
ВОПРОСЫ НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫХ И ФЕДЕРАТИВНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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ВОПРОСЫ НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫХ И ФЕДЕРАТИВНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

Научный журнал

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Academic journal “*Issues of National and Federative Relations*” is an international peer-reviewed scientific periodical in the field of political studies. The journal has an international character because of the composition of its Editorial Board, its editors, its contributing authors and topics of its publications.

The scientific journal is published since 2011 at the “Publishing House “Science Today”. Translated (eng.) version of the journal is published since 2018. Since its inception, the journal was guided by high scientific and ethical standards and today it is one of the leading political science journals in Russia.

The purpose of the journal is to promote scientific exchange and cooperation between Russian and foreign political scientists.

The journal is intended for the publication of the results of fundamental and applied scientific research. Thematic focus of the journal is reflected in the following permanent headings: “Domestic history, ethnology and ethnography”, “History of international relations and world politics”, “History and philosophy of politics”, “Political institutions, processes and technologies”, “Political culture, ethnopoltics and ideologies”, “Political problems of international relations and globalization.”

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The target audience of the journal is Russian and foreign specialists-political scientists, as well as graduate students and masters in the fields of political science, state and municipal management and international relations.

The journal strictly adheres to the international publishing standards and publication ethics identified in the *COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics)* document. <http://publicationethics.org>.

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СОДЕРЖАНИЕ

ОТЕЧЕСТВЕННАЯ ИСТОРИЯ, ЭТНОЛОГИЯ И ЭТНОГРАФИЯ

- Вдовин С.С., Сыздыкова Ж.С.** Этнический состав
и территориальное устройство Хивинского ханства XVIII-XIX вв. 1996
- Ушмаева К.А., Волков А.А., Состин Д.И., Гончаров А.С.**
Духовная культура ставропольского казачества
во второй половине XX в. 2005
- Дьун-Дьангхай С.В., Сыздыкова Ж.С.**
Ислам – государственная религия Караханидов
как один из факторов модернизации тюркского языка XI в. 2016
- Гусейнова Б.М.** Дагестанцы на государственной службе России:
Абдурахман Даниялов – видный государственный
и общественный деятель Дагестана 2024
- Кириченко В.Ю.** К вопросу о матримониальных связях
коломенского купечества во второй половине XVIII века 2032
- Моргунов К.Г.** Москва и москвичи в зимний
период 1918-1920 гг.: зарисовки из повседневности 2041

ИСТОРИЯ И ТЕОРИЯ ПОЛИТИКИ

- Болтенкова Л.Ф.** Библия как источник права (часть десятая) 2050

ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ИНСТИТУТЫ, ПРОЦЕССЫ И ТЕХНОЛОГИИ

- Николенко А.А.** Русская локальная цивилизация:
этапы и основные характеристики 2065
- Пацеля Я.С.** Протесты в Хабаровском крае:
анализ и прогноз развития политической ситуации 2072

ТЕОРИЯ И ИСТОРИЯ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ И ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКИ

- Сыздыкова Ж.С.** Народы и этносы Афганистана
и Центральной Азии в историческом контексте 2077
- Винченцо Лигорио.** China's Digital Soft-Power
in the Post-Soviet Space: a threat to Russia's Regional Predominance/
Китайская (цифровая) мягкая сила на постсоветском пространстве:
угроза региональному превосходству России 2085
- Шашишев Е.Д.** Дилеммы евразийского интеграционного
процесса в условиях санкционной политики 2091
- Петрухин А.М.** Открытие и начало работы
Государственной Думы Российской империи II созыва
на страницах британской прессы 2103

Афонин А.Д. Интеграционные процессы Евросоюза и Грузии в контексте энергосетей	2112
Ситдикова Н.А., Фалалеев М.А., Нечай Е.Е. Влияние политических факторов на динамику входящей международной академической мобильности в современной России	2120
СТУДЕНЧЕСКАЯ НАУКА	
Большаков М.В. Различие в пищевом рационе крестьянского населения Северной и Южной части Рязанской губернии во второй половине XIX века (на примере Зарайского, Касимовского, Михайловского, Скопинского, Раненбургского уездов)	2128
Братковская Д.В., Леонова А.А., Фам Тхи Минь Хуен. Транснациональные корпорации как акторы мировой политики: проблемы терминологического определения	2139
Деточка М.Ю. Перспективы развития американо-кубинских отношений при Джо Байдене	2144
Гэн Ицзинь. Центральнo-Азиатская политика правительства Узбекистана: современные реалии	2149
НАШИ АВТОРЫ	2161
ТРЕБОВАНИЯ К ОФОРМЛЕНИЮ РУКОПИСЕЙ	2165

КИТАЙСКАЯ (ЦИФРОВАЯ) МЯГКАЯ СИЛА НА ПОСТСОВЕТСКОМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ: УГРОЗА РЕГИОНАЛЬНОМУ ПРЕВОСХОДСТВУ РОССИИ

После разрыва отношений между Западом и Россией, Москва и Пекин повысили уровень сотрудничества в нескольких областях. Рассматриваемые западными аналитиками как новый блок, основанный на рамках холодной войны, отношения между этими двумя странами представляют собой не что иное, как стратегический «брак».

