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RETHINKING SINO-CENTRAL ASIAN PERSPECTIVES AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Economic cooperation of the PRC with Central Asian countries has been developing successfully, however unforeseen difficulties have arisen in regional economic integration, this process is extremely slow. The perception by the countries of Central Asia of China, its image is one of the main reasons that impede the implementation of regional economic integration according to the Chinese scenario. Therefore, improving and enriching the image of China is the path that China should follow in strengthening relations with Central Asia, it is also an important factor in the creation of the Silk Road Economic Belt. The problems of forming the image of China have historical background and real reasons. China's image must be shaped comprehensively and systematically, by improving its specific components in order to create a holistic and attractive image. The research article focuses on the current post-covid period image and perception of China in the Central Asian region including five states. The pandemic has had a very negative impact on the image of China in the region. Today, China faces one of the important tasks of correcting this situation. The post-crisis period is expected to strengthen the economic presence of the PRC in the region.

Key words: China, Central Asia, BRI, pandemic, perspectives, perception

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Пандемиядан кейінгі Қытай-Орталық Азия ынтымақтастық перспективаларына талдау

ҚХР-ның Орталық Азия елдерімен экономикалық ынтымақтастығы табысты дамып келеді, алайда аймақтық экономикалық интеграцияда күтпеген қиындықтар туындады және бұл процесс өте баяу жүріп жатыр. Орталық Азия елдерінің Қытайға деген көзқарасы және оның имиджі Қытай сценарийі бойынша аймақтық экономикалық интеграцияны жүзеге асыруға кедергі келтіретін негізгі себептердің бірі болып табылады. Сондықтан Қытайдың имиджін жақсарту және дамыту Қытай Орталық Азиямен қарым-қатынасты нығайтуда ұстануға тиіс жол, сонымен қатар Жібек жолы экономикалық белдеуін құрудың маңызды факторы болып табылады. Біртұтас және тартымды бейнені жасау үшін Қытайдың Жібек жолы экономикалық белдеуі жақсы мүмкіндіктерді жаратқан еді алайда жаңа вирус пен пандемия мәселесі Қытайдық әлем және Орталық Азиядағы көршілерімен қарым-қатынастардың дамуын баяулатты. Зерттеу мақаласы бес мемлекетті қоса алғанда, Орталық Азия аймағындағы Қытайдың қазіргі пост-ковидтік кезеңдегі бейнесі мен ынтымақтастық перспективасын қайта қарастырып оны талдауға бағытталған. Пандемия ҚХР-ның аймақтағы имиджіне қатты теріс әсер етті. Бүгінгі таңда ҚХР алдында маңызды міндеттердің бірі-бұл жағдайды түзету. Постковидтік кезең ҚХР-ның аймақта экономикалық қатысуын күшейтеді деп күтілуде.

Түйін сөздер: Қытай, Орталық Азия, Жібек жолы экономикалық белдеуі, пандемия, перспективалар, қабылдау

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Переосмысление перспектив китайско-центральноазиатского сотрудничества после пандемии

Экономическое сотрудничество КНР со странами Центральной Азии развивается успешно, однако в региональной экономической интеграции возникли неожиданные трудности и этот процесс идет очень медленно. Отношение стран Центральной Азии к Китаю и его имиджу является одной из основных причин, препятствующих реализации региональной экономической интеграции по китайскому сценарию. Следовательно, укрепление и развитие имиджа Китая – это направление, в котором Китай должен следовать для укрепления своих связей с

Центральной Азией, а также важнейший элемент в создании Экономического пояса Шелкового пути. Экономический пояс Шелкового пути Китая создал хорошие возможности для создания единого и привлекательного имиджа, но новый вирус и проблемы пандемии замедлили развитие отношений Китая с соседями в мире и Центральной Азии. Исследовательская статья направлена на анализ текущего постковидного имиджа Китая и перспективы сотрудничества в регионе Центральной Азии, включая пять стран. Пандемия сильно негативно повлияла на имидж КНР в регионе. Сегодня перед КНР одной из немаловажных задач является исправление данной ситуации. Постковидный период ожидается усиление экономического присутствия КНР в регионе.

