

CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS, THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND THE SINO-KAZAKH WATER AGREEMENTS: COOPERATION AND STAGNATION

GEOPOLÍTICA CRÍTICA, A ORGANIZAÇÃO DE COOPERAÇÃO DE XANGAIE OS ACORDOS HÍDRICOS SINO-CAZAQUES: COOPERAÇÃO E ESTAGNAÇÃO

*Lucas Gualberto do Nascimento*¹

Abstract: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), previously known as the Shanghai Five, was formed in June 2001 as a security engagement organization. It is a highly influential organization in the Eurasian continent, and most Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan included - are members of SCO, as well as China.

In recent years, the Chinese water diplomacy towards Kazakhstan has advanced in different agreements that are shaping the patterns of water security in Central Asia. The Chinese strategic interest in the development of the scope of the SCO in this region has made Kazakh transboundary water issues to advance in negotiations. However, these agreements have been made in a bilateral scheme, which is considered relatively unequal towards Kazakh interests; therefore, in spite of the Kazakh efforts, the SCO so far has not turned into a water security organization.

This paper is going to analyze the current trends in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as well as the Sino-Kazakh cooperation platform, especially regarding transboundary water resources. From the perspective of the critical geopolitics scholarship and its considerations regarding the concepts of hegemony and zones of influence, the idea that the Sino-Kazakh cooperation has advanced following Chinese interests is going to be defended. In conclusion, this paper states that due to the lack of interest regarding Chinese water diplomacy, and despite of Kazakh efforts, the SCO is not in the near future launching great initiatives regarding water security in the region, reinforcing the Chinese diplomacy of bilateral water agreements.

Keywords: Critical geopolitics; Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); Chinese foreign policy; Central Asia

Resumo: A Organização de Cooperação de Xangai (OCX), anteriormente conhecida como *Shanghai Five*, foi formada em junho de 2001 como uma organização de engajamento em segurança. É uma organização altamente influente no continente eurasiático, e a maioria dos países da Ásia Central - incluindo o Cazaquistão - são membros da OCX, bem como a China. Nos últimos anos, a diplomacia hídrica chinesa em relação ao Cazaquistão avançou em diferentes acordos, os quais estão moldando os padrões de segurança hídrica na Ásia Central. O interesse estratégico chinês no desenvolvimento do escopo da OCX nesta região fez com que as questões hídricas transfronteiriças cazaques avançassem em negociações. No entanto, tais acordos foram feitos em um

¹ Mestrando em Ciências Sociais - Relações Internacionais e Desenvolvimento, na Universidade Estadual Paulista (Unesp), Marília. Bacharel em Relações Internacionais, pela Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2930-2956>

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esquema bilateral, que é considerado relativamente desigual em para os interesses do Cazaquistão; portanto, apesar dos esforços cazaques, a OCX até o momento não se transformou em uma organização de segurança hídrica. Este artigo analisará as tendências atuais da Organização de Cooperação de Xangai, bem como a plataforma de cooperação sino-cazaque, especialmente em relação aos recursos hídricos transfronteiriços. A partir da perspectiva dos estudos geopolíticos críticos e suas considerações sobre os conceitos de hegemonia e zonas de influência, a ideia de que a cooperação sino-cazaque avançou após os interesses chineses será defendida. Em conclusão, este artigo afirma que, devido à falta de interesse da diplomacia hídrica chinesa, e apesar dos esforços do Cazaquistão, a OCX não está lançando grandes iniciativas em relação à segurança da água na região, reforçando a diplomacia chinesa de acordos hídricos bilaterais.

Palavras-chave: Geopolítica crítica; Organização de Cooperação de Xangai (OCX); Política externa chinesa; Ásia Central

1 THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: CURRENT TRENDS

Since the end of the Cold War, in the 1990s, there has been a growing interest of the Russian and Chinese states to overcome the institutions of the previous bipolar conflict, which due to bipolar state-alliance forms of cooperation, do not correspond effectively to new security concerns. Multilateral initiatives from both states culminated in the example of the foundation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in 2001, product of the group of countries known as the “Shanghai Five”: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. According to Lanteigne (2018, pp. 125-126), the signatories agreed to cooperate in shared security concerns, and the organization rapidly became a mechanism of strategic concern for China, Russia, and Central Asia. Barsky (2012) calls this strategy an “umbrella”, under the

“[...] spirit of centripetal tendencies, which prevailed by the end of 1990s Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have opened above them an ‘umbrella’ under which each member of this new project felt itself more comfortable, got an opportunity to defend its and promote common regional interests with joined efforts.”

