



**KAZAKHSTAN'S ANTI-CHINA PROTESTS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BELT AND ROAD
INITIATIVE IN CENTRAL ASIA**

**KAZAKİSTAN'DAKİ ANTI-ÇİN PROTESTOLARI: KUŞAK
VE YOL GİRİŞİMİ'NİN ORTA ASYA'DAKİ ETKİLERİ**

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ABSTRACT

This article examines China's increasing investments in Kazakhstan amid its declining soft power and growing public dissent. Focusing on Kazakhstan's strategic position within the Belt and Road Initiative, it analyzes how Chinese economic influence persists despite widespread protests and negative public opinion. Using a qualitative approach, the study synthesizes academic literature, policy analyses, news reports, and firsthand accounts to understand local views on Chinese influence. Findings show that while China's economic power supports continued investment, the lack of soft power presents long-term risks. Without efforts to improve its image and build trust, China's reliance on hard power may fuel anti-China sentiments, potentially leading to organized resistance and policy changes in Kazakhstan. The study emphasizes that China must incorporate soft power elements into its foreign policy to sustain influence in Kazakhstan and across Central Asia.

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ÖZ

Bu makale, Çin'in Kazakistan'da artan yatırımlarına karşın azalan yumuşak gücü ve yükselen kamu tepkisini incelemektedir. Kazakistan'ın Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi'ndeki stratejik konumu ele alınarak, yaygın protestolara ve olumsuz kamuoyuna rağmen Çin'in ekonomik etkisini nasıl koruduğu analiz edilmektedir. Nitel bir yöntem kullanılarak akademik literatür, politika analizleri, haberler ve birinci elden gözlemler bir araya getirilmiş ve yerel halkın Çin etkisine dair görüşleri anlaşılmasına çalışılmıştır. Bulgular, Çin'in ekonomik gücünün yatırımları sürdürmesini sağlasa da yumuşak güç eksikliğinin uzun vadede riskler barındırdığını göstermektedir. Çin'in imajını iyileştirme ve güven inşa etme çabası olmadan baskıcı etkilerinin anti-Çin duygularını daha da körükleyebileceği, bunun da Kazakistan'da örgütlü direniş ve politika değişikliklerine yol açabileceği sonucuna varılmaktadır. Çalışma, Çin'in Kazakistan ve Orta Asya'da sürdürülebilir bir etki yaratabilmesi için dış politikasına yumuşak güç unsurları katması gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kazakistan, Çin, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Anti-Çin Protestoları, Yumuşak Güç, Orta Asya, Dış Politika.

INTRODUCTION

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a cornerstone of its global economic strategy, significantly expanding its influence through trade, foreign aid, and foreign direct investment (FDI). This ambitious project, spanning multiple continents, aims to create a network of infrastructure and economic partnerships that position China at the center of global trade and development. Within this framework, Chinese economic investments play a crucial role in leveraging soft power by fostering goodwill and favorable attitudes towards China in host countries. However, the implementation of the BRI has revealed complex challenges that highlight the intricate relationship between economic power and cultural influence. Despite the potential benefits to partner

countries, including improved infrastructure and economic growth (Isaksson and Kotsadam, 2018), concerns have arisen regarding Chinese labor practices, human rights violations, and resource exploitation (Kishi and Raleigh, 2017). These issues have led to a growing disconnect between China's economic ambitions and its ability to cultivate positive perceptions among local populations. Residents in BRI partner countries often perceive Chinese investments as intrusive and exploitative, particularly in resource-rich regions (Wang and Elliott, 2014). This perception is exacerbated by poor labor practices, reliance on Chinese workers rather than local employment, and the resulting cultural and racial tensions (Meunier, 2014).

Kazakhstan, a key partner in the BRI, has become a focal point of grassroots protests against Chinese investments, revealing a significant soft power challenge for Beijing. The anti-China sentiment in Kazakhstan stems from a complex web of factors, including concerns over national debt, the growing presence of Chinese businesses, trade imbalances, and the treatment of Muslim minorities in China's Xinjiang region (Umarov, 2019). These protests, which have spread to major cities, undermine China's carefully cultivated image as a benevolent economic partner and pose a substantial challenge to the success of the BRI in Central Asia. Environmental concerns have also emerged as a significant point of contention, as evidenced by protests in Kazakhstan's Naryn province in 2019 (Bacchi, 2019). These environmental issues, coupled with unmet expectations of economic benefits and job creation, have contributed to an increase in anti-China protests across various BRI partner countries (Goble, 2019). The backlash against China's economic investments underscores the broader challenges China faces in promoting its development model, with anti-China sentiments often spilling over into wider protests against local governments and Chinese policies. The resistance to Chinese investments in Kazakhstan is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader pattern of challenges faced by the BRI. Despite the initiative's ambitious scope, China's efforts to extend its economic influence have encountered various forms of resistance, including political opposition and grassroots protests, particularly in Central Asia (Mohd, 2020). This resistance highlights the limitations of China's current approach to soft power and raises questions about the long-term sustainability of its economic partnerships.

