

## **Societal Contestations and Adaptations to the Belt and Road Initiative in**

### **Kazakhstan**

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#### ***Abstract***

*China's launch of the Silk Road Economic Belt, part of its Belt and Road Initiative, has raised hopes as well as anxieties about China's ever widening engagement in economic, political, security and sociocultural spheres and questions about the promised benefits to national economies and to citizens. By embracing China's narrative of BRI as a harmonious model of development and connectivity the Kazakhstani leaders have found themselves in the position of intermediaries between China's objectives and priorities and interests of their own countries.*

*This chapter examines the societal contestations as well as adaptations resulting from the bonhomie between the ruling political elites and anxieties about the rising influence of China among the people by focusing on the debates and contestations around three key issues: 1) The issue of land lease to foreigners 2) the industrial cooperation agreement with China, and 3) the plight of ethnic Kazakhs from China seeking refuge in Kazakhstan. The examination of anti-China protests suggests that 'China' in many ways is a catalyst that has brought to light issues of corruption, weak legal-regulatory framework about how many top-level decisions on economic matters connected to foreign investments and ownership of business are made. 'Anti-China' protests signify a growing contestation between the ruling elites and the people, the lack of trust among the people of their ruling elites and demands for establishing rule of law, transparency, as well as offering protection to ethnic Kazakhs from China who are seeking legal status and protection in Kazakhstan.*

*Political elites in these states have also 'tolerated' the protests to some extent to allow articulation of societal grievances to let off the steam while also seeking to maintain a firm control. The rhetoric of friendship and 'win-win partnership', aimed at cultivating a discourse of harmonious relationship between the two countries and its peoples has thus been a source of widespread societal contestation on the purported benefits of BRI for Kazakhstan which has also facilitated a process of mutual adaptations while creating a space for democratic activism in Kazakhstan.*

#### **Introduction**

China's Silk Road Economic Belt, part of its Belt and Road Initiative, has been received across Central Asia as an affirmation of the strategic niche and prominence of the region for China. The Kazakhstani leadership took pride in the fact that Xi Jinping chose their capital Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana) to unveil his vision of the Silk Road Economic Belt in October 2013 with then President Nursultan Nazarbaev promptly proposing an alignment of Kazakhstan's strategic development plan *Nurly Zhol* with the Silk Road Economic Belt in 2014. This alignment

(*sostykovka*) has brought several pre-existing bilateral agreements such as the development of Khorgos as an international logistics centre and the largest dry port on the border with China under the BRI umbrella, facilitated the signing of an industrial cooperation agreement pertaining to about 51 projects and paved the way for widening and deepening bilateral and multilateral cooperation, with a distinct emphasis on people-to-people linkages.

While BRI primarily is a state and government-centric model of exchanges which privileges interactions with state officials, state-supported commercial and societal actors, valorising principles of state stability, and security, Beijing has been zealously presenting it as a mutually benefiting or ‘win-win’ initiative with a crucial emphasis on expanding ‘people-to-people’ linkages. By embracing China’s narrative of BRI as a harmonious model of development and connectivity both Nazarbaev and his successor Kassymzhomart Tokaev have sought to advance Kazakhstan’s own vision of development and prosperity, raise its regional profile, and procure domestic support and legitimacy.

At the same time, the enormous asymmetries in their demographic and economic powers, the deepening of bilateral strategic partnership and camaraderie between the top leaders and the sensitivities over Xinjiang have continued to trigger anxieties among its population groups over China’s inexorable global rise and widening control over their economy. The opposition, civil society and human rights activists, business lobbies, association of Uyghurs and ethnic Kazakhs from China have coalesced under a broad ‘anti-China’ platform to question the promised benefits to national economies and to the ordinary people and voiced concerns about the long-term implications for the sovereignty and national identity of the nascent states. Amidst the rising contestations over the role and influence of China, the ruling elites in Kazakhstan, as in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, are facing a growing set of challenges of winning over popular support, trust, and approval of the expanding partnership with China.

Tokaev’s first state visit to China as president in September 2019 saw a major outbreak of protests by opposition groups and civil society activists who were joined by ethnic Kazakhs from China demanding release of their relatives who are held in the re-education camps and vocational centres in Xinjiang (Umirbekov 2019, YouTube 2019a). They protesters pressed the government

to release credible information on China's investments and financial operations, act against the pollution-generating Chinese enterprises, tighten laws to control the creeping institution of Chinese business and labour practices, limit the rapid acquisition of its precious natural resources and raw materials by China, and speak out against the persecution of ethnic Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and other Muslims in Xinjiang (Umarov 2019). While anti-China protests have been common in the neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, the scale of the unrest and its dispersion across various regions in Kazakhstan since 2019 is unprecedented. The year 2019 has been described as “the year of anti-China protests” (Altynbaev 2019).

