

## **THE PERCEPTION OF CHINA IN KAZAKHSTAN**

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### **SUMMARY**

The paper touches on the perception of China among the elites and public opinion in Kazakhstan. It does so by analyzing the strategic partnership between both countries and discussing the BRI projects and the national policy of Nurdy Zhol in Kazakhstan. The last section highlights the growing anti-Chinese feeling among the broader public in the country and presents scepticism towards China.

### **KEY FINDINGS**

1. The BRI should be understood as the essential part of Kazaks' domestic development Nurdy Zhol project;
2. The ZTE Khorgos dry port is a significant part of Sino-Kazakhstan economic cooperation;
3. In the current context, the growing widespread scepticism resulted from protests against cooperation with China which will influence the Kazakhstan government's policy towards Beijing;
4. The growing anti-Chinese sentiments in Kazakhstan open the possibility of transportation corridors via Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. However, as the most stable country in the region, China can hardly bypass Kazakhstan.

## INTRODUCTION

Ever since Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative in Astana (September 2013), Kazakhstan has become a vital part of China's international policy. The country's strategic position as the corridor between China and Europe was recognized by the Chinese policymakers who hope to use this position to the fullest. During his speech in Astana, the Chinese President referred to Emperor Han Wudi and Zhang Qian – the latter the special envoy to today's Central Asia. Xi Jinping's evoking of this history seemed intended to strengthen the relations between both countries; however, the reign of Han Wudi was in fact characterized by the centralization of power and the domination of China in the region. Moreover, taking Kazakhstan as a corridor like Russia, Belarus, and Central Europe limits the possible Chinese investment in the logistics industry, e.g., in Khorgos or natural resources exploration. Taking this perspective, the critical question discussed in the paper is to what extent the government in Astana will pursue cordial relations with Mainland China or will instead join the growing scepticism regarding relations with its eastern neighbour.

## SINO-KAZAKH CENTRAL RELATIONS

Since gaining independence in 1991, strengthening relations with China has been at the core of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. One of Kazakhstan's foreign policy priorities in 2014-2020 was a comprehensive strategic partnership with China (1). In 2005 Kazakhstan signed the comprehensive strategic partnership with China, followed by the enduring strategic partnership in 2019 signed by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

Nevertheless, the biggest promises came from the BRI concept that combines the megaproject land and seafaring parts, which received the abbreviation BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). The fact that the initiative was announced in Astana within Nazarbayev University's walls flamed further enthusiasm in the country. Like everything else that the Chinese leadership undertakes, geographic location to present a new strategic initiative to the global community was carefully thought out and filled with political symbolism.

**As the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart, Tokayev noted in his speech at the February 2020 Munich Security Conference, the Central Asian region is one of the critical regions for implementing this megaproject.**

The first president of Kazakhstan, N. Nazarbayev, also repeatedly noted that Kazakhstan is the first and critical country in its location and the Silk Road Economic Belt geo-economic gateway of China to the West. According to E. Yertysbayev, "Without Kazakhstan, it is impossible to implement the project "One Belt, One Road". Almost all transit land routes run through Kazakhstan. It is through our country that China is rapidly entering the markets of the CIS, Europe and the Middle East" (2). Occupying a vast territory in Eurasia and having large oil and minerals reserves, Kazakhstan has an important geostrategic position. China sees Kazakhstan as a critical transit point, energy source and stable neighbour to its volatile Xinjiang Autonomous Region (3).

#### **NURLY ZHOL AND THE BRI**

Since the end of 2014, cooperation between Kazakhstan and China has been developing within the framework of the conjugation of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Kazakh national program "Nurly Zhol" (4). The consonance of Nurly Zhol and the BRI is determined by the fact that both megaprojects' priorities are such areas as transport and logistics, industry, energy, agricultural exports, housing, and communal infrastructure, education and human capital development, and support for small and medium business.

The Nurly Zhol was announced by Nursultan Nazarbayev in his speech a year after Xi Jinping's speech in Astana. To a certain degree, Kazakhstan's President followed the Chinese model and emphasized the infrastructure development that today is rightfully considered the main engine of the country's economic growth (5). The purpose of this program is to form a single economic market by integrating the country's macro regions based on building an adequate infrastructure on a hub principle to ensure long-term economic growth in Kazakhstan, as well as the implementation of anti-crisis measures to support individual sectors of the economy in the face of deteriorating conditions in foreign markets. In other words, the government hoped to stimulate domestic demand

and market and make the future development more coherent and competitive in mechanical engineering, agribusiness, and housing (6).