Global perceptions of China's soft power strategy further complicate the situation. A Pew Research Center survey indicates that China's efforts to enhance its global image through cultural exports and economic development have largely fallen short. The survey reveals low ratings for Chinese entertainment and standard of living, with particularly negative perceptions in neighboring countries and strategic partners like Indonesia and India (Silver et al., 2023). This global trend suggests that China's soft power deficit extends

beyond Central Asia and may have broader implications for its international ambitions. Critics argue that China's approach to international influence relies more on sharp power than soft power. Sharp power, a concept that has gained traction in recent years, describes the use of "outward-facing censorship, manipulation, and distraction" to shape perceptions and influence outcomes (Walker, 2018). This approach contrasts with the traditional understanding of soft power, which emphasizes attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or manipulation. The distinction between soft and sharp power is crucial for understanding the nature of China's influence and the reasons for local resistance to its economic initiatives. To address these challenges, China has reportedly begun to utilize sharp power tactics globally to ensure its investments yield the desired outcomes (Nye, 2018; Mankikar, 2022). However, this approach may exacerbate existing tensions and further undermine China's efforts to build genuine goodwill among BRI partner nations.

This article seeks to explore the complex interplay between China's economic investments, soft power deficiency, and the emergence of protests in Kazakhstan. By examining this case study, we aim to shed light on the broader implications for the BRI's success and China's global influence. The research is guided by the following question: How does China's soft power deficiency in Kazakhstan impact the success and sustainability of its Belt and Road Initiative investments, and what are the broader implications for China's economic and political influence in Central Asia? To address this question, we will employ a qualitative methodology that synthesizes academic literature, policy analyses, news reports, and firsthand accounts of local dissent. This approach will allow us to explore historical grievances, economic dependencies, cultural apprehensions, and geopolitical tensions to provide a comprehensive perspective on local perceptions of Chinese influence.

The theoretical framework for this analysis draws on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which refers to a state's ability to influence others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2023: 12). Soft power relies on intangible assets such as culture, political values, and foreign policies to shape preferences and legitimize influence. It contrasts with hard power, which uses military and economic means, and has become increasingly important in contexts where power is dispersed (Nye, 2023: 18). By examining the intersection of economic initiatives and soft power within the Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan, this paper aims to highlight the multifaceted nature of international mega-projects and contribute to the academic discourse on international relations, soft power, and economic development. Additionally, it offers practical implications for policymakers and stakeholders involved in the BRI and similar initiatives, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive and

politically astute strategies to achieve sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes.

The paper is structured to provide an in-depth analysis of the interplay between China's economic ambitions and the cultural-political currents in Kazakhstan within the context of the BRI. The first section explores the theoretical framework of soft power, drawing on academic literature to define and contextualize the concept. The second section provides an overview of the BRI, detailing its objectives, scope, and significance in Central Asia. The third section examines the specific challenges faced by China in Kazakhstan, focusing on the emergence of protests and public dissent against Chinese investments. Through qualitative analysis of news reports, policy analyses, and firsthand accounts, the fourth section analyzes how the lack of effective soft power has contributed to these challenges. Finally, the conclusion discusses the broader implications for the success of the BRI and offers recommendations for enhancing China's soft power strategy to foster a more sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship with Kazakhstan and other BRI participant nations.

1. SOFT POWER DYNAMICS IN THE BRI: SUCCESSES AND SHORTCOMINGS

The BRI was launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping in Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan. The formulation of the BRI was driven by several strategic imperatives. The global financial crisis of 2009 significantly impacted China's export industry, prompting the need for corrective economic measures to sustain growth (Çelik ve Erol, 2019: 14-15). China's practice of sending its construction companies abroad began with Jiang Zemin's Go Out policy, which Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative later built upon and expanded (Garlick, 2024: 67). This initiative emerged from a consensus during the National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, which recognized the necessity for a comprehensive economic and political strategy concerning China's relations with neighboring countries. The announcement of the BRI, therefore, aimed to address China's lack of a cohesive regional strategy by 2012 and to establish economic and political foundations with neighboring countries (Durdular, 2016: 79). It was a monumental infrastructure and economic development project aimed at enhancing global trade and connectivity. The BRI seeks to bolster infrastructure investments and foster economic growth across developing nations, particularly in the wake of the 2009 global financial crisis (Demir ve Tekir, 2018: 36).

The BRI was designed to connect 65 countries across Asia and Europe, accounting for 63% of the world's population and 40% of global trade (İkiz, 2019: 1692). The initiative has expanded to include 146 member states from various

regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, Central Asia, East Asia Pacific, Latin America, and the Middle East (Nedopil, 2024). By extending its influence through the BRI, China anticipates fostering stronger economic ties and creating new markets for Chinese goods and services, thereby boosting its economic growth and global competitiveness. In an attempt to fill the infrastructure gap in the developing world (Yağcı, 75: 2018), the BRI comprises several economic corridors to enhance connectivity. These include the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor, China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor ("What Are the Six Economic Corridors"). The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road features two main routes: the West Route from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and the South Route from the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean. Additionally, the Polar Silk Road route, introduced in the 2018 White Paper, highlights the potential of Arctic trade routes due to climate changes (Gürel, 2022: 142-143). By investing in roads, railways, ports, and other critical infrastructure, the BRI aims to reduce transportation costs and increase trade efficiency, benefiting both China and its partner countries. This infrastructure development is anticipated to spur economic growth in underdeveloped regions, leading to job creation and improved standards of living.