Kazakhstan's ruling elites have found themselves caught between aligning their own developmental objectives with those of China as articulated through BRI, balancing between securing aid, investments, technology, and political support from China to accelerate Kazakhstan's strategic modernization agenda under the *Nurly Zhol* programme while also assuring their population that Kazakhstan's national interests, sovereignty, precious resources are not being 'sold out' to China. The tension between “warm politics” – the forging of close informal and personal ties between ruling establishment with the Chinese leadership – and a “cold public”, distrustful of China's promises of development and infrastructural connectivity and fearful of its territorial and economic ambitions has been present ever since the border demarcation agreement leading to the formation of the SCO was reached (Kerr & Swinton 2008).

This chapter offers an in-depth look into the tensions and contestations produced by the close relationship between the Kazakhstani and Chinese leaderships and the rising disaffection among various societal strata about China's growing control over their economy and energy resources. It depicts the Kazakhstani leadership's struggle to manage public anger and grievances by examining some key issues: the inability of the Kazakhstani government to pass laws extending the lease of agricultural land to foreigners; the growing pressures on the government to provide detailed information on Chinese projects and investments; and taking a decisive stance in support of ethnic Kazakhs from Xinjiang, who have relocated to Kazakhstan or are seeking refuge in Kazakhstan. I argue that 'anti-China' protests cannot just be seen as nationalist attitudes seeking to constrain China's rising influence or as expressions of deep-rooted Sinophobia: rather, they signify the lack of trust among the people in their ruling elites, who are seen as seen as privately

benefiting from financial deals with China and are seen as too complicit to China. ‘China’ in many ways is a catalyst that has brought to light issues of corruption, privatization of state assets, lack of transparency about how many top-level decisions on economic matters connected to foreign investments and ownership of business are made.

### **Elite Bonhomie and Societal Distrust**

The anti-China platform has brought together a broad array of societal groups to mobilise domestic support and seek international attention. The ‘China threat’, as Nargis Kassenova (2017, 113) notes, has become a staple of public discourse on security and the future of the country, “while the political elites are warming up for a tight embrace with China, ordinary citizens seem to be growing more worried.”

Given the scale of Chinese influence over the economy and the sensitivity about the plight of ethnic Kazakhs and Uyghurs in China, the outpouring of anti-China protests is hardly surprising. Adil Kaukenov, one of Kazakhstan’s experts on China, mentioned in a conversation with the author in Almaty in June 2017, “we have already been talking about the ‘yellow peril’ for 100 years, about the trepidation and fears injected by 400-million strong country in early 20<sup>th</sup> century.” All through the Soviet period both the elites and societies shared a negative perception of China as an ‘enemy’ in the aftermath of Sino-Soviet split as ideological and popular narratives of aggression and assimilation by China continued to proliferate.

Popular attitudes began shifting gradually with the opening of border after the Soviet collapse but mostly remained negative, rooted in Soviet-inherited selective memories and stereotypes, and assumptions of a civilizational and technological superiority of the Soviet model of development over the ‘backward’ Chinese one. China in the 1990s was still weak, predominantly agrarian, less developed, and viewed as ‘traditional’, poor, with many Chinese struggling to earn livelihoods. Chinese traders who began bringing cheap goods to the newly emerging bazaars in the post-Soviet countries were looked upon with condescension and as competing with the locals and displacing them. Chinese goods which were initially disparaged for being shoddy and of uneven quality, quickly became staples in people’s households due to their affordability and relative durability. The fears raised in the 1990s and 2000s about Chinese traders

and migrants settling down in Kazakhstan and assimilating the locals have proved to be grossly exaggerated as the economic rise of China has presented its citizens with more lucrative options elsewhere than in Central Asia.

As China becomes more familiar, closer, the fear of China or ‘Sinophobia’ as it was cultivated under Soviet rule as an ideological force has been dissipating. China’s economic achievements have continued to transform popular perceptions, attitudes and led to the acknowledgement that China’s growing influence is inevitable and that its investments do bring benefits to the country. In contrast to the evolving bonhomie between the elites, forged through deepening personal, financial and patronage linkages, attitudes towards China and perception of the Chinese across the various societal strata are mixed, ambivalent, as well as shifting.

China’s rising demographic, economic and political capabilities, and more recently, the promotion of Chinese culture, norms, business practices and development model have become new sources of awe, envy, and fear. The reports of persecution of the Muslims in Xinjiang and the overall lack of credible information about China’s investments, labour practices and financial operations have led to references in the media and in ordinary conversations to China’s ‘creeping expansion’, ‘avaricious acquisition of raw materials’, and assimilationist policies that pose a threat to newly-established sovereign statehood. The Kazakh language press is particularly rife with expressions of nationalism and the rural areas farther away from China being more susceptible to Sinophobic sentiments (Burkhanov & Chen 2016).