The SCO, especially after the events of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, turned its strategy against the so-called “three evils” of Central Asia: terrorism, extremism, and separatism, which became to be seen as primary issues instead of regional border concerns (CHUNG, 2004, pp.990-991; In: Lanteigne, 2018, p. 126). This conjuncture was formed with the expansion of the organization, which joined Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia as observers throughout the decade of the 2000s; Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey joined as dialogue partners; and India and Pakistan as the last full members, in 2017. This expansion through Eurasia, which began with a crucial Sino-Russian coordination, transformed the organization in one of the most powerful and influential worldwide. Next, the table 1 illustrates the expansion of the SCO in Eurasia throughout two decades of the foundation of the Shanghai Five.

Table 7.1 From the Shanghai Five to the SCO

<i>Shanghai Five 1996–2001</i>	<i>Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2001–present</i>		
<i>Members</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Observers</i>	<i>Dialogue partners</i>
China	China	Afghanistan	Armenia
Kazakhstan	India	Belarus	Azerbaijan
Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan	Iran	Cambodia
Russian Federation	Kyrgyzstan	Mongolia	Nepal
Tajikistan	Pakistan		Sri Lanka
	Russian Federation		Turkey
	Tajikistan		
	Uzbekistan		

Table 1: Since the foundation of the Shanghai Five group, in 1996, this cooperation movement, firstly aimed at discussing regional security issues, has evolved and culminated in the foundation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Currently, the organization is defined as a crucial alliance in the Asia-Pacific.

Source: LANTEIGNE, 2018, p.123

Primarily founded to be a security-focused organization, the SCO, after its expansion, initiated economic developments in its interests regarding Central Asia. According to Saha (2014),

“Since Xi became president, Russia and China have been strengthening ties with joint naval exercises, economic roundtables and a US\$400 billion gas deal, all taking place in first quarter of 2014. Expanding the SCO is imperative to securing the Central Asian gas pipelines, many of which run through Chinese territory and are threatened by insurgencies that compromise their construction.”

The Chinese economic interest in this region is shaping the activities of the SCO towards a stronger economic approach to regional security, in order to raise opportunities of investment. However, a multilateral “Sino-Russian condominium” in Central Asia has challenges arising from different perspectives and power interests. As Gabuev (2017) affirms, the promotion of a Free Trade Area (FTA) and the creation of a regional development bank were opposed by Russia, as “the Kremlin was worried that China would use the SCO FTA and the development bank to promote its own agenda and to buy influence in Central Asia at Russia’s expense.”

Therefore, the Russian resistance to cooperate in multilateral economic efforts within the SCO, in a move to promote its own economic union, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), engaged China in bilateral agreements with Central Asian countries, without the Russian pressure to maintain a zone of influence in the post-Soviet region.

The current trends of the SCO activities evidence a great expansion of the institution, which highlights its importance, but raises new political-economic challenges. In 2017, India and Pakistan were accepted as full members of the organization, supported

by Russia and China respectively. As the Indian state is highly critical of the Sino-Pakistani “all-weather friendship”, other Chinese economic integrational efforts, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), may arise tensions in the SCO. As a full member of the organization, India is able to protest against projects that do not favor all participants, even though its participation is highly desirable. As Grossman (2017) affirms,

“India’s entry into the SCO, however, could put Beijing in the awkward position of highlighting the organization’s value, while increasingly working around or outside of it. Outright failure of the SCO would be unacceptable for China because of its central role in establishing the forum.”

In fact, there is a contradiction in the functionality terms of the SCO; as its enlargement is noticeable, and therefore its prestige, political challenges and rivalry tensions simultaneously threaten the effectiveness of the organizational objectives. Therefore, bilateral relations, such as the Sino-Kazakh, are a trend regarding Chinese policies to Central Asia. However, unequal balances of power in the establishment of zones of influence may rise from this policy approach in several terms. The pattern of bilateral agreements in issues such as water security – in the case of Kazakhstan in Sino-Kazakh relations, transboundary water partners in downstream position - tends to be advantageous towards China, due to its position of leverage. In section 2, the bilateral Sino-Kazakh water relations are going to be analyzed from the perspective of critical geopolitics regarding the concepts of hegemony and zones of influence.

