

Connecting with the Neighbors: The Central Asian Response to China's Engagement with the Region*

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Abstract:

Since the 1990s, Sino-Central Asian relations have deepened to the degree that China now has the capacity to drastically alter the political and economic trajectories of each of the five states of the region. To date, China has enjoyed tremendous success in pursuing its interests in the region. Whether this continues to be the case will be determined in part by how Central Asians react to Chinese involvement in the region. In this paper, I overview the development of Sino-Central Asian relations and discuss four narratives about China's role in the region which have the potential to shape these relations over the short and medium term future. These four narratives are: China as protector; China as aggressor; China as investor; and China as exploiter.

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In 1405 AD, the founder of the Timurid dynasty, Tamerlane [Amir Temur] died while beginning his invasion of Ming China. Although Tamerlane never reached the territory of contemporary China, more than 600 years later a delegation from Uzbekistan attended the ceremonial laying of the cornerstone of a new monument dedicated to the Timurid dynasty's most celebrated poet, Alisher Navoi at the University of Shanghai (Isaev 2013). The long-delayed arrival of a member of the Timurid court in the form of the new Navoi monument signifies the interest of some Chinese officials in acknowledging (or at least appearing to acknowledge) the cultural symbols of their Central Asian neighbors. Although Navoi wrote in the Chagatai language, not Uzbek, and only spent a few years of his life in present-day Uzbekistan (he was born and died in Herat, in contemporary Afghanistan), he has been heavily promoted by the Uzbekistani regime as a cultural hero and even as the founder of the Uzbek literary language. Contemporary visitors to Uzbekistan encounter images and representations of the poet throughout the country; there is a province and city named after him, as well as the National Library, the State Museum of Literature, the capital's Opera and Ballet theater and its largest downtown park (which hosts a sizeable monument to the poet).

While the details surrounding the building of a particular monument to a 15th Century poet may not seem especially relevant when considering inter-state relations, its construction is representative of the deepening interactions between China and the Central Asian states since the late 1990s. Without appreciating the scope and depth of these interactions, it is simply not possible to understand contemporary political and economic dynamics in Central Asia. Chinese involvement in the region over the next several decades quite simply has the capacity to drastically alter the trajectories of each of the Central Asian states. By all accounts, China's contemporary pragmatic approach to the region has enabled it to achieve many of its apparent interests in Central Asia. Whether or not China will continue to enjoy this level of success in its pursuit of its interests remains an open question. In contrast to the

example of the Navoi monument being built in Shanghai, the vast majority of these interactions are occurring on Central Asian soil. Therefore, understanding Central Asian reactions to Chinese engagement with the region can shed light on the opportunities and obstacles for China's Central Asian policy over the short and medium-term future.

A brief overview of Sino-Central Asian relations

Chinese-Central Asian interstate relations can only be truly examined since the Soviet Union's collapse. Prior to 1991, the five Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, had no history of independent statehood and thus no history of autonomous diplomatic relations with China. As Karrar states, the absence of negative prior engagements led some observers to anticipate that there would be limited obstacles to Chinese-Central Asian cooperation (Karrar 2010, 18). However, despite the historic novelty of their independence, the Central Asian states were not cut out of whole cloth; in fact, over the past twenty-five years, pre-1991 legacies have played an important role in shaping the dynamics between China and the states of the region.

The clearest legacy was the fact that the elites and the masses were firmly in Moscow's orbit. The Central Asian republics had not experienced the massive nationalist mobilizations that had shaken communist party rule in other republics, and by most indications there was limited popular or elite desire for independence (Beissinger 2002; Collins 2006; Hale 2008; 2009). Following independence, the five new states continued to utilize the Russian ruble until the Central Bank of Russia forced them to adopt new currencies. Many Central Asians had spent time in Russia, spoke Russian and regularly consumed Russian media. In comparison, not only was the Chinese language and Chinese culture virtually unknown across the region, but the limited experiences that Central Asians had had with China were predominantly negative and rooted in the tensions of the Sino-Soviet split. These tensions were especially keenly felt in the border zones between the two powers.

While these legacies did not encourage immediate cooperation between the Central Asian states and China, they also did not fully preclude it. Had China made a concerted effort to engage with the Central Asian states in the early 1990s, it is possible that deep ties could have been forged with one or two of the regional states. However, in the 1990s, China did not make this effort; instead, internal security concerns took precedence over developing foreign ties with the Central Asian states. Although it quickly established diplomatic relations with the five states (in return for the assurance that none of the newly independent states would recognize Taiwan), China was generally content to permit Russia to maintain its privileged position as regional leader (Karrar 2010, 55; Lo 2009).

