

REGIONAL POLITICS

THE NORTHERN CASPIAN ON CHINA'S GEOPOLITICAL AGENDA

David BABAYAN

Ph.D. (Hist.), Independent Expert

Introduction

Everyone knows that in addition to its keen interest in the Southern and Northern Caucasus, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is also active in Central Asia, another area of its geopolitical interests.

Much has and is being written about this, but for some reason no one has examined China's presence in the Northern Caspian (I have in mind the Atyrau Region of Kazakhstan, the relations with which are part and parcel of China's Central Asian policy, and the Astrakhan Region and Kalmykia of Russia). Here I will dwell on Chinese strategy in the two latter regions of the Russian

Federation, that is, in the Russian part of the Northern Caspian. As a sort of corridor or link between Central Asia and the Caucasus with a multitude of ties between them and this part of Russia, the region is of immense geopolitical importance for Beijing.

Indeed, the Northern Caspian offers a lot of opportunities for China, ranging from the economy to the humanitarian and religious spheres; its strategic location is very important for China's security. This means that this region is one of the components of China's Central Asian and Caucasian geopolitics.

Kalmykia

The relations between China and Kalmykia, with a very specific and interesting history behind them, go back into the past: at the turn of the 17th century, the Kalmyks moved to Russia from China

(from Jungaria, to be more exact).¹ In 1771, a larger part of the newcomers moved back to China; many died before reaching the Celestial Empire, which makes the “Kalmykian exodus” a very contradictory event in the history of the Kalmyks.² Today, there are Mongolian peoples (closely related to the Kalmyks) in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region (in the northwest of China); some of them are direct descendants of those Kalmyks who moved back to China in the 18th century.

There are two Mongolian administrative-territorial units in the XUAR: the Bayingolin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture and the Bortala Mongol Autonomous Prefecture; the former, which covers the area of 470.9 thousand sq km, is the largest autonomous territory in the XUAR and even in China.³ There is also a Hoboksar-Mongol Autonomous County in the XUAR.

Kalmykia is involved in active cooperation with these territories, as well as with the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

The Kalmyks are the only people in the region who profess Tibetan Buddhism. This and the factors enumerated above create a favorable atmosphere for closer relations between China and Kalmykia and add very specific features to their cooperation.

Significantly, the ethno-religious factor played an important role when Russia and China started their relations: in 1709-1713, Peter the Great allowed Kalmykian envoys to go to Tibet on an official visit; in 1712, they unofficially met Jing Emperor Xuan Ye, who reciprocated with an embassy to Russia to persuade the Russian emperor to join forces against the Jungarian Khanate. According to Prof. M. Kapitsa, this was the first ever trip of Chinese diplomats to a European state.⁴

The relations between China and Kalmykia are highly varied and extend to the economy, culture, religion, and politics. They became especially active in the latter half of the 2000s. So far, the share of China in Kalmykia's foreign trade is small; however, the steadily developing ties between China and Kalmykia might, in the near future, considerably change the situation.

Late in March 2007, in Elista, Prime Minister of Inner Mongolia Yang Jing and Head of the Republic of Kalmykia Kirsan Ilyumzhinov signed an agreement on trade, economic, and cultural partnership; Inner Mongolia was included in several projects: building a dairy products processing plant in Kalmykia and establishing partnership in the manufacture and assembly of minibuses and trucks in Kalmykia at the Caspian Machine-Building Plant in Lagan.

The Chinese side invested about \$20 million at the first stage.⁵ Less than a year later, another delegation of potential investors from Inner Mongolia arrived to negotiate investments in the Elista Airport in exchange for their involvement in mining projects (limestone and gypsum in particular). They were also interested in modernizing a wool-washing and hide dressing plants; their interests also extended to wind power production and agriculture, as well as building specialized storage facilities for consumer goods, a Genghis Khan museum, and a sea port in Lagan.⁶

¹ See: *Narody Evropeyskoy chasti SSSR*, Vol. 2, Moscow, 1964; *Ocherki istorii Kalmytskoy ASSR*, Vols. 1-2, Moscow, 1967, p. 70; U. Erdnev, *Kalmyki (Konets XIX-nachalo XX vekov. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki)*, Elista, 1970; D.Ts.-D. Nominkhanov, *Ocherki istorii kultury kalmytskogo naroda*, Elista, 1969; “Kalmyki,” *Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar Brokgauza i Efrona*, Vol. 82, St. Petersburg, 1904.

² For more detail, see, for example: I. Vishniakova, “K voprosu o begstve volzhskikh kalmykov v Jungarii v 1771 godu,” *Vostokovednye issledovaniia na Altae*, Issue II, Barnaul, 2000, pp. 45-54.

³ See: Bayingolin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture, available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayingolin_Mongol_Autonomous_Prefecture], 17 July, 2012; the official site of the prefecture [<http://www.xjbz.gov.cn/>].

⁴ For more detail, see, in particular: “Ambassadors from the Celestial Empire in the Kalmyk Khanate,” Kalmykia-online, available at [<http://kalmykia-online.ru/history/328>], 1 January, 2010 (here and elsewhere the Internet sites are in Russian unless otherwise stated.—*Ed.*).

