

**CRITICAL RESOURCES AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: CHINA'S
ENGAGEMENT WITH CENTRAL ASIA**

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INTRODUCTION

The Central Asian countries have undergone significant changes in their geographical and geopolitical space since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The newly independent states that emerged became the focus of attention of the world powers, which in turn fully tried to gain leverage in this strategically important region. The countries of the Western world, Russia, as well as China, have directed their efforts to establish relations with a strategically important region, in a geopolitical and geographical aspect. Central Asia, located at the intersection of key transport routes and having large-scale reserves of natural resources, has become an object of active geo-economic involvement of world powers.

Over the past decade, China has significantly strengthened its presence in Central Asia, exerting influence as one of the key economic and political actors in the region. China is actively using economic opportunities, thereby providing loans, investing in infrastructure, and developing the One Belt— One Road initiative. The strengthening of the Chinese presence in Central Asia is based on a combination of economic and political interests related to access to the critical resources of the Central Asian region. All these actions contribute to strengthening its position in the region, especially against the background of the weakening influence of Russia and the limited presence of the West. The Central Asian countries, in turn, perceive China as a source of investment and a long-term strategic partner. China's policy in Central Asia is multifaceted and is aimed at obtaining the necessary resources and expanding its economic and political presence through various initiatives. In this article, we will analyze how the resources of the region determine the nature of the strategic partnership and consider the interrelation of all the above factors and assess the prospects for sustainable cooperation between China and the countries of the region.

Central Asia as a region of critical resources

Central Asia, which includes five independent countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, is the most important supplier of critical raw materials resources. Kazakhstan has significant reserves of uranium, copper and oil, Turkmenistan has the world's largest reserves of natural gas, Uzbekistan produces and, in turn, has extensive reserves of gold, copper and rare earth metals. In addition, the Central Asian countries have significant deposits of minerals necessary for modern technologies and industrial applications. The countries also have 38.6% of the world's reserves of manganese ore, 30.07% of chromium, 20% of lead, 12.6% of zinc, 8.7% of

titanium and significant reserves of other materials. And this, in turn, arouses great interest from multinational technology, energy corporations and foreign governments.

The key importance of the region lies not only in its resource saturation, but also in its transport accessibility: Their geographical location connecting Europe and Asia has historically made them vital components of the ancient Silk Road, and today Central Asia connects China with Europe and the Middle East, making it an important part of the One Belt One project. the path." As the global demand for critical resources and essential minerals continues to grow, the importance of Central Asia as a resource supplier will only increase.

China's dependence on critical resources

China's rapid economic rise has transformed it not only into the second largest economy in the world, but also into a global consumer of raw materials. In the face of growing geopolitical competition, China is striving to ensure the supply of critical resources to the country. China borders several Central Asian countries, which facilitates access and reduces transportation costs for transporting critical resources. Using diplomacy and its economic capabilities, China is building bilateral relations with countries rich in natural resources. By investing in large-scale mining and infrastructure development projects, offering loans and investments to Central Asian countries.

China's dependence on energy and raw materials imports is one of its most important strategic vulnerabilities. Dependence also influences and shapes China's foreign policy, international investment structure, and determines its domestic policy. Resolving the issues of constant access to critical resources and raw materials has become one of the most important prospects for the Chinese government in the coming decades. As global competition for limited resources intensifies, China's strategy for securing critical materials will change and adapt to modern realities, and may also have implications for international relations and global trade around the world. China is also showing a growing interest in the mineral resources of Central Asia, including copper, gold, rare earths and other strategic minerals. Chinese companies have invested heavily in the mining industry throughout the region, mainly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Strategic Partnership Formats for Critical Resources: China and Central Asia

If we consider the partnership relations between the countries of Central Asia and China, the question arises about the formats and conditions, as well as the benefits of this partnership. Will countries be able to meet China's growing ambitions? For the Central Asian states, partnership with China primarily opens up economic opportunities and benefits. The development of these relations has led to the emergence of several different partnership formats, each with unique characteristics and strategic implications for regional geopolitics and economic development. The most significant of all resource partnerships between China and Central Asia is the natural gas partnership. Having established a "long-term strategic energy partnership"

in 2006, China's state oil company CNPC financed and built the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, which was commissioned in 2009.

China has established close bilateral strategic partnerships with each of the countries. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan maintain partnership relations with China at the highest level. This partnership with Kazakhstan is aimed at cooperation in the field of energy, infrastructure development and industrial capacity building. China's oil deals with Kazakhstan represent another major resource interaction. In Kazakhstan, joint ventures are focused on uranium mining, while Chinese companies own stakes in various mines, and Kazakhstan provides almost 60% of Chinese uranium imports.

This partnership model combines Chinese capital with Kazakh resources, building a single supply chain in the interests of both countries and creating long-term structural long-term dependencies.

