

ISSN 2532-845X

ASRIE

Association of Studies, Research and Internationalization in Eurasia and
Africa

GEOPOLITICAL REPORT

Volume 3/2019

FUTURE CHALLENGES AND ECONOMIC TRENDS IN ASIA



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The CICA, SCO and the China Factor in Central Asian Geopolitics

by Ambrish Dhaka*

Abstract in English

Central Asian security framework looks for transition into an economic opportunity. China factor has been an important catalyst in visualising such scenario. Central Asian states were weak authoritarian states that faced numerous multi-scalar challenges. The birth of CICA signified the determination of the Central Asian states not to allow themselves victims of great power geopolitics. The rise of SCO was essentially a Chinese concern on its western periphery but soon found takers of the idea as it harboured security of Greater Central Asia. The economic opportunities present in Central Asia allowed a mutual win-win situation for rising China to strike a deal with Central Asian states that guaranteed them political and economic security. This reciprocal relationship benefited China in its restive province of Xinjiang. The Belt and Road strategy reveals ample imprints of China-Central Asia cooperation in the past. Most of the Central Asian economies have now aligned with this strategy. The organisations of CICA and SCO, which essentially began as a multi-tiered security framework now head towards an economic path. The idea of being landlocked appears to transform into major economic hub across Europe-Asian trade regime. The Central Asian States through CICA and SCO appear to signify alternative models of globalisation.

Keywords: CICA, SCO, China, Central Asia, geopolitics, geoeconomics

Abstract in Italiano

Il quadro di sicurezza dell'Asia Centrale sta vedendo il passaggio dalla transizione all'opportunità economica e la Cina è un importante catalizzatore in questa direzione. I paesi dell'Asia Centrale erano agli inizi dei deboli stati autoritari impegnati nell'affrontare sfide in diversi ambiti e così la nascita della CICA significò per loro la possibilità di non divenire vittime della geopolitica delle grandi potenze. La SCO venne creata inizialmente dalla preoccupazione cinese di controllare la propria periferia occidentale, ma ben presto trovò ulteriori sostenitori visto che tale organizzazione prevedeva il miglioramento della sicurezza in Asia Centrale. La maggiore sicurezza

centroasiatica e le opportunità economiche presenti nella regione hanno creato una situazione vantaggiosa per la crescita della Cina che attraverso la firma di accordi con ognuno degli stati centroasiatici ne ha garantito sicurezza e sviluppo economico assicurandosi al contempo vantaggi tattici nella difficile provincia dello Xinjiang. La Belt and Road Initiative permette una intensa cooperazione Cina – Asia Centrale e in effetti la maggior parte delle economie centroasiatiche si sono allineate con questa strategia. Le organizzazioni CICA e SCO, create inizialmente per mantenere la sicurezza a più livelli, si stanno orientando ora verso un percorso maggiormente economico e pian piano si sta delineando l'idea che la regione centroasiatica possa divenire uno dei maggiori *hub* per il commercio euroasiatico. In questa ottica, gli stati dell'Asia Centrale attraverso CICA e SCO possono divenire dei modelli alternativi di globalizzazione.

Parole chiave: CICA, SCO, Cina, Asia Centrale, geoeconomia, geopolitica

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Introduction

The June 2019 witnessed hosting of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) meet in Bishkek and Dushanbe respectively. The CICA was an initiative of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1992 that has been focussing on the security of Asian states through mutual consensus and shared concerns on terrorism, narcotics, and small arms proliferations. The SCO which came later in 2001 was an offspring of Shanghai-5 created to build military trust between the two Eurasian giants, Russia, China, and the 3 Central Asian 'stans' bordering China, namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. China proposed the 4 principles towards the Central Asian states of 1) peaceful coexistence and good neighbourliness, 2) mutually beneficial cooperation, 3) non-interference, and 4) respect for each other's sovereignty (Yuan, 2010). Central Asia shares with China more than 3,000 kilometres of border, but more than

