

A DILEMMA; CHINESE INFLUENCE IN KAZAKHSTAN AND EAST TURKESTAN

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Analysis

With 97 meters of altitude and its architectural design, the Bayterek tower both marks the year of Nur-Sultan (Astana) city becoming Kazakhstan capital and symbolizes the Kazakh culture and history. Designed as a glass sphere to allow visibility from air, this modern building had been inspired by a Kazakh legend. According to the myth, Samruk, a mythical bird, always tries to lay a golden egg in the nest on top of the 'tree of life' denoting life and hope. Living off the roots of this tree, dragon Aydarhan would go up and swallow the golden egg-depicting the timeless struggle between good and evil. But one day, Samruk manages to lay the egg in the nest and a new life emanates from it. According to rumors, Samruk represents Kazakhstan and the dragon does China. The first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, ordered the construction of the Bayterek tower immediately after he made Astana as the country's capital. Bayterek

symbolizes the tree of life and the glass sphere standing on the top of it the sovereign existence of Kazakhstan.

Having an impressive historical and cultural body of knowledge, Kazakhstan gained its independence after the collapse of the USSR and the end of centuries long Russian invasion. Though the country faced several problems in the early 90s, it resolved its problems through rational policies to a significant extent and increased its influence in Central Asia in time. Through its rapid economic development especially due of its rich underground resources and strategic position, Kazakhstan also attracts the attention of foreign investors. This situation made developing Kazakhstan's confrontation with global powers, in which China become one of major actors asserting itself strongly in the country.



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After the Cold War, the US strived to increase its weight on previously Russia-dominated regions. China, on the other hand, involved in the zone of rivalry in Central Asia. At this point, the fact that China initiated to build a bigger Consulate General than that of USA just opposite it is a remarkable reflection of the situation in question.

Politics of Investment and Culture

Since 1997, China came to occupy an important place in the sector of natural gas and petroleum of Kazakhstan. In this process, pipelines were built between the two countries to deliver the energy resources from Kazakhstan to the Chinese market. Being also strategically located in the crossing of Turkmenistan's natural gas, Kazakhstan has become one of the most important suppliers in meeting the energy demands of China and Chinese firms; who in turn, are actively engaged in Kazakhstan's energy market.

The bilateral cooperation improved further after the launched of the new Silk Road Project, announced by a statement of Xi Jinping in Astana in 2013. Beside the \$30 billion deal signed between the countries, a number of big roads and harbors were built in accordance to the "One Belt, One Road" project. Kazakhstan is currently only second to Russia in the volume of bilateral commercial relations with China among the Commonwealth of Independent States.

In addition to its commercial relations, China endeavors to be more active in Kazakhstan's cultural terms. The Confucius Institute is the most important mean for this aim. The Institute often attempts to expand the sphere of China's influence with its conferences and activities to introduce the Chinese culture. In the meetings that we had at Nur-Sultan Confucius Institute last June, the authorities expressed that the interest in Chinese language is ever increasing.

Indeed, record shows about the instant increase in the number of Kazakh students who have their education in China. The main reason for the increase is more of economic terms than of

interest and love for China and its culture. It is evident that what China and its language can facilitate for the people of Kazakhstan is much more than what other foreign countries can do. China's massive investments in Kazakhstan and the prospect of it providing large employment direct more and more Kazakh students to learn Chinese.

China's Oppression in East Turkestan

Though relations between the two countries continue to improve, the fact that more than one million Uighur Turks, including Kazakh and Kyrgyz citizens, were put into concentration camps that the Beijing administration downplayed as "re-education camps" serves as the most underlying factor that tensed the relations between the two countries.

Because of China's policy of torture, assimilation and cultural genocide targeting the Uighur Turk minorities, the Kazakh people highly resents China, so much so that demonstrations against China were organized in big cities like Nur-Sultan, Shymkent and Almaty because of its practices in East Turkestan. These demonstrations even went viral on social media.

Having Kazakh citizenship despite being born in East Turkestan, Serikjan Bilash is an activist popularly known for his anti-China protests. Serikjan is now the voice of the people forcibly held in concentration camps following his association for human rights activities, which caused him to be put on trial by the Kazakh authorities where he said "I raised the issues nothing less than on the genocide imposed on the people of Kazakh, Uighur and Turkish" while defending himself in court. He added, "hundreds of thousands of people have been held forcibly in so-called centers for vocational training and tortured". After being put under a house arrest in March 2019, he was released in August 2019.

Although such events can happen in Kazakhstan as a country with great commercial relations with China, the Kazakh administration can't

always be indifferent to its people's outrage towards China. The Kazakh authorities can make statements critical of China's practices in East Turkestan in question to temper the public opinion. The most important in this regard was about the request of the resettlements of some Uighur and Kazakhstan citizens in Kazakhstan; where they were previously oppressed by Beijing back in China. The media also reports how some Uighur Turks weren't extradited by Nur-Sultan administration despite China's request.

Moreover, it should be stressed that Beijing took some manipulative initiatives to change the Kazakh public opinion about the East Turkestan issue. Statements of some Uighurs living in the Eastern region near the Kazakhstan-China border and acting as agents of China, such as "give us a state in this territories" was heavily reacted by the Kazakh public. But, it is obvious that it is a conspiracy of Beijing, which strives to sever the relations between the two people.

Anti-Chinese Sentiments in Kazakhstan

As of 2013, when the new Silk Road Project was announced, China bought a great deal of territory in Central Asia. The intimacy caused by close commercial relations with China furnished an occasion to discussion of sale/rent of some agricultural land to China. But it induced great objections and disturbances in the country. Especially in March 2016, the Kazakh administration decided to rent its lands reserved for agriculture for 25 years. The claim that this decision was dictated by Chinese agricultural companies, led to serious nation-wide protests in the country. After these developments, President Nursultan Nazarbayev stopped enactment of rule.

In the same year, a Chinese propaganda video that went viral on social media triggered harsh response from the Kazakh public. It was pointed out in the video that Balkhash Lake should be

within the borders of China. The video also created serious criticism in the country.

Indeed, new Silk Road Project is perceived by the majority of the Kazakh people as a mean of China's expansionist policies in Central Asia. As the most populated country of world, the assertion that China would carve itself out colonies by the way of buying territories is a major cause for the concerns of the Kazakh people.

At this point, the Kazakh administration acts cautiously in certain issues in its relations with China. Though bilateral commercial relations goes on improving, neither its territory sold to Chinese citizens nor they are allowed to live together ghettoizing.

As nation-state notion get crystalized further in recent years in Kazakhstan, it's observed that far-right nationalist tendency has increased, notably in west Kazakhstan; this situation sometimes causes reaction towards minorities to come up. The workers from China get reacted most. Economic reasons go alongside historical Chinese antagonism in this regard. Though the deals between Nursultan and Beijing prohibit mass accommodation of workers, discussions surrounding several Chinese companies to bring along their workers do emerge. Occasionally, secretly taped videos of Chinese workers happen to be posted and the Kazakh people would naturally speak out against this situation.

To summarize, the relations between the two countries is expected to improve further. As it benefited from China's massive investments, Kazakhstan is now an important supplier of energy for China, which makes the relations, seems like a symbiosis mutualism. But China's unacceptable torture and genocide policy in East Turkestan and historical Chinese antagonism has the capacity of deteriorating the painstakingly built relations.