⁵ See: “The Government of Kalmykia and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region have Agreed on Cooperation,” Regnum Information Agency, available at [<http://www.regnum.ru/news/804620.html>], 23 March, 2007.

⁶ See: “Chinese Investors are Prepared to Modernize the Airport in the Capital of Kalmykia,” *Kavkazskiy uzel*, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/133556/>], 3 February, 2008.

Late in June 2012, a delegation of the People's Assembly of the Bayingolin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture headed by its chairman, Bora, visited Kalmykia. This event helped the sides to invigorate their mutual relations.⁷ The delegation paid a special visit to the Yashkul District of Kalmykia to meet Chinese cattle-breeders; the Chinese guests were touched by what they saw.⁸

It should be said that the Kalmyk leaders were encouraged by the plans to bring back ethnic Kalmyks from the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region: in 2006, the then head of the republic Kir-san Ilyumzhinov stirred up a sensation with this statement. Russian political scientists responded by calling his plans "the most ambitious migration project in Russia."⁹

Under the project, no less than 10 thousand Kalmyks-Torguts were to be resettled in Kalmykia; according to some sources, the figure was even higher—100 thousand.¹⁰ The authors argued that, when implemented, the project would eliminate many of the republic's problems, including unemployment: one Kalmykian migrant was expected to produce two or three new jobs in Kalmykia.¹¹ Some of the Xinjiang migrants thought they were performing the important mission of guarding the borders: the local farmers and businessmen were expected to drive Chechens and Azeris away from the local markets.¹² So far, the flow of migrants can best be described as a trickle.

Chinese migrants, however, comprise the second largest group of foreign migrants registered in Kalmykia: 381 persons in 2011. In this respect, Kalmykia comes second after Kazakhstan, which registered 523 Chinese migrants.¹³

On a national scale, Kalmykia, the Jewish Autonomous Region, and the Trans-Baikal Territory have the largest number of Chinese migrants.¹⁴

A project to build the Eurasia shipping canal between the Black and Caspian seas looks very interesting from the geopolitical point of view. It will cross the Republic of Kalmykia, the northern part of the Stavropol Territory, and the south of the Rostov Region. The idea belongs to President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbaev: he expects it to connect Central Asia with the seas via the Russian Federation.¹⁵ Some members of the expert community think that Kazakhstan is mainly interested in the project to move goods from and to China; if realized the new project will bring additional income to the tune of \$2 billion every year.¹⁶

Kalmykia needs the canal: in an interview, its prime minister, Oleg Kichikov, pointed out that the project was of strategic importance for the republic and that the government would spare no effort

⁷ See: "The Head of Kalmykia Met a Delegation from the PRC," Official site of the Head of the Republic of Kalmykia [<http://glava.region08.ru/ru/soobscheniya-dlya-pressy/3373-delegaciya-knr.html>], 25 June, 2012.

⁸ See: N. Azydova, D. Jambinov, "Guests from China Visit the Yashkul District," *Vesti/Kalmykia*, available at [<http://vesti-kalmykia.ru/society/4026-delegaciya-bayngol-mongolskoy-avtonomnoy-oblasti-s-rabochim-vizitom-pribyla-v-yashkulskiy-rayon.html>], 27 June, 2012.

⁹ See, for example: V. Ishutin, "Chinese Kalmyks Return to the Motherland," *Rossiiskie Vesti*, available at [<http://www.rosvesty.ru/1818/regions/1146-kitaiskie-kalmiki-vozvrashajutsya-na-rodinu/>], 26 April-2 May, 2006.

¹⁰ See: "Kalmykia is the Motherland of the Chinese," *Novaia gazeta*, available at [<http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/37257.html>], 25 January, 2007.

¹¹ See: V. Ishutin, op. cit.

¹² See: "Kalmykia is the Motherland of the Chinese."

¹³ See: "In 2011, Kalmykia Registers over 5 Thousand Foreign Migrants," *Kalmykia*, Portal poleznoy informatsii, available at [<http://kalm08.ru/v-kalmikii-2011-godu-na-migracionniie-uchet-postavleno-bolee-5-tisyach-inostrancev.html>], 31 January, 2012.

¹⁴ See: "In 2011, Officials of the Federal Migration Service Deported 5.6 thousand Chinese Migrants from Russia," *RIA Novosti*, available at [<http://ria.ru/society/20120321/601757782.html>], 21 March, 2012.

¹⁵ See: "Nazarbaev: The Eurasia Canal Might Connect the Caspian and Black Seas," *RIA Novosti*, available at [<http://ria.ru/politics/20070610/67005824.html>], 10 June, 2012.

