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CHINA STRATEGY IN CENTRAL ASIA IN THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE CONTEXT

Summary: Evolution of the Beijing strategy in Central Asia promulgated by the changes in the Western policies towards China and formation of the Eurasian economic union. The Beijing belt and road initiative as a broader context for such strategy.

Key words: China strategy in Central Asia, belt and road initiative, Western policies towards China, Eurasian economic union.

Traditionally Beijing saw Central Asia as a strategic backyard of China. The region did not carry such importance for the PRC as relations with the USA or ASEAN countries. A young Belarusian researcher Maria Danilovich travelled extensively in Xinjiang and successfully defended in 2015 her PhD thesis “The Central Asian Vector of the PRC Foreign Policy in 2001-2013”. In her thesis she wrote: “*The main interest* of China in the region remained – maintaining national security (security of the North-West of the PRC under the condition of the stable situation in the region). While developing the Chinese policy in Central Asia in recent years, along with the main interest the leading role was played by the so-called *important interests*: providing for the energy needs and implementing the tasks of the economic development”. [2, p. 14]

The role of Central Asia as a strategic backyard of China has somewhat changed in two recent years.

The first change is associated with new attitudes of the Western World to a new economically, politically and militarily powerful China. The Western States (and their close allies like Japan, Australia, South Korea) were alarmed by the strong performance of the Chinese national economy (even during the world economic and financial crisis of 2008-2009 it showed a remarkable growth of over 7 per cent). The Chinese strategy “go global” in international trade and investments accelerated and put the western companies in direct competition with the Chinese companies in the Third World and even in the Western countries themselves. The military-industrial complex of the West and some politicians were genially alarmed by the fast modernization of the PLA. The reasons for concern were multiplied by the new assertive Beijing policy in the East China Sea (2012 crisis over the Senkaku islands) and in the South China Sea (territorial disputes with Viet Nam, the Philippines and other countries). These new concerns grew on the foundation of the traditional concept of the threat to the Western democracies and universal human rights emanating from the communist authoritarianism.

The second change is associated with the new Western and partly Russian policies. The concerns over the Chinese bolder international policies were conceptualized in the West that resulted in reviving the strategy of containment. This strategy materialized in some practical steps recently undertaken by the West. In January 2013 it was announced that the negotiations on creating the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) had begun. In March 2013 negotiations started on developing the EU-Japan FTZ. The negotiations on creating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) were intensified and in October 2015 the relevant agreement was signed. The agreement united 12 main countries in the Asia Pacific region, excluding China. All these moves were rightly assessed in Beijing as attempts to rewrite the rules of international trade behind the China back (and outside of the WTO framework, which on the insistence of the West the PRC joined) [1, p. 144-145]. In addition, to the north and west of China the Eurasian Economic Union was formed by Russia and started functioning since January 1, 2015.

The third change is associated with the new China's policies. The Chinese leaders who came to power in March 2013 started thinking of overcoming the policy of economic containment of China. It seems that they are looking today in at least two main possibilities. The Chinese leaders offered the West a "carrot" approach. They offered the Chinese money and other resources to improve effectiveness of the world economic ties. Prime Minister Li Kejang during his visit to Islamabad in May 2013 confirmed Beijing intention to create a "Chinese-Pakistani economic corridor", and later during negotiations in Delhi he introduced idea of developing an economic corridor China-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar. Later this way of strategic thinking was continued by President Xi Jinping who put forward a suggestion to develop an economic belt of the silk road.

In parallel with the "carrot" strategy the Chinese leaders were trying to forge some kind of an economic "stick" in order to counter the Western policy of containment. In his speech at the Nazarbaev University in Astana on September 7, 2013, Xi Jinping declared: "Member-states and observer states of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization cover Eurasia, South and West Asia, and we can received an enormous space for development by strengthening cooperation between the EAEU and the SCO" [6]. In other words, Xi Jinping was trying to show that there is an opportunity to create a mighty economic community that could be capable of successfully develop itself without Western assistance. And eventually this community could turn into a powerful competitor of the Western regional integration formations.

And as one can clearly see Central Asia is directly involved in both the "carrot" and "stick" strategies.

The attitudes of the Governments of the Central Asian states become of the paramount importance for the implementation of the "carrot" and "stick" Chinese strategies. And because of that the traditional Beijing view of Central Asia as a strategic backyard of China becomes obsolete, the region becomes intertwined with the broader Chinese strategy – "go global", part of which is devoted to countering the attempts to contain China.

One of the instruments of this strategy in Central Asia is the SCO. For some years the SCO had been used by Beijing to counterweigh the Russian (and partly American) influence in the region. Today the organization is seen as one of the avenues for promoting the economic belt of the silk road initiative.

Leading Kazakhstani expert on China Konstantin Syroezhkin wrote few years ago that “formation of Customs Union between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, and in perspective, formation of the Eurasian Economic Union are the essential steps forward in limiting the Chinese appetite in relation towards the post-Soviet countries in general, and the Central Asian states, in particular” [6, p. 61]. Some members of the political elites of the Central Asian states are afraid of this “appetite” and would like to really limit the Chinese infiltration into the region. At the same time the leaders of the Central Asian states try to conduct policies of balancing between interests of Russia, USA and China. A striking example of the latter is the content of the new Concept of Foreign Policy of the Kazakhstan Republic, signed by President Nazarbaev in February 2014 [4].

