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China-Kazakhstan Relations: An Analysis of Kazak People's Perception of Belt and Road Initiative

*Arfat Ahmad Bhat**

*Dr. Abdul Maajid Dar***

Abstract

Kazakhstan shares a long border with China and is one of the five most important Central Asian countries with the closest ties to China. At the state level, both China and Kazakhstan share a view that strengthening relations between the two countries is mutually beneficial. As a result, the Kazakhstani state generally holds a positive perception of China. It actively supports the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by China in 2013 as an ambitious framework of projects offering infrastructural interconnectivity. Kazakhstan was the first country to confirm its participation in the Chinese BRI initiative, and both countries have enthusiastically identified more than 55 joint projects related to BRI, collectively valued at over \$21.2 billion. These projects are being implemented in Kazakhstan in the following areas: oil and gas, engineering, agriculture, energy, construction, and chemicals. However, unlike the Kazakhstani state, the Kazakhstani public perceives Chinese BRI-related projects and investments negatively, seeing Chinese political, economic, and cultural engagement in their country as China's 'creeping expansion'. Focusing on analyzing China-Kazakhstan relations from the perspective of Kazakhstani people's perception, this paper attempts to identify the areas related to BRI where Kazakhstani people experience fears and examine how anti-Chinese sentiments and activities that are present in the country pose a significant challenge to the realization of BRI dreams. Furthermore, it examines the nature of soft power diplomacy employed by China to improve its negative image within Kazakhstan and analyzes to what extent China has succeeded in it.

Keywords: *BRI, Central Asia, China, Kazakhstan, Sinophobia, Perception, Soft Power, Culture*

Introduction: Chinese Engagement in Post-Soviet Central Asia

After the Soviet-Sino split in the early 1960s, China-Soviet Central Asian relations became practically nonexistent. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union,

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China and Central Asian countries experienced deep mutual suspicion as the former feared the latter's support for Uighur separatists, and the latter had the fear of an influx of millions of Chinese. In the early 1990s, negotiations on border delineation and demilitarization laid the foundations for confidence-building that was institutionalized in 1996 in the Shanghai Five and, subsequently, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Pomfret, 2019). In other words, the Central Asian countries' perspectives of strategic and economic cooperation with China became more enticing after the conclusion of the bilateral agreements on border conflicts and the formation of the SCO.

Since the independence of Central Asian Republics (CARs), China-Central Asian relations have been governed by many factors. The social, political, and economic landscapes of CARs have been profoundly and subtly altered by Chinese engagement in the region. The economy has been the most deeply affected of all the other spheres. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the local economy of CARs has become increasingly dependent on China (Peyrouse, 2007). Beijing's first strategy in the region was to entice the CARs with economic lures and incentives to stabilize the newly independent CARs, given that there would be a significant impact on Xinjiang and China's economic development if the CARs became unstable (Shichor, 2005). Accordingly, it developed a transnational regional development plan to keep Xinjiang separatism under control. Financial inducements have greatly helped China to establish and strengthen friendly ties with newly independent CARs (Cooley, 2012).

Furthermore, the strategic position of the Central Asian region not only presents a new market for Chinese commodities but also the opportunity for new highways, railroads, and infrastructure upgrades. The CARs have realized that the trans-Eurasian corridor would bring their weak economies closer to countries like Iran, Turkey, and Russia, which would help them to promote accessibility and development (Jonson & Allison, 2001). Chinese technology transfer is another significant advantage of Sino-Central Asian cooperation. China has also long been the world's largest importer of raw commodities from the Central Asian region. In addition, for CARs, China has become an enticing partner as, against the West, Chinese investments and loans have never been made contingent on political conditions, making China a 'popular' economic partner with various developing nations (Gyene, 2020).

China has a strong presence in international politics (Zhu, 2016). Recently, China has stepped up its efforts to reinforce its grand strategy of becoming a real global superpower, the vital component of which is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013, and the first and foremost stretch included in it is towards Central and Western Asia. The BRI (or New Silk Road) aims to integrate transnational infrastructure and massive transportation projects across land and water via a concerted plan (Lain, 2018).

