180</sup> At the International Institute for Modern Politics, there are no genuine Sinologists, but the Institute does enjoy close relations with the SCO, having been granted the title of a "SCO expert center". As a result, it organizes annual conferences with the expert centers of other member states and carries out press surveys to monitor perceptions of China in Kazakhstan.<sup>181</sup> But it is the Institute for World Economics and Politics that has the most serious ambitions to be the future center for Kazakh Sinology. Indeed, from the time of its creation, the Institute has been the only institution in Central Asia yet to open a Center for Chinese studies, and engages in research it labels "scientifico-practical".

The center clearly foregrounds its role as a provider of expert knowledge to political power: it has ambitions to be able to influence decision-making organs and to "construct more adequate and profitable relations with China for Kazakhstani society (...) with the aim of defending Kazakhstan's national interests."<sup>182</sup> As a result, one of its lines of research is devoted to Sino-Kazakh relations, in particular to the migration question, while another line examines developments in contemporary China and its economic experience. The Center, run by Adil Kaukenov, with the part-time collaboration of Konstantin Syroezhkin, includes half a dozen young researchers of around 30

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<sup>180</sup> See the Institute's web site, <[www.kisi.kz](http://www.kisi.kz)>.

<sup>181</sup> Interview with Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, Almaty, 5 March 2008. Also, see the Institute's website, <[www.iimp.kw](http://www.iimp.kw)>.

<sup>182</sup> See the website <<http://www.chinacenter.kz/>>.

years of age. They are all either political scientists or economists that have spent some time in China. The hope is that in a few years the center can be transformed into an independent institute that will serve as the basic reference center for questions of contemporary Sinology for the whole of Central Asia.<sup>183</sup> Intrinsically related to the presidency, these three institutes, the KISI, the IWEP, and the IIMP, nonetheless have a relatively large freedom of speech: they are able to express veiled criticisms concerning the political leadership's handling of the relationship with China and researchers speaking off the record will occasionally engage in severe criticism of Beijing's role in Central Asia.

In the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the International Institute of Strategic Studies (MISI) in Kyrgyzstan was successfully run by several renowned researchers such as Muratbek Imanaliev, Akylbek Saliev, and Valentin Bogatyrev. Over the last few years, however, the MISI has become increasingly disorganized. This disorganization has resulted from the conflicts of interest that plagued Askar Akaev's presidency, as well as the reorganizations that followed in the wake of the March 2005 "Tulip revolution", and the ongoing conflicts between the presidency and the parliament.<sup>184</sup> With Valentin Bogatyrev's resignation in 2006, the institution was reduced to an empty shell, and its key researchers on China left to take up positions in private institutions.

In Tajikistan, the Center for Strategic Studies, run by Sukhrob Sharipov, maintains close links to the presidential office. It is the offspring of the 2003 transformation of a former strategic center formed by the Institute of Economic Research in the Economics Ministry of the Tajik Soviet Republic. Its original focus on economic questions is a result of the fact that Tajikistan has always had a lack of international relations specialists with adequate skills to run it. Still today, the Center lays much emphasis on the economic questions crucial to Tajikistan's future. In addition to foreign policy, which only comprises one of its sections, it runs programs on social questions (poverty, Islamism, drug-trafficking, corruption, and work regulations) as

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<sup>183</sup> Interview with Adil Kaukenov, Almaty, 29 February 2008.

<sup>184</sup> The MISI has no website but there is a brief presentation of it on the website of Valentin Bogatyrev's Analytic Consortium Perspektiva, <<http://www.perspect.org/about/?misi>>.

well as a section devoted to ethno-political problems.<sup>185</sup> Although it has several researchers working on Dushanbe's relationships with neighboring countries, including China, and although the Center enjoys a status as Tajikistan's "SCO expert center", only one of its researchers, namely Saifullo Safarov, is a Sinologist by training. However, the Center does currently have several young doctoral candidates writing PhDs on China who will soon be able to make up for the lack of expertise in this area.<sup>186</sup>

Similar to the academic domain, the expert knowledge on China in Uzbekistan falls short of the country's usual intellectual standards. The Institute of Strategic and Transregional Studies, which is close to the presidential office, has largely lost its dynamism as a result of the restrictions placed on public freedom. Today, it is confined to organizing conferences and seminars which do no more than showcase government opinion.<sup>187</sup> The field of expert knowledge in international relations is shared with two other institutions, which themselves do no more than reflect official discourse, namely the Center for Political Studies (run by the president's eldest daughter, Gulnara Karimova), which is one of the most well-known Uzbek think tanks in China and seems to maintain close relations with Chinese scholars,<sup>188</sup> and Saifuddin Zhuraev's Foundation for Regional Politics, both created in 2005.<sup>189</sup> Although these three centers regularly organize international conferences devoted to the SCO, Ablat Khodzhaev's departure has left them almost without any Sinologists that work systematically on China. The main exception is A. Gurbanov, who works as vice-director at the Institute of Strategic and Transregional Studies. The University of World Diplomacy and Economics, which is one of the country's most prestigious university institutions, for a while had one of the main specialists on the SCO in Fakhrat Tolipov. However, with Uzbekistan's geopolitical U-turn in 2005, the latter's pro-western opinions obliged him to return to the

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<sup>185</sup> Consult the Center's website, <<http://www.src.gov.tj/>>.

<sup>186</sup> Interviews with Sukhrob Sharipov and Saifullo Safarov, Center for Strategic Studies, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008.

<sup>187</sup> The website of the Institute for Strategic and Transregional Studies, <[www.uzstrateg.info](http://www.uzstrateg.info)>, is no longer accessible.

<sup>188</sup> Information provided by many Chinese scholars working on Central Asia. Interviews in Beijing, Shanghai, Lanzhou and Xi'an, September-December 2008.

<sup>189</sup> For the Foundation for Regional Policy, see <<http://www.polit.uz/>>, and for The Center for Political Studies, <<http://www.cps.uz/>>.

National University.<sup>190</sup> In Turkmenistan, the extreme authoritarianism of Saparmurat Niazov's regime has prevented the establishment of even a restricted circle of specialists, but in March 2008 an Institute of Studies in International Relations connected to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was created. This seems to suggest that provisions are being made for the creation of an expertise capable of providing the authorities with policy guidance and that the country will slowly open up internationally.<sup>191</sup>

Official expertise constitutes one of the most dynamic sectors of Central Asian think tanks. In the early 1990s, Central Asian governments were quick to understand that they needed a basic discourse presenting their stance on international issues, not to mention people capable of providing analyses to aid decision-making and justify policy choices. As all their funding comes from the state, these institutions have as much room for maneuver as their country's overall political situation allows. Hence, in Uzbekistan, where the regime is strongly authoritarian, the various centers of strategic studies have been unable to develop any autonomy. In Kyrgyzstan, the dismantling of the MISI is a reflection not only of the absence of state funding reserved for research, but also of the structural weakness of the presidential apparatus and its inability to develop any long-term political conception for the country's future. In this regard, Kazakhstan has a clear superiority over the other Central Asian states. Having three major centers, each with diverse activities and publications, and a number of renowned researchers, Kazakh authorities have made very clear the importance that they assign to the question of expertise, and are willing to set aside substantial amounts of funding for it.

#### *The Small Sector of Private Expertise*

Privately-funded think tanks comprise a very heterogeneous group with much greater diversity than in the governmental centers of expertise or in academia: in the Anglo-Saxon world they include the think tanks of political parties and established lobbies; private foundations with ideological objectives to promote specific values or sectors; centers of private research welcoming university-educated researchers that work in positions

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<sup>190</sup> Interviews with Fakhrat Tolipov, National University of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, 14 March 2008 and Almaty, 5 June 2008.

<sup>191</sup> Interviews conducted in Ashgabat in early April 2008.

appropriate to their specialization; and a whole swathe of NGOs capable of procuring the most varied types of funding. In Central Asia, this spectrum is quite reduced, since it depends on the economic, not to mention political, situation of each state. In the majority of them, these possibilities are limited, either by the intrinsic weakness of the domestic economy (in the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) or by the state's quasi-total stranglehold over the political sphere (in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). Only in Kazakhstan does the situation allow for coming close to providing relatively good conditions for the exercise of private expertise, both in terms of the room – albeit reduced – for political expression offered, and in terms of substantial financial means, which has allowed some entrepreneurs to be able to free up enough funds to commission expert reports. Nevertheless, by international comparison, the general field of expertise in Kazakhstan is only in its infancy.

Think tanks connected to political parties are inexistent in Central Asia, while private foundations that base their autonomy on the diversity of their sources of funding are rare. In spite of a few aid programs promoted by their national state, the main source of funding for these think tanks comes from large international institutions: the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, specialized United Nations Agencies such as UNDP, USAID, European organizations such as the OECD, the OSCE, the European Commission, the TACIS program, and private funds from the West, mostly United States (the MacArthur Foundation, the Soros Funds Management and Open Society Institute, the Eurasia Foundation, and various think tanks) and Germany (the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung).

In Kazakhstan, the first independent think tank to emerge was the Public Policy Research Center created in 2001 by Meruert Makhmutova. It has published a few analyses on sales of Kazakh oil company assets to China, often with a critical view of such transactions. The Risk Assessment Group, run by Dosym Satpaev, specializes in the political and economic elites, pressure groups and lobbies, and provides reports on the financial and political risks facing Central Asia and the Caspian region.<sup>192</sup> It is therefore in

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<sup>192</sup> See the website <<http://www.risk.kz>>.

a good position to be able to gauge China's rise in power in Kazakhstan and the question of the constitution of Chinese pressure groups. Last, the Institute for Economic Strategies – Central Asia, founded in late 2005 at the same time as its Russian partner, the Moscow Institute of Economic Strategies, is showing a growing interest in China's commercial activities throughout Central Asia and the impact of these activities on the region's national economies.<sup>193</sup>

In Kyrgyzstan, two foundations have emerged outside of the academic and state sector thanks to private funding, namely the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) and the Alexander Kniazev Foundation. The first, regarded as the MISI's successor, acts to centralize the expert knowledge produced on international matters in the country. Thanks to the large personal networks of its director, Muratbek Imanaliev, who was the former minister of Foreign Affairs in 1991-1992 and again in 1997-2002 and today is the director of the Foreign Policy Commission in the same ministry, it has good access to decision-making circles. The Institute focuses a lot of its research on China. Apart from its director, who is a Sinologist by training, it has two other researchers that take direct interest in Sino-Kyrgyz relations, namely the French journalist Philippe Noubel, who runs the regional office of Internews China, and Erlan Abdylaev, another former Kyrgyz Ambassador to China.<sup>194</sup> Last, the Alexander Kniazev Foundation, which receives most of its financing from Russian sources, specializes in questions of regional security, in particular concerning Afghanistan and has on various occasions published its opinion on China's rising influence in the region.<sup>195</sup>

Though private foundations are rare in Kyrgyzstan, there have been many small private research centers set up as part of the university system. For the most part, these centers specialize in domestic questions, due largely to Kyrgyzstan's lack of international influence and to the considerable presence of NGOs and western foundations in the country, which, as a rule, favor research on social questions.<sup>196</sup> In Bishkek, only one university center concentrates purely on international questions, namely the Institute for

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<sup>193</sup> See the website <<http://www.inesnet.kz/>>.

<sup>194</sup> See the website <<http://www.ipp.kg/>>.

<sup>195</sup> See the website <<http://www.knyazev.org/>>.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with Ainura Asamidinova, convener of the Social Research Center at the American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, 21 February 2008.

Strategic Analysis and Forecasting (ISAP), created in 2005 by Akylbek Saliev as part of the Slavo-Kyrgyz University. Saliev himself was the first director of the MISI before becoming Kyrgyzstan's representative in Russia.<sup>197</sup> The ISAP organizes several types of projects, including the information portal East Time, which disseminates analyses on Central Asia, Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Asia.<sup>198</sup> It aids with decision-making on domestic and foreign policy issues, and it conducts fundamental research on Islamism in Central Asia, as well as on the Kyrgyz population's perception of foreign activities and NGOs in the country.<sup>199</sup> Along with Muratbek Imanaliev, Akylbek Saliev is one of Kyrgyzstan's main specialists on China-related issues, and during the 1990s, he participated in the bilateral border demarcation commissions.

The last category of centers of private expertise is the amorphous grouping formed by the NGOs that emerged in Central Asia in the early 1990s onwards. Western researchers often take these centers as objects of study, insofar as they are expressions of "civil society", however not all can be considered to provide expert knowledge. Only two categories conduct quality analyses, have members with a specialist training (often former university academics), and try to influence the political authorities. The first category includes human rights oriented NGOs, none of which work on international questions, while the second – sociological and survey centers – specialize on social questions and public opinion, and are run by teams of sociologists who have quit academia.

Several centers deal on occasion with international topics, usually when they are conducting public opinion polls of their respective country's geopolitical situation. These include the Sanzh Research Center in Kazakhstan,<sup>200</sup> Valentin Bogatyrev's Perspektiva Analytic Consortium in Bishkek,<sup>201</sup> the Analytical Center Sharq, the Panorama Association, and the Zerkalo Center

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<sup>197</sup> Interview with Akylbek Saliev, Bishkek, 19 February 2008.

<sup>198</sup> <<http://www.easttime.ru>>.

<sup>199</sup> Asiiia Esenbekova, "Spetsialisty nedootsenivaiut perspektivy islamskoi radikalizatsii Kirgizii" [Specialists play down prospects of Islamic radicalization in Kyrgyzstan], *CentrAsia*, January 23, 2007, <[www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1169550660](http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1169550660)>.

<sup>200</sup> See the website <<http://www.sange.kz/>>.

<sup>201</sup> See the website <<http://www.perspect.org>>.

for Sociological Research in Dushanbe.<sup>202</sup> Many of them, like Sharq, have also conducted specific surveys on China.<sup>203</sup> In fact, Beijing's rise to power in the region is starting to appear within their purview, since Central Asian societies are increasingly affected by certain socio-economic phenomena linked to China (e.g. imports of Chinese products into bazaars, road-building to open up isolated regions, migration flows etc). In addition, then, to the already long-studied activities of Russia and the West in the region, these sociological centers are bound to become distinctly interested in the "Chinese question".

These private centers are strictly distinct from the two preceding categories, namely academia and the official institutes. In a sense, they are close to the former category since their researchers are university trained, but also to the second, since they work on current issues and are interested in the multiple transformations of Central Asian societies since independence. Even if their political opinions are not publicly expressed, their leaders are committed to more global ideological aims: in terms of their activities, these private centers are often pro-western, lament their populations' disengagement from political debates, and desire more interaction between their supervising state and the international community. However, with rare exceptions, such as the three former directors of the MISI in Kyrgyzstan, namely Muratbek Imanaliev, Akylbek Saliev, and Valentin Bogatyrev, all of whom have intimate contacts in decision-making circles, these private centers have a far lower policy impact than do the official institutes for strategic studies. The primary reason for this is that their members come from academia and do not share a political and/or diplomatic background.

This analysis of Central Asian expertise on China shows the difficulties that these countries are having in overcoming the Soviet heritage of the division of academic labor – a division which saw these new states catapulted onto the international arena devoid of the basic intellectual resources required to engage in international affairs. Although diplomatic circles, notably in Kazakhstan, are beginning to develop in professionalism, the field of expertise has – inasmuch as it requires greater independence of mind and

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<sup>202</sup> See the website <<http://www.zerkalo.tj/>>.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with Saodat Olimova, vice-director of the Sharq Analytical Center, Dushanbe, 28 March 2008.



distance from power – encountered problems in establishing an institutional structure with regular funding, and in recruiting well-educated and motivated individuals from the younger generations. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, the general domination of state institutions over private-sector institutions – which are still in their infancy – is part not only of the effects of the continuity of Soviet structures, but is also a consequence of the decisions that have been taken in Central Asian countries concerning domestic development. The reason for this is their tendency to prioritize mechanisms of state control over the formation of expertise. The loss of knowledge acquired during the Soviet period, in particular in Uzbekistan, as a result of the non-renewal of the intellectual elites, appears to be a problem for the future of the entire region. The effect of which is a weakening of public policy and of the population's capacity to critically interpret the information broadcast by the authorities about the current problems facing these countries.

## **Conclusion**

In the space of a decade, China has become a key, even if indirect, object of analysis in Central Asian policy debates to the extent that they can be openly expressed. In the framework of the “Chinese question” public opinion in Central Asia has found a way to formulate its legitimate anxieties over the threats to national territorial integrity that emerged shortly after independence. It has also influenced the desire to develop their countries without undue external pressure, especially in relation to issues such as cross-border rivers. Moreover, public opinion has also come, if discretely, to evoke its opposition to the selling of natural resources at bargain prices by rent-seeking elites suspected of promoting their personal rather than national interests. The China question provides a way to express social anxieties related to the market economy, such as the development of the labor market, the deterioration of working conditions, and the difficulties faced by the classes of small entrepreneurs who made their fortunes in unregulated commercial sectors. Their fears of possibly massive migratory flows from China are part of the broader context: immigration is a new phenomenon in Central Asian societies, which, lacking an understanding of its underlying economic mechanisms, generally find it brutally confronting. At any rate,

China's rise to power has clearly acted as a catalyst, exposing the dysfunctional aspects of the local economies, and compounding the anxieties and phobias connected to the last two decades of major social transformations.

Within political circles, the "China question" is also an object of virulent polemics. These debates, however, are largely inconsequential. The ruling circles actively promote friendly relations with Beijing, whereas their opponents try to undermine the legitimacy of the former by accusing them of betrayal in the name of Chinese interests. However, in the event that they succeed in attaining governmental powers they will also be constrained to promulgating the same Sinophile discourse as their predecessors. In fact, Kyrgyzstan's second president Kurmanbek Bakiyev has, in spite of the "Tulip revolution", pursued the very same good relations with China that Askar Akaev had built, and retracted the critical remarks he made while in opposition. In Turkmenistan, where the transition in leadership occurred without any popular protests, the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, has been even more open to Chinese influence than his predecessor. In all likelihood, the impending regime changes in the other three states, whose leaders have been in power for over two decades, will not disrupt current attempts to build a privileged partnership with Beijing. If the Central Asian states are officially pro-China, it is due to a lack of alternative: in view of the large economic, political, and demographic differential, no Central Asian regime can afford to present itself as Sinophobe.

The situation in the other elite circles of Central Asia is more complex. It is probable that in economic groups more distinctly pro- and anti-Chinese lobbies will form in the coming years. Some social groups, such as employees, workers' unions, independent small businessmen, and directors of medium-size companies, tend to concentrate on criticizing competition from the Chinese, while big national groups, both public and private, generally stand to gain from pursuing closer relations. As for the orientation of the armies and secret services, which is beset with uncertainty, it seems that China is held in relative suspicion. This is both because of its disquieting capacity for entryism, and because old traditions of cohabitation with Russia are still dominant. For the time being intellectual milieus in general continue to display minimal interest in China, which does not structure their

ideological field as does Russia or the West. However, expertise on China is starting to develop, since both the authorities and academia are becoming aware that continued ignorance will be detrimental. In the years to come, the intellectual milieus will become more distinctly structured in accordance with their opinion toward China.

The weight of Soviet legacy still largely mediates the complex relations between Central Asia and China: the dearth of institutionalized knowledge on China is a major reason for the generally hesitant policies of Central Asian leaders, as well as for the simultaneous presence of very pragmatic directives and old phobias, not to mention the scarcity of knowledge about the political, social, and economic realities of contemporary China. In Central Asia, Beijing continues to be seen through a predominantly Russian prism: politicians take good Sino-Russian relations as their main point of reference; the Kazakh and Kyrgyz media outlets reproduce the clichés on China which circulate in Russia; and local researchers tend to base their analyses on the publications of Russian Sinologists. This Russian prism derives from the long, shared history of the two regions: the “de-Russification” of Central Asian knowledge will first of all require generational change, and the training of new elites with their own vision and knowledge of China. The question of pressure groups has therefore to be understood dialectically and as a mutually reinforcing process: the more that Sinophile discourses appear in Central Asian public space, the more Sinophobe pressure groups will try to organize to counter them, and vice-versa.

### III. Sinophilia/Sinophobia: A Double Narrative

While the official declarations proclaiming the need to maintain friendly relations with Beijing have been unanimous, this has not been the case among the Central Asian experts and academic specialists, who present more variegated viewpoints. In fact, the experts' understandings of the situation are in general far more critical than those of their political leaders. And they do not hesitate to condemn the latter for their lack of good will to provide more detailed information about Chinese activities in Central Asia. Almost all experts express concern about the silence cultivated by the authorities in relation to the partnership with Beijing. They worry that the extent of China's grip over the region has been concealed. Moreover, they vigorously decry the authorities' incapacity to make decisions for the future of the nation and are concerned about the atmosphere of suspicion – generated precisely through the dearth of information – that surrounds the topic of China in public opinion. They maintain that if the issue does not receive adequate expression, it will only contribute to increasing social tensions.

The discourse that has been developed by Central Asian expertise on China's role in the region is a complex one. While some key figures are on record expressing their unilateral critiques of Chinese activities, others do not conceal their appreciation, and even admiration, for China's dynamism. However, the majority of experts tend to identify both pros and cons with China's engagement. This more nuanced argumentation can in part be explained by the variety of issues involved. In relation to geopolitical issues, China is mostly viewed as a positive factor, whereas in questions of identity and culture, it elicits negative reactions. Moreover, perceptions of China differ according to country: Kazakhstan seems in general more Sinophobe, while Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's attitudes are more Sinophile. What is striking, however, is just how little overall sympathy China elicits: there is a prevailing feeling of mistrust about Beijing's possible "hidden" objectives. Local experts suspect, despite the current positive effects China is having on

Central Asian nations, that its presence will cause huge problems in the long term. They tend to believe that after centuries of near invisibility, China's rapid rise over recent years has once again made it into a valuable – if cumbersome – neighbor, one which Central Asian states will have to reckon with regardless of future regime changes and geopolitical developments vis-à-vis Russia and the West.

### **The Ambiguities of the Strategic and Geopolitical Partnership**

Of key interest to Central Asian experts is China's overall geopolitical presence. This involves issues such as developments in diplomatic relations, the SCO's growing influence and real capacity of intervention, and the balance of relations between Moscow and Beijing, widely thought to be precarious. For many experts, the question is not whether China will have a major geopolitical and political influence in Central Asia – this has already been confirmed. It is rather to analyze how much advantage the Central Asian governments will be able to take from their inevitable rapprochement with the Middle Kingdom.<sup>204</sup> While expert observations are generally quite similar, the conclusions drawn diverge between countries and as a consequence of the particular political sensibilities of the experts themselves.

