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in Continental Asia on the United States”

Why Does China Have No Business in Central Asia?

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A search of many current sources and messages from several of my personal contacts in Central Asia indicate, not surprisingly, that People’s Republic of China (PRC) has little significant *normal commercial business* in the five post-Soviet countries of Central Asia. This does not deny that China is conducting a growing state-to-state trade and investment program. China wants oil and gas more than anything else in Central Asia, aside perhaps from control of Uighur separatists in the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in China’s northwest frontier. Chinese energy investments in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan will be reviewed by another informant.¹ There is also a large amount of smuggling and informal “shuttle trade” from China’s township and village enterprises (TVE’s) to Kazakhstan and onwards to the bazaars of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Organized commercial trade by established Chinese business enterprises, however, must be judged insignificant. There are several structural reasons to expect this situation to continue for years to come.

Total trade

Both the destination and the values of trade between China and the countries of Central Asia are difficult to ascertain. Relevant figures are published by the International Monetary Fund in its quarterly *Directions of Trade Statistics* and by the Asian Development Bank in its *Key Indicators*. The IMF figures are estimated, for the most part, from the so-called “mirror

¹ In brief, the PRC has been a net oil importer since 1993, and its 8-10% growth rates since then make securing supply a priority objective. China fears that in an armed conflict, its marine shipping lanes from the Middle East through the Strait of Hormuz would be blocked. Piracy and terrorism are also threats in the Straits of Malacca, through which half of all oil bound for China passes. Already a 960 kilometer oil pipeline, constructed by the Chinese Petroleum Company from Atasu, Kazakhstan to the Chinese border, is pumping a modest amount of oil to Xinjiang. Within about two years this network will extend 3000 kilometers to western Kazakhstan. Some more goes by rail. China has bought rights to several Kazakhstani fields and made preliminary agreements for oil (and gas) development in Turkmenistan. In addition, China has made loans to Turkmenistan to rehabilitate wells there. A natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan is under construction. Eventually it will carry 30 billion cubic meters of Turkmen and Kazakh gas yearly to western China. Both China and the EU will be competitors with Russia for the natural gas and oil in the Caspian Sea off Turkmenistan and will likely force Gazprom to pay higher prices for needed supplies. The CNPC has also recently agreed to explore for natural gas near the Aral Sea in a production-sharing arrangement with South Korea’s National Oil Corporation and two other firms. However, it is doubtful that Chinese companies will try to develop these geologically challenging deposits without their accustomed Western partners or skilled national ones. The CNPC has just lent the Kazakhstani state-controlled company, KazMunaiGas, \$5 billion.

statistics,” i.e., calculations from partners’ statistics, probably on a cif basis. The ADB takes national statistics as received. Both are in millions of USD; hence the conversion from other currencies is at issue. The totals for the year 2007 (the last year published as of March, 2009) can be quite different. For example, Kazakhstan’s exports are reported by *Directions* as \$46.5 billion and by *Key Indicators* as \$36.6 billion. Tajikistan’s imports are reported as \$1.46 billion by the former and \$2.54 by the latter. As for the reported destination, it’s obvious that the port of entry is used, not the ultimate customer or consumer country. Otherwise, countries like Bermuda and the Netherlands would not appear so prominent in *Directions!* Hence, trade between China and Kazakhstan will be exaggerated, since much is transshipped from there to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and probably the others. This is simply a matter of geography and land routes in the region.

Furthermore, since China’s exports of goods assembled there from imported components are registered *gross* and Russia’s exports are reported including transit trade from European sources, the net value of both countries’ sales may be overstated by an unknown factor. This would apply more to consumer electronics and capital equipment than to oil and gas, though. Finally, much of the low-quality clothing and footwear is brought by informal traders from China without paying duties or registering values, if they can avoid it. Nevertheless, I give the ranges here, as presented in the two available sources.

Kazakhstan sent 12-15% of its 2007 exports to China, 9% to Russia*.² China supplied 25-22% of its imports, Russia 40-34%.