During the 1990s, internal Chinese security services were attempting to pacify a wave of contention in its largest province, Xinjiang, orchestrated by ethnic Uyghurs, a Turkic Muslim minority group (Bovingdon 2010; Hierman 2007). Chinese officials were concerned that the independence of largely Turkic and Muslim Central Asian states could complicate these efforts. While the notion that the independence of the states could inspire Uyghur separatists, who were seeking to establish their own autonomous state, was troubling, the possibility that a destabilized border country could enable transnational material support for separatist/terrorist elements was even more disconcerting. China's respect for Russian influence in its "near abroad" throughout the 1990s was founded on the presumption that Moscow shared Beijing's interests in discouraging separatism, rooting out terrorism and generally encouraging stability in the region (Lo 2009). Thus, from the Chinese perspective, by establishing minimal relations with the Central Asian states while letting Russia take care of providing security guarantees, Beijing could focus on more vital issues such as economic development and the status of Taiwan (Lo 2009, 92).

According to Lo, the Chinese implicit endorsement of the status quo lasted until Russia decided to welcome the deployment of United States' troops into Central Asia following the September 11, 2001 attacks without communicating or warning Beijing of its intention. He writes that Russian compliance

with US interests “rammed home the point that Russia would not support Chinese interests in Central Asia, except on a purely coincidental basis. From this it was a short step to concluding that China would have to rely largely on its own efforts to advance its agenda. That tacit bargain in Central Asia was off” (Lo 2009, 96).

While this assessment rightly identifies the role that September 11 played in altering Chinese perceptions of the compatibility of Russian interests with their own, it is important to recognize that Sino-Chinese interactions had been intensifying since the mid-1990s. In her analysis of diplomatic visits, Zakhirova finds that between 1997 and 2001, Chinese interactions with the Central Asian states had deepened enough to move China from the periphery to a core position within the Central Asian subsystem (2012). The intensification of contact had been partially the result of the founding of the Shanghai Five in 1996. This group, comprised of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan was initially concerned with resolving border tensions between the states, but a series of incursions by a non-state actor, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000, prodded the members to broaden and further institutionalize their security cooperation. Thus, in June 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 28).

This new organization, which included the original five members plus Uzbekistan, provided China with a convenient means of advancing its economic and security interests following September 11. Reflecting Chinese public statements, official SCO documents frequently emphasize the fundamental internal sovereignty of member states while rejecting Western/US-style interventionism (Cooley 2012, 77–8). From the beginning, enhancing security cooperation has been a fundamental goal of the SCO: one of the first official documents released was entitled “Shanghai Convention on Combatting Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism” highlighting the organizations intent to combat what China has labeled the “three evils” (Karrar 2010, 119). Despite this explicit attention, the SCO’s achievements with regard to security cooperation are modest at best: although the organization has formalized joint

military exercises and established an anti-terrorist structure (RATS) based in Tashkent, it has generally been unable or unwilling to react to the security crises within the region (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012). As Laruelle and Peyrouse point out, the weaknesses of the SCO's security capacity are illustrated by the organization's inability to craft a coherent collective policy towards Afghanistan as well as its non-reaction to the 2010 ethnic riots in Osh, Kyrgyzstan that left hundreds dead (2012, 42).

Its inability to foster robust security cooperation notwithstanding, the organization has successfully enhanced Chinese standing in the region. Laruelle and Peyrouse correctly emphasize that the organization has helped to build trust and confidence between the Central Asian states and China; in essence, through the provision of frequent and repetitive formal engagements, the SCO has paved the way for China to productively engage with the states of the region on a bilateral basis (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 41–2).

The fruits of these engagements are most visible on the economic front; since 2001 China has established itself as a vital economic partner in the region. Figure 1 which depicts total trade between China and the five Central Asian states between 1994 and 2013, shows a deepening of trade relations over the past several years. The flow of trade varies between the Central Asian states. While Chinese trade with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is largely driven by the import of natural resources (oil and gas, respectively), trade with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has been predominately driven by Chinese exports. In Kyrgyzstan, massive bazaars such as Dordoi (located outside the capital Bishkek) and Kara-Suu (located along the south-west border with Uzbekistan) are filled with Chinese goods that are re-exported elsewhere within the post-Soviet space.

