

## Central Asia in Chinese Geopolitical Imagination

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This article aims at analyzing how the imagination of a country form a region have caused the formation of a new geopolitical vision and how this formation has led to an expansion of country bound up to that region. To do that, the article first presents a theoretical background and explains how china's imagination from central Asia is formulated. The article then applies this analysis to the case of China relations with Central Asia with respect to how this imagined geography shapes the priorities of china foreign policy in the region.

**Method:** The method in this research is descriptive-analytical and data and information are required by the library method and summarize historical data.

**Results:** Article findings show that given the historical background of China-Central Asia relations and cultural commonality, China's imagination of Central Asia is positive and China is seeking to exploit the geopolitical capacities of Central Asia to strengthen its political and economic power. Besides, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, geopolitical codes such as security, economics and the formation of a great game have led to deepening China's relations with Central Asian countries.

**Conclusion:** Examining the characteristics of the geopolitical image of China from Central Asia has shown that the country uses several geopolitical codes to extend its connection with the countries of the region. However, among these codes, there are specific codes that Beijing uses to adjust its relations with the countries of the region, which include the great game, economy, and security.

**Key words:** Central Asia, China, Economy, Geopolitics, Imaginations, Security

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**1. Introduction**

Central Asia is a landlocked land that has no way to free waters. But, it located somewhere that, is the heartland or the pivot of history. Besides, the presence of natural sources and communication routes has made it a strategic region. In particular, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the formation of a new space for action by international actors, the importance of this region has increased. Many great powers, as well as regional states, are seeking to influence the region. This competition for power in the Central Asian region recognized as a great game. We can consider four levels for this game, the rivalry between great powers (US, China, Russia), competition between regional governments (Iran, Turkey, India, and Pakistan), competition between great powers and regional governments and finally, the competition between international organizations and multinational corporations (such as multinational oil companies). Each of the actors seeks to exploit opportunities and reduce their weaknesses.

China, both as a major power and as a neighbor of Central Asian countries, plays a role in this game. China's connection with Central Asia has a prolonged history. But, after the decline of the USSR, China's affinities with Central Asia have increased. Initiatives like one belt-one road, and China's struggle to integrate Central Asian countries into the international order, reflects the depth of China's attention to the region. Thus, identify the factors affecting China's relations with Central Asian countries is important. In other words, the question is, by what criteria and principles China set its relations with central Asian countries. Understanding these indices is important in explaining China's behavior in Central Asia. To achieve this purpose, the article used geopolitical imagination as a conceptual framework for analyzing Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia. The paper argues that China's action in the Central Asian region influenced by some indicators, which can be understood from a Geopolitical aspect. In addition, it believes that, given the fact that geopolitical imagination takes both objective and subjective dimensions into account, it can provide an exact understanding of China's behavior.

This realization is very important because it allows other actors to pursue regional developments with greater awareness. The importance of the present research is to contribute to such awareness. For example, Iran is one of the indigenous actors in the Central Asian region, and any effort by other actors affects its interests. Therefore, the accurate identification of China's behavioral patterns in Central Asia can help to reduce the vulnerability of Iran's foreign policy in this region. On the other hand, given China's huge investment in the Central Asian region, new chances have been created for Iran to cooperate with Beijing and the countries of the region. Utilizing this opportunity requires awareness and data, and this article is working to provide such information.

**2. Theoretical Framework****2-1. Geopolitical Imagination**

The study of geography's impact on political action derives from the geopolitical concept. In other words, in geopolitical studies, especially in the classical geopolitics, it is assumed that the geographic features have a significant impact on political action, especially in international politics. Indeed, in conventional academic understanding, geopolitics regards the geography of international politics, particularly the relationship between the physical environment (location, resources, territory, etc.) and the conduct of foreign policy (O Tuathail and Agnew, 1992: 191). For example, The Heartland theory of the Halford Mackinder believes that "much of the heartland, as well as the pivot itself, was located in what was the Russian Empire. From this, it appears that Russia was in complete control of the heartland and was well-placed to establish herself as the global hegemon" (Harper, 2017: 14). Or Karl Haushofer, as a founder of classical geopolitics, argues that "geopolitics logic maintained that every nation in the midst of demographic consolidation and growth was in need of space that is, the expansion of the original homeland" (Sand, 2012: 13).

Ning An claims that classical geopolitics emphasizes a neutral, objective, and pre-given understanding of geography, by which geography is usually viewed as a discipline describing the objective realities of the physical environments around us. However, the physical geographical environment is not the only factor that would impact upon the exercise of international politics. The imaginary geographies that are subjectively produced by politicians, statecraft intellectuals and institutions may also impact upon the making of foreign or strategic policies (An, 2017: 22). Edward Said in his article as Orientalism states that, obviously some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and this objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality (Said, 1977:167). Imaginary geography celebrates a postmodern receptivity in the sense that it rejects the idea of an enclosed space. It means that national geographical configurations are constituted by power and knowledge (Al-Mahfedi, 2011: 3-7).