Kyrgyzstan exported 6-8% to China, 21-18% to Russia. Imports came 14-61% from China (!); 14-16% from Russia.

Tajikistan’s exports went 1-0% to China, 7-9% to Russia; imports came 11-21%** from China, 32-21% from Russia.

Turkmenistan’s gas exports went mostly to Ukraine first; 9-10%** of its imports came from China; 12-8% from Russia.

Uzbekistan sends only 6% of its exports to China, 22% to Russia—not accidental, since Uzbekistan has no gas pipeline to China as yet. Some 13-14%** of its registered imports come from the PRC, 30-26% from Russia.

In short, the Chinese sell a great deal to the states adjoining the XUAR; only Kazakhstan finds China a sizable market (mostly for oil and steel).

Country situations

In *Kyrgyzstan* (the Kyrgyz Republic), the nation with the most Chinese penetration in Central Asia, much more its imports come from China than from Russia, formerly the dominant economic partner in this remote and poor country (\$1790 per capita at purchasing power parity in 2006). A couple of small companies exist in Bishkek at the Dordoi bazaar selling ordinary consumer goods or at Kara-Suu, the famous regional bazaar near Osh and the Uzbekistan border (now open without visas). There are also two or three Chinese tour

² The first figure in the range come from *Directions*, the second from ADB. If *Directions* indicates a significant decrease in the distribution for the first nine months of 2008, that is marked by a *; an increase is marked **.

operators in Bishkek. (They also operate down the road in Almaty.) I have observed Kyrgyz at the airport in Urumqi loaded with electronics, clothing, or even build materials waiting for the regular flights to Central Asia. (Railroad or bus connections are very poor.) A Chinese company delivered non-combat equipment to the Kyrgyz military from 1998 to 2001.

There are an estimated 30,000 Chinese now living in the cities and towns of the Kyrgyz Republic, population 5 million. Some 6000 work permits were issued to PRC citizens in 2008. Some run restaurants or work at food stalls. Chinese are said to feel safer in this tolerant atmosphere than in Russia, and quite a few have enrolled in universities after learning Russian, a potentially valuable skill, rather than Kyrgyz, a Turkic language. These choices indicate that the Chinese intend to return to the PRC. Young Kyrgyz who are able to learn Chinese may find jobs with brick-making, plastic window, or other companies in the Chinese section of the Dordoi bazaar, but career jobs in China itself are hard to break into for ethnic Kyrgyz.³

In *Tajikistan*, the other small, fragile economy in the region, the situation is similar. China supplies about 20% of its modest imports, but trade the other way is very small. Aside from declining remittances, a major source of foreign exchange, mountainous Tajikistan's future development is closely tied to its water resources and the electricity which may be generated for its aluminum complex. These could generate exports to China, a neighbor to the east. At present, however, Tajikistan must import a great deal of its fuel from Uzbekistan. China Export-Import Bank is financing a \$300 million hydropower project on the Zeravshan river. The Chinese National Corporation for Heavy Machinery has agreed to build two alumina factories to supply TALCO, the Tajik aluminum combine. While China's credit and infrastructure activity in Tajikistan is growing, Russia and Iran are still more involved in these sectors than are the Chinese. Supposedly, eighty Chinese companies are registered in the country, plus some joint ventures with "Chinese participation."⁴ But my Tajik source could identify only a brickworks in Hissar, a foundry in Dushanbe, and two chemical factories at Yavan and Kurgan-Tiube. The Interior Ministry Migration Service reported all together more than ten thousand Chinese laborers in Tajikistan, and there may be another one to three thousand illegals there. Most (more than three-quarters young men) are employed in all-Chinese markets or state companies located far from urban areas, often in shabby conditions. In the great majority, these workers know no Tajik or Russian and plan to return to China after a year or so. Thus, most of Chinese involvement appears temporary in nature.

