

# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/02/26/the-bri-in-kazakhstan-the-chinese-dream-with-kazakh-characteristics/>

ANTONIOS VITALIS, FEB 26 2023

The unprecedented rise of China politically and economically in the last decade especially seen through its announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in Astana, Kazakhstan, has understandably elicited significant alarm and apprehension within the Western community (Bank, 2018; Brautigam, 2020; Bolton, 2017). This is no less the case with scholars within the domain of IR. Indeed, curiosity, fascination, and interest in understanding the motivations and consequences of China's rise have merit. Certainly, when Chinese leader Xi Jinping's rhetoric declares that once "all roads" led to Rome but that "today, they lead to Beijing," the lifespan of the contemporary Western liberal order would appear to be under threat (Frankopan, 2018; Beeson, 2018; Kumar, 2021). The extensive nature of transit and economic networks, along with substantial infrastructure projects driven by the BRI as far as Latin America and Africa, let alone its recent forays into Eastern Europe, portrays, for some observers, "unmistakable imperial overtones" beckoning the growing reality that Sino-centric world order is imminent (Kumar, 2021, p. 3; Yu, 2019; Callahan, 2016).

Are concerns regarding China's ambition and dream of establishing a Sino-centric world order through the implementation and realisation of the BRI justified? Does the BRI reflect an extension of a Chinese Grand Strategy acting as an instrument of Chinese geoeconomic might? Though these questions are wide-ranging in scope and focus, this paper offers insight, however remote, into whether the BRI achieves the aims and objectives of China's Dream and Grand Strategy — and the implications it has on China's BRI partners (Pröpper, 2020; Winter, 2019; Cai, 2018). It does so in a manner that dispels the paradigmatic constraints of singular theoretical IR analysis by incorporating analytic eclecticism as the applied framework (Friedrichs, 2009; Garlick, 2020a). It is from this framework that this research advances its enquiry.

Analytic eclecticism enables this paper not only to emphasise the material nature of the BRI's *geoeconomic* implications on Kazakhstan within its analysis but also points out, taking the lead from previous scholars, the crucial and often understated role of the ideational tenets (specifically the Chinese Dream) that are embedded within the BRI (Wang, 2017; Pröpper, 2020; Garlick, 2020b). The Chinese Dream, this paper argues, underpins the BRI and hence China's Grand Strategy (Callahan, 2016; Winter, 2019). In other words, an additional contribution of this paper is its conception of the BRI as the embodiment of the Chinese Dream and Grand Strategy. To avoid confusion, this paper refers explicitly to the BRI's overland route, which encompasses the famed historical Silk Road that stretches from China throughout Eurasia and into Eastern Europe (Bank, 2018; Bitabarova, 2019).

Kazakhstan provides the basis for this paper's analysis of the ability of the BRI to deliver the Chinese dream and achieve the objectives of its Grand Strategy. It is selected given that Kazakhstan lies at the pivotal geographical juncture from where the BRI embarks on its expansive journey into Eastern and Western Europe (Bitabarova, 2019; Garlick, 2020b; Kley & Yau, 2021). Moreover, a large-N-case-study analysis on Kazakhstan offers a unique opportunity given that it has demonstrated, up to the time of writing, the ability to apply a multi-vector foreign policy that has balanced the competing interests of major powers, including Russia and China and the United States (Kembayev, 2020; Neafe, 2022). Furthermore, Sino-Kazakh relations have reflected a convergence of shared collective interests and hence a desire to maintain reinforced bilateral relations (Bitabarova, 2019; Kembayev, 2020). Identifying the change or continuity in Sino-Kazakh relations considering the BRI's emergence is the starting point of

# **The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?**

Written by Antonios Vitalis

this study's analysis. It then enables the analysis to consider the question of Chinese commitment; can the BRI truly adhere to a win-win principle if the BRI is to be considered the embodiment of both the Chinese Dream and Chinese Grand Strategy? These are questions articulated in the following subsection, which may offer the reader insight into this paper's key aims and objectives in structuring this research.

## **Research Questions, Aims and Structure**

Considering this paper's intentions, the following research questions (RQs) are presented:

RQ 1: Does the nature of Sino-Kazakh relations preceding and following the emergence of the BRI reflect continuity or change?

RQ 2: Can the outcome of relations between both countries be expected to align with the BRI's principle of "win-win" cooperation?

This paper attempts to demonstrate how the Chinese Dream and Grand Strategy converge and how the BRI reflects them by responding to these questions. It also seeks to determine whether the BRI reflects change or continuity in Chinese foreign policy engagement in Kazakhstan. Moreover, it assesses the BRI's implementation in Kazakhstan per the Chinese Dream and its Grand Strategy and whether it is conducive to a win-win principle for both parties. Penultimately, it provides enhanced analysis and understanding of Kazakhstan's response and strategy(-ies) regarding increased Chinese engagement in the era of BRI. Finally, it seeks to highlight the utility of analytical eclecticism as a framework centred around an understanding of geoeconomics and Grand Strategy when considering the role and significance of China's BRI. Only by incorporating an analytical lens that views the confluence of factors, themes, and facets, shaping the BRI is IR scholarship better informed as to the nature of characterising and the role served by the BRI in achieving a Chinese Dream and relevant Grand Strategy.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it unpacks current literature emphasising the significance and consequences of the BRI. Second, it presents and demonstrates the heterogenous utility of applying an analytically eclectic framework within IR scholarship to garner a clearer picture of the BRI per its logic and geopolitical consequences. Third, it applies a case study of the above RQs in the context of a case study analysis to ascertain and fulfil the aims mentioned above in this paper aims to achieve (Yin, 2017). Therefore, its analytical approach is inductive and qualitative and refers to secondary research papers, reports, and speeches relevant to the ensuing inquiry (Alaasutari et al., 2008). This paper reveals that despite the dominant and overarching presence of the Chinese dream embodied by the BRI, the dream has yet to be realised, at least in its most potent form. Instead, its manifestation in Kazakhstan has been localised, taking onboard Kazakh characteristics as opposed to a fully realised Chinese Dream. Hence, this research challenges scholarly accounts that assume the relations between BRI participants and China are asymmetric and favour the latter. In the case of Kazakhstan, there persists space for state agency and 'push-back' that remoulds the nature and form of BRI implementation, thereby negating the assumption of asymmetry in relations between China and relevant.

## **Analytical Framework**

### *Overview of the Literature*

This chapter traces the logic of inquiry framing this paper. It first presents an overview of the nature and limitations of existing BRI scholarship and how this paper seeks to resolve inevitable tensions made apparent upon the culmination of this literature review. Second, it departs from the literature review's limitations by applying the selected framework this paper refers to when attempting to respond to the core research questions driving this inquiry. It then concludes by reiterating the logic of analysis the subsequent chapter follows, reinforcing the lucidity of selection behind the applied analytical framework.

Contemporary IR literature analysing the BRI often points to its potential consequences for recipient states, given that the projects aim at fostering development initiatives for less-developed countries in the global south. Indeed, one

# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

criticism often cited per the BRI to reflect the potential ‘threat’ of a resurgent China is the implication of its “debt-trap diplomacy” (Brautigam, 2020; Lai et al., 2020; Beeson, 2018; Cai, 2018). The latter concept alleges that China provides infrastructure investment per the BRI in a manner that burdens recipient states with burgeoning debt, whereby later repayments by recipient countries prove unfeasible, binding them firmly within the sphere of Chinese influence (Cai, 2018; Lai et al., 2020; Clover, 2018). This, IR scholars argue, represents China’s ambition of establishing itself as a rival leader in global development and modernisation, offering an alternative source of funding for states that cannot secure the necessary loans from Western financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank (Lai et al., 2020; Yu, 2019; Cai, 2018). What stifles such analyses is their approach to studying the BRI as monolithic, a project whose shape and nature do not depend on the country or regional context upon which it is applied (Garlick, 2020a; 2020b; Jackson, 2018). Indeed, recognising the complexity and nuance of the BRI as a multifaceted material, and as observed in the latter section, as an ideational symbol of Chinese supremacy is of utmost pertinence for IR scholars in this field (Garlick, 2020b).