that, it has a geo-cultural continuum that extends well into Chinese province of Xinjiang. The geo-cultural continuum across borders makes states vulnerable to great power geopolitics. Central Asia has a legacy of vulnerability towards the great power rivalry since the 19th century. The CICA appeared in the aftermath of the collapse of Soviet Union as an external safeguard to the Central Asian states from the great power *buzkashi*. The Almaty Act of CICA states that the, “determination to form in Asia a common and indivisible area of security, where all states peacefully co-exist, and their peoples live in conditions of peace, freedom and prosperity”. It has a very significant element in the act, which states, “direct or indirect threat or use of force in violation of the UN Charter and international law against the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of the states...and offensive strategic doctrines pose threats to regional and international peace” (CICA, 2002). This reflects upon the extra-ordinary leadership of Kazakhstan at the behest of the Central Asian states in reaching out to global community, especially, the UN for de-monopolising the Eurasian hemisphere. China has been an important member of the CICA forum, but it has a different approach towards regional security consensus of the CICA. China has focussed more on the border relations and cross-border cooperation with its Central Asian neighbours rather to be an advocate for a larger Pan-Asian security framework. The CICA does not have an institutional structure, which explains why China prefers Russia to be a significant partner for any larger security framework of the Eurasian scale. The post-Cold War order had raised fears among ‘not so democratic’ Central Asian governments of a possible rise of resistance fomented by the Western democracies and capital. The Central Asian republics, Russia and China believed that ethno-religious sentiments might destabilise the border regions allowing the western states to secure geopolitical foothold. The SCO represents a more concrete step in focussing towards such threats. The SCO clearly targets the three evils of religious extremism, terrorism, and separatism. The SCO is been misconstrued as an ‘Asian NATO’ as it does not have a military command structure, but only runs a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent. The security cooperation is been extended to strengthen economic cooperation in successive SCO meetings. The SCO defines a shared Asian future based on mutual trust,

benefit, parity, consensus among member states representing diverse civilisation, also known as the Shanghai spirit (Xinhuanet, 2018). The SCO and CICA have many common goals which has prompted scepticism that China-led SCO might take over control of CICA affairs (Stuenkel, 2016). The concentric relation between SCO members and CICA is possible, but it basically depends on how China and Russia reshape the Eurasian geopolitical order in response to the Western challenges as evident in the Middle East or Pacific. The SCO and CICA promote multilateralism, which challenges the US hegemony and the idea of unipolar world. One important advantage of plural engagements of Asian countries is to hedge the path of economic growth from regional contradictions. The diversity among Asians in terms of political and social organisation simply prevents the convergence of all national interests under one big framework. The CICA and SCO complement each other by accommodating these diversities. The CICA's official language is English, which reveals its effort to reach out to the Asian diversities and a common bridge with the international organisation, most importantly, the United Nations. The CICA has greater degree of proximity with the UN organisations, while the SCO has preferred an independent growth. Over the years, the CICA seems to be following into the footsteps of SCO with China encouraging more non-governmental business and economic interactions under the CICA framework. The transformation of regional organisations from security building measures into economic cooperation units are a new impetuous of globalisation that has strong imprint of China's push for an alternative model of globalisation. It has found takers in most of the regions, as political security amongst the states has been the first jeopardy in the Western model of globalisation. The economic globalisation with uniformitarianism has contributed to the exacerbation of economic disadvantages. It has come to full circle with its proponents now facing the same situation as evident from the US-China trade war. This paper examines the Central Asian geopolitics that swings like a pendulum between political security and economic integration on the one hand and the increasing influence of great powers that affects its cohesiveness. The paper argues that central Asian states have the essential priority of political security due their geopolitical

disposition vis-a-vis south and west Asia that has global levers affecting the region's economic opportunities.

