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Rising Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Central Asia: A Harbinger of Regional Unrest?

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Abstract



The novel coronavirus pandemic has affected the world in an unprecedented way, affecting production, supply chains and the mobility of people and goods. This includes China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While Beijing's soft power is expanding in Central Asia, economic and diplomatic dependence on Beijing has given rise to a widespread anti-Chinese sentiment among the local population. This paper suggests that understanding China's broad strategy, the reasons for rising

Sinophobia, and Beijing's capabilities, are of critical importance for projecting the geopolitical future of the region. This discussion paper is divided into three parts. The first section details China's strategic logic behind its interests in Central Asia by providing historical context, and its stated geopolitical and economic objectives. The second section evaluates the characteristic of China's Central Asian Projects. The third section sheds light on up-to-date local reactions of the Central Asian countries and identifies the reasons for rising anti-Chinese sentiment amidst rising geopolitical rivalry in the region.

Introduction

Central Asia is witnessing a significant rebalancing of power with European, Russian and Chinese interests being in a battle over the influence in the region. Since 2001, China's diplomatic and economic expansion in Central Asia has grown dramatically. It is likely to continue to grow in coming years, perhaps even to a point where Beijing politically and economically dominates the area. This strategic posturing raises questions about the possible geopolitical shifts with the consolidation of China's power in Central Asian countries. By 'Central Asia', this paper refers to the following five states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In the last decade, Central Asian nations have also been in search of viable partners, particularly in economic and security sectors. While there are a growing number of actors in the area, such as the United States and Russia, the primary catalyst to Central Asia's reintegration process has been the advocacy of the Great Silk Road initiative. Having become the major partner, or at least one of the key trading partners, of each of the Central Asian state, China has translated its greater intentions through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The move was first revealed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan in 2013 and aimed to enhance and command a new network

of trade links. Via the BRI, China may acquire the capability to shape the region's economic potential by providing significant opportunities for Central Asian states which need considerable investment to maintain growth rates. It is imperative to bear in mind that Beijing engages with Central Asia primarily on regional economic issues and international diplomatic cooperation; it has made no overt push into political or military issues. China's influence in Central Asia is not limited to changing the international environment of these five states or structuring their economic development. However, it plans to partially structure the domestic orders, social changes, and national narratives of the domain (Peyrouse, 2007). According to Baker McKenzie's report (2017), amid China's rearrangement of the social and economic fabric of the neighbouring countries, its growing presence and influence were described as 'defensive'. Some initiatives raised primary debates about high-level corruption and demands for transparency in government financial activities. Beijing's growing clout for the last two decades has given it considerable leverage over the regional order and national narratives (Chung, 2004). While it is still early to make any authoritative forecasts, the public in Central Asian countries harbours a deep fear of Chinese expansion.

1. China's Strategy in Central Asia

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the five Central Asian states stepped out for the first time into the outside world and commenced a process of limited global integration. The accelerating rise of China changed both the domestic and international agendas of these 'stan' countries, as establishing direct bilateral relations with Beijing required overcoming societies' longstanding perceptions engendered by Soviet-era propaganda. These constructions and discourses, which rested on eschatological notions of "threat from the East", "Chinese expansion" (tikhaia ekspansiia)

or "historical enemy" have become frequent in the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik newspapers. Central Asia became critically essential and a key element to China's imagination of its Silk Road Project, border security, energy supply, and the geopolitical and economic corridor, with substantial deposits of rich natural resources and minerals. The region connects not only China to Europe but also Russia to South Asia. To these ends, the expansion and details of China's strategic influence can be analysed by three main factors:

1.1 Economic Strategy

The first strategic-level concept was built around China's economic ambition to become an indispensable commercial partner of the five states whose presence is translated into different infrastructure projects. Chinese interest has been structured around the concept of a "voluntary implantation policy" in essential economic sectors in order to consolidate its political influence in Central Asia (Peyrouse, 2007, p.9). Thus, it is imperative to bear in mind that the geopolitical and economic objectives are in-trinsically linked, as Beijing sees Central Asia not only as a border region, but also as an intermediary and transit area which facilitates trade with Iran, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan.

In 2009, shortly after the global financial crisis and during the Great Recession, Beijing engaged in the massive internal stimulus (The Impact of China, 2016). This created massive export opportunities for resource-rich

