



The Middle East's influence on the reconfiguration of Eurasia

Dr. Sunamis Fabelo Concepción

SPECIAL REPORT

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The Middle East's influence on the reconfiguration of Eurasia

Central Asia is a region that is historically viewed as a bridge between civilisations, including with the Middle East. The disintegration of the USSR meant many people returned to their Persian, Turkish, Arab, and Muslim roots and, above all, to the Middle East. The reconfiguration of Eurasia is currently reflected in projects such as the Eurasian Economic Union, led by Russia, or the Chinese megaproject the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Central Asia, Eurasian integration and the Middle Eastern dimension

A little over 2,000 years ago the so-called Silk Road established a magnificent bridge through the motley roads that descended from the mountains, crossed the steppes and the oasis that extended from Chang'an in China, crossing Antioch in Syria and Constantinople, to reach the gates of Europe and from there to the fifteenth century Hispanic kingdoms. Caravans of merchants, soldiers and sages migrated from the east to the west and vice versa, populating the steppes and cities.

The history of the Central Asian region has been intimately linked to the symbiosis between two fundamental questions: On the one hand, this legendary route, an exchange between very different worlds. On the other hand, all types of activity have been conditioned by a very specific natural environment, the climate and geography of the area, which has determined, to a large extent, every moment of its historical evolution.

In general, Central Asia is one of the least clearly defined regions in the world. Its rich, historical cultural dynamics, such as bridges, crossroads and space for exchange between the experiences of different civilisations make it a difficult area to define. In this regard Professor Sebastián Stride explains that the only definition on which most specialists agree is "negative:" Central Asia encompasses everything that is neither China, nor India, nor Southeast Asia, nor Europe, nor the East Medium "...this last definition is very expressive since, despite what its name suggests, "Central" Asia is never the centre of anything. A no-man's-land between "civilisations" that the atlases of the world reflect, in general, only on maps throughout Eurasia. In the regional maps, on the contrary, it usually appears sectioned, filling in the angle that completes the maps centred on large countries or civilisations: the Chinese, Indian, Russian or Middle Eastern worlds..."¹

1 Sebastián Stride: "Identidad y espacio en Asia Central", en *Cidob d' Afers Internacionals*. P. 10

It is complementary to this analysis to take into account another definition, that given by UNESCO, associated above all with cultural inspiration, which is much more linked to Asian influence, following significant migratory waves. This definition includes western China, northern Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Iran and, in addition, the Caucasus and Mongolia. In this case it is necessary to consider the process of the Turkification of Central Asia, which began with the first migration of Turkic people arriving from Altai, especially after the establishment of the Turkic Khanate in the sixth century. Throughout the following centuries, and until the Russian conquest, many peoples and tribes, mainly Turkic but also Mongols, entered Central Asia from the northeast. The migration of Turkic people did not stop in this region, but continued westward across the Iranian plateau to the Caucasus and Anatolia (after the Seljuk victory over the Byzantine Empire at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071).

However, these movements of people, together with the political dominion of the Turkic dynasties (all the reigning dynasties are of Turkish-Mongol origin since the death of the last Samanid² sovereign in 1005) meant a very slow and progressive Turkification of Central Asia. The new people adopted the culture of sedentary regions and, in particular, Persian as the language of administration, literature and diplomacy. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, the dominant language of culture and administration remains Persian. The majority of the population speaks Turkic dialects belonging to three large groups: Kipchak (to which Kazakh, Karakalpak and Kyrgyz belong), Oghuz (Turkmen) and Karluk (Chagatai, Uzbek and Uyghur). But, through the Turkic world, we progressively move from one dialect to another without it being possible to define languages that are not yet systematised.³ In the case of Tajik

² *Samanida: Imperio creado por la primera dinastía islámica irania, que existió entre 819 y 1005. Su capital fue Bujará en el actual Uzbekistán y ocupó casi todo los territorios de los actuales Afganistán, Pakistán, Tayikistán e Irán, buena parte de los de Trukmenistán y Uzbekistán y ciertas zonas de Kirguistán y Kazajistán.*

³ *En muchas regiones como Samarcanda, la mayor parte de la población es bilingüe, hay casos de asimilación lingüística en los dos sentidos y una lengua como el uzbeko es muy próxima al persa, no únicamente en lo que respecta al vocabulario (más del 50% de las palabras son de origen persa) sino también en cuanto a la estructura gramatical.*

they speak Farsi, a language of Persian origin, considered as the purest of Persian languages.