## **Societal Protests and Pressures**

### *The Land Lease Issue*

The land issue has become a powerful symbol for mobilizing public anger. There is also a widespread perception across the Central Asian region that China has continued to harbour territorial claims over their lands, that their own national governments have been forced to concede far more territory to China under the border demarcation agreement in late 1990s (Pannier 2016). Many leading China experts characterised anti-China protests on border demarcation and land related issues in the 2000s as “scare-mongering” by populist nationalists. In a conversation with the author in 2012, Konstantin Syroezhkin, a reputed Sinologist, referred to deep ignorance of

China as the basis for the popular hysteria, noting that even academic experts such as him working at a topmost government-financed thinktank did not have credible information as access to the relevant maps or documents showing border demarcation remained in “secret” collections either in Moscow or “among the top organs” in Kazakhstan. Demarcation of the borders with China was the main objective behind the initiative of China and Russia to establish the ‘Shanghai Five’ in 1996 with the bordering states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The group was upgraded in 2001 as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) after Uzbekistan – the only country which does not have a border with China – joined it. The resolution of the border demarcation has been a major accomplishment of the SCO and seen as the basis for establishing all-round cooperation. The Chinese authorities reportedly toned down their claims and opted for a “good neighbourhood” strategy with the new independent states (Peyrouse 2016).

During the 2000s, both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan saw large popular protests whenever their governments declared plans to allow foreign investment in agricultural sector, resulting in a setback to these plans (Demytrie 2010). The protests were also connected with efforts by their governments to carry out reforms to the Land Code and the lease of agricultural land. Kazakhstan passed major amendments to the Land Code in 2003 to allow private ownership of farming land. These reforms have also exposed the problems ailing its agricultural sector, particularly the issues of ownership and the difficulties in passing the relevant laws to provide for a smooth privatization process. The government’s efforts to promote reforms in the agrarian sector through privatization have not materialised as the land has mainly come under control of small number of influential individuals, with “no massive turnover in the ownership of farming land” (Zakon.kz 2016).

The land issue has generated considerable misgivings and disinformation among the affected groups. In 2009 Nazarbaev was reported to have floated the idea of renting about one million hectares of Kazakhstan’s farmland to the Chinese (Pannier 2009). Senior government officials subsequently denied that Nazarbaev had made such a statement. In an interview to Radio Free Europe, then Deputy Agriculture Minister Arman Yevniev referred to “China’s need for agricultural products like soybeans”, and its annual import of some 40 million tons, adding that “the steppe of south Kazakhstan and Zhambyl provinces, if effectively cultivated, could be used for growing soybeans” (Pannier 2009). He qualified his remarks by saying that they referred to

launching a pilot project of growing soybean on 10,000 or 15,000 hectares of land, emphasizing that Kazakhstan's constitution bans the sale or lease of land to foreigners. Such assurances were not enough in assuaging the protestors who claimed that Kazakhstan was planning to lease its land to Chinese for soybean production (Radio Free Europe 2009).

In 2014, amidst persistent speculation that Kazakhstan had been illegally leasing land to China, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Regional Development released information on the lease of some 4,750 hectares of land – a miniscule area – to 32 Chinese citizens (Kapital.kz 2014). As protestors alleged that China was (illegally) gaining control over Kazakhstan's precious lands through its notorious policy of “creeping expansion”, the government failed to persuade the public that the size of the land concerned was extremely insignificant.

In March 2016, the Minister of Economy Yerbolat Dossayev unveiled plans to auction 17,000 sq. km of farming land to make leasing a more appealing option. Presenting the reforms of the Land Code as part of Kazakhstan's “100 Concrete Steps to Reform” modernization programme within *Nurly Zhol*, he proposed to increase the lease of unused agricultural land available for purchase by Kazakhstani citizens or joint ventures or for rent by foreigners from the existing 10-year limit to up to 25 years via land auctions (Putz 2016). The government justified the extension to 25 years by arguing that long-term investments require a greater time frame to produce returns and 10-year period was not sufficient. In April 2016, opposition parties, independent media, civil society workers, environmental activists and Kazakh nationalist groups came together to organise protests in several cities against the introduction of the bill on land lease extension in the parliament. As one protester conveyed, “we can't give land to the Chinese. If they come then they won't leave!” and “After 25 years, they will stay for 65. After 65 their descendants will take Kazakhstan's citizenship and our descendants will be their slaves” (BBC News 2016). Acceding to the demands by the protestors, Nazarbaev intervened to instruct the parliament to Kazakh impose a five-year moratorium on the issue (Orazgaliyeva 2016; Putz 2016). Kyrgyzstan has seen a cycle of protests over Chinese investments in agriculture and in mining. Recently, Kyrgyzstan passed a law banning foreigners from acquiring right to buy or lease its mines, forests, and other natural preservations.

