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EDITED BY MARLENE LARUELLE

CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

AND ITS IMPACT IN CENTRAL ASIA

CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND ITS IMPACT IN CENTRAL ASIA

Marlene Laruelle, editor

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China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2013 at Nazarbayev University. It is therefore natural that, for its launch, the NAC-NU Central Asia Studies Program, in partnership with GW's Central Asia Program, seeks to disentangle the puzzle of the Belt and Road Initiative and its impact on Central Asia.

Selected from over 130 proposals, the papers brought together here offer a complex and nuanced analysis of China's New Silk Road project: its aims, the challenges facing it, and its reception in Central Asia. Combining methodological and theoretical approaches drawn from disciplines as varied as economics and sociology, and operating at both micro and macro levels, this collection of papers provides the most up-to-date research on China's BRI in Central Asia.

It also represents the first step toward the creation of a new research hub at Nazarbayev University, aiming to forge new bonds between junior, mid-career, and senior scholars who hail from different regions of the world and belong to different intellectual traditions.

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PART III. CHINA'S "SOFT POWER" TOOLKIT: THE ISSUE OF PERCEPTIONS

Chapter 10. Silk Road Economic Belt: Effects of China's Soft Power Diplomacy in Kazakhstan

Bhavna Dave
(University of London, London)

It was in September 2013 at Nazarbayev University in Astana that the Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, a massive Chinese-led infrastructural development strategy for establishing connectivity across Central Asia, and onward, through the Gulf and Mediterranean region, with Europe. Its Central Asia component, which he referred to as the Silk Road Economic Belt, was a pledge to revive the fabled ancient route by means of massive infrastructural investment in roads, rail links, bridges, pipelines, and commercial networks, as well as expanded socio-cultural ties, including people-to-people linkages.

The title "*One Belt, One Road*" highlights the principles of unity and one-ness that underlie China's infrastructural construction strategy. Its goal is to attain shared developmental and security goals through cooperation and the complementarity of objectives and strategies benefiting all. The choice of Astana, and of the Nazarbayev University in particular, as the venue for unveiling SREB could not have been more symbolic and astute. Hailing the Silk Road initiative as a "golden opportunity for development" in the region, Xi emphasized the special place of Kazakhstan by quoting the Chinese proverb that "a close neighbor is more valuable than a distant relative."

In China, the launch of BRI has led to the rapid rise of institutions, centers, and think tanks for developing and promoting the various components of the strategy. China has held a series of conferences and workshops within the country and abroad to promote its vision, implement construction projects,

and garner local support through engagement with officials, business experts, and a variety of non-state actors. BRI has spurred a flurry of public diplomacy to engage the various stakeholders within society and reinforce high diplomacy—the handshakes between the leaders of China and the Central Asian states that serve as affirmations of friendship, a common vision, and the convergence of goals and priorities.

Over the past two decades, the Communist Party of China (CPC) leadership has established a wide-ranging economic and trade partnership with the Central Asian states. It has also forged a close personal bond with local ruling elites, pledging support to state sovereignty and non-interference in internal matters. These promises have boosted the durability of authoritarian regimes in the region and weakened social and political challenges.¹ However, the warm and deferential political rhetoric has not overcome public unease, fear, and skepticism. On the contrary, the rapidly widening economic partnership with China has intensified public fears about China's economic and political ambitions, the attraction of the region's natural resources and raw materials, and the influx of Chinese migrants—in other words, what locals perceive as China's creeping economic, commercial, and demographic expansion.

Indeed, the gap between Central Asian leaders' support for China and pervasive public distrust persists despite increasingly cordial official ties.² China's policymakers are mindful of the lingering negative perceptions about China in its neighbor-

1 Alexander Cooley, "Authoritarianism goes global: Countering democratic norms," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (July 2015): 49–63.

2 Marlène Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change, and the Chinese Factor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

hood and beyond, as well as the fear of being “taken over” by China in economic and demographic terms. The Chinese expression “warm politics, cold public” (*zheng re, min leng*) reflects an acknowledgement on the part of the Chinese leadership that notwithstanding very good elite relations, public opinion in neighboring states remains wary of, if not completely hostile toward, China.³ Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan share a long border with it, which simultaneously offers an opportunity for close partnership and serves as a source of angst. China’s official rhetoric and public diplomacy have sought to curb these widening disparities using the language of “complementarity” and mutually beneficial economic development.

As China invests vast amounts in enormous infrastructural projects and in agriculture in parts of Africa and Asia, the ruling authorities are becoming sensitized to local resistance to China’s growing influence in the economic, business, and sociocultural spheres. In response to local protests demanding better labor conditions, transparency, and accountability, the Chinese have adjusted their policies and made appropriate concessions, as the cases of Sri Lanka and Thailand show.⁴ Greater engagement of private and state-affiliated Chinese companies with societal groups, local communities, and trade unions has produced a learning curve, resulting in an increasingly cordial and mutually beneficial partnership in a number of African states.

China has embarked on a concerted public diplomacy drive, emphasizing people-to-people contacts in order to transform the way it is perceived in the region and engaging with a broader array of societal actors and stakeholders in order to alter the prevailing stereotypes. A vital component of its new strategy is the desire to convert its economic and commercial power into an important educational and cultural resource by offering scholarships and numerous opportunities for Central Asians to learn the Chinese language and familiarize themselves with China’s culture and history. China has already allocated vast funds to enhancing educational, cultural, and social cooperation. China’s recent initiatives to enhance people-to-people contacts have in-

creasingly relied on projecting its “soft,” or persuasive, power through education, propaganda, PR, and public diplomacy.

This chapter analyzes China’s projection of soft power and numerous public diplomacy efforts to promote close people-to-people relations. It assesses China’s efforts to mitigate widespread concerns about its goals and activities among neighboring populations by representing itself as a benign peaceful actor, committed to development and connectivity that benefit all. I also look at how China’s public diplomacy efforts resonate with various economic and social actors in Kazakhstan, to what extent they challenge the prevalent stereotypes, and how they contribute to building a more favorable image of China. The chapter contributes to debates on China’s soft power and public diplomacy in the region within the context of important geopolitical shifts and economic partnerships.

