

Bart Dessein

Ghent University

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8853-9665>

China, Central Asia and a Changing Global Order

Abstract

The following paper addresses the issue of presenting the historical significance of China's cultural influence in the region of the contemporary Central Asian republics – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, and in the contemporary Autonomous Region Xinjiang. Using historical texts, the author analyses the place of the Central Asia issue in the thought and strategic plans of successive Chinese authorities. The author points to the importance of building, including metaphorically, the Great Wall and highlights the contemporary importance of developing economic and political relations between China and the countries of the region.

The paper emphasizes that the Great Wall did not prevent cultural influences from the north entering China and was a 'border,' not a 'limit,' in the same way that also the Silk Roads that cut into China's western borders were channels of intercultural exchange. The text concludes that in the contemporary period, the Central Asian region could and should become a region of intercultural exchange in a constantly changing global order.

Keywords: *China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Xinjiang, Great Wall, Belt and Road Initiative, Silk Road*

1. Introduction

Looking back in history, China's cultural influence – its 'international clout' – in the region of the contemporary Central Asian republics Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, as

well as in the contemporary Autonomous Region Xinjiang Weiwuerzu (*Xinjiang Wuweierzu zizhiqu*) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) dates back to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), when the Chinese ruling house sent Zhang Qian (195–114 BCE) as an envoy to Central Asia with the order to look for allies to deal with the constant threat of the nomadic forces to the north of the Chinese empire. This threat was also the reason why, under China's first emperor (reigned 221–210 BCE), the individual defence walls that had been erected earlier in order to protect the pastoral domains in the north of Chinese territory against incursions of nomadic hordes, were connected with each other, thus forming the famous Great Wall (I will return to the Great Wall at the end of this contribution). Zhang Qian arrived in Bactria, the region of the Amu Darya (= Oxus), in 128/127 BCE, but his mission was not a military success. Through his mission, however, the Chinese knew of the produce and handicrafts of the Central Asian region. This opened important commercial possibilities and led to the creation of the so-called 'Silk Road' (*sichou zhi lu*).¹

After China's relations with Central Asia had become less important during the period of disunity of the empire that followed the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, these relations were renewed in the Tang dynasty, the period in Chinese history starting in 618 when Li Yuan (566–635) dethroned Sui Yang You, the ruling emperor of the preceding short-lived Sui dynasty (589–618) (Lewis, 2009, p. 13). The importance of Li Yuan's usurping the throne is that, at that moment, Sui Yang You was only 13 years old. This enabled the new Tang rulers to narrate the usurpation as Yang You's act of Confucian filial piety. The narrative that Yang You 'yielded the throne' to the new ruling house allowed Li Yuan to build his prestige not only on his military skills, but also on his Confucian virtue. This explains the name he chose for his reign: Wude, i.e., 'Military Virtue' (Skaff, 2012, p. 110). This narrative can also be understood against the ethnic background of the Li clan. The Li clan was a minor Chinese clan that had, in the middle of the sixth century, belonged to a garrison the Tuoba people of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–535) had established near contemporary Datong (Shanxi Province). The Wei

1 For a historical account of Zhang Qian's mission: see Sima Qian, 1976, pp. 3157–3158. For a translation and study of the *Shiji*, the classical work in which Zhang Qian's mission is narrated, see Hulsewé, 1975. It can be noticed that before that time, the Central Asian region had been predominantly oriented towards the West as it was inhabited by descendants of the Hellenic culture that had moved there during and after the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE).