The perception of China in Central Asia somewhat changed during last two years. When the Western sanctions were introduced against Russia China extended a helping hand towards Moscow. This produced a favorable response among Central Asian populaces. “Today, - writes Konstantin Syroezhkin, - not just political establishment but also population of Central Asia do not consider China being a source of potential threats. Moreover, she (China – A.B.) moved into the category of favorable foreign political and economic partner and is sometimes considered being a decent alternative to Russia and the Western countries in providing for the regional security” [5, p. 168].

There are two main routes for the economic belt of the silk road that are under consideration today. One route goes from China to Central Asia – to Russia – to Belarus, and – to Europe (the Baltic Sea). Another route extends from China to Central Asia, - to Western Asia,- to the Persian Gulf – to the Red Sea, and through Suez Channel – to the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, Central Asia is really central to both these routes.

Central Asia, bordering Afghanistan, obtained more international attention and became a playground for different geopolitical interests after 2001 when US forces started an anti-terrorist war in Afghanistan. Many global and regional players became involved in Central Asian affairs, among them Russia, China, USA, Turkey and Iran.

After the withdrawal of the US combat troops from Afghanistan in 2014 Washington pays less attention to the region. On the contrary, Moscow increased its efforts to ensure stability of the Russian security perimeter using different means of “hard power” and “soft power”. The latest Russian “soft power” invention was to create a Eurasian Union that would ideally include all the former Soviet republics, except the Baltic States.

After the refusal of Belarus and Kazakhstan to go along with the formation of a political Eurasian Union, Moscow reluctantly agreed to create the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEC), considering it to be the first step towards a more coherent political entity.

Now the EAEC consists of five former Soviet republics (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia) with Tajikistan considering joining. I don't have any substantial proof but it seems that Tajikistan would have already joined the EAEC, if Beijing hadn't done some elegant work on Dushanbe.

From the very beginning Beijing viewed the EAEC on the par with other regional integration initiatives that excluded China: TTIP, TPP and FTZ between Japan and EU. But after Russia came under the pressure of the Western sanctions over Ukraine, the Chinese leaders saw a window of opportunity in breaking the chain of the inter-regional economic blocks encircling China.

At this juncture comes a proposal from Xi Jinping to integrate the EAEC, the SCO and the economic belt on the silk road. To facilitate things in this direction, Beijing even agreed to India's joining the SCO (alongside with Pakistan).

Moscow would like to retain the EAEC under its own undivided control but being forced to fight the Western policy of containment reluctantly agreed to allow

Beijing to develop the economic belt of the silk road through the heart of the EAEC. A relevant Joint Statement was adopted by both sides in Moscow on May 9, 2015.

Today one could envisage at least two scenarios for the future:

(1) Moscow and Beijing agree on dividing their interests and responsibilities in the EAEC, the SCO and the economic belt of the silk road. In this case there will be a strong possibility to integrate the potentials of these three. And by doing this, to increase their chances to break the Western containment of China and Russia. If we narrow this scenario just to the framework of the Central Asian region, we could come to a conclusion that it would be quite visible to divide their interests and responsibilities in Central Asia, because two main resources of the region – hydro carbonates and labor force - could go to different destinations: hydro carbonates – to China, and labor force – to Russia.

(2) Because of historical traditions, prejudices and strong inclinations to be a global power China and Russia do not agree on dividing and respecting the interests and responsibilities of each other. In this case the SCO remains as today a platform for dialogue, and Moscow impedes the economic belt of the silk road going unobtrusively through the EAEC.

The battle about who would dominate Central Asia is on. But so far it's mostly a political battle. Up to now, economic indicators do not point out at economically sustainable belt on the silk road.

First of all, there are not that many goods in the Western or even Central provinces of China waiting to be transported to Europe via the belt. Even less things are waiting to be railroaded from Europe to China. Most products that are exported to Europe are made in Eastern and Southern provinces of China with an easy access to the shipping lines.

Secondly, the price of shipping goods to Europe is much less than for railroading them. Moreover, the transportation giant –Danish “Maersk” – has recently ordered building at Korean shipyards 10 huge vessels (container carriers) capable of taking aboard 18 thousand standard 20-foot containers (TEU) at once. In

October 2015 the Chinese shipbuilders produced in Shanghai a similar container carrier named “Zheng He” [3, p. 12]. And they are not going to stop at that. The price for container transportation in such big quantities is going to become even lower. The only economic advantage the belt has is a somewhat shorter time span needed for the transportation of goods to Europe. And knowing that companies mostly transport not fresh agricultural products one can easily overlook this time difference.

Thirdly, the economic belt on the silk road would have to deal with notorious Kazakhstani, Russian and Belarusian transportation bureaucracies as well as the different width of the railways in China, Russia, and Europe.

In conclusion, it must be said that the belt and road initiative was introduced while the relations between Russia and the EU were quite friendly with a free flow of goods, services and capitals between them. Without such free flow le raison d’etre behind the belt and road concept is disappearing (at least, behind its northern route going through Russia and Belarus). But the belt and road initiative as a whole could survive the cutting of ties between Russia and the West. It could keep the sea route and the route through Central Asia, West Asia, the Red Sea and the Suez Channel.

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