¹⁶ See, for example: "Does Russia Need the Eurasia Canal?" *Ekologicheskaja pravda*, available at [http://www.eco-pravda.ru/page.php?al=canal_evraz], 17 September, 2009.

to implement it as soon as possible.¹⁷ In 2008, in anticipation of implementation of the much needed project, the government of Kalmykia set up a Manych Shipping Canal Company.¹⁸

The project's active supporters argue that, when implemented, the project would create 200 thousand jobs at the clusters of the main project (the Black and Caspian Seas Canal), which would tap the huge management and business potential of the Northern Caucasus, reduce tension in the labor market, and stabilize the social and political situation in the region.¹⁹

They are also convinced that the year-round traffic of oil will increase the volumes moved from the Caspian to the Black Sea 3-4-fold.²⁰

Alternative routes are also being discussed; the opponents of the Eurasia project are no less numerous than its supporters, which explains why the project has stalled at the discussion stage.

On 25 May, 2012, for example, a scientific-practical conference held at the Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, attracted officials of federal structures, the Committee for Transport of the Federation Council, the RF Federal Assembly, and members of the academic and business communities. First Deputy Prime Minister of Kalmykia Vyacheslav Ilyumzhinov delivered the main report and met the heads of Moscow companies to discuss their involvement in investment projects in the republic.²¹

If implemented, the project will create important means for organizing and developing China's relations with the Northern Caucasus and with the countries on the Caspian, Azov, and Black Sea shores.

Kalmykia and China are developing cooperation in the humanitarian sphere, education being one of the most promising fields. Back in June 2002, Kalmyk State University (KSU) and the University of Inner Mongolia (UIM) signed an agreement on cooperation and academic exchange. Late in March 2007, the two universities signed an agreement of unlimited duration on cooperation and academic exchange.²²

Mutually advantageous cooperation was raised to a higher level when the UIM opened the Institute of Confucius at KSU (it began functioning in May 2008). Today, teachers and lecturers of both higher educational establishments teach Chinese language and culture courses at this institute.²³

The institute received an official letter of congratulations from the President of Kalmykia on the occasion of its opening; he expressed his firm conviction that this cultural and educational center would promote and expand the economic ties between the two republics and consolidate humanitarian interaction and friendship between Russia and China.²⁴

¹⁷ See: B. Jengurov, "The Leaders of Kalmykia Intend to Speed Up Implementation of the Eurasia Project," *Kavkazskiy uzel*, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/173344/>], 25 August, 2010.

¹⁸ See: B. Jengurov, "From the Azov to the Caspian," *Rossiyskaia gazeta*, available at [<http://www.rg.ru/2008/11/06/reg-jugrossii/manyh.html>], 6 November, 2008.

¹⁹ See: "The Conception of Linking the Caspian and Black Seas was Presented in Makhachkala," *Kaspiyskiy faktor*, available at [<http://www.casfactor.com/rus/news/1597.html>], 27 April, 2011.

²⁰ See: B. Jengurov, "The Leaders of Kalmykia Intend to Speed Up Implementation of the Eurasia Project."

²¹ See: "Kalmykia's Suggestion Causes Heated Debates at the Institute of Oriental Studies," *Pravitelstvo Respubliki Kalmykia*, available at [<http://gov.kalmregion.ru/news/2012-02-03-08-36-50/6718-2012-05-28-05-52-52>], 28 May, 2012.

²² See, for example: "International Activities," *Kalmytskiy gosudarstvenny universitet*, available at [http://www.kalmsu.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=145:2011-03-23-07-33-32&catid=54:2011-03-23-07-21-50&Itemid=86], 8 July, 2012.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ See: "To the Participants in the Gala Opening of the Institute of Confucius," Official site of the Head of the Republic of Kalmykia [<http://glava.region08.ru/ru/kilyumzhinov/86-ot-pervogo-lica/942-uchastnikam-torzhestvennoi-tseremonii-otkrytiya-instituta-konfutsiya.html>], 23 April, 2009.

In May 2012, the KSU and UIM signed a new agreement on the development of their long-term cooperation, under which the Institute of Confucius acquired the right to function as an educational center and open its branches in higher educational establishments in the South of Russia.²⁵

It should be said that every year the best KSU students are given the opportunity to spend one year as students in Chinese higher educational establishments; this is done within the program of annual stipends granted by the Embassy of the People's Republic of China.²⁶

Religion plays an important role in the bilateral relations between Kalmykia and China; not infrequently, however, these relations spill beyond the bilateral framework to crop up in certain global aspects of China's geopolitics.

The Kalmyks are Tibetan Buddhists, this means that closer ties with the Tibetan clergy are an important element of the Kalmyks' spiritual life. This causes certain concerns in Beijing, because of Tibet's special importance for China.²⁷

Beijing hopes that the Russian Buddhists will remain neutral on this painful issue. Certain analysts, however, are convinced that the Government of Tibet in Exile is not sparing any efforts to draw the Russian Buddhists into its conflict with Beijing in the hope of forcing Russia to change its Chinese policy.²⁸