dynasty was one of many short-lived dynasties that ruled over Northern China after the fall of the first Confucian dynasty of the Han – the dynasty after which the Chinese still call themselves: the people of Han. These Tuoba were a Turkic/Xianbei (Särbi) ethnic group. Because the Li clan had intermarried widely with the non-Chinese aristocracy of the region of Datong, Li Yuan was to all probability a member of the mixed Chinese/Turkic/Xianbei aristocracy of Northwest China (Wechsler, 1979, pp. 150–151). This peculiarity also helps to explain the following event in which Tang Taizong, the second emperor of the Tang (reigned 626–649), portrays himself as Confucian protector of the Central Asian Turkic people: when, after an unsuccessful attempt to subdue the Turkic people with which there were recurring territorial conflicts, the – to use the Chinese phrasing of Chinese official history writing – “chiefs of the four *yi* (barbarians)” (*si yi junzhang*) went to the palace in 630 CE and ritually requested that the emperor take the title of Heavenly Qaghan (*tian kehan*),” Tang Taizong is reported to have replied that he, as “the Son of Heaven of the Great Tang” would also “attend to the affairs of the Heavenly Qaghan” (*Wo wei Ta Tang tianzi, you xiaying kehan shi hu*) (Sima Guang, 1956, p. 6073; Wang Pu, 1957, p. 1312; Pan, 1997, pp. 133–138, 166, 171–176; Lewis, 2009, p. 148; Skaff, 2012, p. 120). This recording portrays the emperor as having acknowledged that the empire encompassed both Chinese and nomads and shows his will to accommodate the non-Chinese in his empire (Lewis, 2009, p. 150). This interpretation is corroborated by the following recorded statements, attributed to Tang Taizong: “The central territories (= China) are like the root and stem, the four *yi* (barbarians) are like the branches and leaves” (*Zhongguo ru ben gen, si yi ru zhi ye*) (Sima Guang, 1956, p. 6073), and “Since olden times, all [emperors] have valued the central Chinese culture and have depreciated the *yi* and *di* (= barbarians); only I view them as equal. That is why they all rely on me as if I were their father and mother” (*Zi gu jie gui Zhonghua, qian yi, di, zhen du ai zhi ru yi, gu qi zhongluo jie yi zhen ru fumu*) (Sima Guang, 1956, p. 6247; Pan, 1997, p. 182; Pulleyblank, 1976, pp. 37–38). These statements testify of the multicultural awareness of the Tang elites, an attitude which I have termed ‘benign pluralism’ in a previous publication (Dessein, 2016, p. 26).

It is further important to note that this attitude *vis-à-vis* the Central Asian Turks is, apart from the emperor’s personal convictions, likely also the result of the fact that his reign roughly coincides with the formation of Turkic empires in Central Asia. This development must have filled the

Turkic groups with a sense of wealth and power, as is illustrated in the Kül Tegin Inscriptions, two memorial texts written in Old Turkic in the 8th century that relate the legendary origins of the Turks. We read:

Hear these words of mine well, and listen hard! Eastwards to the sunrise, southwards to the midday, westwards as far as the sunset, and northwards to the midnight – all the peoples within these boundaries [are subject to me.] (...) If the Turkish kagan rules from the Ötükän mountains there will be no trouble in the realm. I went on campaigns eastwards up to the Shantung plain; I almost reached the ocean. I went on campaigns southwards up to Tokuz-Ärsin; I almost reached Tibet. Westwards I went on campaigns up to the Iron Gate beyond the Pearl River, and northwards I went on campaigns up to the soil of Yir Bayırqu. I have led [the armies] up to all these places. A land better than the Ötükän mountains does not exist at all! The place from which the tribes can be [best] controlled is the Ötükän mountains (Tekin, 1968, quoted through Moses, 1976, pp. 83–84).

The pastoral nature of the economies of the Turkic empires explains why they were eager to establish economic and diplomatic contacts with Tang China, a phenomenon in which the partly Turkic descent of the ruling Li house of the Tang dynasty must have been conducive. Starting from the middle of the eighth century, however, the importance of China's relations with Central Asia diminished dramatically. This was the direct result of a 755 revolt against the Tang ruling house, staged by An Lushan (703–757), a general from Sogdian-Turkic descent. It is in these circumstances that, under the Caliphates of the Umayyads and the Abbasids, Islam was introduced in the region, replacing Buddhism as dominant religion. This added a new important element to regional identity. After a period of cultural and economic orientation towards the East, Central Asia was, under the Abbasids, again reoriented westward, as it was included in an economic and political-economic zone that extended to the Mediterranean (Dessein, 2022, p. 18).