Vangeli’s (2020) work provides a strong example of why such an approach is essential. They trace how the BRI has provided the medium for the “development” of “ideas and practices” and how these are then diffused and applied within specific regional contexts. This further reiterates the call to action pleaded by Sil and Katzenstein (2010) and Garlick (2020a; 2020b) to embrace heterogeneous analytical approaches within the IR discipline (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010; Garlick, 2020a; 2020b). IR approaches to studying the BRI are often constrained to Western paradigms, whereby comparative analyses are applied to demonstrate China as the counterfactual alternative to US unipolarity (Garlick, 2020a; Yu, 2019; Kumar, 2021). Such comparisons are often misplaced. How China perceives itself and the role it may secure as leader of a pax-Sinica is distinguishable from the traditional perceptions held within IR theory when describing the ascendancy and leadership held by the US (Loh, 2021; Yu, 2019).

A proposed solution to this puzzle in recent literature is to apply the concept of ‘geoeconomics’ as an analytical mechanism conveying China’s application of the BRI as an instrument which enables it to leverage its national economic influence as framed by its Grand Strategy (Beeson, 2018; Blackwell & Harris, 2017). Such analytical labour proves fruitful for this analysis, yet conclusions reached within IR scholarship attempting to provide analytical clarity on what comprises the Chinese Grand Strategy are often ambivalent. On the one hand, perceptions of China as a rising and aggressive power fall short of credibility given its inability to consider the ‘Chinese way’ of pursuing its national interests per its non-interventionist mantra (Pröpper, 2020; Zhou & Esteban, 2018; Beeson, 2018). Whereas alternative studies point to how the paradox, since the launch of the BRI in 2012, has seen China grapple with managing its pursuit of the national interest with urgency but without compromising its commitment to non-interventionist foreign policy conduct, let alone the BRI’s principle of win-win cooperation for recipient states (Kumar, 2021; Winter, 2019). While the concept of geoeconomics enables a starting point from whence this research may evaluate such questions, it also requires refinement given that studies incorporating the term in the search for analytical clarity omit the significant role of the BRI’s — and hence Chinese Grand Strategy — ideational components (Jackson, 2018; Kumar, 2021; Callahan, 2016; Garlick, 2020b). Additionally, there is a tendency to indirectly imply the link between China’s Grand Strategy and the BRI without acknowledging the role and intellectual basis of the Chinese Dream’s concept in reinforcing the two. Therefore, this paper aims to explicitly demonstrate how the three converge and how the BRI can be viewed not solely in material terms per the Chinese Grand Strategy within the confines of geoeconomics but also on ideational grounds, specifically regarding the Chinese Dream.

The implication of such a decision would assume that studies claiming that asymmetrical relationships between China and BRI recipient countries would transpire and reinforce the notion of an unrelenting Chinese resurgence (Garlick, 2020b). However, it is crucial to consider the scope of such studies as the BRI cannot be analytically assessed as a monolithic entity. It is not simply regionally dependent but also country-specific in its manifestations (Louthan, 2022; Garlick, 2020a; Garlick, 2020b). This is, therefore, a key reason analytical specificity in this paper is significantly emphasised, as viewed by referring solely to the land component of the BRI and solely considering a case study analysis on the BRI in Kazakhstan through the lens of Sino-Kazakh relations. Even so, the nature of studies specifying their analysis of the BRI per a specific national context often overly focus and prioritises material consequences of the BRI (Callahan, 2016; Garlick, 2020a). While indeed necessary an approach this study replicates to a large extent, it is also important to chart the linkages of the ideational dimension that the BRI espouses within its the country-context is resides – because, as mentioned previously, the BRI has been shown to adapt to the

# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

context whence it is applied (Garlick, 2020a; Callahan, 2016; Stroikos, 2022).

Finally, while the BRI's presence and overbearing nature in Africa and Latin America have understandably galvanised a significant body of literature, one critical region often overlooked is that of Central Asia, which the BRI's land route heavily depends upon as it marks the commencement of its journey through west-Asia, into the Middle East and ultimately into Europe (Laruelle, 2018; Noort, 2020). Moreover, the region's place in IR has always been of significance per Mackinder's "Heartland Theory," which highlighted the immense importance of the region as a geographical pivot for competing Great Powers and that those who control the region can expect geopolitical and economic supremacy given the region's natural endowments (Mackinder, 1904; Nabiyeva, 2019; Bitabarova, 2019). China has indeed recognised this point, given its recognition that it requires an increased and secure supply of energy sources to sustain its growing population leading to its urgency in fostering and maintaining strong cooperation with countries in the region – most notably Kazakhstan (Garlick, 2020b; Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020; Downs, 2006; Bitabarova, 2019). Moreover, China has a unique perspective on the region, given that historically the fabled old Silk Road traversed and encompassed Central Asia during the reign of China's dynastic imperial leadership (Wang, 2017, p. 130; Kumar, 2021; Contessi, 2018). Indeed, studies argue that the location of the BRI's announcement in Kazakhstan, the largest state in Central Asia, can hardly be a coincidence (Nabiyeva, 2019; Kembayev, 2020; Kassenova, 2017). Hence, could one not presume that the motivation for China's BRI in the region is causally linked to the Chinese Dream? Or is China's interest in applying the BRI in the region purely centred on strategic logic per its Geoeconomic interests?

Studies have yet to converge these above tensions in a manner that is comprehensive enough ideationally and materially — let alone also consider the ability of states along the BRI's periphery to engage with China to maintain agency and autonomy (Garlick, 2020b; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Connolly (2020) and Stroikos (2022) both reaffirm the latter point on the state agency. Both demonstrate how the nature of Chinese forays per the BRI in both Melanesia and Greece have resulted in either a balanced partnership (Greece) or, indeed, an outright rejection of Chinese expectations (Melanesia) — reflecting the capacity of small states to manage a balanced relationship, through the prism of the BRI, with China suitable for their national interests rather than submitting to the demands of the resurgent power (Stroikos, 2022; Connolly, 2020).

Whether Kazakhstan has demonstrated such abilities is debatable and indeed a focus of this inquiry (Bitabarova, 2019; Bohnenberger-Rich, 2015). Kazakhstan's uniqueness in this regard has been highlighted throughout IR scholarship per its ability since independence to manage competing interests within the region in a 'multi-vector' foreign policy approach (Bitabarova, 2019; Downs, 2006; Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020; Stegen & Kuznir, 2015). Whether its multi-vector approach retains feasibility considering a resurgent China per the presence of its BRI is the second exploration of this paper.

Hence, this paper considers the interplay between the ideational and material synergies underpinning and conveyed by the BRI's presence in given contexts. It links and discusses the Chinese Dream to the Chinese Grand Strategy before elaborating further on how the BRI embodies the two. Moreover, it considers whether the BRI in Kazakhstan has been able to reaffirm China's commitment to a win-win principle by considering the response and engagement of Kazakhstan in managing China's BRI presence from the turn of the previous decade until 2019. Finally, it demonstrates and dispels concerns that generalise conclusions that working within the BRI – and with China, therefore – equates to the generation of an asymmetrical relationship because Kazakhstan will demonstrate that state agency in the face of a resurgent China is still feasible when recognising the needs and objectives China pursues per its dream.