#### *China: A Credible Partner in Matters of Security?*

All Central Asian experts profess to be astonished by the rapidity with which China has managed to impose itself on the Central Asian scene. Indeed, in the 1990s it was difficult to imagine that Beijing, only a decade later, would come to have such a large geopolitical influence in the region.<sup>205</sup> Nevertheless, their viewpoints of Central Asia's place in China's foreign policy are varied. There are some who, while recognizing that the Caspian basin is not a priority for China by comparison with its relations to the United States and the Asia Pacific region, still contend that the Chinese

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<sup>204</sup> Askar Abdrakhmanov, Adil S. Kaukenov, "Otnosheniia Kitaia i stran Tsentral'noi Azii glazami kazakhstanskikh ekspertov" [The View of Kazakh Experts on the Relations between China and the Countries of Central Asia], *Kazakhstan v global'nykh protsessakh*, no. 3, 2007, pp. 119-129.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

authorities see the region as being of real strategic interest.<sup>206</sup> Others, such as Muratbek Imanaliev, director of the Institute for Public Policy, more modestly maintain that the Chinese objective is less to impose itself on the Central Asian domestic scene than it is to demand loyalty with respect to sensitive questions such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Uyghur separatism.<sup>207</sup> But irrespective of their particular opinions on the foreign policy of their neighbor, all experts insist on the long-term nature of Chinese geopolitical thinking. They maintain that Beijing waited patiently for the independent states to define their own economic and political priorities before engaging in a policy of support for official decisions.<sup>208</sup> They thereby point to the specificities of Chinese diplomacy, claiming that it is defined by restraint and patience rather than confrontation and use of force. Sukhrob Sharipov, the director of the Center for Strategic Studies in Dushanbe, notes that this stands in sharp contrast to the more confrontational Russian policies.<sup>209</sup>

All experts, particularly those in the weakest countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, remain positive about China's stabilizing role in regard to security matters.<sup>210</sup> Some remark, for example, how much more effective the Chinese border guards are compared to the Central Asian customs officers, who have been corrupted by the drug trade.<sup>211</sup> Muratbek Imanaliev and Akylbek Saliev, director of the Institute for Strategic Analysis and Planning, even consider that Kyrgyzstan need have no concern at all about China but, on the contrary, that Beijing ought to be concerned with maintaining Kyrgyzstan as a buffer zone between China and Islamic

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<sup>206</sup> Ilias Karsakov, "Osobennosti politiki SShA v Tsentral'noi Azii 'Great Game'" [The Particularities of United States Policy in the 'Great Game' in Central Asia], *Analytic*, no. 5, 2006, p. 15.

<sup>207</sup> Muratbek Imanaliev, "Tsentral'naia Aziia i vneshnii mir" [Central Asia and the Outside World], Institute for Public Policy, February 2, 2007, <[www.ipp.kg/ru/analysis/foreign\\_policy/](http://www.ipp.kg/ru/analysis/foreign_policy/)>.

<sup>208</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii* [Problems of Contemporary China and Security in Central Asia], Almaty: KISI, 2006, p. 197.

<sup>209</sup> Interview with Sukhrob Sharipov, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008.

<sup>210</sup> Akbarsho Iskandarov, "SHOS: k voprosu o razshirenii" [The SCO: the Issue of Enlargement], *Analytic*, no. 1, 2007, <<http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070514234555267>>.

<sup>211</sup> Anonymous interview, Bishkek, February 2008.

fundamentalism.<sup>212</sup> The President of the Association of Political Scientists of Kyrgyzstan, Toktogul Kokchekeev, for his part, has welcomed China's genuine efforts to combat Islamism since this leads it to invest in Afghanistan, which can only be of benefit to Central Asia as a whole.<sup>213</sup> According to Sukhrob Sharipov, the authorities in Tajikistan have grave concerns about future potential destabilization in Afghanistan and are trying to get China to join them in developing ways to avert such dangers.<sup>214</sup> While the Kyrgyz and Tajik experts, who are aware of the intrinsic weakness of their states, unreservedly support China's security commitments in the region – not to mention those of other international actors – and while Uzbek experts, whose capacity for public expression is limited, have adopted the official pro-Beijing discourse, Kazakh experts remain rather more skeptical.

For instance, the main Sinologist at the Institute for Strategic Studies in Almaty, Konstantin Syroezhkin, remarks that Chinese policy in Central Asia is not without ambiguity. Even if Beijing strives to maintain stability, it also discretely fosters disagreement among Central Asian states. Its aim, he claims, is to prevent the Central Asian states from establishing a common front that might jeopardize the forward march of its interests.<sup>215</sup> Therefore he tends to think that China's multilateralist aims in the SCO are deceptive. Indeed, he notes that all the fundamental questions have been settled through bilateral agreements. The vice-director of KISI, Sanat Kushkumbaev, is more moderate in his remarks. For him China has always put more emphasis on bilateral relations, but was led to develop a conscious policy of multilateralism because of the Soviet Union's collapse, and even more pointedly because of the success of Asian multilateral organizations such as ASEAN.<sup>216</sup> But even if some are doubtful about China's real desire to get

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<sup>212</sup> Murat Suiunbaev, "Vneshniaia politika Kyrgyzstana: nelegkii vybor" [Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Policy: a Difficult Choice], *Analytika*, December 16, 2006, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20061219232722382](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20061219232722382)>.

<sup>213</sup> Toktogul Kokchekeev, cited in "Kitaiskaia ekspansiiia v Sredniuiu Aziiu", *op. cit.*

<sup>214</sup> Interviews with Sukhrob Sharipov, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008, and Viktor Dubovitski, Dushanbe, 27 March 2008.

<sup>215</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>216</sup> Sanat K. Kushkumbaev, "SHOS i bezopasnost' Tsentral'noi Azii" [The SCO and Security in Central Asia], *Kazakhstan-Spektr*, no. 4, 2006, p. 19.

involved in international institutions, there are many other experts, such as Venera Galiamova of the IWEP, and Adil Kaukenov, director of the Institute for Chinese Studies at IWEP, who insist on the contrary that the Chinese elite have demonstrated an ability to adapt to the new international conditions.<sup>217</sup>

In a survey conducted in 2006 by Adil Kaukenov, twenty of the thirty Kazakh experts interviewed thought that the strategic partnership signed by Hu Jintao and Nursultan Nazarbaev in 2005 was a step toward developing security sector cooperation; less than 20 percent, however, believe that it will have any medium-term effect. Sanat Kushkumbaev, for his part, claims that China's policy of providing aid to the weakest countries can only be pleasing to Astana, since it is also in Kazakhstan's interests.<sup>218</sup> Opinion remains more divided, however, as regards China's effective capacity to improve regional security. Adil Kaukenov's survey showed that only 20 percent of experts think that Beijing is going to be a major player in Central Asian security; and 44 percent declare that over the short term it will not even have the least interventional capacity.<sup>219</sup> Last, none of the experts surveyed believe Chinese policy to be fully compatible with Kazakhstan's interests. Indeed a large majority among them (three-quarters) even reckon that China's increasing geopolitical influence will have contradictory effects and basically run counter to the interests of the Central Asian republics.<sup>220</sup>

Kaukenov's survey also reveals that 50 percent of experts place Russia as their country's number one partner, ahead of the U.S. and China, and that none place China first.<sup>221</sup> During our interviews the majority of experts stated that the only partner who would be really willing to accept the political and financial burden of a military intervention in case of serious destabilization continues to be Russia. They hold it to be most improbable that the Chinese

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<sup>217</sup> Venera F. Galiamova, Adil S. Kaukenov, "Aktual'nye voprosy razvitiia kazakhstansko-kitaiskikh otnoshenii" [Current Questions concerning the Development of Sino-Kazakh Relations], *Kazakhstan v global'nykh protsessakh*, no. 1, 2006, p. 116.

<sup>218</sup> Sanat K. Kushkumbaev, cited in "Kitaiskaia ekspansii v Sredniuiu Aziiu", *op. cit.*

<sup>219</sup> Venera F. Galiamova, Adil S. Kaukenov, "Aktual'nye voprosy razvitiia kazakhstansko-kitaiskikh otnoshenii", *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>220</sup> Askar Abdrakhmanov, Adil Kaukenov, "Otnosheniia Kitaia i stran Tsentral'noi Azii glazami kazakhstanskikh ekspertov", *op. cit.*, pp. 123.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.



armed forces will try to use the auspices of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure – which they view as an empty shell with virtually no efficacy – to intervene in Central Asia.<sup>222</sup> This viewpoint was corroborated in the interviews that we conducted in the region. Even those who see China as a necessary counterweight to Russia claim that the arrival of Chinese troops on Central Asian territory would be opposed by the local governments and would provoke violent reactions among the population.<sup>223</sup> Only a handful of Kyrgyz experts, such as the pro-rector of the Diplomatic Academy of Kyrgyzstan, Murat Suiunbaev, actually envisage the arrival of Chinese troops in case of serious conflict with Islamist groups. He also argues that Kyrgyzstan should be turned into a polygon of anti-terrorist combat in which not only Russia and China but also the West might participate. But there is no one who goes so far as to call for the creation of a Chinese military base on national territory.<sup>224</sup> The issue of China's potential military presence in Central Asia is in fact a particularly sensitive one; the idea is widely decried in the media, above all in Kazakhstan, as it is in populist books, many of which promulgate alarmist perspectives on the Chinese military's purportedly hidden presence in the region.<sup>225</sup>

Several experts have expressed direct concern about Chinese military power. Adil Kaukenov, not to mention Muratbek Imanaliev, both see Chinese military reforms and Beijing's massive investments in military technology as being of major concern and as something Central Asian governments should follow closely.<sup>226</sup> The build-up of military forces in the Lanzhou region, for example, is said to be more than three times as massive as the combined forces of the Kazakh army.<sup>227</sup> Last, the issue of the use of nuclear arms in Xinjiang is not yet resolved, with the Chinese still performing tests on short-

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<sup>222</sup> Venera F. Galiamova, Adil S. Kaukenov, "Aktual'nye voprosy razvitiia kazakhstansko-kitaiskikh otnoshenii", *op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>223</sup> Interview with Adil Kaukenov, Almaty, 29 February 2008.

<sup>224</sup> Murat Suiunbaev, "Vneshniaia politika Kyrgyzstana: nelegkii vybor", *op. cit.*

<sup>225</sup> For instance A. Retivykh, *Voina za mirovoe gospodstvo* [The War for World Domination], Almaty: Galym, 2006.

<sup>226</sup> Interview with Muratbek Imanaliev, Bishkek, 14 February 2008.

<sup>227</sup> Erlan Aben, "Kazakhstansko-rossiiskie otnosheniia: faktory 'za' i 'protiv'" [Russo-Kazakh Relations: issues 'for' and 'against'], *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kavkaz*, no. 3, 2000, <[www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-09-2000/03.Aben.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-09-2000/03.Aben.shtml)>.

and mid-range weapons at the Lob Nor test site.<sup>228</sup> Central Asian experts are aware that the general distrust of the Chinese army tends to restrict the prospects of sending officers to be trained in Chinese military academies. In this domain Russia is clearly favored, followed more modestly by Turkey and the West.<sup>229</sup> Although there is no official information available on this issue, very many experts say privately that too much information exchange between the Chinese and Central Asian secret services might well backfire on national interests. They also state their belief that the Chinese secret services are already too well established in Central Asia.<sup>230</sup>

#### *The SCO – A Balancing Act for or against Central Asia’s Interests?*

The subject by far the most often dealt with by Central Asian expertise is that of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Numerous works, anthologies, and conference proceedings have been devoted to this topic. Many of them have been published by the organization itself, which each year finances meetings between experts representing each of the member states. In addition, the SCO issue, which is relatively uncontentious on the surface, is a handy prop for showcasing the good working relations between China and Central Asia without having to enter into the details. The overall opinion of it is very positive indeed: it is one of the main organizations to which four of the five Central Asian states belong, one of the most focused on by the international media, as well as one of the only organizations that is not limited to the post-Soviet space. Despite the profuse number of publications relating to the SCO, Central Asian experts contend that the major issue concerning the relationship to China is not multilateral but bilateral. Each state has to work out how to manage its power differential with Beijing. Questions about the organization’s future revolve around three major axes: Does the SCO function solely as an instrument to promote Chinese interests or is it designed to help address Central Asian problems? Will the balancing act between Moscow and Beijing continue? And if so, will it enable Central Asia to increase its autonomy or does it thereby risk becoming a dominion of the Russians and Chinese? Is the anti-western

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<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Interviews with Orozbek Moldaliev, Bishkek, 15 February 2008, and Adil Kaukenov, Almaty, 29 February 2008.

<sup>230</sup> For safety reasons, remarks made about this question have been kept anonymous.

direction of the organization an asset of stability or is it liable to cause destabilization in the region?

Central Asian experts dismiss the simplistic western critiques that cast the SCO as the precursor of a future supranational political or military-political organization on the model of the defunct Warsaw Pact. They remind us that neither Russia nor China desire to give up their national sovereignty. On the other hand, whatever direction the organization takes in the coming years, a large majority of experts state that Central Asia will have little influence over it. Only a little more than 10 percent of the Kazakh experts interviewed by Adil Kaukenov suppose that Central Asia will be able to determine the development of the organization in the coming decades. Conversely, more than 60 percent think that the SCO's future will be decided by direct negotiations between Moscow and Beijing, irrespective of the Central Asian viewpoint.<sup>231</sup> The director of the KISI, Bulat Sultanov, manifests more optimism. He argues that the SCO is not a Russo-Chinese creation but a collective solution to the internal security of Central Asia, an opinion which is far from shared by the rest of the expert community.<sup>232</sup> On this issue researchers in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan again seem more enthusiastic than their counterparts in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The first two countries also have much less room for maneuver than the region's two major powers, which are capable of developing more ambitious international strategies.

As a result, the Tajik ambassador to Astana, Akbarsho Iskandarov, believes that small countries like his own have everything to gain from the development of a SCO fostered by the Russian and Chinese giants. He remarks that, as members of the Security Council, China and Russia are in a better position than anyone else to defend Central Asian interests at the United Nations.<sup>233</sup> Researchers from the Center for Strategic Studies in Dushanbe such as Komeb Dzhalilov are mostly welcoming of China's help in

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<sup>231</sup> Venera F. Galiamova, Adil S. Kaukenov, "Aktual'nye voprosy razvitiia kazakhstansko-kitaiskikh otnoshenii", *op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>232</sup> Bulat K. Sultanov, "Respublika Kazakhstan i SHOS v kontekste regional'noi bezopasnosti" [The Republic of Kazakhstan and the SCO in the Context of Regional Security], *Kazakhstan v global'nykh protsessakh*, no. 2, 2004, pp. 74-84.

<sup>233</sup> Akbarsho Iskandarov, "SHOS: k voprosu o razshirenii", *op. cit.*

the fight against terrorism.<sup>234</sup> However, this issue does not have unanimous support. The director of the Analytical Center Sharq in Dushanbe, Muzarraf Olimov, for example, is critical of the Chinese refusal to include the issue of cross-border waters in the SCO's programme. Especially since Astana, Dushanbe, Bishkek, and even Tashkent, have all stated that it is a factor that could contribute to potential future state conflict.<sup>235</sup> The director of the Center for Politics, Religion and Security in Bishkek, Orozbek Moldaliev, points out that the SCO was neither able to intervene in Afghanistan nor to halt the "colored revolutions", and therefore does not seem to have the capacity to react to any large political crises.<sup>236</sup> A specialist on Afghanistan, Alexander Kniazev, for his part maintains that the SCO ought to stick to its original charter, which is to regulate security questions linked with Islamism, drug trafficking, and therefore Afghanistan, and to refrain from becoming multisectorial by investing itself in the economy and culture. For him, the organization's only future is to invest its energies in resolving the Afghan problem.<sup>237</sup>

In Kazakhstan, the SCO arouses even less enthusiasm, despite those experts, such as Oksana Dolzhikova from the IWEP, who hope that Kazakhstan will learn from China's experience in ASEAN and transform the SCO into an efficient organization.<sup>238</sup> The majority of researchers, however, doubt the SCO's real effectiveness. Among the experts interviewed by Adil Kaukenov, only a quarter think that the organization is an effective instrument capable of tackling the important questions facing Central Asia. Three-quarters indeed consider that it will have no direct influence on the development of

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<sup>234</sup> Komeb D. Dzhalilov, "Rol' Tadjikistana i Kitaia v bor'be s terrorizmom" [The Role of Tajikistan and China in the Fight against Terrorism], *Tadjikistan i sovremennyi mir*, no. 3, 2006, pp. 90-93.

<sup>235</sup> Muzarraf A. Olimov, "Ispol'zovanie vodnykh resursov v Tsentral'noi Azii: problemy i ugrozy" [The Use of Water Resources in Central Asia: Problems and Dangers], in *SHOS v poiskakh novogo ponimaniia bezopasnosti* [The SCO on the Search for a New Conception of Security], Almaty: IIMP, KISI, IWEP, 2008, pp. 73-74.

<sup>236</sup> Interview with Orozbek Moldaliev, Bishkek, 15 February 2008.

<sup>237</sup> Alexander A. Kniazev, "Afganskaia voenno-politicheskaia real'nost' i potentsial SHOS" [The Afghan Political and Military Reality and the SCO's Potential], in *SHOS v poiskakh novogo ponimaniia bezopasnosti*, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>238</sup> Oksana Dolzhikova, "Kitai-ASEAN i Kitai-Kazakhstan: perspektiva postroeniia sotrudnichestva po analogii" [China-ASEAN and China-Kazakhstan: the Prospects for Building Cooperation by Analogy], *Kazakhstan v global'nykh protsessakh*, no. 1, 2006, pp. 96-105.

bilateral relations between China and each of its Central Asian partners.<sup>239</sup> The absence of any binding foreign policy agreement between member states, as well as potential conflicts of interest, are regularly cited as reasons that speak against the organization.<sup>240</sup> An expert from the Al-Farabi National University, Gulden Zholamanova, argues that the SCO's declarations of intention are all well and good, but that only the specialized commissions designed to strengthen cooperation in specific areas are of any real efficacy. She therefore urges that one be created for the management of cross-border rivers.<sup>241</sup>

Konstantin Syroezhkin similarly contends that the SCO's capacity for action is essentially limited to declarations of intention, arguing that the more the organization develops, the more it is confronted with multiple problems such as the question of enlargement, the rates of unequal development between member countries, and the competition, or indeed the antagonism, between Russia and China.<sup>242</sup> These multiple inconsistencies are further evident in that the SCO has been unable to establish any sort of unified approach to the priorities of its member states; it seeks to develop military cooperation but refuses to establish supranational structures; and it desires to turn itself into an energy club of global dimensions but at present cannot even ease the growing feelings of competition between provider states and buyer states.<sup>243</sup>

Moreover, China's position within the SCO also raises numerous questions, and opinions on this issue diverge accordingly. The majority of experts agree that the organization's statutes make it impossible to forecast Chinese

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<sup>239</sup> Askar Abdrakhmanov, Adil Kaukenov, "Otnosheniia Kitaia i stran Tsentral'noi Azii glazami kazakhstanskikh ekspertov", *op. cit.*, pp. 119-129.

<sup>240</sup> Klara B. Sher'iazdanova, "SHOS v Tsentral'noi Azii" [The SCO in Central Asia], in *SHOS v poiskakh novogo ponimaniia bezopasnosti*, *op. cit.*, p. 60; Erkebulan N. Orazalin, *SHOS: osnovy formirovaniia, problemy i perspektivy. Puti sovershenstvovaniia mekhanizmov sotrudnichestva* [The SCO: Formation, Problems, and Prospects. The Paths for Advancing the Mechanisms of Cooperation], Almaty: IWEP, 2007, pp. 93-106.

<sup>241</sup> Gul'den Zholamanova, "Rol' SHOS v uregulirovanii transgranichnykh rek mezhdru Kazakhstanom i Kitaem" [The Role of the SCO in the Regulation of Crossborder Rivers between Kazakhstan and China], *Analytic*, no. 1, 2007, <<http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=2007050701005068>>.

<sup>242</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Rossiia i Kazakhstan v SHOS: problemy i perspektivy" [Russia and Kazakhstan in the SCO: Problems and Outlooks], *Analytica*, December 18, 2006, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20061218232229163](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20061218232229163)>.

<sup>243</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Sammit SHOS: ozhidaniia i real'nost'" [The SCO Summit: Hopes and Realities], *Analytic*, no. 5, 2007, pp. 9-19.

expansion in the region and that they provide Moscow with possibilities to counter Beijing.<sup>244</sup> Others, such as Farkhat Tolipov of the National University in Tashkent and Akbarsho Iskandarov, have less nuanced views. For them the SCO is an instrument that directly serves Chinese interests and works to justify Beijing's activities in the region in the eyes of the international community.<sup>245</sup> A professor at the Slavo-Kyrgyz University in Bishkek, Nur Omarov, goes so far as to talk of the "Chinese SCO".<sup>246</sup> A researcher from the KISI, Venera Galiamova, has pointed out that SCO treaties are only valid until 2020 and will have to be re-signed at a time when China will have become even more a superpower than it is now, so that even Russia will have difficulties imposing itself.<sup>247</sup> A highly placed Uzbek official who participated in Uzbekistan's membership process to the SCO in 2001 stated off the record that the fifth founding point of the organization – which stipulates that member states cannot act prejudicially against one another – ought to be revoked. He is concerned about the possibility of Chinese intervention were a given state's policy options to run counter to Beijing's interests.<sup>248</sup> According to Konstantin Syroezhkin, the SCO has made it possible for China to institutionalize its legitimacy in the region. With this done, it can go about playing on the contradictions between member states and lobby groups without the risk of being accused of expansionism.<sup>249</sup>

In spite of the fact that all the Central Asian experts support Moscow's presence in the SCO and refuse to envisage any head-on clashes with Beijing in Russia's absence, their opinions diverge when it comes to the positive or negative value of the Russo-Chinese partnership. Some of them contend that it represents a balance of forces that plays in favor of Central Asia; others denounce it as a simple mechanism of domination by two powers over their local governments. An expert at KISI, Murat Laumulin, expresses concern

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<sup>244</sup> Interview with Nurbek Omuraliev, Bishkek, 22 February 2008.

<sup>245</sup> Akbarsho Iskandarov, "SHOS: k voprosu o razshirenii", *op. cit.*

<sup>246</sup> Nur Omarov, "Tsentral'naia Aziia: vmeste ili porozn'? Pliusy i minusy regional'noi integratsii" [Central Asia: All Together or Each for Himself? The Pluses and Minuses of Regional Integration], *CentrAsia*, March 19, 2007, <<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1174283340>>.

<sup>247</sup> Venera F. Galiamova, "Politika i interesy Kitaia" [China's Policy and Interests], in Bulat K. Sultanov (ed.), *Politika i interesy mirovykh derzhav v Kazakhstane*, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>248</sup> Anonymous interview, Tashkent, March 2008.

