

## NEW ASPECTS OF COMMON SECURITY AGENDA

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**Abstract:** *In the 21st century, the ongoing integration process has led to a new security agenda, particularly concerning cross-border security cooperation between China and Central Asian countries. This new agenda encompasses three primary concerns: the movement of goods and people across borders, cross-border infrastructure, and data flow across borders. Improved mechanisms for cross-border security governance in the future will contribute to the regional citizens' development opportunities. Nevertheless, the increasingly intricate nature of cross-border security will require governments to address persisting issues such as counter-terrorism and anti-crime, along with novel challenges like facilitating the flow of people and data. To address these challenges, China must enhance collaboration with Central Asian countries.*

**Keywords:** *Cross-Border Security, Movement of goods and people across borders, Cross-border infrastructure, Cross-border data flows, Foreign Policy.*

The Central Asian region is an essential partner for China in international cooperation. Since 2000, Central Asia has been a link between China and the world, and it has become even more critical to China. In July 2024, the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) adopted a resolution to comprehensively deepen reform to advance Chinese modernization at its third plenary session<sup>1</sup>. In this historical document, China explicitly proposed to "promote high-level opening to the outside world," it would be inconceivable that Central Asia would be absent from China's opening map.

For China to realize a higher level of opening to the outside world, it must achieve a higher level of exchange with the outside world, including exchanging people, goods, and data. Therefore, for China and the Central Asian countries in the twenty-first century, with the continuous development of the integration process, closed national security is no longer meaningful, and a new type of cross-border security cooperation is the latest security agenda.

Cross-border security is not a new issue. In Europe, cross-border security discussions are more related to immigration issues. In the Asia-Pacific region, cross-border security often means topics such as counter-narcotics and anti-telecom fraud. Regarding cross-border security between China and Central Asian countries, we need to focus on three main issues.

### **(A) Movement of goods and people across borders**

The border between China and Central Asian countries spans over 3,300 kilometers.

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<sup>1</sup> China Daily, Full text: Resolution of CPC Central Committee on further deepening reform comprehensively to advance Chinese modernization, 07 JUL 2024, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202407/21/WS669d02f2a31095c51c50f1f2.html>

Historically, both regions faced challenges with illegal border crossings. After the Cold War, China engaged in productive discussions with Central Asian nations, resulting in agreements on border trust and military force reduction. This led to the signing of bilateral treaties, fostering good neighborly relations. Addressing border issues was instrumental in the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Over the past 30 years, the focus has been on preventing illegal border crossings by terrorists and extremists.

With economic globalization, Central Asia's economic integration with China is deepening significantly, and trade between Central Asia and China has increased dramatically, with China already being the top trading partner and major source of investment for the five Central Asian countries. More notable changes are in the area of people-to-people exchanges, which governments in the region have begun to promote as a key development objective. 2021 saw Uzbekistan implement a "10-day visa-free" policy for China, and in 2023, China and Kazakhstan signed an agreement allowing visa-free travel for ordinary passport holders. Also, in 2023, the Kyrgyz government will allow Chinese citizens holding Hong Kong and Macau passports and U.S.-European visas to visit China visa-free. The Chinese government has also pledged to facilitate entry into China for citizens of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and other Central Asian countries<sup>2</sup>.

Indeed, there is a noticeable upsurge in the exchange of goods and people between China and Central Asia. By 2023, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will surpass 300,000<sup>3</sup>. While governments and communities welcome this growth, there is a growing apprehension regarding potential security risks. How can measures be put in place to prevent terrorists and extremists from exploiting the increased mobility of people in the region to carry out their malicious activities? Likewise, what can be done to thwart organized criminal entities from exploiting the influx of goods in the area to establish illicit trading networks? These concerns are surfacing as emerging security threats in the area.

As China continues to drive regional economic cooperation, it remains steadfast in cultivating the willingness of Central Asian nations to engage in security collaboration. China advocates applying its approach to assist Central Asian partners, leveraging scientific and technological advancements to address security challenges. In 2016, China supplied essential equipment to Tajikistan and established new border checkpoints and training centers along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border to bolster Tajikistan's border defense capabilities. Additionally, in 2019, with the backing of the Export-Import Bank of China, China Nuctech Co., Ltd. furnished security inspection

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<sup>2</sup> Акчабар: Китай упрощает порядок выдачи виз для граждан Кыргызстана, 18.12.2023, <https://www.akchabar.kg/ru/news/kitaj-uproshaet-poryadok-vydachi-viz-dlya-grazhdan-kyrgyzstana/>

<sup>3</sup> Assel Satubaldina: Kazakhstan Anticipates Up to Half a Million Chinese Tourists in 2024, The Astana Times, 29 March 2024.

upgrade equipment to 11 border inspection stations in Kazakhstan, dramatically increasing the transit capacity of relevant ports in Kazakhstan. Looking ahead to 2023, China pledged to aid Kyrgyzstan in upgrading its animal and plant inspection and quarantine laboratories, consequently reinforcing Kyrgyzstan's monitoring capability for transit commodities.