Действительно, в Центральной Азии Китай представляет для России скорее угрозу, чем возможность. Массовое использование различных инструментов мягкой силы постепенно ослабляет влияние Москвы в регионе.

Ключевые слова: *мягкая сила, геополитика, Центральная Азия, Россия, Китай, технологии, цифровое превосходство.*

VINCENZO LIGORIO

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CHINA'S DIGITAL SOFT-POWER IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE: A THREAT TO RUSSIA'S REGIONAL PREDOMINANCE

Since the breakdown of Western-Russia relations, Moscow and Beijing increased the level of cooperation in several field. Seen by Western analysts as a new bloc

based on the cold war framework, the relationship between these two countries it is nothing more than a strategic “marriage”. Indeed in Central Asia, China represents more a threat for Russia rather than an opportunity; the massive use of different soft power tools are slowly weakening Moscow’s influence in the region.

Key words: *soft power, geopolitics, Central Asia, Russia, China, technology, digital supremacy.*

Introduction. The discussion around. China’s international role in the international system needs a short premise which would facilitate the process of understanding among non-expert audience.

The source of current China’s foreign policy finds its roots in the cardinal policy shift seen in the dawn of the twenty-first century.

We observed a long standing transition from a low-profile and as called “hide-our-capacities” approach, under the leadership of Deng to a strategy of power projection at regional as well as global level.

If we look at the timeline of this process, source of China’s international rise may be traced in Kissinger’s idea to terminate China’s international isolation by admitting the People’s Republic of China. (PRC) into the United Nation with the simultaneous expelling of the Republic of China (ROC), in a move which sounded as a betrayed for most and a great foreign policy move for others.

Something similar may be accounted to Clinton’s administration, when the US fully supported Beijing entry into the WTO in 2001; the narrative behind this choice was based on American President idea that if integrated into the international economic system, China would become a responsible and peaceful actor, in the contest of an interdependent world order.

While consolidating its economic potential China began to move toward that assertive role in complete conflict with the above mentioned Deng’s leadership, moving along all those crises at regional as global level. Moreover we may assert that China adopted a twofold strategy, firstly becoming a sort of globetrotters in order to position itself worldwide; second Beijing’s intelligenza understood that if an hard power approach may strength its position as regional actor, a soft power approach is needed in order to promote Chinese modelled international system.

This awareness was transformed into practice in a period that goes from 2005/2006 when the idea of a Chinese alternative in order to substitute the Westphalia’s based international system was implemented. In arch of ten years Beijing intensively promoted its cultural soft power, disseminating around the world about 500 Confucius Institute reaching about 2 million students in 134 countries.

If the cultural diplomacy brought its results in term of cleaning China’s image, other were and are the soft power tools – the *checkbook diplomacy* among the others – which are allowing Beijing to be considered a superpower.

Since the breakdown of Russia's relationship with the West, over the annexation of the Crimean peninsula, Moscow's partnership with Beijing became as strategic as essential – for the Russian side.

China and Russia follow a common parallel path leading to the re-balancing of the international system, Western dominated.

Although this common goal, the relationship may be considered complex and full of shadow areas which seminate along the path mistrust among both the partners; Central Asia represents an area where this mistrust reach its higher level.

Meanwhile China is emerging as the most influential international player in the region, Russia is loosing appeal against its old republics, with nearly no floor to counteract that.

1.1. Redefining borders: China in Central Asia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China and Russia have moved their relationship from adversaries to pragmatic partners. In this framework we can consider their relationship as tactical and opportunistic but with the same element of geopolitical view based on multipolarity.

With the common interest to move the axes of geopolitics from Euro-Atlantic to Euro-Asian, these powers have to share a peaceful coexistence in Central Asia.

The level of complexity and the manifested importance given to ties between these two countries had been quietly personalised, involving directly both presidents – Putin and Xi.

