

Современная наука и инновации.  
2023. № 4 (44). С. 193-199.  
Modern Science and Innovations.  
2023; 4 (44):193-199.

ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ НАУКИ /  
POLITICAL SCIENCE

Научная статья / Original article

УДК 327

<https://doi.org/10.37493/2307-910X.2023.4.23>

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**Китайский мега-проект «Один пояс, один  
путь» в регионе Центральной Азии:  
геополитическая риторика и перспективы  
реализации**

**The Chinese mega-project "One Belt, One  
Road" in the Central Asian region: geopolitical  
rhetoric and prospects for implementation**

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**Аннотация.** Китайский инфраструктурный проект «Один пояс, один путь» стоимостью 1 трлн долларов имеет значительные ландшафтные, социально-экономические и политические последствия для государств Центральной Азии, через которые он протекает. В данной статье исследуется то, как китайская инициатива оказывает влияние на местную инфраструктуру и локальные сообщества региона. Реализация проекта в государствах Центральной Азии показывает не только сильные стороны китайской программы, но и выводит на первый план ее вчерашние недостатки, актуальные риски и потенциальные перспективы. В работе используется объяснительный концепт «иерархический реализм», который позволил приблизиться к лучшему пониманию трудностей в реализации китайского мегапроекта «Один пояс, один путь». Данное понятие помогает нам раскрыть наличие в прошлом иерархического взгляда Пекина на международную систему, согласно которому Китай играет куда более доминирующую роль, чем это выражено в официальной риторике Китая. Именно элементы гегемонистского стиля в реализации мегапроекта «Один пояс, один путь» в странах Центральной Азии привело к тому, что китайские планы были встречены здесь вначале весьма прохладно. Авторы анализируют исторический поворот в реализации китайского мегапроекта, который связан с реализацией Сианьской декларации. Пионерный характер решений, принятых на этом саммите в мае 2023г., заключался в их гуманитарной и социальной направленности с целью преодоления прежнего иерархического взгляда Пекина на регион Центральной Азии.

**Ключевые слова:** китайский мегапроект, «Пояс и путь», Центральная Азия, иерархический реализм, намерения, сианьская декларация

**Для цитирования:** Акимов Р. Х., Магомедов А. К. Китайский мега-проект «Один пояс, один путь» в регионе Центральной Азии: геополитическая риторика и перспективы реализации // Современная наука и инновации. 2023. № 4 (44). С. 193-199. <https://doi.org/10.37493/2307-910X.2023.4.23>

**Abstract.** The Chinese infrastructure project "One Belt, One Road" worth \$1 trillion has significant landscape, socio-economic and political consequences for the Central Asian states through which it runs. This article explores how the Chinese initiative has an impact on the local infrastructure and local communities of the region. The implementation of the project in the Central Asian states shows not only the strengths of the Chinese program, but highlights its shortcomings of yesterday, current risks and potential

*prospects. The explanatory concept "hierarchical realism" is used in the work, which allowed us to get closer to a better understanding of the difficulties in the implementation of the Chinese megaproject "One Belt, One Road". This concept helps us to reveal the existence in the past of Beijing's hierarchical view of the international system, according to which China plays a much more dominant role than it is expressed in China's official rhetoric. It was the elements of the hegemonic style in the implementation of the megaproject "One Belt, One Road" in the countries of Central Asia that led to the fact that Chinese plans were met here very coolly at first. The authors analyze the historical turn in the implementation of the Chinese megaproject, which is associated with the implementation of the Xi'an Declaration. The pioneering nature of the decisions taken at this summit in May 2023 consisted in their humanitarian and social orientation in order to overcome Beijing's previous hierarchical view of the Central Asian region.*

**Keywords:** chinese mega-project, "Belt and Road", Central Asia, hierarchical realism, intentions, Xi'an Declaration

**For citation:** Akimov RKh, Magomedov AK. *The Chinese mega-project "One Belt, One Road" in the Central Asian region: geopolitical rhetoric and prospects for implementation. Modern Science and Innovations. 2023;4(44):193-199. (In Russ.).* <https://doi.org/10.37493/2307-910X.2023.4.23>

**Introduction.** 2023 marks the tenth anniversary of China's Belt and Road Initiative, the largest and most ambitious infrastructure development project in human history. The world's first infrastructure project, One Belt, One Road, worth one trillion dollars, announced in May 2013. Chinese leader Xi Jinping, attracted the attention of the whole world with its courage, scale and transformative potential [1].

For greater clarity, it should be noted that the Chinese super project has several definitions in scientific and journalistic publications. Some evaluate it as the "Belt and Road" initiative, others write about it as the "Silk Road Economic Belt", and in popular literature it is called the "New Silk Road". In this article we will use the most common and well-known designation: "Belt and Road Initiative" (hereinafter – BRI: abbreviation "Belt and Road Initiative").