In early 2021 as the deadline for the expiration of five-year moratorium on land lease bill was approaching, the lower chamber of Kazakhstan's parliament approved the first draft of a bill proposing a ban on the purchase and lease of farmland to foreigners. This has not appeased the protesters who demand that the ban on the lease of land to foreigners be extended to sale or lease of mining fields and forests as well (Kumenov 2021, Putz 2021). A law passed by the Kyrgyz parliament in January 2021 banning foreign companies from participating in mining projects in the future, allowing only state-owned companies to develop "subsoil areas of national importance" has also set a precedent (Reuters 2021). Protesters have also called for the dismissal of the Land Commission, seen as hand-picked by the government, and demanded its re-constitution by independent figures in place of those (Isa 2021). They see any effort at land privatization as enabling the elites or officials to privatise the best of the land and lease it covertly to foreigners (Kumenov 2021).

The moratorium has stymied agricultural cooperation between China and Kazakhstan and contributed to delays in issuing long-term visas to Chinese technicians and resistance to removing the levy on the import of Chinese equipment for agricultural and industrial use (Sukharevskaya 2020). It is projected to further aggravate the problems faced by Kazakhstan's agricultural sector, its unattractiveness for the locals, the need for investment and upgrading for which China represents the best hope (Hofman 2016).

The government's concessions on the land lease issue reflect its failure in presenting the economic rationale for extending the lease to the population, and a victory for the protesters in the information and propaganda war. Soon after relenting to the protesters by withdrawing the land lease bill in 2016, the Nazarbaev regime struck back by cracking down on the protesters for organizing unsanctioned rallies, resulting in detentions, fines, and imprisonment of its key leaders. Max Bokaev and Talgat Ayan, both notable environmental and human rights campaigners from Atyrau, were convicted of inciting social unrest, spreading false information, violating Kazakhstan's highly restrictive law on public assembly, and sentenced to five years in prison each. Following pressures from international organizations and domestic groups, Ayan was released in 2018 and Bokayev in early 2021 (OMCT 2017, Lillis 2021). People charged with violating the laws and committing administrative offences are disqualified under Kazakhstan's laws from



contesting elections, holding a public office, including leadership of public associations, NGOs for a prescribed period. The government has continued to use these clauses to disqualify opposition and civil society activists from playing any public role, let alone seeking a political office.

### *Industrial Cooperation Agreements and 55 joint projects*

Soon after Nazarbaev's proposal to align Kazakhstan's economic modernization strategy *Nurly Zhol* with China's Silk Road Economic Belt set the stage for Kazakhstan and China to negotiate a comprehensive industrial cooperation agreement worth \$14 billion (Satpaeva 2014). This was described as "transfer of production of dozens of non-extractive industries by China to Kazakhstan" (Tengrinews 2014a). These have led to concerns that China was dumping its surplus industrial goods and pollution-generating industries to Kazakhstan, bringing in its own personnel instead of hiring the locals.

Presenting China's infrastructural construction objectives, Li Keqiang on his visit to Astana in December 2014 underscored China's "enormous experience in building infrastructure" by using its "world class quality" materials and equipment (Tengrinews 2014b). The agreement was reported in the Kazakhstani as "China ready to build factories in Kazakhstan" (Tengrinews 2014c) which led to concerns that many of these industries, especially cement, would be very damaging to the local environment as China was opting to export its pollution-generating industries abroad

Then premier Karim Massimov, of Kazakh-Uyghur heritage who studied in China and began his career as Kazakhstan's trade representative in China, was instrumental in sealing the deal. In the absence of basic information, his close contacts with Chinese officials further aroused suspicions about the deal benefiting the elites rather than people of Kazakhstan. Massimov has been the head of Kazakhstan's National Security Committee since 2016, having previously held the positions as the Chief of the Presidential Administration and as the longest serving Prime Minister of Kazakhstan and is amongst the most powerful figures in the government with very close links with China.

In April 2015 Nazarbaev sealed the agreement on "51 projects" involving the sum of \$27.6 billion at the participated in the Beijing forum on BRI. The actual number of projects referred to in official announcements has kept fluctuating between 50 and 55 due to lack of any detailed information. This is because some of projects pre-dated the launch of BRI, and a few others are well-known, a complete official list with details of all the projects had never been released. The

information released in 2016 referred to the creation of “50 joint enterprises” under the framework of the Kazakhstan-China programme of industrial investment cooperation in ore mining and smelting, engineering, energy, chemistry, petrochemistry and many other industries which are “priority industries.” It noted that the enterprises will be located in Almaty, Akmola, Pavlodar, West Kazakhstan and South Kazakhstan regions and all the products will be exported to China (Kazinform 2016).

