



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

China's strategic courtship with Central Asia



Obsessed with symbolism, China organised the first summit with Central Asia states in Xian, the ancient thousand-year-old capital and the starting point of the Silk Road for centuries.

Xian is where, after centuries on Chinese soil, a large Muslim colony took root, built its first mosques and, integrated into the local community.

The welcome to the leaders of the five Central Asia countries could not have been warmer, just like China's interests in the large region in its neighbourhood.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping respects Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as crucial development areas for his and the state's strategic project Belt and Road worth \$1 trillion. But he has even bigger plans for the future.

The two-day summit in Xian, which began last Thursday, is the first joint meeting between the leaders of China and the five former Soviet republics since their independence.

It is a meeting of partners who have strong economic ties. China is the largest partner of the 5 from Central Asia.

China's exchange with the region since the beginning of the year amounts to \$25 billion, a third more than a year earlier. A similar growth trend followed last year, when the exchange amounted to about \$70 billion.

Taking over dominance from Russia

There are multiple motives behind China's "courtship" with its neighbours from Central Asia. Their origin is in Beijing's ambition to

take over the strategic dominance in the region that has traditionally been in Russia's hands.

Beijing recognised that now is the right time for this, given that the economic ties of Central Asia with Russia have been weakening and becoming risky due to Western sanctions.

With the aggression against Ukraine, Russia ceased to be an inviolable guarantor of regional security. At the same time, all governments in Central Asia capitals are cautious and fear, not without reason, that they could be the next victims of Russian military action if Moscow needs it.

Three of the 5 summit participants with China are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). This security format, modelled after NATO and dominated by Russia, has never provided a sense of collective protection since its establishment.

Leaders from Central Asia are aware of this but are nevertheless concerned about Russia's aggressive behaviour. They are open to Chinese security initiatives, although they are on the back burner and subordinated to economic priorities.

An ideal region for the promotion of the Chinese model

It is important for China to prevent the export of instability from Afghanistan to the region, so from a security point of view, military cooperation with Tajikistan, as a buffer zone towards Afghanistan, is a priority.

With a pompous summit and another regional Asian forum, China wants to increase its

influence in Central Asia. If this means displacing Russia, it will have no problem with that.

The recent meeting between Xi and Vladimir Putin in Moscow was marked by a "no limits" partnership. The talks in Xian show that the limits of influence are clear and that they are moving to the detriment of Russia.

The Central Asia region is ideal for China to promote the agenda of a new international order where the West will not be at the centre.

China has been doing this in other places, in the Middle East, for example, but in this regard, Central Asia is a safe bet.

Until now, the Belt and Road Initiative has moved the axis of economic cooperation in the region towards China. The disruptions after the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine have been accelerating that process.

"[The] Ukraine conflict is more an accelerant of pre-existing trends in the region - the largest of which is China pushing out Russia as the largest hegemon in the region", said Bradley Jardine from the Washington Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs.

The countries of Central Asia do not have only China to choose from

Central Asia states have been suffering because of the Ukrainian conflict. It has disrupted trade corridors, investments, transit and migrant flows, and naturally, regional leaders are looking for an alternative to the problems they have got into through no fault of their own.

China is offered to them as the first response. As the largest trading partner, an investor in transport and energy infrastructure, and the closest major global player who can also provide security guarantees if they need them. Russia has lost that influence with its Central Asia partners.

That is why the Chinese narrative about respecting the sovereignty of states, as a significant part of its global presence, has found fertile ground in Central Asia, where countries are afraid that Russia could destabilise them through ethnic conflicts or even open aggression.

Central Asia leaders travelled to China feeling they could bargain with their partner, not just surrender to its ambitions and interests.

The West as a growing support

Just 2 months ago, Central Asia leaders met US state secretary Antony Blinken in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. They received the same assurances about respect for their sovereignty, which is the first message they expect from everyone.

In the new post-Afghanistan policy, Washington treats the Central Asia region as a first-class area for cooperation, not only as a secondary and logistical area for operations in Afghanistan.

Without much expectation that the region will join the bloc that condemns and actively opposes Russian aggression against Ukraine, the US has been stimulating the countries of Central Asia to resist avoiding the imposition of sanctions against Russia, as the region most susceptible to it.

At the same time, US economic operations in

the region are growing, as are options for expanding markets and exchange with the West, which influence local leaders to raise their negotiating price regarding China.

The West, and particularly the US, appear as a significant support for the Central Asia states. They are urgently looking for support due to the disturbances caused by Russia.

China cannot count on being able to fill the economic and security vacuum in Central Asia created by the evident decline in Russia's influence.

Beijing is aware of this, and perhaps that is why it timed the "courtship" with leaders from Central Asia in Xian at the same time as the G7 summit in Hiroshima.