## *Promise of Analytical Eclecticism*

The questions raised in above literature review raised questions regarding how to consolidate an analytical approach that comprehensively: captures the ideational logic and influence of China's Dream; demonstrates its embeddedness within the Chinese Grand Strategy; situates the BRI as an extension of this strategy in a manner devoid of analytical opacity; and evaluates the BRI's application in Kazakhstan and whether this has ramifications on the BRI's ability to achieve the aims of the Chinese Dream.

# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

Indeed, the promise of analytic eclecticism is its encouragement of merging pre-existing research paradigms pragmatically, which enables analytical clarity when inquiring into “more complex” academic puzzles that reflect the “complexity and messiness of ... real-world situations” (Friedrichs, 2009, p. 647; Sil & Katzenstein, 2010, p. 412; Regilme, 2018). The academic puzzle facing this inquiry is approaching and identifying the ideational and material facets of the BRI and how it relates to both the Chinese Grand Strategy and the Chinese Dream. The benefit of analytic eclecticism compliments the aims of this research because such an approach enables the reader to recognise the complexity and significance of the BRI as not solely a ‘grand’ development and infrastructure project but also as the instrument by which Chinese foreign objectives can be reached – especially when considering the role of the Chinese Dream (Garlick, 2020a; Loh, 2021).

Hence the following steps are implemented to formulate the applied framework. The first step requires unpacking and recognising how the BRI expresses the Chinese Dream. The second step is explicitly defining Grand Strategy before demonstrating how the BRI embodies China’s Grand Strategy. The third is to refer to the material and ideational lenses that theoretically inform the subsequent analysis. Finally, this framework then refers to its applicability to the case study of Kazakhstan, reaffirming the logic behind this paper’s research questions and how both are addressed.

The term Chinese dream originates from a series of speeches by President Xi Jinping throughout 2017, most notably his address at the Chinese Communist Party congress in March of 2017 (Pröpper, 2020; Yu, 2019). Its core themes, evidenced throughout the three-and-a-half-hour rhetoric, reflected that of the rejuvenation of China, with its goal of being placed at the pinnacle of the global order, achieved through the development of a “Community of Common Destiny” (Xinhuanet, 2015; Yu, 2019). The latter is a clear indication by President Xi that China seeks to “re-establish” a modern version of *Tianxia* or “All Under Heaven”, the imperial order Chinese dynasties established whereby states along the old Silk Road stretching from China through modern-day Eurasia paid tribute to the Chinese Emperor with China at the centre and its “prominence and superiority” unquestioned (Yu, 2019, p. 7; Vohra, 1992; Callahan, 2016). Therefore, a Sino-centric world reflecting China’s unprecedented power is the ultimate intention of the Chinese Dream, but, as per Xi’s rhetoric, it can only be achieved through harmonious means. So, cooperation is of paramount importance (Pröpper, 2020). In line with IR scholarship, this paper defines Grand Strategy as the “comprehensive prioritisation, direction and coordination of national resources” in achieving the national interest of *any* given state (Connolly, 2020, p. 44; Brands, 2014). Indeed, Luttwak (2009) and Connolly (2022) rightly argue how “all states,” no matter their economic or geopolitical strength in proportion to their counterparts “, have a grand strategy whether they know it or not” (Luttwak, 2009, p. 409; Connolly, 2020). This also applies to Kazakhstan and its ability to coordinate its natural resources best suited to its national interest (Contessi, 2018; Vanderhill et al., 2020). Informing a state’s Grand Strategy is also an “overarching vision” based on the “purposeful set of ideas” (Connolly, 2020, p. 44). The Chinese Dream can therefore be interpreted as providing the vision — the Common Destiny vision — and the ideas — precisely that of *Tianxia* — that drive the Chinese Grand Strategy as embodied by the BRI (Yu, 2019; Pröpper, 2020; Loh, 2021; Callahan, 2016).

Then, the BRI can be seen to embody China’s Grand Strategy, given its material dimension in its delivery of “economic prosperity” through the promised infrastructure projects and investments promised by China for BRI partners (Yu, 2019; Contessi, 2018). Moreover, the coordination of the varying Chinese Government Ministries and agencies, most notably China’s National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce, reiterate the consolidated nature of China’s state apparatus, which echoes the definition of Grand Strategy this paper refers to (PRC, 2015; Connolly, 2020; Brands, 2014). Ideationally, China’s BRI charts the Confucian vision of a Community of Common Destiny, echoing its Sino-centric imperial legacy throughout history per *Tianxia*, highlighting the duality between “harmony and uniformity” (Yu, 2019). The heterogeneous nature of BRI participants in their manner of governance, whether democratic or authoritarian, infers the emphasis China places on harmony rather than uniformity in cooperating with states so long as, per Confucianism’s understanding of obedience and order, recognises China’s pre-eminence (Yu, 2019). From a Western paradigm, the image of the Sino-centric world order is one of linear hierarchy, when the Chinese interpretation of China-led world order is spherical, with China at its nexus and “peripheral nations” within its orbit “in spherical formation” (Ibid., 12). In other words, the Chinese Dream conveys China’s sense of destiny in returning to the top of the international order, which drives its Grand Strategy ideationally, before manifesting itself materially in the form of the BRI to mould the international arena

# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

as Sino-centric in line with the principle of Tianxia. The interplay between the ideational and intellectual constituents of the Chinese Dream and the material and economic facets of the BRI can therefore be seen to converge, culminating in the overarching Grand Strategy China pursues. Recognising the BRI as the face of this Grand Strategy, that its motivations are no less material as they are ideational, provides current scholarship with further supplementation into understanding the Chinese perspective on IR and the nature of the consequences of such a perspective and, indeed, Grand Strategy. These conclusions form the culmination of this framework's first component, and it is now the focus of the remainder of this section to note the role that geoeconomics and discursive analysis play in enabling this understanding of the BRI to bear the required analytical fruits in its case study analysis of Kazakhstan in the subsequent section.

The most pronounced contribution of this paper is its application of geoeconomics as an analytical tool to understand the BRI as the face of the Chinese Grand Strategy (Connolly, 2020). Geoeconomics, as the name suggests, refers to the application of "economic interests" to meet the objectives of the national interest, which in turn generates results of a beneficial and geopolitical nature (Connolly, 2020; Blackwell & Harris, 2017). In the context of China, its Grand Strategy is geoeconomic, intending to achieve asymmetrical economic relations with partner countries in line with their national interests — in this case, the rejuvenation of a Sino-centric order as informed by the Chinese Dream (Blackwell & Harris, 2017; Beeson, 2018). The impetus is that the BRI has drastically recalibrated the nature and "conception of" geopolitical "space" and "power," given that geoeconomics per the BRI captures the geopolitical concerns the project conveys without dismissing the role and consequence of its economic implications (Cowen & Smith, 2009, pp. 24-25; Beeson, 2018). This conception of geoeconomics refers to earlier questions raised in the prior section, explicitly concerning the conceptual component of China's Grand Strategy — one that pursues a Community of Common Destiny.