China's concerns are well-justified: in October 1996, at the opening ceremony of the first building of the khurul complex in Elista, there was an attempt to hoist the state flag of Tibet. Everybody agrees that this was intended as a sign that the Kalmyks supported the Tibetans in their struggle against Chinese expansion. Seen from Beijing, however, it looked like an unfriendly act on the part of Russia. Beijing was equally displeased with the plans of the then President of the Republic of Kalmykia Kirsan Ilyumzhinov to build a "Buddhist Vatican" in the republic; he also offered to mediate at the talks between Beijing and the 14th Dalai Lama and even offered the latter political asylum in the republic.²⁹

In December 2006, President Ilyumzhinov conferred the 14th Dalai Lama with the Order of White Lotus, the highest award of his republic, and personally handed it to the political and spiritual leader of the Tibetans in exile at his residence in Dharamshala. In his speech he said, in particular: "The Tibetans and Kalmyks are bound by many centuries of friendship. In times of trouble, we have invariably stood together and helped each other... Today, His Holiness embodies peace, compassion, kindness, and mutual consideration."³⁰

Head of Kalmykia Alexey Orlov, likewise, maintains close contact with Dalai Lama: "Each and every one of our meetings is an important landmark for me," he said in an interview. "The opportunity to be close to Dalai Lama, to say nothing of the chance to associate with him, a man of huge spiritual power and kindness, the guardian of our souls, teaches us to look differently, to look into the meaning of things and acquire answers to many questions."³¹

Contacts with Dalai Lama are not limited to the political leaders of Kalmykia. There is information that the Supreme Lama of this republic, Telo Tulku Rinpoche, one of the leading Buddhists of

²⁶ See: "International Activities," Kalmytskiy gosudarstvennyy universitet.

²⁷ On the place of Tibet in Chinese geopolitics, see, for example: D. Babayan, "Tibetskiy platsdarm kitayskoy geopolitiki, *Vostok (Oriens)*, Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, No. 4, 2011, pp. 81-99.

²⁸ See: S. Badmayev, "Karma of Russian Buddhism. Politicization of the Community Causes Splits and Conflicts," *NG-Religii*, available at [http://religion.ng.ru/people/2011-08-03/5_karma.html], 3 August, 2011.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ See, for example: "The Head of Kalmykia Awards Dalai Lama the Order of White Lotus," *Kavkazskiy uzel*, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/105183/>], 11 December, 2006.

³¹ "The Head of the Republic of Kalmykia Meets Dalai Lama," *Save Tibet!* Center of Tibetan Culture and Information, available at [http://savetibet.ru/2011/08/17/dalai_jama_kalmykia.html], 17 August, 2011.

Russia, regularly goes to India to meet Dalai Lama to discuss with him all the important issues in the sphere of education and culture of the Republic of Kalmykia.³²

Kalmykia's very special role and place in the Buddhist community of Russia suggests that closer contacts between the republic and Tibet are not limited to bilateral relations. Tenzin Tsultim, Supreme Lama of Tuva (another RF constituency), said that the Buddhist clergy of the republic, which during the spiritual renaissance was oriented toward the Buddhist communities of Mongolia and Buryatia (a republic in the RF), regarded Kalmykia as its future spiritual guide.³³

Since 2009, Dalai Lama has been organizing annual training courses for Buddhists from Russia at his residence in Dharamshala; in 2009, they attracted 800 pilgrims from Russia and other CIS countries; in 2010, over 1,200 attended³⁴; and in 2011, 1,300, while only about 1,000 came from Tibet and even fewer from India and other countries.³⁵

These contacts are purely religious, not infrequently, however, they assume political overtones: from time to time Russian Buddhists ask the central authorities for permission to invite Dalai Lama to Russia³⁶; the leaders of Kalmykia³⁷ and certain political figures of the Russian Federation want the same.

Head of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia Vladimir Zhirinovskiy supported the idea and said that Buddhism might become part of Russia's polyethnicity.³⁸

Beijing is very much displeased with these calls and statements, which look absolutely natural to an unbiased observer: in China, Dalai Lama is treated not so much as a religious leader but as a symbol of the Tibetans' struggle for their independence from China.

Russian Buddhists are resorting to political actions: late in March 2007, for example, members of public organizations and Buddhists traveled from Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, to the Chinese Embassy in Moscow to hand an address to PRC Chairman Hu Jintao, in which they invited him to start talks with the religious and secular leader of the Tibetans.³⁹

In April 2008, representatives of the Buddhist republics of the Russian Federation and the Tibetan community, as well as members of all sorts of Buddhist organizations gathered in Moscow for a picket to demonstrate their support of Tibet and gather signatures under an address to the government of Russia and the world community. The document expressed great concern about the "suppres-

³² See, for example: A. Nemtsova, "A Wondrous Buddhist Tradition Resurrected in Kalmykia," *Russia beyond the Headlines*, available at [http://rbth.ru/articles/2011/10/26/buddhist_revival_in_kalmykia_13607.html], 26 October, 2011 (in English).

³³ See: "Kamby-lama of the Republic of Tuva: 'Kalmykia Will Be Our Spiritual Leader,'" *Save Tibet!* Center of Tibetan Culture and Information, available at [<http://savetibet.ru/2011/09/27/tuva.html>], 27 September, 2011.

