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The Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Central Asia: Building New Relations in a Reshaped Geopolitical Scenario

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1 The Belt and Road Initiative: Focus on Central Asia

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a global geopolitical strategy backed by China to increase interconnectivity through the realization of an economic and trade corridor that crosses Eurasia to link China with Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. Since 2013, when Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the former Silk Road Economic Belt project during a speech at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, China has invested billions of dollars to build new transport infrastructures—highways, railroads, dry ports, pipelines—or to upgrade existing

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ones on which to undertake this strategy (Huang 2016: 314–321). According to China's National Reform and Development Commission, since the launch of this global strategy China has invested over US\$50 billion in countries along the Belt and Road and between 2014 and 2016 signed contracts for new construction projects worth US\$304.9 billion (*China Daily* 2017). This massive financial engagement was confirmed in May 2017 during the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, when Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged US\$124 billion in a combination of aid, loans, and investments to the countries involved in the BRI.

Before the launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in January 2016, bilateral loans—which are mainly granted by state-owned commercial banks, particularly China Exim Bank—and the Silk Road Fund (SRF, created in November 2014 with US\$40 billion), were the main investment tools for realizing BRI-labeled projects. During the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017 the Chinese President decided to allocate US\$14.7 billion more to the SRF and to make an additional US\$79.4 billion of investments (International Crisis Group 2017: 4). However, the AIIB—with US\$100 billion in nominal capital, which will be paid in gradually by members—is expected to be one of the main sources of finance for the BRI, both investing and attracting other financial support to develop transport, energy, and communication projects in the region. The AIIB has approved loans worth US\$1.73 billion to support 13 projects in eight countries, including the former Soviet states of Azerbaijan and Tajikistan (Sands 2017; Hong 2017: 355).

From a Chinese perspective, BRI geopolitical projects aim to achieve two strategic goals: the implementation of an alternative continental route for trade and energy imports to reduce the dependence on maritime routes crossing Malacca and the South China Sea; and the enhancement of a security buffer zone between Xinjiang western province and Central Asia to preserve China's western provinces from instability and threats linked to Islamist terrorism (International Crisis Group 2017: 4–5). Central Asia has a strategic relevance to the BRI because this region is crossed by two of the six main BRI economic corridor projects (China–Central Asia–West Asia and the Eurasian land bridge) which will have an impact on their economic evolution and will influence the regional geopolitical scenario.

The China–Central Asia–West Asia corridor should connect the China–Kazakhstan railway to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran. This corridor is strategically relevant in geopolitical terms, mainly because it will bypass Russian territory and thereby downplay Russia’s influence in Central Asia.

The new Eurasian land bridge economic corridor will involve Russia by linking China with Europe via Kazakhstan and Russia. There are other sub-corridors, or spurs, of the main projects that are particularly relevant:

- the Khorgos–Aktau railway, linking the Kazakh port in the Caspian Sea to the main BRI trade gateway of Khorgos;
- the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan Railway, linking the western Xinjiang cities of Kashgar/Kashi, via the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh, to Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan;
- China–Central Asia gas pipeline, which at present is mainly fueled with Turkmen gas but, following the realization of Line D, will involve all five Central Asian countries as both suppliers and transit countries (Cooley 2016: 5).

The involvement of Central Asian countries in the BRI is evidently very profitable, by ensuring them economic and political benefits. In geopolitical terms, a growing Chinese presence in the region will allow Central Asian countries to undertake a multivector strategy in foreign policy, containing the traditional Russian influence, and balancing Moscow’s pressures to join or further develop their economic integration project, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The Chinese initiative is based on an inclusive dimension; all five Central Asian republics are involved in the BRI mainly because the support to this project does not include a rigid membership to a potential supranational organization, like the adhesion to the EEU (Bugajski and Assenova 2016). The convergence of massive investments to develop and upgrade national infrastructures will be highly profitable for Central Asian countries by promoting interconnectivity and improving regional trade cooperation through the creation of a trans-regional transport network, and by opening up new markets for these landlocked countries; furthermore, modernization of

the transport infrastructure will allow Central Asian states to set aside the networks of pipelines, roads, and railways inherited from the Soviet era, which were designed to serve the needs of the Russian hub of the Soviet economy (Indeo 2017: 39; Cooley 2016: 3).

