

TIGHTENING THE BELT?

CHALLENGES FOR CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT-SECURITY NEXUS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Introduction

For anyone with an interest in global affairs, it is difficult not to be aware of China's now ubiquitous foreign policy soundbites, including 'mutual benefit', 'inclusivity', 'connectivity' and 'win-win co-operation'. According to official Chinese discourse, these noble yet vague goals are to be achieved through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a vast network of transportation (high-speed rail, airports land and sea ports and roads), energy (power generation and pipelines) and telecommunications infrastructure that will connect China to the world. The flagship foreign policy initiative of Chinese president, Xi Jinping, the BRI spans over 70 countries, comprising nearly two thirds of the world's population and a third of global GDP.

Much ink has been spilled on the BRI in Central Asia, rearticulating its foundational myth of Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2013 visit to Nazarbayev University and listing the multitudinous projects carried out under its auspices. All this information is freely available on the internet (see Hillman 2018; Indeo 2018). Hence, this briefing addresses three more analytical questions: (1) What does BRI tell us about China's approach to foreign relations in general? (2) What does BRI tell us about China's approach to Central Asia in particular? (3) How is Chinese investment changing domestic politics in Central Asian countries?

I suggest that an often underappreciated driver of the BRI in Central Asia is China's fears over the on-going instability in its far-Western province of Xinjiang, which may be exacerbated by the unstable and conflict-ridden countries on its borders. However, the Chinese approach of stabilisation through economic development may not have the effect so desired by Beijing, as rapidly increasing Chinese presence in Central Asia is bringing with it new security issues, including rising nationalism, inequality and political instability. One mollifying factor is that neither China nor Russia wish to see violence erupt in the region and are therefore likely to cooperate than enter into conflict over tensions in their occasionally overlapping designs for Central Asia. This is likely to result in a form of 'illiberal peace' in the region's medium term, in which tensions remain unresolved but suppressed by dominant powers (Lewis et al. 2018).

China's approach to international relations and the BRI

In contrast to the multilateralism characteristic of the post-1989 liberal international order, Chinese foreign policy tends to be built on series of bilateral relations, from the tributary system established by Imperial China to the contemporary joint memoranda of co-operation signed by China with BRI-participating states. Where China does engage with multilateral organisations, it tends to do so in the form of bilateral agreements, for example in such formats as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the 17+1 Forum in Eastern Europe. This distinctive approach to foreign relations has been variously theorised by Chinese scholars of International Relations as 'relationality' (Qin 2018), '*tianxia*' (Zhao 2009) and 'symbiosis' (Ren 2015). What these theories share is a conception of the 'international' as a network of more or less stable relations between dominant and subordinate powers, and it is tempting to read the BRI along these lines. Such bilateralism allows China to create bespoke, flexible arrangements with a variety of states and actors, advancing its technologies and values, adjusting when necessary. However, such an approach lacks transparency, oversight and co-ordination across countries, which may be driving some of the implementation issues facing BRI, discussed below.

Three main approaches to the study of BRI have appeared in the English-language literature: one emphasising political economy, one emphasising state fragmentation and one focussing on geopolitics. Analysts in the first group argue that BRI has emerged primarily as a response to Chinese domestic economic concerns. The US\$586bn stimulus package given by Beijing to provinces in the aftermath 2007-2008 financial crisis led to overproduction in the manufacturing and power generation industries and an over-accumulation crisis in the Chinese banking sector (Jones and Zeng 2019; TNI 2019). BRI thus provided a framework to channel domestic production and capital excesses overseas.

The second view emphasises the decentred nature and inherent ungovernability of BRI (Hameiri et al., 2019; Ye 2019; Summers 2016) and sees BRI discourse as the Chinese leadership's post-hoc attempts to rationalise the semi-autonomous practices of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and provincial governments operating from China's periphery (Heathershaw et al. 2019). On this view, the main BRI actor is not the Chinese state acting in the 'national interest', but province-level governmental departments, partially deterritorialised SOEs, and transnational capital and labour flows.

In the third group, scholars have posited BRI as an alternative model of world order that poses a solution to the long-standing dissatisfaction held by China and other emerging powers with the existing Westo-centric international system (Rolland 2020: 14). The BRI, on this view, is a project that shifts both material and normative power away from the West, offering loans and investment free of cumbersome conditionalities, looser social and environmental regulations and with flexible repayment strategies (Dunford and Liu 2019; Hillman 2018: 6; Sanghera and Satybaldieva, forthcoming). In short, China is willing to lend to countries to which Western financial bodies would not. BRI is enabling China to continue the Maoist proclamation of the country as a leader of developing world, representing – and funding – the interests of the Global South in the face of an intransigent, neo-colonial West.¹

¹ A realist extension of this 'world order' approach is the 'debt-trap' diplomacy thesis, which posits China as intentionally saddling developing countries with impossibly high debts in order to cause them to cede

Each of these explanations hold truth. In addition, there are also a number of China-specific strategic factors that BRI aims to resolve, for example its desire to diversify energy sources away from its strong reliance on Middle East oil and to counter US influence in the Pacific Rim. In the context of Central Asia, they all miss a crucial factor: the BRI in Central Asia is chiefly about securitising Xinjiang.