The Central Asian Geopolitics

Central Asian security question has been a multi-scalar ontology of the Heartland geopolitics. The micro-scalar concerns address to the question of maintaining the political stability and economic cooperation among the Central Asian States (CASs). The macro-scale represents the quest for a Europe-Asia order that represent the great power relations. It became clear in the aftermath of 9/11 that terrorism affects both the small states and super powers alike and the reign of terror brings cosmopolitan cities and remote and sparsely populated mountains and deserts in a single bind. Central Asian states showed greater degree of vulnerability being in neighbourhood to vast swathe of territory known as the 'Af-Pak'. The terror sanctuaries created by Al-Qaeda brought several Central Asian insurgent groups and Taliban under a common framework. Central Asia has a strong connection between drug routes and insurgent groups and often its political elites are found in proximity to these operatives (Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2019). The threat increases manifold due to Afghanistan, the world's largest supplier of opiates and sustains small arms groups. The legacy of anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan paved for narco-economy in Afghanistan and its impact on post-cold war Central Asia. There is another dimension to the narco-terrorism prevalent in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The events leading to 9/11 and its aftermath raised the spectre of religious extremism espoused by Al-Qaeda who founded sanctuaries in the region. The connection between the narco-economy and terrorism could not be attested by anything else than the sustained resistance of Taliban against the NATO forces in Afghanistan. The connection between the narco-economy and religious fundamentalism fuelled low-intensity warfare in Central Asia, especially in Tajikistan. The insurgent groups sought legitimacy in the name of Islam to justify their Salafist *jihād* against the *takfirist* governments in the region. This created some confusing trends in Central Asia as the Salafists are staunch opponents to a particular creed of Islam, namely *Sufism*, the culture of revering the saints and visiting their tombs. The

Central Asian states have historically been a great seat of Sufi orders, especially, the *Naqshbandi* order. A convoluted approach striking the compromise between the Middle East Islamic ideologies and the Central Asian traditions emerged in the form of *Hizb-ut Tahrir al-Islami*. The idea of establishing a Caliphate is central to its aims and propaganda, which has brought numerous Central Asian groups closer to Arab jihadists. Their confrontation with the West essentially rests on challenging the values of democracy, pluralism, human rights, and capitalist market. Most of their moralist position on these cardinal issues allows getting the Muslim youth from a disadvantaged section of society to follow the path of confrontation and radicalism. The rise of Tahrirists in Central Asia is attributed to such socio-economic conditions in Central Asia in the aftermath of the break-up of the USSR (Naumkin, 2005).

The great powers, namely, the US, China and Russia influenced the post-Soviet Central Asian region that reminds of the great game of 19th century between Great Britain and Tsarist Russia. Three important trends appeared in Central Asian region after the collapse of the USSR in the region. Central Asian vulnerabilities had Russia re-engaging with the region to tackle its major security threats from the Caucasus. China too got alarmed with the possible spill over effects in Xinjiang. This was supercharged with the US making an extra-ordinary effort to secure Central Asian natural gas reserves through Afghanistan during the early years of Taliban rule (Rashid, 2002). A mix of oil geopolitics, narco-economy, terrorism, religious radicalism, and the great power rivalries proved a big nemesis for the Central Asian republics. The insecurity gripped the region in the aftermath of 9/11 when Afghanistan was the focus of NATO operations and the Central Asian republics faced unprecedented domestic and external challenges. The Central Asian political elites felt threatened due to sponsor of western models of governance that descended in the form of colour revolutions elsewhere. It gave a clear-cut idea about the great power competition that would stay for long until the Central Asian states gather the required strength to remain out of its purview. Central Asian states being a landlocked region have a difficult choice on abdicating their history and geography. Russia and China constitute the twin-periphery of a big Eurasian amphitheatre wherein Central Asia lays at its heart.

Central Asian polity rests on patrimonialism that found itself at odds with the idea of democracy as practiced in the West. An important instrument of control is the restriction of access to foreign funds by opposition groups. This has allowed maintaining tight grip over power by the traditional elite in Central Asian republics. Most of the Central Asian governments are a mix of democracy and patrimony. The leading families have a control over democratic choice and power transition calibrated to maintaining their hold. The patrimony has safeguarded the legacy of Soviet period and has carried loyalty structures into electoral politics of the present times. There has been strong connection between the foreign assistance and popular unrest in Central Asian republics. This helped Uzbekistan to avoid the spill over of Tajik civil war that threatened to Talibanize entire Central Asia (Akbarzadeh, 2013). Russia's return to Central Asia signified with the 2010 Kyrgyz uprising that was a sort of a payback to the western powers who supported the 2005 regime change. Kyrgyzstan has been the litmus test of great power rivalry between the US and Russia. Central Asian leaders have quickly reconciled their differences with Russia under the duress of political seesaw between Russia and the West. The US-led West's behaviour towards the monopoly regimes such as Libya, Iraq, Syria and Iran convinced them of their impending fate unless they are guaranteed protection by the Russia under Putin (Denoon, 2015).