The Central Asian region again changed identities when the Mongols included this region and China in their Yuan dynasty (1271/1279–1368). In this period, the region was not only part of the Mongol empire, but was also Europe's transit zone to the Far East – the Yuan dynasty, it may be reminded, was the period when Franciscan friars went to China and when also Marco Polo allegedly was active in China.² It is during this Mongol rule over Central Asia that the Uyghurs became vassals of the Mongols, and that the Turkic Kyrghyz ended up in their present home area in the

2 For the discussion whether or not the famous Marco Polo ever reached China or had his knowledge about China only second-hand: see Vogel, 2013.

aftermath of the Mongol conquests. While some of the Qipchag-Mongol nomadic tribes under khan Abūl'qāir – who bore the title *ōzbeḡ* or 'true leader' – were later referred to as 'Uzbeks', some other Qipchag tribes who had not recognized the leadership of Abūl'qāir, were later called 'Kazachs,' derived from the Qipchak-Turkic word for 'freebooter'. The current map of Central Asia was further shaped in the second half of the sixteenth century, when the Turkic Karluk tribes and yet another nomadic entity who were descending from Turkic Öguz formed the Turkmens. Turkic Qipchaqs and Mongols are also at the basis of the later Kazaks and Tatars (De Cordier, 2012, pp. 83–99).

With the 1716 expedition of Tsar Peter I the Great (reigned 1682–1725) to the heartland of Central Asia in search of a passage between the Caspian Sea and the Aral Sea, yet another predominantly westward oriented phase in the history of the region began. By the nineteenth century, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan had become the territory to which both Russia and Western Europe tried to expand their influence. The formation of the Soviet Union that brought the Central Asian region into the Russian sphere of influence, also laid the foundations for the creation of the five Central Asian republics after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the contemporary period, the Central Asian region has, once again, become the zone of competition for influence between the great powers.

2. The rediscovery of Central Asia

The historical importance of the Central Asian region and of the Silk Roads as a zone of connectivity between the Western world and East Asia was, in contemporary times, perhaps first mentioned by then Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in a speech she delivered on 20 July 2011 in the Indian city of Chennai. In this speech, she shared her vision of a new Silk Road, "Linking markets in South and Central Asia, with Afghanistan at its heart" (U.S. Department of State, a.). She more precisely stated:

Historically, the nations of South and Central Asia were connected to each other and the rest of the continent by a sprawling trading network called the Silk Road. Indian merchants used to trade spices, gems, and textiles, along with ideas and culture, everywhere from the Great Wall of China to the banks of the Bosphorus. Let's work together to create a new Silk Road. Not a thoroughfare like its namesake, but an international web and network of economic and transit connections. That means

building more rail lines, highways, energy infrastructure, like the proposed pipeline to run from Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan, through Pakistan into India (U.S. Department of State, b).

On 22 September 2011, on the occasion of the ‘New Silk Road Ministerial Meeting’ in the German House in New York City, she partly repeated these words in the presence of Minister Zalmai Rassoul, Afghanistan’s Foreign Minister from January 2010 to October 2013:

For centuries, the nations of South and Central Asia were connected to each other and the rest of the continent by a sprawling trading network called the Silk Road. Afghanistan’s bustling markets sat at the heart of this network. Afghan merchants traded their goods from the court of the Pharaohs to the Great Wall of China (Clinton, 2011).

In the speech ‘Promote Friendship Between Our People and Work Together to Build a Bright Future’ he held on 7 September 2013 at the Nazarbayev University in Astana (now Nur-Sultan), Kazakhstan, and in which he announced the ‘One Belt One Road’ (OBOR; *Yi dai yi lu*) initiative, also Chinese State President Xi Jinping observed that “the world is going through faster economic integration and regional cooperation is booming,” and he stipulated five steps “to forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region”: stepping up policy communication, improving road connectivity, promoting unimpeded trade, enhancing monetary circulation, and increasing understanding between the people (Xi, 2013a).