Under it, China invests extensively in the Central Asian region in infrastructure, oil and gas, energy, engineering, communication, and interconnectivity. As of March 2023, China has invested almost \$1 trillion into BRI (Satubaldina, 2023). Over the past ten years, ‘China has signed more than 200 cooperation documents related to the BRI with 152 countries and 32 international organizations, covering 83% of the countries with which China has diplomatic relations’ (Satubaldina, 2023). China has also surpassed Russia as the most potent economic player in the region and world. Although using a ‘very compelling narrative’, China has been able to promote the BRI (“Interview: Theresa Fallown”, 2017), its engagement with CARs through BRI is ridden with several political, social, environmental, and economic challenges. However, so far, China has, to some extent, successfully prevented any such problem from getting out of hand (Szilagy, 2018).

This paper aims to analyze China-Kazakhstan relations from the perspective of Kazakhstan’s people’s perception of the BRI. To achieve this objective, the paper is divided into two broad sections. The first section attempts to identify the areas related to BRI where Kazakhstani people experience fears and examine how anti-Chinese sentiments and activities present in the country pose a significant challenge to realizing BRI dreams. The following section examines the nature of soft power diplomacy employed by China to improve its negative image within Kazakhstan and analyzes to what extent China has succeeded in it. The main findings are summarized in the conclusion.

China and Kazakhstan: Kazakhstani People’s Perception of BRI

Xi Jinping announced the BRI in Kazakhstan in 2013 as an ambitious framework of projects offering infrastructural interconnectivity, and the most important stretch included in the BRI is towards Central and Western Asia. The BRI, which is about to establish connectivity across Central Asia and onward through the Mediterranean and Gulf region with Europe, has five cooperation priorities: policy coordination, connectivity and infrastructural projects, financial integration, unimpeded trade, and people-to-people bonds (Szilagy, 2018). Kazakhstan, which shares a long border with China, is one of the most important five CARs with the closest ties to China. Kazakhstan’s foreign policy has always remained tilted towards China owing to the presence of a sizeable Uyghur population in Kazakhstan and a large Kazakh minority in the Xinjiang region of China, among other reasons. China surpassed Russia as Kazakhstan’s top trading partner in 2010, and before the launch of BRI, China had already made an investment of US\$19 billion in Kazakhstan’s economy. China-Kazakhstan bilateral trade hit a record high of \$31.2 billion in 2022 (Nuryshv, 2023). Kazakhstan was the first

country to confirm its participation in the BRI project, and both countries have signed many agreements for the BRI. Welcoming the BRI, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev stated in 2014 that the BRI is a ‘wonderful concept’, and unity will be our strength to establish regional cooperation among countries along the New Silk Road (Shi, 2014). Kazakhstan is the only country in Central Asia that has by 2014 already started an ‘all-round strategic partnership’ with China. It is a determined supporter of China’s securitization-oriented development of the Xinjiang Autonomous Republic, a vital supplier of main mineral resources and energy to China, and now a critical transit corridor connecting China to Europe. Several projects, like the ‘2050 strategy’ and the ‘100 concrete steps’ that include Chinese investments, have been launched by the government of Kazakhstan to strengthen the credibility of the BRI further (Frolovskiy, 2016). Beijing is Kazakhstan’s most significant strategic ally, with a \$20 billion-plus economic turnover between the two nations. More than \$30 billion in investments have already been made by Beijing in the country’s oil, mining, transportation, and agricultural sectors. These investments have added to Kazakhstan’s own \$9 billion stimulus package for the country’s development and modernization. Construction of special economic zones, such as the Khorgos dry port on the Kazakhstan-China border, is also underway. Plans for a logistics center in Kazakhstan’s Khorgos special economic zone, Khorgos-East Gate, linking China, Central Asia and the Middle East were announced in November 2011. (Frolovskiy, 2016). The first freight trains from Beijing to Tehran via Kazakhstan that have already begun are seen to invigorate Kazakhstan’s infrastructure further. Kazakhstan is looking to develop and modernize its available locomotives and repair 460 miles of rails to get 10% of China-Europe’s \$600 billion trade volume (Frolovskiy, 2016). Although, like other CARs, Kazakhstan has closest ties with China and has welcomed BRI-related investment plans from China as it has a relatively underdeveloped infrastructure, the civil society in Kazakhstan mostly experiences Sinophobia. Kazakhstan’s rapidly widening economic ties with China through BRI have intensified fears among Kazakh people about China’s political and economic ambitions, the influx of Chinese migrants, and the attraction of the country’s natural resources and raw materials. The logic put forth behind the BRI project is that it carries mutual economic benefits for nations participating in the BRI. However, this logic has been questioned regarding whether participating nations risk acquiring unreciprocated Chinese business and tourism (Sternberg et al., 2017). For participating countries, the inevitable risk of their BRI obligations to China is, for instance, related to oil contracts, loan payments, and rentier bureaucracies, which may not eventually offer a fair share of the benefits. As a result of the BRI’s relatively constrained role for local stakeholders and communities and China’s supervision of the investment plans, the people of Kazakhstan feel that their country’s

