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Информация об авторах:

Ланко Дмитрий Александрович – кандидат политических наук, доцент, кафедра европейских исследований, Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Санкт-Петербург, Россия.

Зотова Дарья Викторовна – Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Санкт-Петербург, Россия.

Lanko Dmitry Aleksandrovich – Candidate of Political Science, Associate Professor, Department of European Studies, St. Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Zotova Daria Viktorovna – St. Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg, Russia.

S.M. Nurdavletova*, D.R. Aitmagambetov
S.B. Aspandiyar, G.Zh. Kenzhalina

L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan
*Corresponding author: saniyanm83@mail.ru

Chinese “One Belt – One Road” initiative and opportunities for Central Asian states

Abstract. *For the first time, the idea of the “One belt - One road” initiative was represented in Central Asia during the visit of Xi Jinping to Kazakhstan on September 7, 2013. But in fact, we are observing that the PRC began to pursue an active economic policy in the Central Asian region in the middle of 2000s. The initiative to proclaim the “Belt and Road” is not a new course, in fact, it is a continuation of the ideological design of an existing economic policy that lasts for a decade with all its inalienable characteristics. According to some researchers, one of the reasons for the emergence of the “belt and the path” concept was unsuccessful attempts by the Chinese side to create an economic union of integration within the SCO. Such attempts include the proposals made by the formation of the free trade zone in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the initiative of China to create development institutions, primarily the SCO Bank. These attempts were faced with the reluctance of economic integration with China from Russia. “One Belt - One Road” is positioned as an ideological doctrine, acting as a unifying idea for those specific projects that China is already selling or will be selling in the territories included in the scope of the initiative. From this point the initiative has one of its key advantages: openness. Almost any project can be included in its framework since the initiative is designed to create an inclusive platform for the interaction of the Chinese economy with the interests of the states involved. Kazakhstan and the Central Asian countries are in the midst of implementing this project. The development of transport communications with China was declared a priority area.*

Keywords: *Central Asia, China, Russia, Belt and Road Initiative, economy, Shanghai Cooperation Organization.*

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Introduction

Nowadays, the initiative of Chinese government “Belt and Road” is attracting more and more attention. All factors contributed to the launching of this project: in the conditions of current international crisis the Chinese macro project opens new opportunities for restructuring the existing system of trade and

economic relations across Eurasian continent. Today, the relevance of topic is growing: there is a lot of research works and forecasts concerning the impressive volumes of cargo flows that will run from the East to the West in the framework of the created logistic infrastructure.

It is important to mention that the Chinese initiative impresses international community by the scope of the project. In detail, the PRC

imported goods valued at 8 trillion US dollars from Asia and Europe until 2019 and invest up to approximately 450 billion US dollars in these regions [1]). The Chinese side promotes this scope at all levels starting from internal till international. The China Global Television Network (CGTN) reports, by May 2020, in the framework the Belt and Road initiative China has signed 200 cooperation agreements with 138 countries and 30 international organizations. According to the data of the World Bank, the implementation of the BRI project could increase trade by 6.2% on the global level, by 9.7% among participating countries and has a positive influence on the foreign direct investment in low-income countries by 7.6%.

The financial issue is a separate topic to discuss. The current volume of the Silk Road Fund is up to 40 billion US dollars, and in these circumstances the funding for the initiative’s strategic projects cannot be singled out by any country except the PRC. It can be compared with the American plans in the New Silk Road, which are still on paper simply because of the lack of funding in the transport and logistics sphere announced almost 5 years ago.

However, it is important to emphasize that the Chinese idea of the Belt and Road is not only a project of trade and transport communications, as can be judged by the readiness of the PRC to transfer dozens of its factories and other production assets to the territory of Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan. This article is aimed to analyze the opportunities of the Chinese project for Central Asian region in the current realities. For achieving this aim, the following tasks were set: to identify benefits for countries of the region, its readiness and attitude, to determine the real interests of China through the BRI initiative and to analyze the tools for attracting Central Asian countries. However, the project implementation attracts special attention due to the complexity and a number of quite real obstacles.

Research methods

A study was conducted using qualitative methods of analysis. Data were collected from

secondary sources: journal publications and articles in professional journals, conference proceedings, working papers, reports published by national and international organizations, archival documents, online resources of various governmental and non-governmental organizations, etc. The collected data were analyzed and presented in the format of logical reasoning, followed by the formation of final conclusions.