Overall, there has been a persistent gap between the scale of Chinese investments and operations in Kazakhstan and the information about these available to the public, giving rise to the general perception about secrecy and lack of transparency about these projects. As a leading China expert conveyed to me in early 2013, “Chinese corporations operate like states within a state, governed by their own rules, procedures and staff, not visible to the outsiders.” While the alignment between SREB/BRI and *Nurly Zhol* is hailed as establishing an equal partnership, backed by a legal regulatory framework and a greater transparency, it has done little to counter the widespread perception that the information on China’s investments and business operations available in the public domain is limited, is carefully curated, and couched in the language of bilateral friendship and cooperation which does not allow for an examination of its reported benefits to Kazakhstan. Much information on contracts made with Chinese corporations such as the terms and conditions, and the details of personnel, recruitment, and production sharing agreements is withheld under the rubric of ‘commercial secrecy.’ The lack of transparency about the operations of Chinese enterprises in Kazakhstan, their labour and recruitment policies, the structure of ownership, terms of investment have produced stereotypes, rumours and disinformation about China’s ever looming presence, and allegations about China illegally bringing in its own workforce in violation of Kazakhstan’s migration law.

Protesters in 2019 pressed the governments to release reliable information on the “transfer of industries” from China and demand greater legal scrutiny, environmental safeguards, and financial accountability. They were also guilty of spreading disinformation by circulating old information about “50 joint projects” on *WhatsApp* as if it had been a recent agreement and referring to these as “production transfer from China.” The Kazakhstani government clarified that these are part of the “Intergovernmental Framework Agreement on strengthening cooperation in

the fields of industrialization and investment between the Republic of Kazakhstan and China in 2015,” and finally released a detailed list. The list referred to 55 joint Kazakh-Chinese projects worth \$27.6 billion covering various industries, such as metallurgy, oil and gas processing, chemistry, machine building, energy, transportation, production of building materials and agribusiness. It noted that the projects will create about 20,000 new permanent jobs, whereby over 90 percent of employees will be the citizens of Kazakhstan (Invest.gov.kz 2019).

As the Minister of Information Dauren Abaev apologised for the delay on the part of the government in releasing the information which fuelled the circulation of disinformation on social media, he came under attack from people within the government for his handling of the situation and was blamed for his ‘incompetence’ in managing the public relations issue (Inform.kz 2019). These admissions have further bolstered efforts by civil society and environmental activists to put greater pressures on their own government and Chinese companies to disclose the social and environmental impacts of specific projects. Chinese oil and gas companies are seen as withholding environmental information, both from the public and from government agencies in Kazakhstan. The NGO Crude Accountability in Kazakhstan, one of the foremost groups monitoring the environmental costs of China’s investments in Kazakhstan, has documented the pollution caused by the operations of CNPC-Aktobemunaygas and the KMK Munai company (a subsidiary of the CNPC and the CITIC Group) in Kokzhide groundwater field in the Aktobe region, which is included in the list of objects of natural reserve fund of republican and international importance. Welcoming the disclosure on the part of the government, Sergey Solyanik of the NGO Crude Accountability averred in June 2019, “the more public information we have on this cooperation, the less room is left for rumours and fears.”

### **Ethnic Kazakhs from China**

Xinjiang is a critical geopolitical link between China and Kazakhstan, shaped by economic, political, and cultural exchanges over several centuries. China’s relentless pursuit of securitization in Xinjiang has resulted in an elaborate and ongoing construction of a surveillance state and internment-camp system to target its Muslim populations (Maizland 2021) and has tainted its official narrative of establishing people-to-people ties. According to the U.S. State Department estimates about 800,000 to 2 million people have been detained in Xinjiang since 2017. Of these

about 22,000 are ethnic Kyrgyz and 10,000 ethnic Kazakhs are incarcerated in the concentration camps (Keller 2018, BBC News 2020). China has continued to deny the presence of these camps and refused to comment on the numbers.

About 1.6 million ethnic Kazakhs live in China, concentrated in the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture in the Uyghur Autonomous region in Xinjiang. Since Kazakhstan launched the state programme in early 1990s to seek a voluntary repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs from abroad since 2020 about 200,000-300,000 from China have relocated to Kazakhstan. The process of acquisition of Kazakhstani documents for the returnees has been a protracted one. Many Kazakhs from China have struggled to obtain documents such as birth certificates, employment record, police clearance certificate required by Kazakhstan and have retained their Chinese passports, residency cards to be able to undertake regular cross-border travels. Their lack of proficiency in Russian and use of the Arabic alphabet for Kazakh (Cyrillic has been used in Kazakhstan and now a switch to Latin alphabet is under way) and pervasive perception as being sinicised have made it difficult for them to integrate in the Kazakhstani society. Responding to continuing pressures from local groups, in 2018 Nazarbaev decreed the creation of a foundation *Otandastar* [compatriots] for Kazakhs from China to help them with registration, obtaining the documents needed and delegated the government with the task of solving this problem.