Similarly, China's comprehensive strategic partnership with Uzbekistan, established in 2016, has accelerated bilateral trade and Chinese investment in Uzbekistan's manufacturing and energy sectors. China also maintains partnerships with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which include significant security cooperation along with economic cooperation. In Kyrgyzstan, Chinese companies have acquired stakes in gold, copper, and rare earth deposits as part of agreements to invest in the country's infrastructure, thereby securing access to critical resources.

The strategic partnership with Tajikistan has expanded significantly, in particular, the flow of investments into the country has increased, with a focus on transport infrastructure and the mining sector. China's relations with Turkmenistan are primarily focused on energy cooperation. This partnership has turned Turkmenistan into the largest supplier of natural gas to China via the Central Asia-China gas pipeline. As a result of the cooperation, Turkmenistan has become the largest external supplier of gas to China, exporting more than 30 billion cubic meters of gas per year.

In addition to bilateral relations, China has developed several multilateral formats for collective cooperation with Central Asia, with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a prime example.

The SCO represents China's most structured and systematic partnership in Central Asia. It provides China with a structured platform to address regional security issues while advancing its economic interests. Energy cooperation is the most developed area of functional partnership based on long-term supply contracts, joint ventures in the field of exploration and production, as well as the development of pipeline infrastructure. These partnerships have created integrated systems covering the extraction, processing, transportation, and financing of critical resources. For China, this framework provides key resources for its economy and expands its geopolitical influence.

Risks and challenges of partnership. Perspectives and recommendations.

Some Central Asian countries have accumulated huge debts to China, which casts doubt on the sustainability of finances and borrowed funds. For example, the debt of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to China accounts for a significant part of its external debt.

Some projects with Chinese investments, especially in the extractive and energy sectors, have been blamed for environmental degradation.

The terms of Chinese loans and investments are generally opaque, leading to corruption and governance problems.

Anti-Chinese sentiments sometimes lead to protests in most Central Asian countries, due to economic dominance, land use issues, and cultural pressures.

Consider the opportunities for Central Asian countries. The demand for critical resources opens up wide opportunities for the Central Asian countries to develop and grow their economies, as well as sectors such as agriculture and energy. Investments in mining and processing enterprises can boost job creation, infrastructure development, and technology transfer, increasing overall economic sustainability. The growing interest may lead to an increase in foreign direct investment in the region. This influx of capital and experience can be used to develop other sectors of the economy through education and training programs sponsored by foreign partners. By playing a more prominent role in the global supply chain of critical minerals, the Central Asian countries can increase their strategic importance on the world stage, which will give them more leverage over international diplomacy and trade negotiations.

It is also worth mentioning the emerging risks for Central Asian countries.

For Central Asian governments, cooperation with China has been a source of investment and export markets, but it has also raised concerns about economic sovereignty and long-term sustainability. In their efforts to exploit their mineral wealth, the Central Asian countries may become overly dependent on one or more external Powers for economic stability. Such dependence can limit their foreign policy autonomy and make them vulnerable to economic or political pressure.

The extraction and processing of rare earth metals and essential minerals can have a significant impact on the environment, including water pollution and soil degradation. Without regulation and supervision, the pursuit of economic benefits can lead to environmental damage.

Intense competition between major powers for access to critical resources may lead to a deterioration in relations between Central Asian countries and other political actors. Thus, some of the resources located in the countries of the region can be used for the military industry, which may not correspond to the views of the parties.

Conclusion.

The intensification of the struggle for critical resources in Central Asia, primarily with the participation of China, underscores the growing strategic importance of the region in the global supply chain of rare earth metals and essential minerals. The vast reserves of these resources in Central Asia allow it to become a potential

counterweight to China's current dominance in the production and processing of rare earths necessary for high technology, renewable energy and the automotive industry. It is worth noting that critical resources are becoming the basis for strategic rapprochement between the countries of Central Asia and China.

The United States is focusing on diversifying its sources of critical minerals to reduce dependence on China, as evidenced by initiatives such as the Economic Resilience Initiative for Central Asia and the C5+1 Dialogue on Critical Minerals. These efforts are aimed at creating sustainable and reliable supply chains, developing regional industrial cooperation, and stimulating the exploration, extraction, and processing of critical minerals in Central Asia.

On the other hand, China is striving to maintain its strategic position and prevent the United States and its allies from accessing new sources of critical resources, as can be seen from its economic influence in the region and strategic partnerships. However, the rapid expansion of the Chinese presence also raises concerns: economic dependence is increasing, social tension is growing, and environmental risks are emerging. Thus, cooperation with China opens up both opportunities and challenges that require a balanced and strategically thought-out foreign policy from the States of the region.

The Central Asian countries face both risks and opportunities. They have a chance to use their mineral wealth for economic development, attract foreign investment and improve their position in the world. However, they will have to overcome the challenges of geopolitical rivalry, environmental degradation, and economic influence. The competition between the great powers in the region underlines that the Central Asian countries need to carefully develop a strategy for their actions in order to maximize benefits and at the same time reduce risks and ensure sustainable development.

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