

POLICY BRIEF



Potential Democratizing Effects of Central Asian Anti-Chinese Sentiments

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Table of Contents

Executive summary..... 3

Is Sinophobia real?..... 5

Is Sinophobia a threat to Central Asian regimes?..... 6

Creation of political opportunities..... 7

Recommendations..... 9

Bibliography..... 11

Executive summary

Numerous anti-Chinese protests in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan over the mistreatment of Turkic ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, Chinese labor migration, and growing economic dependency of Central Asian countries on China demonstrate the looming anti-Chinese sentiments in the region. Although such sentiments are somewhat muted in other Central Asian countries, it is only a matter of time before the public in these countries start voicing their concerns. Obsessed with Chinese multi-billion dollar investments, regional autocracies have largely been reluctant in responding to Sinophobic pressure from below. Being authoritarian in nature, they are interested in maintaining the status quo by repressing the opposition. Fortunately for them, Sinophobia is not real; it is rather a public fear of the unknown represented by the Chinese failure to ‘advertise’ itself through soft power means. The author argues that Sinophobia can become real as the anti-Chinese protesters start politicizing their claims. Nationalist rhetoric would shift from a pure anti-Chinese agenda to that of demanding liberal political reforms. In some cases, the Kyrgyz and Kazakh governments have already expressed their willingness to contain the Chinese question. To prevent potential escalation of violence and political crises, Central Asian governments need to do more to ensure the public’s concerns are addressed. The People’s Republic of China should also revisit its public diplomacy strategies in the region with an aim to manage popular expectations and connect with local populations.

A range of anti-Chinese protests in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in recent years heralded the growth of anti-Chinese sentiments in these republics and hinted at similar trends in other Central Asian countries. The fears associated with the influx of Chinese labor migrants and China’s harassment of Uighur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz minorities in Xinjiang worsened the already-existing public suspicion towards Central Asia’s eastern neighbor. Despite the growing Sinophobic mood in the region, China is determined to continue increasing its economic, cultural and military presence. Sandwiched between the Chinese investors and aggrieved local populations, Central Asian governments are convinced that multi-billion dollar investments within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will bring major benefits to industrialization and faster economic growth at home.

While there is little doubt about the positive economic effects of Chinese investments for the recipient countries in Central Asia, one needs to carefully consider the political effects of such an engagement. As was mentioned above, one such effect could be attributed to the growth of anti-Chinese sentiments and the resulting popular protest mobilization. Party politics may too be affected by the China factor with the growing attractiveness of right-wing parties and nationalist rhetoric. Add to this the exploitation of anti-Chinese sentiments by the opposition in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to stir up Sinophobia and attack the government. Intra-elite cleavages between Sinophiles and Sinophobes may also intensify in light of competition for Chinese trade flows.¹ In addition, the regional security dimension is reportedly experiencing a major “rebalancing of power with Russia declining and China emerging as one of the region’s most influential

¹ Sébastien Peyrouse, “Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7 (2016): 14–23.

players.”² The establishment of a Chinese military base in Tajikistan and the provision of military equipment to the Tajik army, as well as joint military exercises with Tajik, Kyrgyz and Uzbek forces - all illustrate this point.³ Geopolitics-wise, regional experts voice skepticism about China’s potential, or even desire, to overshadow the Russian sphere of influence in Central Asia, something that cannot be said about Chinese geoeconomic ambitions represented by the BRI project. According to Chen and Fazilov,⁴ the BRI has offered Central Asian states economic opportunities that Russia’s Eurasian Economic Community has failed to deliver.

