

Online Workshop

China's Belt and Road Initiative: Curse or Blessing for Democracy in Eurasia?

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International Political Science Association RC 34 and
OSCE Academy in Bishkek
Conference Rapporteur: Niva Yau

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Online Workshop

China's Belt and Road Initiative: Curse or blessing for democracy in Eurasia?

Workshop of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) Research Committee (RC) 34 'Quality of Democracy' and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek

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This workshop of RC 34 was dedicated to the impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on political institution building and specifically on the quality of democracy in Eurasia. The BRI has been spinning its logistical and infrastructural web around the world since 2013. Massive infrastructural investments were made in over 50 countries across a number of key economic sectors. From rail tracks, roads, to agricultural investments, the Initiative has been a central component of Chinese investment policies that have affected core public policy areas in over 100 countries in the world.

The impacts and influences of the BRI in the Eurasian region are of growing importance. Being a flexible, informal project predominantly in the field of economic investments and logistical connectivity, the BRI is a challenging study object when it comes to assessing its political impact on the quality of democracy.

Almost a decade after its official launch, this IPSA RC 34 workshop on 12-14 March 2021 brought together scholars from 17 countries to assess the Initiative's political implications around the key question "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Curse or Blessing for Democracy in Eurasia?" The workshop was divided into five classical panels over three days, in addition to one keynote lecture on each day. All three keynote lectures, on China's democratic vision, the economic potential of BRI, and varieties of authoritarianism served as the knowledge base for the discussions. In the first panel, experts discussed the BRI's political and economic transformation. Impacts on human rights, conflicts, local governance environment and democracy were put forward. In the second panel, experts discussed how China's Initiative has the ability to support regime change in host countries, particularly in aiding authoritarian tendencies. In the third, fourth and fifth panel, experts made assessments on the implementation progress of China's Initiative in Central Asia, South Asia and Europe. It is expected that this cross-regional exchange offered a sound contribution towards the impacts BRI has had, willingly or not, on democratization or autocratization processes in the host countries.

This report summarizes the workshop, reflecting on the main issues raised and discussed during the three days, and represents the view of the rapporteur only.

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The Chinese vision of democracy

It is important to understand China's vision of democracy, as it sets out to become an important actor in the region. With democracy itself being a contested concept, different actors define the concept according to their interests. While China is seen on the world stage as the most extreme opposite of democracy, it did not opt for modernization without democracy. Instead, China adopted a definition of democracy that is actively challenging liberal democracy. The Chinese Communist Party has expressed time and time again that China will not adopt liberal democracy. It claims to be the largest democratic country, but democratic in a Chinese way emphasising the social aspects. When the People's Republic of China was founded, the Communists followed Leninist Democratic Centralism. Modelled on the Soviet Union, the system ensured the Party a final say through the National People's Congress. By now, the West has woken up to the fact that China will never become democratic the way that the West had hoped it to.

The Chinese definition of democracy is internal to the Communist Party, as was highlighted in one of the keynotes during the conference. A 2005 white paper by the Party detailed this definition, termed as socialist alternative democracy. As put, China's democracy is a people's democracy under the leadership of the Communist Party. Through the Party, people are masters of state affairs. The audience was concerned whether or not this Chinese vision of democracy affects Chinese people's freedom of expression. As the keynote speaker added, grassroots democracy, citizen, economic rights, respect for human rights are interpreted in a local, Chinese way. What the West defines as freedom of expression is thus impossible to be applied under the Chinese notion of democracy. Within the political system, the Party promotes inner-Party democracy through the nomination of candidates to induce competitiveness. However, the more inner-Party competition was only open to segments of society over which the Party can exercise control.

Under President Xi's administration, China's claims as a democracy continued. Much emphasis has been put on the fact that Chinese Presidents are selected as their skills are shown over the years of working in political affairs. Meritocracy is invoked to gain popular consent as it shows effective governance. In the Chinese definition of democracy, merit replaces electoral campaigns, candidates are screened by their years of work, and performance output replaces procedure input and accountability. This localised version of deliberative democracy is what the Party termed consultative democracy. As the Party claims, it is a people's form of democracy, with extensive consultation carried out for topics in people's interest.