China has become the main economic power in the region. Trade between China and the five Central Asian republics has risen from US\$1.8 billion in 2000 to US\$34 billion in 2015, while the five states' trade with Russia amounted to only US\$23 billion (Peyrouse 2017: 98). Moreover, China is the most important creditor in the region; in addition to the financing of infrastructural projects, the energy sector in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan has attracted huge investments from the Chinese government and banks, which granted US\$8 billion to Turkmenistan and US\$13 billion to Kazakhstan to develop oil and natural gas deposits and to realize east-oriented pipelines to ship hydrocarbons to China (Cooley 2016: 4). The economic downturn which has affected Russia—due to the collapse of oil prices and the effects of Western sanctions—has currently hampered Moscow in fulfilling its economic commitments to realize hydroelectric power plant projects in Kyrgyzstan and to provide a military aid package to Tajikistan, which has eroded its geopolitical influence in the post-Soviet space.

It is interesting to analyze how the BRI is influencing the foreign policy of Central Asian countries and relations between them and Russia. As a matter of fact, even if Beijing denies having political ambitions and highlights that BRI is only a global economic project, it is clear that Chinese involvement in the region will erode and marginalize Russia's presence. By enhancing a new framework of cooperation between China and Central Asian countries, there will be an impact in the domestic political field (Orozobekova 2016). In spite of the Chinese reiterating their adhesion to the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, the size of their investments and the realization of huge infrastructural projects will entail a growing influence of China on the foreign policy orientations and decisions adopted by Central Asian republics—especially since China has signed a strategic partnership agreement with all of them.

In this chapter, the analysis will be focused on the influence of the BRI in the foreign policy orientations of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and

Tajikistan because its impact in these countries appears to be significant, and because of the different roles they have in the regional geopolitical chessboard: Kazakhstan is a founder member of the EEU; Tajikistan is evaluating its adhesion; while Uzbekistan has always refused to join the EEU, preferring to play a multivector strategy in foreign policy. Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan are also included in the BRI and benefit from this project: China realized strategic road connections in Kyrgyzstan—Osh–Sarytash–Irkeshtam and Bishkek–Naryn–Torugart; while Turkmenistan is one of the most important natural gas suppliers for Beijing, following the realization of the China–Central Asia gas pipeline. However, the impact of the Chinese initiative on their foreign policy is less compared to the other three Central Asian countries: Kyrgyzstan’s adhesion to the EEU enhances its pro-Russian orientation in foreign policy; while the most visible impact of the BRI in Turkmenistan is almost exclusively limited to the energy sector, to implement the eastward gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China.

2 Uzbekistan: BRI Projects and Regional Cooperation

Given its geographic centrality in the heart of Central Asia—sharing a border with the other four Central Asian republics and with Afghanistan—Uzbekistan is in a key strategic position in the BRI. Since independence, the main rationale of Uzbek foreign policy has been to balance interests between East and West, containing Russian, Chinese, and US influence. However, the new President Mirziyoyev has undertaken a proactive approach to foreign policy, based on a profitable multivector strategy to strengthen cooperation with both Russia and China, but mainly oriented to revamping regional cooperation, improving relations with other Central Asian republics (Rakhimov 2017). In this new paradigm, cooperation with China on the BRI project is a key component that is influencing Tashkent’s strategic orientations, especially because China’s political and economic system is perceived as a concrete and successful alternative to Western-style democracy or to overcome the Russian legacy; moreover, the Chinese approach of pursuing “the principles of non-interference in

the internal affairs of other states” makes China a model partner for Uzbekistan (Yu-Wen Chen and Günther 2016).

Before the launch of the Chinese initiative, Uzbekistan had progressively enhanced its relations and cooperation with China, which became an important trade and political partner. Under the former President Karimov, Uzbekistan and China signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership in June 2012, upgrading their political and economic relations. During Xi Jinping’s visit to Tashkent in September 2013, in addition to several agreements on economic cooperation, they also signed a Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation and a Joint Declaration “On Further Development and Deepening Bilateral Relations of Strategic Partnership.” Following this agreement Uzbekistan and China are committed to strongly supporting each other’s chosen path of development in respect of internal conditions and supporting each other’s international cooperation initiatives. Moreover, these countries have engaged themselves to avoid joining alliances or military blocs that could damage the sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of the other side (Tolipov 2013).