Uzbekistan's trade with the People's Republic of China has grown rapidly in recent years, although ground transportation remains a problem since access must be through Kazakhstan (or Kyrgyzstan, if road projects mature). Total trade exceeded \$900 million in 2006, more than double the figure for 2003.⁵ China Mobile, the giant Hong Kong firms with 223 million subscribers in China itself, is seeking expansion in Uzbekistan, as it has in Yemen and unsuccessfully Pakistan's Telecom. If successful, the Chinese firm would compete with an established Russian one **and Huawei Technologies of Shenzhen, a private Chinese company**

³ Dina Tokbaeva, "The Chinese Connection," *Transition Online*, April 15, 2009.

⁴ Saodat Olimova, "The Multiaceted Chinese Presence in Tajikistan," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2008), p. 65.

⁵ Ministry of Commerce of the PRC.

which offers communication services throughout the region, according to my informant from Uzbekistan. Although President Karimov's relations with the Chinese leadership are cordial, he has expressed himself crudely about the quality of imported consumer goods which obviously come from or through China. Karimov's citizens, however, favor the prices.

Since 2000 and up to mid-2008 *Kazakhstan* was the economic star of the region. With growing oil output, a convertible currency, and liberalized financial regulations, Kazakhstan was able to attract several foreign banks. The CNPC and KazMunaiGaz, already mentioned, are both effectively state companies, not normal commercial entities. "Azat," the democratic opposition party in Kazakhstan has recently expressed alarm at the expanded Chinese presence in Kazakhstan's petroleum sector. These dissenters collected 800,000 signatures in support of revising contracts for use of subsoil resources. Long-time President Nursultan Nazarbaev's regime has in fact been sounding notes of resource nationalism recently, yet has allowed China to acquire ownership rights to about one-third of Kazakhstan's oil output.

On a recent trip to Almaty I did not observe any Chinese participation in banking or construction firms. The credit card "China Union Pay" does circulate alongside VISA, American Express, and Diner's Club, though. High freight rates and petty interferences impede Kazakh-Chinese trade. Many Chinese producers prefer to send containers by rail eastward to the Pacific and onwards to Europe rather than utilize shorter routes through Kazakhstan and Russia. Kazakhstan sends steel to China by rail over the Ala pass at Horgos, despite the inconveniences at the border.

In interesting new developments KazAtomProm has signed a joint venture agreement with the Guangdong Nuclear Power Co. to build an atomic power station in China. And Kazakhtelekom has an agreement to develop a wireless network with China's Tietong, financed by the Bank of China.⁶

Turkmenistan has few foreign investors of any origin owing to its tiny market, remote location, and difficulty in obtaining visas. China is supposed to start buying gas this year, if the pipeline is completed on time. The CNPC is also building a gas-processing plant at the Samandepi field. Most of Turkmenistan's limited imports come from neighboring Russia.

Unlike the ex-Soviet Central Asian countries, *Myanmar* appears to be a "satellite" client state of China because the West has tried to isolate that country's military junta. In friendly gestures, China (and Russia) vetoed Security Council sanctions against the regime when it opened fire on protesters. Myanmar is offering a transit route for oil from the Indian Ocean to southern China, avoiding the Straits. It also sells timber and food to China, but overall only 6-14% of the country's \$5-6 billion of exports go there. China does supply a very large and rising share of Myanmar's imports, possibly on concessionary terms. However, both India and Thailand also do business there. The Chinese prime minister, Wen Jiabao, has appealed for democracy in the former Burma, an apparent departure from China's long-held view that foreigners should not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. This is part of China's more flexible and cooperative stance on a number of problem areas, such as Darfur and North Korea. But Central Asia is different from Myanmar in several respects.

Regional projects

⁶ www.kt.kz (in Russian), accessed May 6, 2009.

China is also financing and building a strategically important road link from the Kashgar region of the XUAR. This road will traverse mountainous terrain to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. China is lending \$75 million for that construction. The road from Tajikistan to China over the Kulma Pass (4365 m) was completed three years ago and has reportedly carried traffic of more than 9000 tons.⁷ These routes provide land access to Pakistan. There are also railroad projects to improve bulk transport from the XUAR to Kazakhstan, since the railroad gauges differ and require switching the trucks or cargoes at the frontier.