The BRI is not only an economic initiative but also a political strategy with soft power components. Since the early 2000s, China has actively engaged in public diplomacy to present a positive global image and counter the "China threat" perception. To achieve this, it has promoted concepts like "Peaceful Rise," "Peaceful Development," and "Harmonious Society" in international relations (Bonnie and Medeiros, 2007). The concept of 'soft power' gained popularity among Chinese elites starting in 2001, coinciding with the media industry's 'going global' initiative. This focus was further solidified by a 2011 Central Committee decision on cultural reform and reinforced by President Xi Jinping's repeated emphasis on enhancing China's international appeal and credibility through new media (Miao, 2009: 164). The Soft Power 30 report emphasized that the One Belt, One Road initiative stands out because, for the first time in the modern era, China has successfully combined its economic strength with a soft power narrative of cooperation and inclusivity, highlighting shared prosperity and regional development (Portland, 2017: 18). Although China's soft power initiatives often face skepticism and criticism in the West, where they are frequently labeled as manifestations of sharp power, China continues to demonstrate its commitment to soft power through sustained investments and strategic activities. These efforts indicate that China views soft

power as an integral component of its broader strategy to exert influence on the global stage.

China's soft power initiatives, such as the expansion of Confucius Institutes and vocational training programs, are closely linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These efforts aim to strengthen cultural ties and mutual understanding between China and other nations, reinforcing the BRI's strategic objectives. As Rahman (2019) notes, the BRI not only integrates China's western provinces into global economic routes but also reduces regional disparities, benefiting Central Asia and other participants (p. 314). By offering non-coercive aid without the strict conditions of institutions like the World Bank and IMF, China enhances its soft power, despite concerns over debt-trap diplomacy (Sundquist, 2021). Additionally, China's involvement in humanitarian aid during crises, such as the Asian financial crisis and natural disasters like the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, further boosts its global image (Blanchard and Lu, 2012, pp. 568-569). These initiatives are integral to the BRI's success, as they help generate goodwill and support China's broader strategic goals.

While the success of China's soft power initiatives could ensure the consolidation of the BRI, the failure of China in establishing a reputable popular image hinders the future success of the BRI. Theoretically, the failure of soft power initiatives undermines the legitimacy and attractiveness of a state's influence, which is crucial for gaining the support and cooperation of other countries (Nye, 2023: 12). When a country fails to project a positive image and foster goodwill, it faces increased resistance and skepticism from local populations and governments. This resistance can manifest in various forms, such as opposition to projects, reluctance to collaborate, and a general lack of trust in the intentions behind the investments. In the context of the BRI, if China's soft power efforts are perceived as insincere or self-serving, it could lead to a lack of local support and even active opposition. This could result in delays, increased costs, and potential project cancellations, ultimately jeopardizing the overall goals of the BRI. Furthermore, the absence of a strong soft power foundation may encourage rival powers to exploit these weaknesses, intensifying geopolitical competition and complicating diplomatic relations. In response to its soft power deficiencies, China has increasingly resorted to sharp power tactics, using information manipulation and covert influence operations to shape perceptions and advance its interests. However, these sharp power approaches, while potentially effective in the short term, are likely to be unsustainable and counterproductive in the long run, as they risk further eroding trust and exacerbating negative perceptions of China's global influence. Thus, effective soft power strategies are essential for the smooth implementation of large-scale economic initiatives like the BRI. They help create a favorable environment for cooperation, reduce friction, and build long-term partnerships based on mutual

respect and benefit. The protests in Kazakhstan can be seen as a pertinent example of how the failure to effectively leverage soft power can threaten the success of the BRI.

2. GRASSROOTS KAZAKH RESISTANCE TO THE BRI: THE LIMITS OF CHINESE ECONOMIC INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

The protests in Kazakhstan against Chinese investments exemplify the resistance that can arise when local populations perceive these projects as threats to their sovereignty or economic interests rather than mutual benefits. In Kazakhstan, concerns over debt dependency, environmental degradation, job displacement, and the political implications of Chinese dominance have fueled widespread opposition. Since the early 2010s, protests have erupted in various cities, highlighting the fear and distrust among Kazakhs towards China's growing influence (Umarov, 2019). The Kazakh protests reveal that without addressing local grievances and fostering a perception of mutual benefit, economic influence alone may not suffice. This case study highlights the broader implications for China's global strategy, emphasizing that effective soft power is essential for the successful implementation of large-scale economic projects like the BRI. It underscores the need for a nuanced approach that considers local contexts and perceptions to achieve sustainable geopolitical influence.