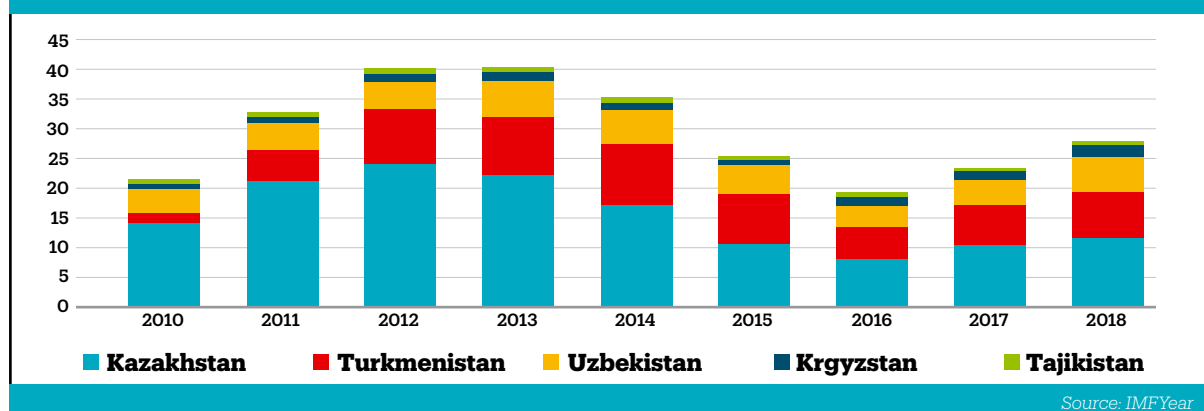
countries in the region. Trade between China and the five Central Asian countries rose from \$527 million in 1992 to \$40 billion in 2011 (Ministry of Commerce, People's Republic of China, n.d.). Trade relations between China and Central Asia improved further after 2002 and turned into a mutually advantageous economic cooperation. Between 2002 and 2003, trade increased by more than 200 per cent, going from about \$1 billion per year to more than \$3 billion. Bilateral trade between China and the Central Asian countries continued to rise between 2007 and 2015, with the Chinese-Kazakh relations composing the strongest economic ties (Gussarova, 2018). According to the European Commission, in 2017, China estimated for 20 per cent of the Kyrgyz trade (2nd place), 20 per cent of the Uzbek trade (1st place), and 10 per cent of Tajikistan (3rd place) (Gussarova, 2018).

Table 1: China Export Share in Total Products, 2016-2018

Trade Flow: Export		Indicator: Export Share in Total Products (%)		
Partner Name	2016	2017	2018	
Kazakhstan	58.18	61.26	62.05	
Uzbekistan	52.55	57.52	59.01	
Kyrgyzstan	44.78	45.72	46.60	
Tajikistan	38.99	37.85	42.73	
Turkmenistan	29.82	29.94	42.73	

Source: TRT World Research Centre

Table 2: China's Total Trade with Central Asia (in \$ billion)



China's economic growth in Central Asia took Russia and Western countries by surprise. While Russia's established presence in the region has been dominant, the growing Chinese involvement has thus posed a difficulty for Central Asian nations. A decade ago, the region depended on Russia for exporting its goods and natural resources to international markets. However, Beijing now challenges Moscow's monopoly over Central Asian energy export routes, for example, with Central Asia-China pipelines (Stronski & Ng, 2018). As both sides compete for influence, Moscow's reaction towards BRI project was apprehensive, driven by fears that China will expand into Russia's sphere of influence. A further response came through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), where Russia was at the centre of the integration project. Russia's 2016 bilateral trade volume with the Central Asian countries amounted to \$18.6 billion, contrasted to China's \$30 billion figure for the same period (Stronski & Ng, 2018). China further began using several distinct strategies for expanding both bilateral relations and corporate structures in the region.

One of China's strategy is called "Going Out Strategy", where it aims to find external markets for Chinese companies in construction and infrastructure in Central Asia. This gradually created opportunity for Chinese firms and various sectors for regional dominance. After three decades as fundamentally a recipient of foreign direct investment (FDI), within the framework of this strategy, Beijing has now emerged as a significant FDI-originating country in Central Asia (Wang, 2016). Even though Russian companies are keen to bid on different infrastructure projects in the region, the sector became more crowded with competitive Chinese counterparts (Stronski & Ng, 2018).

Another critical model here is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO); a key mechanism for Chi-

nese expansion and influence established in 2001. Throughout the years, the SCO regularly emphasised economic cooperation in the region by challenging trade protectionism' and by supporting the strengthening of a transparent and non-discriminatory multilateral trading system (Filippov, 2018). These regional policies were followed by the Chinese idea of establishing an SCO bank. Dragging Central Asia into its influential circle through the economic pillar of SCO became of prime importance for China. For instance, at the June 2009 SCO summit in Yekaterinburg, Chinese officials proposed the establishment of a US\$10 billion anti-crisis fund within the SCO which granted cheap and short-term financing for Central Asian energy and infrastructure (Laruelle, 2018). The SCO has been a successful tool for China in generating the impression that it is a leading provider of public goods in Central Asia by building dependence around its economic sphere. This however led to concerns of local populations over the economic dependence and rise of Sinophilia narratives across Central Asia, which will be discussed further in this paper.