At the same time, the review of the speeches of government officials on related issues of the study is carried out in historical sequence, using the system-chronological method. The results obtained were generalized to analyze the development of the BRI concept.

The scientific research was based on a systematic approach. The Belt and Road initiative as a research object was studied as a complex system of interrelated parts focusing on Chinese interests and following perspectives for Central Asia. During the work a structure-functional method was applied, where each part of the system was observed in detail. In the process of research, we used scientific methods and techniques such as analysis and synthesis, grouping methods, and comparative analysis. At the same time, the research required the implementation of empirical methods – analysis of documents and sources.

Discussion and results

Geopolitical aspect. The geographical position can open new horizons or aggravate the current state in the region. Some experts support the idea that the Belt and Road project will become a bridge between Central Asia and major international centers, helping the region to avoid transport isolation, and become an active participant of the market. Moreover, it was one of the factors influencing the attractiveness of the region in the beginning. It is obvious that Central Asian countries seek to make the cooperation effective and fruitful for both sides. For example, the case of Kazakhstan can be observed, where the counter program “Nurlyzhol” (Bright Way) has been put forward and provided with budgetary financing. Its main aim was to create and update

the transport infrastructure for embedding in the Chinese macro project.

These interests facilitate China to make Central Asia one of the parts of its transport and logistics chain. For example, in June 2015, in Rizhao, Shandong Province, the Third China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum was held on the topic of signing Joint formation of the Belt and Road. It was aimed at the creation of a new structure of transport and communication net. Obviously, the Chinese government is positioning the city of Rizhao, located in the eastern part of the country, as the main link of the emerging Asian-European land highway.

Continuing the topic, since 2014, the eastern Chinese port city is connected by rail with the Western Chinese XUAR. Moreover, Rizhao has also signed an agreement with Aktau, the port in Kazakhstan, which is aimed to become the link between the markets of East Asia and the EU. Focusing on numbers, it can be stated that the total maximum cargo turnover of the port city was equal to 353 million tons in 2014. In future five years, Beijing plans to increase this figure to 750 million tons by building another 274 sea berths [2]. This aim can be achievable by cooperating between two centers – Aktau (in Kazakhstan) and Chinese port Lianyungang. According to the plan, these new capacities are directed to improve the capacity of the logistics infrastructure among the countries of Asian-Pacific region.

It is worth noting that in the framework of the June forum in 2015 the Chinese politicians and officials from Central Asian countries jointly launched the Central Asian Logistics Park and the Central Asian Center for Air Transport Services. In addition, this measure was taken to expand the cooperation between the PRC and the states of the region. Moreover, the International Sea Shipping Center Rizhao-Central Asia was opened. It becomes apparent that China considers the lack of experience of Central Asian countries in international trade. The Chinese side is aimed at creating these mechanisms for maximizing the effectiveness of trade operations in the region due to the high interest in the opportunity to successfully enter the capacious EU markets in perspective.

The growing multilateral cooperation through conducting forums and conferences strengthens the need to build a dialogue among countries with different cultural and historical past. In the framework of these discussing platforms, China places special emphasis not only on the opportunities and potential for infrastructure growth, but also on the cultural component. It becomes obvious that soft power is turning into a powerful tool for conducting effective relations. Due to this reason, China seeks to popularize its culture. Obviously, Beijing is aware that nowadays Central Asian countries have some anti-Chinese sentiments. Therefore, through regular dialogue between the political and business elite, intellectuals, and media representatives, the Chinese side is trying to improve China's perception and understanding in the region.

However, despite Chinese efforts concerning the implementation of the Belt and Road initiative, Central Asia is a region of interest among different world powers. It is known that due to its profitable geographical position connecting West and East, the EU, USA, Russia, Turkey, India, and other actors have both declared and confidential strategies and plans for the region.

These actions cause a deep analysis and the need to undertake measures from the Chinese side. For instance, in 2017, India openly expressed their interest: Prime Minister N. Moody visited the countries of the region, while Japan is becoming more active, which has unexpectedly begun to try to revive the format of the regional dialogue. However, it is worth noting that in Chinese perception the revival of Japanese diplomacy pursues the goal to thwart Chinese initiatives in the region. Therefore, the expansion of China's presence in Central Asia also aims to prevent the strengthening of other competing powers on the Chinese western borders.