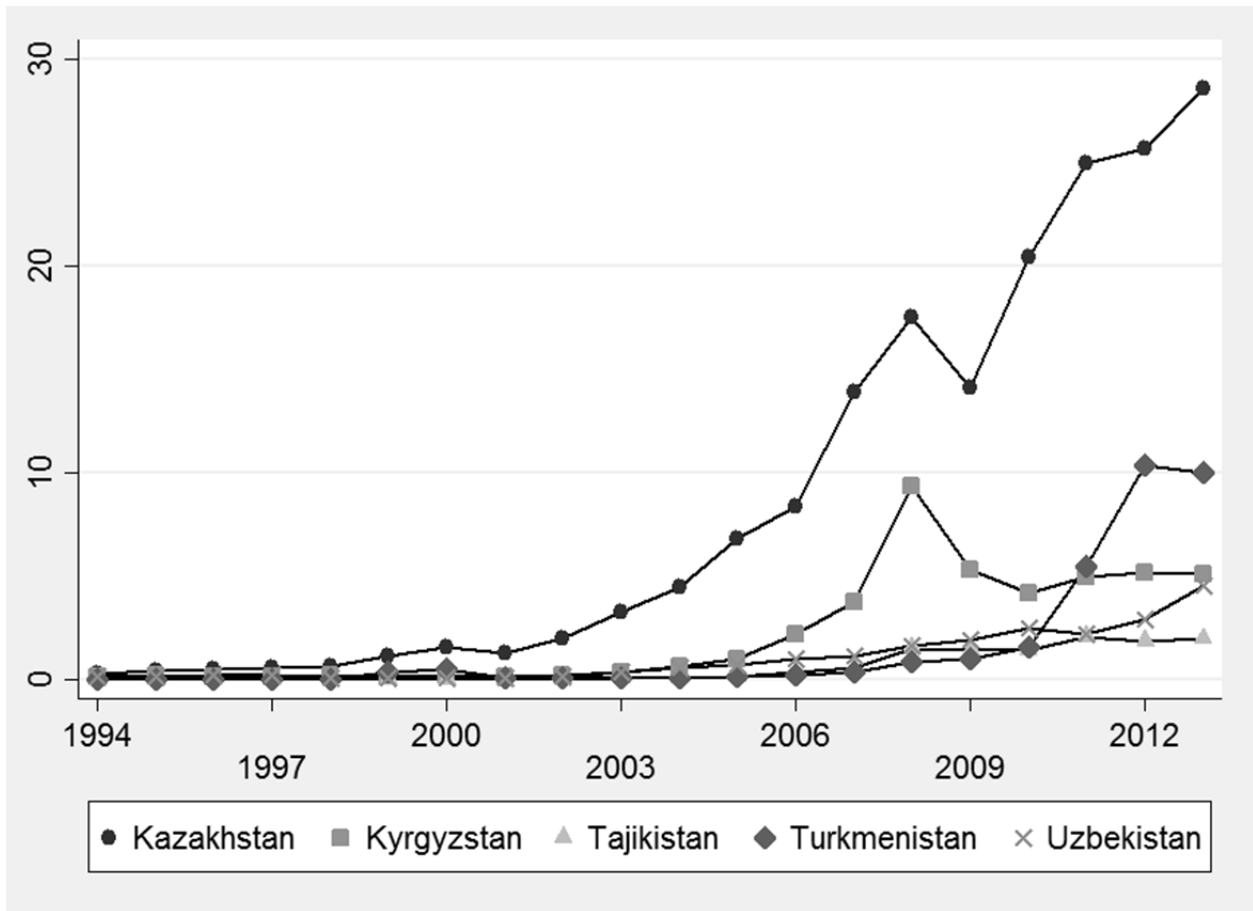


Figure 1: Total Trade between China and the five Central Asian states in billions USD (Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China)

What does this brief overview tell us about Chinese interests in the region? While the level of engagement with Central Asia has deepened in recent years, Chinese concern with ensuring that disruptive or destabilizing elements from Central Asia do not cross into its own territories has been a constant. These concerns drove China to initially seek to resolve border disputes with the new states and later to encourage information sharing about potential terrorist and separatist activities. With regard to the latter, China was especially concentrated on ethnic Uyghur activists operating in the Central Asian states. In recent years, China's growing reliance on foreign hydrocarbons led it to seek more and more economic interactions with Central Asia and its relatively unexploited oil and natural gas

reserves. In general, Chinese economic interests in the region have dovetailed with its interests in stabilization; by trading with and investing in Central Asia, China can be seen as seeking to reduce the possibility that destabilizing dynamics will defuse across its border(Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 45).