China has devised other SCO initiatives to increase the role of the member states the SCO Business Council and SCO Interbank Consortium in multilateral projects, rather than merely bilateral ones (SCO Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, n.d.). The SCO members embraced the SCO Development Strategy Towards 2025, facilitating economic collaboration based on China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) proposal and development of the "indivisible security space" for the member states (Molchanov, 2017). This initiative marks an unprecedented step forward in China's efforts to take a leadership role in Central Asia. By advancing economic collaboration and organisational scope, China also deploys the SCO as a strategic means of locating the oil and gas resources of Central Asia (Laruelle, 2018), as now further discussed.

1.2 The China-Central Asia Energy Nexus

The second overlaid strategic-level concept was built around the energy nexus in the region. Due to Central Asia's unique geostrategic position and rich energy resources, and the potential importance of the region in the world geopolitical landscape of energy is self-evident. Within the framework of economic dependence, Central Asia maintains rich energy resources that Beijing seek to market, notably petroleum and natural gas. The region accounts for about 4% of global energy deposits. Among them, Kazakhstan holds the most significant growth potential of oil in Central Asia. Currently, it holds 3.9 billion barrels of oil, accounting for 1.63% of the world's oil reserves and ranking 12th in the world (Kazakhstan Oil Reserves, n.d.). In Turkmenistan, natural gas reserves comprise of 265 million cubic ft, accounting for 9.4% of the world's total, ranking it sixth in the world (Turkmenistan Natural Gas Reserves, n.d.). Observing how China will proceed to a New Great Game in Central Asia (Cooley, 2012), it also holds energy security concerns and appetite for the region's energy resources. With rising economic development, China's dependence on foreign energy is growing.

Within the last two decades, various infrastructure projects have led to China's demand to secure for unprec-

edented quantities of oil, coal, and natural gas to assist massive manufacturing machine and megacities. The sustained growth of China's economy over the past two decades has produced a massive need for imported energy and has therefore altered the supply-demand equation of the region. China has become the world's largest energy consumer in less than two decades, amounting to almost 20% of the world's total energy consumption (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). The SREB envisions new transportation corridors and a substantial boost in the Chinese imports of hydrocarbons from the region. The construction of the fourth trunk of the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline (CAGP) aims to increase the amount of gas export up to 80 billion cubic meters per year by 2020, thus covering for over 40 per cent of China's gas imports (Molchanov, 2017). China has also pulled Central Asian countries into its economic sphere by strengthening energy cooperation with the region and obtaining the energy resources necessary for its economic development. By establishing a regional free trade zone, China aims to tap into the region's vast energy resources through major players like China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and Petro China (Peyrouse, 2007).

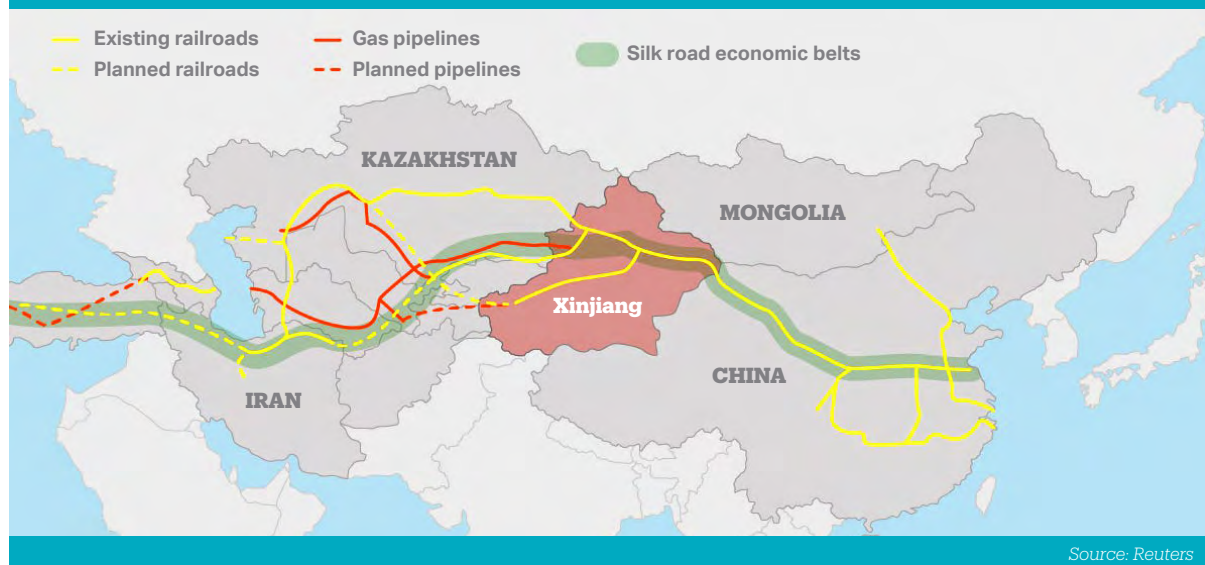
1.3 China's Border Security Strategy

The Chinese government explicitly links economic development with security and stability. Therefore, the third overlaid strategic-level concept was built around border security and "internal stability" (Ball, 2018). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the advancement of relations between China, Russia and Central Asian countries significantly improved China's strategic security environment. The first document it adopted was called "Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism". China's main aim is that the border issue with the Central Asian countries should be resolved and border security should be maintained (SCO Documents, 2020). By supporting sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Central Asian countries, China is ensuring that they become trusted allies. This strategy is based on a new concept of security intended to promote "mutual trust, equality, mutual benefits and co-ordination", a kind of non-binding, Chinese-style multilateralism (SCO Documents, 2020).