Aspect of regional integration. In recent years, China has been showing great and rather reasonable interest to the development and prospects of Eurasian integration, which, since the creation of the Customs Union, includes the countries of Central Asia as key participants. In this case, the creation of the Eurasian Economic

Community (EAEC), which gave the foundation for the creation of Eurasian Economic Union, changed the format and structure of relations within the region and China's attitude – officials, entrepreneurs, and experts - to this association is ambiguous.

At the local level it is known that the Eurasian Economic Union is open to every country, however, the Organization is completely closed to China due to the differences in vision of future development. Moreover, it is worth noting that the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union is aimed at limiting capabilities of China and expansion of Russia's competitiveness [3]. Obviously, the creation and active promotion of the Belt and Road initiative is seen as a Chinese tool for maintaining presence in Central Asian region and measure of Eurasian integration containment. It is apparent that the Chinese experts discussed the new customs regime with the entry of Kazakhstan into the Customs Union/ EEU. They are convinced that it caused losses to Chinese producers oriented to the Kazakhstan market and even influenced the entire Central Asian product flow from China.

Logically, the interconnection is growing fast, and the changes in one country cause changes in the region. For instance, the rise in prices for Chinese goods reduced the attractiveness of the Dordoy market in Kyrgyzstan.

Initially, Chinese leaders focused on the rise of trade with the region, as a key indicator of successful relations. However, in 2015 during the negotiations between the representatives of the N.Nazarbayev Center at the Shanghai Academy of International Studies, from one side, and Chinese experts, from other side, it was found that the development of the EEC led to the formation and improvement of new technical regulations for the goods inside the countries. Subsequently, this process complicated the established trade model [4]. However, it is important to mention that despite the difference in national legislations, the economic specifics of each country, these measures accelerate the fast-growing development of the EEU and creation general rules of the cooperation for the entire CIS countries, [5].

Focusing on the perspectives of cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road initiative, it can be stated that common market with no customs barriers and clear rules of economic behavior creates all conditions for Chinese leaders. For this reason, in the nearest years China aims to accelerate the integration and create beneficial and fruitful relations for both sides. To demonstrate the scale of the project, it can be mentioned that according to the newspaper "Renminjibao", the Belt and Road project covers the consumer market valued at 3 billion people, the financial power of China and real projects [5].

Continuing the topic of regional powers' interest, Russian foreign policy is aimed at strengthening its position in the region. The American Peterson Institute for World Economy reports that by 2025, Russia's GDP may lose up to \$ 2 billion, and exports up to 4.4 billion US dollars [6]. In the framework of the reduction in the capacity among major trading players, Russia and China in Asia will try to increase their activity to develop their own trading block of Eurasian orientation [7].

Obviously, Chinese interests in the region are related to the mining operations and natural resources as a priority for conducting fruitful relations with the countries. Focusing on the detailed analysis of the numbers, the total volume of imports from Central Asia to China is equal more than 27 billion dollars, as a peak achieved in 2013. At the same time, over 82% of imports concern gas, oil and metals [4].

The export of raw materials is a key sphere for increasing the cooperation with the countries of the region. In detail, the total volume of imports from Central Asia to the PRC was recorded during 2009-2010 and reached a peak in 2013, when it was equal to more than 27 billion dollars. At the same time, over 82% of imports fell on commodities of the commodity group - gas, oil and metals [4]. Moreover, in 2014 China invested more than \$ 23 billion in buying up oil assets in Kazakhstan. Moreover, in 2014 the Chinese investments to Kazakhstan was equal to more than 23 billion dollars, focusing on buying oil assets. Earlier this sphere owned to Western partners, however, this

action opened Chinese companies control about a quarter of the oil produced today (less than 20 million tons) [1]. In relation to other Central Asian countries, China gave loans valued at 12 billion dollars to Turkmenistan. This measure gave Chinese leaders the opportunity for the production and export of gas, and the most important – it received an exclusive right to its extraction on the land territory of the republic, including one of the world's largest super-giant deposit Galkynysh.