In what follows, I will discuss the importance of the Central Asian region for China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (*yi dai yi lu changyi*; BRI), as the original ‘One belt One Road’ is now referred to, as part of the People’s Republic of China’s long term international policies and against the background of Central Asia’s historical identity as a ‘land in between’ Europe and the Far East, a transit area through Eurasia. I will hereby also give some considerations on how this initiative has fostered Central Asian regionalism, and on what the role of the European Union (EU) in further shaping this regionalism can be.

3. China’s ‘periphery policy’ (*zhoubian zhengce*)

In a context in which the Western world recognized the Guomindang government on Taiwan as the legitimate successor to the Chinese empire, PRC foreign policy had, at the beginning of the country’s existence, been

preoccupied with the country's recognition as a sovereign nation state by the international community. This situation changed fundamentally when the United Nations changed its recognition to the government of the PRC in 1971. It is arguably the radical change this implied for the country's position on the international stage that enabled Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) to rise to power, and to implement his open door policy (*gaige kaifang*) aimed at economic development to cope with the devastating economic situation Maoist policies had brought the country into. One aspect of these policies is the concept 'periphery policy' (*zhoubian zhengce*) launched in the 1980s. The rationale behind the 'periphery policy' was that economic development of the region at the country's westernmost frontiers, i.e., the region bordering the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, would, on the one hand, keep this region that is, apart from Uyghurs, also inhabited by kinsmen of these Central Asian republics, within the Chinese polity and, on the other hand, would testify of China's benign attitude towards these non-Han citizens. Also in Soviet times, this policy thus had to foster goodwill *vis-à-vis* China among the elites and citizens of the Central Asian republics. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 had a double effect on China. It on the one hand confronted the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with its own vulnerability (Shambaugh, 2016, pp. 104–105, 107–110), but it, on the other hand, also opened important geostrategic and geo-economic opportunities for China. That is to say that the birth of independent republics in Central Asia may have incited the fear of the possibility that rising ethno-nationalism in the Central Asian republics might lead to some form of pan-Islamism or pan-Turkism to which also China's western regions might feel attracted (Kellner, 2014, p. 217), but this at the same time also convinced China's leadership that stabilising political and economic ties with the five Central Asian republics before other powers that were perceived as potentially hostile to China such as the United States did so, was urgent (Kellner, 2011). The need to do so was further exacerbated by the hostile attitude of the international community towards China in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen crisis.

It is also these circumstances that explain the creation of the 'Shanghai Five' in 1996. This first ever international organization created by China, a collaboration of China with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, had to ensure border stability and counter drug-trafficking and terrorism in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This collaboration structure in the domains of border control and national

security was, with the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001, renamed as the ‘Shanghai Cooperation Organization’ (*Shanghai hezuo zuzhi*; SCO). The Association’s anti-terrorist vocation has, in 2004, been further enhanced with the establishment of the ‘Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure’ (RATS) that is headquartered in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. RATS operates within the SCO structure and has to facilitate cooperation among the SCO member states and with other international institutions (Lal, 2006, p. 7). This enhanced aim of contributing to stability and cooperation in the Central Asian region was to portray the PRC as a responsible power and had to lay an important foundation for further economic and political cooperation. And, indeed, the SCO has gradually also developed to be an instrument extending its functions into the political and economic domains (Bossuyt, 2015, pp. 111–113). That also India and Pakistan joined the SCO in 2017 and Iran joined in 2023 further shows the degree to which the weight that China has acquired in Central Asia has come to symbolize “its growing global power” (Kellner, 2014, p. 216).