The term "geographical imagination" was first coined by Hugh Prince in 1962, but it was David Harvey that theorized the geographical imagination with a focus on space and place rather than landscape, nature, and the aesthetic. Harvey conceived of the geographical imagination also to consider the role of space, place, and the political economy (Giesecking, 2016:1). Geopolitical imaging rooted in Critical geopolitics studies. Critical geopolitics tends to destroy geopolitical discourses, and contrary to the argument that geography is the status of objects and places have an argumentative view. These objects enclosed in real and social issues (Ahmadi pour and Badiiei, 2003: 5). Critical geopolitics considers geopolitics as a cultural phenomenon, where the concept of the geopolitical imagination, influenced by national identity, culture, and myths, and refers to how countries construct the world. Thus, in critical geopolitics, geographies are depicted as being imagined or invented rather than

as objective realities. The concept of geopolitical codes, while forming geopolitical imaginations, represents a valuable contribution to our efforts to understand foreign policymaking (Güney and Mandacı, 2013: 433).

## **2-2. Geopolitical Codes**

The concept of the geopolitical code was originally expressed by Gaddis (1982) in his analysis of post-war security policy in the United States. He says: "I would suggest that there exist for presidential administrations certain "strategic" or "geopolitical." codes, assumptions about American interests in the world, potential threats to them, and feasible responses (David Rae, 2007: 19). In fact, these geopolitical codes are the ways in which countries adjust their attitude to the world. These codes refer to a set of social representations based on national political identity, including ideas about the country's natural enemies and allies, about the nature of foreign threats and the major international problems and solutions to them ( Pishghahifard and soleimani moghadam, 2010: 105). While highly ethnocentric and oriented to the perceived needs and interests of the state, geopolitical codes are nevertheless worthy of attention in the interpretation of foreign policy. Codes are the spatial expression of geopolitical efforts to transform a global space into fixed perspectival scenes. (Kliot and Newman, 2013: 36-37).

These codes are relatively stable frameworks for understanding the world with the condition that depending on the interests and threats of governments. For this reasons each country defines its geopolitical code, consisting five main calculations: (a) who are our current and potential allies? (b) Who are our current and potential enemies? (c) Who can we maintain our allies and nurture potential allies? (d) Who can we counter our current enemies and emerging threats? (e) Who do we justify the four calculations above to our public, and to the global community (Flint, 2016: 52).

It is worth mentioning that national identities and legends play a significant role in shaping geopolitical codes. The image of a country and its status in relation to other countries are created within the national identities and national legends, which are the basis for geopolitical codes. According flint, Strategic concerns about resources and economics and ideological referents to national values combine in geopolitical visions, a framing of the world that connects the individual's sense of identity to global geopolitics through the geopolitical code of their country. The content of national myths and the content of geopolitical codes are made within dynamic contexts of conflict (Flint, 2006: 127). For example, illustration of the enemy (those countries and people who are supposed to be represented as evil people or the country) are tailored for the immediate situation, but are based upon stories deposited in national myths that are easily accessible to the general public (Flint, 2006: 58). Therefore, geopolitical imagination is the translation of national identity concepts into geographical terms and symbols. Because ideas about national identity collide with power structures in the world and with other geopolitical constraints, geopolitical visions are developed in order to cope with such threats. The

ultimate aim is to maintain pride, or just to legitimize aggression (Güney and Gokcan, 2010: 24).

Geopolitical codes operate at three levels: local, regional, and global. The local level includes the assessment of neighboring states. The governments of all countries, especially the small countries, have such a code. Regional level codes are required for the state that aspires to expand their power beyond their immediate neighbors. The governments of all regional powers and potential regional powers need to map out such code. Finally, a few states will have global politics, and their governments will have appropriate worldwide global geopolitical codes (Flint and Taylor, 2014: 49). According to Huliaras and Tsardanidis Geopolitical codes do not remain constant and stable but change. Geopolitical codes can change both radically and within a rather limited period of time. Sometimes a radical change in geopolitical codes is the result of a perceived failure (Huliaras and Tsardanidis, 2006: 466). In other word, the construction of a geopolitical code is the product of changing relations between states and other geopolitical actors. Hence, the specifics of the codes are partially the result of the actions of other actors. (Flint Et al, 2009: 608). One of the best examples is China's foreign policy in the Central Asian region.