When studying this problem, the attention of researchers was focused mainly on the logistics and economic aspects of the BRI: rail transport from China to Western Europe, roads and pipelines through Central Asia, as well as investment plans of the Middle Kingdom. In brief and summary, the growing literature on BRI tends to focus on the following themes: Chinese motives, strategic implications, economic integration and geopolitical arguments [2]. In China itself, this mega-investment and infrastructure program is presented as "a major undertaking that will benefit the peoples of the world and will have a significant impact on the countries through which it passes" [3].

However, no matter what socio-political paradigm is declared to be dominant in the implementation of the BRI, its influence will be most felt in the neighboring territories lying on the path of the implementation of this super-project - the countries and regions of the eastern Caspian region, which is the Central Asian area.

In this article we look at how the construction of the supernova "Silk Road" is responding in the countries of Central Asia. In particular, the work answers the question why the Chinese official rhetoric that Beijing wants to develop international infrastructure projects to "create a common future for mankind" is viewed in the countries of the region as a cover for the selfish strategic motives of the Middle Kingdom? How is China trying to correct these shortcomings in implementing the Xi'an Declaration adopted in May 2023?

**Materials and research methods.** This article will answer the questions posed above by focusing on the contradictions of BRI implementation in Central Asian countries. In this paper, we use the analytical framework of the theory of "hierarchical realism" in international relations, put forward by political scientists such as Andrew Nathan and Boshu Zhang [4]. The concept of "hierarchical realism" will help show that the Chinese slogan of "building a common future for humanity," despite its external appeal, is contradictory and vulnerable in practice. Among other things, it seeks to position China as one of many developing countries, but also as a major global leader influencing other states and the international system. The concept we use helps us uncover the following process: Beijing's conspicuously hierarchical view of the international system, according to which China plays a much more dominant role than is expressed in official Chinese

rhetoric. It was the hegemonic style of implementing the BRI in the countries of Central Asia that led to the fact that the Chinese megaproject was met with a very ambivalent reception here.

The empirical base of the study is represented by studies by Russian and foreign analysts, which examine the features of BRI construction in the region. Of considerable value are the interviews of one of the authors of the article with leading Chinese analysts in the field of international relations, conducted in Shanghai in April-May 2023. The study is centered on an analysis of the difficulties and how to overcome them in the implementation and promotion of the described mega-project.

**Research results and their discussion. The Caspian context of the BRI: the potential for cooperation between China and the countries of the region.** In the early decades of the 21st century, the five post-Soviet Central Asian states found themselves caught between two rising superpowers with different agendas: China and Russia. Russia combines the roles of a political leader, a guarantor of security, and also a trading partner through the structures of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). China serves as a trade, economic and investment hegemon, whose influence on the regional economy is rapidly increasing. The indicated spheres of influence of the two hegemons still coexist harmoniously: China dominates in the economy and development, which is forced to exist within the framework of the military, political and cultural presence of Russia.

Chinese leaders and analysts refuse to present the BRI project as part of their aggressive goal-setting and geopolitical offensive. On the contrary, official Beijing, and with it many researchers and observers, are inclined to believe that the Chinese super-project “One Belt, One Road” is a call for an open and mutually beneficial model of economic and cultural globalization, which is based on the historical meanings of the ancient Silk Road [5]. According to this interpretation, the BRI involves creating a framework for open cooperation and the use of multilateral financial instruments aimed at creating infrastructure and productive assets. These achievements are intended to strengthen China's relationship with countries along the BRI route towards modernization and poverty reduction in these communities. By implementing the stated strategy, China is increasing its political influence in the Caspian states through economic and infrastructural initiatives [6].

For greater clarity, it is necessary to briefly highlight the main directions of bilateral relations between official Beijing and the states of the eastern Caspian region. We will briefly consider the role of such Caspian countries as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan in the realization of Chinese ambitions.

First of all, it is important to recognize the importance of such a Caspian player as **Kazakhstan**. China considers Kazakhstan the second (after Russia) important trading partner in the Eurasian direction, which cannot but affect relations between these countries. Kazakhstan is seen as a kind of bridge for trade between China and European countries, and transit potential is, from Beijing's point of view, the main advantage of the economy of the Caspian republic. However, in order to fully implement it, the China will need to make the necessary investments in modernizing the transport infrastructure of Kazakhstan, which fits well with the Chinese concept of the “Silk Road Economic Belt.” The presence of the China in the oil and gas industry of Kazakhstan is constantly growing; the Chinese are not only actively investing in infrastructure projects, but are also investing in the acquisition of small companies.