4. The Belt and Road Initiative as natural continuation of the ‘periphery policy’

After the Central Asian republics had first been affected by China’s so-called ‘periphery policy’ launched in the 1980s (Zhao, 1999, p. 335–336), and after the attempt to address common security challenges had become addressed through the establishment of the SCO, the latter initiative, as has just been stated, gradually also developed into an instrument of economic policies. That the BRI can in this sense be seen as a natural continuation and extension of these earlier two initiatives is corroborated in a speech Xi Jinping delivered on 25 October 2013 during China’s ‘Work Forum on Diplomacy to China’s Periphery’. He stated that China:

[s]hould focus on maintaining the peace and stability of its *periphery* (...). It should promote win-win and mutual benefits. It should actively participate in regional economic cooperation; accelerate interconnectivity of infrastructure and establish the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ and ‘the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route’ (Xinhua, 2013; emphasis mine).

With mentioning the ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Route’, Xi Jinping repeated the statement he did in the Indonesian parliament on 2 October

2013 and that can be considered as a follow-up speech to the one he delivered in Kazakhstan referred to earlier. He said:

China will strengthen maritime cooperation with ASEAN countries to make good use of the China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund set up by the Chinese government and vigorously develop maritime partnership in a joint effort to build the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century (Xi, 2013b).

For China, the launching of the BRI in 2013 was arguably inspired by three elements that testify of the at once national and international character of the initiative, as has also been suggested in the literature: 1) an attempt by China to sustain its economic growth by exploring new forms of international economic cooperation with new partners in circumstances in which the country's heavy industries that produce investment goods are suffering from very high overcapacity rates and in which some new competitive industries are emerging in both industry and service sectors; 2) an attempt to assert greater international influence and contribute to the international economic architecture; and 3) an aspect that goes beyond the economic realm, and includes elements such as policy dialogue, financial support, and people-to-people exchange (Huang, 2016, pp. 315–316). While the first of the above mentioned aspects may, according to Avery Goldstein (2000, p. 186) be of primordial importance, this does indeed not exclude that the BRI also is an expansion of China's growing international footprint, a development that set in with former President Jiang Zemin's call at the turn of the century for China's businesses to 'go out' (*zouchuqu*).

It is hereby to be noted that it was not before 2014 that the BRI narrative also included the rest of Asia, Europe, and Africa, and only beginning from 2015 that 'all countries' were included (Zeng, 2017, pp. 1169–1170). In this respect, the 2015 document titled "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," e.g., declares that the aim of the land connections and the sea connections is:

[i]mproving connectivity throughout Asia, Europe and Africa through a policy of financing and building transport infrastructure across Eurasia, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean (Xinhua, 2017).

It is this enlarged scope of the OBOR/BRI project – a "grand blueprint for China's ambitions to connect three different continents, namely Asia,

Europe, and Africa" (Stahl, 2015, p. 17) – that helps to explain why, in their Clingendael Policy Brief "One Belt, One Road', An Opportunity for the EU's Security Strategy" Jikkie Verlare and Frans-Paul van der Putten (2015, p. 2) assess the just mentioned 2015 document as "the closest thing so far in terms of an articulated 'grand strategy' coming from the Xi Jinping Administration." The judgment of whether the BRI is indeed part of a Chinese 'grand strategy' is partially influenced by the assumption that China's geopolitical strategy is like the Asian board game 'Go'. Tanguy Struye de Swielande (2014, p. 176) has in this respect characterized Western strategic culture as favoring games like chess, "where the confrontation is direct and the objective is the defeat of the adversary." Asian culture, on the other hand, would then be characterized by a preference for an indirect approach. He explains:

In the Game of Go, the actions are at first glance not related. The logic of the actions reveals itself at a later stage. Success is not the result of one shot, but rather of multiple actions in the service of one grand strategy, and the emphasis is more on strategies of relations and less on strategies of confrontation.