In this ambitious project, China was seen as a significant external contributor. In April 2019, Nursultan Nazarbayev participated in Beijing "One Belt - One Road". An agreement was signed on the implementation of 55 projects for Kazakhstan for \$ 27.6 billion. Under this agreement, the country has either already created the following or will build them over the next several years: the modernization of the polypropylene powder production lines, the manufacturing of JAC passenger cars, the development of complex cars and tractors, and manufacturing and investment in mining, chemical and metallurgical industries in the Zhambyl region (7).

**Nevertheless, the most evident example of the investment is in the dry port KTZE-Khorgos Gateway. It is the largest dry port in Central Asia, with an area of 102.8 hectares.**

In 2020, 1,500 container trains passed through the terminal: twice as many as in 2019. Simultaneously, more than 2,600 freight trains were accepted along the narrow track and over 3,500 trains along the wide track.

#### **KAZAKH PEOPLE AND CHINA**

Despite the high level of cooperation with China, there is a phenomenon in Kazakhstan when official assessments and practical economic partnerships, which bring profits to national economies, come into conflict with the rather critical opinions widespread in society regarding the partnership with China. Most experts believe that Sinophobia or anti-Chinese sentiments among the population of Kazakhstan have been increasing. The further development of the BRI will affect the growth of such sentiments among Kazakhstanis. Moreover, experts explain the anti-Chinese sentiment by the following factors:

- the presence of negative historical memory of the confrontation and enmity between the Kazakhs and the Chinese in different historical periods, for example, during the Cultural Revolution;

- the growth of PRC economic and investment activity in Kazakhstan, including in connection with the implementation of the BRI, leading to the "visible presence of China";
- the functioning in Xinjiang of "centres of political re-education", information about which is broadcast by Kazakhstani mass media and circulates on social networks (mainly in Facebook);
- China's weak information campaign about the BRI, the lack of an objective and transparent picture about the country, and about the contracts and projects implemented within the BRI;
- the presence on the territory of Kazakhstan of Chinese migrant workers who have become a "visible community"; while the number of migrant workers has been decreasing there is the widespread belief that this number has been increasing;
- more than 40% of the Kazak population considered the BRI an "only Chinese" project, while for 20%, the Chinese project does not matter (8).

Strengthened by nationalist sentiments and often latent public antipathy towards the Chinese, this concern has a strong mobilization potential. The 2016 protests regarding land reform in Kazakhstan illustrated this situation, with the public rejecting a new law to extend the lease of land to foreigners.

**Fearing that the new law would allow Chinese citizens to buy Kazakh land in the future, unexpectedly strong public discontent led then-President Nazarbayev to suspend it altogether.**

Indeed, as shown by the 2017 survey data, 45 per cent of respondents in Kazakhstan do not see a clear and immediate threat from China now but believe that it may arise in the future, which confirms a significant level of background concern on this issue (9).

More to the point, since 2019, anti-Chinese sentiment has grown significantly and resulted in demonstrations, clashes between local and Chinese workers, and social media outrage and concern over Beijing's economic influence. March 2021 saw action against the "Chinese expansion". Participants say they "do not want to strengthen China's presence in the Kazakh economy and accused former President Nazarbayev of taking too many loans from China. As of now, very different opinions in the Kazakhstani media have

appeared. Most of the anti-Chinese sentiments are broadcast by pro-Western Internet resources such as the US-owned Radio Azattyk. The Kazakh domestic media, however, goes deeper and analyze the consequences of Sinophobia in Kazakhstan. According to experts, Kazakhstani rejection of cooperation with China creates a situation in which transit routes might bypass Kazakhstan. Now, the main railway line connecting China with Europe and the Middle East goes through the Kazakh point of "Khorgos". Nevertheless, the question of new routes beyond Kazakhstan along the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan corridor and further through the Middle East is constantly on the agenda. (10).

## CONCLUSIONS

Due to its geographical advantage, Kazakhstan could become a hub of global importance hub since the direct traffic from China to Europe, the Persian Gulf countries, Central Asia, the Caucasus will soon be reoriented to this region. The most important part of the BRI Nurlı Zol joint project is based in Khorgos dry port. The promises of massive infrastructure, logistic and mining projects, and Chinese migrants' workers' appearance have become subjects of public debate, sometimes influenced by the foreign media. This future cooperation, however, as argued in brief, is limited by several factors, mainly illustrated by bottom-up pressure. The close relations with China have sparked strong emotions and became a catalyst for social unrest in Kazakhstan. This needs to be considered by the government in Astana.

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