### **3. Central Asia in China Geopolitics imagine**

China and Central Asian countries are geographical neighbors. Clearly, their relations have a complicated history, including the fact that parts of Central Asia once belonged to ancient China and now many Chinese ethnic groups live in Central Asia (Jain, 2018: 41). The history of China's association with Central Asia dates back to the Han dynasty. In the first millennium BC, the Graeco-Bactrian kings were the first to establish link across central Asia with China. Over the following century, Han Dynasty in China established trade routes through central Asia (O'Brien, 2002: 51). However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, China's relations with the region expanded and deepened. In fact, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, China was quick to become aware of the unique opportunities contained in this new geopolitical situation, which was not however without new risks, particularly in relation to its north and north-west borders (Peyrouse, 2106: 15). After the independence of Central Asian countries, China questioned 22 percent of the total surface area of Central Asia, however, with the opening of negotiations, they agreed to reduce their territorial claims to "only" 34,000 km. It signed border demarcation treaties with Kazakhstan in 1994 (some still disputed zones were settled in 1999), with Kyrgyzstan in 1996 (here also, resolutions over disputed areas were settled in 1999), and with Tajikistan in 2002 (Peyrouse, 2106: 15).

Indeed, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, China has been facing unprecedented Challenges, new opportunities as well as risks. In fact, the end of the confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States did not mean that geopolitical and geo-economics rifts disappeared, On the contrary, the relationships between countries and regions became more complicated. But, this change has greatly improved the international situation of China as well as

relations between China and the Great Powers (Zhuangzhi, 2007: 42). So, China quickly redefined its long-term strategic plan and foreign policy in Central Asia. Opening the Central Asian borders could make a significant contribution to China's economic development. In 2001, China set up the SCO with the goal of confronting separatism, terrorism and extremism and implicitly hegemony of the United States. Therefore, Central Asia has become meaningful both in the sphere of Chinese influence and in terms of the transformation of China's global position in competing with the United States, Russia, and Europe and other powerful countries. From this viewpoint, China viewed Central Asia as a unique opportunity to increase its power beyond East Asia in the post-Cold War era (Shichor, 2008: 55).

According to Richard Walsh, from China's perspective, the disintegration of the Soviet Union accelerated the process of delinking local and regional conflicts from superpower rivalry. Beijing sees opportunities in the competing interests of contiguous (Iran, Pakistan, India, and Russia) and noncontiguous (Turkey and Saudi Arabia) actors. Their competition reaffirms China's preference for a multipolar world in which U.S. power declines relative to that of regional powers. China's ability to play in the new geopolitical game in Central Asia is based on "comprehensive national strength" (political, economic, and cultural) as well as traditional interests (Walsh, 1993: 272-3). Boris Z. Rumer also argues that: the break up the USSR and the emergence of newly independent state on the china periphery substantially increased china's status in these areas. Despite internal instability and unsolved problems in Central Asia as well as regional actors' competition, China has been seizing opportunities to expand trade and economic contact with central Asia, and at home taking measure to contain negative influence from central Asia, especially in Muslim areas (Rumer, 2015: 176).

In spite of the internal problems and new threats of Central Asian countries to China, a factor that contributed to the expansion of connections between China and Central Asian countries was their shared approach to the new order. "Each looks on the other as a "buffer" and trusts the other as a cooperative partner. The geopolitical strategies of China and the Central Asian countries coincide to some degree. For example, they have the same orientation in terms of external relations and common views on many international problems. Although China and the Central Asian republics do not give each other top priority in terms of international strategy, neither side can overlook the existence and actions of the other (Zhuangzhi, 2007: 42).

Chinese strategy towards Central Asia in the first ten years of independence of the new republics was mainly aimed at three key goals: 1. To guarantee and reinforce national security and regional stability, 2. To develop political and economic relations with the Central Asian republics, 3. To ensure the control of Central Asian oil and gas in order to strengthen its energy security (Indeo, 2010: 2) However, Since 2001, with the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the geopolitical importance of Central Asia has increased for China. In other words, china viewed Central Asia as a region that could provide



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the mainland with strategic depth, as a wide swath of territory where China can build up clout through trade, investment, and loans (Lifan, 2013: 160). the six formal SCO member states occupy a territory of around 30 million square kilometers, which makes up three-fifths of the Eurasian continent, and has a population of 1.5 billion, which is a quarter of the world's population. If observer and dialogue members included, the SCO represents about half of the world's population on the bulk of the Eurasian continent (Bin, 2013: 37). Given this geopolitical potential, the SCO was an appropriate means for China's influence in the region. China, as the initiator of and driving force within the SCO, was primarily concerned about security in Xinjiang. While initially addressing this as a security challenge, China has expanded its view to pursuing economic cooperation and development through the SCO to secure its western region. (Lohschelder, 2017: 103).

Scobell et al, maintains that Central Asia is China's backyard. They claim that: By labeling Central Asia as Beijing's backyard, we do not mean to imply that China covets this region or considers it to be sovereign Chinese territory; rather, we wish to underscore the degree to which Beijing is very sensitive to trends and shocks in Central Asia and the adverse impact these can have on Chinese security (Scobell et al, 2014: 6). For China instability in central Asia could endanger the status quo in its restive western province, where the indigenous Turkic population has long resented Han Chinese domination and on occasion rebelled against it. Separatist its contagion from central Asia could be sparked by a spontaneous grassroots movement or instigated by a hostile power. In either case, Chinese security and territorial integrity would be at the risk (Rumer Et al, 2007: 61).