Chinese exports to the region

There are several reasons why Chinese trade, aside from energy and low-quality consumer goods, is unlikely to expand into manufactures and services during the foreseeable future. To take one example, China has become a major producer (second to the USA) of electronic and information technology products, including office equipment, communications equipment, and consumer electronics, such as DVD players, notebook computers, and mobile telephones. These products are assembled in China from components designed and manufactured elsewhere, notably Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.⁸ In practice, foreign firms employing cheap Chinese labor in an export platform arrangement. Among the foreign firms are the Taiwanese “Foxconn” brand, owned by the Hon Hai Precision Industry Company, which produces for Sony, Apple, and Nokia. Tech Front of Shanghai is a subsidiary of Quanta Computer, Inc., of Taiwan, the largest leading producer of notebook computers. Taiwan’s Asutec Computer owns China’s Magnificent Brightness, another notebook computer producer. Such products may be attractive to a thin stratum of Central Asian intelligentsia and officials, but they are hardly PRC business exports.

According to some experts, mainland Chinese-owned firms are reluctant to spend on research and development, because of poor protection for their intellectual property. Foreign firms protect their proprietary knowledge from Chinese efforts to reverse-engineer or otherwise steal others’ secrets. Sometimes low-quality Chinese clothing bears Western insignia anyway.

Besides raw materials, China imports considerable quantities of capital goods and equipment. This is good news for Japan, but hardly for Central Asian countries.

China exports huge quantities of footwear, toys, and sporting goods. The higher quality, “branded” types go to markets in Europe and North America—with a VAT rebate-- but lesser quality types are sold by TVE’s located in poorer areas of China (such as the XUAR) and filter across the border, often by Uighur and Kazak traders. At the huge emporium outside Almaty these ordinary wares are sold in wholesale and retail quantities to women and men who come with gigantic bags on buses from Bishkek, Tashkent, and other faraway cities.

Although the states of Central Asia have low formal tariffs, they do engage in non-tariff barriers to prevent competition with their own apparel, food, and other consumer industries. The difficulty and expense of exporting from and importing into Central Asia are truly breathtaking. Kazakhstan requires 11 documents to export and 13 to import; assembling all

⁷ Saodat Olimova, “The Multiaceted Chinese Presence in Tajikistan,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2008), p. 64.

⁸ Lee Branstetter and Nicholas R. Lardy, “China’s Embrace of Globalization,” in Loren Brandt and Thomas G. Rawski, eds., *China’s Great Economic Transformation* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 661-62.

this takes a reported 89 days! The cost of sending a container to Europe is \$3000. The other three are similar.⁹

Political aspects

China is aware of competition for energy, but has taken the view that normal friction “should be resolved through dialogue on equal footing, consultation and talks.” In its successful negotiations to join the WTO, China argued that existing members should not condition its entry into this worldwide organization on political or economic concessions, as it accused America of doing. So China has adopted a rhetoric favoring normal free trade.

Central Asia is hardly “central” in the view of most Asians. As noted in the London *Economist*, “Central Asia, belying its label, is on the edge of this space [“Asia”] politically as well as physically.”¹⁰ The East Asia Summit, held this year in Thailand, includes Australia and New Zealand, but not Uzbekistan! ASEAN, the grouping of ten south-eastern nations, is eagerly seeking deals with China, South Korea, and Japan. But a search of ASEAN literature and pronouncements turned up no references to the 60 million Asians in the five countries of Central Asia.¹¹