Kazakhstan's Importance in the BRI

Kazakhstan occupies a strategic position on the commercial route connecting China to Europe, making it indispensable to China's BRI. Leveraging this strategic location, China has invested heavily in various infrastructure projects such as railways, roads, ports, and energy facilities in Kazakhstan. With its vast land and strategic location, Kazakhstan is not only a crucial transit route for the ambitious infrastructure project but also a key economic partner, offering vast natural resources and a rapidly developing infrastructure network. Since 2005, China has invested approximately \$23.2 billion in Kazakhstan, making it the fourth-largest investor in the country. In 2022 alone, bilateral trade reached a record \$31 billion, reflecting a 32% increase from the previous year, encompassing projects in energy, petrochemicals, metallurgy, and transportation sectors (Marangoz ve Tuncer, 2020:233).

The significance of Kazakhstan in the BRI cannot be overstated; it forms the backbone of several major trade corridors and serves as a critical hub for energy exports, railways, and roadways central to the BRI's objectives. Key infrastructure projects like the Khorgos Dry Port, the Aktau and Kuryk Ports, and the integration of the Nurlı Zhol project are pivotal. The Khorgos Dry Port, operational since 2015, connects Kazakhstan to China's Lianyungang Port and is considered the world's largest dry port, handling over 16,000 shipping

containers daily. Often referred to as the 'New Dubai,' it facilitates the rapid transportation of goods from China to Europe. The Nurly Zhol project, announced by Kazakhstan in 2014 with an initial cost of \$9 billion, aimed at developing railways, ports, infrastructure, education, and public services. Due to its similarities with the BRI, it was decided to merge Nurly Zhol with the BRI in 2015 to enhance bilateral trade, modernize infrastructure, and increase economic cooperation (Vakulchuk ve Overland, 2019).

China's investments have significantly boosted the Kazakh economy, particularly in increasing energy exports. Key nodes such as the ports of Aktau and Kuryk play a vital role in this infrastructure network. The Aktau Marine North Terminal, constructed in 2014, increased the port's export, import, and transit capacity, becoming an essential facility for the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor (Aitbay, 2017). Kuryk Port, strategically located at the intersection of east-west and north-south trade routes, is vital for multimodal road container transportation, connecting East Asia to Europe and Turkey (Kuryk Port Development, 2024). At the 2023 Belt and Road Initiative Forum, it was announced that 15% of BRI investments, amounting to \$16 billion, would be directed to Kazakhstan. These investments include 30 trade agreements focusing on technology transfer, the supply of electric vehicles, and new infrastructure projects. Key agreements signed at the forum include the development of the Middle Corridor, enhancement of multimodal and container transportation, and the construction of the Tancheng-Ayagöz railway line. Additionally, Kazakhstan's Temir Zholy National Railway Company and China's CRRC Corporation Limited signed a \$1.3 billion agreement to purchase locomotives and establish engineering and service centers in Kazakhstan (Nelson, 2023).

Overall, Kazakhstan's involvement in the BRI exemplifies its strategic importance in achieving China's vision of a globally interconnected trade network, enhancing global trade and connectivity while strengthening China's geopolitical influence.

Why Do Kazakhs Protest Against China?

Despite potential economic benefits, many Kazakhs are uneasy about the Chinese military power, population, and treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang (Vakulchuk and Overland, 2019: 118). These issues have led to protests in Kazakhstan, such as the 2016 demonstrations against Chinese land purchases. The Kazakhstani government, though non-democratic, remains responsive to public opinion on such matters (Collins, 2020: 153). While some scholars argue that Central Asian elites view Chinese investment positively (Shakhanova and Garlick, 2020), public sentiment is often negative. Several surveys illustrate this trend. A 2017 survey by the Institute of World Economics and Politics found

that 20.4% of Kazakhstanis saw a clear threat from Chinese influence, while 45% believed a threat could arise in the future (Le Corre, 2019). More recent surveys show increasing concern. The 2020 Central Asia Barometer survey revealed that 75% of Kazakhstanis were "very concerned" about Chinese land purchases, and 71% were concerned about increased national debt due to Chinese projects (Trilling, 2020). Another survey by Laruelle et al. (2020) found only 24% of Kazakhstanis were content with China's role in their country, with 55% wanting less Chinese involvement.

Anti-Chinese sentiments of Sinophobia in Central Asia is a multi-faceted issue, deeply rooted in historical, economic, and political dimensions. McGlinchey (2019) suggests that the lack of comprehensive knowledge about China among Central Asians contributes to the persistence of these attitudes. Based on concrete evidence or knowledge or not, the grievances against China in Kazakhstan are real and often manifest themselves through protests. Kazakhstan has experienced significant and widespread protests against Chinese influence and investments over the past several years, indicating deep-seated public discontent. These demonstrations have taken place in major cities such as Almaty, Astana, Oral, Shymkent, and Aktöbe. Protesters have rallied against perceived "Chinese expansion" and the increasing presence of Chinese enterprises, with some demonstrations resulting in detentions and heightened security measures by Kazakh authorities (Berikbol, 2023). As documented by Central Asia Protest Tracker, since 2019 protests against China in Kazakhstan constitute more than 10% of the protests across Kazakhstan with 137 protests occurring (Central Asia Protest Tracker, 2024). The public's skepticism towards China is influenced by identity-based prejudice, Chinese business practices, approaches of local governments in managing relations with China and the treatment of Uighur and Kazakh minorities in China.