To sum up, it should be noted that geopolitically, China regards Central Asia as a vital area for implementing its strategies. This importance is affected by several factors. First, Central Asia Geographically, and based on classical theories, located on Hartland or the pivot of history. As Harper argued, even in the 21st century, control and hegemony over Eurasia did not lose any of its strategic importance to China. Secondly, China has historical and cultural affiliations with Central Asia. Since the Han Dynasty, to date, China and Central Asia have experienced widespread social and cultural interactions. Ultimately, the geography of Central Asia and its relationship with various regions, including the Middle East, Western Europe and East, and the Chinese initiative in these regions, reminds China's dominance of the ancient Silk Road. This picture of Central Asia urged China to determine geopolitical codes to promote its national interests in the Central Asian region. These geopolitical codes are a set of assumptions about the interests of China in Central Asia, threats to them, and ultimately an appropriate response to these threats.

#### **4. China's dedicate geopolitical code in Central Asia**

##### **4-1. Geopolitical Code 1: Great game**

Stephan Blank believes that there is a great game in Central Asia. He says: although many scholars dislike the term “great game” or “new great game”

because to them these terms smack of echoes of the imperial rivalry of the nineteenth and twentieth century's, but, the game is running in the Central Asian region. First, there is an enormous competition among the US, Russia, India, and China for military bases in Central Asia. Second, not only great powers, but regional governments also seek to increase influence in Central Asia. Third, beyond these aforementioned trends, regional actors like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have already begun to take actions to shape their security environment. Fourth, international financial institutions (IFI) like the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the UN and its agencies like the UN Development Program (UNDP), are also heavily involved in major projects and policies in central Asia (Blank, 2012: 155). According to James Dorsey, the Great Game is played not only in Eurasia but across the world map. It is a game that not only aims to achieve dominance of infrastructure and energy but also to reshape political systems at a time that liberal democracy is on the defensive and populism is growing in appeal. Multiple players engage in a complex dance as they strive for advantage and seek to compensate for weaknesses (Dorsey, 2017). Thus, Control of Eurasia was particularly crucial for the strategies of the successive incarnations of the Chinese empires. However, even in the 21st century, control of this region has lost none of its significance to China. China's aspiration in Eurasia, as Zimmerman points out, is reshaping the political order (Harper, 2017: 2-6).

Chen and Fazilov believe that "the "Great Game" refers to the past and present Central Asia and raises the question of how this vast region is being increasingly affected by China differently than how the latter has grown and extended its footprint and impact across the Global South. While Central Asia is not generally seen as part of the Global South, it fits the topic of this themed session quite well for one main reason. Central Asia, as a solid segment of the former The Soviet Union, shares the political, ideological, and economic legacies of the state-socialist system and post-socialist transition societies with China. Relative to these shared features, China's distinctive path of reform and opening and global rise, coupled with border contiguity and geographic proximity with Central Asia, justify the analysis of this region as an integral part of the "China and the Global South" discourse (Chen and Fazilov, 2018: 3). China's strategy is well thought and simple. Its aim is to increase its participation and cooperation with the countries of all continents South East Asia, South America, and Central and South Asia (Iqbal and Afridi, 2017: 238).

To meet with this end it has employed many regional initiatives like one-belt one road, and seeks to revive China's hegemony in Eurasia in a Chinese-backed manner. According to Joel Wuthnow: Eurasian integration as a way to create a more stable security environment around China's southern and western periphery by addressing the underlying sources of violence and building mutual trust. Another benefit is increasing China's energy security by diversifying oil and natural gas supply and transport routes. BRI is a way for China to simultaneously achieve two geopolitical objectives: amassing strategic influence in Eurasia's heartland while deftly avoiding direct competition with



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the United States (Wuthnow, 2017: 2). Since at least the end of the Cold War, Chinese planners have viewed the United States as an oppressive global hegemon, determined to prevent the rise of any potential challenger. Together with its command of the world's oceans, America's forward military presence and its enduring alliance system have long been seen as posing the most direct and serious challenge to China's security. Not surprisingly, when Washington declared its intention to "pivot" toward the Asia-Pacific in 2011, Chinese observers concluded that a new and more intense phase in their competition with the United States was at hand. China needed to find ways to respond (Rolland, 2017: 133).