2 CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS AND THE SINO-KAZAKH WATER AGREEMENTS: COOPERATION AND STAGNATION

From a critical geopolitics perspective, the current changes of hegemony in the international system are not essentially a dispute for supremacy between powers. Hegemony, in a vision of critical geopolitics, can be considered a development of new forms of consensus. According to Agnew (2003, p.57), in a Gramscian perspective of hegemony in geopolitics, the norms and principles that regulate international politics act as an element of convincing, in a relation based on attraction and coercion. The norms being practiced in world politics, according to the author,

“[...] involve(s) a variety of social practices that require the deployment of power, not simply military coercion by the states. The identities and interests of states (and other actors) are formed in interaction with one another and in the nexus between global and local social practices. Hegemony refers to the nature of the dominant social practices in a given historical epoch and how they bind together the various actors into a global society. Power can involve gaining assent, defining expectations, and co-opting others as much as or more than simply coercing them. It is not a singular entity but can involve so-called *soft* forms of consent as well as *hard* forms of coercion.” (AGNEW, 2003, p. 57)

The expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization among Central Asia members, while raising multilateral practices, contradictorily, raised as well bilateral agreements practiced by China. When the “Sino-Russian condominium” began to expand towards deepening economic relations, with the Chinese interest in the establishment of a Free Trade Area and a development bank instead of only focusing on regional security factors, the SCO was turning against Russian interests. Eventually, with the acceptance of India as a Russian ally to counterbalance the ever-growing Chinese influence in the organization and the success of the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, Beijing turned its action to bilateral agreements with Central Asia partners, with concessions towards Kazakhstan. It can be considered a *soft* form of consent, as highlighted by Agnew. Next, the patterns of such Sino-Kazakh cooperation, as a form of co-opting Kazakhstan in Chinese terms and interests, are going to be described and analyzed, especially in the matter of water diplomacy.

2.1 COOPERATION

From the perspective of water cooperation, Biba (2014) emphasizes the common Chinese position of lack of commitment in terms of water diplomacy, as it was one of the only three countries to vote against the United Nations Watercourse Convention of 1997. As it is emphasized,

“China controls the water flowing into neighbouring countries, as it is the upstream country for most of Asia’s major rivers. Yet China has not signed any comprehensive river treaty that regulates the distribution of water. It has also been reluctant to set up, or join, existing inter-state river commissions.” (BIBA, 2014)

Nevertheless, there is a different pattern concerning Sino-Kazakh cooperation. In order to co-opt Kazakhstan and create “a reserve of goodwill” (HO, 2017, p.148) among Kazakh society, China has been engaged in preferential agreements with Kazakhstan in recent years. From the 24 rivers shared by both countries, the most significant are the Ili and Irtysh rivers, which Kazakhstan is in downstream position in both cases. Still according to Biba (*op. cit.*), the Ili is responsible for more than half of the fresh water flowing into Lake Balkhash, one of the biggest of Kazakhstan; while the Irtysh, the main water resource for 15 million Kazakhs, flows through the capital Astana. Therefore, the growing agricultural production and population rise in Xinjiang, the Chinese province where both rivers start, is a matter of great concern of the Kazakh government.



Figure 1: The Ili and Irtysh rivers. The former flows into Lake Balkhash, while the latter reaches Astana, the Kazakh capital. Both are crucial for Kazakh water supplies, and start in Chinese province of Xinjiang, which has projects of river diversion.

This situation is of the most importance to the Kazakh government and society.

Source: HO, 2017, p. 143

There are cooperation institutions, such as Sino-Kazakh river commissions and water agreements, regarding a shared management of water resources, which is unique in the Chinese water diplomacy. As Ho (*op. cit.*, p.143) affirms,

“Even though these negotiations on water allocation have been slow, the fact that China has agreed to put this issue on the table is an achievement on itself, since China has assiduously avoided discussing water-sharing agreements with its other riparian neighbours”.