With the underdeveloped Xinjiang region which borders three of the five Central Asian states—Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan—Chinese investment into region is about creating markets to improve trade with a province that preoccupies Beijing immensely. Historically, this vast region located on the north and west of China's heartlands represented a source of anxiety for Chinese rulers.

China wishes to contribute to regional development and improvement in order to avoid political and social destabilisation, which "could have domestic consequences in Xinjiang" and "slow Chinese economic growth" ("China's Xinjiang to build 'Great Wall'", n.d.). By better connecting Xinjiang to both the domestic Chinese market and markets abroad, Beijing aims to suppress economic and political discontent, which has often created violence in the region's predominantly Turkic Muslim Uyghur population.

Figure 1: Belt and Road Initiative land routes that run through China's Xinjiang



In examining security dimensions, it is critical to note that China sees the comprehensiveness of its strategy as the defining feature, which indicates that the military, political and economic dimensions are all regarded as vital (Ong, 2005). Therefore, Chinese strategic planners frequently use this more general term, 'comprehensive national strength' in discussing the country's long-term strategy. Central Asia, of which China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region holds geographical importance, is often considered by the Chinese authorities as a security issue for the central government. In 2014, at the Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, Xi Jinping stated that "for most Asian countries, development means the greatest security and [is] the master key to regional security issues" (Fourth Summit of Conference on Interaction, n.d.). Hence, China is aiming to use integration and regional economic cooperation as a fundamental mechanism to achieve its goal.

The BRI is one of the main instruments containing a financial commitment to this goal. China has reorganised its army units in Xinjiang to safeguard its oil fields along the 3300 km western border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Auyezov, 2009). According to the latest report, the Xinjiang government said it had earmarked approximately US\$24.6 billion for roads in 2016 (Laruelle, 2018). Developing close ties with Central Asia through an energy nexus helps China deter threats from the so-called separatist activists in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The newly independent Central Asian Republics have raised political security problems in Central Asia for China, as they do have at least a sense of sympathy for

the Muslim people in China's Xin-jiang region. Beijing is aware that the Uyghurs can receive support from neighbouring Central Asian states. Therefore since late 2002, China has ensured to receive the help of Central Asian governments to marginalise the Uyghurs' few remaining Muslim supporters. China has pressured other nations to limit or even eradicate political events coordinated by diaspora Uyghurs and proceeded to push the SCO to focus on Uyghur separatists' networks.

Gradually, the political pressure that Beijing has been putting on Central Asian governments over the Uyghur diaspora has spread a negative image of China in the region. Beijing compelled Kazakhstan, and to a lesser degree Kyrgyzstan, to dissolve the connections that the Uyghur diaspora set up on their territories and forced the Institute of Uyghur Studies, which had been created within the Institute of Oriental Studies in Almaty, to close (Peyrouse, 2007). During this second phase, the Uyghurs were stripped of their primary role in the development of border trade. The Han replaced them, the reason being that Beijing did not want to see these exchanges reinforce the political and cultural links between the newly independent states and its Muslim population in East Turkestan.

In general, the erosion of central authority, exemplified by the collapse of the Soviet empire, has forced China to rethink its control over traditionally non-Han areas such as Xinjiang. Based on these strategic interests, China's geopolitical concerns in Central Asia include holding into the strategic stability and security of its borders, blocking the rise of any strategic threat or politico-military group in the region for China's security (Ong, 2005).

2. Investment: Chinese Projects in Central Asia

No discussion of the role of China in Central Asia would be complete without mentioning China's primary investments in the region. Beijing aims to revive the old trading route through its ambitious One Belt One Road project, which was unveiled first by President Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan in 2013. This project is aimed to develop infrastructure across Central Asia, South Asia and into Europe. The BRI involves over 60 countries in two broad directions: a Maritime Silk Road along China's sea routes, and the SREB, which aims to improve connectivity on Eurasian land routes to Europe. Central Asia holds a vital role in its successful development.

This strategy aims to reinforce Central Asia's historical role on the Silk Road, a massive economic project

that is expected to include investments approaching between \$1 and \$4 trillion (Hillman, 2018). The BRI projects can be categorised in four major divisions: (a) rail and road infrastructure, (b) energy cooperation, (c) trade promotion and industrial development and (d) people-to-people projects (Aminjonov, 2019). BRI thus involves repackaging and producing collectively the many ongoing or completed China-funded infrastructure projects in Central Asia, under the umbrella of the new mega-project: Kazakhstan is the main focus of Chinese investment in the region, followed by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. According to the data from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, the volume of direct for-foreign investment in the five Central Asian countries reached \$14.7 billion in the year 2018 (Umarov, 2020).