Indeed, the implication from geoeconomics is the asymmetrical objective of a state — where China — seeks to leverage its economic strength (embodied by the BRI) on different states, enabling China to secure substantial political influence and thus geopolitical power. This speaks to the duality referred to above regarding the implicit of the BRI promoting the principle of win-win cooperation through an emphasis placed on harmony and collective prosperity while also pursuing the Chinese Dream of "revitalisation of the nation" (Xinhua, 2013; Xinhuanet, 2015; Loh, 2021). As has already been made clear, the BRI cannot solely be considered an economic instrument of geopolitical proportions but also an ideational instrument and embodiment of the Chinese Grand Strategy and, crucially, of the Chinese Dream (Garlick, 2020a; Garlick, 2020b). China's BRI presents an image of a Chinese Dream, one that enables its return to the pinnacle of global power in an order orbiting its presence and leadership as it fulfils its 'destiny' as the pre-eminent power it historically enjoyed (Connolly, 2020; Beeson, 2018; Yu, 2019; Loh, 2021).

## The Chinese Dream in Kazakhstan?

### *Sino-Kazakh Relations: Continuity or Change?*

The purpose of this subsection is to respond to the following RQ: "does the nature of Sino-Kazakh relations preceding and following the emergence of the BRI reflect continuity or change?"

By addressing this question, this section contends how relations between both countries, over time, experienced incremental change and transformation. The latter is reflected by China's launch of the BRI and how doing so galvanised the Kazakh state to produce their infrastructure project, "Nurly Zhol," which means "Bright Path" in English. Tracing the stages in these relations to demonstrate their transformative nature will also showcase how the seeds of China's geoeconomic Grand Strategy began to sprout and blossom. Parallel to this phenomenon was Kazakhstan's realisation of the need to adopt a similar Grand Strategy that was also geo-economically driven because, like China. It realised the need to diversify its economy to support its national interests, especially per its multi-vector foreign policy.

Sino-Kazakh relations can be traced to 1991, when Kazakhstan announced its independence following the demise of the Soviet Union. China raced to foster strong ties, seizing the "crucial opportunity" to resolve "lingering border

## The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

disputes” (Louthan, 2022, p. 9). China led the international community in recognising Kazakhstan’s sovereignty at the end of 1991, the 27th of December 1991 (Zhakypova et al., 2020, p. 126). The following year saw both countries engage in their first set of diplomatic relations, with then Kazakhstan’s leader at the time, President Nazarbayev, reflecting this new partnership by engaging in the country’s first official visit to Beijing, where both sides formulated “the basis of Sino-Kazakh friendly relations” (Ibid). Economics and security characterised the early nature of Sino-Kazakh relations. Given that both shared a 1700 km border, China recognised the geographical significance of securitising its Western border, primarily due to the turmoil facing the previously pre-eminent regional power — the Soviet Union — collapse (Zhakypova et al., 2020; Louthan, 2022). By 2002, both countries had engaged in a variety of negotiations regarding the “delimitation of the state border”, which served both countries in establishing a “clear and principled framework for mutual trust and development” (Zhakypova et al., 2020, p. 129). Negotiations reflecting the latter manifested fully by signing “the Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation” between Kazakhstan and China in late 2002 (Zhakypova et al., 2020, p. 129; Nabiyeva, 2019; Contessi, 2018). These agreements demonstrated a conceptual component, as both countries recognised their historical relationship. Moreover, the geographical proximity reinforced such connotations driving relations, given that Kazakhstan recognised the benefits of aligning — ever so slightly — with a slowly awakened China (Zhakypova et al., 2020; Yu, 2019). Though these tenets were slight, as the objective of these negotiations was security and economically focused, they planted the seeds that would enable China to convey its message of a Common Destiny to its BRI participants — especially Kazakhstan, given its pivotal role “in the development” of the BRI (Zhakypova et al., 2020; Kassenova, 2017).

Upon achieving the necessary “diplomatic resolution[s] of border disputes in 1998”, Sino Kazakh relations began to emphasise an economic dimension, indeed given China’s acknowledgement that Kazakhstan’s natural endowments per its abundant reserves of “mineral and natural resource wealth” helped satiate China’s energy needs (Louthan, 2022, p. 9). This was the case following the planned construction of the “first China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline in 2003”, also known as the Atasu-Alashankou oil pipeline (Louthan, 2022, p. 13; Zhakypova et al., 2020). The pipeline reflected two key takeaways. First that China had indeed realised the significant potential that Kazakhstan offered in providing the necessary energy supply it needed to support its burgeoning population and economy; moreover, it demonstrated Kazakhstan’s multi-vector strategy in diversifying its oil exports from “the former Russian monopoly (Louthan, 2022, p. 13; Kembayev, 2020, p. 206).

Further reinforcing relations to again demonstrate the incrementally changing nature of the relationship from simply being cordial to economically strategic was the 2009 announcement of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline. The pipeline linked “oil fields in western Kazakhstan” with China’s western province of Xinjiang and has, since its development, supplied China with “half of its natural gas imports,” further demonstrating Kazakhstan’s valuable place in China’s peripheral foreign policy strategy (Kassenova, 2017, pp. 110-111; Zhakypova et al., 2020). Alongside energy cooperation, China and Kazakhstan’s infrastructure relationship precedes the BRI announcement, foreshadowing those relations before and after the BRI reflected continuity. Indeed, Kazakhstan has vocally embraced the opportunity to serve as “a transit area” for Eurasian trade relations since its independence in 1991 and establishing the railway network that same year; China and Kazakhstan demonstrated the latter enthusiasm (Kassenova, 2017). In the following decade, both countries agreed to construct an international transport route trailing through Kazakhstan to Russia per the Baltic Sea. This route overlaps with the most significant joint infrastructure both countries pursued prior to the BRI, the Khorgos-Eastern Gate of 2012 (Ibid). Both countries agreed to establish a Special Economic Zone, which began to demonstrate China’s increasing realisation of Kazakhstan’s significance in its evolving foreign policy (Kassenova, 2017; Zhakypova et al., 2020). Following this logic implies that Kazakhstan, not China, had realised its ability to develop a foreign policy based on a nascent geoeconomic basis.

Kazakhstan would devise a strategy, a network, of ‘pipeline politics’ that could secure its national interest of managing competing regional interests regarding its natural resource endowments, as reflected by its multi-vector foreign policy (Bitabarova, 2019; Bitabarova, 2019). China, in contrast, did not have as comprehensive an approach to its bilateral relations with the new republic, not until it began working extensively with the newly independent republic on infrastructure projects, which would soon, over time, pale in comparison with the subsequent announcement of the BRI. There was, therefore, a clear strategy by Kazakhstan, best conceptualised as a Grand

# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

Strategy that was geo-economically driven to ensure the diversification of its natural resources to avoid the “natural resource curse” that other developing states fell victim to while balancing its relationship with regional giants – whether Russia or China. Relations would transform, however, with President Xi’s announcement of the “New Silk Road,” later known as the BRI (Yu, 2019). Therefore, relations between China and Kazakhstan until 2013 were characterised by a mutually agreed focus on securing border resolutions and economic relations — whether on energy trade links or infrastructure projects. Relations benefitted both sides. China benefits from a sustained and extensive supply of Kazakhstan’s natural hydrocarbon reserves which satisfies domestic demand. In contrast, Kazakhstan benefits from gaining access to the “world’s second-largest economy,” enabling it to “modernise its national economy” and allowing it to refrain from an overreliance on Russia as its central export market (Zhakypova et al., 2020, p. 128; Bitabarova, 2019).