Economic Power and Infrastructural Investment as Cornerstones of China’s “Soft Power”

Joseph Nye defined soft power as a form of non-coercive power which has the effect of “getting others to want the outcomes that you want” through the “ability to attract, [which] leads to acquiescence.”⁵ Hard economic and military power constitute the necessary foundation enabling persuasive power and influence to emanate from intangible resources such as culture and norms. Soft power develops organically with the involvement of societal actors; it cannot be consciously cultivated, and is not directly mustered by state efforts.⁶

China’s economic and commercial power, enormous production capacity, and demographic and military strength are the foundations of its hard power. It has all the geopolitical assets for projecting its power: vast territory; huge population; a qualified labor force; a large middle class and high number of professionals; natural resources; production capacity; military forces; a unified political system; a strong cultural tradition; and political stability. The impact of China’s hard power has been magnified by the

3 David Kerr, “Central Asian and Russian perspectives on China’s strategic emergence,” *International Affairs* 86, no. 1 (2010): 127–152.

4 Tom Miller, *China’s Asian Dream: Empire Building along the New Silk Road* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

5 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 5–6.

6 Nye, Josef S., “Hard Power, Soft Power and the Goals of Diplomacy,” in *American Power in the 21st Century*, ed. David Held and M. Koenig-Archibugi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 114–133.

asymmetry between China and Central Asian states in terms of development and demography.⁷

BRI is an element of “China’s Dream,” which encompasses the country’s strategy from establishing supremacy in Asia to attaining global ascendancy.⁸ It is also a personal initiative by Xi Jinping to revitalize domestic support for—and thus increase the legitimacy of—the leadership of the CPC by carrying out further economic reforms that will bring the vision of development to life and deliver on the promise of material prosperity. At the international level, meanwhile, BRI is a narrative of China’s peaceful model of growth and development, particularly for its less developed neighbors and isolated regions in Africa.

China has long since replaced Russia as the number one trading partner of Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian states. When Xi unveiled BRI, trade between Kazakhstan and China amounted to US\$28.9 billion, whereas with Russia it was US\$23.5 billion.⁹ China is the largest investor in Central Asia; it invested about US\$19 billion in Kazakhstan’s economy in the first two decades of the latter’s independence, before the launch of BRI. It has also made significant investments in the energy sectors of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, as well as Russia. China’s economic and commercial success, its ability to carry out enormous development projects efficiently at low cost, and the affordability of Chinese goods—from necessities to “cheap chic” fashion—have helped to extend its impact, a form of “soft power,” to every household.

China’s billions of dollars of infrastructural investments link the border territories of Central Asia ever more closely with the developmental plans and priorities of adjacent Chinese regions. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been pivotal in the securitization of Xinjiang and allowing China to extend its economic and security axis to the west. The establishment of cross-border Special Economic Zones and logistical cooperation centers is one of the key highlights of SREB. The development of Khorgos, on the China–Kazakhstan border, as a key transit hub and logistical center for cargo on the Silk Road

between China and Europe is one of the BRI’s flagship projects, comparable with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the construction of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. All three have been described as “game changers” with the potential to deliver huge benefits to the host countries and benefit all parties. Khorgos is also being developed as the world’s largest dry port, and the one located furthest away from any ocean; this enables Kazakhstan to link up to the port of Lianyungang, where China is building a China–Kazakhstan international logistic cooperation base.¹⁰

The global scale of BRI has inspired widespread debates about China’s efforts to restructure the global order, financial institutions, and international society. It is too early to know whether China is trying to reshape the global order through BRI, which is both a vision as well as a strategy. While the debates on China’s global and geopolitical salience are ongoing and inconclusive, it is clear that in its immediate vicinity—in Central Asia and the border regions of the Russian Far East—China is emerging as the uncontested, number one external economic actor and, increasingly, as a norm-setter.

Coordination of the Silk Road Economic Belt and Nurly Zhol

In 2014, a year after Xi Jinping unveiled the BRI, Nazarbayev announced the coordination (*sostykovka*) of his national development vision, *Nurly Zhol* (“Bright Path”), which is part of the Kazakhstan-2050 strategy, with the Silk Road Economic Belt strategy. The Kazakhstan-2050 strategy also contains the program “100 Concrete Steps,” launched soon after Nazarbayev’s re-election in 2015 to undertake “innovative modernization” and realize the country’s ambition of joining the top 30 developed countries by 2050.¹¹

By emphasizing coordination and complementarity between Nurly Zhol and SREB, both states brought the economic cooperation between them to

7 Kerr, “Central Asian and Russian perspectives,” 137.

8 Miller, *China’s Asian Dream*.

9 Olga Sokolai, “Aktual’nyi aktsent Kazakhstanskoi ekonomiki: Nihao, Podnebesnaya!,” *Ritm Evrazii* 22 (November 2016), <http://www.ritm Eurasia.org/news--2016-11-22--aktualnyj-akcent-kazahstanskoj-ekonomiki-nihao-podnebesnaja-26987>.

10 “Kazakhstan: Khorgos East Gate Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is an important part of transport and logistic system,” *Kazakhstan Temir Zholy*, January 12, 2016, http://uic.org/com/uic-e-news/480/article/kazakhstan-khorgos-east-gate?page=iframe_enevs.

11 “Kazakhstan: Strategy 2050,” <https://strategy2050.kz/en/>.

a new level. They signed investment agreements for the colossal sum of US\$54 billion¹² and forged a long-term partnership and coordination.¹³ Kazakhstan is the only state in the region to have already established an “all-round strategic partnership” with China.¹⁴ It is not only an invaluable supplier of energy and key mineral resources to China, but also a keen supporter of its securitization-oriented development of the Xinjiang Autonomous Republic, and now a vital transit corridor linking China to Europe. As part of its multi-vector foreign policy, Astana has emphasized partnership with the West as well as cooperation with Russia; it has pledged to strengthen the Russia-forged Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), of which Kazakhstan is the second most vital partner.