<sup>249</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Rossiia i Kazakhstan v SHOS: problemy i perspektivy", *op. cit.*

that Moscow actually discusses the region's future more with Beijing than with the Central Asian governments themselves. Not only is such a tendency disadvantageous to Central Asia's autonomy, but were the Russian-Chinese partnership to collapse, it would expose the region to a major risk of destabilization.<sup>250</sup> This opinion is shared by Farkhat Tolipov, who is critical of the organization's politically asymmetrical character. He suspects it of wanting to become an "Eastern NATO" and compares it to the Holy Alliance of 1815, the objective of which was to maintain the political *status quo* and therefore to work in favor of the major powers.<sup>251</sup> In this balancing act, many experts point out the difficulties that stand in the way of the SCO's forging a role to rival that of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or of the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), both of which are conceived to be far better structured and much more effective. Murat Laumulin, for example, underscores that Beijing has a near impossible task in trying to reconcile SCO's antiterrorist work with the politico-military cooperation between CSTO members.<sup>252</sup> Another expert, Muratbek Imanaliev, backs the idea of forming a partnership between the SCO, on the one hand, and the CSTO and the EAEC, on the other. At the same time, however, he considers that it is in the best interests of the post-Soviet states first to reach agreement between themselves and only then to make a joint proposal to Beijing.<sup>253</sup>

Other experts judge the Russo-Chinese partnership in Central Asia more positively. Maria Disenova and Aitolkin Kurmanova of the Institute of

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<sup>250</sup> Murat T. Laumulin, "Geopoliticheskoe polozhenie Tsentral'noi Azii i Kazakhstana na sovremennom etape (2005-2006 gg.)" [The Current Standing of Central Asia's Geopolitical Situation and that of Kazakhstan (2005-2006)], in *Kontseptsii i podkhody k regional'noi bezopasnosti: opyt, problemy i perspektivy vzaimodeistviia v Tsentral'noi Azii* [Conceptions and Approaches Toward Regional Security: Experiences, Problems and Outlooks for Cooperation in Central Asia], Almaty: KISI, 2007, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20061225010119387](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20061225010119387)>.

<sup>251</sup> Fakhmat Tolipov, "The SCO from the Central Asian Perspective", in Bulat Sultanov, Marlène Laruelle (ed.), *Tsentrāl'naia Aziia i Kitai: sostoianie i perspektivy sotrudnichestva*, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-82.

<sup>252</sup> Murat T. Laumulin, "Geopoliticheskoe polozhenie Tsentral'noi Azii i Kazakhstana na sovremennom etape (2005-2006 gg.)", *op. cit.*, pp. 41-54.

<sup>253</sup> Muratbek Imanaliev, "SHOS kak proektirovanie zony sovместnoi otvetstvennosti i razvitiia" [The SCO as Project for a Zone of Common Development and Responsibility], *CentrAsia*, December 12, 2006, <[www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1165906860](http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1165906860)>.

Economic Strategies in Almaty, for instance, remark that Kazakhstan has always had to maneuver between its two neighbors and that history shows this game to be optimal.<sup>254</sup> Esen Usubaliev at the Institute for Strategic Analysis and Forecasting in Bishkek maintains that China will enable Central Asia to set limits on Russian policy, since Beijing has been more accepting of the American military presence in Kyrgyzstan than Moscow.<sup>255</sup> This balancing act is deemed even more beneficial to the region inasmuch as both powers seem to complement one another: while Russia has a good mastery over technology, in particular military, China has money available for investment.<sup>256</sup> As such, many experts believe this arrangement to be optimal, at least for the time being, and note that Beijing at any rate favors maintaining Russian domination in the region.<sup>257</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin has pointed out that China prefers a Russian presence to an American one, and an American presence to that, for example, of an Iranian one. Farkhad Khamraev, who works at the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, thinks that Beijing is discretely supporting Russia's anti-Americanism in order to kill two birds with one stone: getting the United States to withdraw from Central Asia, and having Washington blame Moscow instead of Beijing for it.<sup>258</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the apparent cooperation between China and Russia, many researchers such as the IWEP's Erkebulan Orazaliev, question the future of this collaboration and think that the long-term interests of both

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<sup>254</sup> Maria Disenova, Aitolkin Kurmanova, cited in "Kitaiskaia ekspansiia v Sredniuiu Aziiu", *op. cit.*

<sup>255</sup> Esen Usubaliev, "Kyrgyzsko-rossiiskie otnosheniia – k voprosu ob otvetstvennosti v mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniakh" [Russo-Kyrgyz Relations: On the Issue of Responsibility in International Relations], *Analytica*, June 4, 2007, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=2007060407235456](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=2007060407235456)>.

<sup>256</sup> Vladimir Alesin, "Tsentral'naia Aziia: integratsiia kak put' k stabil'nosti" [Central Asia: Integration as a Path toward Stability], *Analytic*, no. 5, 2006, pp. 10-13.

<sup>257</sup> For example, Basen Zhiger, Klara Khafizova, "Kazakhstan i Kitai v XXI veke: strategiia sosedstva", *op. cit.*, and interview with Viktor Dubovitski, Dushanbe, 27 March 2008.

<sup>258</sup> Farkhat Khamraev, "SHOS v formirovanii sistemy regional'noi i global'noi bezopasnosti" [The SCO's Role in the Formation of a System of Regional and Global Security], *Kazakhstan v global'nykh protsessakh*, no. 1, 2005, p. 75.



powers are contradictory.<sup>259</sup> According to Ablat Khodzhaev, for example, the potential for competition over the control of Central Asian resources is only going to increase,<sup>260</sup> an opinion that is shared by Ainura Dzhorobekova at the National University of Kyrgyzstan, and Murat Asanbaev in Almaty.<sup>261</sup> For his part, Konstantin Syroezhkin surmises that once Russia sees the United States evicted from Kyrgyzstan, the partnership with China will become less relevant for Moscow – meaning that one day Russia will have to choose between the West and Beijing.<sup>262</sup> Other researchers, such as Adil Kaukenov, hope that Moscow will prevent Beijing from entering into the domain that has hitherto been reserved for it. This opinion is held by the vast majority of experts, who believe that Russia will do everything in its powers to curb Chinese expansion.<sup>263</sup> According to Erkebulan Orazaliev, Moscow's policy toward China contains double-standards, since it is preventing China from gaining a foothold in the CSTO's military structure and in its domestic oil and gas market.<sup>264</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin, for his part, dismisses the idea that a real partnership could develop between the SCO and the CSTO, since he does not believe that it is in Moscow's interest to merge an efficient organization over which it has total control with the SCO. This would only result in a structure that is too large, has ambiguous functions, and in which

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<sup>259</sup> Erkebulan Orazaliev, "Perspektivy SHOS v kontekste sotrudnichestva v oblasti regional'noi bezopasnosti" [The Outlook for the SCO in the Context of Cooperation on Issues of Regional Security], *Analytic*, no. 4, 2006, p. 27.

<sup>260</sup> Ablat Khodzhaev, *Kitaiskii faktor v Tsentral'noi Azii* [The Chinese Factor in Central Asia], Tashkent: FAN, 2007, p. 54.

<sup>261</sup> Ainura E. Dzhorobekova, "Tsentral'naia Aziia na perekrestke strategicheskikh interesov Kitaia i Rossii" [Central Asia at the Crossroads of Russia's and China's Strategic Interests], *Voprosy istorii Kyrgyzstana*, no. 4, 2007, pp. 38-41; Murat Asanbaev, "Politika Kitaia i Rossii v Tsentral'noi Azii v ramkakh deiatel'nosti SHOS" [Chinese and Russian Policy in Central Asia in the Context of SCO Activities], *Analytic*, no. 2, 2007, pp. 32-42.

<sup>262</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 278. See also Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Rossiia i Tsentral'naia Aziia: problemnye uzly" [Russia and Central Asia: Problematic Knots], in *Kazakhstan i Rossiia: perspektivy strategicheskogo partnerstva* [Kazakhstan and Russia: Prospects for a Strategic Partnership], Almaty: KISI, 2007, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070218084842792](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070218084842792)>.

<sup>263</sup> Interview with Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, Almaty, 5 March 2008.

<sup>264</sup> Erkebulan Orazaliev, "SHOS kak vazhnyi element v sisteme regional'noi bezopasnosti v Tsentral'noi Azii" [The SCO as an important element of Regional Security in Central Asia], *Kazakhstan v global'nykh protsessakh*, no. 2, 2006, pp. 19-27.

China would exercise an unwanted influence.<sup>265</sup> The vice-director of the IWEP, Leila Muzaparova, contends that Beijing is most definitely working hard at catching up to Moscow and that it has remained cautious only for its short-term tactics: China needs Russian support both to nip its separatist movements in the bud and to act as a check on western influence and its growing competition with Washington.<sup>266</sup>

From a Central Asian viewpoint, the last major issue concerning the SCO relates to Central Asia's attitude toward the place that the West, and especially the United States, occupies in the region. The SCO's anti-western overtones thus tend to be evaluated positively or negatively depending on the specific political convictions of the expert in question. The most pro-Russian complain about western interference, whereas those of more western-oriented sensibilities worry about the disappearance of American power in the region. For example, the vice-director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies in Dushanbe, Viktor Dubovitski, who is close to the Russian neo-Eurasianist movement, positively welcomes the Russo-Chinese alliance in its desire to counter the United States.<sup>267</sup> Murat Suiunbaev of the Diplomatic Academy of Bishkek, and Erkebulan Orazaliev of the IWEP, both see in Beijing's energetic support for the SCO a clearly anti-western orientation, as epitomized by the common declaration of July 2005 demanding the closure of all United States military bases in the region.<sup>268</sup> The director of the Center for Social Research in Bishkek, Nurbek Omuraliev, is concerned by China's desire to enlist Muslim countries in possibly dangerous anti-American politics.<sup>269</sup> Murat Laumulin's view is more subtle: China's growing

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<sup>265</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Novaia arkhitektura bezopasnosti v Tsentral'noi Azii" [The New Architecture of Security in Central Asia], in Bulat Sultanov, Marlène Laruelle (ed.), *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kitai: sostoianie i perspektivy sotrudnichestva*, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-62.

<sup>266</sup> Leila M. Muzaparova (ed.), *Sovremennyi Kitai. Ekonomika, demografiia, vneshniaia politika*, *op. cit.*, pp. 552 and 633.

<sup>267</sup> Interview with Viktor Dubovitski, Dushanbe, 27 March 2008.

<sup>268</sup> Tokhir Adbuchabbor, cited in "Kitaiskaia ekspansiiia v Sredniuiu Aziuu", *op. cit.*; Murat Suiunbaev, "Vneshniaia politika Kyrgyzstana: nelegkii vybor", *op. cit.*; Erkebulan Orazaliev, "Perspektivy SHOS v kontekste sotrudnichestva v oblasti regional'noi bezopasnosti", *op. cit.*

<sup>269</sup> Interview with Nurbek Omuraliev, Bishkek, 22 February 2008.

geopolitical ambitions are simply not yet able to be expressed in terms that are too overtly anti-American.<sup>270</sup>

The director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies of the Slavo-Tajik University, Guzel Maitdinova, expresses her apprehension about the deteriorating relationship with NATO. She suggests that the member states of the Atlantic alliance be invited to join in SCO military exercises as a way of reminding them that it is not a military union but a political and economic union of struggle against “non-traditional dangers”.<sup>271</sup> Her opinion is seconded by Muratbek Imanaliev, who claims that it is up to the SCO to prove that it is not an anti-NATO organization,<sup>272</sup> as well as by Murat Laumulin, who would like to see the European Union and/or NATO obtain observer status so that they could be reassured about the SCO’s intentions.<sup>273</sup> Farkhat Tolipov and Ablat Khodzhaev, for their part, do not hesitate to link the SCO’s success to Central Asia’s disappointment with United States and European policy in the post-Soviet space. According to Konstantin Syroezhkin, despite the rise of anti-American sentiment among the Central Asian elites in recent years, all experts tend to perceive the western presence in the region as a guarantee of stability and that it would be dangerous were the Russo-Chinese partnership to have an exclusive grip over Central Asia.<sup>274</sup> Accordingly, he contends that in coming decades the mounting Sino-American antagonism will pose a substantial risk for Central Asia, which could see itself transformed into a Chinese base for anti-American operations.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Murat T. Laumulin, “Geopoliticheskoe polozhenie Tsentral’noi Azii i Kazakhstana na sovremennom etape (2005-2006 gg.)”, *op. cit.*

<sup>271</sup> Guzel Maitdinova, “Faktor SHOS v sisteme bezopasnosti Tsentral’noi Azii: realii, vektory razvitiia” [The SCO Factor in the Security System of Central Asia: Realities and Vectors of Development], *Tadzhikistan i sovremennyi mir*, no. 3, 2006, p. 37.

<sup>272</sup> Muratbek Imanaliev, “SHOS: konstruirovaniie identichnosti” [SCO: Constructing an Identity], in *SHOS v poiskakh novogo ponimaniia bezopasnosti*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>273</sup> Murat T. Laumulin, “Tsentral’naia Aziia, Rossiia i Zapad v usloviakh rosta vlianiia Kitaia v regione” [Central Asian, Russia, and the West facing the Rise of Chinese Influence in the Region], in Bulat Sultanov, Marlène Laruelle (ed.), *Tsentral’naia Aziia i Kitai: sostoianie i perspektivy sotrudnichestva*, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-54.

<sup>274</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, “Rossiia i Kazakhstan v SHOS: problemy i perspektivy”, *op. cit.*

<sup>275</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, “Rossiia i Tsentral’naia Aziia: problemnye uzly”, *op. cit.*

A dose of realism thus seems to prevail among the experts. All tend to share the conviction that the Central Asian states by necessity will have to adapt to their Chinese neighbor, regardless of whether they view this presence positively or not. In the short term, however, they doubt the SCO's capacity to affect the region's security situation, especially given Russia's predominance, and emphasize the weaknesses of Chinese political power and the difficulties it faces to resolve its own internal issues. Nor do they entertain any illusions about the long-term solidity of the Russo-Chinese partnership. A majority of them consider that China's advance into Central Asia presents significant risks in the medium term for the five states and that it cannot be conceived as being entirely positive for long-term national interests. In one of his most widely distributed articles, Konstantin Syroezhkin sums up this majority opinion well in saying that China remains a *challenge* for Central Asia, including on those issues that are presently regarded as having been resolved.<sup>276</sup> The expression proposed by his colleague at the KISI, Murat Laumulin, concerning China's "soft hegemonism"<sup>277</sup> in Central Asia also appeals to the majority of experts.

### **The Economic Issue: Paradoxical Facets**

While the establishment of good diplomatic relations and a constructive geopolitical context were presented as priorities throughout the 1990s, the new driving force of cooperation is now the development of economic exchange. To the Central Asians, China's development path looks all the more attractive, as Central Asia itself, with the exception of Kazakhstan, is experiencing a situation of profound economic crisis. Whether they be experts, scholars, businessmen, or simply tourists, all the Central Asians surveyed acknowledge having been impressed by their stays in China. Konstantin Syroezhkin underscores that the expression about the "Chinese miracle" is not all that far removed from the truth.<sup>278</sup> However, once again,

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<sup>276</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Kitaiskii faktor v kontekste bezopasnosti v Tsentral'noi Azii" [The Chinese Factor in the Context of Security in Central Asia], *Kazakhstan-Spektr*, no. 4, 2006, pp. 25-30.

<sup>277</sup> Murat T. Laumulin, "Na grani blefa i real'nosti" [On the Border of Spiel and Reality], *Analytika*, June 13, 2006, <<http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20060613225246616>>.

<sup>278</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

opinion is far from being unanimous. The most pessimistic experts consider that the local economies will be wiped out by Chinese economic strength and that Central Asia will be transformed into a mere supplier of raw materials – hardly something to strive for given the demands of globalization on capable human resources, know-how, and technological development. The underlying economic issues of the Chinese presence in Central Asia are in fact the most paradoxical element of Sino-Central Asian relations: they attract the most divergence of opinion precisely because they encompass the greatest variety of aspects, stretching from hydrocarbons to retail trade.

#### *A Promising Energy Partnership?*

In the above-mentioned survey by Adil Kaukenov, three-quarters of the experts claimed that economic and energy interests are the determining factors in the evolving Sino-Central Asian relations.<sup>279</sup> The most often cited argument in favor of a growing cooperation with China on oil and gas resources concerns increasing the number of alternative routes to provide more access to the booming Asian market and to weaken Russian dominance. According to Toktogul Kokchekeev, the Chinese factor will be key for the coming years, insofar as competition for Central Asian gas between the two powers will help Central Asia to hold Moscow to ransom.<sup>280</sup> Another expert, Bulat Sultanov, also hopes that the costs of transporting oil via the Atyrau-Alanshankou pipeline will – on the condition that oil prices remain high – partially compensate for the continual delays in exploiting Caspian oil caused by international consortiums.<sup>281</sup> In addition, as Konstantin Syroezhkin remarks, the terms of the exploitation contracts signed with Chinese companies are more advantageous for Kazakhstan than those offered by

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<sup>279</sup> Askar Abdrakhmanov, Adil S. Kaukenov, “Otnosheniia Kitaia i stran Tsentral’noi Azii glazami kazakhstanskikh ekspertov”, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>280</sup> Toktogul Kokchekeev, cited in “Kitaiskaia ekspansiia v Sredniuiu Aziiu”, *op. cit.* The same argument can be found in the work of Saniiia Sygaeva, “Novye tendentsii v rossiisko-kazakhstanskikh otnosheniiax” [New Tendencies in Russo-Kazakh Relations], *Analytica*, June 8, 2007, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070601004542521](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070601004542521)>.

<sup>281</sup> Bulat K. Sultanov, “Politika Rossii, KNR i SShA v Srednei Azii v novykh geopoliticheskikh realiiakh” [The Policies of Russia, the PRC, and the United States in Central Asia amidst the New Political Realities], in *Kazakhstansko-kitaiskoe sotrudnichestvo: sostoianie i perspektivy* [Sino-Kazakh Cooperation: Its Current State and Outlook], Almaty: KISI, 2007, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070130002921374](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070130002921374)>.

major international groups.<sup>282</sup> China is therefore welcomed insofar as it enables Kazakhstan to restrain Russian and western companies, which give Astana too little room for maneuver.<sup>283</sup>

Nevertheless, this promising partnership raises concerns for many experts who think that increased dependency on China will jeopardize national sovereignty.<sup>284</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin, for example, considers that the Kazakh authorities have concealed the percentage of national energy resources that have passed into Chinese hands, which he estimates stand at 26 percent.<sup>285</sup> The director of the Institute for World Market in Almaty, Alida Ashimbaeva, denounces the dangerous opacity that surrounds the process of awarding tenders for deposit development and thinks that China is being excessively favored.<sup>286</sup> According to Maria Disenova and Aitolkin Kurmanova, Beijing's ambitions in this sector ought not to be underestimated, even if its investments concern sites of mostly medium dimensions.<sup>287</sup> A member of the Far East Department of the Oriental Studies Institute in Almaty, Gulzhakhan Khadzhiyeva, states that the Sino-Kazakh pipeline might run into problems: Its extreme length makes it costly and should oil prices drop or new deposits be discovered in the Tarim basin, it would become less financially viable.<sup>288</sup> In addition, according to Konstantin Syroezhkin, that the pipeline's construction went ahead without Moscow's

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<sup>282</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Kitaiskii vektor vo vneshnei politike Respubliki Kazakhstan" [The Chinese Vector in the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan], in *Respublika Kazakhstan 15 let: dostizheniia i perspektivy* [Fifteen Years of the Republic of Kazakhstan: Outcomes and Prospects], Almaty: KISI, 2007, p. 31.

<sup>283</sup> Basen Zhiger, Klara Khafizova, "Kazakhstan i Kitai v XXI veke: strategiiia sosedstva", *op. cit.*

<sup>284</sup> Tulegen Zhukeev, Nargiz Kasenova, "Prioritety vneshnepoliticheskoi orientatsii Kazakhstana" [The Priorities of Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Orientation], *Analytika*, January 14, 2007, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070114214001106](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070114214001106)>.

<sup>285</sup> Interview with Konstantin Syroezhkin, Almaty, 4 March 2008.

<sup>286</sup> Alida Ashimbaeva, "Starye problemy novoi ekonomiki Kazakhstana" [Old Problems of Kazakhstan's New Economy], *Kapital.kz*, no. 21 (108), May 31, 2007, republished in *CentrAsia*, June 2, 2007, <[www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1180737420](http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1180737420)>.

<sup>287</sup> Maria Disenova, Aitolkin Kurmanova, "Nef't' i gaz Kazakhstana – miagkaia natsionalizatsiia ili smena partnerov?" [Oil and Gas in Kazakhstan: Soft Nationalization or a Change of Partner?], *Oasis*, July 30, 2007, <[www.ca-oasis.info/news/?c=1&id=19422](http://www.ca-oasis.info/news/?c=1&id=19422)>.

<sup>288</sup> Gulzhakhan U. Khadzhiyeva, "Kazakhstan i Kitai: strategicheskie podkhody k ekonomicheskomu sotrudnichestvu" [Kazakhstan and China: Strategic Approaches Toward Economic Cooperation], in Bulat Sultanov, Marlène Laruelle (ed.), *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kitai: sostoianie i perspektivy sotrudnichestva*, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-129.

assurance that Russian firms will use it to transit oil is rather problematic; were they not to use it the line's profitability would be seriously undermined.<sup>289</sup>

Many researchers also mention the ecological risks. The director of the IIMP, Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, for example, expresses his concerns that the pipeline is being constructed in accordance with Chinese norms, which do not appear to him to be as strict as Kazakh norms.<sup>290</sup> Murat Auezov adds to this the fact that China has refused to heed the concerns published in archeological reports about the pipeline's path and that it may have wrecked precious prehistorical and ancient sites.<sup>291</sup> Moreover, as he points out, the Kazakhstan government has not shown any transparency on fundamental questions such as whether China or Kazakhstan will look after the pipeline's maintenance and security arrangements.<sup>292</sup> Like Gulzhakhan Khadzhieva and Konstantin Syroezhkin, he is worried that Chinese firms will be given responsibility for security instead of the Kazakh forces of law and order, which would undermine the country's sovereignty. He considers that China's purchases of relatively unprofitable deposits is motivated not by energy extraction but by a strategic interest to create a network throughout Kazakh territory that would give Beijing leverage in case severe political tensions were to erupt with Astana.<sup>293</sup>

#### *An Opportunity for Opening Up and for Development*

Central Asian experts are all conscious of the region's isolation, a factor that drastically augments the cost of transporting commodities for export and import. In both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, they often express enthusiasm about the prospects that China presents for opening up the region, which was a mere dead-end point in the Soviet circuit of distribution. Along these lines Murat Suiunbaev states: "Do not forget that China, a country of uninterrupted statehood for more than a thousand years, is the only one of our neighbors to belong to the WTO, is the number one world market, and

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<sup>289</sup> Interview with Konstantin Syroezhkin, Almaty, 4 March 2008.