As can be seen, the political effects of growing Chinese engagement in the region are quite varied, ranging from positive dynamics such as increased regional security to the escalation of Sinophobic moods. Without downplaying other political consequences, this policy brief explores protest mobilization fueled by anti-Chinese sentiments. While protest mobilization in authoritarian countries is often suppressed and triggers further coercive governmental responses, I argue that not all protest mobilizations are alike. Under certain circumstances, discussed later in the paper, popular protests may be successful in attaining their objectives without facing violent suppression by law enforcement. Not only do they reach their immediate objectives, but, as the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan illustrate, they can lead to democratic outcomes. If transparency and accountability are regarded as signs of democracy, then this is exactly what Kyrgyz and Kazakh protesters have been making a considerable progress in achieving in recent years. To illustrate, following nationwide protests in May 2016 against the amendments to the Land Code that would allow foreign entities rent Kazakh land, President Nazarbayev had to reject such amendments by announcing a moratorium. Protests in major cities of Kazakhstan were held by nationalists out of fear that amendments would enable Chinese businesses to ‘occupy’ Kazakh land. In Kyrgyzstan, top government officials including President Sooronbai Jeenbekov and First Deputy Prime Minister Kubatbek Boronov were on the defensive after the January 2019 anti-Chinese protests in Bishkek. Apart from promoting transparency and government accountability, these protests also boost politicization of public discourse and civic engagement.

Governments’ prolonged disregard for anti-Chinese sentiments can lead to the politicization of nationalist grievances. Until now, determined to deepen partnerships with China, Central Asian governments have turned a deaf ear to rising popular dissent. How long will the Central Asian autocracies keep their citizenry in the dark in regards to Chinese investments and migration issues before the public starts politicizing their demands and pressing for political liberalization? Till now, Central Asian leaders have been succeeding in suppressing dissent and controlling public opinion via state propaganda and indoctrination. The Color Revolutions and Arab Spring have taught them many lessons, including how to control social networks, keep an eye on ‘foreign

² Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng, “Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 28, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/28/cooperation-and-competition-russia-and-china-in-central-asia-russian-far-east-and-arctic-pub-75673>.

³ Raffaello Pantucci, “China’s Complicated Relationship With Central Asia,” IPI Global Observatory, November 8, 2019, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2019/11/chinas-complicated-relationship-central-asia/>.

⁴ Xiangming Chen and Fakhmiddin Fazilov, “Re-Centering Central Asia: China’s ‘New Great Game’ in the Old Eurasian Heartland,” Palgrave Communications 4, no. 71 (2018).

agents,' coopt opposition and restrict civic activism. It seems that political opportunities for protest mobilization created by fraudulent elections, as in the Color Revolutions case, could no longer repeat themselves. Maybe so, but I maintain that the continuous neglect of local populations' interests in the governments' race for Chinese investments coupled with rising Sinophobia could create political opportunities similar to those found in the Color Revolutions and spark nationwide riots. Just like the Color Revolutions,⁵ these riots could then politicize by shifting their rhetoric from purely 'Chinese question' to that of democratic reforms.

By utilizing social movements and collective action theories, I demonstrate how existing anti-Chinese sentiments in the region could translate into, first, anti-Chinese and then potential pro-democratic reforms protests. Should Central Asian dictators wish to retain their legitimacy and preserve public order, they ought to incorporate civil society and stimulate its role in conducting negotiations with Chinese partners. By renouncing the amendments to the Land Code, the Kazakh government ceded to the demands of unprecedented nation-wide popular protests. While Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have not been affected by anti-Chinese riots, they too should beware of potential risks associated with neglecting public opinion. Therefore, in light of growing Chinese engagement and Sinophobia, Central Asian governments should ensure transparency of investment contracts, civic engagement and inclusivity, and government accountability.

Is Sinophobia real?

Despite numerous media accounts and a series of anti-Chinese protests in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, there is a severe scarcity of contemporary survey data to illustrate growth of Sinophobia among Central Asians. Existing studies on public attitudes towards China often report evidence collected through expert interviews and field reports. With the exception of Gallup's 2006-2018 World Polls survey mentioned in McGlinchey,⁶ I could not find any definitive and reliable poll data. In a December 2019 PONARS policy memo, McGlinchey highlights a paradox often overlooked in Sinophobic narratives: "when surveyed about their views of the Chinese government, [Central Asians] are more likely to approve than disapprove of Beijing." Furthermore, one third of respondents chose 'Do not know' category, failing to say whether they approve or disapprove of Beijing. McGlinchey concludes that most Central Asians are not Sinophobic, but rather Sino-agnostic.

