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China – Russia – EU Relations:

European Union's Perspectives in Central Asia regarding a Sino-Russian Influence, Recent developments:

A Focus on Uzbekistan

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Abstract: this paper aims to analyse the influence of the European Union in Uzbekistan, as a Central Asiatic country. The presence of China and Russia, two major powers in this region, is presented as both an opportunity and a blockage for the EU's development in the country. Thus, this would involve understanding in which of the security, the economic and the diplomatic fields, the European Union is the most influence and how it could exploit these opportunities to consolidate its opportunities in Uzbekistan.

Table of content

| | |
|--|----|
| Abstract | 1 |
| Table of content | 2 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| State-of-the-art and theoretical framework | 5 |
| Results | 8 |
| 1 Security..... | 7 |
| 1.1 Military alliances and binding agreements | 7 |
| 1.1.1 China: a big and growing influence | 7 |
| 1.1.2 Russia: an Uzbek resistance?..... | 8 |
| 1.1.3 The EU: a glaring absence..... | 8 |
| 1.2 Weapons trade and security devices supply | 8 |
| 1.2.1 China: an exchange of good practices..... | 8 |
| 1.2.2 Russia: a recrudescence role?..... | 9 |
| 1.2.3 The EU: a little role | 9 |
| 2 Economy..... | 10 |
| 2.1 Trade..... | 10 |
| 2.1.1 China: A clear supremacy | 10 |
| 2.1.2 Russia: still on the podium | 10 |
| 2.1.3 The EU: a very little position | 11 |
| 2.2 Investments..... | 11 |
| 2.2.1 China: transport and water infrastructures – between competition and sharing with the EU | 11 |
| 2.2.2 Russia: a strength in industry and in energy | 12 |
| 2.2.3 The EU: absolute advantage in sustainable development | 13 |
| 3 Diplomacy..... | 14 |
| 3.1 Official dialogue..... | 14 |
| 3.1.1 China: An incredibly quick and increasing growth | 14 |
| 3.1.2 Russia: a lack of bilateralism..... | 15 |
| 3.1.3 The EU: public investment as a tool for politics | 16 |
| 3.2 Informal links with RUSSIA: at the edge of a change? | 16 |
| Conclusions | 18 |

Introduction

The year 2020 stands at the heart of a very particular context. It has been 10 years since the European Union (EU) set up its own foreign policy body (the European External Action Service, EEAS, took up its duties in 2010 under Article 27§3 of the Lisbon Treaty¹), the third EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs takes office² and it has been seven years since China launched its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project³, in which Central Asia is a central region. So why focus on China, Russia and the European Union in Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan?

The EU and China began a shift of foreign policy almost simultaneously. The EU, institutionally, and China, strategically. Meanwhile, Russia is unavoidable when it comes to deal with Central Asia. As a region of the former USSR, Russia exerts there a historic political influence. But Uzbekistan stands out in this ensemble. It has in fact the specificity that the cultural influence of Russia is limited to the use of the Russian language⁴. Populated by a Turkmen and Muslim population⁵, the Russian populations (cf. infra, "Diplomacy / Informal links: Russia - at the edge of a change? ") and the Orthodox religion are only a very tiny minority⁶. What, then, are the non-ethnic but geographical characteristics of Uzbekistan?

According to a geopolitical definition of Central Asia corresponding to the countries of the former USSR - excluding Russia and Central and Eastern Europe - Uzbekistan is the centre of this region. Deprived of its access to the Caspian Sea by Kazakhstan in the north-east and by Turkmenistan in the south-east, Uzbekistan is a landlocked country. It also shares an eastern border with Tajikistan (East-South) and Kyrgyzstan (East-North), as well as a southern border with a non-member State of this Central Asian region: Pakistan.

Its closest border with Russia, in the Aral Sea, is about 300km south of the Russian city of Dombarovski, through Kazakhstan. As for China, the two countries are about 150km apart across Kyrgyzstan, from the Uzbek reservoir of Andijan to the Xinjiang desert, west of the Chinese S212 road. The closest Chinese locality to Uzbekistan is Suyukecun, a spot lost in the desert. Thus, for both Russia and China, Uzbekistan is far from the centres of activity of these two countries. Moreover, there are no direct roads between them : the Chinese A371 road runs through Kyrgyzstan before reaching Uzbekistan and the M39 road which reaches the Uzbek

¹ Treaty on European Union, article 27§3, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

² "High Representative/Vice President", [eeas.europa.eu](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/3598/high-representativevice-president_en), European External Action Service, 1 December 2019, accessed on 10 February 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/3598/high-representativevice-president_en

³ Philips, Tom, "The \$900bn question: what is the Belt and Road initiative?", [The Guardian](http://www.theguardian.com), www.theguardian.com, 12 May 2017, accessed on 28 February 2020.

⁴ E. Kolko, Beth, "Resistance to Globalization: Language and Internet Diffusion Patterns in Uzbekistan", ResearchGate, www.researchgate.net, December 2005, accessed on 28 February 2020.