sovereignty and local autonomy are under threat. Under projects related to BRI, no information is available about the conditions of credit, and the contracts are not published (Dave, 2018). Due to this lack of transparency, Kazakhstan's civil society has expressed skepticism over whether the BRI's modernization and infrastructure developmental project will lead to the country's future debt to China. As Syroezhkin has stated:

There is no clarity yet about the share of Chinese investments and their credit obligations—there are various statistics but it is not clear how to make sense of these. China is spending US\$2 billion from its US\$40 billion Silk Road infrastructure fund on a new investment fund to support 'capacity cooperation' with Kazakhstan, but all the remaining ones are credits (as cited in Dave, 2018, p. 104).

This means that the people of Kazakhstan perceive investments and loans related to BRI as 'debt traps'. They have fears 'that China would seize land or natural resources in exchange for its loans' (Ryskulbekova, 2023). Furthermore, they perceive the influx of Chinese goods into their country as a threat to local products (Burkhanov & Chen, 2016). In addition to the dangers of managing and enforcing a transnational megaproject, China's BRI also carries specific threats to local communities along the route. Criminality related to international mafia groups that trade in narcotics and human trafficking is on the rise as a result of more flexible immigration regimes and the building of new highways and railway lines. Kazakhstan's government has strengthened the implementation of its anti-trafficking laws to check human trafficking after facing severe criticism attacking Kazakhstan as a 'sex tourism hotspot' ('Kazakhstan's new concept', 2014).

Kazakhstan and all other CARs are also concerned that the expansion of trans-border corridors and linkages by BRI projects may result in a rise in terrorist and radical Islamist activities as well as the formation of safe havens for Uighur separatist and foreign militant groups (Amighini, 2017). Further, there is a perceived risk that multiple transport corridors may 'turn the entire territories of Kazakhstan and adjacent states into major transport corridors, fulfilling China's needs' (Dave, 2018, p. 104). Due to the lack of uniform and fixed customs fees on goods that pass through Central Asia trade corridors, skimming off customs fees has become common in Kazakhstan and four other CARs (Feng & Foy, 2017). This practice of widespread corruption poses a significant challenge to the realization of BRI dreams and makes Kazakhstani people further Skeptical about its promised benefits.

Most importantly, the Kazakhstani public views Chinese migration to Kazakhstan with suspicion. The projects related to BRI have led to a rapid increase in Chinese migration to Kazakhstan. These projects are largely carried out by Chinese workers and companies (Akmadi, 2021). The increasing presence of Chinese workers on railway, road, and port building projects has bolstered Kazakhstani people's fears about losing

local employment to Chinese workers and so has widely contributed to the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment among the Kazakhstani people (Burkhanov & Chen, 2016). Similarly, the Kazakhstani public characterizes Chinese BRI-related initiatives to boost Kazakhstan's tourism industry as an attempt to 'conquer the land of Kazakhstan without a war' (Burkhanov & Chen, 2016, p. 14). Another cause responsible for anti-Chinese sentiment is the practice of wage disparity between Kazakhstani and Chinese workers in local infrastructure industries. Local laborers employed by Chinese companies in Kazakhstan get lower wages and experience poor working conditions than Chinese laborers (Akmadi, 2021). The influx of Chinese migrants and labor issues accompanied by repeated attempts by Kazakhstan's government to lease some portions of the country's agricultural land to Chinese companies and other foreigners have, from time to time, sparked widespread protests and anti-Chinese rallies in Kazakhstan (Burkhanov & Chen, 2016; Dave, 2018; Ryskulbekova, 2023; Szilágyi, 2018).