Based on the Central Asian field research and expert interviews conducted in 2008-2015 period, Peyrouse⁷ also argues that China elicits uncertainty because it "belongs

⁵ Color Revolutions, or as Wolchik and Bunce (2006) call them – Electoral Revolutions – denote the popular protests that took down authoritarian presidents in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005). They began by protesters demanding the cancellation of elections results. Faced with governments' reluctance to meet their demands, masses started demanding the resignation of the president and dissolution of governments.

⁶ Eric McGlinchey, "Questioning Sinophobia in Central Asia," PONARS Eurasia, December 2019, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/questioning-sinophobia-central-asia>.

⁷ Peyrouse, "Discussing China."

to the domain of the unknown for most ordinary Central Asians.” Since people know little about China’s traditions and culture, many fall prey to anti-Chinese propaganda and prejudice. Among other reasons for Sinophobia, scholars often refer to anti-Chinese Soviet propaganda and pre-Soviet oral folklore portraying China as a centuries-long enemy of Turkic people. Others write about the failure or limited success⁸ of Chinese soft power in the region.

If there is anyone out there interested in destabilizing a specific country or a whole region, now is the time they ought to act. Some interested forces did exactly that, according to Zhan Xiao, Chinese ambassador to Kazakhstan, when commenting on the September 2019 anti-Chinese protests in Kazakhstan. Sinophobia may not be real at the moment, but it is this very uncertainty about China that can benefit so many social groups in Central Asia challenging their governments with various agendas.

Is Sinophobia a threat to Central Asian regimes?

Considering the authoritarian nature of Central Asian regimes, democratization literature defines threats as systemic and non-systemic pressure exerted on authoritarian governments by the opposition, which can consist of either formal or informal organizations such as political parties, civil society organizations and social movements. Due to their sporadic and spontaneous nature, popular demonstrations and protests are usually omitted by scholars of authoritarianism. Yet, it was the grassroots mobilization in the Arab Spring and Color Revolutions scenarios that toppled autocratic regimes.

As I said earlier, authoritarian learning ensured Central Asian regimes some immunity from the Color Revolutions-like scenarios. Regimes have become very sophisticated at preempting factors that facilitated Color Revolutions. One of the adopted measures is to either censor or resolve issues brought up by protesters. The decision is based largely upon regimes’ threat estimation and calculation of cost of suppression. Thus, if the issue which mobilized people for protest is not perceived as a threat to the regime, regimes would permit protests driven by this issue. However, if the issue at hand is perceived as a direct threat to regimes’ survival, they would either try to resolve it or suppress protesters. Among the low risk issues in the region are those pertaining to environmental or socio-economic grievances. High risk issues are often connected to violation of human rights, fraudulent elections, interethnic conflicts, corruption, etc. It is worth mentioning that in the event of prolonged crisis or government neglect, low risk issues may get politicized and pose high level of risk to the government. To avoid this, authoritarian regimes have to respond to pressing low risk issues as soon as possible.

How do regimes perceive anti-Chinese sentiments and Sinophobic protests? Fortunately for the Central Asian governments, Sinophobia currently remains a low risk issue due to public uncertainty about China. On top of that, all Central Asian governments are doing

⁸ Nurlan Aliyev, “China’s Soft Power in Central Asia,” *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, December 19, 2019, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13599-chinas-soft-power-in-central-asia.html>.

their best to promote China's image as that of the strategic investor and good neighbor. Aware of its failing public diplomacy in the region, China is also revisiting its soft power strategy by increasing its cultural and civilizational presence⁹ through the work of Confucius Institutes, scholarship programs for Central Asian youth, information tours for journalists, etc. Time will show if these efforts manage to reshape public perception of China.