On the other hand, from United States view the BRI threatens to undermine the basis of American-Asian economic engagement as it is independent of the Bretton Woods system. In providing a means for China to set terms of regional economic relations that do not reflect American interests, the Initiative introduces considerable uncertainty and greatly complicates efforts by the American Government to pursue its economic security agenda. At the same time the BRI reinforces concerns, generated by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) that China is pursuing a revisionist agenda where the international economic order is concerned (Boutin, 2019: 10). China-Russia cooperation is another source of US concern. China and Russia collaborating on issues that have strategic importance because they shared common interests. Moscow and Beijing have wisely solved issues where their interests converge and have done their utmost not to alienate each other through their differences and disagreement. Since Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin signed the initiative to integrate the SREB and the EEU on 8 May 2015, commentators close to the Kremlin have emphasized that Sino-Russian rapprochement has ascended to a new level of partnership (Sangar, 2017: 13) As Silvana Malle argues: In Eurasia, Russia and China are competitors, But they do not need to fight each other (Malle, 2017: 148)

#### **4-2. Geopolitical Code 2: Economy**

About dedicated Geopolitical Economic Code of China in central Asia two subjects are important:

##### **(A). One Belt, One Road initiative (New Silk Road):**

The term Silk Road was first used by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877 (Andrea, 2014: 107). In fact, The Silk Road was a network of trade routes, formally established during the Han Dynasty of China, which linked the regions of the ancient world in commerce (Mark, 2014). Attempts to revive this business network have been involved in various geopolitical imagine of China from different regions, especially Central Asia. Since modern times, it has been proposed for many times that a large railway network in China should be constructed to form an international transport route from the east to the west. After the founding of new China, Ideas like Longhai railway and building a new land bridge through Eurasia and also Co-constructing the Modern Silk Road, widening the economic and cultural exchanges between Asia and Europe

Indicating China's desire to revive the Silk Road. In September and October 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed the “Belt and Road Initiative”, aiming at building modern Silk Road, and it has far-reaching significance to the strategic cooperation and economic development of Eurasian countries (Ruixue Et al, 2016: 50).

The purpose of the "belt" is to build a network of land way, railways, oil and gas pipelines, and a network of power that connects Xinjiang, Central Asia, Moscow, Rotterdam, and Venice. Also, the purpose of the “Road” is to build a network of ports and other coastal infrastructure that connects China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Africa and the Mediterranean. The logic behind BRI is that China can use this comparative advantage not only to help other countries, but also to deal with overcapacity problems that daunt its own infrastructure construction industry, as can be seen in the country’s ghost towns, shuttered factories, and highways and railroads to nowhere (Callahan, 2016: 11). Stenberg and colleagues referred to some of China's motives for the one belt-on road initiative which is specified in the table below (Sternberg Et all, 2017: 3).

Table 1. Motivating factors for One Belt, One Road.

Reason	Citation
Internationalisation of the Yuan	Chatham House (2017) [20]
Infrastructure development in Asia	Lim 2016 [6]
Consume overproduction, overcapacity, excess products	Lim 2016 [6]
Reduce unskilled unemployment in China	Tang 2015 [30]
Improve regional transport links	Lain and Pantucci 2015 [29]
Gain access to natural resources, oil, gas	Tang 2015 [30]
Increase Chinese soft power and good will	Sidaway and Woon 2017 [4]
Foreign policy initiative	Lim 2016 [6]
Sino-centric unipolar Asia	Malik <i>in</i> Sulekha 2017 [31]
Road to empire	Financial Times 2015 [32]
Benefits of development and prosperity	Sidaway & Woon 2017 [4]
Enhance Chinese social stability and security	Rolland 2017 [3]
Central Asia as “key areas” for China’s national energy security	Rolland 2017 [3]
Integrate Eurasian continent by 2050	Rolland 2017 [3]

In addition to these advantages, initiatives like one belt, one road is the main aspect of china's Opening-up policy. This policy assert that China must unleash its economic potential by breaking the barriers that hinder the utilization of efficiency and creativity of the people. To achieve sustainable development, a steadfast attitude toward further reform and opening, toward deeper integration with international collaboration, is a must (Shen, 2018: 277). Opening-up, characterized by international trade, is widely believed to have been more substantial in boosting economic growth in the past two decades, or more precisely, since 2001 when China acceded to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Due to its opening-up policies, China has become the largest trading country in the world. In 2017, its foreign trade registered RMB 27.79 trillion (or equivalently US\$4.28 trillion), with exports of RMB 15.33 trillion and imports of RMB 12.46 trillion. Since 2009, China has replaced Germany as the largest exporter in the world. In addition, since 2015, China has replaced the United States as the largest importer as well. In the past four decades, China’s foreign trade volume has increased 204-fold, whereas its gross domestic product (GDP)

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has only increased 34-fold. In this regard, China has already successfully exhibited a miracle of foreign trade (Yu, 2018: 1).