³⁴ See: "Vladimir Zhirinovskiy Supports Dalai Lama Visiting Russia," *Save Tibet!* Center of Tibetan Culture and Information, available at [http://savetibet.ru/2011/08/15/dalai_lama.html], 15 August, 2011.

³⁵ See: T. Tsering, "Tibetan Spiritual Leader Begins Teaching for Russian Buddhists," Phayul.com, available at [<http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=30563>], 19 December, 2011 (in English).

³⁶ See, for example: "An Open Letter of the supreme Buddhist clergy of Russia to the President of the Russian Federation Mr. V.V. Putin on a Visit of the Spiritual Leader of the Buddhists, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama," *Save Tibet!* Center of Tibetan Culture and Information, available at [http://savetibet.ru/2006/06/28/letter_to_president.html], 28 June, 2006; A. Serenko, "Buddhists Ask Putin to Give Permission to Invite Dalai Lama," available at [http://savetibet.ru/2006/06/30/russian_buddhists_putin.html], 30 June, 2006; "On a Visit of Dalai Lama to Russia. The Community of the Buddhists of Tuva Sends an Open Letter to S.V. Lavrov," *Save Tibet!* Center of Tibetan Culture and Information, available at [<http://savetibet.ru/2011/10/31/dalai-lama.html>], 31 October, 2011; Yu. Zhironkina, "Dalai Lama Blesses the Project of a New Large Temple in Tuva," *Save Tibet!* Center of Tibetan Culture and Information, available at [<http://savetibet.ru/2011/11/13/tuva.html>], 13 November, 2011.

³⁷ See: "The Head of the Republic of Kalmykia Meets Dalai Lama."

³⁸ See: "Vladimir Zhirinovskiy Supports Dalai Lama Visiting Russia."

³⁹ See: "Statement of the Kalmyk Regional Society of Friends of Tibet," *Save Tibet!* Center of Tibetan Culture and Information, available at [http://savetibet.ru/2007/03/26/tsg_kalmykia.html], 26 March, 2007.

sion of the Tibetan acts and rallies in regions of historical Tibet, which caused bloodshed.”⁴⁰ A similar rally was organized in the capital of Buryatia at almost the same time.⁴¹

China is responding with grave concern to the rallies, which put Moscow in a rather difficult situation. Russia is home to a fairly large Buddhist community of between 900 thousand⁴² and 1.3 million⁴³ members. The number of Buddhists is growing in Russia and in the world.⁴⁴ Here is an interesting fact: in 2009, Head of the Traditional Sangha of Russia Damba Ayusheyev announced that Buddhist lamas would be attached to military units with 10% or more Buddhists.⁴⁵

Wider contacts between the Russian Buddhists and Buddhists from other countries have become part of Russia’s foreign policy issues, since they might complicate relations between Moscow and Beijing. Russia, fully aware of its geopolitical interests, has opted for the essentially only correct strategy: clear delineation between religious and cultural spheres and politics. This is best illustrated by the official attitude toward Dalai Lama and his activities, one of the most sensitive issues.

Here is what Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov said on this score: speaking at the Federation Council of the RF Federal Assembly, he said that Russia was against the attempts to add political overtones to what Dalai Lama was doing and was prepared to cooperate in this respect. The Foreign Minister of Russia said that Moscow supported contacts between religions and confessions, but was opposed to attempts to mix religion with politics: “We are closely following the relations between the Chinese leaders and Dalai Lama and know that they prefer that Dalai Lama detach himself from political activities of all sorts so as not to be associated with the separatist trends in any part of China. We, too, would prefer to see normal relations between Beijing and Dalai Lama.”⁴⁶

Sergey Lavrov deemed it necessary to point out that from time to time certain forces try to exploit the pastoral functions of Dalai Lama for purposes far removed from religion. The Foreign Minister said that these efforts did not bring the desired results and did nothing good for normal communication between the Russian Buddhists and His Holiness.

Beijing, which knows that contacts between Kalmykia and the Tibetan clergy cannot be severed since they are absolutely necessary, is trying to decrease the “factors of risk” in its relations with the Republic of Kalmykia on this issue.

The Chinese have arrived at an interesting solution: they are establishing closer economic and cultural ties between Kalmykia and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. In 2007, a delegation of the autonomous region visited Kalmykia to strengthen cooperation and exchanges between them.

⁴⁰ “The Participants in the Picket in Support of the Tibetan People Sign an Address to the Government of Russia and the World Community,” *Save Tibet!* Center of Tibetan Culture and Information, available at [http://savetibet.ru/2008/04/04/petition_tibet.html], 4 April, 2008.

⁴¹ See: “A Second Action in Support of Tibet and Dalai Lama is Held in Buryatia,” *Save Tibet!* Center of Tibetan Culture and Information, available at [http://savetibet.ru/2008/04/05/tibet_buryatia.html], 5 April, 2008.

⁴² See: O. Kazmina, “Confessional Composition of Population of Russia,” *Narody i religii mira*, available at [<http://www.cbook.ru/peoples/obzor/konfess6.shtml>], 10 January, 2009.