These principles are in line with the foreign policy doctrine of Uzbekistan, which is based on four pillars: non-intervention in the internal matters of foreign countries; non-alignment with any military organizations, including non-deployment of foreign military bases on the territory of Uzbekistan; non-membership in the Russian-led EEU; and improvement of relations with Uzbekistan’s immediate neighbors, which will be implemented as a key priority matter (this last pillar was introduced by the new Uzbek President Mirziyoyev, reorienting Uzbek foreign policy toward Central Asia). From a Chinese BRI perspective, Uzbekistan is important not only as a transit country but also as security partner in order to maintain stability in Central Asia and cooperate in the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, even if Uzbekistan does not share a border with China (Hashimova 2016; Yu-Wen Chen and Günther 2016).

In May 2017, the Uzbek President visited China to sign a bilateral deal with President Xi Jinping and to attend an important conference on the BRI. During the bilateral summit, Uzbekistan and China signed nearly 100 deals, worth a total of US\$20 billion, which legitimized China’s role as the main trading partner of Uzbekistan; in 2016 bilateral

trade turnover hit US\$4.2 billion and both countries aim to reach US\$10 billion in the future (Hashimova 2016). Moreover, China is a key investor in Uzbekistan, helping the country in the process of modernization and in the economy's diversification. Following the last bilateral meeting in Beijing, a Chinese bank has pledged to entirely finance a US\$1.2 billion project for the production of synthetic liquid fuel at Uzbekistan's largest gas refinery complex in Shurtan, while an additional US\$3 billion will be invested in the modernization of around 300 water pumping stations and in the development of Uzbekistan's hydroelectricity sector. The realization of the Pap–Angren railway, which connects the Ferghana Valley (in eastern Uzbekistan) with other Uzbek regions, represents the most important project realized with the support of Chinese capital. This railway is a segment of a larger BRI project, which aims to realize a trans-regional railway connecting China's western city of Kashgar to Osh, in the Kyrgyz sector of the Ferghana Valley, and from there the railway will reach Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey. Chinese companies are also involved in the realization of a US\$175 million motorway project, an automobile tunnel under the Kamchik Pass to run parallel to the railroad in the Ferghana Valley. In the energy sector, China has also financed and realized three pipelines to connect Uzbekistan to the main gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China, also engaging itself to supply ten billion cubic meters of natural gas per year (*Eurasianet* 2017).

During the BRI summit, the Uzbek President stressed the strategic relevance of the planned China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan–Afghanistan railroad to connect the region with markets in the Persian Gulf and in South Asia. At present Uzbekistan is Afghanistan's only neighbor with a railway connection, the Termez–Hairaton–Mazar-i-Sharif railway. The improvement of bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan clearly represents a necessary precondition for completing this strategic transportation project, Kyrgyz opposition has to be overcome to realize the domestic line of this trans-regional railway project. However, the visit of Uzbek Prime Minister Aripov to Kyrgyzstan in August 2017 could pave the way for a solution to the border problems and their definitive demarcation, also allowing some progress in the realization of a China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway (Pannier 2017b). In this new paradigm of renovated regional cooperation, the recent rapprochement with

Turkmenistan will produce significant geopolitical benefits, connecting Uzbekistan with the north–south railway from China through Turkmenistan, which will allow Tashkent to open trade corridors with the Caspian and Persian Gulf regions.

In spite of this privileged cooperation with China, Uzbekistan continues to successfully play a multivector policy, which also includes Russia. As a matter of fact, even if Mirziyoyev reiterated the traditional Uzbek approach to foreign policy by refusing to join the regional organization backed by Russia in the security field (the Collective Security Treaty Organization) and in the economic field (the EEU), he did renew economic cooperation with Russia by signing economic and cooperation deals for US\$16 billion during a visit to Moscow in April and a military–technical cooperation agreement (Mashrab 2017). On the one hand, Russia is recognized as an important trade and political partner in the region, and Uzbekistan considers it profitable to cooperate with Moscow in bilateral terms. On the other hand, Uzbekistan can successfully play both the Chinese and Russian cards in the Central Asia geopolitical scenario, exploiting their competition to maximize benefits and strategic gains.

3 Kazakhstan: Central Asian Pivot of the Modern “Silk Road”

The political stability that has characterized the country after independence, the huge economic growth supported by oil exports, the strategic centrality of its geographic position as a kind of Euro–Asia bridge are the main reasons that have allowed Kazakhstan to undertake a multivector strategy in foreign policy. Even if Kazakhstan is one of the founder members of the EEU and a traditional partner of Russia, President Nazarbayev has enthusiastically supported the Belt and Road geopolitical initiative, within which Kazakhstan plays a strategic role as Central Asian pivot. Significantly, Chinese President Xi Jinping presented the former Silk Road Economic Belt initiative in Kazakhstan, at the Nazarbayev University in Almaty on September 7, 2013, confirming the special and

long-term relations between China and this Central Asian republic, which were recently upgraded through the Sino–Kazakh strategic partnership signed in 2005 (McDermott 2011).

