

The Pandemic of Coronavirus and China's Peaceful Hegemonic Ascent in Central Asia

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Keywords: China, Central Asia, Hegemonic Power, Coronavirus, the Balance of Power.

Abstract: The coronavirus fallout has had an impact on the power balance in Central Asia, a strategic region that possesses significant energy resources. The present research argues that, while the pandemic has caused economic, health, medical, social, and psychological crises in both rich and developing countries, it has also prompted a surge in nationalism and a renewed focus on crisis resolution within the countries. Following the outbreak, the Central Asia region, which had previously been the scene of struggle between regional and international powers, experienced a significant increase in the need for assistance and support from other countries. In the meantime, China acquired the upper hand and exerted power in the region by overcoming the coronavirus epidemic internally at a rapid pace before other powers in the region. This was accomplished through the use of structural and communication means. As a result, by speeding up changes and providing urgent and fundamental needs for the countries of the region, the coronavirus pandemic laid the groundwork for China's emergence as a hegemonic power. The present study attempts to explain these changes in relation to the pandemic in Central Asia by employing hegemonic stability theory and a descriptive-analytical research approach.

1. Introduction

Power relations in Central Asia have fundamentally changed as a result of China's extensive efforts to assist the region's governments. The pandemic crisis exacerbated the demands of the region, resulting in China's considerable presence in Central Asia as well as the automatic establishment of hegemonic roots in the region. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, China's hegemonic position on different aspects has been stabilized which will be explained in detail.

2. The Belt and Road Initiative

The BRI aims to reduce the infrastructure gaps between developed and developing nations, such as those in Central Asia, to aid in the expansion of these countries' economies and to promote international trade. The outbreak created both obstacles and opportunities for the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative in the first stages. Since the outbreak, governments have had to block their borders and international ports, resulting in a slowdown in commerce between China and Central Asian countries as well as a delay in the implementation of several projects aimed at enhancing manufacturing capacity. When COVID-19 broke out, the "Silk Road of Health" and "Digital Silk Road" were created to help people who were suffering from the disease. Although it slowed the progress of the Belt and Road Initiative, the pandemic has assisted China in increasing its existential and substantive significance. The development of this plot is accelerating as immunisation has progressed and travel restrictions in the countries engaged in the project are eased.

Since they are key participants in the Belt and Road Initiative, Central Asian countries gain from China's infrastructure investments, credit opportunities, and growth in both exports and production. For its part, China gains a position in Central Asia that provides it with the political, economic, legitimising, and security aspects necessary to establish a dominant hegemony in the region. The coronavirus epidemic exposed the vulnerabilities of Central Asian countries in the face of

unanticipated disasters, highlighting the need for a project such as the Belt and Road Initiative to be implemented in the region. [1]

3. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

SCO is a substantial example of regional cooperation, as it unites many Central Asian countries, China, and Russia. In fact, the SCO is a tool to improve Beijing's relations with Central Asia, lend legitimacy to China's global stances, boost ties with Russia, and counter the U.S. influence and power. [2]

With the help of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), multilateral cooperation in Central Asia is being promoted. This helps China to reduce conflict with its neighbours while also achieving its economic interests in the region, which are mostly tied to energy resources. Apart from that, operating within the framework of the SCO has become a means for China to obtain practical experience in advancing its policies in a multilateral and regional context. It has been agreed upon by all of the members that a gradual transition to mutual settlements in national currencies will aid in the development of financial cooperation under the SCO, and this is precisely one of the most important factors that will assist China in its efforts to achieve dominant regional hegemony soon. This mechanism has the potential to assist in mitigating the consequences of the outbreak while also increasing the financial resources available to member nations. While managing interactions between countries in the region and China, the SCO, with its multifarious functions in the political, economic, and security fields, has supplied China with all of the elements necessary to achieve hegemony. Additionally, the pandemic crisis and the urgent requirement for the capabilities of the SCO have resulted in an increase in the structural importance of this organization at the regional and international levels.