Far from a confrontation between the two major linguistic groups, one must actually speak of a Turkish-Iranian civilisation, which continues to characterise contemporary Central Asia. Hence it is very important to also refer to the influence of the Islamic world and the indissoluble ties that bind the Central Asian region with the Middle East; these are the Turkmen people of Central Asia and the Caspian and those of Persian origin that returned to their roots after the breakup of the USSR.

It is impossible, therefore, to discard the organic relationship the region has with the Middle East, a concept that is also controversial. According to Professor Reinaldo Sánchez Porro, many choose to speak of an Arab-Muslim world or civilisation, a denomination that gives a fairly accurate idea of the whole; others discuss whether it is accurate to include the Maghreb or Iran and Afghanistan in their conception of the Middle East, adding that the disintegration of the USSR has expanded the area by returning the Caucasus and some countries of Central Asia.⁴

Later, in his definition of the Middle East, the professor himself includes the non-Arab countries, which extend from the Anatolian plateau and the Turkish mountain ranges to the Caucasus mountain knot, descending through the Persian mountain ranges to the eastern desert and to the northeast where one ascends again to the elevations of the Pamir. In that northern block is Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iran, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, plus the Turkmen people of Central Asia and the Russian Caucasus, such as Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia.⁵

Certainly, this delimitation of the region has an important religious and cultural base founded on the historical ties that unite the Middle East and the Central

⁴ *Ver: Reinaldo Sánchez Porro: Aproximaciones a la historia del Medio Oriente.*

⁵ *Ibidem.*

Asian countries, despite the fact that maps and contemporary historical science are determined to separate them. Islam arrived in southwest central Asia with the Arab conquest that began with the defeat of the last Sassanid king in Merv (now Turkmenistan) in 651 and ended exactly one century later, in 751, with the victory of the Caliphate army over the emperor of China in Talas (South Kazakhstan). This conquest was parallel to what was coming from the north, the Turkic Khanate. Like the latter, it had an important effect on the identity of the people of Central Asia, since Islam is currently the dominant religion.

Architecture, art and literature were works of artists and craftsmen who worked from court to court and often passed from one state to another. Perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of a division between a culture that could be described as sedentary and another as nomad. The first is written and is Persian, monumental and Islamic. It is represented by the domes of Samarkand, Persian poems and Timurid miniatures. The second is oral, Turkic, movable and tribal and is defined by epics, manas jewels and Turkmen tapestries.

However, it cannot be said that these are necessarily opposites,⁶ rather two poles of the same Central Asian civilisation. This has been characterised by great receptivity to influences from all directions over the centuries. Its base is Iranian, but it has been influenced by the Eurasian steppes, from India, from ancient Greece, from China (on several occasions) and, more recently, from Russia, the Soviet Union and the West.

That said, it must certainly be agreed that a definition of Central Asia refers to a place marked by human transit, a point of exchange, of encounters and clashes, of symbiosis, undoubtedly a particular experience of integration. It can be said then that Central Asia has no clearly established borders, nor can it be exclusive of the mixture of influences and means of communicating with Asia,

⁶ *Algunos grandes autores, como Alisher Navoi, escribían tanto en persa como en chagatai, mientras que los hijos de los kanes nómadas eran enviados a estudiar a las madrasas de Bujará o Samarcanda.*

the Middle East, Europe, and the Caucasus. With this in mind, Central Asia can mean, more or less, an extension of other countries. Specifically, we are talking about the five ex-Soviet republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), plus northern Afghanistan, northwestern Iran and Xinjiang province, East Turkestan. These three territories are assumed, because of their close relationship with the dynamics of the five ex-Soviet republics. This conception is based on the historical character that this definition is intrinsic, taking into account the fragility of contemporary identity constructions centred on the notion of the nation state.

The disintegration of the USSR

With the occupation of the Central Asian region by Russia, indigenous people were repressed. The method used by Moscow to dismantle a type of state such as that of the nomads, which had been valid for the operation of societies for many years, was a process of sedentary settlement and forced detribalisation, first by the Tsarist Russia and later by the Soviet regime, especially during the so-called Stalin era, which instilled fear in the community and left behind a dysfunctional society.

However, after the break-up of the USSR, the Central Asian people not only drifted but also suffered trauma over their identities, given that the vast majority of these people lacked what has been called “the ethnicity project.” Their ethnic backgrounds had been denied and they were turned into cartoons for the good of the Soviet supranational project.