Kazakhstan benefits from a significant role in the BRI initiative, as a strategic transit country crossed by most of the land corridors projected to reach Europe. As a matter of fact, Kazakhstan is crossed by the Eurasian land bridge corridor and the China–Central Asia–West Asia corridor, and is also fully involved in the Khorgos–Aktau railway corridor, aimed to link the Sino–Kazakh border with the Kazakh seaport in the Caspian Sea (Indeo 2017: 40–41). Astana has already received over US\$27 billion of China’s BRI investment to realize these transport infrastructures and to develop some transport hubs along the Sino–Kazakh border; among them, Khorgos—opened in 2015—is the most relevant land bridge, which currently represents the main commercial and logistic hub in Eurasia under the BRI label (Ghiasi and Zhou 2017: 20). The strategic centrality of Khorgos to the BRI, which also hosts one of the ten Special Economic Zones created by Nazarbayev, is confirmed not only by the railway connecting the Sino–Kazakh border with Aktau—one of the main oil-producing areas of the country, where Chinese companies invested several billion dollars to exploit the energy sector—but also because it is the main gateway of the BRI infrastructural and energy projects (Assar 2017). In May 2017, the Chinese COSCO Shipping Corporation and Jiangsu Lianyungang Port Co purchased a 49% stake in the Khorgos transport hub from the national railway company, further showing the relevance of this transport hub to the BRI project (*China Daily* 2017).

The deep cooperation with China in the BRI framework has gradually influenced the evolution of Kazakh foreign policy, which remains multi-vector—based on balancing the interests and goals of all external actors involved in the country—even if it is gradually coordinating and integrating with the Chinese initiative.

As a matter of fact, President Nazarbayev has highlighted the strategic complementarity between the BRI initiative and Kazakhstan’s new economic policy, called the Bright Road, because both aim to create new transport infrastructures integrated with the big international railway and roads in order to consolidate the role of Kazakhstan as a political and

economic bridge between East and West. This cooperation is conceived as mutually beneficial for achieving a common prosperity, also allowing Kazakhstan to be connected with international markets and to develop diplomatic and commercial partnerships with other players (Putz 2015b; Kassenova 2017: 110–116). According to Kazakh officials, the integration of these projects will create a multiplying effect for the development of industries and unimpeded trade in the region, turning Kazakhstan into a major Eurasian transport and logistics hub (*Astana Times* 2016).

The mutual dimension of this strategic cooperation in foreign policy further emerges following the visit of President Xi Jinping to Astana in June 2017 (one month after the BRI summit in Beijing), when he signed US\$8 billion business deals confirming the Chinese intention to work on aligning the BRI with Kazakhstan's *Nurly Zhol* (The Path to the Future) economic policy (International Crisis Group 2017). Furthermore, China–Kazakhstan economic cooperation is not limited to infrastructure projects. Since 2005, China and Kazakhstan have developed a profitable cooperation in the energy field, and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has invested billions of dollars to exploit Kazakh oil fields. The Atyrau–Alashankou oil pipeline represents a tangible result of this cooperation, allowing both Astana and Beijing to enhance the diversification strategy of energy routes (CNPC 2017). In addition to the oil sector, China is also interested in completing the Beyneu–Bozoi–Shymkent gas pipeline, which will be connected to the China–Central Asia Gas Pipeline, at present fueled by Turkmen and Uzbek gas.

Chinese investments are crucial to support Kazakhstan's efforts to overcome the economic downturn mainly due to the scenario of low oil prices and worsened by membership of the EEU, where the Russian economy is severely affected by Western sanctions. Kazakhstan (and Kyrgyzstan) do not have significant economic benefits from their EEU adhesion, even if the abolition of customs barriers from the Kazakh–Kyrgyz border in August 2015 and from shared EEU borders is a concrete result of this regional cooperation. There are some economic distortions to address and hindrances to remove to implement economic cooperation within the EEU. One of the main problems is that the single external tariff adopted by EEU members is based on pre-existing higher Russian trade tariffs, and, consequently, for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

imports are more expensive (mainly for Kyrgyzstan this regime implies higher prices on Chinese imports and difficulties for wholesale and re-export trade). Moreover, the balance of trade is unfavorable to Kazakhstan. National exports within EEU space are declining as is bilateral trade with neighboring Kyrgyzstan (International Crisis Group 2016: 10–13; Pannier 2017a).