Except oil sphere, the Chinese side strives to develop cooperation in metal sphere (uranium, copper, iron and gold). Focusing on the numbers, in 2014 this index exceeded \$ 2.7 billion, where 98% fell to Kazakhstan. Concerning export, ore is at the top, which is already exported to the PRC. Also, Kazakhstan is considered as an uranium mining leader, it holds the first place in the world, and now accounts for 75% of the total uranium imports in the PRC. China plans to increase the number of nuclear reactors from 31 in 2015 to 110 by 2030, and a key role in providing raw materials for fuel production is likely to be played by the Kazakhstan [8].

According to the China Global Investment Tracker, in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative the total volume of Chinese investments in Kazakhstan is equal to 18.69 billion US dollars from 2013 to 2020. In detail, more than half of the amount is directed to the energy sector, \$3.81 billion to the transport sphere, while \$2.65 billion are for chemical industry and \$1.91 billion for metallurgic engineering.

Chinese government was a key initiator to provide funding for the South-North rail line in Kyrgyzstan and an utility pole in Tajikistan. Moreover, these actions were aimed at enabling both countries to reassemble their countrywide electricity supply infrastructure, which had become dispersed following the fall of the USSR. Naturally, such initiatives help to increase the health of the economy of the Central Asian countries.

In geopolitical aspect, it is seen that China is one of the top three players in the commodity market in the region along with Russia and Western countries. Moreover, China has built a

basic pipeline infrastructure which provided a growth in raw materials supplies from Central Asia. For instance, in Kazakhstan an oil pipeline with a capacity of 20 million tons a year was commissioned, while in Turkmenistan a gas main with a current capacity of 55 billion cubic meters was put into operation. It is worth noting that today these pipes are capable of serving less than 3% of Chinese annual oil consumption and 15% of its gas consumption toward the eastern part [9]. Despite the low volume it can be stated that this pipeline system, built by China in the region, is planned with perspective for the future. These measures demonstrate Chinese firm intention to strengthen relations with Central Asian countries. Most experts analyzed this policy and came to the conclusion that this action has several causes, one of which is security. The Belt and Road initiative is crucial for China to reduce its vital dependency on vulnerable sea supplies and increase continental logistics. It is obvious that China has made remarkable progress in relations with Central Asia through creation a large trade market uniting both sides and has already budged Russia as Central Asian primary trade partner through the permanent presence in the region.

According to the data from Chinese Ministry of Commerce, it is seen that in 2021 trade between China and the five countries surged by 25 percent year-on-year to \$44.6 billion [10]. The value between China and Kyrgyzstan grew the fastest at 131 percent, to \$6.3 billion. For Kazakhstan -the largest trading partner for China among the five countries - the figure rose by 15 percent to \$23 billion.

Chinese export is represented by high-value goods (machinery, light, and electronic industry items) to the region while consuming the natural resources of Central Asia. As a result, the region becomes more and more dependent on China in terms of technology.

Additionally, despite the regional economic crisis the Chinese side was able to maintain high levels of commodities exports in comparison with Russian export. It should be noted that Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which are members of the EEU, receive the majority of China's

supply. Moreover, Chinese products also enter Russian market through these countries. In order to expand sales, China uses main tools: allocates related loans, builds infrastructure between Central Asia and XUAR.

China attempts to avoid conflict with both Russia and the Central Asian countries in resolving its economic issues. This position differs from Western countries' approach. It can be stated that China rejects projects in Central Asian countries which can lead to the aggravation of relations among neighbors (for example, the construction of hydroelectric power plants on Transboundary Rivers in Tajikistan due to objections from Uzbekistan).

The Chinese loans policy started in 2016. Due to this policy Central Asian countries got approximately 30 billion dollars. Basically, this funding was directed to implement infrastructure projects in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as projects in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan that were of interest of China. Credits are given to the countries in the region with preference, but they are also related since they must be controlled by Chinese enterprises. In case of difficulties in repayment of funding, China frequently provides counterparties with the opportunity to pay off loans on the supply of natural resources, or the admission to mineral deposits. The largest such transaction is the calculation of China's loans to natural gas supplies.