Central Asian governments should not passively observe simmering public frustration with Chinese regional engagement. They need to do more than just promoting and branding Chinese investments and good will. Sweet-talking the aggrieved masses is how we can characterize governments' current approach to dealing with anti-Chinese protests. Little is done to actually solve issues of Chinese migration, mistreatment of Turkic ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, etc. Trying to cater to the interests of China, alarmists argue that Central Asian governments are playing a dangerous game with their populations. Concerned with preserving political stability in Kazakhstan, a prominent Kazakh writer and ex-ambassador to China, Murat Auezov urged for authorities to listen to the protesters.

Creation of political opportunities

According to a theory of political opportunities, the social movement dynamics depend on the existence – or lack – of a specific political opportunity.¹⁰ Opportunities such as elite defection, decline in repressions, and rise of political pluralism and participation tell anti-regime forces that the political system is vulnerable to challenges. The ability of social movements to recognize and take advantage of such opportunities often translates to successful popular mobilization and achievement of movement demands.

Naturally, authoritarian regimes are notorious for depriving their internal and external challengers from gaining momentum in attacking the incumbent regime. Thus, they erect barriers to independent media, harass political opposition, strengthen the elite support base and increase protest policing. These and other measures, however, did not prevent escalation of protest activism in the June 2019 post-presidential election period in Kazakhstan. What this suggests is that political opportunities are not set in stone and can change in days, weeks, months or years.

By criticizing the Kazakh government for flirting with Chinese investors, Mr. Rinat Zaitov, a prominent Kazakh poet-improvisator, created a very resonant collective action frame that initially mobilized several hundred supporters on June 10 for protest. After his arrest for holding an illegal protest, even more supporters showed up on the streets. Originally nationalistic in nature, anti-Chinese protest rhetoric soon politicized and resonated with non-nationalist movements and organizations such as Oyan Kazakhstan [Wake Up Kazakhstan] and Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) protesting against fraudulent elections and pushing for democratic reforms.

⁹ Aliyev, "China's Soft Power in Central Asia."

¹⁰ David S. Meyer, "Protest and Political Opportunities," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004).

Neither nationalist nor non-nationalist movements would have taken off had there not been thousands of aggrieved citizens. According to grievances theory, the widening gap between what people have and what they believe they deserve to have increases the chances of collective action. The murder of famous Kazakh figure skater Denis Ten and the tragic death of five children from a single family in a house fire shocked the public and consolidated opinion around the issues of initiating criminal reform and boosting social welfare. Add to it people's growing environmental concerns caused by the government's plan to build a nuclear power plant near Balkhash and Chinese mistreatment of the Muslim population in Xinjiang, and you are left with enough popular frustration to fuel protest mobilization. Elsewhere in Central Asia, frustration with Chinese labor migration and Chinese men's marriage with local women in Kyrgyzstan, and the growing economic dependency of Tajikistan, are among the issues that have the largest mobilizational potential.

Finally, abundance of intangible resources such as movements' publicity in social media (Facebook, VK), utilization of messaging apps (Telegram, WhatsApp) and activists' mobilization skills and training significantly helped social movement organizations (SMOs) articulate and aggregate public interests. It is not a secret that organizations such as Kyrk Choro [Forty Knights] in Kyrgyzstan and DVK in Kazakhstan utilize messaging apps to coordinate and organize their rallies and protest campaigns.