An investigation of the factors that have led to widespread protests against Chinese influence highlights several key issues fueling local discontent. Firstly, the historical enmity between China and Central Asia significantly contributes to Sinophobia. As Shakhanova (2019) discusses, the BRI has led to increased Chinese investments in Kazakhstan, which many locals view with suspicion due to historical enmities. This suspicion is not unfounded, as historical narratives have long depicted China as a predatory neighbor. Related to this, Kruglov (2019) highlights that Chinese investments in Kazakhstan are often seen as a continuation of historical exploitation, fueling anti-Chinese sentiments. The perception that these investments are a modern form of economic imperialism exacerbates distrust among the local population. Peyrouse (2020) and Mohd (2020) note that Sinophobia in Central Asia is partly rooted in Soviet-era propaganda that portrayed China as a historical adversary. Lastly, the already negative perception towards China is compounded by reports of human rights

abuses in Xinjiang, where up to 2 million Muslims, mostly of Uighur, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek as well as the kinsmen of Kazakhs are persecuted in various ways including through infamous re-education camps. The public in Central Asia is frustrated by their governments' inability or unwillingness to address this issue, further fueling anti-Chinese sentiments (Garibov, 2018: 143). These deeply ingrained views continue to influence contemporary attitudes, leading Central Asians to perceive the growing Chinese presence as a strategic move to dominate and exploit the region. Activists argue that China seeks to economically exploit Central Asia by flooding it with Chinese goods and extracting its natural resources (Karibayeva, 2020: 6). This belief is reinforced by visible Chinese economic activities that prioritize Chinese interests. Additionally, demographic pressures in China, although not supported by concrete evidence, fuel speculation that the BRI (BRI) is driven by China's need to alleviate its overpopulation and gender imbalance. This concern, amplified by nationalist sentiments, has a strong mobilizing effect. For example, the 2016 land-reform protests in Kazakhstan were driven by public fear of Chinese land acquisition, leading to the suspension of a new land-lease law (Reuters, 2019). These protests highlighted the depth of public anxiety regarding Chinese intentions, showing how historical enmity and contemporary geopolitical moves intersect to fuel Sinophobia in the region.

The second major source of Sinophobia revolves around the impact of Chinese business practices on local job markets and business environments. Central Asian countries, with their growing young populations, face significant pressure to increase employment opportunities. However, the influx of Chinese businesses has often exacerbated these challenges rather than alleviating them. For instance, Yu (2022) argues that Chinese companies often prioritize their own workers, leading to job competition and economic resentment in Kazakhstan. This preference for Chinese labor means that local workers are frequently overlooked, which contributes to rising unemployment and frustration among the local population. Schulz (2022) points out that the influx of Chinese labor migrants in Kazakhstan has not significantly benefited local employment, exacerbating economic tensions. The presence of Chinese workers in significant numbers creates a sense of economic displacement among locals. Bagdonas (2021) reports that Chinese business practices in Kazakhstan, such as reserving most jobs for Chinese workers, intensify local economic grievances leading the local populations feel marginalized in their own labor market. Moreover, the economic dominance of Chinese companies in key sectors is often perceived negatively. Woods and Baker (2022) illustrate how public opinion in Kazakhstan has soured due to the perceived economic exploitation by Chinese enterprises. The local sentiment is that Chinese investments benefit the Chinese economy more than the local one, further fueling resentment (Karibayeva, 2020: 6).

Furthermore, Chinese companies reportedly ignore environmental standards, creating hazardous working environments, such as those at oil refineries in Kazakhstan. Chinese migrant workers are often perceived as accepting lower wages and poorer working conditions. Additionally, Chinese-owned companies are frequently accused of neglecting environmental standards, leading to unsafe and unhealthy work environments. This has sparked numerous workplace protests and violent inter-ethnic clashes, beginning with incidents at Chinese-owned gold mines in Solton-Sary, Kyrgyzstan, in 2011, and continuing with protests at oil refineries in Kazakhstan's Mangistau region in September 2019 (Karibayeva, 2020: 7).