⁵ "The World Factbook, Central Asia: Uzbekistan", Central Intelligence Agency, www.cia.gov, 7 February 2020, accessed on 28 February 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uz.html?fbclid=IwAR0huqLFni2YK0pgnqRRBTVHIWVD1zDYYSi-RiHwswGzPlwSlT1MNCuZbno>

⁶ Ibid.

capital, Tashkent, is only a convergent point of the Kazakh road networks (those which are linked to Russia). This distance is even worse regarding the EU. The closest geographical point between the borders of the two entities is located halfway between the Danube delta on the Romanian-Ukrainian border and the town of Korakaplofiston in eastern Uzbekistan. These two points are 900 kilometres apart and to reach them, it is only possible by crossing three countries (Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine) and two seas (the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea). Again, therefore, this kilometre is not significant at all and only reflects Uzbekistan's remoteness from the EU, China and Russia.

Thus, in this context, Russia has a historic presence and China has a "pioneering" role to claim. The EU, on the other hand, does not seem to have any a priori advantage. So, what are the EU's opportunities in Uzbekistan regarding a Sino-Russian influence?

We will focus on three aspects of these opportunities. First, the security opportunities for the EU, compared to Sino-Russian influences. Second, its economic opportunities, also in comparison with Russia and China. Thirdly, its diplomatic opportunities, again in relation to the Russian and Chinese presence.

State-of-the-art and theoretical framework

Since its launch in 2013, interest in the BRI has been phenomenal. Indeed, much has been written about the new Chinese influence in Central Asia, particularly in light of the historical Russian presence in the region. As such, it is relevant to begin the study by reading a general but detailed book on China in Central Asia, focusing on issues related to Uzbekistan. This book is the article of Fabio Indeo: "The impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Central Asia: Building New relations in Reshaped Geopolitical Scenario", published in the book *China's Belt and Road Initiative, changing the Rules of Globalization* and edited by Messrs. Wenxian Zhang, Ilan Alon and Christoph and Latteman for the Palgrave studies of Internationalization in emerging markets in 2018. In it, he argues that Uzbekistan has built a balance in foreign policy between China and Russia. This article has the merit of highlighting the main stakes for Uzbekistan in this international remodelling: the security, the economic and the diplomatic influence of foreign powers. Thus, the theoretical framework having been established, it was necessary to compare the contribution of China, Russia and also the European Union in these three areas, in order to bring out the opportunities of the latter.

The search of an empirical basis for this study leads to combine academic articles with reports, with official data releases, as well as with facts relayed by the classical press. This is the effort that has been invested in this work. However, while this cocktail enables the creation of a solid database, it nevertheless presents the biases that are intrinsic to it.

Indeed, few academic articles have been written on the EU-Russia-China influence triangle in Uzbekistan. The EU is often neglected, leaving room only for Sino-Russian relations. As far as Russia is concerned, it is analysed above all in terms of its historical role in the region, in particular on the basis of the USSR legacy. China, on the other hand, is mainly understood as a new player that sees only commercial opportunities for the BRI. Thus, the European Union, having neither this historic Russian role nor this "pioneering" Chinese role, is absent from most academic considerations on the issue. Academic papers therefore needed to be complemented by elements from other disciplines, such as reports, figures and institutional communications. But these also had their shortcomings.

Biases of objectivity and neutrality are the main obstacles to the use of such institutional data. Indeed, whether they are presented by Russia, China or even the European Union, the publicly available elements can be nothing but political and therefore biased. Even if it is reasonable to assume that Russia and China provide a vision of the world that is perhaps more oriented than that of the European Union, the secrecy of certain information is nonetheless common to all three entities. Therefore, the use of institutional data is necessarily partial and incomplete. It was therefore necessary to supplement these data with facts relayed by an a priori independent actor: the press. But here again, the use of press articles is not without flaws.

First, the independence of the press can be questioned. Indeed, the freedom of expression of the press depends largely on the degree of liberalism of the political regimes of the countries in which it operates. Thus, just like their institutions, it is reasonable to think that the Chinese and Russian presses can only offer a partial view of their countries' influence in Uzbekistan. This obstacle could then be circumvented by reading European press articles, but the problem here would be the distance of the European media's viewpoint and their lack of immediate interest in Uzbekistan. Similarly, the classic press articles rarely offer a macroscopic analysis of the issues they deal with. In fact, the complete objectivity of the press, whether for political or focal reasons, is rarely achieved.

In addition, the language barrier presents a problem. Being fluent only in English, French and German, articles in Chinese and Russian that were not translated were inaccessible to me. Thus, one might assume a certain Western ethnocentrism. In fact, the confrontation of points of view is limited to articles translated into English, French and German.

For all these reasons, the search for empirical data is fundamental to this research. The analysis of facts may be biased, but empirical data is not subject to misinterpretation if it is read properly. To sum up, while the mix of academic, institutional and media sources is certainly imperfect, empirical evidence is necessary to approach this empirical reality.

Thus, this research has two objectives. Firstly, to analyse the respective influences of Russia, China and the European Union in Uzbekistan in the fields of security, the economy and the diplomacy. Secondly, based on these results, to try to understand whether Uzbekistan is an exception or a typical case of the influence of these three powers in Central Asia.