As Xi puts it, this consultative democracy in essence allows the people to get to discuss their affairs, it is democracy in a socialist, Chinese way. The audience was interested to hear if Chinese nationalism played a role in this Chinese notion of democracy. As the keynote speaker explained, lying at the heart of the Chinese nation's core value is socialism. China's vision of democracy thus manifests itself in accordance with this set of values. The audience was also interested in how historical Chinese foreign policy concepts can be applied today. As the keynote speaker explained, these core values are socialist and are described clearly in the Party's belief system. Key at the nation-state level are prosperity,

democracy, civility, and harmony; at the society level are freedom, equality, justice, and rule of law; key at the individual level is patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendliness. Evidently, democracy is amongst the highest ranked values.

However, only six out of twelve of these values have been given clear meaning by the Party. Democracy, amongst others, is absent from specific definition. These values fall under strict guidelines of the Party and are not typically invoked in society. Individuals are not encouraged to interpret these values as they can simply be enjoyed with the security of other values with specific meaning. Also, not giving clear meaning to democracy has the added benefit of taking this language out of people's everyday life language, preventing it from becoming captured by other political goals. In one rare occasion, during Xi's presidential inauguration in 2013, he spoke of democracy as a beautiful aspiration of human society. The democracy the Chinese strive for, he said, is a people's democracy, in its true core, is people acting as their own masters. Democracy is the life of socialism and the political guarantee for creating a beautiful and happy life for the people, Xi said.

The audience was curious to what extent the Chinese vision of democracy undermines liberal democracy and if the Chinese vision is crafted specifically to outweigh the liberal democratic notion. As the keynote speaker put it, all of these claims are present to support and ensure endurance of China's own value discourse; in such a way, it undermines the West's claim on China's governance model. Directed at itself, it is consistent with China's own goal to become a strong nation. The keynote speaker added that, with arrival of the BRI Initiative, China's definition of democracy has dozens of implications for the world. The Chinese alternative discourse might be attractive when new alliances form, it can make a refreshing impression amongst Eurasian actors and allow democratising states in the region to pick and choose elements of the Chinese version of democracy. This is especially the case since the image of liberal democracy has been damaged by its failure to deliver public goods during the pandemic. China's efficient management of the pandemic has given support to China's own claim of democracy as the more efficient model.

BRI and the erosion of democracy

Panellists debated whether or not China's BRI is eroding democratic values. In general, the supporting side asserts that Beijing is interested in weakening democracies as this can undermine the liberal international order. One panellist asserted that the Chinese Communist Party is hostile towards Western constitutional democracy, universal human rights values, civil society and freedom of the press.

The BRI, the panellist added, is not value neutral. It is reflecting the norms of a Sino-centric world order, one that is an Asian order with China at its heart as the most powerful political, economic and military state. This requires dethroning the US as the current Asian hegemon in order to reclaim China's own historical position in Asia. The audience was interested to know how China translates its version of democracy in developing Asia, whether this is evident through implementation of BRI. As the panel speaker explained, the

BRI will play into the political and economic vulnerabilities of partner states and pull them further into the Chinese sphere of influence. This is particularly the case for Central Asia as it is one of the most strategically important regions for China's Initiative.

One panellist went on to describe China's autocratic regime and its evident autocratic lobbying efforts such as through global propaganda and changing norms that govern international organizations. Diplomatically, China is creating linkages that make China an indispensable, or at least a very attractive actor on whose interests the system's key actors are reluctant to trample. It is also pursuing an activist international agenda, tying other countries into relationships in which China gets to dictate their behaviour. One panellist described this using the case of Muslim countries unwilling to criticise Beijing on the oppressive situation in Xinjiang. Likewise, China is exporting the technology and teaching techniques of censorship and political repression while providing diplomatic and military support to allied autocratic regimes such as Venezuela. On top of this, China is providing favourable economic access and investment opportunities to allied autocratic regimes that function as key economic and strategic partners on the world stage.