Since that event, nobody would predict that the Moscow and Beijing would intensify their contacts; With a tortuous history full of territorial contentious rocked by war and regime changed, these two countries became allies for a while after the Communist takeover in 1949; Moscow here had played the role of Donor, providing technical assistance (TA), financial and political support to Beijing; The political idyll terminated during the Khrushchev era with border disputes and military confrontation making of them Cold War adversaries; the Russian influence installed a sort of Sinophobic sentiment among Central Asia population that are alive yet. [2]

In parallel to the political-historical factor, until the first official visit of a Chinese delegation – led by Tien Zenpei – in 1992, Beijing could not count on a diplomatic network able to establish any relationship with the Central Asia. [6]

Despite few attempts of economic assistance and some industrial partnership, no matter the difficulties due to the transition period, the Central Asia was still a taboo for Beijing. The discourse orbiting around the post-soviet space was conducted by the new military alliance led by Moscow – Collective Security Treaty organisation (CSTO) – with whom all the international actors had to talk with strategic matters in the region; this framework together with Chinese soviet based background prevented China to push forward with any attempt of deeper relationship in the area.

All the Chinese border/territorial disputes in Central Asia had been solved using a framework known as Shangai Five – similar to the current format used to solve similar issues in the post soviet region, see Ukraine – with Russia playing the role of mediator and facilitator. Such approach ensured a sort of stability and legitimacy in further relations and negotiations between the actors involved. [7]

The predominance of Beijing here became evident in the beginning of the second decade of 2000s when Moscow's attempt to counteract the Belt & Road Initiative, creating a custom union – Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) – did not led to the wanted results.

Left with no control, the trade exchange among China and Central Asian countries grew by about 100 times in the first decade of 2000s reaching more than \$40 billion in 2018. Except for Kazakhstan, China represents Central Asia's main trading partner.

In order to stop the above mentioned tendency, a sort of compromise was found by the Russian Administration based on a development of joint activities in the region among EAEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt.

Despite a sort of compromise the rebalancing tendency in favour of Beijing and the consequent declining of Moscow in the region; trend led by the enormous Chinese appetite of energy resources and ample reserve, which it distributes to Central Asia through commercial investments loans, the special Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and a series of other institutions and aid mechanisms.

As widely described within the concept of “*checkbook*” *Diplomacy*, the higher appeal of Chinese aid mechanism(s) is based on – if compared with the West – no political reforms pressure to Central Asian governments; and unlike Russia, Chinese government does not use political pressure to see the region in its general orientation. Beijing strongly believes that the regional stability may be guaranteed more by the use of economic/financial support rather than forcing institutional reforms or others.

Although China's presence and geoeconomics and geopolitical influence is striking in the region, the most important challenge for Beijing is to maintain a positive dynamics with Moscow. China is astute in the way of managing Russia, because its engagement in the region is based on economic issues. While the soft power is spread under China's flag, Moscow military presence is the last pillar of the Russian policy in the region. [3]

1.2. The geopolitics of Digital Supremacy in Central Asia. Central Asia's customs and cross-border trading represents a great challenge for those Countries involved in such activities in the region. In order to reduce logistics costs in the most expensive containers shipping region in the world a massive reforms is needed. In 2004 several attempts have been made among SCO's members to reach such a goal but with a consolidated soviet logistics legacy to protect, Russia did not manifested a great interest in supporting a more integrated customs system benefiting China in its relationships with Central Asia.

Several attempts. Have been made in order to coordinate Russian and Chinese policies under the framework set up around the SCO. But both Moscow and Beijing desire to arrange trade activities at their advantage with few floor for an effective cooperation – if not only based on regional stability.

The use of new technology of course would facilitate the harmonization of customs affairs in Central Asia increasing its potential as trade bridge for the whole Eurasia. The main interest – which represent in somehow the main limit – for Beijing in this matter is not to exclusively increase the trade flow across the region but to increase the access to Central Asia's data. In this framework can be analysed the massive advocacy for “Made in China” technologies – see Huawei's 5G – set up by Beijing in the region.

After a period of predominance of companies like Turk Telekom or Grameen-phone together with Russian corporation, in 2016 Beijing government implemented - under the umbrella of SCO – a series of technology partnership increase the allocation of funding which in the past were exclusively devoted to counter-terrorism based initiative. [5]

Doing so, Beijing entered a territory that was previously occupied by Russia; developing. New dual-use technologies, allowed a generation of post-soviet educated academicians and scientists were exposed to new software and machine developed and implemented by Chinese scientists.

Despite initial resistance, several Central Asia countries feared Chinese access to their surveillance data, in 2019 Kyrgyz government turned down a deal with Russian companies (signed just a year earlier), in favor of the Chinese *Sunwin Intelligence Company* which has been awarded a contract for the creation of a surveillance and data management network, entirely managed by a team of Chinese consultants.[4] Moreover Beijing is independently building a set of fiber optic cable along Afghanistan's Wakhan corridor, with the intention to extend it to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. [1]

Our opinion is that for Central Asian governments there is no floor to raise concerns around security reason if they do not want face the risk to lose all those economic benefits provided by Beijing. In this matter, with no options for Moscow to have a backdoor data traffic monitoring – through the countries involved – the risk to lose in the mid term its military predominance in the region would be more then a just hypothesis.

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