These conclusions will then contribute to the state of research on the question in two different manners. First, they will confirm or contradict Fabio Indeo's assessment that Uzbekistan is building a balanced balance between China and Russia. Secondly, they will complete a subject that is not yet sufficiently covered: the place of the European Union in the interplay of major powers in Central Asia.

Results

1 SECURITY

The security influence of the three entities can be divided into two aspects. First and obviously, military and security agreements and cooperation. But also has another aspect: the sale of security devices and armaments.

1.1 MILITARY ALLIANCES AND BINDING AGREEMENTS

1.1.1 China: a big and growing influence

In September 2013, China and Uzbekistan pronounced a joint declaration “on further developments and deepening bilateral relations of strategic partnership”. They engage themselves not to join any alliance or military block that could damage the sovereignty, the security, and the territorial integrity of the other side⁷.

This makes the EU not likely to bind any security partnership with Uzbekistan. Indeed, the only most credible partnership of this kind would have been with Eurocorps, one of the most advanced European integrations in military, which eventually works with the EU on its external military missions such as EUTM in Mali or EUTM in Central African Republic⁸. Nevertheless, Eurocorps is also linked with NATO⁹, whose expansion is strongly condemned by China, as a fundamental breach of its “five principles of peaceful coexistence”¹⁰. Therefore, this link between NATO and Eurocorps excludes any strong security alliance between EU’s armed forces and Uzbekistan.

We easily notice the very few links between NATO and Uzbekistan. It’s only question of civilian cooperation (sciences, natural catastrophes, etc.) or of very little military cooperation against terrorism in Afghanistan¹¹ (Uzbekistan is even not contributing to the International

⁷ Fabio, Indeo, “The impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Central Asia: Building New relations in Reshaped Geopolitical Scenario”, *China’s Belt and Road Initiative, changing the Rules of Globalization*, ed. Wenxian, Zhang, Ilan, Alon, Christoph, Latteman (Palgrave studies of Internationalization in emerging markets, 2018), p. 140.

⁸ “European Union,” eurocorps.org, Eurocorps, accessed on 6 February 2020, <https://www.eurocorps.org/operations/european-union/>

⁹ “NATO,” eurocorps.org, Eurocorps, accessed on 6 February 2020, <https://www.eurocorps.org/operations/nato/>

¹⁰ Denis, J. Blasko, “China’s Views on NATO Expansion: A Secondary National Interest”, Huygur Human Rights Project, Jamestown Foundation (China Brief Volume: 9 Issue: 5), 4th March 2009, accessed on 6 February 2020, <https://uhrp.org/featured-articles/chinas-views-nato-expansion-secondary-national-interest>

¹¹ „Relations avec l’Ouzbékistan”, nato.int, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2nd May 2019, accessed on 6 February 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics_22839.htm?selectedLocale=fr

Security Assistance Force, the first and main NATO mission in Afghanistan¹²), in which China also has a stabilization interest¹³. This position is also confirmed by one of the four pillars of Uzbekistan Foreign Policy, which includes the non-deployment of foreign military bases on the Uzbek territory¹⁴.

1.1.2 Russia: an Uzbek resistance?

Russia doesn't have this Chinese success in terms of security alliances. Indeed, Uzbekistan always refused to integrate the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)¹⁵. This could be the sign that Uzbekistan wants to move away from former soviet influence, and nowadays Russian security backyard.

1.1.3 The EU: a glaring absence

Because of the Chinese presence (*cf. ultra*), Uzbekistan is not member of any European military organisation. The only European influence in this field consists in some vague security cooperation, lost in the amount of other treaties. For example, the security dimension of the EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council on November the 11th 2019, only consist in one line of the official public communication¹⁶.

1.2 WEAPONS TRADE AND SECURITY DEVICES SUPPLY

1.2.1 China: an exchange of good practices

In 2015, arms trade analysts relayed the supply of high-tech military equipment from China to Uzbekistan. These are modern FD-2000 long-range air defence systems, renowned for their effectiveness¹⁷. This delivery was conditional on a reduction in the purchase price by

¹² "Resolute Support Mission (RSM) "placemat" (Key Facts and Figures)", nato.int, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, December 2019 (PDF)

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_12/20191202_2019-12-RSM-Placemat.pdf

¹³ Indeo, "The impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Central Asia: Building New relations in Reshaped Geopolitical Scenario", p. 136.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁵ Fozil Mashrab "New Uzbek President Courts Moscow During State Visit", Jamestown.org, The Jamestown Foundation (Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 14 Issue: 53, 24 April 2017), accessed on 10 February 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/new-uzbek-president-courts-moscow-state-visit/>

¹⁶ "EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council, 11 November 2019", Council of the EU, consilium.europa.eu, 11 November 2019, accessed on 28 February 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2019/11/11/uzbekistan/>

¹⁷ "China delivered HQ-9 air defense systems and Ylong-1 UAV to Turkmenistan", Army Recognition, armyrecognition.com, 3 February 2015, accessed on 18 February 2020,

China of natural gas from Uzbekistan¹⁸. This agreement seemed to be considered as a major step in Uzbek-Chinese security relations.