Table 3: Number of China's BRI and bilateral projects in Central Asia DATES?

	Total number by sector	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan	Turkmenistan
Total by country	261	102	46	44	43	26
Trade and industrial development	131	61	17	17	24	12
Rail and road infrastructure	51	14	11	16	5	5
Energy cooperation	48	20	5	7	12	4
People-to-people projects	31	7	13	4	2	5

Source: (CADGAT: OSCE Academy in Bishkek, n.d.)

The SREB is one of the most significant terrestrial segments of China's BRI; a massive programme to invest as much as \$800 billion only in transport and trade infrastructure between China and the rest of the world (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). BRI is not merely the sum of projects and schemes created around the idea of uniting China to the rest of the world through new

continental and maritime infra-structure. Instead, it is a political and economic discourse on the Silk Road and a new manifestation of China's soft power, of its 'peaceful' and 'multilateral' rise. Some analysts speculate that BRI's success could form the basis for a new kind of international order in which China aims to play a leading role (Miller, n.d.).

3. Rising Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Central Asia

Chinese investment and financing have resulted in tangible gains for Central Asian economies. However, all the enterprises in the region must be part of a carefully crafted plan. Initially, Beijing aimed to demilitarise the borders, which was then followed by a crackdown on the Uyghur community. Later, this proceeded with the creation of a collective security framework through the SCO, through which China built secure infrastructure and communications systems in the region through its institutional soft power.

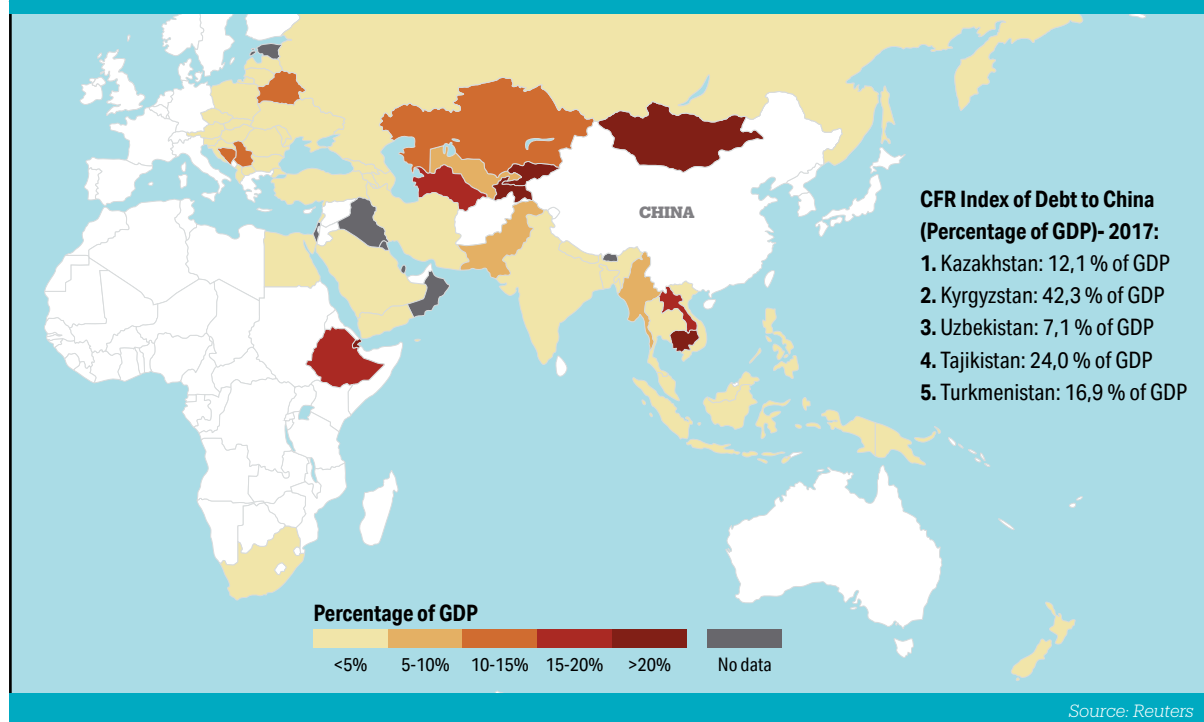
However, it is imperative to bear in mind that China's presence in Central Asia is, at times, controversial, and full of confusion and complications. The Chinese government became a scapegoat for local problems in the region such as economic and employment woes, and a focal point for sensitive cross-border issues such as the harsh treatment of Muslim minorities in China (specifically Uyghurs), accusations of debt-trap diplomacy, and fear over the recent Coronavirus (COVID-19) alert in China.