Added to this was a devastating economic and social crisis due to the rupture of existing links with the USSR and the failure of the local integrationist project. The very fact that the countries of the region agreed to independence that came to them by decree and from abroad, constituted, in itself, a limitation on the construction of the new society.

Amid this rubble came the birth of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) on December 8, 1991, created by the leaders of the Russian Federation,

Ukraine and Belarus, stating in the corresponding agreement that the RSS Union ceased to exist as a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality. This fact, in principle, left between Central Asia and Caucasia the bitter taste of contempt and Slavic pre-eminence, thus motivating a union of Turkish speakers and a return to their roots. This would be the precedent for the return to their origins and the first key to disconnection from the so-called Russian world, although later, and in a climate of protest and distrust, they would join the CIS.

Historically, Central Asia has been a key point in the interaction between people of different backgrounds. In the last millennium, this region also witnessed the penetration of Turkish and Mongolian tribes throughout the vast area between the mountain range of Altai and the Caspian and Black Sea, which were Islamised when they came into contact with villages that had embraced Islam almost from the very beginning of the prophet Mohamed's sermons.

This process concluded with the establishment of a very particular way of being from the articulation of a close relationship between Persian culture, with its strong traditions of status on the one hand, and Turkish tribal democracy and its social structures on the other, which merged with the historical traditions of these people that continued to be enriched with other Asian and European influences.

The first Soviet tsarist regime later ended up almost completely disconnecting the region from both its historical and geographical surroundings. This situation began to noticeably transform in the late 70s and early 80s, when for several reasons there were more or less important changes in the area, the most significant being the following:⁷

- A relative liberalisation of the political regime in the USSR in the 70s and 80s, which resulted in less participation of the Kremlin's leaders in the

internal affairs of Central Asia in exchange for the political loyalty of the Central Asian leaders.

- The influence of Iran's triumphant Islamic revolution in 1979 over the entire region.
- The war in Afghanistan (1979-1989), in which members of the Soviet army intervened, which the Central Asian population did not like, especially Tajik people, who are ethnically and culturally related to Afghans and are the closest to the Islamic tradition in the USSR.
- The logical replacement of the older generation of Islamic clerics, who adapted and participated in the main events of the Soviet Union, by a new and energetic generation of more radical and active clerics, sometimes influenced by different foreign movements, especially those of Saudi origin. Some of them were sponsored by the West, which had been working away at them in a patient, systematic way.

Undoubtedly, these elements constituted important precedents, which with the emergence of the new Central Asian republics energised a predisposition in the Central Asian environment to rescue regional historical ties. The new Central Asian republics had begun to interact with important actors in international relations, which unleashed a series of pressures and trends. In line with this, two essential integrationist tendencies were clearly delineated: the Eurasian and the Western. Both were manifested from various conceptions, from which the configuration of different mechanisms of association, cooperation or consultation were promoted.

One of these conceptions was based on the "Aryan Unit." This concept implies the integration of the Persian-speaking countries of the region and the creation of a kind of axis, which would be ethnically and culturally oriented by the Tehran-Kabul-Dushanbe line and which is one of the dreams of today's Iranian

⁷ *Colectivo de Autores: La geopolítica regional de los países del Oriente Medio y el Estado Islámico en Asia Central. P.31*

leaders. Greater Iran,⁸ also called the Iranian Cultural Continent, is a historical region that has been or is under the significant influence of Iranian culture and where languages of Persian origin are spoken.

It is important to note that the triggering factor of the alleged “Aryan unity” is the interpretation of Islam. The religious factor eventually became a destructive force that weakened the foundations for trust between the Tajiks and the Iranians. The Tajiks are Sunni, as are the Muslims of the other republics of the post-Soviet space of Central Asia. This, of course, is alternative to Shia expansion in these environments and, therefore, the Tajik position in this instance is not liked by Tehran. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between economic and political relations from relationships in the field of religion.