The seeming absence of a clearly defined strategic goal in China's international relations is also voiced in the assessment of the outcome of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, made by Thierry Kellner (2014, p. 216). He noted that when,

[o]bservers evoked the international actors deemed likely to play a role in Central Asia, the People's Republic of China (PRC) seldom came to mind (...) in most analyses, authors essentially privileged the future role of Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

This assessment was based on overall historical and cultural arguments: linguistically speaking, Central Asia belongs to the Turkic and Iranian world, and Russian has become an important language in the domain of politics and economy; religiously, the region predominantly belongs to Sunni and Shia Islam, and Orthodox Christianity (Kellner, 2014, p. 216; De Cordier, 2012, pp. 9–10); and politically speaking, the region is linked to imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. It was, however, indeed China that further enhanced its influence in Central Asia through the BRI. This is evident from the following figures: total trade of the Central Asian countries with China increased from 17.5 billion USD in 2008 to 27.2 billion USD in 2018, making China, alongside the EU, the major partner in the Central Asian region (Falkowski, 2022, p. 150).

5. Great power rivalry and the importance of Central Asian regionalism

The BRI also brings us to one of the paradoxes of the Xi Jinping era. The above mentioned call by President Jiang Zemin for China's businesses to 'go out' and the country's growing economic and political clout has gradually developed into China's self-portrayal as a norm/system shaper rather than as a norm/system taker (Zeng, 2017, p. 1164). This has, to refer to Dominique Moïsi (2009) incited a feeling of 'fear' in the West. Aggravated by the still ongoing COVID-crisis and the still ongoing war in Ukraine, this 'fear' has manifested itself in a rhetoric that the world is evolving towards a dichotomy between the democratic countries on the one hand, and the countries with an authoritarian political system on the other hand, i.e., the rhetoric that a new bipolar world order that somehow resembles the situation of the Cold War (the United States and Europe against Russia and China) is taking shape. Xi Jinping's foreign policy has indeed incited key economic partners to reconsider their engagement with China, and the current crises have strengthened the existing trend of increasing rivalry between the great powers. This threatens to hasten a decoupling process, as Western economies have been painfully confronted with the negative impact of their economic dependence on China. For China, the danger of being excluded from advanced Western technology that a decoupling could bring about, is that this could impede the country's economic growth and jeopardize its national unity. The paradox that has ensued thus is that while China has, on the one hand, come of age as an economic and increasingly also political and military great power, the growing international concern about China's rise and doubt concerning its true intentions are also fostering homeland insecurity (Khan, 2018, p. 211). China's international stature also encroaches on what it calls its 'core interests' such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, the South China Sea, and, relating to the topic of this contribution, the country's 'western regions'. With a Chinese population that is not only increasingly demanding towards its leaders on economic welfare, but that also wants to be treated respectfully in the international system, Beijing's policies with respect to its 'core interests' may prove counterproductive.

All these developments have fundamentally changed the international position of the now independent Central Asian republics. China's economic presence in Central Asia through the BRI has downplayed Russia's influence in that field whereby Russia appears to have hereby

accepted China's growing role in the Central Asian economies, including the energy sector, as an inevitable development and arguably a 'lesser evil' than Western influence. Along with China's economic importance – it can be noted that Russia remains the first trading partner of some of the Central Asian countries, while for some other countries, China is the main trading partner (Bossuyt, 2015, pp. 211–213) – it has moreover become clear that China's investments in the framework of the BRI are indeed not only intended to create new markets, but are also conducive to China's gaining a lot of political influence, including in the domain of foreign policy orientations of other states (Biscop, 2019, p. 61). Be that as it may, China has so far not challenged Russia's preeminent security role in the region – as was evident in the Kazakhstan political protests of January 2022.³ Also in domains such as cultural products and education, Russia has been able to capitalise on historical legacies and Central Asian populations' language fluency. Russia has also increasingly invested in Commonwealth of Independent States-whole initiatives, in an attempt to 'Eurasianize' a broader regional space centred around Russia; in the Russian language as a 'natural' instrument for inter-ethnic communication; and in framing a common historical path, in which narratives of the common victory in the Second World War play an undisputable role (Valenza, Boers & Cappelletti, 2022).