⁴³ See: “Why Dalai Lama cannot Visit Russia,” *Golos Ameriki*, available at [<http://blogs.voanews.com/russian/russia-watch/2011/07/19/dalai-lama-russia/>], 19 July, 2011.

⁴⁴ See: O. Lipich, “More and More People All Over the World are Embracing Buddhism, said Dalai Lama,” *RIA Novosti*, available at [<http://ria.ru/religion/20111228/528298390.html>], 28 December, 2011.

⁴⁵ See, for example” E. Krivyakina, “Buddhists Recognize Medvedev as a Deity Reincarnate,” *Komsomolskaia pravda*, available at [<http://kp.ru/daily/24347.5/536873/>], 24 August, 2009.

⁴⁶ For more detail, see: “Sergey Lavrov: The RF is Against Politicization of the Activities of Dalai Lama,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, available at [<http://www.rg.ru/2010/05/13/lavrov-anons.html>], 13 May, 2010; C. Arpi, “Dalai Lama and the Russian Card,” The Buddhist Channel, available at [<http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=70,9233,0,0,1,0>], 29 May, 2010 (in English).

The two capitals, Elista and Lhasa (the capital of Tibet), signed an agreement on a union of twin-cities.⁴⁷

The same year, Elista hosted a Week of Tibetan Culture, which Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the PRC to Russia Liu Guchang described as an important step toward better mutual understanding and friendship between the peoples of the Tibet Autonomous Region of the PRC and the Republic of Kalmykia and long-term cooperation between them.⁴⁸

Kalmykia reciprocated with an initiative to build a pagoda or a Buddhist stupa to commemorate the Kalmyk monks who had long preached in Tibet.⁴⁹

Beijing is obviously trying to balance out Elista's policy to avoid spiritual and religious sympathies outweighing the economic advantages and prospects.

The Astrakhan Region

China and the Astrakhan Region established their first contacts during Soviet times.⁵⁰ On 27-29 June, 1990, the first official delegation of the Astrakhan Region arrived in the city of Dandung; the visit produced a protocol on cooperation in the economy, technology, and trade between the cities of Astrakhan and Dandung.

Three years later, an official delegation from Dandung visited Astrakhan to sign an agreement on friendship, mutually advantageous economic cooperation, and cultural exchange between Dandung and the Astrakhan Region and on the twin-cities relations between them. Officially, these agreements are still valid.

The sides intended to organize deliveries of young sturgeon and cultivation technologies from Astrakhan to Dandung; it was an important agreement with a practical follow-up. In July 1995, a delegation of the BIOS Scientific-Production Center for Cultivation of Sturgeon arrived in Dandung where it and the Department of Fisheries of the People's Government of Dandung signed a Protocol of Intention.

In January 1996, a BIOS delegation returned to Dandung to readjust the Protocol somewhat: financial problems forced BIOS to drop the previous free-of-charge scheme and sell 200 thousand fish eggs at a price of 8 cents per egg. The first two batches, however, exhausted China's finances. It should be said that until 1998 the sides regularly exchanged official delegations.

On 16-20 September, 2001, a delegation of the Embassy of the PRC in Russia headed by Fan Chunyong, Counselor for Economic Affairs at the Chinese Embassy in Russia, came to Astrakhan to familiarize itself with the agriculture of the Astrakhan Region.

Nearly a year later, on 12-14 October, 2002, a delegation of the Chinese Embassy in Russia headed by Ambassador Zhang Deguang and accompanied by Chinese businessmen paid another

⁴⁷ A Delegation from Tibet Visits Kalmykia," *Kavkazsky uzel*, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/117649/>], 1 July, 2007.

⁴⁸ See: "The Head of Kalmykia Receives a Letter from the Chinese Ambassador to the RF Liu Guchang," Official site of the Head of the Republic of Kalmykia, available at [<http://glava.region08.ru/ru/kilyumzhinov/82-glave-kalmykii-pishut/200-na-imya-glavy-kalmykii-postupilo-pismo-ot-posla-knr.html>], 2 October, 2007.

⁴⁹ See: "The Head of Kalmykia Intends to Build a Pagoda in Tibet in Honor of the Kalmykian Monks," *Kavkazskiy uzel*, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/120967/>], 13 August, 2007.

⁵⁰ For more detail about the chronology of their bilateral relations see, in particular: "Information about Cooperation between the Astrakhan Region and the People's Republic of China," Ministry of International and Foreign Economic Ties of the Astrakhan Region, available at [http://www.astmid.ru/uploaded/mezhdunarodka/_fà_nàèò_ÀÏ-Èèðàé_2012.01.30.doc], 26 July, 2012.

official visit to the Astrakhan Region. During the talks with the governor on mutually advantageous economic cooperation, the Chinese discussed the possibility of organizing wholesale and retail trade of Chinese products in the region. The sides agreed that tourism should be developed. Trade representative of China in Russia Wang Jiongwei informed that he intended to add the Astrakhan Region to the list of places recommended to Chinese tourists along with Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Sochi.