Kazakhstan's anti-Chinese sentiments and attitudes are stoked by other factors as well. The ruling elite and other elite groups in Kazakhstan are primarily interested in using investment flows related to BRI for their own purposes at the cost of questioning the uncontrolled Chinese investment that encourages anti-Chinese sentiment. The country's various nationalist groups exploit the anti-Chinese sentiment for their own agendas that contribute to further strengthening the roots of Sinophobia. The general lack of awareness regarding China, its culture, language, and customs among the common population hampers the interpersonal relationships and communication between the local people of Kazakhstan and Chinese migrants, such as employers, in many ways. Among other things, China's inability to successfully address and respond to local citizens' concerns and apply corporate social responsibility methods to solve the problems of local workers working with Chinese companies is a contributing issue (Akmadi, 2021).

Thus, on the one hand, both China and Kazakhstan, at the state level, hold that strengthening relations between the two countries are mutually beneficial. In the sphere of regional security, both countries are fully conscious of the benefits of cooperation to keep extremist (or separatist) movements at bay. In Central Asia, China needs Kazakhstan to realize its hegemonic ambition as among the five CARs, Kazakhstan is the closest neighbor of China, while, in turn, Kazakhstan needs China to realize its goal of becoming a central player in Central Asia. In the economic domain, China, for its own development, needs natural resources and raw materials from Kazakhstan and access to new markets for its commodities via Kazakhstan, while, in turn, Kazakhstan needs China for the development of infrastructure as well as requires finished products and basic consumer goods from China. Accordingly, as a part of the BRI initiative, both Kazakhstan and China have enthusiastically identified more than 55 joint projects, collectively valued at over

\$21.2 billion (Satubaldina, 2023). These projects are being implemented in Kazakhstan in the following areas: oil and gas, engineering, agriculture, energy, construction, and chemicals. On the other hand, due to Kazakhstani public distrust of China caused by the above factors, anti-Chinese rallies were launched by Kazakhstani public first in 2019 and then again in 2021 against the realization of these Chinese projects (Akmadi, 2021; Ryskulbekova, 2023). During these rallies, the key slogans were ‘we are against Chinese factors’, ‘no Chinese expansion’, and other similar anti-Chinese slogans. Although these anti-Chinese rallies have failed to produce a strong influence on the implementation of BRI-related Chinese projects as Kazakhstan’s government brutally and quickly suppressed them, anti-Chinese sentiments and activities are still present in Kazakhstan that pose a significant challenge to the realization of BRI dreams.

Chinese Recourse to Soft Power Diplomacy

Currently, in Kazakhstan, the Chinese government is actively engaged in using soft power to promote a positive image among the people of Kazakhstan by removing their fears and skepticism about the projects related to BRI in particular and China’s political and economic involvement in Central Asia in general. Chinese soft power strategy is aimed at eliminating what the Kazakhstani public perceives as China’s ‘creeping expansion’ by negating their perception of BRI-related projects and investments as tools of China’s political and economic ambitions through interpreting and presenting them as positive collaborative initiatives for achieving complementarity and mutually economic development (Akmadi, 2021; Burkhanov & Chen, 2016; Dave, 2018; Frolovskiy, 2016; Sternberg et al., 2017). As Bhavna Dave (2018) has summed it up well: Since the launch of BRI, China has reinvigorated its global public diplomacy. The Chinese political establishment is taking determined steps to alter notions about it held in the West which have become hegemonic and been shared widely around the world. China wants to be seen as a reliable economic partner interested in the mutually beneficial pursuit of shared objectives but without any political goals. Chinese soft power strategy promotes an image of Beijing as a reliable and pragmatic economic alternative to the West and Russia. In promoting its traditional emphasis on infrastructural development and economic growth as prerequisites for security and political reforms, China is seeking support and legitimization for its development strategy by procuring wider public support in the region (pp. 104-105).

To improve its image within Kazakhstan, China is actively engaged in implementing BRI’s important component of people-to-people bonds that, as soft power initiatives, aim at developing and promoting people-to-people relations through the promotion of cultural and educational exchanges, art, tourism, youth and women