4. Economic Dimensions

Although China was the region's major economic power and the main trading partner before the coronavirus crisis, the conditions and necessities that emerged following the outbreak led to the acceleration and strengthening of China's economic dominance in the region. This region had a profound impact on global hegemony as it could permanently shape the dominating economy. Three categories will be used to explain the influence of the epidemic on China-Central Asia economic relations and the expansion of China's economic power in the region.

4.1. Investment and Business Partnership

China, the region's leading power, is one of Central Asia's greatest investors and one of the region's top commercial partners. To put it another way, China is the region's dominant economic power and its presence is fueled by a combination of foreign aid, investment, and short- and long-term loans. In April 1996, China signed a series of comprehensive economic and security agreements, as part of which it devised a unique set of economic tools appropriate to fit the individual needs of each recipient country. In 2006, Chinese companies began building two oil and gas pipelines from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to China.

According to official data, investment in manufacturing and information transmission sectors continues to grow. The manufacturing sector has attracted \$ 7.2 billion which is 11.8 percent more than the prior year. Investment from China's local enterprises reached \$ 32.75 billion, which is 3.8% higher than the previous year. This accounts for 75 percent of China's total foreign direct investment in the same period. In fact, Central Asian countries are dependent on international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on the one hand, and the potential barter exchange deals with China on the other hand (Xinhua, China.org.cn, 2021).

4.2. Economic Aids and Financial Support

Unlike Westerners that impose difficult conditions such as the rule of law, independent judiciary, and transparency on loan applicants, Beijing works with its partners without imposing difficult

reforms. Thus, compared to Westerners, Beijing could invest more freely wherever it tends. In other words, more opportunities and fewer barriers lead to greater influence, especially in Central Asia where competition for Chinese investments has intensified. Beijing only desires to ensure that Chinese companies and workers benefit from these investments. [3]

China is becoming the world's leading international lender, with its outstanding debts equaling approximately 5 percent of global GDP. With the aid of Chinese loans, various critical infrastructures (roads, thermal power plants, power stations, and power lines) have been built and modernized in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. [4]

4.3. Debts Increase of Central Asian Countries

According to the statistics, there was an increase in the debt-to-GDP ratio in 2020 by 3 percent in Kazakhstan, 7 percent in Tajikistan, 8 percent in Uzbekistan, and 15 percent in Kyrgyzstan. China is the world's largest official creditor, owing 50 to 80 percent of all new foreign debt issued in the region. According to official statistics, Kyrgyzstan had a total foreign debt of about \$ 3.8 billion in 2019, which roughly 1.8 billion refers to the Export-Import Bank of China. Meanwhile, almost half of Tajikistan's foreign debt is owed to Beijing. China now has to extend, write off or waive some loans known as "bad loans". Unlike the World Bank, Chinese loans tend to have higher interest rates and use national assets as collateral. [5]

4.4. Replacement of Dollar with Yuan (RMB)

China is seeking to increase the level of RMB trade with other countries and has targeted its neighbors, including Central Asia; trading for many years with the Yuan on a trial basis. In fact, China aims to end the dollar's dominance and replace its currency internationally. If this is accomplished, China's dominance over the world economy will increase. The SCO member states have also shown their willingness to create their own Swift by offering solutions and reduce the dollar's monopoly. This can be the most important tool for exercising and consolidating the comprehensive power of a hegemon.

The conditions resulting from the coronavirus crisis in the Central Asian region, the urgent and vital needs of the countries in the region, the increase in loans, debts, and the Chinese infrastructure investments in the region, as well as the US and Russia domestic attempt to address the coronavirus crisis, left the control of affairs and initiatives to China. Perhaps in the absence of this pandemic, the power structure in the region would be formed differently.

5. Military and Security Tools

While being a necessity for establishing trade and economic relations and providing China with energy and mineral resources, the establishment of security in Central Asia is also essential for ensuring security in China's Xinjiang province. Establishing security in the Central Asian region is inevitable due to the terrorist, extremist, and separatist groups' efforts to destabilize China's western frontiers.