At the local level, China manages and guides the overseas Chinese communities to use them as agents of Chinese foreign policy. One panellist highlighted the presence of United Front Work groups around the world. The BRI places great emphasis on people-to-people, party-to-party, and Chinese enterprise-to-enterprise relations, with the goal to co-opting foreigners to support and promote Chinese foreign policy goals. A global, multi-platform, strategic communication strategy is evident with the purchasing of media outlets in overseas countries and expansive broadcast of Chinese state media worldwide. The initiatives have also been used to provide China-based "China model" training programs and exchanges for foreign government officials. These connections with foreign government officials allow China to get foreign governments to do the work of promoting China's BRI to their own citizens. In addition, China invests in a pro-China group of think tanks to support China and its BRI implementations.

One panellist highlighted the export of Chinese surveillance technologies as a key Chinese tool that can be used to promote autocracy. From the first internet connection to becoming a digital leader in a mere 35 years, China has applied many tech-driven initiatives to further domestic developments. After becoming a master of the great firewall, it is now combining surveillance in digital and physical domains, using cameras in a new way. This partly came as a result of the integration and fusion of commercial tech and the Chinese government, where Chinese tech companies actively enjoy support by the latter. After having its domestic success, the Digital Silk Road was brought into the world to export Chinese technologies. The audience was curious as to the reason why China's tech expansion seemed so aggressive. The panel speaker explained that, as the US-China competition grows in the area of technology, this problem received a bigger visibility than before. However, the panel speaker stressed, China takes all opportunities to enter in new markets and expand its profitability and tech influence wherever possible. It is driven primarily by economic interests, before geopolitical ones.

The audience also asked whether or not authoritarian countries themselves find Chinese technologies such as surveillance systems appealing. In Central Asia, the panel speaker

noted, states are interested in working with Chinese tech companies to bring fibre optics and telecom connections, as having access to internet is essential for future growth of any economies. Huawei, in particular, has huge market dominance in Central Asia because they are affordable. As the panel speaker saw it, China's export of digital surveillance technologies was primarily driven by economic interests. Chinese companies can improve themselves by expanding abroad as data optimizes Chinese software which can also be monetized and generate future profits. By themselves, they are traffic monitoring tools, which do not inherently violate citizen's rights as they work to improve the safety of a city. However, problems arise when facial recognition technologies are attached and present in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, where police command centres and police vehicles use them to track persons of interest. In these cases, they have a capacity, given by China, to enhance autocracy.

As a result of these autocracy promotion efforts, some countries saw increased autocratic tendencies in Eurasia and beyond. One panellist described such a case in Belarus, with heavy Chinese investments. Also, according to one panellist's study of 149 countries, part and not part of the BRI, who received Chinese investments, countries participating in BRI saw a decrease in democratic freedom, accountability and an increase in forced labour. However, in another empirical study on Pakistan, there were mixed effects on democracy. A panellist stated that the trade share and Pakistani travellers to China had a positive effect on democracy, but the causal mechanisms behind these results are still subject to investigation. In turn, Confucius institutes and the military index in Pakistan had a negative effect on democracy. The audience here was curious how exactly Confucius institutes undermine democracy. The panel speaker mentioned the study programs offered by these institutes which expose Pakistani students to the Chinese way of autocratic governance when they study in China, thus learning an alternative to Pakistani – albeit weak and dysfunctional – democracy. In another empirical study of two important BRI countries, Pakistan's democracy score declined while Sri Lanka's democracy score increased in the same time frame. The panellist called for scholars to provide a more granular assessment of on the ground dynamics as the decrease in Pakistan's democracy score owed largely to the way Chinese investments were distributed unevenly. Chinese desire for a centralized decision-making process conflicted with Pakistan's federal institutional set-up, thus failing to incorporate voices of the Pakistani provincial level governments, decreasing their power and thus the democracy scores.

In another empirical study, on Central Asia, one panellist pointed out that there was no apparent change in key democratic variables such as civil liberties, accountability, and elections after the implementation of BRI. In fact, there was a positive change in improved anti-corruption efforts in Central Asia. Yet, the panellist asked to keep in mind that while data failed to capture autocracy promotion in Central Asia, several recent events showed increased autocracy. For example, the panel speaker pointed to the decrease of protection of privacy, and the increase of political and physical violence likely due to Chinese aid to law enforcement, government interest and ability to shutdown internet, heightened state surveillance, all alongside a rise of anti-Chinese protests.