**The role of Turkmenistan.** Chinese-Turkmen cooperation within the framework of bilateral relations is developing in large steps along an ascending line. In recent years, China and Turkmenistan have established a strategic partnership, signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, ensuring the progressive development of interstate relations [7]. This agreement is of great importance for cooperation between the two countries, since investments are the most important tool for establishing the economic influence of the China. Of all the areas of cooperation between the China and Turkmenistan, the gas sphere of mutual relations stands out brighter than others. This, in particular, is manifested in the growing dynamics of events in

bilateral relations. The Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline, with a length of 1,800 kilometers, is the largest cross-border gas pipeline in the world.

**The importance of Azerbaijan.** We mention Azerbaijan to highlight its involvement in Chinese trade and infrastructure endeavors through Central Asia and the Caspian ports. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan (AR) and the People's Republic of China on April 2, 1992, bilateral relations have been developing dynamically. Official Beijing does not hide the colossal importance of Azerbaijan in the implementation of its geo-economic plans: “The Caspian Sea is an important trade channel connecting the Eurasian continent. China welcomes and highly appreciates the efforts of the Azerbaijani side to promote the construction of transport infrastructure and the implementation of projects that promote interconnectivity. Beijing is ready to deepen comprehensive Chinese-Azerbaijani cooperation within the framework of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, and make due contribution to the development of countries located along the “Silk Road” through investments in the economic development of Azerbaijan” [8].

China's policy in the Caspian region has led to significant changes in international relations. The Caspian countries have significantly expanded cooperation with China in the energy sector, developing oil and gas fields with the help of Chinese investments, as well as implementing pipeline projects that have provided their hydrocarbon resources with access to foreign markets. In return, the Celestial Empire has access to the region's energy resources and strengthens its position in both energy and national security.

**The Hierarchical Nature of the BRI: Dynamics and Regional Challenges of Chinese Infrastructure Construction in Central Asia.** Here it is important to identify the key problems and difficulties in implementing the BRI that China encountered on the way to implementing its mega-project. The countries of Central Asia and the Caspian region want to benefit from a moderate Chinese presence in the region. However, these hopes until recently came into conflict with the growing difficulties in implementing Chinese initiatives. These include local communities' distrust of Beijing's intentions, concerns about the uncontrolled economic hegemony of Chinese corporations, opaque business deals, non-public transfer (or sale) of local lands by Chinese companies, etc. [9].

We were able to identify the key components of what formed the distrust of Beijing's true intentions, and what were the basis for yesterday's fears of the local population from the alleged economic hegemony of Chinese companies. Past shortcomings of Chinese policy, which are now being successfully overcome, are as follows:

1. There was uncertainty about China's true intentions in the countries of this region, which was complemented by an unclear list of infrastructure projects that the Celestial Empire wanted to build in Central Asia. Any such list, if we follow the logic of equal cooperation, should have included two components: what China wants to build, and what the countries through whose territory the BRI will pass want to receive.

2. To this we must add such a factor as the not always appropriate hegemonic statements of the Chinese military and officials regarding the implementation of the BRI, expressed in 2016-2017. “Progress to the West was “a historical necessity for the Chinese nation, as well as our destiny. Therefore, Central Asia should be viewed “not as a border region, but as territory that needs to be reclaimed during our infrastructure offensive,” said PLAC General Liu Yazhou [10]. These kinds of public declarations created an atmosphere of suspicion in the countries of the region towards Chinese intentions. As already noted, there have been many loud statements from Chinese politicians that Beijing is offering altruistic friendship, investments, and infrastructure to the countries of the region, following the imperative of a “common destiny.” However, as the researchers emphasize, there were few real facts of mutual trust at that time. According to French analysts Sebastien Peyrouse and Jerome Raballand, “a route drawn on a map does not in itself create traffic and trade” [11].

3. An important shortcoming of Chinese policy was that the decision-making process under the BRI was opaque for some time. For this reason, the driving forces behind the

megaproject remained unknown. Another drawback of the implementation of the current stage of the Chinese megaproject, which researchers repeatedly point out, was the lack of a plan or document defining the goals, standards, and code of conduct of the Celestial Empire in relation to local interests and local requirements. One of the results of this policy was that in 2016, Mass anti-Chinese protests took place in Kazakhstan, caused by fears of the seizure of Kazakh lands by China. In such an atmosphere, despite good relations between the Chinese authorities and the Central Asian states, the level of trust between Beijing and the countries of the region remained low. Mainly because agreements between states were not supported by civil society and local communities. As a result, in the same 2016, protests forced authoritarian Kazakhstan to repeal the law allowing land to be leased to foreigners [12]. The above suggests that the Chinese side, in the process of promoting BRI projects, needed to take into account the interests of the local population and civil society.