3.1 China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy and the rise of Sinophobia

As stated before, the purpose of BRI is to "promote regional economic cooperation, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning between different civilisations, and promote world peace and development" ("Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative", 2015). Behind this evocative blend of material, economic, and cultural ambitions, there are other hidden motivations not likely to be mentioned in official Chinese discourse. One of the significant strategic motivations at play is that China aspires to increase the dependence of Central Asian countries into its economic circle of influence. A significant part of the debate revolves around the assertion that the Chinese government employs 'debt-trap diplomacy' through the BRI, which means trapping developing countries with debt dependence, and then translating that dependence into geopolitical influence. The initiative hoped to follow Chinese practices to date for delivering trillions of dollars in infrastructure financing to Asia, Europe, and Africa, often entailing loans to the sovereign borrower.

Nevertheless, this opportunity carries equal amounts of risk. Chinese loans are forcing Central Asian nations into ever-growing dependency on Beijing, as the BRI raises the risk of the debt crisis in some borrower lands. According to a report published by the Center for Global Development (2018) based in Washington D.C., five Central Asian countries are vulnerable to debt crises, in which Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are at higher risk (Hurley et al., 2018). To estimate the countries that may suffer from BRI-related debt distress, the report uses a statistically significant threshold effect for the countries with rising debt. According to the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) Belt and Road Tracker, overall debt to China has soared since 2013, surpassing 20 per cent of GDP in some countries (Steil & Della Rocca, 2019).

Figure 2: **Map of CFR Index of Debt to China (Percentage of GDP)- 2017**



There are several aspects of Chinese aid that are problematic in the case of Central Asian countries. Tajikistan is evaluated by the IMF and World Bank to hold a high risk of debt distress, and it appears that the situation is worsening, with Dushanbe looking set to take on more and more debt (Bhutia, 2019). Being one of the poorest countries in Central Asia, it has been described as the first leg of the land-based elements of BRI. Significantly, a \$3 billion portion of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline is aimed to pass through Tajikistan, reportedly financed through Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) (Hurley et al., 2019). Similarly, Kyrgyzstan holds the fundamental importance of significant new BRI-related infrastructure projects, much of it financed by external debt. Thus, Kyrgyzstan's dependence on Chinese loans has been proliferating over the past decade. Kyrgyz and Chinese authorities are reportedly discussing the construction of a China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, a connection of hydropower plants, additional roadway construction, and completion of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline (Mogilevskii, 2019). By the end of March 2017, the debt to Eximbank of China made up 42% of total government external debt public, while publicly guaranteed debt amounted to roughly 65 per cent of GDP, of which external debt represented about 90 per cent of the total. While currently it is considered as a moderate risk of debt distress, Kyrgyzstan remains

exposed to economic collapses, resulting from a sizeable exchange rate devaluation exacerbated by the scaling up of public investments.

In countries suffering from the debt crisis, the Chinese government provides a case-by-case solution. For example, in 2011, China agreed to write off an unknown amount of debt owed by the Tajik government in exchange for some 1,158 square kilometres of disputed territory (Hurley et al., 2019). In Kyrgyzstan, China provides loans in exchange for the right to extract mineral resources by locking the region into the role of raw material exporters. There is a strong correlation between Chinese credit expansion and Chinese business engagement in Central Asia. Many BRI projects are motivated not only much by pure economic rationale but by strategic/geopolitical considerations with gains from these projects possibly materialising only in the (very) long-term. BRI seems exceptionally beneficial for Central Asian states since it facilitates trade and develops infrastructure in the region. However, closer analysis suggests that these changes predominantly serve the interests of China, expanding its export markets and increasing its companies' access to foreign natural resources. Therefore, we can conclude that there are some small and relatively weak countries, that face a significant growing risk of a sovereign debt default

if planned BRI projects are implemented speedily and backed with sovereign loans or guarantees. This however led to concerns of local populations over the economic instability and rise of Sinophobic narratives are commonplace across Central Asia.

Anti-Chinese sentiment can be found at all levels of the community in each Central Asian state, and prejudiced stereotypes are frequently aired publicly. While local Central Asian elites are more comfortable about forging closer relations with China, these adverse reactions are particularly pronounced in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In Kyrgyzstan, the anti-Chinese sentiment is often seen in the form of demonstrations or is used by political leaders to gain support against Chinese companies (Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries, 2017). According to several opinion polls conducted in Kyrgyzstan, more Kyrgyz citizens view China as an economic threat than a partner. They also view Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey and the EU as more significant economic allies (Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries, 2017). A suicide bomb attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek in August 2016 raised fears in Beijing regarding security threats emanating from across its borders. There also are environmental concerns, as Chinese infrastructure and exports pollute the region. A \$300 million Chinese-led factory in Kara-Balta region, Kyrgyzstan, was forced to suspend operations temporarily after local demonstrations occurred against pollution (Akylbekova, 2018). This combination of nationalism, anger over corruption and environmental impacts could fuel anti-Chinese and anti-government sentiment in Central Asia.