BRI and China's approach to Central Asia

Contrary to what many Central Asia pundits claim, Central Asia is not a region of major strategic importance for China. The South China Sea is of much greater significance, both in terms of economy and geopolitics (Rolland 2017: 94). Chinese companies also have far greater investments in Africa (Shepard 2019). Reflecting this relative disinterest at the state level, expert knowledge on Central Asia in China is weak: there are few specialists inside China's universities and think tanks, and few Chinese PhD students are being trained on the region. Central Asia is only meaningful for China in the context of securitising its restive far-western province, Xinjiang, China's largest province that borders with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The region, populated predominantly Uighur Muslims who share more cultural similarities with Central Asians than with China's other ethnic groups, only formally became part of China in 1884 and has since remained prone to separatist currents, witnessing periods of violence, unrest and terror attacks. Currently, up to a million Uighurs are being detained in which China has called 're-education camps', but which human rights organisations argue violate international human rights law (HRW 2018). In order to understand China's approach to Central Asia, it is necessary to understand its approach to Xinjiang.

Following years of mutual hostility during the Cold War, Soviet collapse brought fears of territorial disunity in Xinjiang to China, since the Uighur population, which had become a geopolitical pawn among the two Communist powers (Šilde-Kārklīņš 2015), was now dispersed across four countries. In 1999, in order to integrate Xinjiang and other peripheral provinces more effectively into the mainland, Beijing targeted these regions with rapid economic development, significant Han in-migration, and the construction of cross-border infrastructure with neighbouring states. This policy, known as the 'Great Western Development' or 'Go West' campaign, shares many similarities with today's BRI and is often considered its precursor (Summers 2016; Jones and Zeng 2019). At the international level, the Shanghai Five, comprising China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan, and which would later become the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), was signed into existence with the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions. Interestingly – perhaps given its unique political focus on combatting the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism and extremism – the SCO is the only China-initiated international cooperative endeavour that is not constructed on bilateral ties.

Today, Xinjiang is a vital transit region for Central Asian oil and gas towards Eastern China. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) also envisages Xinjiang as a central hub for gas and cargo transited from the China-owned Gwadar Port on Pakistan's coast. Seeking to stabilise the province by replicating the development miracle of the coastal fishing village turned economic powerhouse, Shenzhen, three Special Economic Zones

more resources and, possibly, sovereignty. This thesis has now largely been discredited - see Brautigam 2020.

have been set up in Xinjiang.² Two are on the border with Kazakhstan, one of which is Khorgos, a formerly deserted border crossing point now frequently touted as one of the flagship BRI nodes in Eurasia (Rolland 2017: 83),³ and the third is Kashgar, an impoverished, predominantly Uighur city in the south of the province. While Khorgos' economic integration can be designed from scratch (a wholly new city is under construction on each side of the border), Kashgar and Shenzhen can hardly be more different. While Shenzhen is located on the southern coast near Hong Kong where access to international markets was easy, Kashgar neighbours four countries, each with histories of conflict and instability: Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Pakistan.⁴ China thus considers the construction of infrastructure routes, transport hubs and telecommunications networks through these countries a vital component in ensuring the economic development of Xinjiang, its bordering countries and, consequently, bolstering its overall internal security.

BRI and changing domestic dynamics in Central Asia

The BRI has the potential to improve the living standards and economies of Central Asia, one of the most poorly connected regions of the world. Infrastructural development is desperately needed – for example, only 38% of roads in Kyrgyzstan are tarmacked (UN 2018). New transport projects represent growing state capacity for political leaders and transformed daily lives for citizens (Reeves 2017). Chinese investment in energy pipelines has allowed Central Asian energy-producing states to diversify away from the colonial-era infrastructure that sent oil and gas solely to Russia. However, the way in which Chinese investment has been implemented to date enables local elites to position themselves as the primary beneficiaries of this closer co-operation, while citizens see fewer gains and evince a far more circumspect – even Sinophobic – attitude (Owen 2017). It is beyond the scope of this report to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of BRI on Central Asia. Here, I highlight four broad issues: corruption, inequality, debt and ethno-nationalism – problems that predate Chinese involvement, but are being compounded by it.

First, the lack of transparency characteristic of Chinese negotiations combined with self-serving local political elites and the lack of domestic oversight mechanisms exacerbates regional corruption networks. In Tajikistan, for instance, whole sectors of the economy have recently been taken over by partnerships between Chinese investors and Tajik businessmen closely tied to the premier, Rahmon. Shanghai's Huaxin Gayur is now the leader in the country's cement production, thanks to its connections with Rahmon's son-in-law. In Kyrgyzstan, government-level corruption relating to China was exposed last year when Chinese contractor Tebian Electric Apparatus secured a lucrative power plant contract thanks to lobbying by a former prime minister, despite the rival bid being cheaper (SCMP 2019). In Kazakhstan, 12 senior officials are under investigation for corruption associated with a failed light-railway project in the capital financed by China through BRI (Umirbekov 2019).