Central Asia thus appears to become a zone of contest between great powers. In these circumstances, although basically welcoming Chinese initiatives in the economic domain, the Central Asian countries have become increasingly concerned that they might become economically and financially dependent on China, and that also their cultural traditions would be impacted by the Chinese presence, this despite the fact that, e.g., the SCO's charter emphasizes that the organization respects the sovereignty of its member states and rejects any interference in their internal affairs. To again refer to Dominique Moïsi, the 'fear' is thus that the BRI would comprise an expansionist claim. In historical terms, the perceived threat is that the Central Asian region would become the 'periphery' of China once again.

As much as this was the case for some periods in the past, also today's relations of Central Asia with other powers threaten to make the region a 'land in between.' Different from the past, however, is that

3 That also the ongoing war in Ukraine may have important effects on a Chinese-Russian geopolitical and geo-economic competition in the Central Asian region is increasingly becoming evident.

where the Central Asian 'land in between' traditionally divided the East Asian (Chinese) world from Europe, industrial development since the nineteenth century and the globalization of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries have importantly complicated the nature of this 'land in between.' Central Asia has become the terrain of economic, political, and geopolitical contest between different major players on the contemporary world scene, with Russia viewing Central Asia as within its 'traditional' sphere of influence, China increasing its economic presence in the region, and the European Union making some progress in the region, but not yet having crafted a unified strategy toward the region (Rakhimov, 2018, p. 126). To these three powers, also the influence of Turkey and the United States should be added. As this was the case in the past, further, inasmuch as imperial China's perception of Central Asia developed from a Chinese/non-Chinese dichotomy to a concept of benign pluralism, also today, the contending powers in the Central Asian region will have to overcome mutual mistrust and develop tailored cooperation. For the sake of a more cooperative international and regional environment and for maintaining 'one world,' there is therefore a growing need to defuse the rising tensions between the Western and the non-Western powers.

The EU may here be in a unique position to balance both competition and cooperation (Biscop, 2020, p. 1013) and may, in this respect, be perceived as a viable alternative by the Central Asian countries. That is to say that a growing new self-identity of the Central Asian region in a context of great power rivalry in the region can give the EU a unique opportunity to take leadership in building a more productive dialogue with the Central Asian region as a whole. This EU may in this way play a conducive role in further shaping Central Asian regionalism. Indeed, the role of the EU in Central Asia has significantly evolved from almost invisible in the early 1990s to a strategic player by the late 2000s. This change can largely be explained by the following: immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the EU's primary concern were the Central and Eastern European countries that wanted rapprochement with and inclusion in the Union. The Central Asian countries with which historical ties were far less strong and which were of little interest to the EU were only of minor concern. Internal political developments in the Central Asian countries and the growing geostrategic importance of the region have changed the EU's position. To be more precise, the EU perceived a monopolization of Central Asia by either Russia or China as to be avoided, because this would not only jeopardize the EU's chances of getting direct access to the region's energy

resources and hamper its overall economic prospects in the region, but also contained the risk that the Central Asian countries' progress towards democracy and political pluralism would be halted. Also the emergence of transnational security challenges emanating from the region, including rising Islamic radicalization, instability in neighboring Afghanistan, and drug trafficking (from Afghanistan through Central Asia), has fast-tracked Europe's interest in the region. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 have further enhanced the EU's relations with Central Asia. Military cooperation with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan became important for EU member states as they needed access to military bases in the region (Jian, 2018, p. 246).