China's entry in the Eurasian chessboard happened after the collapse of the USSR. However, China has been viewed as a century old threat to the region by the Mackinder's school of geopolitics. China had a grave concern in post-Soviet Eurasia due to the vast Turkic population spread in continuum from Xinjiang to the Central Asian states. China had twin needs of controlling the restive Uyghur population as well as to secure an access to Central Asian oil and gas reserves. China has maintained its idea of 'peaceful rise' to tackle both the needs rooted in the region. It got a lease of life in the aftermath of 9/11 when the actions against Turkic Islamists taken to full swing. Western scholars like Stephen Blank have underestimated China's rise in Central Asia and its potential for 'vassalisation' (Clarke, 2011). China aims at translating Xinjiang into the Turkic heartland for the Central Asian states and Turkic communities beyond. It corroborated rising trade with Turkmenistan, which became an important partner of

China in the early years of post-Soviet Central Asian states. It allocated blocs for oil and gas exploration to China in the Caspian Sea. The Chinese company Sinopec invested heavily in Shatlyk gas fields. China entered into railways, telecommunications and textile sector of Turkmenistan and it became a model imprint for expansion in Central Asia (Šir & Horák, 2008). The major development arrived with the commencement of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline, which became a template for cooperation among the Central Asian states to seek advantage with China's economic drive under its Great Western Development programme. This created a geopolitical vector in pipeline geopolitics of Central Asian energy resources and the Western hemisphere saw it as a great shift of Central Asian states towards China.

The Western democracies engaged Central Asia with the aim of introducing the values and norms that are common to the universal standards in their hemisphere. The most notable of them is the idea of democracy and free market economy. The ontology could be traced to the five principles of the US policy towards the former Soviet states outlined by former Secretary of the State James Baker as 1) democratic principles, 2) territorial integrity, 3) electoral system of governance, 4) human rights, and 5) commitment towards international law (Rumer et al., 2007). This remained a post-9/11 goal too as the Bush doctrine of 1) promoting democracy, 2) free market reforms, 3) diversification of energy supply, 4) winning the War on Terror assert the continuity of policy (Bush, 2009). In 1992, the US Congress passed the bill named Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets Support (FSA) Act (Omelicheva, 2015). The FSA Act formalised the US assistance for democratisation and economic reforms in Central Asia. The 9/11 was a setback for the democratic reforms in Central Asia. Most of the authoritarian governments of the region received active support and financial aid from the US and the western agencies in coordinating fight against Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan irrespective of their political model. The US has been working with the authoritarian regimes in the sectors of defence and security often ignoring the dismal human rights record of Central Asian rulers.

Geoeconomics Of Regional Cooperation

Central Asian republics have been singly qualified as a region with rich natural resources and sparse population that offers great opportunity for economic linkages with the rest of the world. However, the landlocked region has severe constraints in engaging with the major maritime economies due to long standing geopolitical tussles in the periphery. It paved way for the emergence of China as a major trading partner for these countries. The figures (Fig. A, B, C and D) are the heatmap generated from the UNCTAD Statistics data for major export-import partners of the Central Asian economies and their principal trading commodities (UNCTADstat, 2019). The study of UNCTAD data for a period of 2005-2016 reveals China and Russia together have been the leading source of imports for all the Central Asian economies.

Germany is the third largest exporter to Kazakhstan, who in turn is also the third largest exporter to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Turkmenistan has major imports from Turkey and is followed by Russia and China; Ukraine being another significant exporter. The situation for exports is no different with China, Russia seen as the top destination; though Italy leads as major importer of goods from Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan exports primarily to Kazakhstan and Russia and sparingly to Switzerland, UAE, and Turkey. Tajikistan too finds Russia and China as its major exports destination, but Turkey is ahead of them and Iran and Italy are also important importers of Tajik goods. Turkmenistan as an exporter stands in exception to other Central Asian republics, as Ukraine is the leading importer followed by Turkey, Italy, and Iran. Nevertheless, of late there has been a sudden detour towards the east with China emerging the lead partner particularly after 2009 with commissioning of the Central Asia-China natural gas pipeline. Chinese scholars have seen this as China's most successful energy security venture in Central Asia. Almost all of the China's natural gas imports from Central Asia is through pipelines and the Turkmen gas contributes to nearly half of its total gas imports (Sakwa, 2018).