The dependency of Central Asian elite's on the fraudulent use of Chinese development loans form as only one potential driver of anti-Chinese sentiment in the region. There is an outrage that major BRI projects in Central Asia use Chinese expatriate labour. Other objections concentrate on purported Chinese attempts to increase control over Central Asian land and on Chinese workers' taking over local industries and trade, thus pressing Central Asians out of coveted local jobs (Pennier, 2016). This is precisely the case in Kyrgyzstan, where the government has long been accused of downplaying Chinese labour migration (Kruglov, 2019). According to some figures, in 2018, more than 30,000 Chinese migrants came to Kyrgyzstan, many of whom worked as construction workers on BRI-funded projects. Tajikistan has also faced growing public discontent. Unofficial data claims that there are 150,000 Chinese migrant workers in the country (Laruelle et al., 2018).

One of the main concerns is the lack of transparency surrounding many agreements and contracts in which companies are selected without competing tenders, providing scope for mismanagement and corruption. Within this context, massive protests occurred in 2019 in Kyrgyzstan demanding fewer work permits for Chinese workers, and the expulsion of illegal migrants. In February 2020, hundreds of people gathered in Kyrgyzstan's At-Bashy region to protest the construction of a trade and logistic centre sponsored by Chinese investors. Kyrgyz citizens fear that the land will be sold to the Chinese ("Another protest in At-Bashy, 2020).

Kazakhstan has seen a similar wave of sporadic protests against perceived Chinese economic invasion of the country—the Khorgos case—is a notable example of this. On the Chinese side of the Khorgos border district is a new city with a developing series of high-rise structures covering some 100,000 people (Corre, 2018a). Chinese citizens were encouraged to move to this part of the land to take an active role in BRI-related business activities. While many business people and investors have supported the BRI related projects in the region, ordinary Kazakhs citizens felt wary about the country's China connections. The first wave of protests occurred in 2015 when a dispute broke out between local and Chinese workers at a Chinese-owned copper mine factory in Kazakhstan. In 2016, many Kazakh citizens protested against the country's Land Code that enabled government sales of agricultural land to Chinese for 25 years ("Kazakhstan's land reform", 2016). The protestors feared that Chinese investors would use their land ownership in Kazakhstan to gradually exercise their influence and dominance. In 2019, another wave of protests kicked off in Kazakhstan's industrial town of Zhanaozen and spread to Almaty, Aqtobe, Shymkent and the capital, Nur-Sultan. The sudden uprising against Chinese investments and loans created a dilemma for the new president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, as Kazakhstan was slated to receive Chinese assistance for the construction of 50 new industrial facilities soon ("Wave of anti-China protests poses", 2019).



Intense security measures taken prior to Ramadan in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China aftermath the clashes where 35 people has lost their lives. (Ali İhsan Çam - Anadolu Agency)

3.2 Mass imprisonment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities

Regional Sinophobia reached its highest level with China's counter-extremism in Xinjiang and with its systematic mass imprisonment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the region. Public believes that the Chinese see all Muslims and Turkic peoples as nothing more than a source of terrorism and extremism (Umarov, 2020). In Kazakhstan, people were generally sceptical of Beijing over investment, Chinese migrants and especially the treatment of Uyghurs in China (Zheng, 2019). According to the latest report from the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan and National Committee of Chinese People's Political Board, there are an estimated one million ethnic Kazakhs and half million ethnic Kyrgyz live in Xinjiang (Uat Khanov, 2016). China's recent attempts at so-called 're-educating' these Kazakh and Kyrgyz Muslim minorities has led to a spike in anti-Chinese protests in Central Asia.

One of them occurred in December 2018, where protesters gathered outside the Chinese embassy in Bishkek to demand an end to Chinese 'fascism' and an explanation for why ethnic Kyrgyz were being held in the Chinese camps (Kyrk-Choro is protesting, 2018). There were even protests at the border of Kazakhstan, Korgos. Demonstrators protested against not only Chinese investments, but also the imprisonment of Muslims in Xinjiang ("Kazakh advocate of Muslim rights," 2019). Relatives of the detainees called on the head of states, Sooronbai Jeenbekov to intercede for the ethnic Kyrgyz citizens in China ("Kyrgyz citizens request," n.d).