At this point Pakistan plays a fundamental role. In contrast to the principles of secularism within Islam propagated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and of the ideologues of democracy, the Tablighi Jamaat movement exhibited and carried out the so-called “Pakistan Ideology” that was articulated on the basis of the following five fundamental components: Islam as a state religion; Urdu as a national language; Kashmir as an inalienable part of Pakistan; a strong army as guarantor of the integrity and prosperity of the country; establishment of a confederation between Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Kashmir.⁹

This last point is fundamental in the analysis we are developing. The declaration of Islam as an official state religion was a measure, or rather a first step, on the road to transforming Pakistan into an Islamic theocratic state. The adoption of Urdu as a national language was, in turn, considered a means for the

8 *Gran Irán (en la Encyclopedia Iranica se usa el término continente cultural iraní) es el término que se utiliza para referirse a las regiones que tienen una significativa influencia cultural iraní. Se corresponde a grandes rasgos, con el territorio que rodea la gran meseta iraní, abarcando desde la cordillera del Cáucaso hasta el río Indo, y conforme a la comprensión histórica de todo el territorio de “Irán”. En su mayor extensión, comprendía íntegramente los países actuales de Irán, Azerbaiyán, Armenia, Afganistán, Turkmenistán, Uzbekistán, Tayikistán, Kirguistán y partes de Irak, Pakistán, Turquía, Siria, Georgia, Armenia y China. Ver: Colectivo de Autores: Ob. Cit.*

9 Ver: Colectivo de autores: Ob. Cit.

suppression and gradual liquidation of regionalist tendencies among local populations. On the other hand, the admission of Kashmir as an inalienable part of Pakistan demonstrates Muslim unity. To this we must add that the idea that the letter K appeared in the name of the region became popular and, finally, the recognition of the army as guarantor of the integrity and prosperity of the country, a mechanism that converted the armed forces into one of its fundamental levers, and with this, the Islamification of the officers was accepted.

One after another, these five fundamental components of the project of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq¹⁰ were the ones that should lead, according to the criteria of the recognised journalist and international relations expert Ahmed Rashid, to the following: General Zia-ul-Haq, like Great Mughal, was trying to recreate a considerable area of Sunni orientation at the expense of the “infidel Hindustan,” the “heretical Iran” and the “Christian Russia.”¹¹

10 *El general Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1924-1988) fue un militar y dictador de Pakistán, presidente de la República Islámica de Pakistán entre el 16 de septiembre de 1978 hasta su muerte en 1988 en un accidente de avión. Había sido general en jefe del ejército del Pakistán dos años antes de ser el autor del golpe de Estado que llevó al poder en 1977, luego de lo cual hizo condenar a muerte por ahorcamiento al antiguo Primer Ministro Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (padre de la posterior primera ministra Benazir Bhutto). El General Zia desempeñó un importante papel en la Guerra de Afganistán (1979-1989), proporcionando ayuda financiera y militar a los muyahidines, ayuda que fue fuertemente apoyada por los Estados Unidos, que habían prometido a Zia territorios en el noroeste para compensar la pérdida de Bangladesh. Dio continuidad al programa nuclear de Pakistán en la década de 1970, programa que obtuvo una exitosa prueba nuclear en 1998, relanzando el conflicto con la India por el control de Cachemira. A diferencia de Zulfikar Bhutto, atraído por la laicidad, el General Zia tenía la intención de establecer un estado islámico apoyándose en los mulás: prohibió los intereses bancarios, instauró la limosna obligatoria, los castigos públicos, obligó a las mujeres a ponerse el velo para aparecer en televisión, entre otras cosas. El General Zia quiso ir aún más lejos al intentar restaurar el califato que había sido abolido el 3 de marzo de 1924 por el presidente turco Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. En 1988, cuando iba acompañado por diplomáticos estadounidenses, su avión se estrelló sobre Pakistán en circunstancias misteriosas, aunque no existen pruebas para refrendar la teoría de un asesinato. Luego de su muerte, la democracia se restableció con la elección de Benazir Bhutto.*

11 Ahmed Rashid: “Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia”, en Viking, P. 47.

Three years after Zia-ul-Haq's death, the USSR collapsed and just six years after his death, the Taliban began their movement north to the Muslim territories of the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia after seizing power in Afghanistan, although they were rejected in the Fergana Valley and other Central Asian territories.

The debates around the Turkic world, or the *crush*, are diverse, precisely because of the complex historical conformation and its interactions over time with Persia, the Mongols, the Ottoman Empire or Tsarist Russia. Hence, in general, the historical evolution of the study of Turkish is strongly influenced by the nationalist current. The concept of Pan-Turkism is closely linked to the notion (or dogma) of pan-Turanism, where Turan is usually seen as a mystical historical construction that includes all communities of Turkic people and unites all areas where they have expanded, from Baikal to the Balkans.