The relationship, therefore, underwent an incremental change initially before it undertook rapid evolution per the increasing lines of cooperation both countries engaged in per energy and infrastructure transport projects. Therefore, characterising the two-decade relationship prior to the BRI announcement as simply ‘change’ does not accurately reflect the scale and rate at which China and Kazakhstan recognised each other’s key role in enabling each other to achieve their respective national interest. Therefore, the author posited the term ‘*transformation*,’ given that the connotations this term implies are the pronounced change and the nature of that change better compliments this analysis on Sino-Kazakh relations before the BRI announcement. The relationship transformed through the BRI, as is discussed further below. However, the origins of this transformation became all too apparent once relations between the two extended from solely the establishment of cordial relations and the construction of two pipelines to one that expanded to the development of extensive infrastructure projects and, indeed, the construction of a Special Economic Zone that only further demonstrated the intense proximity, at a bilateral level, the two countries shared during this period.

The announcement of the BRI is where the applied framework takes shape. The location of the announcement in Kazakhstan’s capital reflected the “historical symbolism” of the project, given that “2,000 years” prior, according to the Chinese narrative, China established its first “friendly contracts” with the people of Central Asia, encapsulated by the Old Silk Road (Nabiyeva, 2019, p. 1; Hoering, 2018). Kazakhstan’s position within the BRI project has often been labelled as ‘the buckle’ of the belt, given its economic superiority over its other Central Asian neighbours, its potential for economic growth and development as the Eurasian land bridge matches the needs of the BRI’s realisation in an objective sense (Nabiyeva, 2019; Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020). As Louthan (2022) notes, “the construction of the world’s largest “dry port,” a railway depot and logistics centre meant to process Chinese rail traffic in the border town of Khorgos, Beijing pins the” BRI’s success on its relationship with Kazakhstan (Louthan, 2022, p. 12).

The needs of the BRI, as discussed in the above framework, were driven by a newly found Chinese Dream that prioritised harmonious bilateral relations with Chinese partners in the pursuit of its Common Destiny characterised by the principle of win-win (Frankopan, 2018, pp. 94,231). Indeed, the Chinese President’s rhetoric referencing China as the sleeping lion having now “awakened” but that “it is a peaceful, friendly and civilised lion” reiterates such narratives China has emphasised to incentivise cooperation with states, like Kazakhstan, that it deems of strategic importance in completing the BRI (Miller, 2017, p. 245). Moreover, the externally oriented discursive elements of the Chinese Dream that Xi conveyed in the context of the BRI have been to distinguish China from “Western imperialism” because through the BRI “, the pursuit of peaceful development represents” the harmonious nature of Chinese foreign policy conduct (Kumar, 2021, p. 3; Yu, 2019). Additionally, the BRI reflected a geoeconomic approach that captured the newly established Grand Strategy of developing a transnational economic and infrastructure project that situated China at its helm – an apparent reference to the Chinese Dream’s *Tianxia* connotations. Given this newfound sense of direction and clarity in China’s approach to Kazakh relations – as upon the BRI’s announcement, China undeniably recognised the strategic value and, to a lesser extent, the conceptual historical linkages that Kazakhstan now held. The question remains whether China can commit to a win-win principle given its precise determination to return to the centre of the global order, one characterised by Sino-centrism.

## *A Relationship Reaffirming a Harmonious Win-Win?*

The penultimate subsection of this analysis, therefore, intends to address the following and most pertinent question



# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

of this paper: “can the outcome of relations between countries be expected to align with the BRI’s principle of “win-win” cooperation?”

To address this question, this section first details how the BRI was framed — precisely its overland route that would expand through Kazakhstan — before considering the response and nature of engagement Kazakhstan has pursued since the BRI’s establishment.

As noted throughout this paper, the BRI’s announcement heralded a significant reaction from the international regime. With the BRI’s ambition of encompassing “63 per cent of the global population and over 1/3rd of the world’s GDP” in its quest to establish substantial nodes of “infrastructure connectivity and investment through land-locked continental Eurasia”, it is no wonder that the BRI has been cited as the material embodiment of “China’s unilateral vision”, or Grand Strategy Dream – in keeping with this paper’s fundamental assertion – of a Sino-centric future (Yu, 2019, p. 187). Such a future would be established on the principle of a “common destiny,” whereby interstate relations are harmoniously conducted regardless of regime type, religion or political ideology as envisioned by the Dream of *Tianxia*, albeit one with China at the centre (Yu, 2019, p. 187; Callahan, 2016). Kazakhstan, as the ‘buckle’ to the unprecedented unveiling of China’s geoeconomic project, plays a crucial — and very clearly a strategic — role in the BRI’s potential for success (Zhakypova et al., 2020, p.129). The risk of embracing the BRI for Kazakhstan in moving closer into China’s sphere of influence — economically or politically — thereby constraining and hindering its multi-vector foreign policy was clear. Nevertheless, the decision by Kazakhstan’s government to mitigate such risks and consequences has proven to be distinctly innovative.

Following the BRI’s announcement, Kazakhstan welcomed the BRI for economic reasons and recognised substantial opportunities that reinvigorated its geoeconomic approach to foreign policy, which offered transformative implications for its grand strategy. Given Kazakhstan’s position in the BRI’s outlook, China actively collaborated with the country to reinforce its previous relationship with the government. Indeed, the “geoeconomic” value that the BRI offered both countries became evermore evident upon the announcement by Kazakhstan of its national infrastructure program, the Nurlı Zhol (Zhakypova et al., 2020, p.129; Louthan, 2022). This program “supplemented the construction” of BRI projects, specifically in the development of “transport corridors” connecting either side of Eurasia, but also granted Kazakhstan the opportunity to modernise and further diversify its economy per the energy and infrastructure sectors (Zhakypova et al., 2020, p.129).

Nurlı Zhol reflects the geoeconomic underpinnings of a transformed Kazakhstani Grand Strategy (Contessi, 2018; Neafe, 2022; Kembayev, 2020). Kazakhstan viewed the BRI as an opportunity to establish its national strategy based on the BRI’s principles. Kazakhstan also demonstrated its ambition of becoming a critical geopolitical player in Central Asia (Blackwell & Harris, 2017; Arynov, 2017). This further justifies the definition this paper posits of Grand Strategy as a concept capable of being manifested by any state — regardless of economic or political influence (Luttwak, 2009, p. 409; Beeson, 2018; Connolly, 2020). Embracing the BRI and co-opting its project development initiatives within its own national economic and infrastructure development project enabled Kazakhstan to formally sign a joint plan with China in 2016, emphasising three critical areas of cooperation; transportation infrastructure, trade, and manufacturing industries (Kassenova, 2017; Louthan, 2022; Zhakypova et al., 2020). Transportation infrastructure is directly correlated to China’s BRI dreams of connecting China, particularly Russia, Turkey, and Western Europe (Kassenova, 2017, p. 112). Trade and manufacturing were the transformative features that characterise Sino-Kazakh relations in the new era of bilateral relations as both industry sectors were targeted for “the stimulation and optimisation of trade” as well as the “creation of joint ventures” in manufacturing the Special Economic Zone located in Kazakhstan following its establishment at the turn of the decade (Ibid). The new cooperation plan amounted to approximately \$25 billion, which focused on transferring China’s “industrial capacity ... to Kazakhstan” (Kassenova, 2017, p. 112; Zhakypova et al., 2020). Out of a total of “fifty-five projects,” it is expected that funding will originate from “Chinese policy banks” given that the uniqueness of the Nurlı Zhol in being the only economic policy in development by a BRI participant directly is expected to lure in Chinese investments (Kley & Yau, 2021, p. 8; Zhakypova et al., 2020, p. 148).