Agreements such as the use and protection of transboundary rivers, development of research cooperation, and finally a joint river commission, created in 2008, have been part of a *quid pro quo* cooperation in Sino-Kazakh relations, even though there is an evident asymmetry of power between the two states. In this case, the Chinese exercise of hegemony is present not in the use of force – the *hard* form of coercion -, but in the use of persuasion, the *soft* form of consent. When China prefers to shape the norms of Sino-Kazakh cooperation, agreeing in favor some of the Kazakh water concerns, it is an exercise of hegemony through consensus.

In exchange for the discussions of Kazakh water concerns, China seeks deepening cooperation with its neighbour in terms of economic, energy, and security matters. As Ho (*op. cit.*, p.148) again states,

“Linkages between water and broader political, strategic and economic issues incentivize China, as the hydro-hegemon, to cooperate with Kazakhstan, a weaker downstream neighbour. China sees a strong partnership with Kazakhstan on a range of issues as critical to its interests. These issues include domestic stability issues involving the Uighur minorities in Xinjiang, bilateral Sino-Kazakh economic and energy cooperation, and at the regional level, the competition for influence and power in Central Asia among Russia, China and the United States. [...] The desire to create a reservoir of goodwill with the Kazakh government and people was a strong motivating factor in China’s decision to embark on water negotiations with Kazakhstan.”

The issue-linkage concept evidences a time coincidence of water agreements conceded by China and security, energy, and economic cooperation mechanisms supported by Kazakhstan. Next, the table 2 highlights water-related agreements that coincide in time with Chinese interests supported by Kazakhstan, such as the regional security measures of the SCO, energy cooperation through the construction of pipelines, and the economic projects of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB).

Year	Water-related agreement / development between China & Kazakhstan	Other issue involving China & Kazakhstan
2001	Agreement on cooperation in use & protection of transboundary rivers, governmental level	<i>Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)</i> founded (from former <i>Shanghai Five</i>), China & Kazakhstan both members
2006	Agreement on the development of research cooperation on transboundary rivers	first oil-pipeline from Kazakhstan to China, growing oil exports to China
2006	Agreement on exchange of hydrological and hydro-chemical data on main transboundary rivers	
2008	joint river commission brought under the umbrella of the China-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee	
2015	Since March Consultations on the draft of the Agreement on Water-Distribution of Cross-Border Rivers	China officially launches Silk Road Economic Belt project (SREB) and becomes Kazakhstan’s second largest trade partner

Table 2: This timeline illustrates the time coincidence of issue-linkage practices in Sino-Kazakh relations; while negotiations in water diplomacy are being developed, Chinese security, energy and economic concerns are being favoured by Kazakhstan.

Source: own, based on Ho (2017)

An important achievement for Kazakh interests was the establishment of a joint river commission under the China-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee. A rising level of institutionalization of Sino-Kazakh water relations is a key interest for Astana, due to the enormous negative consequences of possible Chinese water diversions from the Ili and the Irtysh. Mustafina (2014, p.93) and Revsky (2006) list some of the negative consequences provoked by a possible extension of Chinese water reallocations:

“- Damage of the natural water balance and the balance of the nature in the area of Lake Balkhash and Zaysan (East Kazakhstan);

- An increase of natural concentration of harmful substances in the water, making it impossible for household and domestic use;

- Degradation of the environment;

- Deterioration of the epidemiological situation in these regions;

- Problems with the water supply to the coastal villages and towns;

- Pasture degradation;

- Reduction in crop yields.

[...] - The prospect of becoming a zone of ecological disaster of one of the most beautiful lakes in the country with clean, fresh water (Balkhash);

- Declining fish stocks and consequently the elimination of livelihoods of coastal communities;

- The emergence of social tension in the surrounding regions as a result of unemployment of people in nearby towns. (Semipalatinsk, Ayaguz, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Zaysan, Pavlodar, etc.)” (MUSTAFINA, 2014, p.93; REVSKY, 2006. In: MUSTAFINA, 2014)

Therefore, it is of utmost importance for the Kazakh society that China cooperates towards a better use of transboundary water resources. In exchange for the Kazakh cooperation in the SCO security measures, pipeline constructions that provide China with energy source diversification, and infrastructure integration that allows the expansion of the Silk Road Economic Belt, China cooperates with Kazakhstan in terms of water quality, research, and allocation. (HO, *op. cit.*, p. 155)

However, a multilateral water committee, especially being part of the SCO – a historical Kazakh claim – is constantly blocked by China. Kazakh President Nazarbayev constantly claimed for a multilateral solution throughout SCO summits in order to solve water-related issues in Central Asia, but to no avail (KAMALOVA, 2014). This *status quo* provoked stagnation in Sino-Kazakh water relations, with no sight of change in the near future.