After the Soviet collapse, the idea of pan-Turanism received a considerable boost, related to the appearance in independent nations of a quintet of new states of Turkish origin, former Soviet republics within the USSR: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Hence it was no accident that Turkey recognised them immediately and that this recognition was accompanied by the establishment of close and peculiar relations with each of them, although soon they had to recognise the impossibility of establishing subordinate relations with the Turkish centre.

In the 90s of the twentieth century, pan-Turanism acquired a more radical character, which became particularly intense after the idea of building the Grand Turan state emerged, which was supposed to bring together all the Turkic people in a single state unit. This Great Turan was to unite the Balkars, Circassians, Calmucos, Ngayos, Chechens, Ingush people, Avars, Lesguinos, that is, all the Turkic peoples of the North Caucasus plus the population of the new post-Soviet states of Central Asia (Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Uyghurs and Uzbeks); Tatars (from Tartary and Crimea), Bashkirs or Bashkirs and Yakutias were also included.

Finally, this idea, as it is, could not advance far due to the enormous differences between its members. However, it can be noted that, at the state level, one of the mechanisms created for the development and strengthening of links between Turkey and the new republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus was that of the regular summits of heads of state of the Turkophone countries. In the words of former Turkish President Abdullah Gül, these summits constituted platforms for solidarity and the exchange of opinions both in terms of relations between the Turkic countries and in terms of global problems.

The IX Summit of Heads of State of the Turkish world took place between October 2 and 3, 2009, in the city of Nakhchivan.¹² In this meeting the creation of a new institutional structure was approved to foster cooperation between the Turkish-speaking nations, the Cooperation Council of the Turkic States (the Turkic Council). The fundamental documents of the new entity were adopted and the headquarters were established in Istanbul, Turkey. After the signing ceremony, then president Abdullah Gül, said that the agreement contained a distinct historical character, by virtue of which the legal and institutional foundations of the future unified Turkish world were laid down. With the conception of neo-Romanism, other ideas of Turkish Eurasianism¹³ were closely linked, which so far have not materialised into concrete and universal structures.

The term Eurasianism itself is widely used by leaders in the Turkish National Movement Party (Milli Hareket Partisi) in the context of the Turkish unit. This concept of Eurasianism for the Turkish elite includes the Turkish territories of the Caucasus, Central Asia and Turkey itself, which they consider a unified entity. At the same time Eurasianism is understood, in this context, as the ideology for the unity of Russia, Turkey and China. From another approach, it

¹² *Enclave azerí ubicado al Oeste de Armenia y sin continuidad geográfica con el resto del territorio de Azerbaiyán.*

¹³ *Es Turquía junto a Rusia y Kazajstán, uno de los Estados cuyo territorio se extiende por Europa y Asia.*

can be said that Eurasianism is a political and economic term used in Turkey to explain the diversifying course of its policy and economy.

In general, this is an extremely complex issue, in which various historical contexts are interwoven that undoubtedly lie at the very foundations of the region and its integrity. It is no accident, therefore, that in the first years of independent life this return to the origins and approach of legendary powers, with various ancestral doctrines and a pragmatic approach towards the Central Asians, was one of the first expressions, incipient if you will, which began to promote the first Eurasian conceptions that later, along with other experiences, would become an integrationist trend among these people, focused on the search for national references to build a framework for action.

The Eurasian economic union and the Belt and Road Initiative: Building a shared future community

Eurasianism, one of the trends that was lost in historiography along with the end of the Cold War, began to be recognised as an ideology officially in Kazakhstan from the moment it became independent. From those early days, the Kazakh President Nursultán Nazarbáyev understood that the CIS was only a first step in the transition to a stronger integration process. Nazarbáyev proposed the idea of integration at different levels and with different speeds. This idea was included in the Eurasian Union project, raised by Nazarbáyev, at the Moscow State University in 1994. In that line of proposals and action, Nazarbáyev's maximum commitment within the CIS has been, and is, the creation and advance of the customs union.