When the coronavirus outbreak occurred, it became clear that significant military power is not necessarily effective in resolving a crisis such as the coronavirus. In addition, the rise of the Democrats in the United States, and the withdrawal of NATO and U.S. forces from Afghanistan created a significant shift in China's overall position in the region of Central Asia. In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, China has now the ability to fill the vacuum with military intervention. Connecting the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe gives Afghanistan an important strategic role for China in terms of trade and serves as a hub connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

6. Cultural Tools

Developing cultural relations and collaboration appears to be one of China's most important tools for strategic influence and strengthening its presence in Central Asia. Chinese investment in institutes

that promote Chinese language and culture in Central Asia such as the Confucius Institutes is part of a strategy to influence the region. Promoting the Chinese language & culture conveys a message to the people of the region that China is "your close friend". To establish a favourable image, China uses mass media as well as educational activities. The China Central Television (CCTV) with Chinese state news agency "Xinhua" are regularly presented in the domestic broadcast networks of these countries. Central Asian authorities have come to believe that China is the only political and industrial superpower in the region.

7. Successful Management of the Pandemic Crisis in China

Dealing with health crises was one of the advantages of Western civilization during the American hegemonic period, which was challenged by the rise of Eastern powers and the shortcomings of the structural capabilities of Western powers (Roberts & Lamp, 2020). The pandemic caused millions of deaths and critical conditions for the economies of most countries in the world. While other countries are still dealing with the pandemic fallouts, China has handled the pandemic successfully and gained a strategic advantage which opened up new scenarios in favor of China, as well as a change in the structure and power relations, especially in the Central Asia region.

8. Conclusion

While there had been discussion about a power struggle among China, Russia, and the United States for multilateral influence in Central Asia before the outbreak, the pandemic created conditions that facilitated power shifts and consolidated China's position as a dominant power in the region. In this way, China was able to establish the necessary foundations for its rise to global prominence. The conditions generated by the epidemic gradually and automatically provided the components that China, as the region's economic superpower need in order to establish itself as a regional hegemon. These elements have taken root in such a way that China will unavoidably emerge as the superior hegemon in the region in the long run. The situation in the region following the coronavirus pandemic can be summarized as follows:

An increased need for aid around the world, losses of jobs, and widespread economic impacts, as well as damaged economies and poverty due to the emergence of a major COVID-19 outbreak; the necessity for international powers in the liberal order to return to their borders to prevent and manage the crisis; and a power vacuum emerging at the regional and global level similar to what happened during the collapse of the Soviet Union; severe financial and support needs of Central Asian countries; China's prompt release of COVID-19 and rapid recovery of its economy while most of the great powers are struggling to resolve the crisis within their borders; the sharp increase in financial aid, support loans, and infrastructure investments in Central Asia by China; The tools and structures that China already used in the region to communicate with Central Asian countries are more institutionalized than those of other powers such as the U.S.; China quickly released COVID-19 and restored its economy in the midst of a crisis in which most of the world's major nations are engaged. Increased financial aid and support loans from China helped Central Asia; it has already adopted and implemented new communication methods and institutions that are more institutionalized than other major nations, such as the United States. The common interests of Russia and China as two superpowers, especially in terms of security and military, facilitated the balance of power in favor of China and its policies; the withdrawal of NATO and U.S. forces from Afghanistan let China, the winner of the pandemic, take the initiative which will strengthen the hegemonic elements of Chinese power in the region.

As a result, according to the idea of hegemonic stability, China, which was Central Asia's main trading partner prior to the pandemic, increased its influence during the COVID-19 and automatically gained extra power. China was able to extend its influence in the region due to the absence of the U.S. and Russia, as well as the emergence of other hegemonic elements such as security, economic and political strength, and legitimacy. In fact, the foundation of China's hegemony in Central Asia

was laid during the pandemic and a new era has emerged in their relationship that could influence their future political decisions in China's favor.

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