It has been shown that China's unconditionality of its aid and its autocracy-lobbying efforts tempts autocrats to abuse office and seek rents to legitimise and strengthen their ruling.

In general, there is no trend of autocracy promotion as China picks a partner who is willing to advance their interest. As one panellist simply put, it is a marriage of convenience. The above leads not to autocratic stabilization but rather autocratic deepening. One panel speaker notes that the success of China's autocracy promotion will depend on how liberal and constitutional democracies, that are built on consensus rather than on consultancy, respond and counter these efforts. What is certain however is that there will be extreme competition between China's autocracy and Western democracies.

Unmet expectations of economic development

The talk of BRI in Eurasia and beyond affecting democracy also largely depends on how successful this initiative is, particularly concerning the economic projects and local development that are serving as the backbone of the initiative. In modern history, the pattern of economic development had strong faith in democracy. Democracy without economic development is not imaginable, but is it also the other way around?

The BRI offers an alternative path to economic development. While many countries are hopeful about the economic benefits the BRI will bring, some are wary of risks, and some are still not sure. For Central Asian states, one speaker noted the role BRI can play to connect these landlocked nations.

In Kazakhstan, one speaker noted, the GDP has been sensitive to the impact the global market has on its narrow economic industries. Since the 1990s, Kazakhstan has centralized its economy towards energy. Being landlocked, the keynote speaker stressed, was never the biggest problem in the development of the Kazakh economy. Failing to connect with the global trade system on the other hand, was one main reason contributing to regional inability to diversify economies. The keynote speaker also noted political instability as another main reason.

After working extensively with China in the past 30 years, Central Asia's connection to the global trade system has increased. The keynote speaker traces this progress back to 2011 when European auto manufacturers first expressed desire to send car parts to China to reduce costs along its supply chain system. At the same time, Beijing wanted to move its manufacturing from the east coast to the central parts of China. Together, these incentives drove the building of a Eurasian rail network system through Central Asia. The keynote speaker said, from the beginning, many carriers such as DHL or FedEx quickly hopped onto the China-Europe trains via Central Asia. By now, over 60 European and Chinese cities are connected to this railway. Container growth increased rapidly, from 46,000 in 2015 to 333,000 in 2019. During the pandemic, this figure skyrocketed to 553,000 as flights were cancelled, and cargo ships suffered many delays. The pandemic showed the rail link to be most reliable as ships were stuck and under multinational restrictions. An overwhelming number of global businesses all switched to using rail.

As the global value chains increasingly undergo fragmentation, the parts of a product are created in many countries. These productions do not keep inventories and are thus moving

goods everywhere. The Eurasian railway system is more attractive in this case because it travels between China and Europe in under 15 days, with much greater predictability than cargo ships, which take at least 40 days and are exposed to risk of pirate attacks. At the moment, as the keynote speaker noted, the Eurasian railway system is the most profitable route for German companies. The audience was looking for recommendations from the keynote speaker regarding the ways in which Central Asian governments should respond in order to profit from China's Initiative. The keynote speaker explained, as the railway system passes through Central Asia, it is a fair estimate that Kazakhstan is already gaining at least \$1 billion dollar a year in transit fee. Efforts in easing restrictions, good industrial policies to facilitate trade as well as advocating for railway routes to stop in Central Asia feeds high potential to allow Central Asian states to diversify their economies as the rail link creates conditions for businesses to start and allow the connectivity to engage in global trade. In such a way, China and host countries can benefit from a win-win situation.

The workshop audience was interested to know if China is interested to include more countries in its BRI. As the panellist explained, with this Initiative, China is looking to diversify trade routes so as to not be dependent on one transit country, such as Russia. The keynote speaker noted that when the UN first eased sanctions on Iran, China immediately tested a train route option to Iran. In addition, China and Uzbekistan are very keen to build the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway for its potential to connect to Pakistan and access the ocean. The audience asked about the status of this China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway. As the keynote speaker explained, as it is an expensive project as large as the size of the Kyrgyz GDP, it has faced much local opposition. As the BRI advances, it is signalling strong Chinese financial support for the expansion and diversification of the Eurasian rail system, which is expected to overcome these local oppositions.