The third dimension of Sinophobia is linked to the perception of local governments' failure to protect their citizens' interests in dealings with China. Anti-Chinese protests often have an anti-governmental undertone, as the public associates the two. This is particularly evident in how Chinese companies are perceived to exploit institutional weaknesses in Central Asian countries, with governments seemingly unable to enforce laws that restrict the percentage of foreign employees. This regulatory failure exacerbates public frustration. Civil society activists claim that governments ignore Chinese companies' violations of environmental and labor standards and give them preferential treatment for infrastructure contracts. This preferential treatment fuels a sense of injustice among the local population. Regarding this, Plakhina (2021) argues that anti-Chinese sentiments in Kazakhstan are often linked to broader anti-government protests, reflecting frustration with perceived governmental complacency. This indicates that sinophobia is intertwined with wider political discontent. Peyrouse (2016) observes that Central Asian governments' perceived favoritism towards Chinese companies contributes to growing sinophobic attitudes among the populace. This favoritism undermines public trust in governmental institutions and fuels perceptions of corruption. Additionally, Umirbekov (2019) reports that the Kazakh government's lack of transparency in dealings with China has led to increased public protests and anti-Chinese sentiment. This lack of transparency is seen as indicative of the government's inability or unwillingness to act in the best interest of its people, further aggravating anti-Chinese sentiments (Karibayeva, 2020: 10). In summary, the perception that local governments are failing to protect their citizens from the negative impacts of Chinese economic activities is a significant driver of Sinophobia in Central Asia. This perception is strengthened by instances of regulatory failures, favoritism towards Chinese companies, and broader political discontent, leading to a complex and volatile socio-political environment.

The Kazakh government finds itself in a complex position concerning Chinese investments (Vakulchuk and Overland 2019). On one hand, these investments are crucial for Kazakhstan's economic development, particularly in

infrastructure, energy, and technology sectors, which align with the country's long-term strategic goals. The government has welcomed Chinese capital, viewing it as essential for modernizing the economy and integrating Kazakhstan more fully into global trade networks, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, this economic partnership has come at a significant social cost, as many Kazakhs view Chinese investments with suspicion, fearing economic dependency and cultural erosion.

Under both Presidents Nazarbayev and Tokayev, latter being fluent Mandarin speaker Kazakhstan has maintained a stable relationship with China while restricting democratic opposition and controlling dissent. Despite the regime's efforts, criticisms of China's influence, particularly in the oil industry and land leasing, have led to significant protests, including violent clashes in 2014 and widespread demonstrations in 2016, prompting government concessions and a continued ban on land sales to foreigners (Rymbetov, 2021). To manage this dichotomy, the Kazakh government has adopted a dual approach. Publicly, it emphasizes the benefits of Chinese investments, often highlighting job creation, infrastructure development, and increased foreign direct investment as tangible benefits for the population (Kumenov, 2023). At the same time, the government has implemented measures to mitigate public dissent, such as allowing small scale protests (Wani, 2019). Additionally, the government has occasionally engaged in low-key diplomacy to reassure the public that Kazakhstan's sovereignty is not compromised. This balancing act underscores the government's pragmatic approach—welcoming economic benefits while carefully navigating public opinion to maintain social stability.

The implications of these protests in Kazakhstan are multifaceted. Firstly, they reflect a significant challenge to the Kazakh government's handling of foreign investments and its relationship with China. The public unrest has put pressure on the government to balance economic benefits from Chinese investments with the growing nationalistic sentiments and concerns over sovereignty among its citizens. These protests are part of a broader trend in Central Asia and beyond, where countries receiving Chinese investments under the BRI are grappling with similar issues. In Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and other neighboring countries, there have been comparable demonstrations and public outcries against Chinese projects. These protests often highlight fears of economic dependency, loss of land, environmental degradation, and a perceived lack of local benefits from Chinese investments. This regional pattern of resistance suggests a broader skepticism and resistance to China's expanding influence across Central Asia (RFE/RL's Kazakh Service, 2021). Additionally, the protests in Kazakhstan and other parts of Central Asia have broader geopolitical implications. They contribute to a complex environment where Chinese investments are both welcomed for their economic potential and resisted

for their social and political impacts. This duality complicates China's strategic objectives under the BRI, potentially slowing down or altering the course of its projects. The persistent public dissent also provides opportunities for other global powers to influence the region, countering China's ambitions and adding layers of diplomatic complexity (Moldabekov and Kurmangazinova, 2021). In conclusion, the protests against Chinese influence in Kazakhstan are not isolated incidents but part of a wider regional and global phenomenon. They highlight the challenges China faces in implementing its BRI projects and underscore the importance of addressing local concerns to foster smoother international cooperation and project implementation.

In summary, Sinophobia in Central Asia is driven by a combination of historical prejudices, the negative impact of Chinese business practices on local job markets, and the perceived failure of local governments to protect their citizens' interests in relations with China. These factors collectively contribute to a deep-seated and complex skepticism towards China in the region.

How the Chinese Soft Power Shortfalls Could Threaten the BRI in Kazakhstan and Beyond

As the BRI faces significant hurdles in Kazakhstan, China's lack of soft power becomes evident, jeopardizing the future success of this strategic initiative. Protests fueled by economic, geopolitical, and cultural grievances pose substantial risks to the BRI's progress and success. These protests threaten to disrupt ongoing projects, escalate costs, and diminish investor confidence. Despite persistent public protests, China continues to invest heavily in Kazakhstan due to the country's strategic importance in the BRI. Kazakhstan's geographical position as a gateway between China and Europe makes it an indispensable partner for China's overland trade routes. Additionally, Kazakhstan's abundant natural resources, particularly oil and gas, are vital for China's energy security, further reinforcing the necessity of maintaining strong economic ties.