More recent statements by Kazakhstani officials, experts, and media continue to highlight the “coupling” (*sopriazhenie*) or “aligning” (*sostykovka*) of the country’s own developmental objectives and strategic visions with SREB. One analyst defined Kazakhstan as the “buckle” (*priazhka*) in the Silk Road Economic Belt, fastening the various links together.¹⁵ Many others note the changes leading to a positive reception of China’s role.¹⁶ The “coupling” of the two projects rests on the existing framework of bilateral economic partnership and trade and commercial ties, as well as a multilateral partnership within the SCO framework.

At the same time, SREB, as part of China’s BRI, is seen as coterminous with China’s foreign policy rather than its global vision. In many ways, SREB is an extension of China’s massive developmental investments in its “peripheral regions” in the northwest (notably the Xinjiang Autonomous Region), geared at an aggressive securitization of its restive western borderlands through infrastructural development.

The distinction between bilateral agreements, partnerships and new projects being launched under SREB is blurred, as many bilateral agreements are now being brought under the Silk Road and BRI umbrella. While delivering a talk on the effects of on Central Asia in August 2016 at the Kazakhstan

Institute of Strategic Studies under the President in Astana, I asked the audience what the appropriate Russian abbreviation would be: OBOR or SREB? Both sound rather too flippant in Russian to be taken seriously. The chorus of voices advised me, “Just say OBOR,” but finally one person said, “Simply say China—it’s all the same!” which prompted laughter from the audience.

SREB, and earlier SCO, together with China’s policy toward the region, have had common elements: emphasis on the principles of non-interference, strong support for the regime, and aversion to any form of externally induced “regime change.” This agnosticism about values and the nature of the regime, with a lack of regard for human rights, civil society, and normative concerns, has bolstered state power and the hold of despotic and authoritarian political elites in the region.

The coordination of Nurly Zhol with China’s Silk Road development strategy in 2014 provoked mixed reactions in Kazakhstan, though media and public debates remain circumscribed. Many voiced concerns about the lack of specific details of Chinese investments and specific projects, despite huge promises. One well-known expert on China mentioned that so far, these investments and projects are like apparitions: everyone talks about them, but nobody has seen them.¹⁷ Others echoed the sentiment that details are deliberately kept vague, and the lack of a legal framework raises questions about the terms and conditions of investments, the transfer of production, and the hiring of workers and specialists from China. Many also warned that the inevitable influx of workers from China would squeeze out Kazakhstani workers. The latter concern is, however, exaggerated, as the number of Chinese workers and traders in Kazakhstan is far smaller than estimated. Kazakhstan’s migration laws, devised to protect the national labor market, use quotas to impose strict limits on the share of foreign workers and the allocation of top management position to foreigners.

12 Sokolai, “Aktual’nyi aktsent Kazakhstanskoi ekonomiki.”

13 Sanat Kushkumbayev, “Kazakhstan’s Nurly Zhol and China’s Economic Belt of the Silk Road: Confluence of Goals,” *The Astana Times*, September 22, 2015, <http://astanatimes.com/2015/09/kazakhstan-nurly-zhol-and-chinas-economic-belt-of-the-silk-road-confluence-of-goals/>.

14 Michael Clarke, “Kazakh Responses to the Rise of China: Between Elite Bandwagoning and Societal Ambivalence?,” in *Asian Thought on China’s Changing International Relations*, ed. Niv Horesh and Emilian Kavalski (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

15 Shaimerden Chikanaev, “GRATA,” February 17, 2017, [http://www.gratanet.com/up_files/\[GRATA\]-FDIs_in_Kazakhstan-Key_Legal_Challenges_Feb_percent202017_rus.pdf](http://www.gratanet.com/up_files/[GRATA]-FDIs_in_Kazakhstan-Key_Legal_Challenges_Feb_percent202017_rus.pdf).

16 Yaroslav Razumov, “Kazakhstan i Kitai: sblizhenie ili imitatsiia?,” *Global Affairs*, May 31, 2016, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/global-processes/Kazakhstan-i-Kitai--sblizhenie-ili-imitatsiya-18190>.

17 Adil Kaukenov, China expert. Personal interview with the author, August 2016.

Andrey Chebotarev, a political analyst, lamented Kazakhstan's failure to formulate its own strategy for defending its national interests despite widespread panic and fear about China's expansion. By contrast, Valikhan Tuleshov, the director of Institute of Regional Development of the International Academy of Business, echoed the official line and portrayed public concerns as an affirmation of the correct direction of Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy, saying, "Our political leadership has learnt to balance the political wind from Russia and the economic one from China."¹⁸ Tuleshov blamed the Russian-controlled media for projecting Sinophobia and framing Russia and China as rivals in Central Asia, noting that such fear-mongering about China ("*strashilki o KNR*") is expediently used by Russia to strengthen its geopolitical project of forging the EEU, while at the same time Russia seeks to forge multilateral cooperation both between the EEU and SRB and between Russia's own developmental projects and those initiated by China under BRI.¹⁹

Public opinion surveys funded by the Russia-based Eurasian Development Bank (an organ of the EEU) found that only one in six Kazakh citizens see China as a "friendly country," in contrast to 84 percent and 48 percent who see Russia and Belarus, respectively, as "friendly." Furthermore, these surveys found that China was among the top three nations most likely to be named an "unfriendly country." The in-built bias in the survey (it was conducted by a pro-Russia bank)²⁰ and lack of any details on methodology prove that the data is used for propagandistic purposes. Other reports simply note in very general terms that Sinophobia—and other negative public perceptions—could pose a major challenge to the Silk Road project, while failing to provide specific details.²¹

As Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister in 2016, Erlan Idrissov rather contentiously invoked the phrase "new Great Game in Central Asia," alluding to prevalent Western concerns about Central Asia tilting toward China only to rebuke them. Evoking the official platitudes, he added, "the strengthening of our

role as a bridge between Asia and Europe is in our raw economic interest and initiatives such as the Silk Road Economic Belt will create a wealth of opportunities in the region and beyond." He dismissed the concerns raised by journalists about asymmetry between Kazakhstan and China as "a neat headline" that ignores the reality: "a hard-headed and mutually beneficial partnership involving Kazakhstan, Russia, China, and others which is creating the jobs and investment Kazakhstan needs."²²

These officials' assessments indicate Kazakhstan's pragmatic embrace of SREB, its coordination with China's developmental goals, and also the latter's ability to use its persuasive power by deploying its economic and manufacturing capabilities alongside an invigorated public diplomacy. As cooperation between both states deepens and benefits start trickling in, the asymmetries are likely to widen and trigger further concerns about several details that have yet to be worked out. Unintended and unanticipated consequences of the partnership will also come to the surface. Kazakhstan must simultaneously appease national interests, manage popular expectations, and be seen as prioritizing its national interests and safeguarding its sovereignty and well-being.

Changing Perceptions and Stereotypes about China

As mentioned earlier, Kazakhstan's perceptions of China are dynamic and complex. Growing familiarity and contacts with the Chinese are bringing about shifts in perceptions and attitudes. With the invigoration of China's public diplomacy, its diplomats and other emissaries are also becoming more approachable and more engaged with the local milieu. Studies of perceptions of China's role and practices conducted by Kazakhstani scholars in the late 1990s and 2000s revealed a widespread pattern of distrust of China and anxiety about its ambitions in the region, with stereotypes and prejudices running rife.²³ Noted

18 "Eksperty rasskazali ob ekspansii Kitaia v Kazakhstan," *Nur.kz*, December 6, 2013, <https://www.nur.kz/293563-eksperty-rasskazali-ob-ekspan-sii-kitaya-v-kazakhstan.html>.

19 "Eksperty rasskazali ob ekspansii," *Nur.kz*.

20 Eurasian Development Bank, http://eabr.org/e/research/centreCIS/projectsandreportsCIS/integration_barometer/index.php?id_16=48994.

21 Dmitriy Frolovskiy, "Kazakhstan's China Choice," *The Diplomat*, July 6, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/kazakhstans-china-choice/>.

22 Erlan Idrissov, "Kazakhstan: 100 Steps Toward a New Nation," *The Diplomat*, July 25, 2015, <http://www.kazakhembus.com/content/khorgos-opens-new-opportunity-eurasia#sthash.24yNkZHJ.dpuf>.

23 Elena Sadovskaya, "Chinese migration to Central Asia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 49, no. 1 (2008). See also Laruelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia*.

Kazakhstani sociologist Konstantin Syroezhkin identified the pervasiveness of “myths” about China, propagated in media, public discourse, and even official publications.²⁴ Researchers in Russia have similarly reported widespread distrust and stereotypes that have no empirical basis.²⁵ The mix of a lack of familiarity, ignorance, disinformation, prejudice, and anxiety has resulted in exaggeration of the number of Chinese in the region, their interests and influence. This is compounded by the absence of reliable statistics or methodology for identifying the different categories of Chinese living in and visiting Kazakhstan.

Survey research and interviews reveal the scale of ignorance and disinformation about the Chinese, which are shaped by respondents’ level of familiarity with China, their geographical location, social status, and level of education.²⁶ Burkhanov and Chen have analyzed the differences in Russian and Kazakh media’s perceptions of the “threats” posed by Chinese migration to Kazakhstan, with the latter tending to be more nationalistic and xenophobic.²⁷ The prevailing prejudices and distrust, including Sinophobia, are rooted in a lack of first-hand contacts between the Chinese and Kazakhstani, and a lack of knowledge about one another.

The availability of new information, direct experience of dealing with the Chinese at various levels, and travel to different parts of China are contributing to a greater sense of goodwill and trust. However, the picture is diverse, mixed, and dynamic, and growing familiarity and knowledge do not necessarily and consistently lead to greater amity and trust. Attitudes are contingent and liable to undergo quick shifts, showing that longstanding distrust cannot be easily untangled.

The next sections analyze the protests on proposed amendments to the Land Code to allow foreigners to lease agricultural land for up to 25 years and the debates about the proposal to transfer a number of Chinese production facilities to Kazakhstan. These developments indicate shifting attitudes, as well as efforts by both China and Kazakhstan to frame China’s role in the region favorably.

The Debate on Leasing Land

Protests broke out in several towns in Kazakhstan in April and May 2016 against proposed amendments to the Land Code that would have increased the term for which foreigners could lease agricultural land from 10 to 25 years. The scale and intensity of protests against the proposed legislation in various cities—including Almaty, Astana, Atyrau, Uralsk, and Pavlodar—took the state by surprise, and it struggled to control this opposition.²⁸

The proposed law was interpreted as allowing the Chinese to take over farmland for agricultural as well as commercial purposes. The protests were ignited by the fears about the rapid pace of Chinese investment under SREB, which was seen as turning Kazakhstan into a vast transit corridor, opening up the country’s rich resources for exploitation by China, and making the country a “dumping ground” for China’s surplus production. Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states have seen several popular protests sparked by reports—verified and unverified—that their governments had ceded or leased territory to China as part of border demarcation or for agricultural cultivation. Furthermore, the terms and conditions of leasing land have been seen as unfavorable for Kazakhstan; they lack environmental safeguards, not to mention a clear legal framework on land lease to foreigners, property ownership, and the employment of foreign workers. These dynamics are seen as aiding informal and quasi-legal patterns of land lease and production in Kazakhstan from which foreigners benefit at the expense of Kazakhs—with Chinese the most important foreign economic influence. The absence of credible statistics, facts, and informed debates on the scale of Chinese factories, workers, and investments has contributed to public anger.