However, one panel speaker was less optimistic and highlighted that Chinese investors neglected sustainable urban development in Central Asia. A misreading of the local situation in Central Asian societies has misled Chinese investors in backing projects which are unprofitable and did not bring positive effects on urban development. In Ukraine, one panellist warned, China's attempt to expand its economic and political influence is perceived by many as doing more harm than good. Inherently, China and Ukraine have very different interests when it comes to deepening relations. China is interested in Ukraine in order to expand the markets for Chinese goods, winning contracts for construction of infrastructure and energy projects, access to cheap raw materials and gain military-technical technologies. On the other hand, Ukraine is interested to work with China to gain support in economic recovery, obtain investments in high-tech sector and infrastructure, as well as Chinese support in the conflict with Russia.

While participating in the BRI secures infrastructure project financing and more Chinese business contacts, many Ukrainian businesses find contradictions between the standards of Chinese and European project financing. This has raised debates within the Ukrainian political circle regarding which great power to side with. Evidently, the BRI weakens Ukraine's European and NATO integration. Aggravating dependence on China is seen as in direct conflict with the pan-European position with regards to Hong Kong and human rights issues. This makes working with China on non-trade issues undesirable.

On trade, Chinese investments have thus far failed to add value to Ukrainian products as Ukraine remains a source of cheap materials and a mere transit territory to China. Also, the general population perceives working with China on infrastructure projects as enhancing local corruption, as China tends to obtain beneficial contracts through closed-door agreements. Most importantly, development of bilateral military-technical cooperation is not balanced and Ukraine stands to benefit little from China. The Ukrainian military complex is facing increasing threats from China's attempt to gain access to strategic assets of the state and stealing Ukrainian military technology. Also, since the rise of US-China tension, Ukrainian arms manufacturers are wary of potential US sanctions in working with China. This potential weakening of defence partnership with the US risks hybrid confrontation with Russia, and Ukraine doubts China's willingness to mediate conflicts as this will spoil relations with Russia.

The audience pointed to the recent political development in Minsk, highlighting its seemingly strong relationship with Beijing and whether this has an impact on Kyiv. As the panel speaker explained, the Belarusian experience with Beijing is completely different than the Ukrainian one. This stems primarily from the fact that Belarus and Ukraine are two very different countries inherently, Ukraine being much more democratic and holding European values. The audience also pointed to China's engagement in Central Asia, local worries over land and asked whether or not this is also Beijing's interest in Ukraine. As the panel speaker assured, it is impossible for China to obtain land in Ukraine as there are plenty of domestic restrictions in this regard.

From the perspective of countries with a much less developed economy on the other hand, such as Afghanistan, only benefits can come from working with China on BRI. As Afghan political circles see it, Afghanistan was the centre of trade during the old Silk Road, and it is only right that it occupies an important position in the making of a new Silk Road. The audience was sceptical about this optimism, suggesting that Afghanistan should be cautious against China's imperialistic motives. One panel speaker dismissed this concern. In any case, as the current political instability is to blame for the absence of Afghanistan from China's BRI planning, China's imperialistic moves are yet to become evident. The panel speaker also noted that since the beginning of BRI, China has moved closer to enlarge economic cooperation with Afghanistan despite absence of top-level planning. For example, as one panel speaker noted, direct flights between Kabul and Urumqi have been opened in recent years and the five nation railway between China-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran (where some sections used cargo trucks) was tested. The audience also expressed the view that Afghan policy makers should learn from Central Asian states in their experiences of working with China. The panel speaker notes that as the first step, Afghanistan expects to make use of its geo-strategic and geo-economic location to trade vast amounts of natural resources for development of infrastructure and regional connectivity. The BRI is a hope for peace and stability, the panellist stressed.