Uzbekistan exports primarily to Russia and China, and then followed by Turkey and Kazakhstan. An interesting trend is visible from the exports that there has been a

consolidation of exports basket for most of the Central Asia republics as far as their trade with China is concerned. If one takes the case of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, then these primarily export cotton and natural gas to China. Tajikistan has no gas, so it exports aluminium, cotton, and metal ores to China. Kyrgyzstan has strong animal husbandry and mainly exports leather, wool, fur skins and hides with little metal ores to China. However, if one looks at the imports basket then China provides them practically most of their consumption needs. Most of the apparels and footwear in Central Asia are from China, and articles made of plastic and household electric equipment are Chinese too. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have changed their composition in favour of engineering goods and telecommunication goods since 2010 onwards. Turkmenistan is even more frugal and hardly imports any noticeable share of consumer goods from China. It imports fundamentally industrial goods related to engineering, automobile, telecommunications, railways, and heating plants. China exports tea and mate to most of the Central Asian republics. A crucial element of Central Asian trade is the export of nuclear and radioactive minerals. Kazakh Company Kazatom is rated as the world's fourth largest company handling mining of nuclear fuels. Kazakhstan holds nearly 1.6 million tonnes of uranium, perhaps world's second largest (Kassenova, 2010). The possession of rich uranium sites near conflict region such as Afghanistan-Pakistan posed many security challenges for the Central Asian states. The EU-Kyrgyzstan security programme focussed on rehabilitation of uranium mining sites such as Min-Kush in central Naryn province (Muzalevsky, 2013). China has an ambitious nuclear power generation plan that fits well into Central Asian nuclear mineral development strategy. China's demand for uranium is likely to reach 24,000 tonnes in 2030 (Stanway & Chen, 2016).

The mature growth of trade between Central Asian economies and China has been a precursor to the Belt and Road strategy. The regional connectivity in Central Asia is bound to boost trade along Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and its mega-form as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Central Asia would connect with Iran and West Asia through one of the corridors and through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) via Pakistan to maritime trade linkages. It would also consolidate their

connectivity to Europe via West Asia and Russia. The issue of connectivity is significant for the landlocked Central Asian states. Uzbekistan does not share a direct border with none of the big powers of Eurasia, Russia and China, but has very important position in extending the connectivity to Afghanistan and South Asia through the Ferghana valley. China is a major investor in Uzbekistan's transport infrastructure. It is building the Pap-Angren railway, which would connect Chinese town of Kashgar to Central Asian town of Osh and further through Ferghana valley to westwards Iran, Turkey via Afghanistan (Zhang et al., 2018). China has invested almost \$31 billion in Central Asian republics during 2005-2014. China is also a significant contributor to the individual national development strategies of these republics. The Kazakh programme of "Road to Brightness", Tajik programme of "Energy, Transport and Food", and Turkmenistan's "Strong and Happiness Era" are finding their common alignment with One Belt One Road objectives (Wei et al., 2016). Of recent, Pakistan's national economic revival seems to be hinging heavily on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The reorientation of national economies along corridors has great significance for future growth of Pan Asian economic network for which China's BRI would be a fulcrum raising tangible flow of goods and influences. A hallmark of BRI is the High-Speed Railway (HSR) System that would be a game changer across vast Euro-Asian continent. China is already testing a 600 kmph magnetic-levitation train with a prototype unveiled in the eastern city of Qingdao (Xinhuanet, 2019). Central Asia is a vast territory with sparsely populated settlement and the HSR system would be a great impetus for regional integration of Central Asia and its neighbours. Russia in comparison to China has focussed more on affordable aviation to increase connectivity across former Soviet republics, the nature of relationship is quite different in terms of networking and costs for the two modes and it affects the commerce and trade accordingly. Air transport has a strong dependence on hierarchy than railways that cuts horizontally across hierarchies and has its own geopolitical estimates and repercussions.