China's decision to continue investing, even in the face of widespread public opposition, is driven mainly by two factors: economic and security. China's economic interests in Central Asia center on two main objectives: fostering economic development and securing access to raw materials. The motivation behind gaining raw materials is straightforward—China requires cost-effective resources to support its manufacturing sector. The focus on economic development stems from the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) longstanding belief that economic progress underpins social and political stability. Given Central Asia's closeness to China, stability in the region is strategically important to Beijing, reinforcing China's economic priorities there

(Hamilton, 2024: 6). Central Asia is also critical to China's security concerns. The region is viewed both as a potential source of instability due to religious extremism and separatist movements and as a corridor for threats linked to Afghanistan. Xinjiang is central to CCP security considerations, as the region has strong ethnic and religious ties with Central Asia's Uighur community. Chinese leaders recognize the historic connections between Xinjiang and Central Asia, noting that past Chinese dynasties rose and fell with the region's influence (Yau, 2021). Moreover, China relies on its robust diplomatic relations with the Kazakh government, which has so far managed to suppress large-scale dissent and maintain a stable investment environment. China's confidence is bolstered by its ability to deploy sharp power tools—such as economic incentives and political influence—to manage dissent and ensure that its projects proceed without significant disruption.

The protests have the potential to disrupt ongoing and future BRI projects, leading to construction delays, increased security costs, and potential damage to infrastructure. These disruptions can escalate project budgets and extend timelines, making the investments less attractive and profitable. Construction delays can affect the overall progress of the BRI, as projects are often interconnected. Increased security costs arise from the need to protect sites, workers, and equipment, adding a financial burden to the projects. Potential damage to infrastructure from vandalism or sabotage can result in further expenditures for repairs and replacements. Additionally, the heightened risk environment may deter other international investors, compounding the financial challenges faced by Chinese enterprises in Kazakhstan. This deters potential collaborators who might have otherwise contributed capital, expertise, or resources to these projects. The compounded financial strain can affect the sustainability and scalability of BRI projects in the region. Overall, these disruptions can undermine the economic goals of the BRI by creating uncertainties, reducing investor confidence, and decreasing the efficiency of project completion, thereby diminishing the attractiveness and feasibility of continued investment in Kazakhstan and potentially other regions.

The resistance to Chinese influence in Kazakhstan may put fuel on the fire of similar sentiments already present in other Central Asian nations involved in the BRI, such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This regional ripple effect can diminish China's influence across Central Asia and complicate its diplomatic efforts. The anti-Chinese protests can be leveraged by geopolitical rivals to undermine China's initiatives, increasing regional competition and presenting a more challenging environment for China's strategic interests. Geopolitical rivals may use these protests to fuel anti-Chinese sentiments, promoting their own interests and alliances in the region. This increased competition can lead to a more fragmented and contested geopolitical landscape,

complicating China's efforts to maintain and expand its influence through the BRI. In this complex environment, China's strategic objectives in Central Asia may be increasingly difficult to achieve, necessitating a reevaluation of its approach and potentially requiring more nuanced and collaborative diplomatic strategies.

The perceived cultural insensitivity in Chinese investments and operations can exacerbate existing ethnic and nationalistic tensions as well. This dynamic threatens social cohesion and can foster a hostile environment for Chinese workers and expatriates, potentially leading to increased incidents of violence and social unrest. Local populations feel that their cultural and social norms are being disregarded or overshadowed by the influx of Chinese influence, leading to resentment and conflict. The failure to address these cultural concerns adequately can lead to a sustained backlash against Chinese presence, further complicating China's efforts to integrate economically and socially with the local population. This backlash can manifest in various forms, from organized protests to grassroots movements, and even acts of sabotage against Chinese projects and personnel. Moreover, the cultural insensitivity may hinder effective communication and collaboration between Chinese and local stakeholders, reducing the overall efficiency and effectiveness of BRI projects. Addressing these cultural and social issues is crucial for fostering a more harmonious and cooperative environment that supports long-term investment and integration.

The Kazakh government's role in the protests against Chinese investments is complex. On the one hand, the government has welcomed and facilitated increased Chinese investment as part of the BRI, seeing it as an opportunity for economic development (Omirgazy, 2024). However, the government has also struggled to balance these investments with growing public discontent and nationalist sentiments among the Kazakh population. The protests often have an anti-government undertone, as the public associates the Chinese investments with the government's policies and perceived lack of protection for local interests (RFE/RL's Kazakh Service, 2021). While the government has at times cracked down on protests, it has also faced pressure to address the underlying public grievances. This delicate balancing act suggests that the Kazakh government is not entirely happy with the situation but feels constrained in its ability to both attract Chinese investment and appease the public.