However, this delivery remains marginal in the global arms trade. Thus, although China is participating in the modernization of Uzbek armaments, it is far from exerting an insurmountable influence.

1.2.2 Russia: a recrudescence role?

In November 2016, Uzbekistan and Russia signed an agreement implementing a program of furniture of ammunitions and of tanks reparation by Russia. As a compensation, Uzbekistan engaged to purchases Russian helicopters¹⁹. However, this agreement seems to be an exception in the recent Uzbek history toward Russia.

In fact, Russia was for a long time a negative exception for Uzbek weapon trade. According to Jeremy Bender and Skye Gould from *Business Insider* in March 2015, “(...) the former Central Asian Soviet republics all purchased their arms solely from Moscow, with the curious exception of Uzbekistan”²⁰. Confirming this assessment, Mikhail Barabanov writes that “The previous Uzbek administration of Islam Karimov, who had ruled since 1991, tried to plot an independent foreign-policy course, making efforts to distance itself from Russia”²¹.

It is clear that China is slowly occupying a place that Russia didn't. What about the EU?

1.2.3 The EU: a little role

After the lift of the 2005 embargo in 2015²², EU's armament trade with Uzbekistan restarted. However, it remains very few. For example, only 5 million€ export of “arms and ammunition” were sent between 2015 and 2018 - including 0 million in 2016²³.

https://www.armyrecognition.com/february_2015_global_defense_security_news_uk/china_delivered_hq-9_air_defense_systems_and_ylong-1_uav_to_turkmenistan.html

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mashrab “New Uzbek President Courts Moscow During State Visit”

²⁰ Bender, Jeremy, Skye, Gould, “This map shows where the world's 3 biggest arms exporters are sending their weapons”, *Business Insider*, businessinsider.com, 20 March 2015, accessed on 18 February 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/where-the-world-buys-its-weapons-2015-3>

²¹ Barabanov, Mikhail, “Russian Arms Exports to Central Asia”, *Moscow Defense Brief*, bmpd.livejournal.com, 31 December 2018, accessed on 19 February 2020, <https://bmpd.livejournal.com/3478307.html>

²² “EU arms embargo on Uzbekistan”, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, sipri.org, 14 November 2015, accessed on 19 February 2020,

https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/eu_arms_embargoes/uzbekistan/uzbekistan

²³ “European Union, Trade in goods with Uzbekistan”, *European Commission Directorate-General for Trade*, 3 June 2019, p.7, accessed on 18 February 2020,

https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_uzbekistan_en.pdf

None of China, Russia nor the EU seem to have a pregnant neither monopolizing role in Uzbek security trade. Could the EU play a bigger role? Maybe. Perhaps, this role won't be limited to armament trade, but also to EU's general economic influence.

2 ECONOMY

In our case study, economy is declined into two aspects. First: the trade. Then, the investments in the country.

2.1 TRADE

2.1.1 China: A clear supremacy

China is now the first trade partner of Uzbekistan. In May 2017, 100 trade deals were signed between Uzbekistan and China, for a total value of 20 billion US Dollars²⁴. After these agreements, Uzbekistan external trade has grown up of a third (+ 29,4%)²⁵. Thus, China became the second client of Uzbek exportations after Switzerland, while receiving 24% of them – Switzerland receives 26,6% of them²⁶. In addition, Chine possesses the biggest part of Uzbek market with an amount of 3,9 billion US\$ representing 22,9% of it²⁷.

2.1.2 Russia: still on the podium

Russia also plays a huge role in Uzbek trade. In 2018, it was its 4th exportation client, collecting 10,9% of Uzbek exports (after Switzerland, China and Afghanistan – 11,5%)²⁸. Additionally, Russia possesses the second biggest part of Uzbek market, with an amount of 3,3 billion US\$, representing 19,3% of the total market.

²⁴ Indeo, "The impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Central Asia: Building New relations in Reshaped Geopolitical Scenario", p. 140.

²⁵ "Le commerce extérieur de l'Ouzbékistan en 2018", [tresor.economie.gouv.fr](https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Pays/UZ/le-commerce-exterieur-de-l-ouzbekistan-en-2018), Direction générale du Trésor, Economy and Finances Ministry of the French Republic, 23rd Septembre 2019, accessed on 7 February 2020, <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Pays/UZ/le-commerce-exterieur-de-l-ouzbekistan-en-2018>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

2.1.3 The EU: a very little position

On the contrary, European Union's member States only play a very little role in Uzbek trade. For example, in 2018, not a single of them were in the *top ten* of Uzbek export partners – the only European countries are Ukraine (1,2% of Uzbek exportations) and Switzerland²⁹, but they are not even members of the European Union.

Germany, with 808 million US\$ of possession, representing 4,7% of Uzbek market parts, is the biggest EU's country in these terms, but only the 6th in general. For example, Italy is 7th on this list, while France is 18th (with 0,8% of parts)³⁰.