China has two crucial foreign policy goals which affect Central Asia. First and foremost, the Chinese wish to suppress any support for separatists in the XUAR who have occasionally resorted to violent attacks on the growing Han population there and its police and military colonists. There are an estimated 210,000 Uighurs in Kazakhstan, some of whom are active in supporting their ethnic kinsmen in the XUAR. A further 46,000 reside in Kyrgyzstan, which borders the most sensitive area (Kashgar city) of the XUAR from this point of view. China calls them “terrorists” likely associated with Al Qaeda, a doubtful connection.¹² But China has received cooperation from all the Central Asian regimes involved in surveilling and controlling these groups. Furthermore, China has succeeded in persuading the Central Asians to adopt the PRC position with regard to Taiwan and Tibet. The neighboring Central Asian states have joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, regarded by the Chinese as a key instrument of their regional policy. Originally designed to counter US and NATO military installations and military assistance for these countries, the SCO has had little independent effect, in my opinion. Borders have been demarcated bilaterally. The Uzbekistanis have limited their cooperation on military matters and regard the SCO as an economic grouping only. The Chinese, therefore, have little reason to penetrate Central Asian business circles or the political elites, assuming they could do so.

⁹*Doing Business 2009. Europe and Central Asia*, various tables (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2009). There are no data for Turkmenistan. The reasonable standard for documents and days would be in the single digits, as indicated by European examples.

¹⁰ *The Economist*, April 11, 2009, p. 43.

¹¹ Martin C. Spechler, “Central Asia between East and West,” *The Carl Beck Papers*, no. 1904 (University of Pittsburg, 2008), pp. 22-24.

¹² According to a report to the PRC State Council, “From 1990 to 2001, the ‘East Turkestan’ terrorist forces inside and outside China were responsible for over 200 terrorist incidents in Xinjiang which resulted in the death of 162 people of all ethnic groups, including grassroots officials and religious personnel...” *Beijing Review*, January 31, 2002, quoted by Ramakant Dwivedi, “China’s Central Asia Policy in Recent Times,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2006), p. 143. My own observation and interviews with Uighurs in Urumqi during the late 1990’s indicate these concerns are overblown.

China is limited in its ability to influence Central Asia through business relationships, as compared with Russia, the USA, or the EU. Because of historical accidents, the Sino-Soviet split, and deep cultural and religious differences, the Chinese have few contacts in these countries, as compared with the Koreans, for instance. Central Asians are fearful of the overwhelming Chinese population and even of China's ancient position in the Fergana Valley during the Tang dynasty (618-906 c.e).¹³ Chinese traders have expressed dismay to me at the corrupt and disorganized business practices of the Central Asians. Much of exchange is still conducted in cash, not modern credit instruments. As for bulk goods, transportation links are still poor, despite efforts of the Asian Development Bank. Central Asians use Russian as a lingua franca, but that language has long yielded to English as a second language for Chinese.

Central Asian experts are increasingly worried about the region's sources of fresh water. China controls the head waters of the Ili and the Irtysh, which flow into Kazakhstan. The Chinese plans to exploit those rivers for civilian needs, oil field development, power, and irrigation present a latent conflict with Kazakhstan, although the situation at present is not critical, as it is for Amu Darya water entering Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan on its way to the much-reduced Aral Sea.

China's increased activity and support of Central Asian governments clearly worries India, which has resumed efforts to expand its strategic depth and influence in this area, close to Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁴ Like China, India has friendly relations with all the countries of the region. New Delhi has also obtained their support for India's position on Kashmir. Agreements have recently been signed to allow exploration for energy. India's state-run gas company GAIL agreed to build facilities in Uzbekistan to produce some 100 thousand tons of liquefied petroleum gas at a cost of \$50-60 million each.¹⁵ New Delhi's effort to purchase a share of the Kurmangazy field in Kazakhstan lost out to a Chinese bid, though. Probably India's strength in information technology is more promising for the time being. So we see one result of China's initiatives is to stimulate its natural rivals in the area—Russia, India, and perhaps the USA. India's activity increase in the future will also depend on its continued economic and military expansion.¹⁶

Prospects

The basic reason for the insignificance of normal business relations between China and the countries of Central Asia has to do with their present comparative advantages and technical barriers to such relationships. The Central Asian countries have conducted an external policy

¹³ Murat Auezov, former Kazakh ambassador to China has said: "I know Chinese culture. We should not believe anything the Chinese politicians say. ...I'm telling you that 19th century China, 20th century China, and 21st century China are three different Chinas. But what unites them is a desire to expand their territories." Jeremy Bransten, "Central Asia: China's Mounting Influence." *Eurasia Insight*, November 23, 2004.