Since 2006, the Astrakhan Region has been activating its contacts with China; the same year, within the Year of Russia in China, the regional government held two important international events designed to further identify the prospects for cooperation between the Astrakhan Region and the PRC.

The Astrakhan Region was one of five Russian regions involved in the commercial real estate show MIPIM Asia 2006 (held in September) in Hong Kong and was one of the 20-odd countries that presented their investment projects. This helped the regional government to identify the main spheres of its possible cooperation with China: trade, education, medicine, fisheries, agriculture, and tourism.

In February 2007, cooperation between the Astrakhan Region and China entered a new stage: the Astrakhan Region established relations with Henan, the largest and most developed Chinese province. Several months later, in spring, the first work contacts with the province's department for international ties were established. It was decided to start looking into the potential for their cooperation. Askar Kabikeev, Minister of International Cooperation of the Astrakhan Region, was invited to visit the province on 10-14 June, 2007. The visit produced an agreement on a reciprocal visit to identify the main trends of future cooperation and discuss the prospects for signing a corresponding agreement.

On 2-25 June, 2007, a Chinese delegation headed by Deputy Chief of the Department for International Ties of the Government of Henan visited Astrakhan, where it familiarized itself with the region's economic, cultural, and educational potential; the sides signed a Protocol of Intention, the main point of which was a cooperation agreement for 2007-2008.

On 17-19 March, 2008, Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Henan People's Political Consultative Council Zhao Ganteo arrived in the Astrakhan Region on an official visit to discuss bilateral trade and economic cooperation in the form of Chinese investments in the region's economy, the use of Chinese cotton-growing technology, etc.

On 9-12 June, 2008, the Astrakhan Region was presented in Beijing at the Russian Embassy to China—the central event during the year of development of Astrakhan-Chinese relations. It was attended by official representatives of the PRC, including officials of federal structures, vice governors, heads of foreign affairs chancelleries, and people responsible for contacts with other countries of the provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, Jiangsu, Gansu, Yunnan, Hebei and Henan, and other Chinese regions. Chinese businessmen proved to be as interested in the prospects offered by the Astrakhan Region as the official circles. The presentation at the RF Embassy in Beijing attracted the leading figures of top Chinese companies involved in trade, production, investments, and tourism, as well as representatives of the Chinese Small and Medium Business Association, the Chinese Transport Association, the China International Freight Forwarders Association, etc.

On 12-14 June, 2008, Governor of the Astrakhan Region Alexander Zhilkin visited the Henan Province as head of a delegation of the region's key ministers: he and his colleagues familiarized themselves with the province's industrial and tourist potential and discussed a wide range of issues of mutual interest with the heads of the province and the state university of Zhengzhou, the province's capital.

On 21-22 October, 2008, an official delegation from Henan headed by Vice Governor Zhang Dawei arrived in Astrakhan to discuss joint projects in the oil and gas sphere, as well as roads and

construction, with the region's governor. The Chinese side received information about the construction projects and the conditions on which it could be involved in them.

The contacts continued in November 2011, at the 3rd China Overseas Investment Fair COIFair 2011; Astrakhan arrived with a portfolio of investment projects including:

- (1) developing North Caspian oil and gas fields;
- (2) building the Alcha agro-industrial park;
- (3) creating sturgeon-growing facilities;
- (4) building a sugar-beetroot processing plant;
- (5) establishing the Zaboldinsky industrial-commercial park;
- (6) housing construction in several districts (Moshkarikha, Bekhterev, and the Nachalovskoe Highway);
- (7) manufacturing city and intercity buses in the Astrakhan Region;
- (8) developing efficient innovation technology for the manufacture of pharmaceuticals and medicine based on Caspian lotus;
- (9) constructing a state-of-the-art hothouse tomato complex with a total area of 215 hectares;
- (10) building the first and second phases of the Olya port.⁵¹

In 2012, bilateral cooperation received a significant boost when a delegation from the Henan Province came on an official visit to the Astrakhan Region.⁵² The Chinese came to discuss in greater detail bilateral trade, as well as economic and humanitarian cooperation, the foundations of which were envisaged in the Agreement on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological, and Cultural Cooperation signed in 2008.

The sides discussed the possibility of direct air flights between the Astrakhan Region and China which, the Chinese argued, would bring Chinese businesses and tourists to the Astrakhan Region. They intended to look into the details and identify which of the national air companies might be interested in the project; the Chinese were eager to help organize contacts between the tourist companies of both regions.

The energy industry, particularly the oil and gas complex, constitutes the most promising sphere of cooperation. The Astrakhan Region has already organized cooperation between LUKoil and Gazprom, which will work together with Chinese partners at six oil and gas fields.⁵³

Cooperation between the Astrakhan Region and China in building drilling platforms is gaining momentum: in May 2010, China's Yantai CIMC Raffles Offshore Ltd. placed an order for a Super M2 Jackup Drilling Platform (which will be installed in the Turkmen sector of the Caspian⁵⁴) with Krasnye Barrikady, one of the leading Astrakhan dockyards. It was launched in June 2011; the

⁵¹ See: "The Government of the Astrakhan Region Extends its International Cooperation with China," *Astrakhansk-
ie novosti*, available at [<http://astra-novosti.ru/правительство-астраханской-области-4/>], 7 November, 2011.