² Between 1978 and 2014, Shenzhen's status as China's first SEZ saw its per capita GDP increase by 24,569 per cent (Holmes 2017).

³ However, Khorgos was proposed as a 'land bridge' as early as 2005, and the Urumqi to Almaty railway which runs through Khorgos, was begun in the mid-2000s and completed in 2012, before the BRI was announced.

⁴ China has begun various forms of military co-operation with all four of these countries, ranging from naval drills with Pakistan to military training for Tajikistan's army. Stability in Afghanistan, as well as Xinjiang, is seen as central to the success of CPEC. See Hussein 2020.

Second, and related, BRI benefits are not felt across the population and Central Asian patronal economies do little to redistribute financial flows: remittances from Russia are increasing (Bhutia 2019) and youth unemployment levels remain constant at around 17% (FRBSL n.d.). While Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have seen large increases in GDP per capita since 2000, Uzbekistan has seen a much more modest increase while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have remained stagnant (World Bank 2019). The model of finance favoured by Chinese companies exacerbates the already clientelistic political economies. Firstly, Chinese construction companies tend to bring their own workers to projects, providing few opportunities for employment to locals. Second, many energy infrastructure agreements are negotiated on a Build-Operate-Transfer model, allowing China to operate and profit from the running of a plant for an agreed period of time before handing over to domestic agents. And the loans taken out to build the much-needed infrastructure is sometimes placed on the end-user: drivers must often pay a toll for driving on China-funded highways (Asia Plus 2017). Clearly, such arrangements contradict the lofty 'win-win' rhetoric of Beijing.

Third, some Central Asian countries are increasingly saddling themselves with very high levels of debt to China, leaders apparently unable to refuse the lure of new infrastructure. An influential 2018 report into the debts accrued to China through BRI found that out of the 33 countries analysed, 8 are singled out as particularly at risk from debt distress, two of which are Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Hurley et al. 2018). China owns almost half the external debt of these two countries. In Tajikistan, China is involved in so many areas of government activity that a conflict of interests with its large neighbour could prove ruinous for Tajikistan: a secretive agreement between the two countries authorised China to build 11 outposts, a training centre and 30-40 guard posts on the Tajik-Afghan border (Nelson and Grove 2019), Chinese company Huawei operates an AI-equipped surveillance system in the capital, Dushanbe (Ruhullo 2019), and Rahmon has already given 1,000kmsq in land to China as an unofficial form of debt repayment (Lain 2016). Similarly, China is by far Turkmenistan's largest purchaser of natural gas, upon which the country's economy depends. If China finds an alternative source – one of the aims of the BRI – the Turkmen resource-based economy will suffer.

Fourth, some Central Asian countries are witnessing rise in ethno-nationalism and ethnic violence, driven at least partly by rising anti-China sentiment. Protests with an anti-China flavour have been escalating in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the past few years.⁵ One of the main organisers of the protests in Bishkek is the nationalist group Kyrk-Choro, which has been mobilising public sentiment against Chinese in Kyrgyzstan for some time (Kaktus Media 2018; Eurasianet.org 2019). In Kazakhstan, local authorities have been detaining protesters at anti-China rallies (Reuters 2019). Most recently, Kazakhstan's south, ethnic violence broke out between Kazakhs and Dungans (Chinese Hui Muslims who had settled in Central Asia), killing ten people and causing 24,000 to flee into neighbouring Kyrgyzstan (Economist 2020). While this is not thought to be BRI related, it feeds into an environment where people of Chinese descent in Central Asia are periodically targeted (Varshalomidze 2020).

⁵ In Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, views towards China are more positive (see Indeo 2018; Central Asia Monitor 2016).

Conclusion

This briefing has attempted to place Chinese involvement in Central Asia in the context of its goal to securitise Xinjiang, which it seeks to do through rapid economic development. However, employing this strategy overseas is not the same as doing so within one's own territory where emerging social tensions can be managed through autocratic repression. In Central Asia, rising corruption and inequality, exacerbated by BRI, are already impacting the domestic political landscapes, increasing dissatisfaction with political elites and contributing to nationalist tendencies. China cannot currently manage these issues while maintaining a commitment to the sovereignty of BRI states, not least when the actors on the ground are SOEs and there is very little central oversight (Yu 2017).

In light of the above, a central question is whether China's securitisation efforts are likely to backfire, producing more conflict, not less. Chinese authorities are aware of many of these issues, yet the vast scale and fundamentally fragmented nature of BRI means that a co-ordinated strategy is very difficult to impose. While the promise to build the infrastructure that could transform Central Asian societies' living standards is a noble one, it is perhaps the model of Chinese foreign relations on which BRI is structured, which relies on opaque bilateral agreements and provides ample opportunities for graft, that is transforming this promise into something more of a threat.

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