Conclusion

The centrality of China in reaching common goals of uplifting of Central Asian economies is well beyond contest. China is the most complete economy of the world. It has industries of all categories as classified by the United Nations; maybe the only country in the world. Its GDP increased at a rate of 8 percent during 1979-2012 when world grew at a rate of 3 percent. China is the world's largest trading economy of tangible goods and is the biggest trading partner for more than 2/3rd countries of the world (Lei, 2018). An important aspect of China's heavy investment in these republics is the relative political stability and better security situation even though they share an Afghan neighbourhood. This has helped in creation of transport network and pipelines, which could have been a soft target in a low intensity warfare arising from domestic turbulence. Central Asian republics have numerous ethnic groups that are vulnerable to domestic and external influences. China in Central Asia has advocated collective guard against the three evils of extremism, separatism and terrorism, and economically helps them tackle the three evils of poverty, underdevelopment and economic growth. The geopolitics of Central Asia remains well entrenched into great power geopolitics. Multiple layers of security cover the region and economic organisations acting as a smoke screen against the vulnerabilities of great power geopolitics.

The CICA and the SCO are the two pivotal bodies that are the earliest and an indication of the growing influence of Central Asian states in Eurasian geopolitics. The two organisations connect the Central Asian region with the great powers in the neighbourhood and notably, the United Nations. The CICA and SCO have become supporting arms of China's BRI in response to latter's massive investments in Central Asia. The political economy of BRI can act as a conveyor belt of transmuting the regional tensions and conflicts that involves multiple scales of power relations affecting small and big states. The idea is more relevant as CICA was essentially the Central Asian initiative that allowed non-polar view of regional politics, a hiatus from the great power geopolitics. The SCO would remain under the Chinese inertia given its ontology since Shanghai-5. Though, the inclusion of India, Pakistan and a possibility of Iran joining

make it a wider consultative group focussing on security challenges. The Central Asian States have increased their role in addressing the Afghanistan situation under a wider SCO and CICA framework. It would be an opportunity for them to lead the path for finding stability in Afghanistan and the larger region. This will allow them to increase their economic cooperation with South Asian states that stand as the next big opportunity for them after China and resuscitate their centrality in larger integration of Asian economies.

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Fig A. Central Asia's Leading Imports Partners