Even if Nazarbayev has strongly supported the idea of Eurasia for a long time, he fears the perceived neo-imperialist approach of Moscow in the region, which could affect and limit the profitable multivector strategy adopted in his foreign policy, as well as their national sovereignty. The Kazakh President has clearly stressed that the EEU will only have an economic dimension, refusing the idea of creating a supranational political institution. In fact, to preserve its sovereignty and political independence, Kazakhstan has threatened to leave the EEU (Satpayev 2015: 11–16).

4 Tajikistan: Between the BRI and the EEU

The impact of the BRI on Tajikistan's foreign policy is a good case study given the position of the country in the geopolitical regional scenario. Unlike Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, Tajikistan is a poor country, without natural resources to exploit; and since its independence this Central Asian republic has been dependent on Russia in the economic, energy, and security fields. Tajikistan has become a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and Moscow maintains its largest foreign military base in the country (the 201st Motorized Rifle Division). Tajikistan has not yet joined the EEU, which has opened a space for maneuver for China to extend its influence in the country through the BRI strategy.

Since 2014 Tajikistan has enthusiastically supported the BRI. The two sides have adopted a five-year development plan for a China–Tajikistan strategic partnership, with the ambition to expand bilateral cooperation in economy and trade, infrastructure construction, energy, and mining, and to create favorable conditions to attract more Chinese investment (*China Daily* 2014). It is evident that Chinese investments aim to realize internal rail and road routes—which could eventually form the basis of a

new trans-regional network—and to boost the national security system to better fight the terrorist threat coming from neighboring Afghanistan, which has gradually influenced Tajikistan's foreign policy. However, Tajikistan still appears too geopolitically weak to successfully play a multivector foreign policy while balancing Sino–Russian interests. China has invested approximately US\$720 million in infrastructure improvements in Tajikistan, including the rebuilding, widening, and improvement of the road between Dushanbe and Khujand, and the opening of a new major highway from Dushanbe to Kulma, which has incentivized the rise of bilateral trade (Shahbazov 2017). The implementation of the Dushanbe–Kulyab–Khorog–Kulma–Karakorum highway will be the key project in the Sino–Tajik cooperation, because this route will run from Dushanbe to Xinjiang, crossing the border at the Kulma Pass, the only overland route between Tajikistan and China (Putz 2015a). Furthermore, the project to build the China–Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan–Afghanistan–Iran railway will increase connectivity in the region, opening new trade routes toward the Persian Gulf and boosting the necessary cooperation between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which have had bad relations due to border disputes. In 2016, the AIIB approved a loan of US\$27.5 million for the Dushanbe–Uzbekistan border road improvement project, for an upgrade of a key five-kilometer section of the motorway. This project is co-financed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development with US\$62.5 million, in a total project cost of US\$105.9 million (AIIB 2017). In this case, the precondition for implementing the project will be the improvement of bilateral cooperation with Uzbekistan, solving border problems, and other issues, which will also benefit China.

In addition to economic and trade issues, the growing military presence of China in Tajikistan as a potential security provider is raising discontent and concern in Moscow, which wants to maintain the Central Asian country under its sphere of influence. Following the withdrawal of NATO military forces from Afghanistan in 2014—although a new NATO-led mission is currently training and assisting Afghan security forces—Russia and the existing multilateral security organizations—CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes both China and Russia—appear unable to provide security in the region. Chinese concerns about stability in Tajikistan are strongly linked to the need to provide security for the trade and energy corridors included in

the BRI framework. China has to adopt concrete initiatives to contain and fight the serious threats represented by transnational terrorism and radical Islamist insurgency, which could propagate along the shared borders and seriously affect China's western region. The vulnerable and porous Tajik–Afghan border is the main source of concern, considering that it is regularly threatened and affected by Taliban attacks. Moreover, many ethnic Tajiks have fought in the Middle East under the banner of the Islamic State—from 400 to 2000, depending on the source—and they could represent a threat to Tajik and regional stability following their return after the defeat of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (Lemon 2015: 69–73). To address these threats, on August 4, 2016, China promoted a new regional forum in the security field, the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism, with Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, to develop closer military cooperation in a multilateral regional organization which excludes Russia. Furthermore, in September 2016, China signed an agreement with Tajikistan, pledging the construction of 11 outposts and a training center along the Afghan–Tajik border. In terms of military assistance, China has already spent US\$15 million to construct apartments for military officers in Dushanbe, while in October 2016 China held its first-ever joint bilateral counterterrorism exercises in Gorno Badakhshan, the remote eastern end of Tajikistan that borders both Afghanistan and China (Shahbazov 2017).