Moreover, the nature of cooperation on project development between China and Kazakhstan follows what Kley and Yau (2021) term a ‘build-transfer model’ (Kley & Yau, 2021, p. 10). Under this model, the relevant “Chinese

## The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

companies involved” in a project’s construction transfer the project to their Kazakh counterparts either upon completion or operates the project “for a time” before control is granted to Kazakhstan enterprise (Ibid). Strategically, this benefits both sides because Kazakhstan receives control of newly constructed industries which was “historically” lacking in the country, while Chinese companies become “absolved” of having to “deal with the ... obstacles that often arise when operating a business in Kazakhstan” — as elaborated upon later. (Kley & Yau, 2021, p.10; Louthan, 2022). The joint nature and alignment of the BRI and Nurly Zhol projects between China and Kazakhstan has demonstrated Kazakhstan’s ability to not only embrace the Chinese Dream — in realising the BRI — but also demonstrates Kazakhstan’s willingness “to affect the course of” the BRI per its announcement and establishment of the Nurly Zhol (Nabiyeva, 2019, p. 7; Bitabarova, 2019)

These bilateral developments in Chinese and Kazakh relations following the establishment and, indeed, the announcement of the BRI — no less in Kazakhstan’s capital city — point to the nature and manner of China’s Dream of taking on new distinct characteristics. Kazakhstan’s Nurly Zhol has demonstrably affected the manifestation of the BRI in its backyard — reaffirming Kazakhstan’s newfound Grand Strategy that, like China’s, is geo-economically driven (Kembayev, 2020; Kassenova, 2017). Nevertheless, China’s ability to maintain a substantial willingness to commit to its portrayal as a trustworthy bilateral partner committed to the BRI’s fundamental principle of win-win reinforces its narrative and ideational norms conveyed through its Chinese Dream of a harmonious common destiny for “all under heaven” (Yu, 2019; Callahan, 2016; Wang, 2017). However, the motivation behind such a strenuous commitment to maintaining the image of a win-win partnership is less to do with the Chinese initiative and more with the reaction of the Kazakh state agency. Kazakhstan’s response to the BRI with its infrastructure project — that China must commit to developing if it envisages a successful completion of the BRI — thereby once more demonstrating the pivotal role of Kazakhstan while also demonstrating its ability to retain state agency (Bitabarova, 2019). Furthermore, local Kazakh communities’ localised nature and moulding of these joint cooperative projects reinforce such promises of harmonious relations in the spirit of *Tianxia*.

The cautiousness and scepticism of the local Kazakh communities, however, and the ability of Kazakhstan to leverage its natural endowments and geography into a multi-vector strategy that balances regional powers in its surrounding perimeter against each other demonstrates that the concept of the successful realisation of the Chinese Dream through Chinese BRI implementation in Kazakhstan is, on the surface, less conducive to reality. Kazakh sentiment towards China is characterised by increasing sino-phobia due to the “human rights atrocities committed against Uyghurs and ethnic Kazakhs” in China’s western Xinjiang province. Despite the Kazakh government acting swiftly to silence such criticisms, it has been forced to cancel certain project pipelines “widely interpreted as a basis for expanded Chinese economic activity in the country” (Kley & Yau, 2021, p. 19). This has seen a significant effort by Chinese State Enterprises to quell “these anti-China” sentiments in a manner that relates to the promise of win-win cooperation and a common destiny (Yu, 2019; Kley & Yau, 2021; Yu, 2019). Of nine projects jointly cooperated between Kazakhstan and Chinese firms, most of the labour workforces are of local origin — demonstrating the micro-level agency of Kazakh workers in moulding the nature of Chinese projects (Kley & Yau, 2021, p. 23). Moreover, China National Petroleum Corporation, “the largest Chinese investor in Kazakhstan,” unequivocally states “that 97 per cent of its workforce” in Kazakhstan “is localised”, with senior management from Huawei also reaffirming this point in that “over 80 per cent of workers” in Kazakhstan “were locals” (Kley & Yau, 2021, p. 22; Bitabarova, 2019). Therefore, China’s strategy to dissuade Sino-phobia amongst Kazakh communities also fits into its BRI narrative of portraying itself as a trustworthy and collaborative partner driven by the emphasis conveyed by its Chinese dream of fostering harmonious interstate relations per the prism of the BRI (Bitabarova, 2019; Kembayev, 2020; Loh, 2021).

Resultingly, this has shaped, focused, and directed its strategy in Kazakhstan to adapt to the needs and requirements of local communities — which themselves demonstrated the agency to affect the change western scholars did not consider plausible (Bohnenberger-Rich, 2015; Jackson, 2018; Kley & Yau, 2021). Only when Kazakh citizens voiced their concerns did Chinese projects adapt to these circumstances, and so the agency reflected by Kazakhstan goes beyond solely statist interpretations but also to the micro-level of analysis (Callahan, 2016; Stroikos, 2022; Sciorati, 2021). Kazakhstan has, therefore, through a macro and micro-level perspective as per the Nurly Zhultan program and instances of local communities affecting China’s approach to managing the BRI’s various projects, been able to retain a substantial degree of agency which has further enabled it to embolden its multi-vector approach to foreign policy. Since the announcement of the BRI, this is also true of the EU, which has made a

# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

substantive effort to compete with China and Russia for Kazakh cooperation — further bolstering Kazakhstan's multi-vectored approach to foreign relations (Commission, 2022; Arynov, 2017). Nonetheless, this is an area of research this paper points to for further consideration in future scholarship rather than an area of relevance for this study.

This paper has demonstrated that the image of an all-domineering Chinese dream vanquishing the agency and autonomy of smaller states dispersed throughout the BRI has yet to transpire. Indeed, the most striking manifestation of this is the context of the announcement of Nurlı Zhultan. The project closely aligned with the BRI and enabled Kazakhstan to retain political agency, particularly in executing infrastructure development policy parallel to the aims of the BRI, thereby balancing ever so intricately the demands of China in the country as it pursues its Sino-centric world order as espoused through its Chinese dream. Such a balance has seen China's Dream take on Kazakh characteristics demonstrating that while its success in achieving win-win relations with Kazakhstan, so far, it has had to compromise in a manner that the Chinese state and leader did not anticipate. Nevertheless, such a compromise reinforced China's commitment to inter-state cooperation, specifically regarding the BRI's win-win principle.

The point to recognise is that while such a projection of a trusted partner, China's collaboration with Kazakhstan over infrastructure and energy projects per the merging of the BRI with the Central Asian state's national infrastructure project was initiated by Kazakhstan, as it too — like China — pursued a Grand Strategy of economic diversification that touted geoeconomic motives in becoming a regional power (Connolly, 2020; Blackwell & Harris, 2017). To do so, Kazakhstan recognised that its economy required substantial modernisation and diversification, which the BRI offered, leading to the announcement of Nurlı Zhol (Bitabarova, 2019; Nabyeva, 2019; Kassenova, 2017). Such a strategy enabled Kazakhstan to strengthen its multi-vectored approach to regional foreign policy. Kazakhstan emboldened its capacity for balancing the economic interests of both China and Russia while also developing its sense of geoeconomic influence per its focus on embracing the role as a critical overland transit area that China's BRI could expand. Added to this was the role of local Kazakh communities, which localised BRI projects by pressuring Chinese companies to employ most Kazakh workers rather than the initial intent of solely depending on an all-Chinese workforce (Louthan, 2022; Kley & Yau, 2021). Such efforts further enabled economic development at a micro-level, reiterating Kazakhstan's unique ability to retain state agency in the presence of global power intent on returning to the helm of the international order as dictated by a Chinese Dream and Grand Strategy embodied by the BRI (Yu, 2019). There is then the sense that while the Chinese Dream has begun to manifest itself through the BRI's successful implementation throughout Kazakhstan, this has been heavily dependent on Kazakhstan's enthusiastic embrace of its objectives and co-optation of the BRI's projects to supplement the Nurlı Zhol (Zhakypova et al., 2020). Thus, the Chinese dream — at least in Kazakhstan — has taken the form of Kazakh characteristics.