By all accounts, China has successfully pursued its interests in Central Asia. Starting from a peripheral position in 1991, it has repositioned itself into a central player in the region. It has surpassed Russia as the central trading partner with Central Asia, and promoted the SCO as a vehicle for its own security interests. Taking these successes into account, Alexander Cooley writes in his assessment of Chinese, Russian and U.S. engagement in the region that “[i]f we had to declare a winner in the new Central Asian contest, China is clearly the candidate ahead on points” (2012, 165). Whether it continues to enjoy this level of success in the future remains an open question. In part, the answer will be derived from how its engagement is viewed by Central Asians themselves.

In other words, mass and elite opinion regarding Chinese involvement in the region will likely determine how well it can pursue its own policies. In the next section, I describe four contemporary narratives from the region about Chinese engagement with Central Asia. Two narratives (*China as protector vs China as aggressor*) predominantly revolve around Chinese security interests in the region, while the other two narratives (*China as investor and China as exploiter*) are primarily concerned with Chinese economic interests. These narratives are stylized since they are intended to aggregate a number of distinct perspectives on China from within the region. Focusing on two positive narratives and two negative narratives should not be taken to indicate that Central Asian popular opinion is evenly divided, rather I am focusing on these narratives in order to elucidate both the opportunities and obstacles that China faces as it attempts to frame its continued engagement with Central Asia.

China as protector

Despite the aforementioned weaknesses of the SCO as a security organization, it has encouraged China to boost military aid to the Central Asian regimes in exchange for their cooperation in combating what China has labeled the three evils of “terrorism, extremism, and separatism.” Although minor compared to Russian military assistance, since the late 1990s China has provided communication and transportation equipment to Kazakhstan, technical military assistance to Kyrgyzstan, financial assistance to Tajikistan’s military, precision equipment and uniforms to Turkmenistan, and financial support for Uzbekistani authorities to purchase customs scanning equipment (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 32).

The potential for Chinese military influence in the region will remain limited so long as it lacks a military base in Central Asia, a development which would likely be strongly opposed by Russia (Swantsrom 2015). However, events over recent years have suggested that concerns over the stability of the region following NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan may be prompting the Central Asian states and China to deepen their military ties. Furthermore, unease generated by the Russian intervention in Ukraine may be accelerating this development. Reports have indicated that China has helped to finance the construction of officer quarters in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as a promised \$16 million for military equipment purchases in the latter state (Yuldoshev 2014; Kucera 2014). The biggest indication that the level of Sino-Central Asian military cooperation may be changing is China’s rumored sale of HQ-9 air defense systems to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. If true, these two states would represent the first buyers of the Chinese system, and the sale would be China’s largest military sale to Central Asia (Kucera 2015).

The prospects of increased military cooperation with China is valuable for the authoritarian Central Asian regimes since it provides cover from Western criticism over human rights violations while at the same time allowing space for the leaders of the region to assert their autonomy from Russian influence. Both Russia and China have openly criticized western democracy promotion policies,

emphasizing the importance of stability and secular governments over popular mobilization. For the leadership of the Central Asian regimes, the endorsement of the sanctity of sovereignty has meant that the two dominant neighborhood powers have effectively sanctioned the use of repressive practices to stifle political opposition. For instance, the SCO summit which followed the May 2005 Andijan events in which hundreds of unarmed protesters were killed by Uzbekistani security forces essentially echoed Uzbekistan's disingenuous official framing of these events as a response to terrorist threats (Human Rights Watch 2006). Comparatively, the responses from the EU and US to these events were much more critical and led to the closing of the US Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base in Uzbekistan (Cooley 2008).

At the same time, China's promotion of the SCO as a multi-national forum has enabled the Central Asian elites to occasionally openly express their displeasure with Russian policies. This was most notable at the 2008 SCO summit in which member states refused to fully support Russian actions in Georgia or to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (RFE/RL 2008; Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 38). It is doubtful that the Central Asian regimes would have been as steadfast in their reluctance to endorse Russia's wishes in the absence of China's engagement through the SCO.

China as aggressor

As the Soviet Union collapsed, many members of the sizeable ethnic Uyghur populations of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan sought to actively encourage Uyghur nationalist movements within Xinjiang. The 1990s witnessed the flowering of Uyghur nationalist organizations which propagated the Uyghur cause through newspapers and books (Bovingdon 2010). Their proximity to Xinjiang enabled them to play an essential intermediary function; not only could they collect and disseminate news from Xinjiang to the rest of the world, they could also distribute information collected by members of Uyghur diaspora in Europe to Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Thus, these organizations represented important information

transmitters and spiritual supporters of the nationalist cause but did not provide arms or otherwise drastically influence the likelihood of a successful independence movement (Roberts 2004).