Ключевые слова: Китай, Центральная Азия, Экономический пояс Шелкового пути, пандемия, перспективы, восприятие.

Introduction

In modern conditions of development of countries, the ability of the state to influence foreign and domestic policy, by the power of ideas and purposeful information flows, is becoming increasingly important. Along with state development priorities (such as introducing innovations, attracting investments, developing infrastructure, etc.), a special place belongs to the image of the state as a necessary condition for its strategic development, a way to protect the interests of the country and its citizens, to ensure support for domestic and foreign policy as one of the conditions national security of the country. Understanding the importance and relevance of the topic of forming and maintaining a positive image of the state in the international arena, more and more scientists have recently paid attention to the problems of forming the image of the state and its bodies.

Central Asia, as the first region on the path to implementing the land part of the One Belt – One Road initiative, is of particular strategic importance for China. For several years now, China has been radically changing the format of its presence in Central Asia – Beijing is rushing to the region in earnest and for a long time. China's cooperation with the countries of the Central Asian region is consistently expanding, which definitely changes not only the current configuration of Central Asian geopolitics and geoeconomics, but also qualitatively changes the international positioning of Central Asia.

The independence of Kazakhstan and the republics of Central Asia in 1991 radically changed the geopolitical environment of China: instead of a dangerous but predictable enemy in the form of the USSR, a motley variety of small independent countries appeared on the western borders of the PRC, the development prospects of which were very vague. For the first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, China pursued a rather cautious

policy in the region aimed at resolving security issues, resolving border disputes, and developing trade ties. However, in the 2010s China's role in Central Asia has been seriously transformed.

The rapid growth of the economy at the beginning of the 21st century increased China's need for resources and markets for its own goods, expanded Beijing's opportunities for economic penetration and created the prerequisites for strengthening political influence in Central Asia.

Within a few years, China has become the largest economic and political partner of the countries of the region. China has become one of the largest investors and creditors of the Central Asian countries, which were previously perceived by foreign investors as ambiguous and very risky investment targets.

Having come to the region under the slogans of non-interference in internal affairs and the priority of economic cooperation, China was perceived by local elites as an alternative to non-regional players who periodically demanded loyalty, as well as the introduction of certain norms and standards of political and social life. And, most importantly, the Chinese were ready to invest in infrastructure projects (oil and gas pipelines, roads and railways, power plants, bridges, and transport and logistics centers), many of which would never have been implemented without Chinese help.

Despite intensive advancement in Central Asia over the past 10 years, China has not achieved absolute dominance in the region, especially since it has never really aspired to this. This is due to the fact that Central Asia has been and remains peripheral to Chinese foreign policy. China's main eyes are directed to East and Southeast Asia and the Pacific Ocean, where the most important trading partners and the main transport and logistics routes for the supply of Chinese goods to foreign markets are located. Nevertheless, the further development of the region is already impossible to imagine without cooperation with Beijing. Several facts speak in favor of this.

First, China is the largest market for the main export commodities of the Central Asian countries (oil, natural gas, uranium and non-ferrous metals). For example, China accounts for more than 2/3 of gas exports from Turkmenistan and more than half of uranium exports from Kazakhstan (China Briefing, 2021).

Secondly, China is the largest investor and creditor of the countries of the region. According to 2019 data, the countries of Central Asia owe China more than \$22 billion, of which more than 50% is owed to Kazakhstan. According to the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, in 2018, the volume of accumulated direct Chinese investments in the countries of Central Asia is \$14.7 billion (China Briefing, 2021).

Thirdly, China is actively working in various formats of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and developing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Fourth, the joint fight against terrorism also strengthens China's position in Central Asia, especially since its security interests in the context of the «Uyghur problem» are the highest priority. China provides financial, organizational and methodological assistance to the special forces and law enforcement agencies of Central Asia, regularly conducts joint anti-terrorist exercises, provides information on persons suspected of terrorism, and provides military-technical assistance.