## Conclusion

### *Summary and Significance of Findings*

This paper set out to gain enhanced clarity into the consequences of China's BRI in Kazakhstan, a country in which China has invested heavily, giving its strategic importance to paving the route for BRI success. A case study considered the nature of relations between China and Kazakhstan dating back to the country's independence in 1991. It demonstrated that up until the announcement of the BRI, relations were characterised by a mutual desire to cooperate on border issues, eventually showing an incremental change in economic areas as characterised by relations focusing on energy and infrastructure projects — most notably the construction of the Special Economic Zone in the dry port of Khorgos in 2012. This paper argued that while change did occur, like cooperation between both countries, this change is better understood as transformation given that relations intensified significantly regarding economic issues — again, most notably that of energy cooperation and joint infrastructure initiatives. The applied framework, which incorporated the analytic eclecticism approach, demonstrated the geoeconomic nature of Kazakh engagement with China. Its multi-vector foreign policy heavily emphasised balancing regional interests and seeking access to Kazakhstan's natural endowments. Accordingly, by establishing and coordinating relations with China on energy pipelines and infrastructure projects, Kazakhstan could diversify its economy to avoid an asymmetric dependency on its traditional economic partner in Russia. While geo-economically, China did not display as intensive an engagement in its relations with Kazakhstan, it too increasingly began to recognise the added importance of Kazakhstan as a strategic partner in its foreign policy — such recognition became evermore

# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

pronounced following the announcement of the BRI, thereby reiterating the transformative implications of the project for the bilateral relationship.

Following the BRI's announcement, which took place in Kazakhstan's capital, China conveyed a newfound sense of foreign policy direction. Embodied within the BRI, it expressed ideational tenets linking to a Chinese Dream of a harmonious future that prioritised the place of China at the centre of international politics. Characterised by the win-win principle, China embarked on its BRI strategy geo-economically, extensively expanding prior projects in development per its relationship with Kazakhstan — specifically in the energy and infrastructure sectors. However, Kazakhstan, in keeping with its multi-vectored foreign policy approach, was able to seize the opportunity offered by the BRI by developing its infrastructure project of 'Nurly Zhol,' which enabled it to diversify its economic needs further while also increasing its geopolitical significance as a strategic player within Central Asia. Moreover, given its pivotal placement along the BRI network — significantly per the project's land route — Kazakhstan was able to, in essence, co-opt BRI projects and tie them directly to the Nurly Zhol, particularly enabling the retainment of its state agency against the backdrop of an all domineering and resurgent Chinese Grand Strategy seeking to realise the Chinese Dream through the fulfilment of the BRI.

Hence, this paper argues that the BRI's ability to align with its principle of win-win in the context of Kazakhstan has proved successful. However, this achievement has less to do with China's independent realisation of the need to actively pursue and ensure that the project entails a sense of mutually beneficial — harmonious — a sense of win-win. Instead, Kazakhstan has emphasised that such an alignment with the project's fundamental principles is reached, as seen through its persistence that the BRI be incorporated within its infrastructure project, the Nurly Zhol. In a sense, therefore, the Chinese Dream has been realised in Kazakhstan. The BRI's success there has manifested alongside the Nurly Zhol, which reflects the Chinese Dream of a 'resurgent' China driven by a geoeconomic Grand Strategy and the tenets of a harmonious relationship with BRI partners. One that enables China's pursuit of a Common Destiny shared by all who wish to partake in this geoeconomic endeavour — albeit 'all under a heaven.' More important is the recognition of Kazakhstan's state agency in shaping and affecting the manner and nature of the BRI in its national strategy. The BRI has been a vessel by which Kazakhstan has been able to reinforce its multi-vector foreign policy and co-opt its projects for its own 'Grand Strategy' perse.

There is then the sense that while the Chinese Dream has begun to manifest itself through the BRI's successful implementation throughout the region and primarily through Kazakhstan's enthusiastic embrace of its objectives, the dream — at least in Kazakhstan — has taken the form of Kazakh characteristics.

## *Limitations and Avenues for Future Research*

Despite this research's aims and objectives being met and research questions being sufficiently addressed, there remain key areas that future studies should consider when studying the BRI — especially in Central Asia. Firstly, primary sources were unattainable, so studies should consider applying ethnographic research in Kazakhstan to note how projects and relations develop between Kazakh and Chinese businesses per specific infrastructure and energy projects. Moreover, using a case study does not lend itself sufficiently to replicating the findings identified in this research. Kazakhstan's relationship with China varies significantly from the other Central Asian states. So further research should consider comparatively analysing relations between China, Kazakhstan, and the other states to gauge the consequences better and the impact the BRI has had on the region – and whether it has aligned with a principle of win-win cooperation and enabled the furtherment of the Chinese Dream or indeed Grand Strategy.

The critical question is how the western-order best approach this resurgent China that appears more capable of achieving global primacy through the prism of the BRI. A key player in future relations within Eurasia is the role of the EU in acting as a counterbalance to China's presence in the region. Indeed, recent developments have emerged between Kazakhstan and the regional institution, so how this affects the realisation of the Chinese Dream, Grand Strategy, and effectively the BRI's potential for success are all questions that should be raised in future research analyses. Moreover, this paper has highlighted the critical linkage between China's Grand Strategy and its Chinese Dream and how both manifest in the form of the BRI. This was only achieved by incorporating a framework that emphasised both the material and geoeconomic elements, with the conceptual and narrative facets underpinning

# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

Chinese foreign policy conduct.

Furthermore, as exemplified by analytic eclecticism, it points to a new way to understand the BRI as country-specific rather than as a monolithic, domineering entity, as former studies have assumed. The BRI, as in the case of Kazakhstan, has been localised in keeping with its win-win principle. Whether this was intended on the part of Beijing only serves as a question for future research.

## Bibliography

- Alaasutari, P., Bickman, L. & Brannen, J., 2008. *The SAGE Handbook of Social Research Methods*. London: SAGE.
- Arynov, Z., 2017. Opportunity and threat perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. *Central Asian Survey*, 0(0), pp. 1–18.
- Bank, W., 2018. *Belt and Road Initiative*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative> [Accessed the 17th of August 2022].
- Beeson, M., 2018. Geoeconomics with Chinese characteristics: the BRI and China's evolving grand strategy. *Economic and Political Studies*, 6(3), pp. 240–256.
- Bitabarova, A., 2019. Unpacking Sino-Central Asian engagement along the New Silk Road: a case study of Kazakhstan. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 7(2), pp. 149-173.
- Blackwell, D. R. & Harris, J. M., 2017. *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, (New York: New York: Belknap Press.
- Bohnenberger-Rich, S., 2015. *PhD Thesis: China and Kazakhstan: Economic Hierarchy, Dependency and Political Power?* London: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Bolton, J. R., 2017. *The Then National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton delivered a speech on The Trump Administration's New Africa Strategy*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarksnational-sec> [Accessed the 17th of August 2022].
- Brands, H., 2014. *Hal Brands, What good is grand strategy? power and purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Brautigam, D., 2020. A critical look at Chinese' debt-trap diplomacy': the rise of a meme. *Area Development and Policy*, Volume 5, pp. 1–14.
- Cai, K. G., 2018. The One Belt One Road and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: Beijing's New Strategy of Geoeconomics and Geopolitics. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(114), pp. 831–847.
- Callahan, W. A., 2016. China's "Asia Dream": The Belt Road Initiative and the new regional order. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 1(3), pp. 226-243.
- Clover, C., 2018. *Financial Times: IMF's Lagarde warns China on Belt and Road debt*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/8e6d98e2-3ded-11e8-b7e0-52972418fec4> [Accessed the 16th of August 2022].
- Commission, E., 2022. *Global Gateway*. [Online] Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en) [Accessed the 14th of August 2022].