⁵² For more detail, see: "The Astrakhan Region and the Henan Province are Extending Their Partnership," Ministry of International and Foreign Economic Ties of the Astrakhan Region, available at [<http://www.astmid.ru/index.php?mode=news&iid=1332162483>], 27 July, 2012.

⁵³ See: "The Astrakhan Region is Seeking Chinese Investments," *Vesti/Ekonomika*, available at [<http://www.vestifinance.ru/articles/3541>], 9 November, 2011.

⁵⁴ See: "Astrakhan Shipbuilders Add New Production Facilities to Meet the Order of Oil Business," Astrakhan's site, available at [<http://astrahan.gs/novosti-astraxani/10901-astrahansk-iesudostroitelirasshiryayutmoshnosti-podnoviezakazidlya-nefityanikov.html>], 23 June, 2012.

Astrakhan University is member of SCO University (a network university engaged in an international educational program in Asia), the only one of the universities of the Northern Caspian and the Caucasus that specializes in information technology.⁶³

There is a shortage of workforce in the Astrakhan Region, which explains why it invites 14,785 labor migrants (the quota for 2011). This shortage is most acutely felt in agriculture (over 80%), followed by the processing and construction spheres.⁶⁴

To close the gap, the region needed 16.5 thousand labor migrants in 2012.⁶⁵

In 2011, the region gathered one million tons of vegetables and water melons, which would have been impossible under Soviet power for the simple reason that labor migrants proved to be much better workers than soldiers and students, the main agricultural workforce in Soviet times.⁶⁶ Many researchers think that it was Chinese guest workers who made the greatest contribution.⁶⁷

There are different opinions about Chinese and other labor migrants: according to public opinion polls, 45% of the respondents in the Astrakhan Region agreed that "Russia should mainly invite Russians from the former republics" (23%) and "The fewer migrants there are in Russia the better" (22%); 32% supported the following statements: "Russia should accept all migrants wishing to live and work there, irrespective of their nationality and country of origin" (13%); "There is nothing bad in the fact that Azeris, Armenians, Georgians, Tajiks, etc. come to Russia" (10%) and "There is nothing bad in the fact that Chinese, Afghan, and African migrants come to Russia" (9%).⁶⁸

This attitude is based on what the people in the region think about migrants: 20% believe that the newcomers add to the crime statistics; 18% that they cause ethnic conflicts; 16% that they do not respect the local people and their traditions; and 14% that they monopolize the markets.⁶⁹

On the whole, people are less concerned about Chinese migrants and their compact settlements because migrants from the Southern Caucasus outnumber them by far.

Illegal Chinese migrants are deported: in January 2012, eight Chinese were brought to court and deported by the Administration of the Federal Bailiff Service for the Astrakhan Region.⁷⁰

Conclusion

China's policy in the Northern Caspian region is active and multivectoral, while its relations with Kalmykia and the Astrakhan Region can be further developed.

⁶³ For more detail, see: "The Higher Educational Establishments which Coordinate Training for the USCO," SCO University, available at [http://www.eduweek.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=5&Itemid=7&lang=ru], 27 July, 2012.

⁶⁴ See: "The Astrakhan Region can Expect Labor Migrants in the Coming Year," Ministry of Social Development and Labor of the Astrakhan Region, available at [<http://www.minsoctrud.astrobl.ru/event/trudovye-otnosheniya/trudovaya-migratsiya/astrohanskaya-oblast-mozhet-rasschityvat-na-trudovy>], 19 August, 2010.

⁶⁵ See: K. Aleksandrov, "Prioritet v trudoustroystve za rossiyanami," *Volga*, 12 January, 2012.

⁶⁶ See: N. Bykova, "Migratsiia ostanovit nevozmozhno," *Stavropolskaia pravda*, 24 December, 2011.

⁶⁷ See, for example: A. Malinin, "Kitayskaia interventsia. Astrakhanskii selchane stolknulis s novoy, opasnoy problemoy!" *Fakt i kompromat* (weekly), 18 November, 2011.

⁶⁸ See, for example: *Protokol zasedania Obshchestvenno-konsultativnogo soveta pri Upravlenii Federalnoy migratsionnoy sluzhby po Astrakhanskoy oblasti*, No. 4, Astrakhan, 15 September, 2009.

⁶⁹ See: *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ See: "Astrakhan Bailiffs Deport Citizens of China Who Lived Illegally in Russia," Administration of the Federal Bailiff Service for the Astrakhan Region, available at [<http://www.r30.fssprus.ru/news/document21085013/>], 20 January, 2012.

China is attracted by the region's advantageous geopolitical location: the Northern Caspian is a bridge between Central Asia and the Caucasus, which means that by extending and deepening its contacts with the Russian regions, China is seeking to increase its influence there.