Despite their relatively non-threatening posture, since the emergence of these organizations, China sought to pressure the Kazakhstani and Kyrgyzstani governments to suppress them. Initially, the Central Asian governments paid lip service to Chinese concerns about the separatist menace posed by these organizations while clandestinely permitting them to continue their activities (Roberts 2004). By the late 1990s, however, the position of Uyghur organizations were growing tenuous by the increasing tendency for regional states to blame domestic issues on “foreign” agents, a designation easily stretched to include Uyghurs regardless of their formal citizenship (Bovingdon 2010; see Tromble 2014 for additional discussion of this tendency to find “foreign” scapegoats). The expansion of interstate ties between the Central Asian regimes and China through the formation of the Shanghai Five and later the SCO effectively eliminated the space for Uyghur organizations to operate. In effect, Chinese security assurances linked to these multinational forums led the Central Asian states to restrict the rights of their own Uyghur citizens.

Uyghur nationalists are not the only ones to perceive China as acting as a geopolitical bully in the region. Over the past decade, Kazakhstan has found itself in a water dispute over the Ili and Itysh rivers which each have headwaters in China before flowing west. Despite objections from Kazakhstan and the United Nations Development Program, China has pursued plans to divert water from these two rivers, which threatens Kazakhstan’s ecological balance as well as its industrial and urban development (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 17–9). In addition, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan inherited the border disputes that had been unresolved between China and the Soviet Union. While the Kazakhstani and later the Tajikistani regimes were able to resolve these disputes with limited domestic turmoil, in Kyrgyzstan the ceding of 90,000 hectares of border land to China initiated a nationalist backlash. Reflecting the geopolitical insecurity of the Kyrgyz republic, a deputy in the Kyrgyz parliament, Azimbek

Beknazarov, threatened impeachment charges against the President, Askar Akayev (Megoran 2012; Radnitz 2005). Ultimately, Akayev's heavy handed response to Beknazarov's challenge and the protests which accompanied it set the stage for 2005's Tulip Revolution which removed Akayev from power (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012). Despite the formal settlement of the border issue more than a decade ago, Kyrgyz nationalists still often express anxiety about the territorial ambitions of China.

China as investor

The race to exploit and export the rich hydrocarbon reserves found in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan has dominated much of the global attention paid to Central Asia in the post-Soviet era (LeVine 2007). China was a late entry to the race, but has quickly made up for lost time by gaining control of some Kazakhstani oil fields and controlling shares of some Turkmenistani gas deposits (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2013). Its most notable achievement in the area of hydrocarbon exploitation has been in the construction of alternative pipelines to export these resources while bypassing Russian territory. Although it only has the capacity to export a small percentage of Kazakhstani oil reserves, the Sino-Kazakh pipeline has provided an opportunity for Kazakhstan to diversify its hydrocarbon exports. The pipeline, which extends more than 3,000 km from western Kazakhstan into Xinjiang has been transporting an increasingly large amount of oil since it became operational in 2006 (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 73–4; UPI 2014).

China has also initiated the construction of a Central Asian gas pipeline which links Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan together with Xinjiang. Through the construction of this pipeline and its savvy handling of the Turkmenistani regime in Ashgabat, China has emerged as the dominant player in the Turkmenistani gas market (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012; Laruelle and Peyrouse 2013). This relationship has proven to be mutually beneficial, while Turkmenistan receives needed

foreign currency from China, China's ever growing thirst for hydrocarbons is partially quenched. For instance, in 2013 Turkmenistan supplied more than 46% of China's gas imports (Xinyu 2015).

In addition to pipelines, China has been a prominent investor in Central Asian infrastructure, including telecommunications and hydroelectricity (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012). Perhaps China's most prominent investment from the perspective of the largest amount of Central Asians has been in transportation infrastructure, particularly in the construction, maintenance and modernization of roads. The transportation links in the region had been predominantly constructed during the Soviet era and primarily geared towards North-South connections. Through loans and the importation of Chinese laborers, China has greatly improved the quality of several major highways in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan including the connections with the East. While these efforts are not entirely magnanimous - the construction of these roads open up markets within and beyond Central Asia for Chinese products – China is producing needed public goods which the regional states have no alternative capacity to otherwise provide (Kassenova 2009).