Some countries, for example many in Central Europe, have still not decided whether or not to fully commit to China's Initiative. The audience was curious whether or not the China-led 17+1 mechanism is undermining EU solidarity as some states in the mechanism are also EU member states. As the panel speaker explained, when China came to be interested in investing in Central Europe, it was an economic decision on the part of the Central

European states. Many of these countries witnessed vast Chinese investments entering Western Europe and were keen to attract a greater portion to speed up economic recovery post-2008 financial crisis.

The audience was interested to hear the panel speaker's opinion on which is the most pro-China country in Europe. As the panel speaker explained, the region holds different threat perceptions of China. To the extreme, some Central European countries have little familiarity with the BRI as it is a rare topic mentioned by local media. One panel speaker noted the experience of Poland. The Polish authorities are sending mixed messages to China regarding its commitment and is trying to treat each Chinese project on a case-by-case basis. While the Polish authorities arrested a Huawei staff member on charges of spying for China, Polish trade offices were opened in China to expand bilateral trade. The Czech Republic's current political narrative rests ideologically on its historical fight against authoritarianism and is in direct opposition to China's current authoritarian policies. Slovakia hasn't spent that much attention to discuss China in its political life, but has quickly been critical of China's human rights issues. Hungary on the other hand, is ruled by a pro-China party that has enjoyed financing from Chinese projects. Serbia, as it is not part of the EU, has also turned pro-China as practical trade cooperation is not restricted by EU commitments.

China as an actor in conflict dynamics

Before real benefits of China's grand connectivity project are seen, at the implementation stage, their impacts on local conflict dynamic on the ground are already overwhelmingly evident. According to one panellist's case study of four key BRI countries, the Initiative has brought more harm to local populations than benefits. As China must secure a political ally on the ground to support its work, it holds a preference for dealing with top-level government instead of gaining local community support. This desire to get things done quickly instead of building local consensus aggravates local conflicts on the BRI as most host countries already suffer from democratic weaknesses. This reluctance to work with local communities is made worse by the fact that China has no concern for the institutional environment in any BRI country. As one panel speaker noted, China is more interested in the political stability of a host country instead of good governance. As a result, often, China invests much more in democracies than non-democracies. This means that China does not have a preference in working with autocratic regimes; partner countries simply have to be willing to collaborate.

In Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) works only in the wealthier parts of the country. The audience was curious as to how the host country's agency is expressed. As the panel speaker explained, whereas provincial level governments traditionally have a say in what happens in their state, when it came to CPEC level projects with the Chinese, these provincial level governments have been stripped of their decision-making powers granted by the Pakistani political system. Working in Pakistan, China has centralized all decision making to the highest level of the Pakistan government. The Gwadar port in particular, was a project that the Pakistan government advocated for. The audience

was interested to know if the panel speaker understands CPEC deals to be strengthening authoritarianism. Indeed, the panel speaker noted, development of CPEC has enhanced power of the Pakistani military as it developed a closer relationship with China to protect these infrastructure projects. The parts of Pakistan that need investments the most were not able to negotiate and obtain any from China, aggravating local conflicts. A similar situation is also observed in Myanmar where China's BRI investments are headed towards the Burmese military, thus enhancing their capacity. This is due to the fact that China relies on the local military to provide security for large Chinese investments.

Central Asia, a region that stands in theory to benefit the most from BRI, is witnessing a rise of tension with China. In Kyrgyzstan, protests against China are frequent and they centre on corruption, land grabs, labour rights and debt issues. Chinese investments have been heavily targeted violently by locals, and have prompted China to militarize investments zones, bringing in private security to protect their assets. In Kazakhstan, one panel speaker noted, the Initiative is adding to bilateral pressures between China and Kazakhstan. On one hand, Kazakh political elites desire more cooperation with China through the BRI as it expects the Initiative to aid its economic growth and diversification of its economy. However, China's security strategy in Xinjiang has posed a dilemma for Kazakhstan.