2.2 STAGNATION

China-Kazakhstan water relations began to stagnate after bilateral solutions regarding Kazakh concerns became scarce. After the establishment of a joint river commission under the China-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee, the evolution of this water-related diplomacy would lead to the expansion of negotiations with other states with transboundary rivers in this region, such as Russia and Kyrgyzstan.

Nevertheless, an expansion of these negotiations would not be interesting to China, given its favourable geographic position of being the hydro-hegemon in Central Asia. A multilateral mechanism of negotiations among China, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan would have the potential to balance the Chinese geographical leverage and pressure Beijing to accept better terms in what concerns Kazakh water-related issues. Therefore, China uses its position of power to shape the terms and conditions of Sino-Kazakh relations, again highlighting the soft power of consent. The power of defining Kazakh expectations towards water agreements, convincing Astana that issue-linkages in a bilateral scheme are better than insisting in an unlikely broad multilateral agreement is an evidence of the Chinese hegemonic convincing power, that is, the power to shape the conditions - bilateral negotiations – and its terms. Mustafina (*op. cit.*, p.92) states that

“China insists on bilateral negotiations in resolving water issues. In turn, as the long-standing practice, bilateral negotiations with China did not give any meaningful results. China seeks to exclude from the trilateral negotiations with Russia and Kazakhstan (or Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) on the issue of cross-border rivers. Given Russia’s interest in solving the problems of shared water resources of the Irtysh, the Kazakh side has repeatedly expressed about the involvement of Russia and, if possible, of Kyrgyzstan as well, to the negotiations with China for the development of joint actions on the issue. However, the Chinese leadership has consistently held the impossibility of discussing the problem of transboundary rivers in the trilateral format. Russian experts also emphasize that China is reluctant to discuss the problems of the Irtysh River in a trilateral format, or under SCO.”

This reluctant position of China can be explained by an accommodation of its interests in Central Asia by a scheme of bilateral negotiations with its partners, which evidences power asymmetries. The refusal to bring to the SCO issues that China has a reserved leverage acting in a multilateral avoidance is shaping its action in the region, in spite of the critics being raised. After the exhaustion of the economic integration approach towards the SCO – especially after the Russian refusal in favour of its own organization, the EEU – and the standoff as an aftermath of the Indian and Pakistani entering in the organization, the Chinese diplomacy towards Central Asia has been mainly bilateral. Gabuev (*op. cit.*) emphasizes that

“The Kremlin was worried that China would use the SCO FTA and the development bank to promote its own agenda and to buy influence in Central Asia at Russia’s expense. Having exhausted the SCO track, China has started to engage Central Asian countries on a bilateral basis without any checks from Moscow, and soon learned that this approach has plenty of advantages. In addition, in 2013–2014 Beijing started to create China-centered multilateral institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and broad initiatives like the Belt and Road, which don’t have a regional focus but include Central Asia, so the SCO as a tool grew increasingly irrelevant for China’s strategy.”

This Chinese foreign policy suggests that the SCO is currently only a regional security-related organization, therefore excluding other negotiations such as water agreements. This conjuncture does not seem to be changeable in the near future, even though it may raise environmental concerns and challenges due to the increasing water scarcity in this region as Xinjiang province shows sharp economic and population increases. Only if the Chinese image and reputation in this region starts to be threatened by critics towards its lack of environmental concerns that policies regarding other water-related initiatives are probably being pursued, which may contribute to the conclusions of the draft of the Agreement on Water Distribution of Cross-Border Rivers of 2015.

Even though it is unlikely that multilateral negotiations are going to be accepted by the Chinese water diplomacy, the environmental conditions of the river basins are important in this matter. The Chinese Ministry of Water Resources highlights that in the summer of 2014, during a serious drought in the Ili basin, there was a great effort to increase downstream water levels, showing “the commitment of China to rational development and effective protection of trans-boundary rivers” (MWR, 2015, p.9). If the environmental conditions of the Ili and Irtysh basins deteriorate in the next years, the Chinese leverages may disappear with the risk of a new drought like the one that severely reduced the size of the Aral Sea, caused by great river diversions. Projects like the Irtysh-Karamay Canal, if widespread, may reduce downstream flow to severe levels. Mustafina (*op. cit.*, p.91) affirms that

“Kazakhstan may face huge problems such as water deficit, mainly in East Kazakhstan. It will cause numerous problems to energy industries, agriculture, and metallurgy in this area. In fact, there is a threat of drought in East Kazakhstan in the coming future if the two countries do not immediately come to the strong negotiation of water use.”