Moreover, speaking of geopolitical relations, four out of the first five countries involved in Uzbek market are adversaries, rivals or at least concurrent of the EU. They are namely: China, Russia, North Korea (2,1 billion US\$, 12,7% of the total) and Turkey (951 million US\$, 5,5% of the total)³¹ – Kazakhstan occupies the 4th place with 1,6 billion US\$ representing 9,5%³² of total, but cannot reasonably be considered as a EU rival, neither an opponent or a concurrent³³.

All in all, the European Union has very few trade opportunities with Uzbekistan.

2.2 INVESTMENTS

2.2.1 China: transport and water infrastructures – between competition and sharing with the EU

Chinese investments in Uzbekistan focus and transport and water infrastructures. However, the EU also plays a role in these fields. China has a clear superiority in terms of transport, meanwhile it shares its influence with the EU when it comes to water infrastructures.

Indeed, in August 2017, the China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan railway project was ratified by Uzbekistan³⁴. It is estimated to cost between five and six billion euros³⁵. On the other

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ The European external action service website refers to a lot of programs and agreements concluded with Kazakhstan. "EU-Kazakhstan relations", [eeas.europa.eu](https://eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-external-action-service), European External Action Service, accessed on 7 February 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/4076/EU-Kazakhstan%20relations.

³⁴ Indeo, "The impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Central Asia: Building New relations in Reshaped Geopolitical Scenario", p. 141.

³⁵ Majorie van Leijen "Uzbekistan, China one step closer to building railway corridor via Kyrgyzstan", [railfreight.com](https://www.railfreight.com), 8 October 2018, accessed on 10 February 2020, <https://www.railfreight.com/beltandroad/2018/10/08/uzbekistan-china-one-step-closer-to-building-railway-corridor-via-kyrgyzstan/?gdpr=accept>

hand, EU's projects in transportation are a lot less ambitious. Launched in 1993, the TRACECA (Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor) program was esteemed to cost 170 million€ in 2012, spread into 80 projects³⁶. Thus, depending if we consider a cost of five or of six billion euros for the China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan railway, this last mobilizes 29,41 times to 35,29 times more money than TRACECA. Its largely overcomes EU's 19 years of investments. China shows a clear dominance in terms of transports.

On the contrary, its involvement in water infrastructures is not bigger than the EU's one. While China modernizes 300 water pumping stations³⁷, the EU's programme "Sustainable Management of Water Resources in Rural Areas in Uzbekistan" (providing of six Basin Irrigation System Authorities - BISA - provided with some new equipment)³⁸ concurrences China. Indeed, there are only 10 BISA in all Uzbekistan³⁹. So being involved in the investment in 60% (6 out of 10) BISAs, represents a big influence of the EU, which easily counterbalances the 300 Chinese water pumping stations modernization. Thus, the investment of both EU and China in Uzbek water infrastructures is possible: there are no blockages nor visible concurrence. We can talk of a double influence.

However, there are investment areas where neither China nor the EU have a big influence. In terms of energy and of industry, the most important actor remains Russia.

2.2.2 Russia: a strength in industry and in energy

Russia's biggest economic involvements in Uzbekistan are industry and energy. Even recently, the April 2017 agreement implemented an amount of 16 billion US\$ of Russian private investments in Uzbekistan in the fields of industry and of energy⁴⁰. In terms of energy, this agreement provides a massive Russian investment in Uzbek metallurgy, as well as a facilitation of Uzbek industry exports (textile and automobile)⁴¹. Regarding energy, Russia engaged to supply a half ton of oil to Uzbek refineries⁴².

³⁶ "EU support to the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor", European Commission, ec.europa.eu, 28 February 2012, accessed on 6 February 2020,

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_12_141

³⁷ Indeo, "The impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Central Asia: Building New relations in Reshaped Geopolitical Scenario", p. 141.

³⁸ "Sustainable Management of Water Resources in Rural Areas in Uzbekistan", eeas.europa.eu, European External Action Service, 20 January 2020, accessed on 6 February 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/central-asia/73204/modern-equipment-effective-water-use-uzbekistan_en

³⁹ Kakhramon, Djumaboev, Ahmad, Hamidov, Oytur, Anarbekov, Zafar, Gafurov *Collective Action in the Irrigation Sector of Uzbekistan: A Case Study of Water Consumers' Associations (WCAs) in the Karshi Steppe*, International Water Management Institute (Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2017), p. 1.

⁴⁰ Mashrab "New Uzbek President Courts Moscow During State Visit"

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

2.2.3 The EU: absolute advantage in sustainable development

The EU has chosen to follow a complete opposite way to Russia. There is almost not any trace of EU public – or public backing - investments in the areas of industry and energy. On the contrary, the EU invests in Agriculture, ecology and sustainable development, which has become EU's as almost absolute advantage⁴³.

Indeed, in addition to its investments in water infrastructures (which also takes place in the framework of the preservation of Aral Sea⁴⁴ and of some other seas, rivers and lakes⁴⁵), the EU has a lot of programmes aiming to improve Uzbek agriculture, its transition to a sustainable economy and the preservation / restauration of its environmental patrimony. For example, a 30 million€ subvention found for the “Sustainable management of water resources in the Ferghana Valley” programme is provided by the EU⁴⁶. In terms of agriculture, the project “Livestock sector development” will include a 15 million€ EU's donation⁴⁷.