<sup>290</sup> Interview with Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, Almaty, 5 March 2008.

<sup>291</sup> Interview with Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

our window onto the Pacific region.”<sup>294</sup> This opinion is shared by Akylbek Saliev, who also regards the main advantage of good relations with China in terms of sea access.<sup>295</sup> Tajik experts express similar motivations for developing relations with China, hoping that their country can become a transport corridor for production from ASEAN countries toward Iran and Afghanistan.<sup>296</sup> In Almaty, the director of the Risk Assessment Group, Dosym Satpaev, argues that Kazakhstan ought to construct railway, road, and aerial transport corridors and transform itself into a bridge between Europe and the Asia Pacific.<sup>297</sup>

According to Esen Usubaliev,<sup>298</sup> China’s pragmatism works to foster “the calm and emotion-free development of economic ties” between China and Central Asia, something that is greatly appreciated in the region. In Russia, the director of the Economic and Policy Communication Agency, Dmitri Orlov, points out that Kyrgyzstan is amassing huge revenues from the transit of Chinese productions via Torugart and Irkeshtam, a source of regular and heaven-sent royalties given the state of its economy.<sup>299</sup> Kyrgyz and Tajik experts also make positive remarks about the concreteness with which China participates in tunnel and road construction, highly publicized projects that the local populations greatly appreciate.<sup>300</sup> For instance, a former ambassador to China now working at the Institute for Public Policy, Erlan Abdylbaev, considers that the construction of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz-Chinese railway is one of the most important driving forces in ameliorating Central Asia’s landlockedness.<sup>301</sup> According to him and his colleagues in Bishkek and Dushanbe, such projects have enabled an “invasion” of Chinese products,

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<sup>294</sup> Murat Suiunbaev, “Vneshniaia politika Kyrgyzstana”, *op. cit.*

<sup>295</sup> Interview with Akylbek Saliev, Bishkek, 19 February 2008.

<sup>296</sup> This possibility was mentioned by Akbarsho Iskandarov, “SHOS: k voprosu o razshireniia”, by Sukhrob Sharipov during the interview, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008, and by Zaure Chulanova, “Kitaiskaia model’ vneshneekonomicheskogo razvitiia” [The Chinese Model of Foreign Economic Development], *Kazakhstan v global’nykh protsessakh*, no. 4, 2007, pp. 30-43.

<sup>297</sup> Interview with Dosym Satpaev, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

<sup>298</sup> Esen Usubaliev, “Kyrgyzsko-rossiiskie otnosheniia – k voprosy ob otvetstvennosti v mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniakh”, *op. cit.*

<sup>299</sup> Dmitri Orlov, cited in “Kitaiskaia ekspansiiia v Sredniuiu Aziiu”, *op. cit.*

<sup>300</sup> Interview with Viktor Dubovitski, Dushanbe, 27 March 2008.

<sup>301</sup> Erlan Abdylbaev, “‘Iubilei’ kitaisko-kyrgyzsko-uzbekskoi zheleznoi dorogi” [‘Jubilee’ of the Sino-Kyrgyz-Uzbek Railway], *Institute for Public Policy*, December 2006, <[www.ipp.kg/ru/analysis/308/](http://www.ipp.kg/ru/analysis/308/)>.



which is good insofar as it lowers prices and raises the transit value of some isolated and mountainous regions situated on the trade routes from China.<sup>302</sup> Experts from both countries thus adopt an optimistic standpoint on this question, since they view the region's transformation into a zone for re-exporting Chinese products as a unique opportunity for greater long-term development.<sup>303</sup>

According to Konstantin Syroezhkin, Kazakhstan faces a similar situation: if Chinese production were to vanish, then it would not be replaced by production from anywhere else and a large part of the population, not just that involved in the area of shop-tourism, would lose its means of subsistence. As a result, the country would suffer shortages of parts for automobiles, electronic goods, construction materials, and clothing.<sup>304</sup> The proof of China's obvious economic value lies in the unprecedented increases in competition between Central Asian countries, a remark made by many experts. For instance, Akylbek Saliev points to the already existing competition between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, while Nurbek Omuraliev underlines the paradox that Uzbekistan – which historically has been the region's trade linchpin – has disappeared from the scene and been replaced by Kyrgyzstan.<sup>305</sup> Uzbek expert Rustam Khazhdarov, as well as researchers from the Center for Strategic Studies in Dushanbe, underscore the nascent but aggressive competition between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for control over the transit of Chinese goods.<sup>306</sup> In addition, Maria Kuleva from the Kyrgyz National University recalls that today a large part of the population of Osh makes its livelihood from transit trade, and that the loss of this would have an immediately detrimental impact on the region.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Muratbek Imanaliev, Erlan Abdylbaev, "Vyzovy globalizatsii v Tsentral'noi Azii i nekotorye aspekty politiki KNR v regione" [Challenges of Globalization in Central Asia and Several Aspects of PRC Policy in the Region], *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kavkaz*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2007, <[www.ca-c.org/journal/2007-03-rus/o8.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2007-03-rus/o8.shtml)>.

<sup>303</sup> Interview with Sukhrob Sharipov, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008.

<sup>304</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Kitaiskii vektor vo vneshnei politike Respubliki Kazakhstan", *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>305</sup> Interviews with Akylbek Saliev, Bishkek, 19 February 2008, and with Nurbek Omuraliev, Bishkek, 22 February 2008.

<sup>306</sup> Interviews with Sukhrob Sharipov and Saifullo Safarov, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008.

<sup>307</sup> Maria Kuleva, "Tadjikistan vyzhivaet Kyrgyzstan iz vsekh pribyl'nykh sektorov khoziaistvovaniia v Tsentral'noi Azii" [Tajikistan evicts Kyrgyzstan from all the

As regards joining the World Trade Organization, this has raised concerns among Central Asian experts. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, which has been a member since 1998, all the other countries (save Turkmenistan) have made applications for membership with China's backing. Opinions diverge about this, once again, depending on the country. Kyrgyz experts are unanimous about the benefits of membership, which among other things has transformed this little country into the support base of China's economic expansion into Central Asia. Some, however, such as Muratbek Imanaliev, are more skeptical observing that Bishkek is more susceptible to the upheavals of the international economy and the volatility of the financial sector.<sup>308</sup> Tajik experts also largely favor joining the WTO, while Uzbek experts are far more reserved, and tend to think that membership would cause national industry to be wiped out. In Kazakhstan, there is a situation of widespread skepticism. Konstantin Syroezhkin, for example, suspects that Beijing is simply waiting for Astana's membership in the WTO to be approved before it invests more heavily in the Kazakh market, as this would enable it to take advantage of new, lower customs duties<sup>309</sup>. The IWEP's Gulnar Smailova criticizes Beijing for the protectionist measures it itself employs in certain sectors, but which it disallows to new members.<sup>310</sup>

The prospect of transforming the SCO into a free-trade zone also raises questions. On this issue, too, Tajik and Kyrgyz experts tend to support China's propositions, because they have everything to gain from a merger of the Eurasian Economic Community with China, whereas their Kazakh and Uzbek colleagues worry about the major repercussions this could have on their respective economies. As a result, Akbarsho Iskandarov argues that Central Asia should seek to emulate the Chinese model of special economic

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profitable economic sectors in Central Asia], *Oasis*, April 25, 2007, <[www.ca-oasis.info/news/?c=6&id=13440](http://www.ca-oasis.info/news/?c=6&id=13440)>.

<sup>308</sup> Interview with Muratbek Imanaliev, Bishkek, 14 February 2008.

<sup>309</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 185. But he has a more positive vision of the Chinese WTO experience in another article: Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Kitai i VTO: uroki dlia Kazakhstana" [China and the WTO: Lessons for Kazakhstan], *Analytic*, no. 3, 2008, <<http://www.kisi.kz/site.html?en=0>>.

<sup>310</sup> Gulnar Smailova, "Vstuplenie Kitaia v VTO: usloviia, posledstviia i perspektivy" [China's Membership in the WTO: Conditions, Consequences and Prospects], *Kazakhstan v global'nykh protsessakh*, no. 1, 2006, pp. 87-96.

zones.<sup>311</sup> However, among the experts surveyed by Adil Kaukenov, less than 10 percent consider that the creation of a unified economic space with China would increase commercial opportunities.<sup>312</sup> Sanat Kushkumbaev sees it as being an economic risk for Kazakhstan in view of the latter's developmental differential with its neighbor.<sup>313</sup> According to Konstantin Syroezhkin, that Russia and Central Asia are being transformed into the providers of primary resources to China is liable to disturb the Russo-Chinese equilibrium within the SCO.<sup>314</sup> Only Maria Disenova and Aitolkin Kurmanova maintain that Kazakhstan would benefit from a common economic zone, since this would enable it to better control the quality of Chinese products. They believe that in principle there is nothing to fear from free trade: "Economic growth in neighboring countries generally brings positive effects: that is what the ASEAN countries have understood, and that is why they created a free-trade zone with China."<sup>315</sup>

#### *The Restriction of Central Asian Economies to Primary Resources*

Official Chinese and Central Asian discourse lays emphasis on the complementary nature of both economies, which purportedly makes for a win-win trade situation. Several Central Asian experts, often economists and specialists in Chinese political economy, question such a one-sided view.<sup>316</sup> In the first place, they argue that Chinese authorities have massively facilitated public and private investments in foreign countries while they, at the same time, have taken strict measures to protect their own companies by regular modifications to tax regimes<sup>317</sup> and by requiring foreign firms to reinvest

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<sup>311</sup> Akbarsho Iskandarov, "SHOS: k voprosu o razshirenii", *op. cit.*

<sup>312</sup> Venera F. Galiamova, Adil S. Kaukenov, "Aktual'nye voprosy razvitiia kazakhstansko-kitaiskikh otnoshenii", *op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>313</sup> Sanat K. Kushkumbaev, "SHOS i bezopasnost' Tsentral'noi Azii", *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>314</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Rossiia i Kazakhstan v SHOS: problemy i perspektivy", *op. cit.*

<sup>315</sup> Maria Disenova and Aitolkin Kurmanova, cited in "Kitaiskaia ekspansia v Sredniuiu Aziiu", *op. cit.*

<sup>316</sup> Adil S. Kaukenov, "Problemy sovremennogo ekonomicheskogo razvitiia Kitaia" [Problems of China's Economic Development], *Kazakhstan v global'nykh protsessakh*, no. 2, 2005, pp. 97-108; Zaure Chulanova, "Nekotorye aspekty spetsifiki rynochnoi ekonomiki Kitaia" [Some Specific Aspects concerning the Market Economy in China], *Ibid.*, no. 1, 2006, pp. 76-86.

<sup>317</sup> Alida Ashimbaeva, "Starye problemy novoi ekonomiki Kazakhstana", *op. cit.*

their profits locally.<sup>318</sup> The key accusation nevertheless concerns the restriction of Central Asian economies to the role of producers and exporters of primary resources. Konstantin Syroezhkin is unequivocal on the matter when he says that “China’s economic successes objectively go against all Central Asian interests in the sector of industrial processing and to a certain extent in food processing.”<sup>319</sup> An expert situated in Tashkent who is a regular consultant to the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Vladimir Paramonov, corroborates this conclusion claiming that this tendency is liable to cause a significant socio-economic crisis in the region.<sup>320</sup>

On this matter, also, the level of criticism of Chinese economic policy varies depending upon the country. There are fewer Kyrgyz and Tajik experts who see it as a problem. Neither of these countries has an efficient industry or agricultural sector and they already import most of their goods from Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Turkey. China’s arrival is therefore not viewed as jeopardizing but as dynamizing because its prices are competitive. Muratbek Imanaliev and Akylbek Saliev even complain that there is a lack of small- and medium-size Chinese companies in Kyrgyzstan – a result of that country’s dearth of resources. These companies, they argue, could play a key role in domestic industrial development via the joint-ventures system.<sup>321</sup> The Center for Strategic Studies in Dushanbe welcomes this Chinese presence, too. However, there are some audible voices of disagreement inside the Center that fear the disappearance of the last national companies.<sup>322</sup> For instance, Tajik economist Khodzhimukhammad Umarov criticizes Beijing’s policy, arguing that investments in the upgrade of local factories (cement, food processing, or agriculture machinery factories) will suffer as Beijing merely seeks to export its own finished products. He calls upon the Chinese authorities to change the structure of trade relations by promoting

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<sup>318</sup> Interview with Ablat Khodzhaev, Tashkent, 22 March 2008.

<sup>319</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost’ v Tsentral’noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

<sup>320</sup> Vladimir Paramonov, cited in Murat Omarov, “Tovarooborot Kyrgyzstana s Kitaem” [Trade between Kyrgyzstan and China], *Analytica*, June 4, 2007, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070528232957997](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070528232957997)>.

<sup>321</sup> Interview with Muratbek Imanaliev, Bishkek, 14 February 2008.

<sup>322</sup> Interviews with Sukhrob Sharipov and Saifullo Safarov, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008.

investments that could help the country develop indigenous production.<sup>323</sup> Tokhir Abdychabbor, for his part, recalls that Tajikistan's debt to China is destined to rise drastically which, in the end, will cause the already acutely weak Tajik government further financial problems.<sup>324</sup>

However, it is in Uzbekistan, and more so in Kazakhstan, that this issue is most often raised by experts. In Tashkent, however, the subject remains off-limits and very few specialists are able to question the official discourse on the current honeymoon in Sino-Uzbek relations. Nevertheless, Ablat Khodzhaev used his high-level position to obtain political approval to publish a work entitled *The Chinese Factor in Central Asia*. The work was printed in a limited edition of 100 copies in 2004, 500 for the second edition in 2007, and is clearly critical of China. Unable to express himself directly, he cites Russian and American authors who criticize China's economic settlement and, on his own behalf, maintains that Beijing has launched many joint-ventures as part of its strategy of "good neighborliness" but that the majority of them are simply fictitious.<sup>325</sup> As he explains, "Chinese investments are not aimed at the development of local production but at the creation of conditions to aid the export of Chinese products and the import of primary resources". He continues by saying that "China is not ready to offer large-scale economic aid to the states of Central Asia for the development of local production and the augmentation of their export potential."<sup>326</sup> In this vein, he remarks upon China's refusal to finance factories for processing cotton and synthetic silk, even though they are important future sectors of the national industry. He therefore invites local governments to compare the nature of Chinese investments with those proposed by South Korea, which help in developing local industry.<sup>327</sup> He concludes his work by urging the SCO to be careful not

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<sup>323</sup> Khodzhimukhammad U. Umarov, "O nekotorykh problemakh ekonomicheskikh otnoshenii mezhdru KNR i RT na sovremennom etape" [Some Current Problems in the Economic Relations between the PRC and Tajikistan], *Tadzhikistan i sovremennyi mir*, no. 3, 2006, pp. 23-34.

<sup>324</sup> Tokhir Adbuchabbor, cited in "KITAISKAIA EKSPANSIIA V SREDNIU AZIIU", *op. cit.*

<sup>325</sup> Ablat Khodzhaev, *Kitaiskii faktor v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 56. See also Ablat Khodzhaev, "The Central Asian Policy of the Peoples' Republic of China (Based on Chinese Sources)", *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2009, pp. 9-28.

<sup>326</sup> Ablat Khodzhaev, *Kitaiskii faktor v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, pp. 73 and 78.

<sup>327</sup> Ablat Khodzhaev, "O perspektive tsentral'noaziatskoi politiki Kitaia (s pozitsii ee vliianiia na problemy razvitiia mestnogo proizvodstva i trudostroistva naseleniia)" [On the Perspectives of China's Central Asian Policy (à propos of its Influence on the

to wind up as an instrument for “imported expansion”<sup>328</sup> from one member country to another – the message of this diplomatic talk is clear to whoever knows how to read it. For his part, Farkhat Tolipov argues that Uzbek products, which are three times more expensive than Chinese products, are simply unable to compete.<sup>329</sup> Speaking off the record, a high-level Uzbek functionary claims that China is in fact not the only one responsible for Tashkent’s failure to develop its industrial sector: its extreme protectionism has undermined its former role as a transit country, and massive corruption among customs officials serves to deter Chinese companies.<sup>330</sup>

In Kazakhstan, greater freedom of speech and a large number of economists and experts specializing in China have enabled a more open expression of concerns about economic over-specialization. Dosym Satpaev is of the view that Astana has no choice other than to give up all its processing industry and instead specialize uniquely in hydrocarbons, uranium, hydroelectricity, cereals, and transit.<sup>331</sup> According to Konstantin Syroezhkin, the sectors that are most affected by Chinese competition are light industry, construction (for example, cement production), and food processing. Losing these sectors, however, may jeopardize the country’s security since Kazakhstan would then be dependent on China for its basic foodstuffs.<sup>332</sup> Experts also criticize attempts of the Kazakh government to conceal the real bilateral trade figures. They claim these figures are calculated in such a way that Kazakh exports are overvalued and Chinese imports undervalued. While official trade between China and Kazakhstan was put at US\$ 10 billion for 2006, according to Konstantin Syroezhkin it actually amounted to US\$ 13 billion with Xinjiang alone.<sup>333</sup> If some of these discrepancies are due to Astana’s politically motivated desire to play down Chinese economic activity, the Kazakh customs services nonetheless also face many difficulties in gauging the extent of this trade. It is simply impossible to calculate the uncontrolled

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Development of Local Production and the Working Population)], in Bulat Sultanov, Marlène Laruelle (ed.), *Tsentrāl’naia Aziia i Kitai: sostoianie i perspektivy sotrudnichestva*, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-119.

<sup>328</sup> Ablat Khodzhaev, *Kitaiskii faktor v Tsentrāl’noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-158.

<sup>329</sup> Interview with Farkhat Tolipov, Tashkent, 16 March 2008.

<sup>330</sup> Anonymous interview, Tashkent, March 2008.

<sup>331</sup> Interview with Dosym Satpaev, Almaty, 6 March 2008.

<sup>332</sup> Interview with Konstantin Syroezhkin, Almaty, 4 March 2008.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*

flows of everyday consumer goods, which according to Maria Disenova and Aitolkin Kurmanova constitutes a genuine stumbling block for the national economy.<sup>334</sup> Experts such as Alida Ashimbaeva and Konstantin Syroezhkin point out that capital flight also poses significant financial risks, as Chinese investors established in Central Asia transfer money back to their home country<sup>335</sup> and the development of shuttle trade reduces Kazakh liquidities.<sup>336</sup>

China's development project for the "Far West" also attracts expert attention. Ablat Khodzhaev interprets Xinjiang's transformation into a zone of transit for commodities to Europe as a direct attempt to compete with comparable specializations in Central Asia.<sup>337</sup> According to Alida Ashimbaeva, Beijing is trying to have Kazakhstan specialize in the provision of primary resources for Xinjiang in order to accelerate its development.<sup>338</sup> According to Konstantin Syroezhkin, it is no coincidence that Beijing launched its "Far West" project in the 1990s, taking advantage of the Soviet Union's disappearance to develop its North West and cleverly "make the most of the chaos that engulfed the post-Soviet space".<sup>339</sup> He considers that Xinjiang's development is in large part buoyed by Central Asian, and especially Kazakh, resources. In fact, he invokes a bill that the Xinjiang government passed on June 28, 1992 in relation to barter trade with foreign countries, which purportedly makes it possible for Chinese firms to take greater advantage of Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's "shock therapy" treatment.<sup>340</sup> This barter trade first involved consumer goods before encompassing furniture, electronic goods, and automobiles, and is widespread at the bazaars of Kazakhstan and Xinjiang. Syroezhkin criticizes the high-level state employees responsible for economic relations in the 1990s, as well

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<sup>334</sup> Marie Disenova and Aitolkin Kurmanova, "Neft' i gaz Kazakhstana – miagkaia natsionalizatsiia ili smena partnerov?", *op. cit.*

<sup>335</sup> Alida Ashimbaeva, "Starye problemy novoi ekonomiki Kazakhstana", *op. cit.*

<sup>336</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>337</sup> Interview with Ablat Khodzhaev, Tashkent, 22 March 2008.

<sup>338</sup> Alida Ashimbaeva, "Starye problemy novoi ekonomiki Kazakhstana", *op. cit.*

<sup>339</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>340</sup> For more details, see Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Kitai i Tsentral'naia Aziia: politicheskie otnosheniia i torgovo-ekonomicheskoe partnerstvo" [China and Central Asia: Political Relations and Economic and Trade Partnership], *Kazakhstan-Spektr*, no. 1-2, 1997, pp. 61-67.

as the businessmen who invested in this domain, for not having implemented better structured exchange networks that would have responded to Kazakhstan's national interests.<sup>341</sup> The idea of unfair competition in relation to the economic boom in Xinjiang, a region that was originally poorer than Central Asia, appears to be a majorly significant issue for Central Asian experts.

#### *An Image Problem: China's Products, Traders, and Companies*

Central Asian opinion harbors the widespread notion, which is skillfully manipulated in the media, that Chinese products are of bad quality. Such views receive more nuanced expression in expert groups. The overwhelming majority of specialists recognize that while Chinese products were of bad quality at the start of the 1990s, it is no longer the case today. Moreover, all of them note that, given the particularly low standard of living of Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek households, the only affordable Chinese products will necessarily be of bad quality. Lastly, they remind us that Central Asian businessmen are largely responsible for this situation, because they purchase the cheapest Chinese goods that they can in order to maximize their profits.<sup>342</sup> Numerous experts nonetheless call for the Central Asian and Chinese governments to deal seriously with this question, which may well have a long-term impact on the consumer choices of the middle classes. For them quality remains synonymous with Russian and, even more, western products.<sup>343</sup>

If Chinese products have a bad reputation, so also do Chinese businesspeople, at least according to public opinion in which they are depicted as criminogenic. Dosym Satpaev notes that the danger is not so much Chinese economic expansion as such, but the widespread and massively corrupt signing of contracts by high-level Central Asian state employees which jeopardize national interests.<sup>344</sup> The question of competition between Chinese and Central Asian traders has not been made the object of any detailed studies, sociological or otherwise. But the experts are well aware of

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<sup>341</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, op. cit., pp. 128-129.

<sup>342</sup> Interview with Akylbek Saliev, Bishkek, 19 February 2008.

<sup>343</sup> Interview with Viktor Dubovitski, Dushanbe, 27 March 2008.