Over the past decade, the Kazakhstani government has sought to feel the popular pulse, moderate public opinion, and cautiously lay the groundwork for popular acceptance of a closer embrace of China. The leadership would like the population to adjust to a growing Chinese presence in the country and increasing Chinese access to Kazakhstan’s raw materials and land resources. Kazakhstan First Deputy Prime

24 Konstantin Syroezhkin, “Social Perceptions of China and the Chinese: A View from Kazakhstan,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2009): 29–46.

25 Vilya Gelbras, “Chinese migration in Russia,” *Russia in Global Affairs* 2 (April–June 2005), http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_4962.

26 Sadovskaya, “Chinese migration to Central Asia”; Aziz Burkhanov and Yu-Wen Chen, “Kazakh perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese migration,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 12 (2016): 2129–2148.

27 Burkhanov and Chen, “Kazakh perspective on China.”

28 “Kazakhstan: Crackdown on peaceful protests,” *Human Rights Watch*, May 23, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/23/kazakhstan-crackdown-peaceful-protest>.

Minister Bakythan Sagyntaev rather confidently endorsed the existing scheme for leasing land to foreign citizens on May 13, 2014. He stated that the citizens of China, Russia, and other states were leasing land in Kazakhstan, adding that “there is no problem” with this, since Kazakhstan’s Land Code does not prohibit leasing land to foreigners or foreign companies: “It is another question to sell the land to foreigners—the law does not allow it—it only allows lease for up to 10 years.” He also acknowledged that land in Akmola oblast and in East Kazakhstan was leased for agricultural production: “We know who it is leased to, for how many years and how many hectares.”²⁹

It was clear that the government had been complacent and failed to anticipate the scale of protests. The protests may have had the covert or tacit support of officials and notable figures within the government, given the large scale of public participation and popular fury (at least by Kazakhstani standards). After initially appearing ineffective and tolerant, the authorities cracked down on protestors, making numerous arrests. Nazarbayev announced a moratorium on the proposed amendment until the end of 2017 and pledged to protect national sovereignty and interests.³⁰ Prime Minister Karim Masimov, who is seen as very close to China (he speaks fluent Chinese and has mixed Kazakh–Uyghur origins), issued a rare apology for the government’s handling of plans to auction off agricultural land to private bidders, and announced the formation of a State Commission for Land that will include opposition politicians and serve as a forum to discuss the contentious issue of land privatization.

Having made crucial symbolic concession to nationalist concerns, the regime also took harsh measures, designed to send the message that unauthorized rallies and protests would not be tolerated. Social activists Max Bokayev and Talgat Ayan were sentenced to three-year prison terms for inciting social unrest, spreading false information, and disrupting public order by holding unsanctioned rallies. Another individual, Tohtar Tuleshov, who was

alleged to have given Ayan US\$100,000 to finance the protests, was sentenced to 21 years in jail on charges of plotting a coup.³¹

Transfer of Chinese Production Capacity to Kazakhstan

Another sensitive issue is the proposal to transfer a number of Chinese manufacturing enterprises to Kazakhstan and uncertainty about the legal framework within which Chinese managerial staff and workers are brought in. At the G20 summit in Hangzhou in 2016, China proposed moving the production capacity of 51 plants to Kazakhstan under the Silk Road development plan, in order to enhance its US\$20 billion investments. These include work on the new railroad transit route Altynkol–Khorghos, the Sarybulak–Zimunay gas pipeline, and the Beyneu–Bozoy pipeline. Details on the plants and their locations have not been forthcoming, fueling suspicions that the transfer of Chinese production capacity to the natural resource base for “industrial purposes” will generate favorable conditions for them to acquire control of land and use it covertly for commercial, including agricultural, purposes. This has led to fears that the moratorium on leasing land to foreigners could easily be circumvented by giving these lands to Chinese for industrial construction and staff housing, which would, de facto, present Chinese with the opportunity to use the land for commercial and agrarian purposes.³²

Opposition activists allege that the transfer of Chinese factories to Kazakhstan raise many questions about the “real interests” of Chinese capital and will be followed by the arrival of engineers, technicians, and labor from China, pushing out local staff and requiring them to learn Chinese.³³ There are widespread reports, again lacking sufficient evidence, that the local affiliate of China National Petroleum Corporation in Aktobe has been asking its workers to take Chinese language tests.³⁴ There is also resentment toward KazMunayGas, which sold a crucial share to Chinese companies and established a joint

29 “Kazakhstan dal zemliu v arendu grazhdanam Kitaia,” *Nur.kz*, May 13, 2014, <http://finance.nur.kz/313398.html>.

30 “Kazakh president postpones land privatization until 2017,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-Nazarbayev-delays-land-privatization/27717597.html>.

31 Aigerim Toleukhanova, “Kazakhstan: Land protests trial ends with 5 year jail sentences,” *EurasiaNet*, November 28, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/81441>.

32 “Why China transfers production to Kazakhstan?,” *Kazworld*, September 7, 2016, <http://kazworld.info/?p=56343>.

33 “Kazakh KazMunayGas to transfer shares to CEFC China,” *YiCai Global*, July 28, 2017, <https://www.yicaiglobal.com/news/kazakh-kazmunay-gas-transfer-shares-cefc-china-energy>.

34 Jack Farchy, “Kazakh language schools shift from English to Chinese,” *The Financial Times*, May 9, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/e99ff7a8-0bd8-11e6-9456-44ab5211a2f/>.

venture in which the Chinese CEFC holds a 51 per cent stake in KazMunayGas International (KMGI) while the latter retains the remaining 49 percent. The venture relies on Kazakhstan's energy and China's financial resources to expand Belt and Road-related business.