exchanges, health care, sports exchange, political trust, science and technology collaboration, cooperation among non-governmental organizations, cooperation and communication between legislative bodies, political parties and political organizations, and media cooperation (Sadovskaya & Utyasheva, 2018). As a part of this soft power initiative of BRI, China has established thirteen Confucius Institutes in Central Asia, where students study Chinese language as well as are introduced to Chinese culture, with five in Kazakhstan, four in Kyrgyzstan, and two each in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Akmadi, 2021; Dave, 2018; Ryskulbekova, 2023). At Kazakhstan's five Confucius Institutes, 14,000 students are enrolled and study (Akmadi, 2021). Furthermore, China has been enthusiastically providing scholarships to the students of Kazakhstan for study in China, and these scholarships are annually increased by China. As a result, students from Kazakhstan are actively interested in getting an education in China (Jiang, 2021; Ryskulbekova, 2023). This is clear from the fact that from 2003 to 2020 the number of students from Kazakhstan in China increased 750 times (Ryskulbekova, 2023). As of 2023, almost 15,000 Kazakhstani students are studying in China, making Kazakhstan among the top ten countries sending the largest number of students to China. China's use of education as a soft power diplomacy contributes to making the Chinese language increasingly popular among youth in Kazakhstan as well as in the other four CARs. In 2016, Dariga Nazarbayeva, daughter of Kazakhstan's former president Nursultan Nazarbayev, stated that 'Kazakh children should learn Chinese in addition to Kazakh, Russian, and English' (as cited in Dave, 2018, p. 106). Most importantly, it widely contributes to softening, if not eliminating, stereotypical anti-Chinese perceptions that Kazakhstani people hold about China. As Zhanibek Arynov, an associate professor at Nazarbayev University, states:

People who have studied and worked in China for some time have a positive attitude toward the country. Once they arrive, they know more about China, they don't have one-sided stereotypical perceptions that China is a threat, that you have to distance yourself from it, fence yourself off. These students have a more comprehensive perception of China, and that's a good thing (as cited in Ryskulbekova, 2023).

Like education, China is also using tourism as a soft power strategy in Kazakhstan to strengthen the cultural bonds between the two countries and promote people-to-people contacts and networking, besides focusing on boosting Kazakhstan's tourism industry (Sadovskaya & Utyasheva, 2018). Justifying China's investment in BRI projects, Chinese discourse holds that the tourism industry has the potential to significantly contribute to human development in Kazakhstan by creating jobs and improving local social and civic facilities. Supporting this Chinese discourse, in 2013, shortly after Kazakhstan was declared as the venue for the exhibition EXPO-2017, the government of Kazakhstan

declared 2017 a year of Chinese tourism in Kazakhstan and stated that five million Chinese people would attend this exhibition in 2017 (Burkhanov & Chen, 2016;

Sadovskaya & Utyasheva, 2018). Since 2013, both countries have been actively engaged in facilitating visa regime for group tourism from China and online tourism services, making information about tourist attractions easily accessible, promoting air traffic, and increasing the quantity as well as the quality of Chinese-language tour operators.

Another important aspect of China's BRI-related soft power diplomacy is its focus on digging into the deep historic cultural connections between China and CARs and then urging the latter to continue and strengthen that shared history of cultural bonds by presenting itself as a historically tolerant, multicultural, peaceful, and Muslim-friendly country (Dave, 2018). Chinese authorities accept that a lack of awareness and proper understanding of China and China-Kazakhstan relations generates myths, stereotypes, and Sinophobia that might hamper the realization of BRI dreams. Accordingly, China has taken many initiatives to implement the cultural component of BRI with the belief that it has the capacity to remove Kazakhstani people's negative perceptions of the Chinese political and economic engagement in Kazakhstan. The 'Non-governmental Organization for Cultural Cooperation Eurasia–Silk Road' was created during the Second Great Silk Road International Cultural Forum held in Moscow in September 2015, the central theme of which was 'Developing Partnership: Planning of Joint Projects for Cultural Cooperation' ("The great Silk Road forum", 2015). This organization aims to serve as a tool for international collaboration between Eurasian countries and as a mechanism for the implementation of recommendations adopted by the Forum, such as the implementation of Silk Road's tangible and intangible heritage as a resource for cultural tourism development, Museum of XXI Century, Silk Road's spirit and prospective collaboration in Eurasian space, and use of advanced science and technology in cultural preservation. Organized by China's Silk Road Fund, China's Foundation of Culture and Arts of Nations, the Fund of Spiritual Development of People of Kazakhstan, and the Intergovernmental Foundation for Humanitarian Cooperation for Commonwealth of Independent States, this Forum was attended by around 300 leading personalities—artists, scientists, businessmen, media representatives, and politicians—from nations along the New Silk Road and representatives from both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and UNESCO ("The great Silk Road forum", 2015). In this Forum, during the cultural program, within the framework of the event called 'Silk Road Pearl', various projects organized by China, Kazakhstan, and Russia meant to preserve the folk traditions of these three countries were presented. Furthermore, Kazakhstan has actively supported and joined several other collaborative cultural projects