Methods and methodology

The research article is based on the secondary data analysis of international relations, political scientists and oriental studies scholars' main works, articles and analysis on image and perception of China in the world and Central Asian region. In general, the influence of China and its rise in the context of influence on the structure of the international order is seen in the range of perceptions of China as a «threat» and as an «opportunity» (Callahan, 2005).

However, the perception and image is a dynamic phenomenon. The events that are taking place in modern China are changing its content; accordingly, the image of the country needs constant targeted adjustment in the eyes of the world community. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to analyze the formation and components of China's image and its perception in the Central Asian region.

Modern features of the formation of the image of states in the international arena and international cooperation perspectives are studied around the world by representatives of different scientific schools, approaches, theories and concepts such as functionalism, constructivism and neoliberalism

offered by Alexander Wendt in «Social Theory of International Politics» (1992), Nicholas Onuf's «World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations» (1989), David Mitrany «A Working Peace System» (1943), Ernst Haas «The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces» (1958). In addition, it is necessary to mention the concepts and works of J. Nye and R. Koehane «Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition» (1989). According to the offered approaches on international cooperation perspectives constructivism highlights the role of norms and ideas in shaping international cooperation. It suggests that actors' perceptions of their interests are shaped by social norms, identity, and culture, and that shared understandings can help foster cooperation. Functionalism focuses on the role of technical cooperation in building trust and promoting integration between states. It suggests that cooperation on specific functional issues (such as trade, transportation, or environmental regulation) can create a positive feedback loop that leads to more cooperation in other areas while neoliberalism highlights the role of international institutions and regimes in facilitating cooperation between states.

Discussion

The outbreak of novel coronavirus pneumonia in early 2020 created both challenges and opportunities for the Belt and Road Initiative. The epidemic has forced countries to close their borders and international ports, prompting countries to work on building resilience, adjusting their development strategies, streamlining supply chains, and improving industrial capacity.

The pandemic has reduced trade between China and Central Asian countries and delayed some capacity building projects. However, during the same period, the so-called Health Silk Road (健康丝绸之路) and Digital Silk Road (数字丝绸之路) were developed. As a regional public product, the Belt and Road Initiative is having an increasingly profound impact on relations between China and the countries of Central Asia. Ultimately, the epidemic not only failed to weaken the Belt and Road, but also contributed to the expansion of its significance. Due to the pandemic the image of China and perception towards Chinese has worsened accordingly.

Speaking about coronavirus outbreaks, the experts and healthcare specialists write that the coronavirus epidemic in Central Asian countries mainly came from Europe and the Middle East, and

not from China. The main reason for the epidemic in these countries is that after the outbreak in China in January, the countries of Central Asia focused on preventing the entry of the virus from China by closing borders and air links with China, but did not pay due attention to other areas. As a result, the virus was brought to Kazakhstan from Germany, to Uzbekistan from France, to Kyrgyzstan from Saudi Arabia. Tajikistan officially confirmed the first case only on 30 April, 2020. Given that Tajikistan closed its borders with China on March 2, 2020, the virus was not brought into this country from China either.

Firstly, the economy has experienced a severe recession and growth has been weak – the worst economic crisis since the independence of the Central Asian countries. At the same time, the forecasts are disappointing. Even if the situation improves in 2021, the growth rate was not too high, and the economic recovery will still take longer. Although the governments of Central Asia have introduced preferential aid and other anti-crisis measures to streamline business operations, they continue to find it difficult to counter declining demand, disruption of production chains, lower investment, high spending, and ensure the well-being of socially vulnerable groups. Small and medium-sized enterprises and retail, aviation, oil and gas, services and other industries are hardest hit. While a small number of industries and companies have taken on new life as a result of market changes (such as e-commerce, pharmaceuticals), most companies and financial institutions have struggled. The real income of people has fallen and discontent is growing among the population.

Secondly, security risks are increasing. During the epidemic, the threats of terrorism and extremism in Central Asia did not decrease, but intensified, and cyberspace security problems began to arise more often.