In view of the scant information about governmental negotiations on environment safeguards, production-sharing arrangements, and other issues, local activists allege a contradiction or double standard in terms of China's commitment to environmental protection. China is working to tackle domestic pollution and is also engaged in international efforts through multilateral fora such as the Beijing Consensus on environmental protection. At the same time, however, this lack of details about their environmental practices in Central Asia—coupled with credible analysis—suggests that China is moving high-polluting factories to neighboring states and selling crops cultivated through the use of toxic fertilizers and pesticides in the region. This has led to suspicions that key government figures are the special beneficiaries of business deals with China, are withholding information, and are thereby contributing to “Chinese state control” in Central Asia.³⁵

The absence of statistics and information make it difficult to estimate the number of Chinese migrant workers in Kazakhstan; the legal framework under which they are brought in; the national composition of the top management bodies; work conditions and wages paid to the Chinese; and relations between Chinese and locals. When I asked a leading Sinologist about the legal framework and staff composition of Kazakhstan's numerous Chinese enterprises in 2011, he noted that these enterprises seem to function as “states within states,” completely closed to outsiders and inaccessible to the media.

Kazakhstan's leading experts do not have a comprehensive understanding of the China–Kazakhstan economic partnership. Syroezhkin noted, “There is no clarity yet about the share of Chinese investments and their credit obligations—there are various statistics but it is not clear how to make sense of these. China is spending US\$2 billion from its US\$40 billion Silk Road infrastructure fund on a new investment fund to support ‘capacity cooperation’ with Kazakhstan, but all the remaining ones are credits.”³⁶

The conditions of credit are not known and contracts are not published, though talks about large-scale investment and massive projects in which the Chinese are participating make the headlines.

The lack of transparency regarding China's investments and activities and the process of concluding these deals and tenders also contributes to rumors, distortions, and myths, culminating in the proliferation of clichés such as “creeping expansion,” “covert settlements,” “yellow peril,” and the “use of local fronts for Chinese business.”

As with China's projects under BRI worldwide, there are questions about how Central Asian populations stand to benefit from the proposed investments and developmental plans. There is a perceived risk that while the various transport “corridors” will allow China to export its goods via Central Asia to Europe, they may also turn the entire territories of Kazakhstan and adjacent states into major transport corridors, fulfilling China's needs.

To a certain extent, the ruling authorities have allowed measured public debate. Public figures have been able to “air out” their grievances through spontaneous societal resistance to expanding Chinese influence, which is also a way to increase pressure on China and so secure better deals. Sinophobia is for instance a key instrument used by national-patriots who, over a decade and a half ago, were engaged in mobilizing public opinion to combat the hegemony of Russia and the Russian language.

China's Public Diplomacy and People-to-People Contacts

Since the launch of BRI, China has reinvigorated its global public diplomacy. The Chinese political establishment is taking determined steps to alter notions about it held in the West which have become hegemonic and been shared widely around the world. China wants to be seen as a reliable economic partner interested in the mutually beneficial pursuit of shared objectives but without any political goals. Chinese soft power strategy promotes an image of Beijing as a reliable and pragmatic economic alternative to the West and Russia. In promoting its traditional emphasis on infrastructural development and econom-

35 Kazworld, “Why China transfers production to Kazakhstan?”

36 “Private China firm to take control of unit of Kazakh state oil company,” *Reuters*, December 15, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-china-kazakhstan-idUKKBN0TY1D320151215>.

ic growth as prerequisites for security and political reforms, China is seeking support and legitimization for its development strategy by procuring wider public support in the region.

China has increasingly been sensitized into projecting its image as a peaceful, multicultural, tolerant, Muslim-friendly country, and is using its activities and engagement in the Muslim world—in Central Asia, Pakistan, and the Middle East, as well as among Muslims in Africa—to enhance its own image, both domestically and abroad.

In unveiling the SREB in Astana and emphasizing deep historical contacts between Kazakhs and Chinese, China has also invented connections and linkages that did not exist. Xi dated the establishment of close ties between the two peoples to 2,100 years ago, during the Han dynasty, when Chinese envoy Zhang Qian was twice sent to Central Asia with a message of peace and friendship. His journeys are portrayed as opening the door to friendly contacts between China and Central Asian countries along the Silk Road that links East and West, Asia and Europe. Xi also referred to Almaty as the “ancient city,” but while Kazakh nomads traversed these territories and established summer abodes (as evident from many archaeological relics), Almaty, then called Verny by the Russians, was founded in 1854 as a Cossack military outpost and was peripheral to the numerous Silk Road routes. Xi’s mention of the “Xian Xinghai Boulevard”—a name foreign to almost all of Almaty’s inhabitants—referred to a street which had been so named in 1992 after the signing of a treaty with China.³⁷

A central component of the strategy to promote “people-to-people” contacts is increasing the number of opportunities for Central Asians to familiarize themselves with Chinese culture, language, and norms, socializing them with China’s world view in order to transform negative stereotypes about the country.

Emphasizing people-to-people contacts while unveiling the Silk Road Economic Belt strategy, Xi an-

nounced that 30,000 government scholarships would be awarded to students of SCO member states. He also mentioned plans to invite a further 10,000 teachers and students from Confucius Institutes in these countries to visit China for study tours. Xi extended an invitation to 200 faculty members and students from Nazarbayev University to go to China the following year for summer camps. In addition, there are Chinese Government Scholarships, the Chinese Government Chinese Government Special Scholarship Scheme—University Postgraduate Program in designated universities, the Distinguished International Students Scholarship Scheme, the Chinese Culture Research Fellowship Scheme, and short-term scholarships for Chinese language studies. There are major centers for teaching Chinese language to students from SCO states at Lanzhou University in Gansu province, which is on the list of China’s top 100 universities, and at Xinjiang Pedagogical University in Urumqi.³⁸ China is already the third largest destination for international students after the United States and the United Kingdom.³⁹ Among international students, the perception of China has undergone a noticeable shift, with the country becoming an internationally recognized destination for high-quality education. After Russia, China is the second most popular destination for students from Kazakhstan.