<sup>344</sup> Interview with Dosym Satpaev, Almaty, 6 March 2008.



the long-term implications of the problem. In this sense, Kyrgyz researchers maintain that it is one of the most potentially destabilizing factors for the country. They nonetheless challenge the parliament's attempts to introduce quotas on the number of foreign traders. Instead they think this move will only work to push Chinese merchants into illegality. As a result, they urge for the government to engage in negotiations with Beijing in order to get it to exercise direct control over its own citizens abroad.<sup>345</sup> In Tajikistan, the phenomenon of large Chinese bazaars is only in its infancy, so conflicts with Tajik traders are rare. Specialists like Guzel Maitdinova, however, are wary of a possible rise in tensions.<sup>346</sup> In Uzbekistan, this first became an issue at the end of the 1990s but was settled by Tashkent's implementation of ultra-protectionist measures and the expulsion of Chinese businessmen. However, it will again become a prescient question when the country opens up its borders to foreign trade. As Ablat Khodzhaev and Farkhat Tolipov point out, bazaar property has always been a particularly profitable financial manna for mafia circles.<sup>347</sup>

In Kazakhstan, the experts are more confident on this issue: there are far fewer feelings of competition since, with the exception of workers in shop-tourism, Kazakh traders engage almost exclusively in big business and disregard the shuttle trade.<sup>348</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin even believes that Kazakh business circles are very much in favor of Chinese activity. They also feel more protected due to the fact that, as Adil Kaukenov remarks, Astana has been much stricter than Bishkek in the granting of visas and working permits to Chinese citizens.<sup>349</sup> With the exception of the issue of Chinese traders, the arrival of Chinese workers remains minimal and has made it possible to develop neglected sectors. Akylbek Saliev thus notes that the few Chinese workers who come to work in the construction, mining, and metallurgy industries actually make up for the labor deficit resulting from the local population's refusal to work in these sectors.<sup>350</sup> The director of the

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<sup>345</sup> Interviews in Bishkek with Muratbek Imanaliev, 14 February 2008, Orozbek Moldaliev, 15 February 2008, Nurbek Omuraliev, 22 February 2008.

<sup>346</sup> Interview with Guzel Maitdinova, Dushanbe, 27 March 2008.

<sup>347</sup> Interviews with Farkhat Tolipov, Tashkent, 16 March 2008, and with Ablat Khodzhaev, 22 March 2008.

<sup>348</sup> Interview with Dosym Satpaev, Almaty, 6 March 2008.

<sup>349</sup> Interview with Adil Kaukenov, Almaty, 29 February 2008.

<sup>350</sup> Interview with Akylbek Saliev, Bishkek, 19 February 2008.

Panorama Center in Dushanbe, Tatiana Bozrikova, notes that Chinese migrants, who perform menial jobs, open restaurants, and work at bazaars, are also making up for the absence of a class of small- and medium-size Tajik entrepreneurs.<sup>351</sup> In Kazakhstan, construction jobs, however, are still mostly done by Uzbek and Kyrgyz immigrant workers. They presently have a competitive edge (Russian language and a close culture) and this state of affairs is unlikely to change in favor of the Chinese.

Finally, Chinese companies established in Central Asia also have bad reputations. To begin with, in no country of the region does it seem possible to get reliable figures on their number. Konstantin Syroezhkin questions what their real activities are since in Kazakhstan the majority of companies with Chinese capital are classified as wholesale traders, but this is a vague term that could conceal many potentially illicit activities.<sup>352</sup> In addition, nearly two-thirds of Chinese companies registered in the country either no longer provide information about themselves or quickly become idle, which might be seen as confirming the suspicion that Chinese traders often seek to obtain a legal front and then disappear into the black market.<sup>353</sup> According to Konstantin Syroezhkin, Murat Auezov, and Ablat Khodzhaev, the establishment of so many fictitious companies is part of a Chinese strategy to set up indirectly in Central Asia.<sup>354</sup> Of the Chinese companies that are active and legal, those in the energy sector come in for the most criticism. They stand accused by experts such as Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, among others, of giving preferential employment to Han Chinese over local personnel, of operating in accordance with Chinese and not Kazakh labor regulations, and of offering local workers lower salaries than Han immigrants.<sup>355</sup>

Many experts are therefore convinced that Beijing is trying to transform the economies of Central Asia to suit its own interests, to weaken their potential for autonomy, and further establish their status as Chinese protectorates dependent on their neighbor for technological know-how. On this issue, clear-cut distinctions can be made between Central Asian countries: on the

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<sup>351</sup> Interview with Tatiana Bozrikova, Dushanbe, 25 March 2008.

<sup>352</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> Interview with Konstantin Syroezhkin, Almaty, 4 March 2008.

<sup>355</sup> Interview with Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, Almaty, 5 March 2008.

one hand, both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are clear-sighted about the state of their economies and resolute about taking advantage of the opportunities that China offers by becoming zones for the re-export of Chinese products; on the other, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, whose economic, and particularly industrial, ambitions have not faded, aim to develop competitive technological sectors not dependent on Chinese goodwill. If this issue is presently of most concern in the Kazakh economy, the situation is also likely to change in Uzbekistan, and even in Turkmenistan, as soon as the political authorities decide to open up their economies to the global market. The sector of Central Asian expertise is thus going to experience virulent debates on this question in years to come as the – positive or negative – economic consequences of their proximity to China become clearer.

### **The Legacy of History and the Weight of Cultural Apprehensions**

Following centuries of relatively little contact between them, China has recently made an abrupt entry into the Central Asian imaginary. The expert views of China are still stamped by the old clichés of Soviet propaganda casting China as the historical enemy. In Soviet times, Moscow claimed that Chinese development had no future and that the PRC was basically a patriarchal society struggling hard to survive the consequences of the Cultural Revolution. In addition to this, there exists an old and this time specifically Central Asian tradition, handed down through the centuries-old oral epics, which presents China as a distant but recurrent enemy of Turkic peoples and as an historical opponent of Islam. Still today, these key clichés are largely operative: aside from the theme of the “yellow peril”, the idea that Chinese power does not evolve historically, that it pursues a-temporal objectives which stretch across several centuries, or even millenaries, and that the Chinese authorities in principle conceal their imperialist objectives, are all very widespread. Lastly, in spite of the divergences in their opinion on China and their degree of radicality, Central Asian experts have all been schooled in the same Soviet culture. They declare that Tsarist Russia helped defend Central Asian peoples against Chinese incursions, support Moscow in its evaluation of the causes of the Chinese-Soviet conflict, and a majority of them identify with the idea that they are part of a common “civilization” including Russia.

*The Thorny Border Question: Resolution or Stalemate?*

Central Asian and Chinese diplomats unanimously consider the border litigation cases to have been settled.<sup>356</sup> At all bilateral and multilateral conferences, there is a general display of satisfaction about the fact that these questions were dealt with peacefully – undoubtedly the first step toward strengthening cooperation. Nevertheless, the issue remained a polemical one for many years in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Central Asian experts present more varied viewpoints in their texts and interviews than do their leaders. Their opinions are clearly dissociable depending on the state concerned. Whereas in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan general opinion is optimistic, in Kazakhstan it is much more critical. However, all the experts are in agreement on the importance of the principle of diplomatic reciprocity in this domain: it would be folly for Central Asian states to allow themselves not to subscribe to the “One China” policy. Not to consider Taiwan as an integral part of the PRC, they would only wind up having their border disputes with Beijing turned into instruments of coercion.

It is worth noting that, when it comes to interpretations of the history of Sino-Soviet border disputes, all Central Asian experts adopt the Russo-Soviet arguments: they accuse China for having exclusively provoked the 1969 confrontations by its incursions into Soviet territory, giving Moscow no other option but to defend itself. All of them uphold the Soviet reading of the dispute. They recall that for many years China had seemed satisfied with the border situation and then all of a sudden decided to claim that various parcels situated in Soviet territory were “under dispute.” This is the case, for example, with Konstantin Syroezhkin and Ablat Khodzhaev, both of whom remark that Moscow itself never laid any claim to land on Chinese territory.<sup>357</sup> This opinion is also held by a collective of specialists who published a volume in 2006 about Kazakhstan’s borders that caused quite a

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<sup>356</sup> See for example Bulat K. Sultanov, Leila M. Muzaparova (ed.), *Stanovlenie vneshnei politiki Kazakhstana. Istoriia, dostizheniia, vzgliad na budushchee* [The Establishment of Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy. History, Successes, Vision for the Future], Almaty: IWEP, 2005; Muratbek Imanaliev, *Ocherki o vneshnei politike Kyrgyzstana* [Essays on the Foreign Policy of Kyrgyzstan], Bishkek, 2002.

<sup>357</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, “Central Asia between the Gravitational Poles of Russia and China”, in Boris Rumer (ed.), *Central Asia. A Gathering Storm?*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002, p. 182; Ablat Khodzhaev, *Kitaiskii faktor v Tsentral’noi Azii*, op. cit., pp. 133-134.

stir. In it they explicitly refer to China as the sole perpetrator of the violence in 1969 and to the fact that a Soviet commission dispatched to the region in the 1970s demonstrated that the majority of China's claims were unfounded. Despite this fact, Moscow then accepted to renegotiate with Beijing on the basis of China's claims and not of its own observations.<sup>358</sup>

In Bishkek, Orozbek Moldaliev considers that the relatively quick settlement of border disputes has worked to consolidate the pragmatic atmosphere of Sino-Central Asian relations: although the disputes were settled to Beijing's advantage in territorial terms, they can now well and truly be considered a thing of the past, since what China was above all concerned with doing was to stabilize its North West border.<sup>359</sup> For Muratbek Imanaliev, Kyrgyzstan's smallness is even a security asset and Beijing could by no means feel threatened by it. He purports that this has contributed to the normalization of bilateral relations.<sup>360</sup> Kyrgyz experts are nonetheless critical of the inequality of the landswap negotiated in 1999: while Bishkek obtained a large part of the Khan Tengri peak, the second highest peak in the country (7,000 meters of altitude) and a national symbol, it lost the Uzengi-Kuush zone, an area that contains precious arable land for Kyrgyz agriculture, as well as a strategic road that links together several border posts. In Tajikistan, the experts are likewise pleased that Beijing claimed much less land than it had originally wanted. Nonetheless, some of them have stated off the record that the border agreement signed in 2002 have caused a stalemate in discussions over many other litigious zones, thereby deferring resolution to an unknown point in the future.<sup>361</sup> They suspect that Emomali Rakhmon's regime tried to appease China by selling sections of its territory cheaply without revealing it publicly, only to leave it to their successors to manage the future scandal.

In Kazakhstan, some experts such as the director of the Institute of Economic Strategies, Basen Zhiger, and Klara Khafizova at Kainar University, consider that Chinese threats to Soviet integrity belonged to a particular history in the PRC, that of the Cultural Revolution. This page of history having today been turned, they urge public opinion not to dwell on

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<sup>358</sup> Zulfiiia A. Amanzholova, Murat M. Atanov, Bigalii Sh. Turarbekov, *Pravda o gosudarstvennoi granitse respubliki Kazakhstan*, op. cit., pp. 40-44.

<sup>359</sup> Interview with Orozbek Moldaliev, Bishkek, 15 February 2008.

<sup>360</sup> Interview with Muratbek Imanaliev, Bishkek, 14 February 2008.

<sup>361</sup> Off the record interviews, Dushanbe, March 2008.

the lost territories.<sup>362</sup> Some of their colleagues, such as Konstantin Syroezhkin, nonetheless believe that Beijing did take advantage of the weakness of the newly formed independent states to procure a more favorable settlement.<sup>363</sup> They therefore reproach their leader for the fact that, while triumphantly professing to have succeeded in keeping 53 percent of the contested territories, he unilaterally ceded the remaining 47 percent. Objections were also raised by Murat Auezov about the official claims that these lands were of no strategic value. He points out that Kazakh border guards were once stationed in the valleys that are now dominated by their Chinese counterparts, who have taken up position on the ridges.<sup>364</sup> According to him, Beijing would have had to pay the Tajiks customs duties just in order to move the demarcation signposts back.<sup>365</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin, for his part, quite rightly remarks that the refusal by the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik governments to publish the complete text of the agreement can only work to sow doubt in public opinion and lead it to surmise that certain aspects have been deliberately hidden.<sup>366</sup>

The question of cross-border water resources alone constitutes a major stake of Sino-Kazakh and, to a lesser degree, of Sino-Kyrgyz relations. In Kazakhstan, the border settlements are perceived to be a negative element of the country's diplomatic history, largely because of the impossibility of resolving the question of cross-border rivers. On this subject a broad unanimity rules: all the experts consider that China's attitude is indicative of the low regard in which it holds Kazakhstan's legitimate concerns. Even the most Sinophile experts such as Klara Khafizova are convinced that the construction of the Kara Irtysh-Karamai canal is going to have a negative impact on Kazakhstan's economic and ecological situation.<sup>367</sup> The director of the IIMP, Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, has indicated that in the near future the

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<sup>362</sup> Basen Zhiger, Klara Khafizova, "Kazakhstan i Kitai v XXI veke: strategiiia sosedstva" [Kazakhstan and China in the 21st Century: Strategy of Neighborhood], *Analytica*, June 21, 2007, <[www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070615050207340](http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070615050207340)>.

<sup>363</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

<sup>364</sup> "Murat Auezov o vremeni i o sebe" [Murat Auezov on the Time and Himself], *Ekspres K.*, no. 161, September 8, 2000.

<sup>365</sup> Interview with Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

<sup>366</sup> Interview with Konstantin Syroezhkin, Almaty, 4 March 2008.

<sup>367</sup> Basen Zhiger, Klara Khafizova, "Kazakhstan i Kitai v XXI veke: strategiiia sosedstva", *op. cit.*

major issue of the management of potable water will also have to be addressed.<sup>368</sup>

The former director of the Center for Uyghur Studies at the Institute for Oriental Studies, Komunar Talipov, underlines the ecological problems that Xinjiang's intensive development raises: in addition to the fact that winds carry nuclear particles from the Lobnor experimentation site as far away as Central Asia, China is also having a negative impact on Kazakhstan's soil quality, not to mention on its water supplies and forests. It is thereby directly worsening the already poor ecological situation of the Kazakh border zones.<sup>369</sup> Those experts with the most Sinophobe tendencies, such as Murat Auezov, argue that the draining of water supplies is actually one of China's primary means of expansion into Kazakhstan. He criticizes the authorities for having dissociated the settlement of border issues from those of cross-border rivers: "Kazakhstan did not produce strong enough arguments to defend its interests" and should have allied itself with Kyrgyzstan, which contains rivers that flow into China.<sup>370</sup> Auezov states that the declarations made by Beijing in 2001, proclaiming to be carefully examining the projects of cross-border cooperation, is only designed to win time so that it can sign agreements after the river flow has been modified in its favor.<sup>371</sup> Like Adil Kaukenov, Gulden Zholamanova recognizes that China is doing its utmost to exclude Russia from the negotiating table in order to take the greatest possible advantage of its power differential with Kazakhstan.<sup>372</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin's point of view on the future of the cross-border issue is terse. He states that "China speaks as an equal only with those that are stronger than

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<sup>368</sup> Interview with Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, Almaty, 5 March 2008.

<sup>369</sup> Komunar T. Talipov, "Prirodnye resursy Sin'tszian-ugurskogo avtonomnogo raiona Kitaia: problemy na fone optimisticheskikh prognozov" [The Natural Resources of the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang in China: Problems on a Background of Optimistic Forecasts], *Shygyz*, no. 1, 2005, pp. 95-100.

<sup>370</sup> Murat Auezov, "Istoriia i sovremennost' v kitaisko-kazakhstanskikh otnosheniakh" [History and Current Standing of Sino-Kazakh Relations], *Tsentr'al'naia Aziia i Kavkaz*, no. 4, 1999, <[www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-04-1999/st\\_20\\_auezov.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-04-1999/st_20_auezov.shtml)>.

<sup>371</sup> Interview with Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

<sup>372</sup> Gul'den Zholamanova, "Rol' SHOS v uregulirovanii transgranichnykh rek mezhdu Kazakhstanom i Kitaem", *op. cit.*

it, or with those from whom it wants concessions.”<sup>373</sup> Kazakhstan’s hopes of procuring an equitable share of water from the Ili and the Irtysh, then, would seem to be lost.

### *Is China a Threat? Political Pressure and the Uyghur Question*

On the political level, none of the Central Asian experts questioned by us hold the Chinese political system up as an example to follow. Notwithstanding, many of them do acknowledge that they admire the way in which the current generation of Chinese leaders, lacking the legitimacy of the revolutionary past, are able to discuss publicly economic and social problems. Such an approach stands in stark contrast to the atmosphere of censure and secrecy that prevails in Central Asia. All experts suppose that the slow course of the reforms since Tiananmen has been necessary to avoiding implosion. They reckon that the Chinese authorities have learnt a lot from the Soviet experience. Some experts, such as Bulat Sultanov, nevertheless insist on the fact that the strengthening of ties between China and Central Asia was made possible by the compatibility of their respective political systems.<sup>374</sup> Moreover, some countries, such as Uzbekistan, have discretely indicated that they even considered the “China model” a possible path of development at the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>375</sup> Nevertheless, the political pressures that Beijing has exerted on the Central Asian authorities has not occurred without raising doubts about its intentions. The majority of the Central Asian experts believe that China coerces local governments by directly applying pressure at the highest levels of the state. They are convinced that Beijing has the capacity to be able to “buy off” the political elites, including the presidential families, especially given the high-level of corruption in the region.<sup>376</sup> In a co-authored text on “Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy Strategy”, Tulegen Zhukeev (a political scientist and Kazakhstan’s ambassador to Iran) and Nargiz Kasenova (daughter of former KISI director

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<sup>373</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, “Central Asia between the Gravitational Poles of Russia and China”, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>374</sup> Bulat K. Sultanov, “Politika Rossii, KNR i SShA v Srednei Azii v novykh geopoliticheskikh realiiakh”, *op. cit.*

<sup>375</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost’ v Tsentral’noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>376</sup> For safety reasons, remarks made about corruption among the presidential families have been kept anonymous.



Umerserik Kasenov) argue that political destabilization in any one of the Central Asian states would probably lead to direct intervention by the Chinese authorities.<sup>377</sup>

On the whole, Central Asian experts consider that China presents risks for social and political stability. The idea that, contrary to appearances, China remains a fragile country is very widespread.<sup>378</sup> While some experts, such as Adil Kaukenov, claim that the single-party system is presently the best solution for ensuring the country's development, even if the massive presence of the military in the political life is not particularly appreciated,<sup>379</sup> there are others, such as Ablat Khodzhaev, who believe that Chinese monopartyism will soon be undermined, and thereby that China harbors the risk of political upheaval – dangerous both for itself and for its neighbors.<sup>380</sup> Experts also regularly examine the economic risks that China presents. Many worry about the possibility that the PRC's economy will overheat, since this would affect Chinese investments in Central Asia.<sup>381</sup> They further worry about the possibility of social unrest and believe that both the official unemployment figures and the percentage of the population living below the poverty line have been underestimated.<sup>382</sup> According to Konstantin Syroezhkin, the real unemployment rate is probably as high as 20 percent, and even higher in rural areas and among the urban youth. He claims that by 2020 there will be some 250 million Chinese unable to find work in agriculture.<sup>383</sup> The magnitude of regional disparities, as well as the dissatisfaction of the urban middle classes, has also been studied by some Central Asian specialists. Irrespective of the scenario, a majority of experts, in particular those from Kazakhstan, fear that instability in China could give

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<sup>377</sup> Tulegen Zhukeev, Nargiz Kasenova, "Prioritety vneshnepoliticheskoi orientatsii Kazakhstana", *op. cit.*

<sup>378</sup> Interview with Dosym Satpaev, Almaty, 6 March 2008.

<sup>379</sup> Adil Kaukenov, "Vooruzhennye sily KNR i ikh rol' v politicheskoi zhizni strany" [The armed forces of the PRC and their Political Role in the Country], Almaty: IWEP, <[www.iwep.kz/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=750&Itemid](http://www.iwep.kz/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=750&Itemid)>.

<sup>380</sup> Interview with Ablat Khodzhaev, Tashkent, 22 March 2008.

<sup>381</sup> Maria Disenova, cited in "Kitaiskaia ekspansiiia v Sredniuiu Aziiu", *op. cit.*

<sup>382</sup> Basen Zhiger, Klara Khafizova, "Kazakhstan i Kitai v XXI veke: strategiiia sosedstva", *op. cit.*

<sup>383</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaa i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

rise to a large flow of Chinese migrants that would have a huge impact on Central Asia.

As could be expected, Xinjiang is a key element of Central Asian concerns. This is not only because of a basic sympathy for the Uyghurs but because of pragmatic issues to do with Xinjiang's proximity. While the Central Asian diplomatic services have adopted the "three evils" discourse at the request of the Chinese, the experts express far more nuanced opinions. The pressure that Beijing has brought to bear over the question of the Uyghur diaspora has been largely negatively received in Central Asia.<sup>384</sup> Kazakh researchers, including many specialists in the Xinjiang economy, criticize the general marginalization to which the Uyghurs have been subject on their ancestral territory. One such researcher, Gulzhakhan Khadzhieva, has written several articles discussing the "Far West" development project and the idea of redressing regional disparities in development. She argues that while the project has been useful for the Han Chinese populations, enabling them to overcome land shortage problems by moving to the North West, it has been detrimental to the indigenous populations of the autonomous region.<sup>385</sup> All the Central Asian experts draw attention to the fact that the national minorities remain confined to the sectors of least growth and are mostly unable to gain access to higher education, whereas the Han tend to occupy those sectors for which technical specializations are required.<sup>386</sup> The shortage of cadres in the region is not being addressed in a way that benefits the national minorities. Instead it is being solved by bringing in Han Chinese from eastern regions, thereby modifying Xinjiang's ethnic make up to the detriment of Turkic peoples.<sup>387</sup> The closure of schools that teach in the

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<sup>384</sup> The issue of the Uyghur diaspora was in fact brought up by most experts themselves at the beginning of the interviews.

<sup>385</sup> Gulzhakhan U. Khadzhieva, Viktor M. Krivonogov, "Ekonomicheskaiia modernizatsiia zapadnykh regionov Kitaia: zadachi i perspektivy" [Economic Modernization of the Western Regions of China: Objectives and Outlook], *Shygyz*, no. 1, 2005, pp. 90-95; Gulzhakhan U. Khadzhieva, "Problema regional'nogo razvitiia Kitaia i strategicheskie podkhody k ee resheniiu" [Problems for the Regional Development for China and Strategic Approches to Resolve them], *Shygyz*, no. 1, 2004, pp. 88-93.