According to Hideo Ohashi "China's opening-up policy under the Xi Jinping administration no longer means the development of specific bilateral relations and the specific requirements to introduce foreign currency and technology but represents the response to multilateral international relations as an economic superpower. (Ohashi, 2018: 100). The BRI, which was initiated by the Chinese government in 2013, is devoted to improving regional cooperation and connectivity on a transcontinental scale. The economic scale of the BRI is large. Even excluding China, which accounts for one-sixth of world's population and around 10% of world GDP, the BRI trade bloc accounts for more than two-fifths of the world's population and nearly a fifth of world GDP. According to the World Bank's estimates, the BRI trade bloc also accounts for around 75% of known energy reserves. Moreover, bilateral trade between other BRI economies and China accounts for more than one-quarter of China's total exports of US\$2 trillion. The scope of the initiative is still taking shape—recently, the BRI has been interpreted to be open to all countries as well as international and regional organizations ((Yu, 2018: 13).

**B). Hydrocarbon resources of Central Asia:**

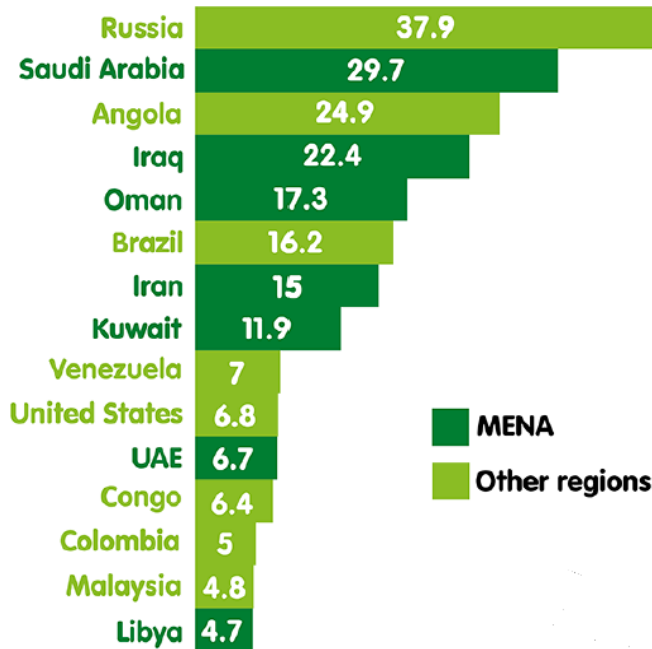
As the world's most populous country with a fast-growing economy, China is already the largest energy producer, consumer, and oil importer. Despite China's huge potential for production, its demand for crude oil has more than doubled since 2000, driven by rapid economic growth, industrialization and increasing exports of refined petroleum products, mainly to other Asian markets. The growth in demand for crude significantly outpaced domestic supply, which rose 23% over the same period. The gap in the crude oil balance has been filled by the increasing reliance on imports that approached 70% of the country's demand in 2016 (Rioux et al., 2019: 2018). In 2018, China had record oil and gas imports and remains the number one crude oil importer in the world after surpassing the United States in 2017 and is the number two natural gas importer, behind Japan, according to the International Energy Administration. (export.gov, 2019). Also, in future, China has to cope with a dual challenge: an energy demand projected to rise by another 44 percent by 2040 (consuming about 80% more than the U.S.) and at the same time, shifting its energy mix from coal to gas, as well as non-fossil fuels (nuclear power and RES). But even in the most optimistic scenario, China will be unable to shift its energy completely to RES by 2040/50 as it is considered too expensive and unrealistic (Umbach and Raszewski, 2016: 32).

Energy recognized as a core national interest among China national security apparatus. Thus, energy security is not only economically vital but also has political, diplomatic and military implication (Lei and Qinyu, 2006:39). The main goals of China's energy security policy are: 1. Ensure energy self-sufficiency to the extent possible and as economically feasible as possible. 2. Secure sufficient and stable supplies of energy resources at reasonable prices. 3. Invest in more energy-efficient technologies and increase the share of renewable

and new energy sources in total energy consumption.4. Establish strategic reserves for use when resources are in short supply or during price hikes in the world market.5. Diversify imports of fossil fuels through trade and cooperation with more countries.5. Sign long term supply contracts for energy import.6. Sign more international contracts for resource exploration and development of new resource bases (Odgaard and Delman, 2014:3).

Given these goals, China has a special focus on Central Asia. China–Central Asia oil and gas cooperation have experienced four stages starting from a single project and ending in regional cooperation: the first stage (1997-2003): A single project of ongoing production, targeting economic benefits. The second stage (2003-2004): New projects for production increase and further cooperation. The third stage (2005-2010): Merger of large projects and the construction of oil and gas pipeline infrastructure. The fourth stage (2011-present): Oil and gas cooperation rapidly improved, as well as the scale of oil and gas pipeline construction (Bin, 2014:559). China is looking towards diversification of its oil import sources. For instance, in 2018, China supplied its refineries crude oil from 46 countries. Approximately half (44.1%) of Chinese imports of crude oil account for nine countries in the Middle East, with payments ranging from \$ 748.8 million from Qatar to \$ 29.7 billion from Saudi Arabia. The top-most suppliers of crude oil to China – the first fifteen countries in 2018 delivered 90.6% of the total crude oil imports to China. Together, the top five Chinese suppliers of crude oil — Russia, Saudi Arabia, Angola, Iraq, and Oman — supplied more than half (55.2%) of total Chinese imports of crude oil in 2018. And the top ten supplies was almost four-fifths (79%) of the volume of imported crude oil (Eurasian Times, 2019).