4. BRI infrastructure runs through rural areas, many of which have long remained marginal and depressed. These territories are oppressed by poverty, worn-out social structure and backward economic order. Residents of these territories, of course, are not able to disrupt the implementation of the BRI, but, as the above events in some Central Asian states have shown, they can initiate protest movements and even change the political regime, as was the case in Kyrgyzstan, or they can oppose the autocratic system, as happened in Kazakhstan in January 2022. This means that if the BRI infrastructure becomes a haphazard corridor that destroys or degrades the environment, then the Chinese, who do not use the potential of soft power, may be left alone with regional instability and sinophobia.

5. Chinese politicians and experts understood that Sinophobia could become a threatening regional problem that Beijing would have to face in the Caspian countries when implementing the BRI. It must be especially emphasized that the elements of Sinophobia were not caused by the innate distrust of Central Asian citizens and politicians towards everything Chinese. They stemmed from uncertainty about China's true intentions regarding local geography, local economies, and local communities [13].

The Kyrgyz experience, like no other, testified to the deep suspicion among poor Central Asian countries about Chinese intentions in the region. A striking example of such an attitude towards China is that in the 2017 presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan, only a small number of candidates supported BRI in their election rhetoric [14].

**Conclusion.** New prospects for the implementation of the “One Belt, One Road” project in the context of the Xi'an Declaration. We were able to show that the use of the pioneering concept of “hierarchical realism” allowed us to get closer to a better understanding of the difficulties in implementing the Chinese mega-project “One Belt, One Road”. This concept helps us uncover Beijing's past hierarchical view of the international system, in which China plays a much more dominant role than is expressed in official Chinese rhetoric. It is precisely the elements of the hegemonic style in the implementation of the BRI in the countries of Central Asia that led to the fact that Chinese plans were met here with very ambiguity.

Is it possible to reconcile these differences along the lines of “BRI - Central Asian countries”? Reconciling the benefits of the BRI with its potentially adverse consequences will require not only active Chinese recognition of local concerns, but also the full involvement of local economic and political players in the implementation of the BRI. What is needed, it seems to us, is greater transparency in decision-making regarding the construction of infrastructure facilities, the creation of channels for local participation and consultations with representatives of the local public.

A constructive process of mutual understanding can also begin with China's willingness to develop a Code of Conduct that would spell out not only legal protections for the project, but also mechanisms for involving local communities in BRI-related consultations and decision-making. Moreover, China has experience in promoting socially oriented initiatives in host states. Thus, the company "China National Petroleum Corp" in its report on Kazakhstan talks about its

efforts to comply with corporate social responsibility standards, offering open policies and real ways to improve relations with local communities.

Events that occurred in May 2023 may become a turning point in terms of the development and implementation of Chinese policy, which will be more sensitive to the local realities of the countries and regions of Central Asia. From May 18 to 19 this year in Xi'an, Chinese President Xi Jinping hosted the leaders of five Central Asian states for the first-ever joint summit. The historical significance of this event lies in the fact that the Xi'an Declaration of the China-Central Asia Summit was adopted at it. The pioneering nature of the decisions made at this summit lay in their humanitarian and social orientation (Interview with Wang Chuanxin, professor of the Department of International Relations at Tongji University (Shanghai, China), May 19, 2023). In particular, the declaration aimed at the implementation of the following priority directions of Chinese policy in the regions of Central Asia: 1) all parties noted the importance of jointly improving policies in the field of poverty reduction, increasing employment, increasing incomes and creating jobs, and are ready to strengthen cooperation in the above-mentioned areas, implement effective social support policies and carry out expert and business exchanges; 2) the summit participants emphasized the importance of strengthening humanistic cooperation and promoting interpersonal communication and welcomed the beginning of the "Year of Folk Culture and Arts of China and Central Asia" and the China-Central Asia Youth Art Festival; 3) the parties support the development of exchanges between universities and college students, as well as the holding of youth cultural festivals, forums and sporting events; 4) all parties will actively promote the creation of mutual cultural centers. China is ready to continue to provide government scholarships to Central Asian countries and organize specialists in related fields to participate in training, further research and exchanges in China [15].

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**Вклад авторов:** все авторы внесли равный вклад в подготовку публикации.

**Конфликт интересов:** авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**Contribution of the authors:** the authors contributed equally to this article.

**Conflict of interest:** the authors declare no conflicts of interests.

*Статья поступила в редакцию: 16.10.2023;  
одобрена после рецензирования: 18.11.2023;  
принята к публикации: 02.12.2023.*

*The article was submitted: 16.10.2023;  
approved after reviewing: 18.11.2023;  
accepted for publication: 02.12.2023.*