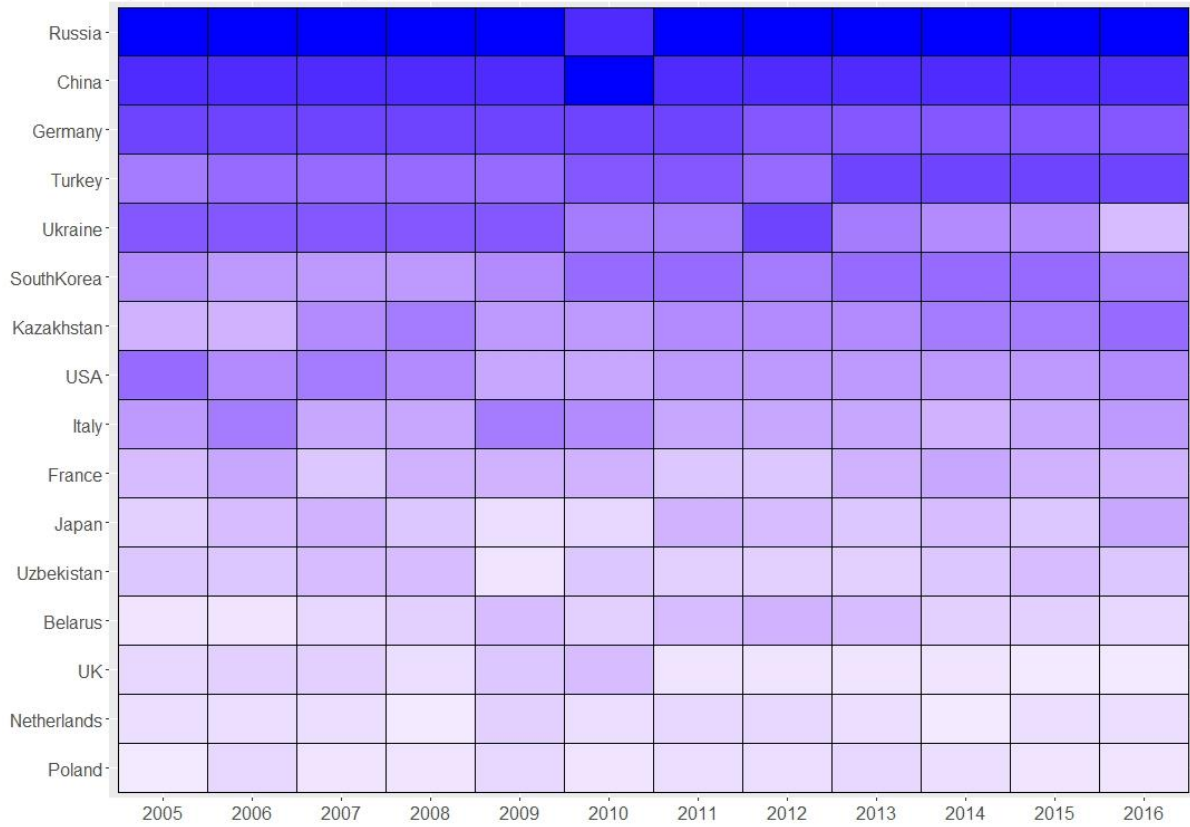


Fig B. Central Asia's Leading Exports Partners

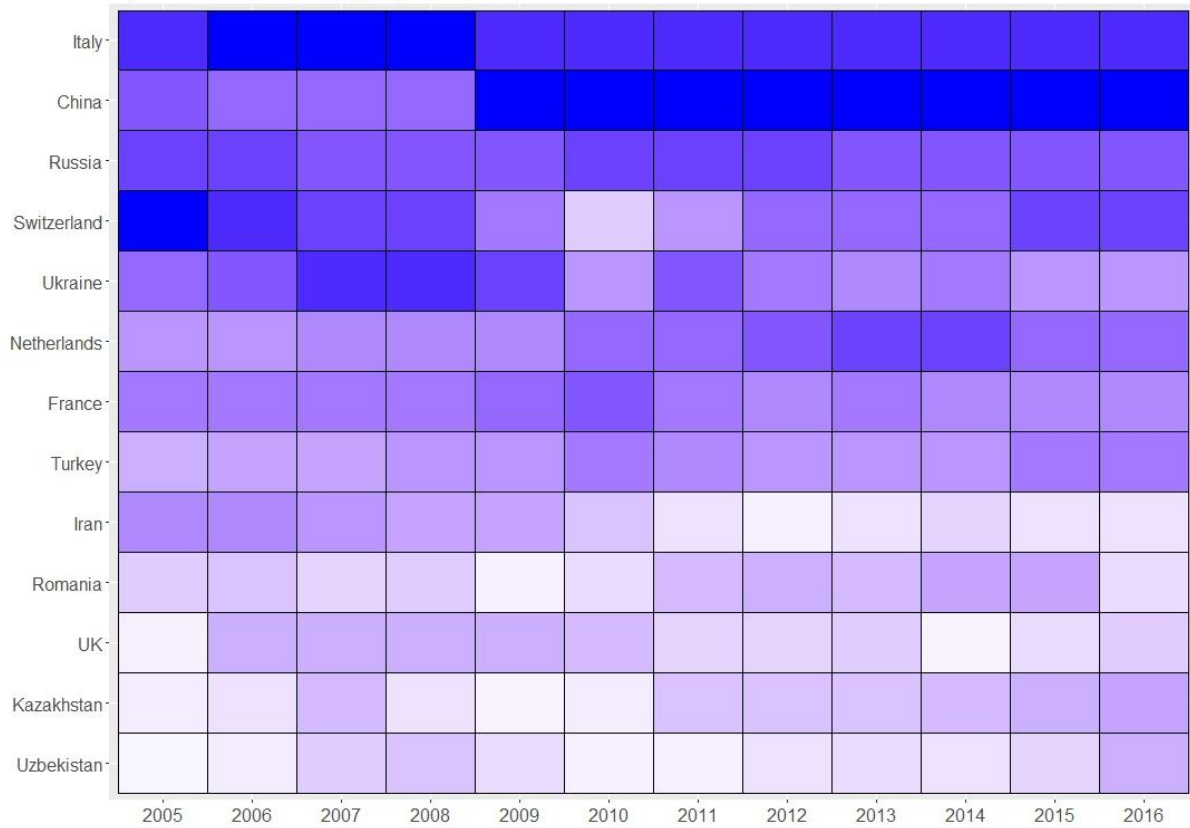