Eurasian construction was thought of as a broad international collaboration, with the participation of all ethnic groups that had historically been present in Eurasia. On October 12, 2012, Nazarbáyev, in his speech at the Kazakh-Turkish Business Forum held in Istanbul, made a resounding statement: "... Between the Mediterranean Sea and the Altai massif live more than 200 million [of] our ethnic brothers. If we joined together, we would be a large and

influential state throughout the world ..."¹⁴ To this he added: "We live in the homeland of the entire Turkish people. In 1861 [after] they killed the last Kazakh Kan, we were a colony of Russian Zarato, after the Soviet Union. In 150 years, Kazakhs almost lost their national traditions, customs, language and religion. With God's help, we proclaimed our independence in 1991. Your ancestors, leaving their historical lands of the Turkish Khaganate, have taken with them the name of the Turkish people. So far the Turks call the best *yiğit* [dzhigit] 'Kazakhs'. Well, we are those Kazakhs."¹⁵

These words were accompanied by the ritual of raising the Turkish Council's flag, consolidated in October 2009, at the IX Summit held in the city of Nakhchivan, capital of the autonomous homonymous republic of Azerbaijan.

This Kazakh conception of Eurasian integration, although it had a centrist view, also had a pragmatic view of Central Asian capabilities and their development potential at the regional level, conceiving fundamental parts of Russia and China in this dynamic of integration, which constitutes a kind of continuity and break with the traditional conception of the Eurasian, because China is incorporated into the regional dynamics in the new scenarios and the main postulates of Eurasianism are maintained. That is why in the case of Vladimir Putin's Russia these projects were considered particularly attractive. His geopolitical projections went through precisely the Russian repositioning in this important area, and the displacement of the West.

In this context, the Eurasian Economic Union, which was resumed by President Vladimir Putin, was promoted as an important framework for economic and political integration. To that end, a series of structures gained momentum that over the years were developed for the Eurasian project: the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union and the Single Economic Area,¹⁶ expandable to

¹⁴ *Centro de Prensa Internacional: "El panturquismo ayer y hoy"*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *En 1999 Bielorrusia, Kazajstán, Rusia, Kirguistán y Tayikistán firmaron el Tratado del Espacio Económico Único. Para promover la integración y la cooperación en la región.*

other CIS states and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC),¹⁷ made up of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan.

The idea of the Eurasian Economic Union has been readopted by Vladimir Putin since 2010. As planned, this project was launched in 2015. It is an integration agreement that began to take its first steps in the economic order, taking advantage of the geopolitical potential with which the region is endowed, the privileged situation of Russia, the powerful industrialisation of Belarus and the favoured Kazakh position on the Caspian riverbank, essential for energy and geostrategic power.

In this sense, the customs union formed by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan was a fundamental element for the achievement and consolidation of the Eurasian project proposed by Putin. For Putin, the project responded to the objectives of Russian geopolitics which is why Ukraine's entry was essential. This individual was subject to Kiev's decision¹⁸ to associate or not to join the Community Association Eastern Initiative, which would reduce to zero their chances of entering the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union, according to Vladimir Putin. In this context, the conflict broke out in 2013 in Ukraine's east, which resulted in the incorporation of Crimea, the majority of whose population are of Russian origin, into Russia, on March 18, 2014. This was extremely disturbing for the Central Asian republics, whose populations have significant Russian minorities.¹⁹ So much so that Kazakh President Nursultán

17 *Dejó de existir el 1 de enero de 2015 sustituida por la Unión Económica Euroasiática (UEEA).*

18 *Conviene tener presente que en el imaginario nacionalista ruso Ucrania constituye el corazón cultural y ancestral de la cultura eslava. Algunos politólogos resaltan además, la preeminencia de Ucrania en el tablero geopolítico euroasiático al apuntar su importancia precisamente porque puede escoger su camino. Su elección entre la integración con Europa o el retorno a la esfera rusa tiene un efecto vital en el equilibrio de poder en el conjunto de la región euroasiática. De ahí el importante debate suscitado entre su aproximación a la Unión Europea o la participación en la UEE, dado su emplazamiento privilegiado como "cabeza de puente", según Zbigniew Brzezinski en el margen europeo del Heartland.*

19 *Kazajistán e 35% en 2002 y el 23,7% en 2017; Kirguistán el 18% en 2002 y el 7,7% en 2017; Turkmenistán el 7% en 2002 y el 4% en 2017; Uzbekistán el 6% en 2002 y el 5,5% en 2017.*

Nazarbáyev abstained from the UN in the vote that invalidated the referendum on Crimea in March 2014.

Under these circumstances the UEE project was virtually paralysed. The signing of the agreement scheduled for May 1 was delayed until the 29th of that month after Putin met in Kazakhstan with Nazarbáyev and gave his assurances that his country would not meet the same fate. Finally, the possible incorporation of Ukraine into the customs union was ruled out indefinitely and the UEE project, in general, took a different path that opened the doors to the Turkic world. Thus, the new common market began operating on January 1, 2015.