# The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

- Connolly, P., 2020. The Belt and Road come to Papua New Guinea. *Goeconomics in the Indo-Pacific*, 16(4), pp. 41-64.
- Contessi, N. P., 2018. Foreign Policy Diversification and Intercontinental Transport Corridors: The Case of Kazakhstan's. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(5), pp. 759-790.
- Cowen, D. & Smith, N., 2009. After Geopolitics? From the Geopolitical Social to Goeconomics. *A Radical Journal of Geography*, 44(1), pp. 22-48.
- Downs, E. S., 2006. *China's Quest for Energy Security*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
- Frankopan, P., 2018. *The new silk roads: The present and future of the world*. Bloomsbury. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Friedrichs, J., 2009. From positivist pretence to pragmatic practice, varieties of pragmatic methodology in IR scholarship. *International Studies Review*, 11(3), pp. 645-648.
- Garlick, J., 2020a. *The impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative: From Asia to Europe*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Garlick, J., 2020b. The Regional Impacts of China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 49(1), pp. 3-13.
- Hillman, J., 2020. *The Emperor's New Road: China and the Project of the Century*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Hoering, U., 2018. *China's Long March 2.0. The Belt and Road Initiative as development model*. Hamburg: VSA Verlag.
- Jackson, S., 2018. *China's Regional Relations in Comparative Perspective: From Harmonious Neighbours to Strategic Partners*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kassenova, N., 2017. China's Silk Road and Kazakhstan's Bright Path. *Asia Policy*, Volume 24, pp. 110-116.
- Kembayev, Z., 2020. Development of China-Kazakhstan Cooperation: Building the Silk Road of the Twenty-First Century. *Zhenis Kembayev*, 67(3), pp. 204-216.
- Kley, D. v. d. & Yau, N., 2021. *How Central Asians Pushed Chinese Firms to Localise*, Massachusetts: Carnegie Endowment.
- Kumar, K., 2021. "What can the Chinese experience of empire tell us about the Belt and Road Initiative?" *Theory and Society*, the 3rd of November. pp. 1-32.
- Lai, K. P. Y., Lin, S. & Sidaway, J. D., 2020. Financing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): research agendas beyond the "debt-trap" discourse. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 61(2), pp. 109-124.
- Laruelle, M., 2018. *China's Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact in Central Asia*. Washington Dc: Central Asia Program.
- Loh, D. M. H., 2021. The 'Chinese Dream' and the 'Belt and Road Initiative: narratives, practices, and sub-state actors. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Volume 21, pp. 167-199.
- Louthan, T., 2022. *A 'Bright Path' Forward or a Grim Dead End? The Political Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan*, Ankara: Foreign Policy Institute.

## The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

- Luttwak, E., 2009. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mackinder, H., 1904. The Geographical Pivot of History. *The Geographical Journal*, 23(4), pp. 421–437.
- Miller, T., 2017. *China's Asian dream: Empire building along the new silk road*. London: Zed Books.
- Nabiyeva, K., 2019. Win-win or Win-lose? China-Kazakhstan Energy Cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative. *Blickwechsel*, pp. 1-8.
- Neafe, J., 2022. Producing the Eurasian Land-Bridge: a case study of the geoeconomic contestation in Kazakhstan. *International Politics*, pp. 1–21.
- Noort, C. v., 2020. Kazakhstan, China, and the Belt and Road Initiative. In: *Infrastructure Communication in International Relations*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 112–133.
- PRC, 2015. *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.beltandroad.gov.hk/visionandactions.html> [Accessed the 16th of August 2022].
- Pröpper, H., 2020. The “Chinese Dream”: An Analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative. *International Social Science Review*, 96(1), pp. 1–25.
- Regilme, S. S. F., 2018. Beyond Paradigms: Understanding the South China Sea Dispute Using Analytic Eclecticism. *International Studies*, 55(3), pp. 213-237.
- Sciorati, G., 2021. Looking East? An Analysis of Kazakhstan's Geopolitical Code after Participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Eurasiatica*, pp. 233-258.
- Shakhanova, G. & Garlick, J., 2020. The Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union: Exploring the “Greater Eurasian Partnership.” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 49(1), pp. 33–57.
- Sil, R. & Katzenstein, P., 2010. *Analytic eclecticism in the study of world politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stegen, K. S. & Kuznir, J., 2015. Outcomes and strategies in the ‘New Great Game: China and the Caspian states emerge as winners. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 6, pp. 91-106.
- Stroikos, D., 2022. Head of the dragon’ or ‘Trojan Horse’? reassessing China-Greece relations. *Journal of Contemporary China*, Volume 31, pp. 1–18.
- Tjia, L. Y.-n., 2022. Kazakhstan's leverage and economic diversification amid Chinese connectivity dreams. *Third World Quarterly*, 43(4), pp. 797-822.
- Vanderhill, R., Joireman, S. F. & Tulepbayeva, R., 2020. Between the bear and the dragon: multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a model strategy for secondary powers. *International Affairs*, pp. 1–19.
- Vangeli, A., 2020. Belt And Road and China's Attempt at Region Building in Central-East and Southeast Europe. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 49(1), pp. 14–32.
- Vohra, R., 1992. *China's Path to Modernisation: A Historical Review from 1800 to the Present*. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Wang, B., 2017. *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture and World Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

## The BRI in Kazakhstan: The Chinese Dream with Kazakh Characteristics?

Written by Antonios Vitalis

Westcott, B. & Jiang, S., 2020. *China is embracing a new brand of foreign policy. Here is what wolf warrior diplomacy means.* [Online] Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/28/asia/china-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-intl-hnk/index.html> [Accessed the 15th of August 2022].

Winter, T., 2019. *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Xinhua, 2013. *Youths were urged to contribute to the realisation of the 'Chinese dream.* [Online] Available at: [http://www.china.org.cn/china/2013-05/05/content\\_28731285.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2013-05/05/content_28731285.htm) [Accessed 14 06 2022].

Xinhua, 2018. *[Translated from Mandarin]: Kazakhstan's Ambassador to China: China Has Set an Example of Openness.* [Online] Available at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-03/12/c\\_129826453.html](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-03/12/c_129826453.html) [Accessed the 16th of August 2022].

Xinhuanet, 2015. *[Translated from Mandarin] Jinping: Towards a community of common destiny and create a new future for Asia.* [Online] Available at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-03/28/c\\_1114794507.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-03/28/c_1114794507.htm) [Accessed the 16th of August 2022].

Yin, R. K., 2017. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods.* Sixth ed. California: SAGE Publications.

Yu, S., 2019. The Belt and Road Initiative: Modernity, Geopolitics, and the Developing Global Order. *Asian Affairs*, pp. 1-15.

Zhakypova, F. et al., 2020. *Analysis of China's Economic Strategy and Foreign Policy in Kazakhstan,* Nur-Sultan: Kondrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Zhao, D., 2015a. *The Confucian-Legalist state: A new theory of Chinese history.* Oxford University Press. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zhao, S., 2015b. Rethinking the Chinese World Order: The imperial cycle and the rise of China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24(96), pp. 961-982.

Zhou, W. & Esteban, M., 2018. Beyond balancing: China's approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(112), pp. 487-501.