Taken together, powerful and resonant slogans, thousands if not millions of aggrieved people, and the growing sophistication of SMOs at mobilization and utilization of resources to organize protests have created favorable political opportunities for protest mobilization in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The Kazakh government, for example, crushed these protests and immediately declared the establishment of the National Committee of Public Trust to win hearts and minds of the disillusioned masses. Kyrgyz authorities such as the migration service, police and state security committee "continued to cooperate with Kyrk Choro, taking the responsibility for managing anti-Chinese sentiment."¹¹ Time will show if post-elections 'democratic' measures adopted in Kazakhstan will make any significant changes to country's political landscape. What Kazakh and Kyrgyz experiences illustrate is that Central Asian autocracies should not wait until the masses take to the streets and potentially overthrow governments, but instead foster strong, lasting and sustainable relationships with the polity based on the principles of transparency, equality and rule of law.

Instead, what Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been doing is coopting and repressing Sinophobe activists and protesters. It appears that regimes' perception of Sinophobia may be changing from a low risk issue to a high risk one. To illustrate, a leader of Ata Jurt [Homeland], Serikzhan Bilash, was arrested in March 2019 as Kazakh authorities began to fear radicalization and further politicization of this unregistered nationalist movement. Ata Jurt aims to help Kazakh families whose relatives had been detained in Xinjiang's reeducation camps. Faced with the Ata Jurt followers' protests demanding a release of Bilash, the Kazakh authorities offered Bilash a plea deal in August 2019, according to

¹¹ Kamila Eshaliyeva, "Is Anti-Chinese Mood Growing in Kyrgyzstan?" Open Democracy, March 13, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/anti-chinese-mood-growing-kyrgyzstan/>.

which, he would have to refrain from political activism for seven years if he wanted to be set free. By saying that he had no choice, Bilash disillusioned many Ata Jurt supporters and caused a major split in the movement.¹²

The transformation of Sinophobia from a low risk to a high-risk issue would lower protest dynamics due to shrinking political opportunities for anti-Chinese protesters. Regimes would naturally increase costs of participation in protests for citizens through intimidation and arrests. But as we have seen above, political opportunities are subject to change. Unless Central Asian regimes address Sinophobes' issues, the latter will undeniably continue their mobilization work of searching for or even creating new political opportunities that could endanger autocracies. To reiterate, regional powers should introduce and foster patterns of democratic decision making to the Chinese question if they want to remain in power and maintain stability in the region. As for China, it should do a better job to address the anti-Chinese narratives proliferating in the region. The mere fact that one third of Central Asians are uncertain about China means that not everything is lost for Beijing. According to McGlinchey,¹³ China should exploit this opportunity to up "its soft-power game to counter the region's inchoate anti-Chinese populism."

Recommendations

- Central Asian governments should stop ignoring anti-Chinese sentiments and protests. Continuous neglect of the public's concerns could lead to radicalization of demands and potentially turn into political violence.
- Governments need to establish an open dialogue with organizations pushing the anti-Chinese agenda. Only by showing genuine commitment, observance of rule of law, and ensuring transparency and accountability can the authorities attract public trust so vital for a dialogue.
- Governments should identify and isolate agent provocateurs interested in destabilizing the dialogue between the authorities and nationalist organizations. This task should be carried out within the confines of the legal system.
- Governments should improve their communication with the masses by reporting, among other things, the true number of Chinese labor migrants, shedding light on bilateral agreements with China, and subjecting planned projects with China to public hearings and scrutiny. Last but not least, relevant civil society organizations should be invited to parliamentary hearings to participate in discussing the most controversial bills. These measures do not have to remain in place forever, but they are especially timely in the context of current uncertainty.

¹² Emily Feng, "An Advocate For Kazakhs Persecuted In China Is Banned From Activism In Kazakhstan," NPR, October 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/26/771989624/an-advocate-for-kazakhs-persecuted-in-china-is-banned-from-activism-in-kazakhsta>.

¹³ McGlinchey, "Questioning Sinophobia in Central Asia."

- China should revisit its public diplomacy in Central Asia. Faced with so much Sinophobic bias and prejudice, China needs to reestablish itself as a neighbor interested not only in economic partnerships, but also in fostering local human capital and intercultural dialogue in addition to supporting regional sustainable development and environmental security.

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