¹⁴ Yashwant Sinha, "India and Central Asia in the Emerging Security Environment," in K. Santhanam and Ramakant Dwivedi, eds., *India and Central Asia: Advancing the Common Interest* (New Delhi: IDSA & Anamaya Publishers, 2004), pp. 2-9, quoted in Dwivedi, supra, p. 158.

¹⁵ RFE/RL, May 22, 2006.

¹⁶ Stephen Blank, "India's Rising Presence in Central Asia," in Ariel Cohen, ed., *Eurasia in Balance* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 183-201.

of “staple globalism,” which involves state trading of exports and selective imports of capital goods.¹⁷ China buys as much staple energy (and some metals) as it can at world prices from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, but is hardly interested in the gold¹⁸ and cotton which are the main currency earners of these three countries. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have little to offer China besides their labor, though potentially hydropower could be available if the requisite dams can be built or operated efficiently and transmission lines constructed over the mountains to the XUAR. China does not produce the kind of capital goods or high-quality consumer goods the half-Westernized ruling elites in these countries want to purchase with their scarce foreign exchange. Furthermore, potential Chinese businessmen and investors have always worried about the weak enforcement of property rights in all the Central Asian states. According to an authoritative international source, it requires between 177 and 281 days and 32 to 42 procedures to enforce a contract in Central Asia at a cost of 25-30% of the claim—several times worse than in European markets.¹⁹ **Lack of financing for foreign ventures would also be a problem. China’s state-owned banks favor large state-owned enterprises and infrastructure projects, with only some 8% of loans going to small and medium-sized enterprises.**²⁰

The current worldwide slump has severely affected Kazakhstan because of its heavy dependence on oil and gas exports, as well as metals exported to Russia. A huge share of the money Kazakhstan earned went to its active construction sector, which employed more than 500,000 people (in a country of 15 million). With a recall of extensive loans taken in dollars, the government has been forced to expend an estimated \$3 billion to finance some 220 unfinished housing projects in Astana alone.²¹

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have lost a tangible share of their GNP’s from the return of workers from Russia and elsewhere. Their remittances constituted as much as a third of national income in the first two countries, while Uzbekistan has lost revenue from weak cotton prices. When and if natural gas prices, normally set in state-mediated contracts, fall off, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan will face budget crises. So far, however, China has not extended open budgetary assistance, as Russia has said it will do.

Conclusion

With regard to China’s activity in Central Asia the current United States Administration has little to worry about. Most of PRC direct involvement is temporary and is intended to diversify its sources of fossil fuels. This can reduce world prices slightly, as long-term monopolization of energy is infeasible, and should bother Russia more than the USA. Informal trade with the XUAR is innocuous and beneficial to ordinary Central Asians.

¹⁷ Martin C. Spechler, “The Economies of Central Asia: A Survey,” *Comparative Economic Studies*, vol. 50 (2008), pp. 30-52.

¹⁸ At present China is buying gold from domestic sources at a discount to diversify its reserves.

¹⁹ *Doing Business 2009*.

²⁰ National Bureau of Statistics of the PRC, quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, May 14, 2009, p. A9. **Lack of collateral or other credit guarantees often lead to refusals by banks.**

²¹ Alisher Khamidov, “Kazakhstan: Construction sector still reeling despite government’s bail-out package,” *fergana.ru*, April 6, 2009.

Genuine PRC business firms have yet to establish themselves to any significant extent anywhere in Central Asia.

China's suppression of Islamic Uighurs and Buddhist Tibetans is objectionable, of course, but no one can reasonably expect the United States to do more than protest violations of human rights there. A similar lack of feasible instruments affects our position with respect to the malevolent military rule in Burma.

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