It's important to highlight that China is not driven by geopolitical agendas in such collaboration. Additionally, China has a favorable stance regarding the involvement of other nations in enhancing the border control capacities of Central Asian countries.

### **(B) Cross-border infrastructure**

Concerning infrastructure, Central Asian countries hold immense significance for China. China has established the most extensive cross-border infrastructure in Central Asia, which includes two railway ports, 15 road ports<sup>4</sup>, three natural gas pipelines, and two crude oil pipelines connecting Central Asia and China. Moreover, China actively presents technological solutions for developing cross-border power grids alongside Central Asian nations. The railway freight volume between China and Kazakhstan is set to reach 28 million tons in 2023, marking a 22% increase from 2022.

The land-based terrestrial backbone cable linking Central Asia and China is critical to the Diverse Route for European and Asian Markets (DREAM)<sup>5</sup>. This route ensures efficient low-latency network services from Hong Kong to Frankfurt. Following the onset of the Ukraine crisis, some network services in Central Asia actively link to the global submarine cable system in the Asia-Pacific region via China's fiber optic network using cross-border fiber optic cables.

It can be observed that China has already established a well-developed cross-border infrastructure network with Central Asia. Despite the significant disparity in GDP between China and the Central Asian nations, the cross-border infrastructure linking the two holds great significance for China's economic security. In 2023, China's imports of essential energy resources such as coal, crude oil, and natural gas from the five Central Asian countries constituted over 50% of its total imports from these nations during the same period<sup>6</sup>. A compelling example is the widespread gas supply shortage experienced in northern China during 2017-2018, which is closely tied to the stability of the gas pipeline from Central Asia to China. The quantity of direct rapid container trains traveling across Central Asia has surged from 17 in 2011 to more

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<sup>4</sup> Du Haitao: "Port Economy Releases Vitality," People's Daily, October 31, 2019, Page 07 (杜海涛:《口岸经济释放活力》,《人民日报》,2019年10月31日,07版)

<sup>5</sup> Internet Society Pulse report: Internet Resilience and Efficiency in Central Asia, May 2024, [https://pulse.internetsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Internet-Resilience-and-Efficiency-in-Central-Asia\\_Report\\_May2024.pdf](https://pulse.internetsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Internet-Resilience-and-Efficiency-in-Central-Asia_Report_May2024.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Wang Lin: "Deepening Energy Full Industry Chain Cooperation between China and Central Asia," China Energy News, May 29 2023, Page 01. (王林:《中国—中亚深化能源全产业链合作》,《中国能源报》,2023年05月29日,第01版)

than 15,000 in 2021<sup>7</sup>. Following the Ukraine crisis, China's freight trains to Central Asian countries emerged as the mainstay of cross-border freight operations.

The Ukraine crisis serves as a mirror, revealing numerous unanticipated challenges related to the fragility of transnational infrastructure. One compelling instance is the swift obliteration of the "Nord Stream-2" pipeline connecting Russia and Germany, which was brought to ruin in just one night despite taking three years to construct. Ongoing occurrences of drone assaults on railway tunnels, substations, and docks during conflicts signal a potentially significant peril for cross-border infrastructure in the times ahead.

There is no reason for China and the Central Asian countries to disregard the security of cross-border infrastructure. The stable operation of these facilities is vital for economic cooperation in the region. Some of these infrastructures, such as the Kambarata-1 dam being built on the Naryn River in Kyrgyzstan, are important for ecosystems throughout Central Asia<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, Central Asia is home to several industrial facilities where there is a possibility of urgent environmental pollution incidents occurring, such as petrochemical plants in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, gold mines in Kirghizia, and aluminum plants in Tajikistan. These facilities must be well safeguarded in an attack, as they can release significant quantities of hazardous substances into the natural environment.

### **(C) Cross-border data flows**

In the 21st century, we witnessed the coexistence of the natural and digital worlds, with all countries recognizing the significance of the digital economy as a primary development focus. From 2008 to 2018, the global digital delivery trade export scale surged from US\$1,838 billion to US\$2,931.4 billion, displaying an average annual growth rate of approximately 5.8%, notably exceeding the growth rate of goods and services trade during the same period. In 2019, global digital service trade reached US\$3,192.59 billion, marking a 3.75% increase against the prevailing trend. These figures accounted for 52% of service trade and 12.9% of global trade<sup>9</sup>. Over the span from 2005 to 2022, cross-border data flow expanded from 3,554GB to 997,301GB, experiencing an increase of over 280 times.<sup>10</sup> The average growth rate between 2020 and 2022 even exceeded 30%. Data flows can resolve complex issues such as fraud detection, supply chain optimization, and R&D collaboration. It is estimated that the