Still, Russia might concurrences the EU in agriculture. According to Russian Ministry of Foreign affairs, agriculture is a “such crucial area⁴⁸” for Uzbek-Russian relations. Indeed, relying on a report of the French Ministry of Foreign affairs for the FAO and the EBRD⁴⁹, Russia possesses a lot of fruits (JV ‘Mevalar Kamalagi’, named as a “Key fruit processors⁵⁰”) and malt companies⁵¹, and 100% of Uzbek fruit exports are sent to both Russia and Europe⁵². Nevertheless, it seems like the EU has the highest development opportunities in Uzbek agriculture. In fact, even if the Uzbek agriculture technique is manly inherited from a Russian influence, all the machines (example of Ferghana Pivot, renovated in 1980 by the USSR⁵³) are now obsolete⁵⁴ and the EU invests to modernize them.

⁴³ Sir David Ricardo defines the “comparative advantage” of an economy in its book. Ricardo, David, *Principles of political economy and tax*, 1817, ed. Flammarion, 4 January 1999.

⁴⁴ „EIB und Usbekistan stellen Weichen für 100-Millionen-Euro-Investitionsprogramm zur Rettung des Aralsees“, eib.org, European Investment Bank, 24 September 2019, accessed on 11 February 2019, <https://www.eib.org/de/press/all/2019-226-eib-and-uzbekistan-take-first-steps-towards-a-eur-100-m-investment-program-for-the-recovery-of-the-aral-sea>

⁴⁵ “Узбекистан договорился о привлечении нескольких десятков миллионов евро от ЕС в рамках грантов”, spot.uz, Spot, 20 July 2018, accessed on 11 February 2020, https://www.spot.uz/ru/2018/06/20/eu/?utm_source=push&utm_medium=telegram.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “Dmitry Medvedev’s visit to the Republic of Uzbekistan”, government.ru, Russian Government, 30 May 2019, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/36864/>

⁴⁹ Hidier, Emmanuel, Franc de Ferrière, Jean-Jacques, Ergashey, Adkham, “Uzbekistan, Investment Opportunities in the, Agribusiness Sector”, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (FAO investment centre cooperation programme, ebrd report series n. 5), august 2003

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 33

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 36

⁵² Ibid, p. 51

⁵³ Ibid, p. 58

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 39

Finally, the EU has definitely comparative advantage in public investments in Uzbekistan. But none of these economical neither security influences could be achieved without agreements. Let's compare Chinese, Russian and Eu's diplomacies in Uzbekistan.

3 DIPLOMACY

Two main components are important for diplomacy. First: the visible and official dialogue. Then, the informal links between people (populations and individuals) - where Russia seems to have a monopole despite some fragilities.

3.1 OFFICIAL DIALOGUE

3.1.1 China: An incredibly quick and increasing growth

Since 2013 the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs relate five crucial meetings of highest rank that have been hold between Chinese and Uzbek authorities. Among which: meetings between Heads of State (8-10 September 2013: Xi Jing Ping went to Uzbekistan) and between governments (28 – 29 November 2013: Premier Li Keqiang attempted SCO Council in Uzbekistan; 30 – 31 October 2014: second Uzbek-Chinese intergovernmental cooperation committee – which led to 15 intergovernmental rounds between), meetings on crucial issues such as Security and Defence (29 April 2015: Chinese State councillor and the Minister of Public Security met the Secretary of Security Council of Uzbekistan; 22 September 2015: Central Military Commission met with Uzbek Defense State Councilor and Defense Minister), also leading to cultural cooperation (establishment of 2 Confucius institutes; establishment of Chinese academic language centres; Chinese city of Xi'an became sister city of Samarkand)⁵⁵.

Note that the years of each event are not explicitly mentioned on the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. We can therefore assume an annual chronology regarding the months of each event. Nevertheless, few cross-sources can definitively confirm these assumptions.

Moreover, the Chinese-Uzbek diplomacy doesn't limit to these meetings, and an innumerable amount of other activities could be cited for illustration purpose⁵⁶. Simultaneously, Russia seems to adopt the opposite strategy.

⁵⁵ "China and Uzbekistan", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, fmprc.gov.cn, accessed on 18 February 2020,

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zizg_663340/dozys_664276/gjlb_664280/3255_664392/

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, fmprc.gov.cn, accessed on 18 February 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zizg_663340/dozys_664276/gjlb_664280/3255_664392/3257_664396/default_4.shtml

3.1.2 Russia: a lack of bilateralism

A very simple indicator emphasises a lack of interests for bilateral discussion from Russia toward Uzbekistan. Between the 11 February 2020 and the 5 December 2016, on the official website of the Russian government⁵⁷, searching the public browser with key word “Uzbekistan”, only 4 publications (willingly excluding three articles about Mr. Medvedev getting greetings for its birthday) mention any kind of bilateral meeting between Russian and Uzbek authorities^{58 59 60 61}. On the contrary, 10 refers to other implications of Uzbekistan in the Russian diplomacy, including the SCO^{62 63 64 65}, the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council^{66 67} or other meetings^{68 69 70 71}. To sum up, fewer than 30% (28,57%) of Russian public actions concerning Uzbekistan during this period refers to any kind of bilateral dialog between the two countries. Russia clearly shows a preference for multilateralism toward a country which is supposed to be in the Russian post-soviet backyard.