Pic.1: Top 15 crude oil exporter to china 2018



(Lons et al, 2019:5)

Despite this diversification in imports, China is interested in expanding energy relations with Central Asian countries. The central Asia region is enriched with the huge amount of natural resources such as crude oil, natural gas, gold, copper, and iron. Proven oil and gas reserves across the whole Caspian region, excluding Russia and Iran, are estimated at 190 billion barrels of oil. The possible estimates of its proven gas reserves are about 196 trillion cubic feet. These Islamic countries are regarded as 'treasure house' of natural resources. They possessed the huge potential of hydroelectric power, hydrocarbon resources, crop production and minerals resources. It is estimated that about 4 percent (270-360 trillion cubic feet) gas reserves of the world are there in Central Asia. While its oil reserves are estimated at 2.7 percent (13-15 billion barrels) (Quaid and Muhammad, 2017:38).

In central Asia, 80% of oil supply from Kazakhstan comes through trucks completely avoiding maritime route. China is also the main buyer of Kazakh uranium. Since 2012, more than half of China's gas supply is from Turkmenistan through Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline (CAGP) which also crosses through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. China plans to bring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also in the line by 2016-2017. China has forwarded a loan grant of \$8 billion in Turkmen gas to bring Galkynysh gas field online. President Xi's visit to the region further boosted the economic ties (Khalid et al, 2016: 60). In 2017, China received 38.7 billion cubic meters of natural gas via the Central Asia-China gas pipeline (Shaban, 2017). At present, China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline capacity is 20 million tons per year. The China-Central Asian gas pipeline, which consists of four lines, is expected to provide about 40% of the

gas needed by 2020, equivalent to 80 billion cubic meters per year (Contessi, 2016: 6). Apart from Central Asia being a vital source for fossil fuels, China's land-based link with Central Asia is considered a safe route for the country (Bushra and Adnan, 2017: 364).

#### **4-3. Geopolitical code 3: Security**

China has territorial proximity with Central Asia. China's Xinjiang province shares a 2,800 Km long border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. China's initial problem in Central Asia was just security and border demarcation. After Soviet demise, the issue in Chinese foreign policy circles regarding Central Asia was just fear of instability. This concern is still ongoing because Instability in Central Asia along with Afghanistan could trigger problems in Xinjiang province where China's biggest concern is East Turkestan Islamic Movement (Khalid et al, 2016:59). The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is a Muslim separatist group founded by militant Uyghur's, members of the Turkic-speaking ethnic majority in northwest China's Xinjiang province. It seeks an independent state called East Turkestan that would cover an area including parts of Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) (Beina Et al, 2014:1).

The presence and role played by members of the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan in the form of the Turkestan Islamists Party in Syria's civil war was a serious warning to the Chinese government. according to Uran Botobekov report: more than 2,000 Uyghur fighters of the Turkestan Islamic Party are estimated to have joined with Jabhat Fateh-al-Sham in conducting military operations in northwest Syria against Bashar al-Assad's regime ( Botobekov, 2017). Although the members of the Turkestan Islamist Party, as a branch of the Al-Qaeda, fought for the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad and the implementation of the Shari'a laws on the Islamic frontier, the Chinese officials, however, had a different idea. For instance, Chinese Major General Jin Yinan believes that Turkestan Islamists Party is using the Syrian conflict to increase the recognition of its struggle against China and to gain operational experience in order to return to China and breathe new life into the insurgency back home ( Clarke and Rexton Kan, 2017: 5).

The Islamic Movement of East Turkestan and its connection with the Islamic fundamentalism are concerned China about the increasing terrorist threats inside the country, especially in the Xinjiang region. For different reasons, Xinjiang and its security have strategic importance for China. Firstly, Xinjiang has vast natural reserves. It has 122 kinds of minerals existing in more than 4,000 mineral sites. This constitutes 78 percent of minerals available in entire China. The prospective coal reserves stand at 1600 billion tons that amount to one-third of China's total reserves, Xinjiang has abundant oil and natural gas resources in its Tarim, Junggar, Turpan and Hami basins. Secondly, Xinjiang is strategically located. Its geographical location provides the great advantage to China from the geopolitical point of view. Thirdly, Xinjiang provides China with a corridor



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to assert its influence in Central Asia, a strategically vital region. Central Asia borders not only China but also countries like Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. It also has important ties with India and Pakistan (Panda 2006: 31-32).