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<sup>7</sup> Zulfia Karimova: How Trade via Rail in Central Asia Can Mitigate the Energy and Climate Crises, Asian Development Blog, 24 August 2022, <https://blogs.adb.org/blog/how-trade-rail-central-asia-can-mitigate-energy-and-climate-crises>

<sup>8</sup> Газета.uz: Узбекистан, Кыргызстан и Казахстан подписали «дорожную карту» по Камбаратинской ГЭС-1, 7 января 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/01/07/ges/>

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, J., D. Ker and M. Leshner (2021), "Measuring the economic value of data", OECD Going Digital Toolkit Notes, No. 20, OECD Publishing, Paris

<sup>10</sup> López González, J., S. Sorescu and P. Kaynak (2023), "Of bytes and trade: Quantifying the impact of digitalisation on trade", OECD Trade Policy Papers, No. 273, OECD Publishing, Paris

resultant data sharing could contribute around 2.5% to the annual global GDP.

China is realizing the importance of addressing concerns related to data security to facilitate cross-border data flow and promote constructive international cooperation in the digital realm. China has committed to enhancing its data security governance and establishing a streamlined, secure mechanism for cross-border data flow according to the resolution of the Third Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. The country is also designing a hierarchical classification system for data and developing regulations and restricted lists for cross-border data flows. Central Asian nations may find China's approach informative as they seek to establish frameworks for managing data flows.

Although Central Asia's digital economy is still evolving, it must deepen its global connections to unlock more significant opportunities. Central Asian countries possess abundant scientific and technical expertise, energy resources, and a substantial industrial digital market. Facilitating cross-border data flow between China and Central Asia can reduce data collection costs, optimize data utilization, increase data value, and stimulate cross-border information application, supply chain management, and optimization across manufacturing and service industries.

However, facilitating a secure cross-border data flow entails overcoming three significant security challenges. The foremost obstacle is the risk of breaching data privacy, leading to unauthorized access and misuse of individuals' personal information. In Central Asia, where homegrown digital enterprises and services are scarce, reliance on multinational companies exposes user data to potential leakage due to inadequacies in technical management and legal frameworks across borders. The second challenge involves navigating the complexities of geopolitical conflicts in the digital realm. It's essential to recognize that real-world geopolitics undeniably impact the digital sphere, with major digital economic powers, such as the United States and Europe, increasingly factoring geopolitical considerations into matters related to data flows. Moreover, many countries seek to restrict data flows for national security reasons, responding to geopolitical tensions such as those stemming from the Ukraine crisis. Periodic cyberattacks, such as the 2013 "Prism Gate" incident in the United States and the 2018 "Stuxnet" incident in Iran, have prompted widespread international concern regarding the data security of sovereign nations. Notably, certain developed countries, including the United States, leverage their digital dominance as a unilateral tool, straining international relations. Finally, effective governance poses a key challenge for national governments. Cross-border data flows complicate the authorities' ability to access enterprise data lawfully, raising enforcement uncertainties. While countries have established mechanisms, such as mutual legal assistance agreements (MLATs) and mutual legal assistance agreements (MLAAs), practical impediments persist, making it arduous to assert jurisdiction over data.

China has the opportunity to collaborate with Central Asian nations regarding the security governance of cross-border data flows. China and Central Asian countries are relatively close in their positions on data governance principles, supporting concepts such as the "local storage of important data" and the "protection of national digital sovereignty"<sup>11</sup>. In the future, China and Central Asian countries could emulate the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) mechanism and establish a digital governance framework in the Eurasian region. Building upon established mechanisms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), China and Central Asian countries can work together to advance the development of inter-regional data facilitation mechanisms.

### **Conclusion**

Cross-border security will be a new security agenda that China is actively discussing with Central Asia. A better cross-border security governance mechanism will provide better development space for citizens in the region and a better guarantee for the area's economic development and social progress. However, in the future, cross-border security will be more affluent, and governments will need to face old issues, such as counter-terrorism and anti-crime, as well as new issues, such as the convenient flow of people and data. To solve these problems, China needs to cooperate better with Central Asian countries.

In future practice, China and Central Asian countries can strengthen dialogue in professional fields and attract more experts to participate. Ultimately, the security agenda of China and the Central Asian countries will be realized by establishing regional integrated governance mechanisms. At the same time, these security agendas must be more transparent so that the international community is fully aware and citizens can actively participate.

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<sup>11</sup> Chen Changsheng, Xu Wei, Lan Zongmin, Jiang Yu: "Research on the Internal and External Environment of China's Development during the 14th Five-Year Plan Period," *Management World*, Issue 10, 2020.(陈昌盛、许伟、兰宗敏、江宇：《“十四五”时期我国发展内外部环境研究》，《管理世界》2020年第10期)