launched by China in association with other partners, such as the International expedition titled 'Thousands li Along the Silk Road' launched in 2014 to strengthen cultural and economic ties and revive the ancient Euro-Asian transport corridor. Kazakhstan was the first country to visit the expedition. China and Kazakhstan also started a walking friendship and cooperation caravan titled 'China-Kazakhstan: Tea Culture of the Great Silk Road', which, while carrying Deyang treating tea Fuca grown in the Chinese Shaanxi province, arrived in Kazakhstan in 2015 from Xian (Nurlanuly, 2015). It was directed to ancient trade routes.

Thus, while China's use of soft power diplomacy has brought about some positive shifts in Kazakhstani people's attitudes and perceptions about China, it has not entirely led to eliminating anti-Chinese perceptions. Even it is being argued that a further increase in Chinese involvement in the economic, political, and cultural spheres of Kazakhstan through soft power diplomacy is bound to strengthen anti-Chinese sentiments and attitudes and reinforce the fears that Kazakhstani people have about the projects and investments related to BRI. As about China's use of the tourism industry as a soft power strategy, the Kazakhstani local newspaper 'Zhas Alash' in an article titled 'What If Chinese Came' has stated:

The government wants to attract up to five million Chinese tourists. Why don't they try to attract English or French tourists? Of course, since China is way overpopulated, they advise its citizens to go and settle abroad. To let them all in would be a dangerous policy for us since many of them come on fake documents and remain unaccounted . China's proposal to adopt visa-free travels for tourists is hence unacceptable for us. It is a way for them to conquer us without a war (as cited in Burkhanov & Chen, 2016, p. 14).

Similarly, regarding the educational component of Chinese soft power, an associate professor at Nazarbayev University, Zhanibek Arynov, states:

Confucius Institutes and scholarships at Chinese universities are a strong tool of China's soft power, but not long-term. All these students come back to Kazakhstan and work in Chinese companies, it's hard for them to find a job afterwards. I'm not quite sure that a Chinese education is a ladder to a career. In the mid-2000s and early 2010s, there was a need for specialists who knew the Chinese language and had the skills to work with China. But now the market is already crowded, so I don't think China has a long-term influence in education (as cited in Ryskulbekova, 2023).

Many fears, such as fears of debt traps, loss of the country's sovereignty, Chinese migration to Kazakhstan, land leases to Chinese companies, lack of transparency in Chinese projects and investments, increase in crimes, human trafficking, corruption and extremist movements, Chinese goods as a threat to local products, and wage gaps between

local and Chinese laborers, that Kazakhstani people have about Chinese projects and investments related to BRI pose a significant challenge to the realization of BRI dreams. China's soft power strategy cannot help it to comprehensively improve its image among the Kazakhstani public unless the Chinese and Kazakhstani governments take concrete steps to remove these fears.

Conclusion

Analyzing China-Kazakhstan relations from the perspective of Kazakhstani people's perception, this paper has found that while, at the state level, the Kazakhstani state generally holds a positive perception of China and actively supports the BRI, the Kazakhstani public perceives Chinese BRI-related projects and investments negatively, seeing Chinese political, economic, and cultural engagement in their country as China's 'creeping expansion'. It has identified that Kazakhstani people experience many fears about Chinese projects and investments related to BRI, such as fears of debt traps, loss of the country's sovereignty, Chinese migration to Kazakhstan, land leases to Chinese companies, lack of transparency in Chinese projects and investments, increase in crimes, human trafficking, corruption and extremist movements, Chinese goods as a threat to local products, and wage gaps between local and Chinese laborers. All these fears have contributed to the growth of anti-Chinese sentiments and attitudes among the local people of Kazakhstan. The paper has found that although China's use of soft power diplomacy has brought about some positive shifts in Kazakhstani people's attitudes and perceptions about China, it has not entirely led to eliminating anti-Chinese perceptions. This paper has also found that the Kazakhstani people's fears about Chinese projects and investments related to BRI pose a significant challenge to realizing BRI dreams. China's soft power strategy cannot help it to comprehensively improve its image among the Kazakhstani public unless the Chinese and Kazakhstani governments take concrete steps to remove these fears.

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