<sup>386</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>387</sup> Gulzhakhan U. Khadzhieva, "Zapadnye raiony KNR v kontekste gosudarstvennoi strategicheskoi programme" [The Western Regions of the PRC in the context of the State's Strategic Program], in *Uigurovedenie v Kazakhstane: traditsiia i novatsiia* [The

national language is also perceived as proof of Beijing's policy of forced Hanicization.<sup>388</sup>

Similar to his colleagues, Konstantin Syroezhkin is extremely critical of Chinese policy in Xinjiang. He does not believe that the Uyghurs can achieve independence, since never before has the region had such a large population of Han Chinese, nor a culture that was so Chinese-influenced, nor been so economically integrated into China's maritime trade. However, this observation does not suffice to resolve the problems. He believes that there are real risks of interethnic conflicts between the Han and the Uyghurs. He argues that because of Beijing's policy initiatives designed to facilitate the national minorities' entry into university, the emergence of a Uyghur elite is bound to create further interethnic competition between cadres.<sup>389</sup> Although many Central Asian scholars have discretely raised the issue of the plight of the Kazakhs of China, Syroezhkin is one of the only ones to have dealt at length with the issue of interethnic tensions between Uyghurs and Kazakhs. He denounces the way that the Uyghurs conceive of Xinjiang as their own national territory, while neglecting the existence of the other Central Asian minorities living there.<sup>390</sup> He purports that the Kazakhs of China are losing out as much to the Hanicization of the region as they are to its "Uyghurization". According to him, the conflicts between the Kazakh and the Uyghur are bound to increase in scope, which might provoke a new wave of Kazakh emigration from China to Kazakhstan.<sup>391</sup>

This overall situation is not unfavorable to separatist tendencies. According to both the director of a small Kazakh think tank called "Traditions in Politics", Erlan Aben, and the director of the Central Asian Agency of Political Research (CAAPR), Erlan Naryn, Uyghur separatism has been given fresh impetus by the opening of the borders with Central Asia, and in

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Uyghur Studies in Kazakhstan: Traditions and Novations], Almaty: Nash mir, 2007, pp. 164-171.

<sup>388</sup> Interview with Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

<sup>389</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, "Strategiia 'bol'shogo osvoeniia zapada' i problemy bezopasnosti Tsentral'noi Azii" [The Strategy for the "Far West" and the Security Problems of Central Asia], *Analytic*, no. 2, 2007, pp. 22-32.

<sup>390</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Mify i real'nost' etnicheskogo separatizma v Kitae i bezopasnost' Tsentral'noi Azii* [Myths and Realities of Ethnic Separatism in China and Security in Central Asia], Almaty: Dajk-Press, 2003, p. 271.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 536.

particular the corridor between Yining and Khorgos. They claim that the Kashgar region and the south of Taklamakan, densely populated by devout and traditional Uyghurs, are the most dangerous regions in Xinjiang, while the north around Urumqi and Yining is held to be more loyal to the central authorities. These authors mark out two large potential conflict areas, both of which straddle China and Central Asia, one connecting the Tarim basin to the Ferghana valley, and the other stretching from Kuldzha to Semirechie and across the Dzungaria plain.<sup>392</sup> The majority of Central Asian experts working on this question nevertheless doubt that Uyghur Islamism presents any real risks and criticize Beijing's repression of Islam on account of its counter-productivity.<sup>393</sup>

Venera Galiamova, for example, maintains that the Chinese refusal to listen to any autonomist demands, even cultural ones, can only encourage radical separatism to take root. She criticizes Beijing's abandonment of the rural Uyghur youth and their favoring of the urban student youth, since it is pushing the former group into the swelling ranks of the Islamists.<sup>394</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin is even more critical and believes that Chinese policy is leading the Uyghurs to interpret Islam as an ideology of national liberation.<sup>395</sup> Notwithstanding, he argues that the Uyghur separatist movement has no future. A number of things stand in its way: the different independentist groups are not large in number; they are heterogeneous in their demands and modes of action; they lack the backing of the Uyghur intelligentsia of Urumqi and have no popular support in the country; and so long as they remain affiliated with international Islamism they will never be able to obtain the aid of the international community.<sup>396</sup> And as for the

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<sup>392</sup> Erlan Aben, Erlan Karin, "Natsional-separatistskie tendentsii v SUAR KNR i problema bezopasnosti tsentral'noaziatskogo regiona" [National-Separatist Tendencies in Xinjiang and Security Problems for the Central Asian Region], *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kavkaz*, no. 4, 1999, <[www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-04-1999](http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-04-1999)>.

<sup>393</sup> Many experts see a parallel between the Chinese pressures on Islam and those in effect in Central Asian states, which are also criticized for fueling instead of stopping extremism. On this matter, we protect the identity of those experts interviewed.

<sup>394</sup> Venera F. Galiamova, "Etnicheskii separatizm v Sin'tsziane: sostoianie problemy i perspektivy" [Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang: State of the Problem and Outlook], *Kazakhstan-Spektr*, no. 1, 2004, pp. 9-15.

<sup>395</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Mify i real'nost' etnicheskogo separatizma v Kitae i bezopasnost' Tsentral'noi Azii*, op. cit., p. 299.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358.

associations of the diaspora scattered around the world, they have little influence on the ground and have not elaborated a well-structured ideology.<sup>397</sup>

### *China as Empire: A Culturally Entrenched Suspicion*

This critical analysis of Chinese policy is part of a broader background of suspicion about Beijing's real objectives in Central Asia. Even if the Central Asian view of China is often grounded in fact, there is nonetheless a prevailing misrecognition of China that has allowed many phantasmagorical elements to color the picture. Central Asian experts in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan regularly bemoan the media dissemination of caricatured information about their large neighbor, which is most often focused on the popular topic of the "yellow peril". However, as Konstantin Syroezhkin points out, some pro-China articles have also been written, often by journalists lured by Beijing into writing about the positive aspects of China in exchange for organized holiday stays.<sup>398</sup> On the other hand, other Sinophile experts, such as Muratbek Imanaliev, object that the information about China they receive is imported from foreign, and mainly Russian, sources. They argue that this tends to distort the Central Asian view of China by superposing it with European fears.<sup>399</sup> However, several Sinologists have observed that, by contrast to Western Europe and Russia, Central Asian societies are not attracted to Orientalized fashions whose existence might work to promote a positive image of Chinese (and Japanese) culture.<sup>400</sup> Many experts note that, on the contrary, China's cultural visibility is significantly less than even that of the more distant India, which is well-known amongst the former Soviet populations.<sup>401</sup>

The viewpoints of experts are more variegated; nevertheless to disseminate knowledge about the Middle Kingdom does not necessarily entail having respect for it. Central Asian experts share with public opinion a dominant feeling of suspicion in relation to Chinese ambitions. They all insist on the historical dimension of Chinese foreign policy and on its age-old ancestral

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<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 522.

<sup>398</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

<sup>399</sup> Interview with Muratbek Imanaliev, Bishkek, 14 February 2008.

<sup>400</sup> Interview with Adil Kaukenov, Almaty, 29 February 2008.

<sup>401</sup> Interviews with Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008, and Dosym Satpaev, Almaty, 6 March 2008.

conceptions of its relations to others. Those who have training in history point to the fact that China's presence in Central Asia has always been that of a conqueror seeking expansion to the detriment of Turko-Mongolian peoples. Ablat Khodzhaev took up this topic in the 1970s and began to specialize in ancient Chinese sources. Through the study of ancient ethnonyms, his aim has been to show that the China of the Hans (200 BC–200 AD) had once recognized Xinjiang as being outside its borders and as peopled by non-Han. According to him, Chinese sources mentioned the Turks as early as 4,000 B.C., an historical fact that would confirm their right to form states on their original territories despite being subsequently incorporated into the Chinese empire.<sup>402</sup> He also contends that the very term *Xinjiang* actually only appeared in Chinese sources in the 18th century, when it was used to replace the term *Sijui*, itself a transformation of the supposed ethnonym for the Turks in Chinese, *Sijun*. With this argument he hopes to confirm that China once recognized Xinjiang's historically Turkic nature.<sup>403</sup> Khodzhaev is also very critical of the Tsarist empire. He accuses it of having prevented the emergence of a Turkic state including Xinjiang by retroceding the Ili region to China and then allying itself with Beijing against the local populations.<sup>404</sup> In the conclusion to his work, Khodzhaev expresses his hope that the contemporary Chinese leaders not return to the conqueror and warrior model of the Qing dynasty, but he also raises his doubts about their good intentions.<sup>405</sup>

Klara Khafizova, for her part, contends that until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911 the Chinese Empire in fact structured its relations to “barbaric” neighboring peoples in accordance with their acceptance of Chinese values.<sup>406</sup> She has worked for many years on the Qing strategies in relation to Xinjiang and the Kazakh world, and many of her works have been translated into Chinese. Her analyses, however, are not uncritical of Chinese

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<sup>402</sup> Ablat Khodzhaev, *Kitaiskii faktor v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–25. Ethnogenetic theories are common currency in Central Asia and especially in Uzbekistan, where the theme of the millenary long existence of the Turkic peoples on their present territory is a part of official dogma.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>406</sup> Basen Zhiger, Klara Khafizova, “Kazakhstan i Kitai v XXI veke: strategiiia sosedstva”, *op. cit.*

policies, which she qualifies as “Machiavellian”.<sup>407</sup> As she notes, “In the second half of the 19th century, Qing China adopted active policies of aggression and violence against the peoples of Central Asia”.<sup>408</sup> She argues, for example, that Qing China not only deliberately accentuated the divisions between the Kazakh hordes, but also obstructed attempts of rapprochement between Central Asian peoples. In addition, it transformed Xinjiang into the outpost of its conquest of Central Asia, refused to give the pasture lands taken from the Dzungars back to the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, developed trade policies prejudicial to the nomads, and even persisted with occasional military raids despite the disappearance of Dzungaria. Klara Khafizova argues that it was only after Russia’s arrival in the area, which she describes as “progressivist”,<sup>409</sup> that Chinese ambitions were effectively curbed and Central Asia was enabled to enter modernity.

According to Konstantin Syroezhkin ethnocentrism is the very foundation of Chinese foreign policy. For his part, he thereby endeavors to emphasize the historical autonomy of the Central Asian peoples and especially of Xinjiang. Contrary to what is written in Chinese sources, he asserts that the Han Chinese played no role in forming Eastern Turkistan peoples in ancient times, and, moreover, that Uyghur territory remained independent from Central China until the 18th century.<sup>410</sup> He blames the Qing for having transformed the process of Sinicization, which traditionally involved trying to entice the “barbarians” to adopt Chinese values, into a violent military conquest aiming at incorporating Eastern Turkistan into the Empire whereas it could have preserved its autonomy as a buffer-zone. His emphasis on the negative historical role of the Qing is not unrelated to contemporary events. Indeed, according to Syroezhkin, a major social crisis would probably cause certain ancient cultural traits to re-surface. In such an instance, he writes, the “Chinese political mentality may well revert to the memory of its ‘lost territories’, which include some immense areas of Russia, Kazakhstan, and the Central Asian states, not to mention Mongolia.”<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> Klara Khafizova, *Kazakhskaiia strategiia tsinskoi imperii*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>410</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Mify i real'nost' etnicheskogo separatizma v Kitae i bezopasnost' Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

Many experts espouse the argument that Chinese diplomacy gets its results through long-term strategies, not via quick, sharp blows. Thus, if Beijing is careful not to offend the national sentiment of the newly independent Central Asian states by claiming more territories, this does not mean that it will not return to the issue in future decades.<sup>412</sup> These persistent suspicions of China's supposed ulterior motives have been strengthened by the prevailing nationalist mood in contemporary China, not to mention the aggravation of its tensions with Japan over the interpretation of the past, and the rehabilitation of pre-communist traditions. Many experts, for example, mention the fact that an increasing number of Chinese publications present the Qing advances into Central Asia as having had a positive "unifying" effect. In fact, Esen Usubaliev refers to the launching in 2008 of a large scientific project on the history of the Qing dynasty. This project, he argues, confirms the Chinese government's will to revive its foreign policy traditions of widening its sphere of influence.<sup>413</sup> Lastly, the discovery that some Chinese school textbooks continue to publish maps in which a large part of Central Asia (namely, the "historical" lands, which include all of Tajik Pamir, almost all of Kyrgyzstan, and the Kazakh region of Semirechie as far as Lake Balkhash) is presented as belonging to the Chinese Empire also caused much dismay among Central Asian experts. For them this is a sign that Beijing has not totally abandoned its territorial ambitions and may one day renege on its border treaty commitments.<sup>414</sup>

Seconded by Bektas Mukhamedzhanov,<sup>415</sup> Murat Auezov expresses concern about China's expansionist designs in his typically clear-cut way: "I know Chinese culture. We ought not to listen to what Chinese politicians tell us. As an historian, I can tell you that the China of the 19th century, that of the 20th century, and that of the 21st century are three different Chinas. But what

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<sup>412</sup> Interview with Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

<sup>413</sup> Esen Usubaliev, "Kitaiskaia 'kolonizatsiia' Afriki" [China's Colonization of Africa], *Analytica*, February 12, 2007, <<http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20070212052315456>>.

<sup>414</sup> Bakhytzhhan Zhumaliev, "Kazakhstan i Kitai: vzaimovliianie i sotrudnichestvo" [Kazakhstan and China: interaction and cooperation], *Ekonomicheskie strategii – Tsentral'naia Aziia*, no. 5, 2007, p. 43.

<sup>415</sup> Interview with Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, Almaty, 5 March 2008.



unites them is the will to expand their territories.”<sup>416</sup> He also openly expresses his concern about China’s staunch determination to set itself up on the shores of the Caspian Sea and to establish companies in the country’s West. “That will give China,” he says, “an extraordinary chance to legalize its massive physical presence beginning with the western regions of Kazakhstan.”<sup>417</sup> So, those experts who maintain, along with the Uzbek journalist of “The Voice of Russia”, Rakhimdzhon Sultanov, that all China has done is take its revenge on history;<sup>418</sup> and those who assert, with Dosym Satpaev, that Beijing does not have an ideology of world domination<sup>419</sup>; and again, those experts who, with the former director of the KISI, Umerserik Kasenov, simply do not believe that China presents any territorial threat,<sup>5</sup> are largely in the minority.

#### *The Stakes of Migration: the Recurrent Topic of the “Yellow Peril”*

If Central Asian experts underscore the fundamental continuity of China’s history, this is because it is part of an overall background stamped by clearly contemporary preoccupations linked to the question of migration. The essential background in which the discourse on China is taking place is the myth of the “yellow peril”. The facts allegedly speak for themselves: whereas Central Asia as a whole has fewer than 60 million inhabitants, an overpopulated China contains nearly one and a half billion people. Each year the Chinese population increases by more than 15 million people, a number equivalent to the total population of Kazakhstan. Kazakh and Kyrgyz newspapers have taken this as an opportunity to specialize in denouncing what they call China’s “soft expansion” (*tikhaia ekspansiia*) into Central Asia: in so doing, they often deliberately confound the numbers of illegals in their countries with that of Chinese migrants, in spite of the fact that the majority of so-called illegals are nationals from neighboring Central Asian states. They also attribute the increases in criminality in urban zones to the Chinese and regularly exclaim their alarm at the emergence of Chinese ghettos in large cities, in particular the Chinatowns in the capital cities. The tone of the

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<sup>416</sup> Murat Auezov, “Ia znaiu kitaiskuiu kul’turu” [I know Chinese Culture], *Zona.kz*, November 29, 2004, <<http://zonakz.net/articles/7560>>.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>418</sup> Rakhimdzhon Sultanov, cited in “Kitaiskaia ekspansiia v Sredniuiu Aziuu”, *op. cit.*

<sup>419</sup> Interview with Dosym Satpaev, Almaty, 6 March 2008.

articles is therefore explicitly alarmist: “the more that the question of migration is passed over in silence [by the government], the less chance we will have to prevent the appearance of Chinese provinces: our descendents will therefore be obliged to undertake a struggle of national liberation for the resurrection of Kazakhstan.”<sup>420</sup>

The discourse of experts is more nuanced. While experts are quite worried about the long-term impact of the phobias being cultivated by the media, they are not left indifferent by the question of migration. As specialists on China, their chief concern is the social and political causes that might give rise to large waves of migration, such as for example China’s abandoning of the single-child policy, which would accelerate the country’s demographic boom and release greater numbers of individuals into the workforce. Above all, however, they fear a possible deterioration in the Chinese domestic economic situation and a concomitant rise in unemployment. Such an eventuality might cause the current migration flows from the central countryside toward the towns of the Pacific front to redirect toward the less populated border zones of the North West.

From this viewpoint, Xinjiang is almost systematically cast as the key example of the Chinese quest for a new *Lebensraum*. Central Asian experts indeed allege that the settlement of millions of Han in Xinjiang constitutes the third phase of the development program for the “Far West”. A point evoked by Leila Muzaparova,<sup>421</sup> as well as Bektas Mukhamedzhanov and Murat Auezov, is that this plan makes provision not only for the Han to occupy the technically qualified positions that the Uyghurs, who are largely excluded from the training circuits, cannot aspire to, but also for the development of agricultural lands in border areas. They all argue that Beijing plans to establish between 400 to 800 agricultural hamlets along the Chinese side of the Kazakh border, which is to be settled by millions of Han farmers. These highly militarized colonization brigades (*Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan*) would allegedly be under the direct control of Beijing and not of

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<sup>420</sup> Bakhytzhamal Bekturganova, “Pochemu uezzhaiut liudi iz Kazakhstana? Monitoring ot ASiP 15 maia 2001 gg.” [Why are people leaving Kazakhstan? Monitoring by ASIP, May 15, 2001], *Zona.kz*, May 15, 2001, <<http://zonakz.net/oldnavi/articles/asip150501a.shtml>>.

<sup>421</sup> Leila M. Muzaparova (ed.), *Sovremennyi Kitai. Ekonomika, demografiia, vneshniaia politika*, *op. cit.*, p. 383.

Urumqi, and, amongst others, have the function of breaking the Turkic population continuum between the Central Asians and the Uyghurs.<sup>422</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin presents a subtler viewpoint. He recalls that the demographic growth of the Uyghurs is greater than that of the Han Chinese, who remain artificially restrained by the single-child policy. The fact that the national minorities are not subject to this policy, he argues, will limit the impact of colonization, but not prevent interethnic conflicts.<sup>423</sup>

Central Asian expertise is also interested in measuring the migration flows from China to Central Asia. But it has to contend with a persistent lack of figures, which only works to fuel polemics and opens a space for every possible type of interpretation. Konstantin Syroezhkin openly denounces the Kazakh authorities' refusal to conduct precise studies on this topic, which he regards as the only way to put an end to the myth of the "Chinese invasion". He condemns the Interior Ministry and the Security Forces for their sponsoring of "fanciful" articles aimed at procuring additional funds for their fight against illegal migrants. The notion that Central Asia might be overrun by the Chinese receives varied expressions of anxiety depending on the country in question. Kazakhstan, with its sparsely populated spaces, affords opportunities for migration similar to those in Siberia, and so feels like it is first in line. Kazakh researchers therefore scrutinize the demographic evolutions of the Russian Far East.<sup>424</sup> The other four countries consider that they are better protected against demographic "invasion": Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan because they have small and mountainous territories; Uzbekistan because it sees itself as a demographic power at the regional level; and Turkmenistan because it is geographically more remote from China.

One of the stakes of this debate is to know either whether a potential colonization of Central Asia is an explicit Chinese policy, a notion maintained by only the most Sinophobic experts; or whether migration flows are set to outstrip the Chinese authorities' capacity to control them, which

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<sup>422</sup> Interviews with Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, Almaty, 5 March and Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

<sup>423</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>424</sup> See for example Tatiana Kaukenova, "Osobennosti kitaiskoi migratsii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii" [The Specificities of Chinese Migration to the Russian Federation], *Kazakhstan v global'nykh protsessakh*, no. 4, 2007, pp. 59-67.

seems to be a more realistic proposition. According to Konstantin Syroezhkin, it is irrelevant to ask whether or not the Chinese diaspora in Central Asia forms a useful policy instrument for Beijing, because the living standards in Central Asia simply do not invite the Chinese authorities to encourage migratory flows in its direction.<sup>425</sup> Both Sanat Kushkumbaev and Muratbek Imanaliev underline the fact that Central Asia is not an attractive destination for Chinese migrants, the majority of whom aim to make it to Western Europe or the United States.<sup>426</sup> Contrary to the media-promulgated notion that the Chinese help each other to immigrate, Adil Kaukenov recalls that Chinese migrants would rather stem the flow of economic competitors and prevent the emergence of situations of conflict that might jeopardize their interests.<sup>427</sup> Some experts also assert the notion that the Chinese possess inassimilable cultural traits that dissuade them from settling in Central Asia for the long term. Sukhrob Sharipov, for instance, claims that the Chinese prefer not to settle in Muslim countries, where they find it difficult to integrate, but would rather head for the more open societies of Europe or Africa. He also mentions the possibility of a reverse flow of Central Asians to China if and when the latter begins to experience labor shortages.<sup>428</sup>

Expert opinion can, then, be categorized by its degree of radicality. Both Murat Auezov and Ablat Khodzhaev, for example, maintain that, with the Russian Far East, Xinjiang and Central Asia are the only possible corridors for Chinese expansion into the sparsely populated regions of Russia. As a result, these two regions, they claim, are destined to become submerged under waves of migrants searching for temporary or permanent housing further to the West.<sup>429</sup> Since the 1990s, Murat Auezov has unceasingly delivered warnings about the threat of Chinese expansionism: in his view, “it is completely obvious that, in order to resolve its demographic problems, China has no other directions for invasion than the North West”.<sup>430</sup> To justify his claims, he points insistently to the Hanicization of Xinjiang,

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<sup>425</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>426</sup> Dmitri Orlov, cited in “Kitaiskaia ekspansia v Sredniuiu Aziiu”, *op. cit.*

<sup>427</sup> Interview with Adil Kaukenov, Almaty, 29 February 2008.

<sup>428</sup> Interview with Sukhrob Sharipov, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008.

<sup>429</sup> Interview with Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

<sup>430</sup> “Murat Auezov o vremeni i o sebe”, *op. cit.*

arguing that the Han are part of a policy of agricultural and urban colonization to marginalize native populations and eliminate prospects for autonomy. This scenario, he claims, is one that China is preparing to repeat in Kazakhstan. As he puts it: “What is happening in Xinjiang is the building of a platform for the next leap forward into the Central Asian and Kazakh territory”. He even speaks, with allusions to ancient times, of the “large-scale migrations of peoples”.<sup>431</sup>

Other experts, such as Leila Muzaparova, are concerned about migrants because of the alleged social risks they pose (criminalization, money transfers, and monopolization of certain economic niches).<sup>432</sup> She also mentions that migrants could be carriers of epidemics, an idea which seems to be quite widespread in Central Asia. However, more pragmatic perspectives are also proposed. Dosym Satpaev contends, for instance, that Central Asia is likely to see arrivals of ecological migrants from China unless Beijing starts to take the environmental impact of its economic development into account.<sup>433</sup> Both Maria Disenova and Aitolkin Kurmanova, for their part, claim that this type of security discourse no longer has any relevance in an age of globalization, but nonetheless recognize that the Central Asian authorities would in any case be unable to repel any large-scale migratory flow from China.<sup>434</sup>

It is worth noting that Central Asian phobias in relation to the Chinese also apply to the Turkic minorities of Xinjiang. In fact, with the exception of a few individuals known for their Pan-Turkic sensibilities, such as Murat Auezov, or for their interest in the diasporic issue, such as Gulnara Mendikulova, who is a member of the World Association of Kazakhs, many experts make no effort to hide their lack of sympathy for Chinese Uyghurs and Kazakhs. In their view, Astana’s repatriation program is merely going to complicate internal social relations by granting preferential treatment to poorly integrated populations. Leila Muzaparova maintains that the Kazakh

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<sup>431</sup> “Murat Auezov: Nachalos’ velikoe pereselenie!” [Murat Auezov: the Times of large-scale Migrations has begun!], *Postskriptum*, no. 38, 2005, <<http://www.gorno-altaisk.ru/archive/2005/38/003.htm>>.