The tightening of coercive control and surveillance in Xinjiang since about 2016 has brought to light, several cases of illegal detentions and reprisals of ethnic Kazakhs from China with close family connections in Kazakhstan (Radio Free Asia 2018, AFP 2020). A failure or delay on the part of Kazakhs relocating to Kazakhstan to surrender their Chinese passports and residency cards has led to their criminalisation and reprisals against family and friends in Xinjiang. Even those in possession of relevant Kazakhstani citizenship or residency permit have become routine objects of surveillance, interrogation, and detention by Chinese security officials as they travel to China to see their relatives or for business. Many of those detained in raids by China's security officials who suspected them of remitting funds to relatives across the border in Kazakhstan. Most of those detained were sent to the "re-education camps", "political study centres" and camps described as "Professional Education Schools", which are renamed versions of the "Counter-extremism Training Schools" that have long existed in the region (Radio Free Asia 2017, The

Economist 17 October 2020). Hundreds of ethnic Kazakhs have had their bank accounts and assets frozen pending “investigation,” and have been accused of “extremist” behaviour that includes normal Islamic practices (Pannier 2018).

Several cases of Chinese Kazakhs illegally crossing over to Kazakhstan to seek a refugee status in Kazakhstan have acquired a great deal of publicity in social media across the country and abroad in recent years. A notable case is that of Sayragul Sauytbay, an ethnic Kazakh in who fled to Kazakhstan in 2018 by crossing the border through the Khorgos free-trade zone. Sauytbay worked in a ‘re-education camp’ in Xinjiang where she witnessed incarcerations of thousands of ethnic Kazakhs and Uyghurs for ‘political indoctrination’ (Radio Free Europe 2018) and opted to flee to Kazakhstan. She was granted a temporary asylum by a local court in 2018 and subsequently obtained asylum in Sweden with the mediation of international organizations.

Several similar cases of ethnic Kazakhs fleeing China and seeking a refugee status in Kazakhstan, only to face further detention for “illegal” border crossing and prospects of being returned to China, have come to light since, arousing anger among the local population and diplomatic tension between Kazakhstan and China (Radio Azattyq 2019 & 2020). Referring to the well-publicised case of Kaster Musakhanuly and Murager Alimuly who fled to East Kazakhstan to apply for a refugee status the Deputy Chief of Kazakhstan’s National Security Committee asserted in December 2019 that they stood “no chances of staying” in Kazakhstan after the trial and will be sent back to China (Mediazona 2020). A local court rejected their citizenship application in May 2021 (Radio Free Europe 2021). It is unclear whether they will be returned to China or be assisted in obtaining asylum in a third country, as in case of Sauytbay.

The procedure for obtaining a refugee status in Kazakhstan is extremely elaborate and refugee status has been granted in only a handful of cases, limited to a period of one year, subject to renewal. Kazakhstani authorities are yet to grant long-term refugee status, let alone settlement rights, to the persons fleeing China. The United Nations Committee Against Torture has noted violations by Kazakhstan of its treaty obligations under the Convention Against Torture for sending persons to countries where they were at risk of torture (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Publicly, Kazakhstan has maintained that the issue of Xinjiang is an ‘internal’ or ‘domestic’ concern of China. At the same time, the government in recent years has not complied with the demands by China to return the ethnic Kazakhs who have fled to Kazakhstan, and tacitly cooperated with international organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International in arranging a safe passage for them to a third country. A special commission created under the Migration service of Akmola oblast granted temporary refugee status to Musakhanuli, Alimuli and two others who fled from China and Kazakhstan has not deported these individuals to China. Although China has not yet directly pressured Kazakhstan to return its (former) citizens in recent years - in the late 1990s Kazakhstan had given in to pressures from China to return some Uyghurs who were wanted in China on “terrorism” charges - there is fear that the Chinese security services could achieve their forced return to China.

Following a new agreement with China, Kazakhstan granted 43,000 visas to ethnic Kazakhs from China in 2019, compared to 8,000 granted in 2018, about five times more than in previous year. The visa is free and valid for 3 years. China signalled some relaxation of its policy by allowing more than 2,000 ethnic Kazakhs to abandon their Chinese citizenship and leave the country (The Guardian 2019) Kazakhstan’s Minister of External Affairs averred that there are no Kazakhs in the ‘re-education camps’ in Xinjiang (Sputnik.ru 2020, Mediazona 2020).

As in the case of treatment of those protesting the land lease laws, the Kazakhstani authorities refrained from an overt use of force but have subsequently arrested, fined, and imprisoned several protestors, cracked down on their supporters and closed down the groups established by them. Serikzhan Bilash, who came to Kazakhstan in early 2000s from China and has set up the public association *Atajurt Eriktileri* to help ethnic Kazakhs from China seek settlement and integration, has been placed under house arrest for organising “unsanctioned rallies and inciting ethnic hatred” and is banned for 7 years from holding any public office.

In an interview to *Deutsche Welle* (2019), Tokaev expressed solidarity with China and mentioned that the claims about persecution of Kazakhs in Chinese the “so-called re-education camps need verification.” He averred that this topic has been flagged about as “part of geopolitics”

played out between China and the US and noted that Kazakhstan “will not become a part of global anti-China front.”