Beijing has set up 11 Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese language and culture in the five Central Asian states. Confucius Institutes, Centers and Academies exist in virtually all Central Asian states, as well as in Russia, to facilitate knowledge and cultural exchanges.⁴⁰ China’s economic power in the region has led a growing number of Central Asians to learn Chinese. It is estimated that the number of students learning Chinese is increasing by 5 percent per month. Beijing has been actively offering scholarships to Kazakhstani students, and according to the China Scholarship Council, “the number of Kazakh citizens studying in China has risen more than fivefold in the past decade, to 12,000.”⁴¹ Dariga Nazarbayeva, deputy prime minister and daughter of

37 “Promote Friendship Between Our People and Work Together to Build a Bright Future” (speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University, Astana, September 7, 2013), <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cebel/eng/zxxx/t1078088.htm>. A Google search to locate this particular street in Almaty showed a string of numerous previous searches asking where the “Xian Xianghai boulevard in Almaty is located.”

38 Luftiya Abdulkholikzoda, “ShOS: novaia sila v novom mire,” *Znaniia, issledovaniia, nauchnyi poisk—prioritet respubliki Tadzhikistan* 6, no. 88 (2015), <http://pa-journal.ranepa.ru/articles/r102/3568/>.

39 “China’s rapid rise as an international students’ destination,” *University Business*, September 12, 2016, <http://universitybusiness.co.uk/Article/chinas-rapid-rise-as-an-international-student-destination>.

40 “Kitai vydelit 30 tysiach stipendii studentam iz stran ShOS dlia obuchenii v VUZakh,” *Kabar*, August 22, 2015, <http://old.kabar.kg/rus/society/full/61370>.

41 Farchy, “Kazakh language schools shift.”

the country's president, said in February 2016 that Kazakh children should learn Chinese in addition to Kazakh, Russian, and English.⁴² In Kazakhstan—and much of Central Asia—the attitude is, “If you want to go abroad, learn English. If you want to stay in Kazakhstan and do well, learn Chinese.” Nurzhan Baitemirov, founder of East–West Education Group, which specializes in teaching English to Kazakhs, reported increasing interest in learning Chinese among young professionals. Himself a graduate of Wuhan, Baitemirov said, “West Kazakhstan [the country's main oil-producing region] used to be dominated by Canadian companies, but they have shifted and it is now majority Chinese companies. It's better if you speak Chinese if you want to get a position.”⁴³

Vera Exnerova describes the broad group of non-state actors who are engaged in the process of norm socialization and public diplomacy, forming and transforming attitudes and knowledge about China.⁴⁴ China is particularly cultivating connections with the sections of the local society that have been socialized and acculturated into Chinese culture and norms, encouraging these individuals to speak with policymakers, experts, and the media, as well as to share their experiences with ordinary people and disseminate knowledge about the rising and globalizing China. In this way, China aims to socialize local citizens into the cherished norms of development, hard work, stability, harmony and one-ness.

Scholars analyzing China's use of soft power in other contexts have noted its increasing engagement of non-state actors and numerous “soft-power messengers” who have studied or worked in China, or have some other direct association. D'Hooghe suggests that, “a majority of these are, in one way or another, censured by Beijing.”⁴⁵ However, these non-state actors include those promoted by China, as well as those acting of their own volition with some approval and appreciation of Beijing. By and large, they are young and fluent in Chinese, with first-hand experience of living in China as students, function-

al socialization into Chinese culture and norms, and insight into the Chinese way of thinking and communication (thanks to their study and mastery of the language).

To what extent does Beijing control the message being transmitted and in what ways are these “soft power messengers” working in sync with Beijing's objectives? The people I talked to who have studied in China and/or have regular cultural or educational exchanges with institutions in China through contacts with the embassy conveyed enthusiasm, excitement, and a sense of novelty about having visited China and had discussions with officials. However, they cannot be seen as socialized primarily into Chinese values. They are living in a veritable marketplace of ideas, influences, and ideologies: the new nationalism, pride in nomadic values, and rising prosperity forged under Nazarbayev; the appeal of Western norms, cultural icons, ideas, and intellectual accomplishments; the enduring effects of Soviet norms and mindsets; and Russia's resurgent media space and soft power. Other influences and ideologies—Western liberal discourses as well as non-Western ones (“Asian values,” for instance)—also shape their outlook and preferences.

Aims and Limits of China's Soft Power

At the 17th National Congress of the CPC in 2007, Hu Jintao alluded to soft power as an important feature of China's national policy.⁴⁶ While obviously responding to Nye, his formulation sought to combine Confucian thought and other traditional Chinese philosophy with modern Marxism in order to create a notion of Chinese values, or “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” China's concept of external soft power includes “communicating Chinese positions and opinions, establishing a good international image for China, creating a favorable international environment, and promoting a peaceful, harmonious and cooperative world.”⁴⁷

42 “Nazarbayeva noted the need to learn English and Chinese languages,” The Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Official Website, 5 February 2016, <https://primeminister.kz/news/show/22/dNazarbayeva-otmetila-neobhodimost-izuchenija-anglijskogo-i-kitajskogo-jazykov-/05-02-2016?lang=en>.

43 “Ucheba v Kitae: chego khotiat i poluchaiut nashi studenty,” *Zakon.kz*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.zakon.kz/4846930-ucheba-v-kitae-chego-khot-jat-i-chto.html>.

44 See Vera Exnerova's chapter in this volume.

45 Ingrid D'Hooghe, “The limits of China's soft power in Europe: Beijing's public diplomacy puzzle,” *Clingendael Diplomacy Paper 25* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2010), 31.

46 Hu Jintao, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All” (report presented at the 17th Party Congress, October 15, 2007).

47 Osamu Sayama, “China's Approach to Soft Power Seeking a Balance between Nationalism, Legitimacy and International Influence,” *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Occasional Paper* (March 2016), https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201603_op_chinas_soft_power.pdf.

While Beijing has rhetorically launched its public diplomacy to emphasize its harmonious relationship with the world, its soft power is proposed as an alternative to U.S.-led globalization. These “Chinese values” are seen as being in competition with the “American values” of democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech. They seek to strengthen China’s voice and influence in the world, and, above all, to encourage a sense of pride in the country—a sense of nationalism—among Chinese living in China and overseas, with the goal of strengthening the regime’s control.