<sup>432</sup> Leila M. Muzaparova (ed.), *Sovremennyi Kitai. Ekonomika, demografiia, vneshniaia politika*, *op. cit.*, p. 408.

<sup>433</sup> Interview with Dosym Satpaev, Almaty, 6 March 2008.

<sup>434</sup> Interview with Sukhrob Sharipov, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008.

“repatriates” from China pose the same risks as the Han Chinese to whom they have grown accustomed over the centuries.<sup>435</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin fears the possibility of a massive influx of Uyghurs and Kazakhs attempting to flee the Han Chinese.<sup>436</sup> And another specialist, speaking on condition of anonymity, claims that the Uyghurs and Kazakhs from China are a “fifth column” in the service of Beijing, ready to protect Chinese interests in the case of an outbreak of conflict with the Central Asian states.

The expert milieu has proposed as wide a range of solutions to the political authorities as there are points of view on the potential threat of Chinese expansion. Both Murat Auezov and Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, for example, contend that Kazakhstan needs to implement a program to deal with domestic migration. This program should be designed to foster settlements of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks along the Chinese border and to help compensate for the massive rural exodus of Kazakhs by supporting agricultural zones and preventing the depopulation of the border regions.<sup>437</sup> Some experts, such as Muratbek Imanaliev, believe that friendly relations between the Central Asian and Chinese governments ought to suffice to compel Beijing to enforce strict control over its migration flows and prevent the uncertain consequences of interethnic conflict. Others, such as the Sharq vice-director in Dushanbe, Saodat Olimova, respond by saying that the good intentions of the Chinese authorities are in any case insufficient because the illegal migrants living in Central Asia are often the third or fourth children of Chinese families, i.e. individuals that are officially considered inexistent and condemned to live in clandestinity.<sup>438</sup> For the vice-president of the Institute for the Development of Kazakhstan, Erlan Aben, the only chance Kazakhstan has of reducing the risks of migration is to pass a law to restrict the utilization of Chinese labor.<sup>439</sup>

The vice-director of the IWEP (which has an important official role as a government advisory agency), Leila Muzaparova, has proposed not only that

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<sup>435</sup> Leila M. Muzaparova (ed.), *Sovremennyi Kitai. Ekonomika, demografiia, vneshniaia politika*, *op. cit.*, p. 406.

<sup>436</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

<sup>437</sup> Interview with Bektas Mukhamedzhanov, Almaty, 5 March 2008.

<sup>438</sup> Interview with Saodat Olimova, Dushanbe, 28 March 2008.

<sup>439</sup> Erlan Aben, “Kazakhstansko-rossiiskie otnosheniia: faktory ‘za’ i ‘protiv’”, *op. cit.*

the government introduce quotas for migrant workers, but that it maintain its prohibition on the foreign acquisition of rental real estate and on the building of Chinese hotel complexes that would ghettoize the migrants. She would also like to see multilateral negotiations held under the auspices of the SCO to compel China to control its citizens.<sup>440</sup> Alida Ashimbaeva is decidedly more pragmatic. She is not against the flows of Chinese migration as such, but is instead critical of Kazakhstan's inability to solve unemployment issues and provide its citizens with competent professional training.<sup>441</sup> Her viewpoint is shared by Konstantin Syroezhkin, who claims that the Kazakh government should legalize the migration flows to prevent them from becoming monopolized by Chinese mafia networks specialized in the transportation and exploitation of illegal workers, as is the case in the Russian Far East.<sup>442</sup> He hopes that the Central Asian states manage to avoid what he describes as the "failure" of European migration policy. In his view, migration policy needs to regulate work flows more strictly, avoid the constitution of ethnic ghettos, and oblige immigrant communities to assimilate.<sup>443</sup> Many experts recognize that Chinese migrants living in Central Asia fill specific professional niches that nationals rarely seek to enter. They nonetheless worry that there would be pogroms were Chinatowns to emerge in the capital cities, and allege that the local population habitually denounces persons identified as Chinese to the district police.

The majority of Central Asian experts disagree with alarmist discourses about migration. However, they all confess that, although it is largely irrelevant to present concerns, the possibility of massive Chinese migration must be taken into account when considering long-term Central Asian interests. As a result, they consider that in the coming years, one of their main missions will be to better acquaint the population with the Chinese people and thus help thwart the emergence of strong interethnic tensions.

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<sup>440</sup> Leila M. Muzaparova (ed.), *Sovremennyi Kitai. Ekonomika, demografiia, vneshniaia politika*, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

<sup>441</sup> Alida Ashimbaeva, "Starye problemy novoi ekonomiki Kazakhstana" [Old Problems for Kazakhstan's New Economy], *Kapital.kz*, no. 21 (108), May 31, 2007, republished in *CentrAsia*, June 2, 2007, <[www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1180737420](http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1180737420)>.

<sup>442</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, *Problemy sovremennogo Kitaia i bezopasnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

Notwithstanding their differing stances, many experts speaking off the record admit to being worried about the future insofar as the impact on Central Asian societies of even a small-scale migratory flow from China would be massive. Their opinion of developments in Xinjiang does not inspire their optimism. They systematically believe that present-day Xinjiang is tomorrow's Central Asia. Without loudly proclaiming it, many of them share the opinion expressed by Zhannur Ashigalide of the Institute of Economic Strategies in Almaty, who bluntly states: "Analyze the relations of Chinese power to its national minorities and you will see the future of the countries that neighbor China [...] Although Chinese diplomats display moderation and diplomacy towards the latter, in their domestic policy the Chinese occasionally show their 'true face' without worrying about the opinions of their neighbors".<sup>444</sup>

Central Asian specialists also share the vague sentiment that there exists a "civilizational difference" between China and Central Asia. Diverse arguments are used to justify the existence of this apparently impassable "culture barrier". Some conceive of it in terms of Islam, others in terms of Russo-Soviet acculturation, and still others as involving a difference in national essences. Murat Auezov maintains, for instance, that the two regions are irreconcilable on the cultural level, in part because the Chinese consider the Central Asians to be "barbarians".<sup>445</sup> Basen Zhiger and Klara Khafizova also lay stress on the sense of hierarchy embedded in Chinese tradition, which does not uphold equality between peoples.<sup>446</sup> According to Ablat Khodzhaev, ostensible differences in mentality between the Chinese and the Türks have persisted across the centuries without having been abolished or modified.<sup>447</sup> Sukhrob Sharipov is of the mind that Islam enables its populations to withstand assimilation into other cultures.<sup>448</sup> And according to Adil Kaukenov and Konstantin Syroezhkin, this "civilizational barrier", based on Russian-Soviet acculturation, ought to be maintained,

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<sup>444</sup> Zhannur Ashigalide, "Malye narody KNR: neizvestnyi Kitai" [The Small Peoples of the PRC: An Unknown China], *Ekonomicheskii strategii – Tsentral'naia Aziia*, no. 5, 2007, pp. 78-69.

<sup>445</sup> Interview with Murat Auezov, Almaty, 10 March 2008.

<sup>446</sup> Basen Zhiger, Klara Khafizova, "Kazakhstan i Kitai v XXI veke: strategiiia sosedstva", *op. cit.*

<sup>447</sup> Interview with Ablat Khodzhaev, Tashkent, 22 March 2008.

<sup>448</sup> Interview with Sukhrob Sharipov, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008.



since too much Sinophilia would liquidate the future of the Central Asian peoples, dissolving it in cultural assimilation and interethnic marriage.<sup>449</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that their opinions are often widely divergent, Central Asian experts can be placed into two overarching categories, the optimists and the pessimists.<sup>450</sup> In the geopolitical domain pragmatism prevails. In fact, with a few rare exceptions, the experts are careful not to put undue emphasis on the Chinese threat and are even critical of the SCO's inefficiency, which they see as limited to diplomatic exercises with little practical impact. From this multiplicity of attitudes and opinions a general sentiment emerges, namely that the future of Central Asia resides in its ability to maintain a balance between two, or even three, powers – Russia, China, and the West. It is alleged that exclusive domination by any one of them would inevitably create a source of tensions, while Chinese domination is perceived to be particularly dangerous. To counteract Chinese influence, experts such as Murat Auezov have proposed encouraging new actors like India to join the scene in Central Asia. Others such as Akylbek Saliev prefer to garner support for the Japanese project to create a PanAsian OSCE. Lastly, others, such as Ablat Khodzhaev and Farkhat Tolipov, would like to see the creation of a Union of Central Asian states on the model of the European Union, which they claim is “the only way for history not to repeat itself” and for these states to find a way to extract themselves from the Chinese and Russian superpowers.<sup>451</sup> Konstantin Syroezhkin, on the other hand, calls upon the Russian, Chinese, and American powers to come to an agreement that promotes Central Asian interests, pointing out that no one wants to see the Afghan situation spreading to Central Asia.<sup>452</sup>

In the economic domain, the most optimistic experts insist that China's proximity has to be taken as an opportunity to develop the local economies. Central Asian governments must adapt to the realities of accepting the

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<sup>449</sup> Interview with Konstantin Syroezhkin, Almaty, 4 March 2008.

<sup>450</sup> Dosym Satpaev, “Kitaiskii faktor v ekonomike Kazakhstana: mif i real'nost'” [The Chinese Factor in the Kazakhstan Economy: Myth and Reality], *Svobodnaia Azia*, November 10, 2006, <<http://www.freeas.org/?nid=6425>>.

<sup>451</sup> Interview with Ablat Khodzhaev, Tashkent, 22 March 2008.

<sup>452</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, “Rossiia i Tsentral'naia Azia: problemnye uzly”, *op. cit.*

disappearance of non-competitive sectors and adjust to a phenomenon that is not specific to Chinese influence but to the process of globalization as a whole. They therefore urge the authorities to be pragmatic with regard to China and to elaborate adaptive strategies that protect as much as possible the development of the local economies. This can be done, they argue, by supporting the counterweight that is the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Community and by not overestimating the opportunities offered by the Chinese economy, since it remains fragile due to its extensive instead of intensive development, its massive underqualification, its bad quality production, the poor efficiency of its state-run companies, etc. For their part, the pessimists believe that China, not to mention other foreign investors, do not want the Central Asian economies to acquire new technologies. As a result, they think that the region is doomed to be a producer of raw materials, and thus that it will remain exposed to the volatility of world geopolitics and especially to the stranglehold of China.

In relation to cultural questions and the long-term outlook, Central Asian experts hold views of China that to a large extent are infused with pessimism. All think that the states of the region will have inherent difficulties in playing the overall power differential with China to their advantage. They consider that the ultimate objective of the Chinese authorities concerning Central Asia's independence is particularly unclear and that nothing prevents the currently fraternal *status quo* from one day being thrown into question – especially in relation to territorial matters. There is a predominant suspicion that China still has imperial designs for Central Asia and merely wants to conceal or delay them. Even the most optimistic experts, such as Muratbek Imanaliev, who consider that Beijing's economic and geopolitical presence is a guarantee of stability for Central Asia, turn out not to be Sinophiles on the cultural level. In fact, all experts dismiss the notion that a Sinicization of Central Asian societies could take place by any means other than force. Moreover, they all think it is important to maintain the “civilizational barrier” between Central Asia and China on the grounds that falling into the Chinese sphere of cultural influence would threaten the ethnic and cultural identities of Central Asian societies.

China therefore currently lacks the symbolic means to compete with Russia for the conquest of the Central Asian “mind.” The majority of experts

continue to present Moscow as their main ally, as the ally whose partnership is most natural and the least dangerous. Konstantin Syroezhkin rightly maintains that, if the issue was to come to a head, the Central Asian populations would not hesitate to decide in favor of Russia, despite their problems with it.<sup>453</sup> Russia continues to be the country of reference for opinion about foreign policy as well as “civilizational” belonging. Even so, some experts do not hide their resentment of a country they denounce for its past imperialist mentality,<sup>454</sup> its historical inertia, and its inability to offer Central Asia a real long-term partnership.<sup>455</sup> Though some of them denounce contemporary Russian policy on this or that issue, they all have a largely positive vision of the Soviet past, insofar as it involuntarily equipped Central Asian societies with the political, economic, and social foundations necessary for their independence. Moscow is, as a result, thanked for having aided the survival of Central Asian peoples; Beijing, on the other hand, is suspected of having an approach that stamps out the cultural differences of other peoples. The most pragmatically-minded experts argue, for example, that a return to Russian domination would not have as negative an impact as a massive Chinese presence. They contend that the Russians, who are in the midst of a total demographic crisis, would be able to exercise political, but not demographic, control over the peoples under their jurisdiction.<sup>456</sup> Hence, when the debate is expressed in terms of “civilization”, China continues to be conceived as the very embodiment of strangeness and of foreignness, while Russia still belongs to the familiar and known world of Central Asia’s everyday reality.

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<sup>453</sup> Konstantin L. Syroezhkin, “Tsentral’naia Aziia: vybor prioritetov”, in *Sotrudnichestvo i bezopasnost’ v Tsentral’noi Azii v usloviakh politicheskikh i sotsial’no-ekonomicheskikh transformatsii* [Cooperation and Security in Central Asia in Conditions of Socio-Economic and Political Transformation], Almaty: KISI, 2007, <<http://www.kisi.kz/site.html?id=5097>>.

<sup>454</sup> Interview with Sukhrob Sharipov, Dushanbe, 26 March 2008.

<sup>455</sup> Interviews with Muratbek Imanaliev, Bishkek, 14 February 2008 and Orozbek Moldaliev, Bishkek, 15 February 2008.

<sup>456</sup> Interview with Nurbek Omuraliev, Bishkek, 22 February 2008.

## Conclusions

This study confirms the strategic importance of factoring in the points of view of local actors, even when they are those of “small” countries with limited foreign policy options. Indeed, contrary to widespread opinion, the Central Asian states’ ostensible Sinophilia needs to be qualified. The reason that the heads of state and their ministers of foreign affairs make so much publicity about their friendly relations with Beijing is precisely because they do not view their troublesome neighbor as simply a power *like the others* – and this concerns them. As the Kyrgyz case of Kurmanbek Bakiev showed in 2005: political opponents may loudly proclaim their desire for more anti-Chinese policies, but once in power they do not dare to review the partnership with Beijing. Central Asian states cannot in fact afford to endorse policies that are contrary to Chinese interests. The interviews conducted demonstrated that regardless of the region’s future geopolitical evolution nobody envisages returning to an iron (or bamboo) curtain that would again sever China from Central Asia. Central Asian elites and societies must therefore work out how to minimize the negative impact of their neighbor’s proximity without trying to modify the nature of bilateral relations.

### *Central Asian Views of the Competition/Collaboration between Moscow and Beijing*

Central Asian experts express concern about the potential problems that their Chinese neighbor might cause and present skeptical viewpoints on the continuation of friendly relations between Russia and China. In the domain of geopolitics, opinion is nuanced and realistic: the alliance between Moscow and Beijing within the SCO is viewed positively insofar as it has a stabilizing, supervisory role on Central Asia. However, it simultaneously limits the foreign policy options of the region’s states, which therefore struggle to make their differing viewpoints heard. The Central Asian elites are generally aware that they are treated like a buffer-zone and share the

sentiment that the Moscow/Beijing alliance is more a form of control over them than a real partnership. The majority of experts are thus concerned about a possible deterioration in Sino-Russian relations for reasons specific to their bilateral relations as well as for reasons linked to Central Asia.

Such a deterioration would place these states in the inextricable situation of having to choose a preferred partner contrary to their current policies, which seek to strike a balance in foreign power relations. When having to choose between Moscow and Beijing, experts opt clearly in favor of Moscow. The Kremlin sponsored Collective Security Treaty Organization is perceived to be the only real guarantee of Central Asian military security. The SCO, on the other hand, raises doubts about its ability to do more than issue declarations of intention. It is generally judged either to be incapable of acting in cases of conflict, or of serving as a mere cover to enable the Chinese military to set up in Central Asia, a prospect that no Central Asian desires.

In the energy sector, the unanimity is inverted. Central Asian states see their opening up to countries other than Russia as a way of guaranteeing autonomy from Moscow. Indeed, it is seen as beneficial to Central Asia to have Moscow lose its exclusive zone of influence. Experts as well as politicians are on the whole pleased that Russia is no longer simply able to act as though it were in “conquered territories”, and that just like the other players, it is obliged to develop strategies to conquer Central Asian markets, with all the compromises this entails. The fears conveyed by certain experts, who worry that China might take control of these sectors, are for the moment rather implausible, especially given how under-exploited the energy, electricity, and precious minerals markets are. Chinese energy presence is often overestimated in Kazakhstan, where the international consortiums Agip KCO (renamed North Caspian Operating Company, NCOC) and Tengizchevroil still control more than 65 percent of total hydrocarbon reserves. The China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline represents an important export outlet bypassing Russia, but will not shift Kazakh petroleum away from its Russian orbit and into a Chinese one. Neither will the China-Central Asia gas pipeline supersede Russia’s dominance over exporting gas to Europe, which is guaranteed for several decades to come. Fears of China’s gaining an energy monopoly in Central Asia are thus exaggerated.

At the political level, one important factor that contributes to good relations is the absence of any relevant ideological differences between the Chinese and Central Asian political elites, but the same is true for the Russian elites. Moscow as much as Beijing subscribes to the idea that the long-term development of Central Asia is possible only through strong leadership. Another important driving force behind the rapprochement with both China and Russia is the fear of Islamism. Both powers are viewed as fighting against the Islamist threat, and are automatically favored by Central Asia compared to, for instance, Turkey or Iran. China thus finds itself in a paradoxical position: for the Central Asian states it is an excellent instrument for blackmailing Russia, but it also spurs political, social and cultural fears. Moreover, Central Asian societies are in large part exposed to the impact of globalization precisely through China. Many of the criticisms that are brought against Beijing are not specific to Chinese influence but to the process of globalization as a whole. Indeed, Chinese trade domination is a world-wide phenomenon that is not limited to its immediate neighbors. Yet the Central Asian elites continue to think of domination in old-style terms (for example by expressing the fear that Kazakh territory will be “surrounded” by Chinese companies which would legalize Beijing’s right to oversee Astana) and lack the ability to conceptualize new ways of domination and deterritorialized powers.

Central Asia has therefore to play a careful balancing game between Moscow and Beijing. As a result, many Central Asian experts argue for a third way to pull their countries out of what they see as the impasse of the Russo-Chinese partnership. This third way generally takes the form either of building relations with the West, or of a Central Asian alliance, occasionally with pan-Turkic accents. However, experts often stress the fact that the West has caused much disillusionment in Central Asian societies, obliging their leaders to opt for more pragmatic alliances with Moscow and Beijing. The West is perceived as being too far away and too little involved to act as a reliable partner for the Central Asian states and the distrust that has crept in over the last few years will require time to heal. Concerns are also expressed about the poor prospects of forming a Central Asian alliance. Experts criticize their governments for having failed to unify the region at the beginning of the 1990s, which has weakened Central Asia’s long-term

geopolitical leverage. They highlight the leadership struggle between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as particularly detrimental in this respect. And they denounce the various hyperbolic state nationalisms that have refused to acknowledge the real needs of the populations. The dominant feeling is that a lack of credible alternatives has left Central Asia with no real choice other than to side with Moscow and Beijing.

#### *Differencing Viewpoints between Central Asian States*

Any analysis of the “Chinese question” necessitates taking the diversity of national situations into account. There are several schemas by which we can differentiate between the Central Asian states’ differing relations to China.

With the first schema, the three border countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) can be separated from the two non-border countries (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). While the former have all established inter-state relations with China, as well as significant private enterprise trade flows, and either are (or soon will) experience migration flows from China, the latter have limited their economic relations with Beijing to official agreements between large companies, and have had practically no private trade exchanges, nor any back-and-forth cross-border migratory flows of Chinese, Uzbek or Turkmen traders. This division is further deepened since it is reflected at the political level, the first three states being more liberal and the other two distinctly more authoritarian.

With the second schema, it is possible to separate Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where the “Chinese question” has been on the political agenda for more than a decade, from the three other countries, where this question is less developed. This is the case for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan for the above-mentioned reasons, as well as for Tajikistan because the civil war has put it several years behind the evolutions of its Kazakh and Kyrgyz neighbors. In Tajikistan, however, it is only a matter of time before China gains a prominent place in political debate. Dushanbe’s relation to China will almost certainly be modeled on that between Kyrgyzstan and China.

With the third schema, it is possible to single out the poorest and most fragile countries, namely Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, from the other three, which all have real potential for development, even if such remains largely untapped in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. For the first two countries, the

Chinese presence is clearly a more positive thing. They see in it a guarantee of additional stability. And as such they both automatically support every initiative that involves the major regional powers, and particularly China, whose substantial loans and help in opening up isolated regions are highly appreciated. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, on the other hand, have more structured reservations about Chinese involvement, in particular in the economic domain, and manifest greater ambitions of regional autonomy toward the great powers.

With the fourth schema, it is possible to dissociate Tajikistan from the other Central Asian countries insofar as its own peculiar stance has been shaped by its ethno-linguistic specificities. Its fear of Pan-Turkism means that the Tajik elites are staunch supporters of the Chinese policy of fighting Uyghur separatism, not to mention the proliferation of Chinese texts on the pan-Turkist threat. Nevertheless, even if they are marginalized from the real centers of power, the Islamic elites of Tajikistan still form part of the establishment. This is in contrast to the other states in the region which all prohibit the formation of Islamic parties. And although there are no texts to support this contention, it may be assumed that Islamist groups in general and Tajik elites with a “pan-Iranian” sensibility in particular have very negative opinions of China.