Apperception of threat from Xinjiang exist in Chinese historical memory and this issue resulted in a calculation that, in Chinese geopolitical imagine from central Asia Xinjiang and its security have a significant importance. Isabella Steinhauer believes that: Throughout history, East Turkestan, or Xinjiang province, has been in and out of the grip of Chinese imperialist control. The most notable periods can be recognized as the mid-18th century into the early 20th century under the Qing dynasty, and the mid-20th century up to present day under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Steinhauer, 2017: 20). O The kind of Chinese response to the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan is a remarkable example. After the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, Chinese authorities declare their commitment to work with the international community to strengthen political stability, social progress and economic development in Afghanistan. In this regard, Michael Clarke Quoted from China Military Online says that: The complete withdrawal of the U.S. troops in Afghanistan at the end of 2014 will leave a huge security vacuum in the region. At the same time, the regional terrorist forces are rapidly coming back, as evidenced by the facts that the Taliban still has its power in Afghanistan, the core Al Qaeda members hiding in the mountainous areas along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan also seek chances to launch new terrorist attacks, the terrorist organizations including the IMU and the ETIM [East Turkestan Islamic Movement] are accelerating their collusion, and the Islamic State of Iraq and al Shams (ISIS), a newly emerging terrorist organization, even delimits the vast Central Asian and South Asian areas into its ‘territories.’” (Clarke, 2016: 12).

By increasing its expenditures on security in the Central Asian region, China seeks to create secured buffer zones along its borders with Central Asia countries. Also, China’s neighborhood policy towards Central Asia indicates Beijing’s interest in playing a central role in the security field in the region, which is an important part of its multi-billion-dollar investment into the Silk Road Economic Belt. While China’s traditional focus in the security field has been to eradicate the so-called three evil forces, it has also changed to become more about stabilizing the neighboring region than to combat each and every group – in thus doing, minimizing the support for radical groups in Xinjiang and so indirectly reducing tensions. This strategy also has a geopolitical component to it; by engaging the CA states they become more dependent on Chinese aid and collaboration, which in the long term increases China’s influence in the region. China is still largely an external actor and has no military bases in Central Asia (Swanström, 2015:5). China also seeks to ensure that Al-Qaeda- or Taliban-affiliated Tajik Islamists and insurgents will not pose a serious threat to its national security (in particular to the Xinjiang province). China’s new regional security construct could also involve other Central Asian

countries, probably Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, in the future. The new China-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan quadrilateral military alliance (excluding Russia) mainly aims to prevent the growing threat of Islamism in the region, which affects all of the participating countries (**Shahbazov, 2017**).

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to examine the background of China's relations with Central Asia. Given that China and the countries of Central Asia are geographically close, understanding the inner logic of their relationship from a historical landscape could help to predict China's goals in the region. In this regard, the geopolitical imagination was used as a conceptual framework for analyzing the relations between China and Central Asia. The advantage of geopolitical imagination is that it considers both objective and subjective dimensions and presents a complete understanding. In other words, in the study of China relations with Central Asian countries, issues like identity, national legends, and the historical, cultural and ethnic commonalities were important. So, geopolitical imagination could help us to comprehensive knowing.

In geopolitical imagination, it is assumed that the subjective dimension or imagination of a country from one region or another leads to the formation of geopolitical codes, that guide countries in determining the goals and kind of association with the region or country. These geopolitical codes are evident in China's relations with Central Asian countries. The number of these codes is manifold. However, the codes that are referred to in this article are the exclusive codes that China has set up to regulate its relationship with Central Asian countries. These codes are: 1. Great game code: the great game code refers to an important competition in Central Asia. According to this code, In addition to the great powers, regional governments and non-state actors, including international organizations, seek to increase their influence. The aim of many actors in the game is to use the economic and political opportunities of the region. Because they know a country that has control over Hartland or the axis of history can rule the world. China as a major power, as well as a neighbor, has competed in this game. It should be noted that, Contrary to many arguments that China is seeking to change political order through regional initiatives, including the new Silk Road in Central Asia, the paper believes that due to the constraints that exist in the international and regional structures, China's goal is more to reform the political order. The Chinese political order is a multipolar order.

2. Economic Code: The initiative of one belt-one road and the use of hydrocarbon resources in Central Asia are raised up in this geopolitical code. Our finding shows that through one belt, one road, China seeks to revive the ancient Silk Road. The Silk Road and its revival have breathed in the imagination of China from Central Asia. In addition, China's growing demand for hydrocarbon resources like oil and gas has made it important to supply these resources from Central Asia. Easy access and low prices are the benefits of hydrocarbon resources in Central Asia. 3. Security code: According to this code, Central Asian security in general and the security of Xinjiang in can be

considered as an important issue. In addition, the prevention of Xinjiang's threats against China, including the actions of separatist and radical groups such as the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan, are considered by China.

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