The narrative of China’s “peaceful rise” frames the country as an emerging Asian power committed to development, partnership, peace, and stability. It pledges respect to principles of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference while seeking to promote close people-to-people ties. It is implicitly a legitimization of the Chinese model of promoting rapid economic development to establish a stable and secure environment, while emphasizing stability, security, and development as more fundamental values than the Western liberal norms of freedom and democratic choice. The narrative presents China’s “traditional” culture as pragmatic and peaceful, geared towards cooperation and the pursuit of mutual objectives.

As international relations theorists Paul Viotti and Mark Kauppi note, “Non-material capabilities such as reputation, culture, and value appeal that can aid the attainment of a state’s objectives” are crucial in the exercise of soft power.⁴⁸ China’s economic power, commercial strength, and production capacity—providing cheap products of decent quality that appear in every household—are the foundation of its socioeconomic and cultural influence.

Soft power emanates not only from the ideational and normative orientation of the state, but also from the engagement of civil society and non-state actors—including universities, educational and charitable foundations, religious and cultural institutions, NGOs, business, and commercial interests—in defining this vision and bringing it to fruition. China’s

record of censorship and monitoring civil society groups, NGOs, and trade unions is a major limitation. Nye notes that the CPC has not accepted that “soft power springs largely from individuals, the private sector, and civil society.”⁴⁹ Breslin writes that “soft power is conceived as the idea that others will align themselves to you and your policy preferences because they are attracted to your political and social system, values and policies.”⁵⁰ In this regard, though China’s progress and stability are envied by its neighbors, its political and social system and values lack broad appeal. Xi Jinping’s primary aim is to further consolidate the position of both the CPC and himself, rather than to export China’s developmental vision and state model abroad.

Civil society and non-state actors in Kazakhstan are subject to governmental regulations and restrictive laws. However, the numerous pockets of non-state actors and agencies—those not coopted by the state discourse and agenda—are enamored neither of China’s developmental discourse nor of Russia’s efforts to reclaim geopolitical and cultural space through the Eurasian Economic Union; they remain circumspect. Their sense of patriotism and national pride may coalesce with the state-promoted patriotism, but is also independent of it.

China’s experience of investing in Africa, and, more recently, in Sri Lanka and Thailand, reveals that public protests, anxieties, and expressions of Sinophobia are to be expected in response to rapidly expanding Chinese investments and China’s role in these countries’ economic development.⁵¹ How will its experience in Kazakhstan and Central Asian states be different? While China has deployed assertive and aggressive rhetoric toward its traditional rivals in East and Southeast Asia and become embroiled in maritime disputes, it has also built a close partnership with Central Asian states and Russia through securitization, economic investments, and popular diplomacy. China does not have an appealing global brand, but it is already transforming norms, practices, and institutions in its neighborhood and in far-off lands by building infrastructure and making huge investments.

48 Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi, *International Relations Theory*, 5th edition (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2013), 207.

49 Joseph S. Nye, “The Limits of Chinese Soft Power,” *Today’s Zaman*, July 10, 2015.

50 Shaun Breslin, *The notion of China’s “soft power”* (London: Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2011), 8.

51 “Sri Lanka signs deal on Hambantota port with China,” *BBC World Service*, July 29, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-40761732>; “Sri Lanka scales back Hambantota port deal with China after protests,” *The Quint*, July 26, 2017, “<https://www.thequint.com/news/sri-lanka-hambantota-port-deal-with-china>.”

China's active role in and strategic partnership with Kazakhstan, along with its promotion of the SCO as an inter-regional organization, also allows China to claim a greater Eurasian identity. This embrace of Eurasia is a way of promoting geopolitical expansionism alongside economic globalization. Beijing has tightened its control over Xinjiang through development and securitization, extending the arc of security further west into Central Asia, albeit without a military or formal security component as yet. Kazakhstani leaders are also interested in aiding China's efforts to promote its status as a Eurasian power and Muslim-friendly state committed to peace, security, and development, in order to promote multilateralism in the region and devise a balancing strategy. In the context of the Russian-Chinese tandem, which is likewise described as a "close strategic partnership," Kazakhstan seeks to maintain a balanced position by reinforcing its multi-vector approach of balancing close ties and partnerships with China, Russia, and the West. It continues to secure Chinese investments and access the bulk of its oil export routes through Russia, as well as serving as a solid ally of Russia in forging the Eurasian Economic Union. There are, however, concerns among Kazakhstanis about the lack of detail of all these projects, the benefits to their country, and Russia's geopolitical ambitions.

China's symbolic and rhetorical assurance supporting state sovereignty and territorial integrity offers important psychological assurance and also enhances legitimacy. It strengthens the position of Central Asian elites as leaders of sovereign states protecting their national interests, despite the fact that elites' legitimacy and their commitment to acting in the interest of their states has been questioned by scholars and policymakers.⁵² It is not "soft power" per se, but the attention and ideological support coming from Beijing, together with cash and rituals of deference and hospitality, that appeals to Central Asian leaders.⁵³

The lack of any detailed or in-depth account of how local actors—ordinary people, officials, and businessmen—as well as transnational actors are engaging with China's initiatives makes it difficult to assess the social and cultural consequences of implementing Chinese infrastructure projects, including effects that are unintended and unanticipated. Detailed empirical research and ethnographic studies of specific SREB construction projects or sites are needed to gain more specific information on and insights into how China's soft power, derived from the combination of its enormous infrastructure investments and active public diplomacy efforts, is reshaping local perceptions of and attitudes toward the widening asymmetry between China and Kazakhstan.

52 John Heathershaw, "The global performance state: a reconsideration of the Central Asian 'weak state,'" in *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Politics Performing*, ed. Madeleine Reeves, Johann Rasanayagam and Judith Beyer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013): 39–61.

53 Miller, *China's Asian Dream*.