On May 8, 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin and China's leader Xi Jinping signed a decree on cooperation aimed at linking the evolution of the Eurasian Economic Union with the Belt and Road Initiative, promoted within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). At the same meeting, both leaders signed several energy, commercial and financial agreements, aimed at strengthening economic ties between both countries. After the meeting, Putin said that the integration of the Eurasian Economic Union and Silk Road projects indicates a new level of partnership and actually implies a common economic space in the continent.²⁰

In September 2013, Xi Jinping made a tour that included Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. As a result, Beijing raised its bilateral relations with Ashgabat and Bishkek to the "strategic partnership" range, something it had already achieved with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In that context, the Kyrgyz capital hosted the XIII Summit of Heads of State of the SCO, a favourable framework where China reached a consensus between its Central Asian partners and Russia regarding the strategy for the creation of the BRI. It is a strategy of China, which seeks development and integration for the continental mass called Eurasia, based on a system of communications and cooperation.

20 *Serguéi Markedónov: Ob. Cit.*

The terrestrial belt of the project in Central Asia interconnects the Caucasus, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Europe. For its part, the Maritime Route describes a set of ports that also interconnect America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. In general, the project must be understood in a logic where the terrestrial and the maritime complement each other, favouring common development and interdependence, fostering the strengths to carry out regional competition against increasingly aggressive economic policies. In this way, the identification of regional integration is assumed, as a source of prosperity and stability through the intensification of all kinds of links between the participating countries.

The development of the BRI, with a Eurasian component source but with a strategic look towards the Middle East, is an exponent of that vision to return to its roots that began to develop after the disintegration of the USSR, through the reformation of the close links between the countries of Central Asia as well as the Caucasus with the culture and history of the Middle East.

These elements have been interpreted and used by the Chinese side as keys to peace and regional development in a broader concept of Eurasia, where interdependence between countries and subregions is increasingly important and complex. Therefore, the development of the BRI project is an exponent of this vision. The China-Central Asia-Middle East Economic Corridor has already witnessed the arrival of the first freight train that will connect the Asian Giant with Afghanistan. The train departed from the Chinese coastal city of Nantong with 84 containers and after crossing Xinjiang province and Kazakhstan, among others, it entered Afghanistan through the city of Hairatan, on the Afghan border with Uzbekistan.²¹

For Afghanistan, it represents the opening of a new land route to receive and export merchandise. A route that, Kabul expects, can be a real alternative

²¹ *Para ello había cruzado el puente de la Amistad, que la entonces Unión de Repúblicas Socialistas Soviéticas (URSS) construyera en 1985 para transportar soldados durante la guerra y que ha sido un tramo importante en la vía militar de suministros a las tropas aliadas en la lucha contra los talibanes.*

to the main one that has existed until now, through the Pakistani sea port of Gwadar. With the aforementioned route, China aspires to strengthen its ties with Afghanistan, a nation with which it shares a border, and to contribute to the economic and political stabilisation of the country, a task that has become a greater priority for Beijing. The issue of permanent war with the Taliban by the Afghan government, and instability, are threats to these Chinese projects. Stability in the area is urgent, which will lead in the short-term to China having a more active role in the peace processes.

The normalisation of the Afghan conflict would help protect another corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CECP), a long-term plan, which aims to connect Xinjiang province with the port of Gwadar, passing through Pakistani territory. The CECP is a strategic project consisting of the construction of highways, industrial parks and power generation plants, valued at around \$45 billion, that would connect the border between the two countries with the port of Gwadar, through some of the most inhospitable and unstable parts of Pakistan. The CECP means for Pakistan the possibility of strengthening itself in the economic plane and improving its terrestrial infrastructure, generating employment, increasing productivity and increasing exports. For China, it represents a greater presence in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, an opportunity to facilitate its trade with South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East and, given its proximity to Afghanistan, monitor American presence in the country.

The USA and India have said they disagree with the project. The US Secretary of Defence, James Mattis, stressed that his government was concerned that the CECP was designed to pass through a disputed territory. For India, it constitutes a violation that the corridor transits through an area that it considers illegally occupied by Pakistan. In addition, both believe that the corridor will allow an increase in Chinese military presence in the Indian Ocean, a fact that undermines Indian and American interests in the region.