Kazakhstan occupies a crucial geographic position along the overland trade routes connecting China to Europe, making it an indispensable part of China's vision for the BRI. China seems to calculate that the economic benefits of these investments, in terms of trade, transportation, and access to resources, outweigh the risks posed by the public discontent. China may also be relying on its political influence and economic leverage to manage the protests and maintain

its foothold in Kazakhstan. While China has successfully utilized economic influence and sharp power to maintain its investments in Kazakhstan, these strategies may not be sustainable in the long run. The continued reliance on hard power tools without sufficient soft power could exacerbate anti-China sentiments, leading to more profound and organized resistance in the future. This resistance could manifest not only in public protests but also in policy shifts within the Kazakh government, potentially aligning Kazakhstan more closely with other geopolitical powers such as Russia or the West. Integrating a robust soft power approach, centered on responsiveness to local contexts, is crucial to strengthening the legitimacy and sustainability of China's economic initiatives in the region. A failure to improve China's image and build genuine goodwill among the Kazakh population could undermine the stability of Chinese investments and the broader BRI framework in Central Asia. Therefore, China's emphasis on soft power in Kazakhstan should not be seen as merely a complementary strategy but as a crucial component for ensuring the sustainability of its economic and political influence in the region. By investing in cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and people-to-people ties, China can create a more favorable environment for its initiatives, reducing the likelihood of future disruptions.

In conclusion, the protests and anti-Chinese sentiments in Kazakhstan present significant challenges to the BRI (BRI), impacting its implementation and long-term success. Economically, disruptions can lead to increased costs and deter investors, undermining the BRI's goals. Geopolitically, resistance in Kazakhstan could inspire similar sentiments in other Central Asian nations, complicating China's influence and diplomatic efforts. Culturally, perceived insensitivity in Chinese investments exacerbates tensions, fostering hostility and social unrest. These challenges highlight the necessity for China to adopt more culturally sensitive and locally inclusive practices to ensure the BRI's sustainability and effectiveness.

3. CONCLUSION

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) stands as China's ambitious endeavor to reshape global connectivity and economic integration. However, the unfolding narrative in Kazakhstan reveals a compelling paradox: while the BRI seeks to foster economic growth, its impact is profoundly shaped by the intricate interplay of sharp and soft power dynamics. Despite China's substantial investments and infrastructure projects, the initiative has encountered significant cultural and political resistance in Kazakhstan, underscoring the critical importance of soft power in international relations and large-scale economic initiatives.

The Kazakh experience vividly illustrates the potential pitfalls of neglecting cultural sensitivity and public perception in pursuing economic objectives. China's approach, often characterized by sharp power tactics—such as strategic investments and influential diplomacy—has triggered backlash and protests, driven by deep-seated concerns over national sovereignty and cultural identity. While the Kazakh government, under both Nazarbayev and Tokayev, has managed to maintain a stable relationship with China, the recurring protests against Chinese investments reveal the limitations of relying solely on economic leverage without sufficient cultural engagement and genuine soft power.

This study offers several key insights that contribute significantly to both academic discourse and policy formulation. Firstly, it underscores the indispensable role of soft power in the successful implementation of large-scale economic initiatives. Effective soft power strategies are essential not only for mitigating resistance but also for fostering a conducive environment for sustained economic collaboration and mutual benefit. Secondly, the research highlights the critical need for a nuanced understanding of local cultural and political contexts. This deep comprehension is crucial for formulating policies that align with the interests and values of host countries, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and acceptance of foreign investments.

Moreover, the BRI's experiences in Kazakhstan provide valuable lessons that extend far beyond Central Asia, offering insights for other regions involved in similar initiatives. The path forward necessitates a thorough reevaluation of the interplay between economic strategies and cultural-political dynamics. It emphasizes the imperative of integrating soft power into the core framework of international economic projects. This integration can help address the underlying concerns of local populations, ensuring that economic cooperation does not come at the expense of national sovereignty, cultural identity, and social cohesion.

This study also demonstrates that the successful implementation of ambitious economic initiatives like the BRI hinges on a sophisticated integration of soft power with economic strategy. Effective soft power approaches are essential not only for mitigating immediate resistance but also for cultivating long-term political goodwill and fostering a favorable environment for sustainable collaboration. The absence or inadequacy of soft power can lead to significant long-term pitfalls, including deteriorated bilateral relations, increased local resentment, and diminished strategic influence.

In conclusion, the Belt and Road Initiative, with its visionary aim of enhancing global connectivity, confronts a landscape marked by complex geopolitical sensitivities and deep-seated cultural currents. The experience of

Kazakhstan serves as a critical case study, underscoring the essential role of soft power in ensuring the success and sustainability of such ambitious international initiatives. This research contributes significantly to the literature by highlighting the pressing need for strategies that are not only economically sound but also culturally informed and politically astute. As the BRI progresses, its ability to adapt to these challenges and address them effectively will be crucial in shaping its legacy and determining its impact on global economic development and international relations. The lessons learned from Kazakhstan offer a valuable roadmap for refining approaches to international economic cooperation, emphasizing the need for a harmonious blend of economic vision and cultural understanding in the pursuit of global development goals.

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