China as exploiter

Despite the obvious side-benefits brought to the region by the Chinese investment in infrastructure – especially in the construction and maintenance of roads which have the capacity to positively affect a large number of citizens – a heavy Chinese presence has occasionally generated tensions and conflict, especially in Kyrgyzstan. In recent years within Kyrgyzstan there have been a series of local attacks on Chinese-associated mining operations which have occasionally led to temporary work stoppages (Trilling 2012). Nationalist groups, which have formed to pressure the government into restricting the number of foreign workers, have been independently conducting raids to uncover Chinese workers illegally living in Kyrgyzstan (CA-News 2014; Egizbaev 2014).

Although there have been occasional clashes involving Chinese workers in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, these have been relatively infrequent and appear to be disconnected to organized mobilization (RFE/RL's Kazakh Service 2012; Dostiev 2007). Notably, the official announcement that several thousand hectares of land in some of the most fertile and densest populated districts of Tajikistan would be leased to Chinese farmers elicited only limited public dissent (Hierman and Nekbakhtshoev 2014). The absence of open contestation does not necessarily mean that Chinese-Central Asian relations are positive in these states, however. An International Crisis Group report indicates that within Kazakhstan daily discrimination against Chinese workers is high, and that Chinese migrants are frequent targets for police shakedowns (ICG 2013, 15).

What accounts for this hostility? Tensions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan over the Chinese presence are driven by a complicated fusion of economic, environmental, and demographic considerations. Prominent strands of Kazakh and Kyrgyz nationalism are rooted in insecurity: for Kazakhstan, the insecurity is demographic due to the fact that at independence, ethnic Kazakhs were not the majority in their "own" country, whereas for Kyrgyzstan, the insecurity is largely geopolitical due to the country's small size and limited state capacity (Megoran 2012; Kolsto 1998). Especially in Kyrgyzstan these insecurities have been exacerbated by the longstanding economic crisis; currently, Kyrgyzstan is one of the most remittance dependent states in the world as large numbers of male (and increasingly female) citizens seek seasonal work abroad. For many Kyrgyzstanis it is galling that despite the ready availability of local labor, Chinese firms tend to import large numbers of Han Chinese workers (Asanov and Najibullah 2013; Kassenova 2009). In many mining areas, these economic concerns have been compounded by growing resource nationalism and eco-mobilization, rooted in anxiety over environmental degradation¹ (Wooden 2013; 2014).

¹ It is important to note that this is a growing development in Kyrgyzstan and not exclusively limited to areas involving a heavy Chinese presence.

Conclusion

By the mid-2000s China's growing engagement with Central Asia had become clear to many living in the region. By that time, Chinese goods had flooded into the region's bazaars, Chinese laborers and work crews had begun working in various locations, roads to China were clogged with dilapidated trucks loaded down with pilfered scrap metal headed to the border to feed China's resource needs, and even Chinese hotels and restaurants were being built in some cities. For some Central Asians at the time, this engagement brought opportunities, for others anxiety. In the years that followed, China's presence has continued to elicit conflicting reactions amongst the Central Asian population.

Despite the lack of a single coherent local response to its presence, China has successfully pursued its goals in the region primarily through deftly utilizing a multinational forum – the SCO – in order to develop distinct and flexible bilateral relations with four of the states of the region. The benefits of its pragmatic and flexible approach are especially apparent in its tight relations with Turkmenistan, the one Central Asian state which is not an SCO member.²

While the level of Chinese success in the region has been notable, there are likely obstacles ahead. Within Kyrgyzstan, the domestic power of Kyrgyz nationalism remains a potent political force and a potential occasional spoiler for Chinese interests operating in the country. Domestic political dynamics could stimulate the development of similar nationalist impulses in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in the years ahead which likewise could frustrate Chinese engagement in those states. Even more worrisome, however, is the political uncertainty facing the two most powerful Central Asian authoritarian regimes. Neither of the region's two longest serving presidents, Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov and Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev, have named a successor and there is growing concern about the instability that may follow the death or replacement of either one of these aging autocrats. Given that one of China's overriding concerns vis-à-vis the region has been its own domestic security, it is very much an open

² Turkmenistan has declared a status of "permanent neutrality" and thus has never joined the SCO.

question of how it will react in the eventuality of a bloody transition in either Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan. Until and unless such a massive shock occurs, however, there is no reason to expect anything other than the current trajectory of an expanding Chinese presence in the region.

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