The Dushanbe government is attracted by the Chinese perspective because Beijing is concretely investing in the country, effectively realizing the pledged projects, while Russia appears unable to fulfill its promises to invest in the country. In 2012, when Tajikistan allowed Russia to extend the lease of its military base in the country for another 30 years, Moscow pledged to grant US\$200 million in military aid to Tajikistan, which became US\$1.2 billion in 2015. After Chinese military maneuvers in Tajikistan, Russia has further renovated its promise to deliver military equipment to the country, also offering to expand its military presence by renting a new military base in Ayni. Nevertheless, these promises of financial and military aid have not entirely materialized (Kucera 2016; *Asia Plus* 2017).

In this Sino–Russian competition to extend influence in this Central Asian country, the turning point will be Tajikistan's decision about its membership of the EEU. For China, the adhesion of Tajikistan in the

Russia-led EEU would hamper its chances of directly shipping its economic goods to Central Asia. As a matter of fact, Tajikistan remains the only Central Asian country sharing a border with China that is not included in the Russian project of economic integration.

At present Tajikistan has not made a decision and is studying the experience of countries like Kyrgyzstan within the EEU, while the negative economic records of Russia and Kazakhstan may push Tajik President Rahmon to carefully rethink this important step in foreign policy (*Asia Plus* 2017; Salimov 2015). At the same time, Russia could play some strong cards to influence Tajik decisions, among them, Tajik migrant workers in Russia and the economic relevance of their remittances for the national budget, even though since 2014–2015 the number of Tajik worker migrants in Russia has been decreasing because of the economic downturn affecting the Russian economy. Nearly a million Tajik citizens live in Russia and their remittances cover around half the country's annual GDP. The adoption of restrictive immigration policies or the promise of better conditions could influence the approach of Tajik authorities, considering the destabilizing repercussions linked to the return of Tajik workers from Russia in a national context of unemployment, poverty, and lack of professional prospects (Indeo 2016: 9–10).

5 Conclusion

The BRI is an ambitious global economic project that will modify the current geopolitical landscape, not only in Central Asia but also in all the countries involved. For Central Asian countries, BRI is an attractive idea and its success will ensure economic benefits in terms of access to new markets, transit fees, and modern infrastructures. Nevertheless, the envisaged prosperity promoted by the BRI will not be homogeneous. Some countries will be able to exploit their position as strategic pawns in the Chinese initiative, while others could have more difficulty.

The Chinese initiative will allow Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to further maintain their multivector strategy in foreign policy. In the case of Kazakhstan, the envisaged integration between BRI and *Nurly Zhol* appears limited to the economic dimension, while relations with Russia could potentially be managed in a wider framework based on potential

cooperation between the BRI and the EEU (or better, Russia). However, the potential merger of these two geopolitical strategies will mean China and Russia have to overcome mutual mistrust in some fields and work on a tailored cooperation.

Uzbekistan's ability to look for a balance between Russia and China is also confirmed by its new president. The combination of BRI investment and new regional foreign policy could produce significant results while legitimizing the country as a powerful actor in the regional chessboard.

China has become a reliable partner in foreign policy for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, but they will not be able to resist the potential pressure of Russia, which disposes of several tools to reorient their political decision (migrant workers, energy dependence, trade, the use of Kant military airbase in Kyrgyzstan and other military facilities in Tajikistan).

For Turkmenistan, the gas pipeline oriented to China has represented a great success in foreign policy, breaking the traditional Russian monopoly on the control of Turkmen exports. However, Ashgabat is nearly totally dependent on this export route, highlighting an unbalanced dependence on China, which is conditioning the evolution of its foreign policy.

One of the main long-term problems for Sino–Central Asia cooperation within the BRI project will be the capacity of these countries to repay the huge loans granted by China. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in particular could suffer from this situation, because they have no energy reserves, raw materials, or goods to sell in international markets. Another issue is that Central Asian public opinion is increasingly worried about China's growing activism. The threat of Beijing's hidden long-term intentions for territorial expansion and interference could push Central Asian countries to limit their cooperation with China.

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