Fig C. Central Asia's Leading Imports

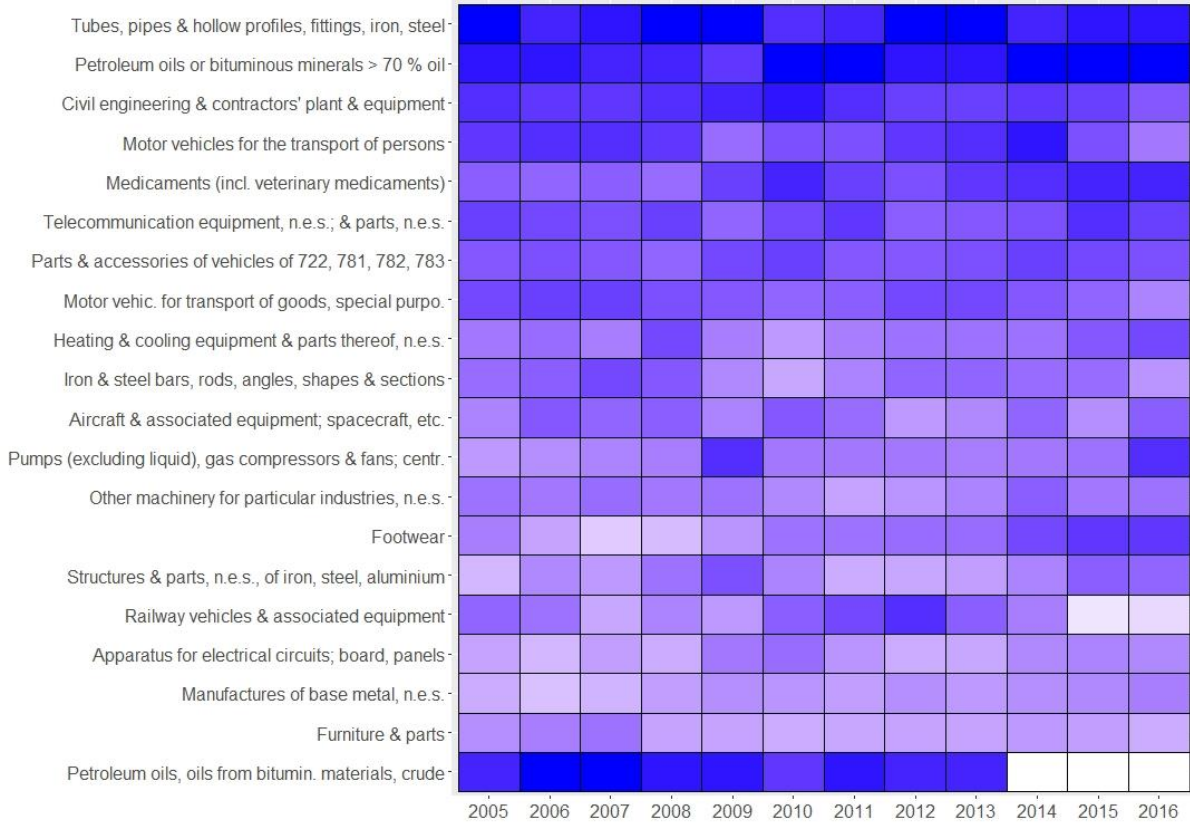


Fig D. Central Asia's Leading exports