Loans are mostly used to build an infrastructure between Central Asian countries and China's western provinces. During the Soviet period, the region was isolated from the Chinese logistic system, and today the Chinese side aimed at filling this gap, which was a major barrier of the trade growth. China focuses its efforts on the building and repair of those infrastructural facilities (checkpoints, logistics hubs, car and railway highways) that enable increasing trade with the countries of the region. Beijing has had rail access to Iran since 2015 via Central Asia. Its efforts will likely be concentrated on building a third railway entrance to the region in the nearest future (the previous two are in Kazakhstan), with the perspective that the new road will connect with the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley (i.e. the

most populated area of Central Asia). Obviously, nowadays China provides loans to Central Asia more than other countries, finances infrastructure more quickly than others, and increases imports of basic goods. According to the current economic policy, the region is conducting the policy of being a raw material partner and strengthening its technological ties with its eastern neighbor.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping seeks to increase trade between China and the region to \$70 billion by 2030. According to the Chinese state newspaper People's Daily, this index has grown 25 times over the past 20 years - from \$1.5 billion to \$38.6 billion in 2020. In terms of growth, Turkmenistan is the leader. To be precise, the trade turnover has grown almost 200 times, reaching \$ 6.5 billion in 2020, mainly due to the export of natural gas. People's Daily informs that by the end of 2020 BRI project covered \$40 billion Chinese investment in total, where \$21.4 billion was in Kazakhstan. By the end of 2021, there were 7,700 Chinese firms operating in Central Asia [11].

Today, the experts and scientists (especially Central Asian) tend to believe that Central Asia is a key region and ultimate goal of the Belt and Road project. The two main reasons for this statement will be studied and shown in detail.

First, it is necessary to emphasize that the region is extremely important for stabilizing the situation in the troubled Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR). This goal can be achieved by improving its living standards and stimulating trade, economic and energy exchanges with the culturally close republics of Central Asia.

Second factor is connected with the extremely limited market. Obviously, Beijing is more interested in Central Asia as a large transit territory for quick access to key markets of the European Union and other European countries.

Over the next ten years, it is projected that China will strengthen its dominance as the region's primary trading partner and creditor by demonstrating rapid levels of economic development and providing infrastructure projects. It is predicted that these measures will make China collaborate with recently formed organizations, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Conclusion

All in all, it is seen that pursuing its own interests China is assisting Central Asian countries with the implementation of their industrial plans. However, Chinese policy differs, compared with European Microfinance Organizations, which are aimed at putting special requirements for making edits to national financial and political structure through its recommendations.

Beijing is delaying the inventory of Turkmen oil. These measures lead to the reduction of European interest in the region and opened new opportunities for Russian fossil in the European market.

It is important to mention that one of the obvious drawbacks is the region's rapid growth in debt obligations prior to the eastern union. For instance, it is known that the international financial structures were the only sources of funding, however, the Chinese policy turned China into the major lender and deepen its position in this status. In detail, PRC provided 43% (or \$900 million) of Tajikistan's total debt. For comparison, in 2015, Kazakhstan borrowed \$13.3 billions while Bishkek borrowed \$35 billion from abroad [12]. It can be concluded that the lending

policy is the most effective tool in Central Asian countries, moreover, some democratic countries have far higher borrowing fees, despite official statistics numbers.

It is worth noting that Chinese and Russian economies intensify their resources in the region to expand their influence in Central Asian economic sphere. Observing the numbers, it becomes apparent that Chinese businessmen become a competitive power in the region in relation to the region's natural resources, compared with Russian enterprises, which have to abandon their retail markets in Central Asian countries.

Moreover, a close analysis of the statements, intentions, and actions of the Chinese side shows that in perspective its mission is much broader, it is the project for the geo-economy of Eurasia.