This is one of the main corridors for the Chinese project and would increase the safety of the BRI's land routes and limit the Islamic extremist groups Beijing

believes operate in Xinjiang, the large border region home to the Uyghur minority of Muslim religion. Securing the borders and guaranteeing the stability of the neighbouring countries of Central Asia has become more relevant after the attack against the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). However, the consolidation of CECP implies great challenges and uncertainties.

In August 2016, China and Afghanistan held their first Strategic Military Dialogue, in which Chinese representatives stressed, according to official media, that international terrorist activity has entered into “a new phase of activity” that threatens regional stability and security. The fact that American presence can lead to a shift in relations between Beijing and Kabul should not be underestimated, especially with the Trump administration that wants a greater presence in Central Asia. This scenario, despite the challenges that it represents, will undoubtedly lead to regional competition against increasingly aggressive policies in the economic, commercial and investment fields, as well as the gradual displacement of the West.

In the case of Iran, it must be said that its presence is strategic for Eurasian cohesion in the framework of the infrastructure advances of the BRI. Not only is China a major buyer of Iranian oil, but its largest importer. Iran is equally vital to the Chinese project of creating entirely new manufacturing and logistics centres or strategic hubs in Central Asia and in Europe.

Indian strategic consultant Debalina Ghoshal believes that China “...has a keen interest in Iran’s geostrategic situation, bordering both the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. The site allows China to deploy the BRI with Iranian support. This country is already linked in part to a recently completed section of this project, the Asian Giant. Since the beginning of 2015, rail transport has circulated on the new roads between Zhanaozen-Gyzylgaya-Bereket-Kyzyl Atrek-Gorgan, in an impressive period of just five years of work. This railway line connects Iran with China through Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan and allows freight traffic to pass from truck to train, linking all the ports and key terminals throughout

the Caspian Sea region.”²² Like this, other important railway projects between the Caspian region, Central Asia and the Middle East have energised the commercial sectors there.

Since April 2017, Moscow and Tehran have engaged in discussions on the construction of a sea channel that links the Caspian Sea with the Persian Gulf through the Persian nation. Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran have also agreed to accelerate talks on a north-south transport corridor, which would partly go along the western coast of the Caspian Sea from Russia to Iran, through Azerbaijan. That north-south corridor, once completed, will reduce the transportation time from India to Central Asia and Russia, which is now around 40 days, to link Mumbai in India with Moscow in 14 days, without going through the congested and expensive Suez Canal.

On the other hand, the Middle East has become indispensable in connecting China with Europe with regard to the passage towards the Mediterranean. That is why strengthening the communication and security of the region is necessary for Beijing. In this sense, the Egyptian project of Suez has been an important case in cooperation with China. Following the Egyptian project in Suez, Saudi Arabia, Oman and other countries have cooperated with China to develop similar industrial areas. The Asian nation has discussed the harmonisation of the BRI through the Vision 2030 strategy of Saudi Arabia and Jordan’s Vision 2025.

For their part, the tensions in Syria, Iraq, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the blockade on Qatar in the first half of 2017, are important issues that determine whether these joint projects can be realised. While Beijing maintained a passive role in the region in the face of conflict, the Chinese megaproject is the reason for its change in position. That is why coordinating with other relevant actors, especially with Russia and international organisations, has been one of the first steps.

²² Engdahl, F. William (2017). *El triángulo estratégico Irán-China-Rusia*. CEPRID. Disponible en: <https://www.geopolitica.ru/es/article/el-triangulo-estrategico-iran-china-rusia>.

In addition to deepening the upstream and downstream collaboration of oil and gas, China will boost solar, wind, and other renewable energy. The Asian nation is also willing to work with Arab countries to explore the peaceful development of nuclear energy. These energy investments will be associated with other sectors, including the manufacture and launch of satellites, as well as related technical exchanges and staff training. In order to promote the Middle East's industrialisation process, China will work with the Arab states to jointly implement capacity building programmes. Beijing has invested \$15 billion in the industrialisation of the Middle East through special loans and has established a total of \$20 billion in joint investment funds with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

In the midst of this scenario, in which the BRI advances towards a global ascent by connecting important critical routes, weaving knowledge and uniting worlds in order to build a community of shared future for all humanity, the challenges and threats the project poses in an increasingly complex world and in a highly volatile region, where physical boundaries are constantly questioned, challenged and collapsed by history, cannot be underestimated.

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