Thirdly, the pandemic is having a strong impact on the political situation in Central Asia. If the situation in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is relatively stable, then changes were brewing in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The strict isolation policy during the pandemic made citizens even more stressed and anxiety mood of people has been tense, many small and medium-sized businesses have been bankrupted and political protests have increased accordingly. In Kyrgyzstan, parliamentary elections in October 2020 ended in large-scale riots. Protesters overthrow the government. President Jeenbekov was forced to resign. This is not only a continuation of the battle between the old and new presidents

that began in 2018, but also a public expression of the ineffective measures of the Kyrgyz government in the fight against the epidemic. January tragedy in Kazakhstan in 2022 was also caused by inner ineffective social and economic reforms.

Fourthly, pressure from the US and Russia has intensified. The countries of Central Asia continue to pursue a balanced foreign policy and maintain relations with such large countries as China, Russia, the United States and the European Union. The countries of Central Asia were initially friendly towards the United States and actively participated in the C5 + 1 mechanism. However, in February 2020, the United States launched a new version of the Central Asia Strategy by new president Biden (Mendis, 2021).

Perspectives of the Belt and Road Initiative post-covid period

The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Kazakhstan and the SCO summit in Samarkand point to the increasing geopolitical and geo-economic importance of Central Asia for China even after the pandemic and mutual cooperation along the BRI can not be stopped especially in the light of Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

According to the Statistical Bulletin of China's Foreign Direct Investment in 2019, between 2013 and 2019, China invested \$117.3 billion in direct investment in countries along the Belt and Road. According to the investment statistics, it should be noted that the pandemic, in a certain sense, made clear the importance of China for the countries of the region. According to the experts, the adverse effects of cutting off ties with China during the epidemic also made the Central Asian countries more deeply aware of the role of cooperation between the two sides, and their policy towards China became more objective and rational. At the same time, it was highlighted a number of difficulties that have arisen in the implementation and promotion of the «Belt and Road» in Central Asia.

First, the volume of trade has declined. According to Chinese customs statistics, bilateral trade between China and four Central Asian countries (excluding Turkmenistan) in the first half of 2020 was only \$13.78 billion, down 27.3% from a year earlier. Among them, imports from Central Asia amounted to \$6.16 billion, which is 9% less than last year; exports to Central Asia amounted to \$7,616, which is 29% less than a year earlier (张宁, 2021). Overall, the decline in imports was relatively small, mainly because commodities such as oil and natural

gas were transported through pipelines and were not affected by border closures. The significant decline in exports was mainly due to the closure of ports and reduced demand from Central Asian countries.

Secondly, the existing potential for expanding cooperation is not being fully used. In particular, the expansion of the so-called “Chinese threat theory” (中国威胁论) slows down cooperation with China. Chinese experts note that the «China threat theory» is gaining momentum in some regions, and some people who do not know the truth are opposed to Chinese projects, which makes some Chinese companies more cautious when investing abroad, and their scale and pace have slowed down significantly, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (张宁, 2021).

Despite certain difficulties, the Belt and Road Initiative, according to the author, continues to develop.

Firstly, the consensus on cooperation continues to deepen, and the concept of a «community with a common destiny for mankind» (人类命运共同体理念) is gaining more recognition.

Secondly, the epidemic has only changed the way of communication between China and the countries of Central Asia, but has not weakened the ties. In the bilateral format, intergovernmental exchange mechanisms are actively used. In multilateral terms, in addition to various meetings within the SCO, China and the five countries of Central Asia in July 2020 created a mechanism for meetings of foreign ministers «C+C5». Thus, for the first time, the countries of Central Asia and China have created a completely independent platform.

Thirdly, China-Europe trains continue to play the role of strategic channels. In the first half of 2020, 5,122 trains ran between China and Europe, up 36% from last year, according to the China National Railway Group. About half of the express trains (2,381 trains, up 49% year-on-year) pass through two ports in Kazakhstan, Alashankou and Khorgos. In the first half of 2020, the cargo throughput of these two ports reached 10 million tons, up 30.2% compared to the same period in 2019 (张宁, 2021). While maritime powers close ports, this land-based container intermodal transport route has become a lifeline for international transportation on the route China-Central Asia-Europe.