With the fifth and final schema, it is possible to single out Kazakhstan from the rest of Central Asia on several points: it is the SCO’s third largest power; its trade accounts for two-thirds of Central Asian trade with China; its economic dynamism has made it into the motor of the whole region; and it is the only one to have performed a genuine analysis of its relation to China, involving a variety of specialists and lines of argumentation. It is also the most Sinophobe country, both economically and culturally, notably because its sparsely populated areas spark fears that this “void” might be “filled-in” by Chinese migration. For the Chinese authorities this fact is somewhat disquieting, since the Central Asian country most involved with China, and which knows it best, is also the most Sinophobe.

By contrast to Russia, which, for better or for worse, is one of Central Asia’s long-standing partners, and to the West, which is often mythicized in public opinion, China still belongs to the domain of the unknown. The few available surveys reveal the ongoing strength of the old Sinophobe clichés



once spread by Soviet propaganda. These clichés have in fact been reinforced over the last two decades with criticisms over the poor quality of Chinese products and fears of the “yellow peril”. However, by contrast to Russia and the Ukraine, it is almost impossible to draw up a precise map of public opinion in Central Asia: little information is accessible on it either in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, and in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan public opinion remains completely inaccessible.

The meager amount of information that does exist, however, tallies with the conclusions presented here. Accordingly, a survey conducted in 2004-2005 in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, revealed that Russia was still the country most trusted by 80 percent of those surveyed. The results for China reveal, by contrast, that it is trusted by 38 percent of those surveyed in Tajikistan, by 26 percent in Kyrgyzstan, and by only 19 percent in Kazakhstan – far behind Moscow but still well ahead of the United States. However, in terms of cultural affinities, Russia is squarely in front, while China only scores between 6 and 10 percent, lagging far behind Germany, Japan, and the United States. Finally, although in Tajikistan only 5 percent of people find China anxiety-provoking, this figure rises to 26 percent for Kyrgyzstan and to 32 percent for Kazakhstan.<sup>457</sup>

The only existing survey in Kazakhstan was carried out by Elena Sadovskaia. It demonstrates that awareness of China, its traditions, and culture remains very weak.<sup>458</sup> Public opinion actually displays much greater interest in the socio-demographic situation in China, and in questions of economic development and foreign policy, than in Chinese culture. The survey also reveals a significant element of possible future tensions. Indeed, while the majority of respondents contend that immigration of Chinese citizens will increase in the coming years, almost 70 percent also believe that this migration will have a directly or indirectly negative impact on the

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<sup>457</sup> Vilia Gel’bras, “SHOS na fonde obshchestvennykh nastroyenii naseleniia Rossii, Kazakhstana, Kirgizii, Tadzhikistana i Kitaia” [The SCO according to public opinion in Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China], in M. Ashimbaev, G. Chufirin (ed.), *SHOS: stanovlenie i perspektivy razvitiia* [The SCO: current state and development prospects], Almaty: IWEP, 2005, p. 186.

<sup>458</sup> Elena Sadovskaia, “Kitaiskie migranty v Kazakhstane: otnosheniia kazakhstankikh grazhdan (po resul’tatam sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia)” [Chinese Migrants in Kazakhstan: the Attitudes of Kazakhstan’s Citizens (results of a sociological survey)], *Analitic*, no. 5, 2007, pp. 20-29.

domestic labor market. By contrast, public opinion in Tajikistan seems decidedly more Sinophile. More than three-quarters of people surveyed by Sharq have a positive view of China's presence in the country. They do not, however, necessarily consider it to be either a close ally of Dushanbe, or fated to surpass Russian and Iranian dominance, especially because, as Saodat Olimova remarks, Tajik public opinion is above all marked by its total ignorance of China more than it is by a consciously positive view of it.<sup>459</sup>

The scattered information available reveals some troubling tendencies. It seems that the more distant the country is from China, the more that country's vision of China is either inexistent (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), or positive (Tajikistan); at the same time, the two countries for whom China has become an everyday reality, namely Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are those in which public opinion appears to be the most Sinophobe. The differences of opinion also vary depending on whether at issue is the economic partnership, in which case China is in second position behind Russia but ahead of the West, or cultural affinities, in which case China is clearly behind the West. All the same, due to the lack of sources, this analysis remains too cursory to be able to be considered properly scientific.

#### *On Sinophobe and Sinophile Lobbies*

The only milieus in which opinions can be more or less accurately gauged are in the circles of political leadership, those of trade and economics, and the intellectual elite. In all three cases both Sinophobe and Sinophile groups are starting to emerge but they are only moderately organized.

For the moment, the Sinophile circles have barely any institutional standing. This is the case for two main reasons. First, they are situated in the uppermost echelons of society, that is, amongst the presidential families, the political elites, and the private sector oligarchs and directors of large public companies. These three groups are already intrinsically linked through a variety of political, personal, regional, corporatist and clan allegiances. As such they belong to decision-making circles and work inside the system, so they have no need to finance institutional mediators to convey their

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<sup>459</sup> Saodat Olimova, "The Multifaceted Chinese Presence in Tajikistan", *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2009, pp. 61-78.

viewpoints. Second, were an official pro-Chinese lobby to emerge, it might cause public opinion to react negatively and this might have the possible counter-effect of generating a structured anti-Chinese lobby. In any case, the growing formation of pro-Russian lobbies is likely to make the differences between the groups starker and soon force pro-Chinese groups to formulate clear policy objectives.

The Sinophobe groups, in turn, are presently unable to acquire any institutional standing. The reason for this is that their critiques of China would directly bear on the authorities' pro-Chinese policies. This would then put them in an awkward position because it might induce the state organs to work against them through administrative obstruction, legal pressures, extralegal activities, etc. In addition, while pro-Chinese lobbies are liable to emerge as a part of the politico-economic establishment and thus be relatively unified, the anti-Chinese circles have divided motivations and social affiliations. They are comprised of political opponents, Uyghur associations, worker's unions, small businessmen and entrepreneurs, etc., all of whom would have a difficult time formulating common viewpoints for the purpose of building genuine cooperation.

There is one social group, however, that is prone to developing both Sinophile and Sinophobe sensibilities, that of businesspeople. This group indeed contains both those who aim to gain from the boom in commercial trade with China and those who fear Chinese competition. National differences are particularly relevant in this area. It is in Kyrgyzstan that the feelings of competition are the most developed. This is the case for several reasons: first, Kazakh legislation has been most favorable to the development of Chinese trade; second, it is the state in which the capacity to enforce the law is weakest; and third, the bazaar economy has come to play a central role in both the country's functioning and in its destabilization. The business circles are at the very core of this process of state collapse and corruption, and thus comprise a politically and socially sensitive milieu which reacts fitfully to the Chinese presence.

In Kazakhstan, the sense of competition with Chinese traders is generally less developed, not only because the latter dispose of fewer rights to establish businesses (they must go through a joint-venture system requiring them to have a Kazakh partner), but also because they engage more in large-scale

trade, which is better regulated, and because fewer Kazakhs work in the small retail trade. In Tajikistan the case is rather different: the civil war, the intrinsic poverty of rural populations, and the high rates of male emigration to Russia (about one million Tajiks undertake seasonal work abroad) have all made the absence of Tajik traders more acute. This has enabled Chinese businessmen to invest in the market without provoking feelings of competition, at least for the moment. In neither Uzbekistan nor Turkmenistan do business circles come into direct contact with Chinese businessmen, although there appear to be some tensions emerging at the Karasuu bazaar, at which the local Kyrgyz compete with both Chinese and Uzbek traders.

#### *The Viewpoints of Central Asian Think Tanks*

The only milieu whose opinions can be gauged with precision is that of the intellectual elites in think tanks, whose job partly involves expressing opinions. In relation to the question of China, these opinions, whether positive or negative, have not been as well-formulated as those concerning the relationship to Russia, the West or Pan-Turkism. It seems that China does not appeal to circles that are already strongly imbued by western, nationalist, or Russophile ideological traditions. But by no means are these milieus unconcerned by China: it is rare to find someone who thinks that the “Chinese question” is not of concern to his/her country or that it ought not to be examined more deeply. Experts are all cognizant of the ambiguous game that the authorities are playing by shrouding their decisions concerning China, and by leaving the public to make their own interpretations of these decisions.

When examining think tanks at the institutional level, it proves difficult to classify them in terms of their opinion of China. The reason for this is that neither academia nor the institutes for strategic studies are able to make overtly anti-Chinese remarks since this would undermine official policy. In addition, academia considers that it is part of the public service and that as scholars it is not up to them to make judgments about politics, while the latter group considers that they are directly affiliated with the presidency and ought to act as consultancy agents to state organs. The small private centers of expertise, for their part, are usually not involved enough in foreign policy

to provide clear-cut positions. They prefer to avoid provoking the ruling elites and not engage in subjects that they deem marginal to their areas of specialization, which mostly bear on social questions. However, the fact that institutions do not desire to provoke conflict with the political authorities does not mean that the individuals belonging to them cannot express themselves more freely in their writings or orally. What this study has shown is precisely that the opinions expressed by experts on China are, by and large, critical. If it is to be grasped in all its nuances and complexity, then, it is necessary to analyze discourse on China at the level of individuals instead of institutions.

Even on the individual level, however, one cannot properly talk of structured pro- or anti-Chinese groups. Experts do not organize themselves according to opinions on China, but in accordance with the subjects that they consider more “organic” to Central Asian societies. These include the relationship of allegiance or dissidence to the authorities; the strength of nationalist sensibility (the importance they grant to debates on national identity, the place of Islam in self-identification); and the view held of the Soviet past (Sovietophile or Sovietophobe) and of the West (admiring or critical). Among China specialists, opinion tends to be at once Sinophile and Sinophobe, but always in specific combinations: Murat Auezov, for instance, openly expresses Sinophobe convictions while also being an admirer of Chinese literature and a great connoisseur of Chinese history; Konstantin Syroezhkin holds among the most subtle and pragmatic views with respect to China’s real present impact, but also sees the coming decades somewhat pessimistically; Adil Kaukenov admires Beijing’s economic modernity and the new globalized Chinese elites, but also hopes that the alleged “cultural barrier” between China and Central Asia will be maintained to prevent Sinicization, etc.

As we have noted, the most favorable expert discourses on China concern either economic or global geopolitical questions. However, as soon as we penetrate further into the questions themselves, the viewpoints become increasingly critical. Not only are the geopolitical stakes qualified, but fears of the Chinese military and secret services start to loom large over discourses of strategic rapprochement with China. The economic question also turns out to be more complex than anticipated. Whereas western entrepreneurs

invest mainly in speculative sectors of the economy, through the acquisition of shares and bonds, Chinese companies focus mostly on sectors such as infrastructure (roads, tunnels, railways, electricity, etc.) that help alleviate the negative consequences of Central Asia's landlockedness. China is therefore thanked by experts for taking up the role formerly played by the Soviet Union, which Moscow no longer really plays. At the same time, however, the topic of trade remains highly sensitive, since Central Asia sees opening-up to China both as an opportunity and a threat to their economies.

When foregrounding questions of identity barely any experts can be classified as Sinophile. This is the case whether at issue is the interpretation of the history of relations with China, the Uyghur issue, the question of Chinese cultural influence, or demographic stakes. In more or less radical terms, all experts articulate the same question: how can the small peoples of Central Asia preserve their autonomy over the long-term and avoid Sinicization, under whatever form that may take? As a "civilization", China is perceived as being foreign, and even as incompatible, whereas with Russia there is still a dominant feeling of proximity, and even of intimacy. The anti-Russian rhetoric of some Central Asian political and intellectual circles, in particular those more inclined to the West, disappears as soon as China is brought into the equation: compared with potential Chinese domination, Russia continues to be seen as a "lesser evil".

#### *Generational Differences: The Youth's View of China*

Despite China's looming destiny to become the foremost economic power in Central Asia, Beijing will nonetheless have to confront a number of challenges in coming years. It will have to work hard to counter the apprehensions it evokes in Central Asian societies, and therefore take this into account when making policy decisions. Beijing has not yet managed to develop a cultural diplomacy that would be effective in countering the anxieties its presence provokes, nor in developing a discourse to promote "Chineseness" (*zhonghuaxing*). Beijing has, however, undertaken to strengthen its linguistic influence in Central Asia. This phenomenon has been well-received among the younger generations seeking profitable career opportunities. Indeed there has been an increasing fashion, which really grew in importance around 2005, to study the Chinese language or to take

university courses in China. This trend is strongest in Kazakhstan, and in Kyrgyzstan, but is also evident in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

All the major universities and prestigious higher technical education establishments in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, both public and private, now offer students Chinese language courses in the most highly sought-after subjects, i.e. international relations, marketing, global economics, and engineering. Over the last few years, Chinese has become the second most taught language at university in Kazakhstan after English.<sup>460</sup> From the interviews conducted with Kazakh students studying in China it emerged that they perceive China as a professional option that will remain unaffected by geopolitical machinations. The view is that whether the Central Asian states incline more toward the West or Russia, they will remain unchanged in their proximity to the Middle Kingdom. This “Chinese given” is perceived in pragmatic terms: while Russia and the West are allegedly out to manipulate Central Asia in accordance with their own interests, China is credited, not with an absence of national interests, but with the additional ability to be able to foster Central Asia’s own long-term interests. A career based upon a knowledge of the Chinese language is therefore perceived to be a professional asset that will remain sheltered from political vacillations. Fluency in Chinese also guarantees an extremely quick rise up the social ladder in both the public administration (especially in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and the private sector (especially the sectors relating to trade, transit, freight, legal supervision, translation, etc.)<sup>461</sup>

The pro-Chinese push of the new generations, who view their large neighbor pragmatically as an opportunity to be taken, will therefore probably have an impact on the balance of relations over the next ten years, when knowledge on China will have become synonymous with a successful professional career and a high income. One of the driving forces of this shift in relations is the process of replacing the former Soviet elites, particularly through the education of the young generations from the middle- and upper-classes abroad. The current fashion of studying Chinese will thus give rise to a

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<sup>460</sup> Russian is not considered to be a foreign language in Kazakhstan because it has an official status as the language of interethnic communication.

<sup>461</sup> Interviews conducted with Central Asian students at the Chinese Universities of Beijing, Uumqi, Lanzhou, Xi’an, Shanghai, September-December 2008.

milieu where China is no longer perceived as an inaccessible, incomprehensible, and alien country, but on the contrary the very example of successful modernity. Regardless of whether these young generations then form Sinophile or Sinophobe lobbies, they will embody Central Asia's newfound proximity with China and view Beijing as a model of development capable of rivaling that of Moscow as much as that of Western Europe. Further studies will need to be carried out to ascertain whether or not this new generation, who will be at once indifferent to old Soviet clichés and familiar with contemporary China, has the effect of modifying social apprehensions, in particular on demographic and identity issues. To date one such study has been carried out. Elena Sadovskaia's survey shows that young people aged between 18 and 29 have the most tolerant attitudes towards China, and that the more familiar people are with the Chinese, the more highly they regard them.<sup>462</sup>

*What are the Policy Implications of this Analysis?*

The Russo-Chinese alliance in Central Asia is based upon very real but only temporarily common interests. However it is possible to discern the contours of a potential rivalry over energy interests emerging on the not too distant horizon, provoked by China's exponential consumption needs and Moscow's preference for exporting Central Asian production to Western Europe instead of reinvesting in its own fields and infrastructure. This rivalry is also likely to extend to uranium, precious minerals, and electricity. There are also doubts about the future solidity of the Russo-Chinese military partnership: at present China needs to import advanced Russian technology, but once it has attained a status nearly equivalent to Moscow's, Russian suspicions about Chinese ambitions are likely to increase to a much larger degree. Moreover, the Russo-Chinese partnership functions in Central Asia because Beijing wishes to preserve Russian domination in the region. This point of view was corroborated during our interviews with Chinese specialists on the former USSR, who maintain that Beijing is not seeking to dethrone Russia from its status as the primary military power in Central Asia. China instead prefers to let Russia pay the heavy costs of military security and of guaranteeing the

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<sup>462</sup> Elena Sadovskaia, "Kitaiskie migranty v Kazakhstane: otnosheniia kazakhstankikh grazhdan (po resul'tatam sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia)", *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.



survival of unstable regimes.<sup>463</sup> However, if China were to decide one day to take up the primary role in the political, military and cultural domains, it is likely to encounter Moscow's fierce opposition.

But do China's goals extend beyond the economic domain and the preservation of stability in Central Asia? The Central Asian zone has strategic value in Beijing's eyes due to its relationship with Xinjiang. Any destabilization of the Central Asia-Afghanistan-Pakistan triangle could directly impact upon China's North West. But this issue aside, Chinese foreign policy is set to stay focused on the United States, Japan, and the rest of Asia. The costs of dislodging Russian domination in the region would be quite excessive by comparison to the modest advantages it would afford. It would also compel Beijing to get more involved than it wants to in the domestic issues of Central Asian regimes. And the Chinese authorities are aware of their limited ability to manage their own unstable national fringes. Beijing's Central Asian policy has, first and foremost, aimed at achieving pragmatic results: it has managed to resolve the border disputes, to reduce the level of military tension at the borders, to suppress the Uyghur issue, and to get the local political regimes to adhere to Chinese discourses on the struggle against the "three evils", on the unity of the PRC and Taiwan, and on the dangers of Western interference.

Moreover, despite the appearance of the SCO as an organization where the Central Asian states ostensibly should sit as equals, the Chinese authorities have effectively managed to establish their power asymmetry through other channels. In fact, all the Central Asian states are deeply involved bilaterally with Beijing, and are therefore locked into a power differential that works against them. On the economic level, China's engagement occurs more through bilateral than through multilateral means. On the strategic level, it also seems easier for each partner to protect its national interests through bilateral negotiations. China has therefore successfully managed to avoid the development of any Central Asian or post-Soviet (Russia and Central Asia) interest coalitions. Russia and Kazakhstan, for instance, were unable to form a unified front on the question of cross-border rivers; Kazakhstan and

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<sup>463</sup> Interviews conducted at the main Chinese think tanks and research centers working on the former USSR in Shanghai, Beijing, Lanzhou and Xi'an, September-December 2008.

Kyrgyzstan are currently rivaling one another for Chinese trade flows; and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan appear to be locked in a struggle to become the region's preferred zone for the settlement of Chinese bazaars. The Chinese authorities therefore have no interest in visibly ratcheting up their pressure on Central Asia. They prefer to allow the officially endorsed idea of a win-win partnership to prevail, while they work to tighten economic relations. At any rate, in the case of destabilization of one of the Central Asian states, of the Taliban's returning to power in Afghanistan, of an overthrow of the government in Pakistan, or of riots in Xinjiang, Beijing has all the necessary tools at its disposal to rally the Central Asian regimes to its side and does not seem to want more. For Beijing the right balance of interests has been struck.

Russia, for its part, partially benefits from the Chinese presence, but does not have the means to curb its expansion. Moscow appreciates Beijing's help in limiting western influence in the region, since it potentially eliminates the threat of a direct confrontation with Washington. The Kremlin also appreciates that Beijing is working alongside it to support local authoritarian regimes and thwart external interference. It therefore cannot be said that Moscow is out to stoke growing Sinophobia among the Central Asian elite. On the economic level, however, Central Asia's progressive entry into the Chinese sphere of influence is a double-edged sword. Russia wants to sell its primary resources to China and in this domain Central Asia is starting to become a potential rival. On the other hand, China is rivaling Russia for control over Central Asian energy. Moscow's room for maneuver thus remains limited for the medium-term: its decision to develop a partnership with Beijing is motivated by foreign policy matters (common views on numerous sensitive international questions) and large-scale energy stakes. However, it is also based on a power imbalance that works in Moscow's favor but that will not last forever. Once this imbalance is overturned, Russia will no longer be equally keen to promote the Chinese vector if it means falling under Beijing's tutelage.

All in all, the real losers of the Russo-Chinese alliance in Central Asia at present seem to be the United States and the European Union. Not only does this alliance limit their capacity for action in the region, but it complicates political relations with local governments over questions of good governance and democratization, and slows down the setting-up of western companies in

the Central Asian economies. On the one hand, it can be argued that Chinese presence is of benefit to the West because it undermines Russian domination. On the other hand, although China provides a balance of power, it should be realized that Beijing is by no means favorable to western political or economic presence in Central Asia. On the contrary, with some degree of finesse, China has dissembled its policy of containment of the West in Central Asia by letting Moscow take the biggest role. It can therefore only be hoped that western countries develop an awareness of their potential to generate positive feelings of goodwill in Central Asia, but also recognize the disillusionment caused and endeavor to return to a region whose long-term stability necessitates the presence of a third actor to counterbalance the Russo-Chinese partnership.

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## About the Authors

**Marlène Laruelle**, PhD, is a Senior Research Fellow with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, a Joint Center affiliated with Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, Washington DC, and the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm. In Paris, she is an associate scholar at *Sciences Po* (the Institute of Political Studies), and at the French Center for Russian, Caucasian and East-European Studies at the School of Advanced Social Sciences Studies (EHESS). She was a post-doctoral Fellow at the French Institute for Central Asian Studies in Tashkent (2002-2005) and a Research Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington (2005-2006). Her main areas of expertise are nationalism, national identities, political philosophy, and the intellectual trends and geopolitical conceptions of the Russian and Central Asian elites. She has expertise in Russian and Central Asian foreign-policy think tanks and academia, as well as in Russian policy on Central Asia. She is the author, co-author or editor of 8 books in French and of 5 books in Russian. Her English-language publications include *Russian Eurasianism. An Ideology of Empire* (Woodrow Wilson Press/Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); *In the Name of the Nation. Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia* (Palgrave, Spring 2009); ed. *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia* (Routledge, Spring 2009); and “Russian Policy on Central Asia and the Role of Russian Nationalism” (*Silk Road Papers*, April 2008).

**Sébastien Peyrouse**, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Fellow with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, a Joint Center affiliated with Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, Washington DC, and the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm. He was a doctoral and postdoctoral Fellow at the French Institute for Central Asian Studies in Tashkent (1998-2000 and 2002-2005), a Research Fellow at the Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University in Sapporo (2006), and a Research Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International

Center for Scholars in Washington (2006-2007). In Paris, he is an Associated Fellow at the Institute for International and Strategic Relations (IRIS). His main areas of expertise are political systems in Central Asia, Islam and religious minorities, and Central Asia's geopolitical positioning toward China, Russia and South Asia. He is the author or co-author of five books in French, *Christians between Atheism and Islam: a regard on Religion in Soviet and Post-Soviet Central Asia* (2003); *Turkmenistan. A Destiny at the Crossroads of Empires* (2007); co-authored with Marlene Laruelle, *Russians in Kazakhstan. National Identities and New States in the Post-Soviet Space* (2004), and *Central Asia, the Drift Towards Authoritarianism* (2006); and with Pierre Chuvin and René Letolle, *History of Contemporary Central Asia* (2008). He is the editor of two volumes in French, *Managing Independence and the Soviet Legacy in Central Asia* (2004) and *Islam and Politics in the former Soviet Union* (2005) (titles have been translated from French).