### **Anti-China protests and state-society contestations**

The relinquishing of presidency by Nazarbaev after being in power for 30 years has provided an opening for the opposition, civil society, and other groups to mobilise public support and press for democratic reforms and accountability. Appointed by Nazarbaev as his successor in March 2019, Tokaev procured popular approval and legitimacy by gaining 70 percent of vote in the presidential elections held in June which were devoid of any real contest. As a career diplomat who has represented Kazakhstan at various international posts at the UN and at the SCO, Tokaev is widely seen as a transitional figure presiding over the process of identifying and grooming a younger figure for presidency. The lack of an independent power base, financial power and patronage network have earned him the reputation of being outside of the major financial interests and clan-based grouping and thus being a neutral person capable of balancing between the various financial groups and interests that exert a covert and informal control over key economic issues. As Kazakhstan’s long-term Foreign Minister, he has been a key architect of its multivectoral foreign policy that seeks to strike a balance between the West, Russia, and China (Tokaev 2007). As a Sinologist, he has the reputation of being ‘pro-Chinese’ enjoying close personal, academic and political connections with key figures and institutions in China. Mukhtar Auezov, another prominent Sinologist and literary figure, who was Kazakhstan’s first ambassador to China during 1992-95, is one of the staunchest critics of the government’s policy on China and a leading voice in anti-China protests.

Peyrouse (2016, 17–18) identifies the existence of pro-China and anti-China groups within Kazakhstan that exert an influence on its policy making process, referring to these as “Sinophiles” and “Sinophobes.” “Sinophiles” are predominantly members of the elites who publicly act according to diplomatic protocol and refrain from commenting publicly on any of the sensitive, unresolved bilateral issues. Under the label “Sinophobes” he includes local groups seeking to defend the rights of the Kazakhs and Uyghurs from China as well as critics of the government’s inability to voice criticism of specific policies of China. While this analysis affirms the existence of pro-China views and interests among the influential people within the regime, it is difficult to



obtain credible information on how personal views and interests of key figures within the regime have influenced decisions on specific projects and investments under BRI. Credible information about the links between personal and financial interests and deals of key political figures in Kazakhstan with those in China is very difficult to obtain in a political system characterised by informal institutions and personal, patronage-based connections lacking formal channels for exerting influence. A specialist or long-term observer of the region may be able to obtain information from ‘insiders’ within the regime but this information is difficult to independently verify and may only offer a subjective perspective.

There is a widespread view that specific groups in the regime have found it expeditious to mobilise anti-China sentiments to challenge their rivals in the regime who are seen as closely connected to China and as benefiting from financial and personal connections. A thread of discussions and commentaries under the handle #uzynkulaq on social messenger *Telegram* alludes to intra-elite rivalries in the top circles in the government with “anti-China” factions or interests sponsoring disinformation campaign against China. These discussions and comments also speculate that some key groups within the regime may be offering covert support to anti-China protests and thus colluding with the opposition leader in exile Mukhtar Ablyazov, the founder of Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, (DPK), who during his tenure as the Minister of Industries and then the Chairman of TuranAlemBank had built a network of supporters within the regime, to signal to China the extent and depth of popular discontent, and thus to secure more favourable deals on projects that are being promoted by China. Kairat Satybaldy, a nephew of Nazarbaev and a major-general in the Kazakhstani National Security, is often described as a key force behind mobilizing Sinophobic tendencies to enhance popular support for pursuing his political ambitions. He oversees a broad range of issues connected to ‘religion’ and ‘nationalism’ which fall within the purview of Committee on National Security under the President. He is also reported to have close ties with Saudi Arabia and its brand of Salafism, and harbouring sympathies for the notion of caliphate, and voicing support to groups and activities in Xinjiang that China regards as “terrorists” and “extremists.”

China has forged close personal and patronage connections with the ruling elites and key business groups in all the countries where they have huge investments in strategic sectors. Close

ties with China have brought great benefits to the ruling authorities “personally in terms of tribute, patronage, legitimacy and financial rewards” (Bitabarova 2018). These ties also signal to ordinary people that Chinese presence is only going to expand, and that the infrastructure connectivity and investments by China seek first and foremost to serve China’s priorities. There is a broad consensus within the regime that Chinese investments currently offer the best hope for overcoming the disadvantages resulting from their physical isolation and lack of connectivity. The official perspective endorses China’s critical importance as Kazakhstan’s largest trading partner and the need to adapt to China’s developmental initiatives, “to establish an intelligent and correct relationship,” and avers that “Sinophobia” offers no alternatives for Kazakhstan for development (Minulin 2018).