Fourth, China has taken the initiative to reduce or cancel the debts of the Central Asian countries. In order to implement the G20 initiative to suspend debt payments to the poorest countries, China announced the suspension of debt payments of 77 developing

countries and regions of the world, including the countries of Central Asia. According to statistics, at the end of 2019, the balance of China’s state loan in Central Asia amounted to \$24 billion, including Kazakhstan – \$11 billion, Uzbekistan – \$3.006 billion, Kyrgyzstan – \$1.795 billion, Tajikistan – \$1.525 billion and Turkmenistan – \$6.7 billion (Statistics of the Ministry of Commerce of PRC, 2020).

Fifth, the rapid development of the “Digital Silk Road” has helped countries transform their economies. Prior to the epidemic, the countries of Central Asia formulated strategies for the development of the digital economy, and the epidemic allowed countries to accelerate their implementation. Cooperation with new Chinese Internet technologies is rapidly gaining momentum. Also, the Silk Road of Health has been developed.

Accordingly, the role and influence of China on the economic development of the countries of Central Asia is growing. The countries of Central Asia are well aware that China is the most suitable partner. In the eyes of the republics of the region, Russia is the most important partner and pillar in the field of security (internal security and regime security). However, Russia’s economic and investment opportunities are relatively weak and difficult to meet the development needs of the Central Asian countries. Although the United States and the European Union have great international influence, they are too far from Central Asia. In addition, they always try to support the opposition, which often threatens the security of the regimes in the countries of Central Asia. China is a close neighbor that has funds and markets, never interferes in internal affairs, and can develop economic cooperation on an equal footing.

Conclusion

The pandemic has caused enormous damage to the countries of the region. The health systems and economies of countries have suffered. No country or region is an exception. Households that used to barely make ends meet and were heavily dependent on remittances from migrant workers are facing the most difficult challenges.

While the coronavirus has hindered the development of the Belt and Road Initiative to some extent, it also opens up unprecedented opportunities for quality growth. Thus, it is emphasized that the pandemic has shown that the primary task of cooperation with the countries of Central Asia is to

increase the resilience of countries located along the route and increase their survival.

Due to the pandemic, China has drastically reduced foreign investment, leading many to talk about the end of the global Belt and Road Initiative. In fact, this is not the end, but a transformation: the infrastructure strategy turns into a security strategy.

It should be mentioned that the infrastructure development projects are not just investments for the countries of Central Asia, but also a means of connecting to world trade. Governments expect investments, primarily in infrastructure projects, to open the doors to the economies of this landlocked region and attract more diversified projects and increased attention from countries around the world. The most likely scenario is that the Belt and Road develops in a way that better serves the interests of the country's leadership in the current rapidly changing environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the relationship between China and Central Asian countries, leading to the need for a rethinking of their perspectives. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of cooperation and coordination in responding to global challenges, and this has provided an opportunity for China and Central Asian countries to strengthen their ties. In

particular, the pandemic has revealed the importance of health cooperation and investment in healthcare infrastructure. This presents an opportunity for China to provide support and investment to Central Asian countries in this area, which could help build trust and foster closer ties. Another area for potential cooperation is economic recovery. The pandemic has had a significant impact on global trade and investment, and this has been particularly felt in Central Asia, which relies heavily on exports of natural resources. China's Belt and Road Initiative could provide a framework for economic recovery in the region, with investments in infrastructure and transportation helping to facilitate trade and investment.

However, there are also challenges to closer cooperation between China and Central Asian countries. The geopolitical context, particularly the rivalry between China and the US, could complicate efforts to deepen ties. Central Asian countries may also be wary of becoming too economically dependent on China. Overall, rethinking Sino-Central Asian perspectives after the pandemic will require a careful balancing of economic, geopolitical, and social factors. However, if done correctly, it could lead to a more integrated and prosperous region, with greater cooperation and understanding between China and Central Asian countries.

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