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С.М. Нурдаuletова, Д.Р. Айтмагамбетов, С. Аспандияр, Г.Ж. Кенжалина
Л.Н. Гумилев атындағы Еуразиялық ұлттық университеті, Астана, Қазақстан

Қытайдың «Бір Белдеу – Бір Жол» бастамасы және Орталық Азия елдері үшін мүмкіндіктері

Аңдатпа. Алғаш рет «Бір белдеу - бір жол» бастамасының идеясы Орталық Азияда Си Цзиньпиннің 2013 жылғы 7 қыркүйекте Қазақстанға сапары барысында ұсынылды. Бірақ іс жүзінде біз ҚХР 2000-шы жылдардың ортасынан бастап Орталық Азия аймағында белсенді экономикалық саясат жүргізе бастағанын байқаймыз. «Белдеу және жол» жариялау бастамасы жаңа мәміле емес, шын мәнінде бұл барлық тән сипаттамаларымен онжылдыққа созылатын бұрыннан бар экономикалық саясаттың идеологиялық дизайнының жалғасы. Кейбір зерттеушілердің пікірінше, «Белдеу және жол» тұжырымдамасының пайда болу себептерінің бірі қытай тарапының ШЫҰ шеңберінде интеграцияның экономикалық одағын құру жөніндегі сәтсіз әрекеттері болды. Мұндай әрекеттерге 2003 жылы Шанхай Ынтымақтастық Ұйымы шеңберінде еркін сауда аймағын қалыптастыру, Қытайдың даму институттарын, ең алдымен ШЫҰ Банкі құру бастамасы ұсынған ұсыныстар жатады. Бұл әрекеттер Ресейдің Қытаймен экономикалық интеграцияға құлықсыздығына тап болды.

«Бір белдеу – бір жол» идеологиялық доктрина ретінде ұсынылған, ол Қытай осы бастаманың аясына тартылған аумақтарда алға жылжитатын немесе алға жылжитатын нақты жобалар үшін біріктіруші идея ретінде әрекет етеді. Осы тұрғыдан алғанда, бастама негізгі артықшылықтардың біріне ие: ашықтық. Кез келген дерлік жобаны оның шеңберіне қосуға болады, өйткені бастама Қытай экономикасының мемлекеттердің мүдделерімен өзара әрекеттесуі үшін инклюзивті платформа құруға арналған. Қазақстан мен Орталық Азия елдері осы жобаны іске асыру процесінде. Қытаймен көлік байланысын дамыту басым бағыт ретінде жарияланды.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, Қытай, Ресей, Белдеу және жол бастамасы, экономика, Шанхай ынтымақтастық ұйымы.

С.М. Нурдаuletова, Д.Р. Айтмагамбетов, С. Аспандияр, Г.Ж. Кенжалина
Евразийский Национальный университет им. Л.Н. Гумилева, Астана, Казахстан

Инициатива Китая «Один Пояс – Один Путь» и возможности для стран Центральной Азии

Аннотация. Впервые идея инициативы «Один пояс - одна дорога» была представлена в Центральной Азии в ходе визита Си Цзиньпина в Казахстан 7 сентября 2013 года. Но на деле, мы наблюдаем, что КНР начал проводить активную экономическую политику в Центральноазиатском регионе еще с середины 2000 -х годов. Инициатива по провозглашению «Пояс и дороги» не является новым курсом, на самом деле это продолжение идеологического дизайна уже существующей экономической политики, которая длится в течение десятилетия со всеми его неотъемлемыми характеристиками. По мнению некоторых исследователей, одной из причин появления концепции «Пояс и путь» были неудачные попытки китайской стороны создать экономический союз интеграции в рамках ШОС. К таким попыткам можно отне-

сти предпринятые предложения, выдвинутые еще в 2003 году формирования зоны свободной торговли в рамках Шанхайской организации сотрудничества, инициативы Китая создать институты развития, в первую очередь, Банк ШОС. Данные попытки столкнулись с нежеланием экономической интеграции с Китаем со стороны России.

«Один пояс – один путь» представлен в качестве идеологической доктрины, действующей как объединяющая идея для тех конкретных проектов, которые Китай уже продвигает или будет продвигать на территориях, вовлеченных в сферу действия этой инициативы. С данной точки зрения инициатива имеет одно из ключевых преимуществ: открытость. Почти любой проект может быть включен в его рамки, поскольку инициатива предназначена для создания инклюзивной платформы для взаимодействия китайской экономики с интересами государств. Казахстан и страны Центральной Азии находятся в процессе реализации этого проекта. Развитие транспортных коммуникаций с Китаем объявлено в качестве приоритетной области.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Китай, Россия, инициатива «Пояса и Пути», экономика, Шанхайская организация сотрудничества.

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