Seeking to placate the anti-China sentiments on the eve of Tokaev’s first state visit as president to China in September 2019, Ermukhamet Ertysbaev, a former presidential advisor who handled issues of PR, and most recently Kazakhstan’s ambassador to Belarus, offered a detailed overview of attitudes towards China in the pro-government *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (Ertysbaev 2019). He set out to dispel the perception of Sinophobia being a widespread force in the Kazakhstani society and singled out “isolated expressions of anti-china sentiments” and alluded to unnamed “specific citizens” who have raised concerns about ‘Chinese threats’, ‘Chinese expansion’ and “practically calling for ending the active partnership with China.” He also referred to “innumerable works on China [these were not identified], which do not provide an accurate understanding of the country.” (Ertysbaev 2019).

Since China is a major buyer of and investor in Kazakhstan’s energy and other precious raw materials, one can posit that prominent business groups in Kazakhstan, dealing with energy resources, precious metals, and infrastructural construction have built close business and personal links with the Chinese communist party elites and its financial corporations. One can also aver the presence of a keen competition among domestic groups or state corporations within both countries for securing contracts as well as fierce negotiations between them on terms of investment, production, pricing. The governing elites may privately share popular concerns about China’s growing economic control and political influence while publicly acclaiming the friendship with China. Given the lack of availability of credible information and data, one can also posit that both

pro and anti-China interests and groups exist within the topmost echelons of the regime, among prominent business groups, oligarchs and directors of large public companies, and these interests vie to wield influence on business, investments, and important decisions. ‘Sinophilia’ and ‘Sinophobia’ are closely entwined and may be articulated by the same person or group, depending on the issue and the context. They symbolise contestations over the role and influence of China as well as adaptations to China’s developmental initiatives as conveyed through BRI.

### **Concluding remarks**

The anti-China protests have capitalised on popular concerns and historic distrust of China as they expose the dependence of their political elites on China’s support and goodwill. The ability of the Kazakhstani ruling elites to deliver economic benefits and prosperity to their population, and thus enhance their support base and legitimacy, depends significantly on China as Kazakhstan’s largest trading partner, a major investor, a prominent buyer of its oil and mineral resources, and a critical supporter of regime stability.

Contrary to the general tendency to view anti-China attitudes and protests as reflections of historical memories and mutual mistrust, these protests are fundamentally a reflection of distrust among the Kazakhstanis of their own government, and anger with the lack of credible information on the various agreements signed with Chinese state-owned corporations, including the ruling elites’ close financial and personal links with China. As an observer notes, “the ‘Chinese question’ provides a kind of catharsis by becoming a focal point for frustration and tension built up over the last three decades in Central Asia”, and points out how the Chinese have become “in part, a scapegoat for local grievances —economic and employment woes — and a focal point for sensitive cross-border issues such as the oppressive treatment of Muslim minorities in China and accusations of debt-trap diplomacy” (Uran Kyzy 2019). The unavailability of authoritative information, compounded by the government’s control over media and informational sphere have fuelled speculation about China’s operations and the collusion of their own elites with Chinese investors, also generating rumours and disinformation about Chinese investments and business operations.

As Pavličević and Talmacs (2021) have argued, BRI, and the widespread engagement of China in various sectors of the economy and society have become a growing source of contestation

between the ruling elites and the populations, producing demands for establishing rule of law, legislative oversight of accountability, transparency and denote an instrumentalization of the “China question” by various actors. At the same time, there is an underlying recognition on the part of the government and the populations that accommodation with China is ultimately the best form of cooperation since Kazakhstan does not have many other countervailing options. Kazakhstan’s continuing affirmation of BRI as committed to realizing a mutually beneficial, ‘win-win’ outcome and forging closer people-to-people ties can be seen as an attempt to tone down the asymmetries in their economic relationship, downplay the differences in their policies and placate the concerns of the domestic audience. Overall, the pledges to a harmonious, mutually beneficial partnership within the framework of BRI enable the ruling elites, relevant actors, and institutions in both countries to allow some space for contestation as well as to engage in a process of mutual adaptations.

This close partnership rests on an unspoken understanding that both parties refrain from publicly criticising each other, let alone allude to problems in their relationship. The rhetoric of friendship and ‘win-win partnership’, aimed at cultivating a discourse of harmonious relationship between the two countries and its peoples has also been a source of widespread societal contestation and debates on the purported benefits of BRI for Kazakhstan. The protests have also exposed the Tokaev regime’s vulnerability to domestic pressures as reflected in the concessions to the several specific demands of the protestors. They also reveal the inability of the Kazakhstani leadership to address the grievances of ethnic Kazakhs from China who have now settled in Kazakhstan, let alone grant long-term legal status to those who have escaped persecution in Xinjiang, and are seeking asylum in Kazakhstan. Amidst widespread anti-China protests, Tokaev concluded his first state visit to China in September 2019 by accepting Beijing’s offer to seal Sino-Kazakhstani relationship to the level of “a permanent strategic partnership” (Xinhua 2019).

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