The situation of ethnic Kazakhs in China has become the cause for unrest inside Kazakhstan (Standish & Toleukhanova, 2019). In Kazakhstan, Atajurt Eriktileri organisation has announced the detention of approximately 10,000 ethnic Kazakhs in northwest China. Thus in 2018, the Kazakh foreign minister acknowledged that his office had received over 1,000 letters asking for help in securing the release of family members in Xinjiang. According to Nergis Kassenova (Standish & Toleukhanova, 2019), a Central Asia expert and senior fellow at Harvard University, public opinion is getting worse, and the anti-Chinese sentiment is growing in Kazakhstan. Kazakh delegations and officials have made several visits to Xinjiang region, and the Kazakh Foreign Ministry began proposing re-ports and press briefings to show that it is active and working on the issue ("Are Kazakhs oppressed," n.d). Later, Kazakh Foreign Minister Beibut Atamkulov announced in succeeding of freeing 20 Kazakh citizens from camps and assuring that the pressure will be given to Beijing regarding its citizens ("Atamkulov told about," 2019). The Kazakh consulate in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang had played a significant role in this regard as well. They managed to issue a temporary passport for its citizens and forced the Chinese administration to issue an emergency visa, which later allowed them to leave for Almaty by bus (Standish & Toleukhanova, 2019).



3.4 Post-Pandemic Scenarios

The most current reason for anti-Chinese sentiment is the rapid spread of the Coronavirus disease. This further has unleashed a wave of panic and, in some cases, outright anti-Chinese sentiment across the globe (Rich, 2020). Especially those bordering China, Central Asian states have been among the first to feel the effects, as there are hundreds of Central Asian students at Chinese universities and thousands of Chinese workers in Central Asia (Rickleton, 2020). As the new virus killed more than 328,000 people in five months and continues to spread around the world, Central Asian states have introduced measures to tackle the Covid-19 and prevent its spread within its borders.

On January 28, 2020, Kazakhstan announced restrictions on Chinese citizens obtaining visas ("Kazakhstan restricts visas," 2020). Also, the governments suspended all forms of passenger travel to and from China in late January (Kazakhstan suspends, 2020). Tajikistan notified local and foreign air-lines that it would block the entry of citizens from China for holding high cases of the Coronavirus.

Closing borders also means a definite drop in cross-border trade. Commercial community lock-downs, companies and factories closures, and travel bans on Chinese migrant workers have, in effect, stopped vital BRI value chains. Furthermore, uncertain are the disruptions in international trade that inhibit the inflows of construction equipment and materials needed to keep BRI infra-

structure projects going. According to some experts, in the post-Covid-19 situation, all Central Asian countries remittances are bound to shrink due to job cuts overseas, thus putting further pressure on the economies vying for Chinese investment.

As China has become the major player in financing infrastructure projects in BRI partner countries, some observers state the current crisis may increase demand for China's cooperation, particularly with regards to health-care infrastructure (Braw, 2020), making health and energy aid a natural extension of Beijing's partnerships. China sees the pandemic as a golden opportunity to develop energy infrastructure focused on health facilities across Central Asia through its existing strengths in the renewable energy sector (Brent, 2020).

Whatever the accurate scale of diseases in Central Asia, the economic impacts are already starting to show. The pandemic situation has the potential to become a spoiler for the BRI's trade and infrastructure plans. The coronavirus outbreak is inciting setbacks and disruptions to China's construction and investment plans in the region, risking years of planning and hundreds of billions of dollars in economic diplomacy. Currently, China is making efforts to engage and rebuild its relationship with Belt and Road Initiative nations through the coronavirus pandemic that has interrupted its connectivity strategy.

Conclusion

Over the years, the most discussed Chinese dominance question in Central Asia has been: how will China's economic influence shape the region's geopolitical fabric? The question of China's growing presence in Central Asia is a sensitive issue. The public would like to know if their country's relationship with China is built on a win-win basis, or is the cooperation in China's favour? People are concerned that Beijing might be taking advantage of the weak political regimes in Central Asia and the lack of economic muscle in order to create a zone of Chinese economic dominance. The reasons for this are manifold: growing economic dependence, ethnic human rights violations, debt concerns, and geopolitical expansion of China. The enormous influx of funds and capital from Beijing poses risks for Central Asian countries. Central Asian leaders may not be able to balance the threat of anti-China sentiment. Increasing debt burdens, financial degradation, the lack of transparency in many agreements, and the influx of Chinese workers in some places, raises concerns for future BRI-related projects. Central Asians may grow more antagonistic toward Beijing if the government fails to address the anti-Chinese sentiment increasing

in the region. Much will depend on how Beijing will play its economic control, and whether it will manage to decrease the anti-Chinese populism. Thus, Chinese plans face serious challenges. Political sensitivities abound. While Central Asian elites welcome an influx of funding, Chinese investors often encounter widespread suspicion and xenophobia. The rise of Sinophobia will affect the political, geostrategic, and cultural situation in the region. For now, the Chinese question constitutes a focal point for frustration and tension built up over the rapidly changing and tumultuous last three decades in Central Asia. The more Beijing tries to expand the borders of its influence in the region, the more resistance it will encounter. But it is also within this context of intensified Sinophobia that Beijing now struggles to find the means to both further and then protect its own national, strategic, and economic interests in Central Asia. Thus, China's expanding footprint in Central Asia risks a mass backlash. If growing public outrage about China in Central Asia translates into changes in government policy, the region could become a spoiler for all of Beijing's BRI ambitions.

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