⁵⁷ <http://government.ru/en/news/>, accessed on 11 February 2020

⁵⁸ “On 7 September, Dmitry Medvedev will meet with Prime Minister of Uzbekistan Abdulla Aripov in Moscow”, government.ru, Russian Government, 4 September 2018, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/33859/>

⁵⁹ “Dmitry Medvedev meets with President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev”, government.ru, Russian Government, 1 November 2019, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/38248/>

⁶⁰ “Dmitry Medvedev’s visit to the Republic of Uzbekistan”, government.ru, Russian Government, 30 May 2019, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/36864/>

⁶¹ “Dmitry Medvedev speaks over the phone with newly elected President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev”, government.ru, Russian Government, 5 December 2016, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/25533/>

⁶² “Meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of Government”, government.ru, Russian Government, 1 December 2017, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/30366/>

⁶³ “On 11-12 October, Dmitry Medvedev will take part in a meeting of Heads of Government Council of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Dushanbe”, government.ru, Russian Government, 4 October 2018, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/34193/>

⁶⁴ “The SCO Heads of Government Council Meeting”, government.ru, Russian Government, 12 October 2018, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/34306/>

⁶⁵ “The SCO Heads of Government Council Meeting”, government.ru, Russian Government, 2 November 2019, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/38252/>

⁶⁶ “Eurasian Intergovernmental Council meeting”, government.ru, Russian Government, 31 January 2020, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/38886/>

⁶⁷ “Eurasian Intergovernmental Council meeting”, government.ru, Russian Government, 25 October 2019, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/38189/>

⁶⁸ “Dmitry Medvedev sends greetings to the prime ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Abkhazia and South Ossetia for the upcoming 73rd anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War”, government.ru, Russian Government, 3 May 2018, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/32543/>

⁶⁹ “The 8th Moscow International Forum Open Innovations”, government.ru, Russian Government, 22 October 2019, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/38163/>

⁷⁰ “14th East Asia Summit”, government.ru, Russian Government, 4 November 2019, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/38272/>

⁷¹ “On 22 October, Dmitry Medvedev will take part in the Open Innovations 2019 Moscow International Forum”, government.ru, Russian Government, 21 November 2019, accessed on 11 February 2020, <http://government.ru/en/news/38158/>

Thus, this kind of non-exclusive relation could harm the dialogue between the two countries. If other powers don't especially implement more bilateral dialogues (with the same indicator, the European External Action Service's website, in its section "Europe and Central Asia"⁷², only three articles mentions Uzbekistan^{73 74 75}, out of 25 published or shared between the 27th of November 2019 and the 5th of February 2020) Russia still leaves the place for other actors to get involved. This is precisely what the EU (*cf. infra*) and China (*cf. supra*) are doing.

3.1.3 The EU: public investment as a tool for politics

The EU uses its public investments as a diplomatic tool for politic. Especially when it comes to inflex Uzbekistan toward EU's political values. For example, in exchange of the June 2018 90 million€ EU's donation to Uzbekistan - including 5 million€ for helping the country to integrate the World Trade Organisation⁷⁶ - Uzbekistan engaged to ratify 27 international conventions on human rights, working conditions and environmental protection⁷⁷. To sum up, EU's investments in Uzbekistan are a tool for the EU to "Europeanise" the country.

3.2 INFORMAL LINKS WITH RUSSIA: AT THE EDGE OF A CHANGE?

The influence of inter-personal relations between Russian oligarchs and Uzbek authorities has is as Russian specificity as proven phenomenon. For example, the 2016 agreement between Russia and Uzbekistan would certainly not have been possible without Russian businessmen closely bound with the Uzbek President, Mr. Mirzigaev, and the Russian President, Mr. Putin⁷⁸. They are strong private Russian ambassadors to hold sway over the country.

However, Russia cannot longer rely on its immigration in Uzbekistan. Indeed, the population of Russian people living in Uzbekistan more than halves since the fall of the Soviet

⁷² "Europe and Central Asia", [eeas.europa.eu](https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/europe-and-central-asia_en?page=4), European External Action Service, accessed on 5 February 2020

⁷³ "Green Central Asia Conference: partnering up for climate action in one of world's most vulnerable regions", [eeas.europa.eu](https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/europe-and-central-asia/73565/green-central-asia-conference-partnering-climate-action-one-world%E2%80%99s-most-vulnerable-regions_en), European External Action Service, 29 January 2020, accessed on 5 February 2020,

⁷⁴ Borell Fontelles, Josep, "EU and Central Asia: new opportunities to work together for a green future", [astanatimes.com](https://astanatimes.com/2020/01/eu-and-central-asia-new-opportunities-to-work-together-for-a-green-future/), The Astana Times: Bringing Kazakhstan to the World, 24 January 2020, accessed on 5 February 2020,