Therefore, the Chinese bilateral agreements approach towards Sino-Kazakh relations, dependent on issue-linkage processes, may face changes if moderation is not applied regarding water resources usage in Xinjiang. The hegemonic process of establishing zones of influence by methods of norms and convincing, similarly, may lose appeal the more the asymmetry of power is used as coercion and as a social practice. If an unequal balance of power is pushed towards coercion methods, movements in order to balance such geopolitical result may arise, such as the deterioration of Sino-Kazakh relations in favour of the Russian-Kazakh, and more political pressure being applied towards a multilateral water-related treaty.

3 CONCLUSIONS

This paper intended to analyze the current trends of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), since its foundation as the Shanghai Five, in the decade of the 1990s, as well as the Sino-Kazakh relations in terms of water agreements, that have been evolving since the 2000s. Both cooperation schemes and the dynamics of Chinese positions among them, multilateral and bilateral respectively, were debated from the perspective of the critical geopolitics paradigm of hegemony in international politics; that is, the social practices that involve the exercise of power, in forms of consent – so-called *soft* – and in forms of coercion – so-called *hard*.

The definitions of the expectations regarding Sino-Kazakh relations, especially towards water diplomacy, have been dictated by China, an upstream hydro-hegemon in Central Asia. Through the application of issue-linkage measures, Kazakhstan has been able to reach important agreements with China concerning water usage, such as the establishment of a Sino-Kazakh Joint Commission. However, it is still evident that such compromises are still in the interests of China, since a multilateral commission involving all riparian states, especially in the security system of SCO – the ultimate Kazakh objective – is very unlikely to be formed. In order to shape the expectations of their transboundary river partners and possess full control of its geographic and power leverage, China avoids multilateral water-related negotiations that would join other powers able to balance Chinese interests, such as Russia.

The Chinese capability of dictating the norms and the forms of negotiation regarding water diplomacy of transboundary rivers is a demonstration of its hegemony capacity in terms of influence and co-optation. While the sphere of the SCO activities is reserved for regional security matters, based on the three threats of Central Asia – terrorism, extremism and separatism – other issues that would not represent an advantage if discussed multilaterally, such as water agreements, are left outside of the organization, despite the Kazakh claims for a water treaty with all riparian states involved.

Even though the bilateral schemes of negotiations are not likely to face significant changes in the near future, the issue-linkages involved – security, energetic and economic issues – may suffer changes in terms of growing disadvantages towards Kazakhstan, especially from the latter. There are growing environmental costs involving the economic growth of the Chinese Xinjiang province, which needs an ever-growing water flow in order to keep its economic activity, based on agriculture and oil business, as well as its rise in water consumption caused by population immigration.

If the environmental distress worsens, severe droughts in downstream regions of Kazakhstan are happening more frequently, which would turn Kazakh society against

Chinese actions regarding water-related issues once again. Therefore, this conjuncture, if remained unchanged, would raise the *hard* form of consent regarding the Chinese display of power and hegemony, which would be based on coercion, as Kazakh public opinion would once again turn against China, with the disappearance of the “reservoir of goodwill” preserved by Chinese water negotiations with Kazakhstan.

Thus, there is a fragile balance in Sino-Kazakh relations, which need constant renegotiations in order to preserve its functionality. Whether these relations, especially regarding water agreements, are going to keep a bilateral pattern – as it has been the Chinese option so far – or are starting a multilateral approach is dependent on the levels of Chinese water consumption and the balances of the agreements reached through the Joint Commission. If there is an option to be chosen that would result in bigger levels of environmental distress – the *hard* coercion method – there is a possibility of a disappearance of the Chinese leverage – the *soft* consent method – and a rise on the political pressure towards a multilateral scheme, which would be an undesirable defeat for the Chinese influence in Central Asia.

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