It is this awareness of the EU of the geopolitical, geostrategic, political, and economic importance of Central Asia, that has also led to a growing interconnection between the EU and Central Asia in the form of trade. As stated, China and the EU are the major trading partners of the Central Asian region, be it that the EU's trade volume with the Central Asian states is hugely unbalanced with Kazakhstan accounting for 90 per cent of the total trade volume (Bossuyt, 2015, pp. 210–211). It can hereby also be taken into account that the EU's enhanced energy connection with Central Asia (especially with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) is also an important feature to diminish its reliance on Russia for its energy supply (Bossuyt, 2015, p. 227) – a tendency that has gained importance given the current war in Ukraine. In a context in which the region's current dependence on its hydrocarbon resources has deepened, the region would greatly benefit from European as well as from Chinese investments that would help make the transition to 'green' energies. This would not only be beneficial for Central Asia itself, but given the current climatic challenges also for the world at large (Siddi & Kaczmarek, 2022).

Deepened EU engagement in the central Asian region has the possibility to break the EU's image of being a regional donor without influence. Jasper Roctus (2020, p. 4) interestingly noted that the open-door policy that started at the end of the 1970s was essentially an empty box, inviting Western countries to economically engage with China, and that also the BRI likewise is a deliberately 'empty' concept, an "ambiguous heading for a hotchpotch of many divergent local experiments." This means that the BRI holds in it the possibility for the EU to "remold the project from within by making conforming to EU standards a requirement for joint initiatives" (Roctus, 2020). To this has to be added that it is the EU that has the leverage to give the BRI the necessary credibility

because the whole project has met with growing doubt and criticism, also among the populations of those countries that have engaged in BRI related initiatives, and because of the very fact that the EU is the final destination of the global network envisaged in the initiative. Seen from this perspective, the importance of Central Asia and the EU for the BRI might therefore be the perfect opportunity for the EU to implement a policy of 'principled pragmatism' *vis-à-vis* China in co-operational projects in Central Asia. Such cooperation initiatives should be built on solid relationships based on mutual understanding and respect. In cooperating with China on its BRI initiatives, EU policy-makers should carefully balance the EU's relationship with the United States, possible Russian involvements and reactions, and great power geopolitics more broadly.

6. By way of conclusion: borders and limits of culture

The trajectory of China's 'discovery of the world' during the country's long imperial period is illustrative of the porosity of cultural boundaries and the incentives for constant cultural renewal this porosity brings about. This not only applies to China's western borders that were cut by the Silk Roads and the accessibility of Chinese territory over the seas, but also to the famous Great Wall (*changcheng*) at the country's northern border. China's Great Wall that conspicuously marks the northern frontier of the agricultural domains that were referred to as 'Zhongguo' (commonly translated as 'China') in Chinese classical literature, may have been intended to 'delimitate' the Chinese cultural and agricultural lands and protect it against invasions by northern steppe peoples, but it is important to note that, in the eyes of later historians, this Great Wall became a negative symbol as it stood for the tyranny of China's first emperor Qin shi huangdi towards the people who were coerced into forced labor to build the wall (Waldron, 1990, p. 195). Also the repeated reconstructions of the Wall throughout Chinese history depended on forced labor. Moreover, despite the human and financial cost to build and maintain the Wall, the structure was only effective as part of a much more complex military organization. Any neglect in maintenance works on the Wall – symptomatic for a decline of power of the central authorities – undermined the functioning of the Wall and resulted in the intrusion of northern steppe people into the heartland of 'Zhongguo'. Such was the

case with, among others, the aforementioned Mongols who incorporated China in their Yuan empire, and the Manchus who established the last imperial dynasty of the Qing (1644–1911). That the connotation of China's Great Wall was, until modern times, a negative one, is important for the following: a 'limit' is what one cannot go beyond. In contradistinction to 'limits,' borders, including cultural borders, are what one can go beyond; they connect what they have separated (Chakrabarti & Weber, 2016, p. 1). In actual practice, the Great Wall did not prevent cultural influences from the north entering China; it therefore was a 'border,' not a 'limit,' in the same way that also the Silk Roads that cut into China's western borders were channels of intercultural exchange. Also in the contemporary period, the Central Asian region could and should become a region of intercultural exchange in a constantly changing global order.

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