⁷⁵ "EU Regional Conference on Enhanced Integration for Prosperity in Central Asia kicked off today in Nur-Sultan", [eeas.europa.eu](https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/europe-and-central-asia/71162/eu-regional-conference-enhanced-integration-prosperity-central-asia-kicked-today-nur-sultan_en), European External Action Service, 28 January 2019, accessed on 5 February 2020,

⁷⁶ Spot, "Узбекистан договорился о привлечении нескольких десятков миллионов евро от ЕС в рамках грантов"

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Mashrab "New Uzbek President Courts Moscow During State Visit"

Union⁷⁹. There are nowadays (data from 2007), only 700 000 Russian people left people, representing 3% of Uzbek population⁸⁰ (for 1 653 000 in 1989, representing 8,3% of the population⁸¹).

The future of Russia in Uzbekistan is uncertain. It could either rely on its specific links with the country, or no longer find long-term support to maintain that influence. Thus, despite these Chinese and Russian influences, the EU exercises a diplomatic normative power on Uzbekistan.

⁷⁹ Peyrouse, Sébastien “Les flux migratoires des Russes entre Asie centrale et Russie”, journals.openedition.org, 2007, pp. 47 – 57, <https://journals.openedition.org/eps/1945>

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Conclusions

Fabio Indeo's statement that Uzbekistan is looking for a balance between China and Russia ("Uzbekistan's ability to look for a balance between Russia and China(...)"⁸²) is therefore erroneous, according to the criteria of security, economy and diplomacy. Indeed, it is clear that Uzbekistan refuses Russia but China in the area of security. Similarly, the relative loss of Russian influence in the Uzbek economy is glaring. Finally, Russian diplomacy, even if it preserves privileged ties with the country, seems clearly insufficient in comparison with the Chinese influence. In short, Uzbekistan is showing a mistrust of Russia and a shift towards China. So, what are the opportunities for the European Union in this reshaping?

Speaking of security, it seems that it does not stand a chance. Indeed, whether in terms of arms trade or alliances, the EU seems to face a market already monopolized by China and Russia.

In terms of economy, the situation is more contrasted. While trade between the EU and Uzbekistan is and will certainly remain low due to the Chinese and Russian market position, the Union could have opportunities in terms of development aid. It is influencing sectors in which it has a quasi-monopoly in comparison with Russia and China (for example, in agriculture) and could encourage private European investment in these sectors. It would, however, face a problem of accessibility to the Uzbek market due to the geographical distance mentioned in the introduction. In this context, the BRI could be an opportunity for the EU. Indeed, the construction of transport infrastructures by China in Central Asia and Uzbekistan could enable the EU to gain commercial access to the country - provided that this cohabitation with China does not turn into competition.

Finally, of these three criteria, none is more uncertain than the future of the EU's diplomatic influence in Uzbekistan. In terms of migration, for instance, the question of a substantial European immigration to Uzbekistan does not even arise - the country does not have sufficiently attractive characteristics for European people's immigration. As far as the traditional channels of diplomacy are concerned, the EU is entering a slippery slope. Indeed, while it has sufficient influence to get the country to ratify certain treaties and charters, it must be cautious about the Russian reaction to such methods. Indeed, in a context where Russian-European tensions are already exacerbated by the crisis in Ukraine, the Syrian crisis and others, the feeling of too much European influence in a country that Russia considers to be part of its backyard could lead to a redoubling of the latter's efforts to simply prevent every European access to Uzbekistan.

In short, whether towards Russia or towards China, the European Union must be seen as a partner and not a competitor. Indeed, it is not dominant in that country and cannot afford to act in any way that might appear aggressive towards its alter egos. So the EU's opportunities in Uzbekistan will be alongside China and Russia, through public support that could eventually lead to private investment.

⁸² Indeo, "The impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Central Asia: Building New relations in Reshaped Geopolitical Scenario", p. 149.

Finally, Uzbekistan cannot be considered as a typical case of this triangle of influence in Central Asia. This is by virtue of the fact that it presents resistance to these three powers (which is not the case for the other Central Asian states).

Indeed, regarding Russia, Uzbekistan is the only country that always categorically refused to be an integral part of Russia's zone of security influence - whether by permanently renouncing the integration of binding alliance, or by a broad diversification of its security partners. As for China, Uzbekistan seems to be more resistant than other Central Asian countries to the integration of the BRI project - hence, for example, the fact that Uzbekistan has long refused the China - Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan railway project while Kyrgyzstan has long been in favour of it.

Regarding its relations with the EU, Uzbekistan's exceptional status is specific because here, it seems that it's the EU which is resisting. Indeed, still considering the online publications of the European External Action Service, Uzbekistan is on the one hand abandoned in absolute terms (cf. "Diplomacy / official dialogue / Russia"), but also abandoned relatively to other countries⁸³.

All in all, Uzbekistan is an oddity of the Sino-Russian-European influence in Central Asia. This oddity gives a certain number of opportunities to the European Union, as well as it closes others.

⁸³ For example, in comparison to Kazakhstan. EEAS, "EU-Kazakhstan relations", www.eeas.europa.eu.