As China's strike hard against violent terrorism program expanded forced detentions of ethnic minorities in 2014, ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang have become the target, with some scholars estimating the arrests of up to half a million. At the same time, Kazakhstan's nation-building rhetoric is based on supporting ethnic Kazakhs at home and abroad, with policies aimed at repopulating the country with ethnic Kazakhs, bringing financial and cultural support to ethnic Kazakhs abroad. Evidently, this has sparked an issue for the Kazakh leadership in balancing a China-led Eurasian foreign and economic policy and the tension China poses on its nation-building rhetoric.

Publicity of the treatment of Kazakhs in Xinjiang has increased in Kazakhstan in recent years. Whistle-blowers and refugees who fled to Kazakhstan added visibility. As well, local and international human rights associations such as Atajurt/ Atajurt Eriktileri, Qaharman Human Rights Initiative, Demos, Kazakhstan's Bureau for Human Rights and Free Kazakh all actively drew attention from the wider society in Kazakhstan through mass-scale protests and solo protests. Audience members asked the panel speaker whether these anti-China protests are truly anti-Chinese or simply a way of criticising the local government. The panel speaker explained these protests by pointing to the facts that many of these Kazakhs have families in Xinjiang. As well, Kazakhstan has more favourable conditions to organize protests compared to other Central Asian states.

Kazakhstan's official responses to the Xinjiang issue have also changed at the same time. From 2017 to the beginning of 2018, the First Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev rejected the claims of human rights issues towards Kazakhs in Xinjiang. He grew more careful in responding to the issue as it gained a spotlight in Kazakh society. Since Kassym-Jomart Tokayev became the President of Kazakhstan in 2019, he was proactive in officially managing the issue, granting official recognition of activists on the one hand, and sealing the borders to prevent refugees on the other.

Apart from these local level and regional level conflicts, above all, the BRI Initiative increases competition between autocracy and democracy in the world. Democracies around the world are being challenged. Implications of the Initiative are most visible amongst authoritarian regimes. Autocrats argue that they can provide good governance in all areas and claim that democracies are decreasing in their efficiency. The audience was curious to know if there are many key factors commonly shared between authoritarian regimes. The speaker warned against this view, stressing that we are far from witnessing a China-led authoritarian international. In the speaker's view, authoritarian governments do not share common essences. For example, Kazakhstan's authoritarian tendencies are different from Russia's and Uzbekistan's. Kazakhstan achieved independence by accident, and it has claims to governance due to performance legitimacy and ethnic identity policies. Russia on the other hand wishes to be a great power and makes use of surveillance to suppress and blackmail political opponents. Uzbekistan is undergoing a transition from an inward-looking authoritarianism led by Islam Karimov to a new authoritarianism. Led by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's new authoritarianism looks to its neighbours but is deeply rooted in social conservatism. To put simply, authoritarian governments are one unhappy family.

What most of these authoritarian regimes do have in common is their leadership-led tendency which makes their policies and ideology fragile. Transfer of power in these cases depends on the institutions they have established, if there are high motivations to have a peaceful transfer of power and so on. The audience was interested to know if autocracies are better implementers of policies. As one speaker explained, while the regime type may or may not improve the country, choosing democracy is about selecting institutions and practices that are more humane. The audience argued that Central Asian states do not find appeal in democracy as they regard the Chinese model as more efficient and Asian. The speaker suggested to look further east, as Japan and South Korea also practice democracy, their Asian version of democracy.

Conclusion

In sum, is participation in the BRI a marriage of convenience or a curse for democracy? As consistently shared by the speakers and panellists in this workshop, BRI's host countries indeed have agency when it comes to working with China. The BRI is what states make of it. It can have a transformative effect, but one speaker stressed that the architects of change don't get to determine the final outcome. As the Initiative evolves and engages with more actors across Eurasia, impacts on various sectors are expected to surface, challenging democratic developments in the region. Understanding the magnitude and closely following Chinese BRI footprints is essential to map these challenges. This workshop has illustrated some of the challenges, aspects and ways by which the BRI can trigger responses of the autocratic and democratic kind. It has not yet substantially eroded democracies, but it has also not promoted democratic or consensus building practices, institutions or modes of governance.

Further information about this workshop can be found on the RC34 website [here](#), and on the OSCE Academy website [here](#).



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