China in Central Asia*

Local Perceptions from Future Elites

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Abstract: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seems to have exhibited its goodwill by aiming to integrate its neighbors peacefully and cooperatively into joint economic prosperity; nevertheless, there are various concerns about the implications of China's mounting influence in Central Asia. This article attempts to compare the results of several small-scale surveys conducted among university students in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, so

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as to get a glimpse of local perceptions in Central Asia on the growing Chinese influence in their countries. Our primary survey analysis shows that Kazakhstani respondents tend to believe China has the biggest influence in Central Asia, while Kyrgyzstani respondents believe that Russia outperforms China in status in the region. However, both Kyrgyzstani and Kazakhstani respondents believe that Russia's influence will largely decline and be overtaken by China in the next decade. Although our respondents have some awareness of China's presence in their countries and an understanding of China's influence, they do not consider the Chinese development model a suitable one for their country. China's much advocated Belt and Road Initiative has not seemed to reach the radar of the young respondents included in this study.

Keywords: Central Asia; China; Kyrgyzstan; Kazakhstan; survey analysis.

China's recent and much-propagated Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seems to have exhibited its goodwill by aiming to integrate its neighbors in Central Asia peacefully and cooperatively into joint economic prosperity. Coupled with economic assistance, Beijing is proactive in its public diplomacy, seeking to communicate a benign image of China to the locals in Central Asian countries. Before the launch of the BRI, Confucius Institutes had existed within Central Asia for years. These educational and cultural institutes have not only promoted the learning of Mandarin and Chinese culture in the region, but also been increasingly used by the Chinese government as a channel to convey Beijing's strategic narrative¹ which, as Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin point out, is "soft power in the 21st century."²

Understanding the complex combination of Chinese programs of soft power and local willingness to understand a neighbor with whom cultural, economic, and political links are undeniably growing is not an easy task. Studying public opinion in Central Asia on such a topic is rather difficult

¹Falk Harting, "Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China's Strategic Narratives," *Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3/4 (Fall 2015), pp. 245–258.

²Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understanding Soft Power," *Media, War and Conflict*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 70–84.

because of the various constraints on carrying out politics-oriented surveys therein.³ This article attempts to compare the results of several small-scale surveys conducted among university students in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, in order to get a glimpse of local perceptions in Central Asia on the growing Chinese influence in their countries.

China's "Silk Road Economic Belt:" Policy Intentions and Impacts

The diplomatic rhetoric used by Chinese President Xi Jinping elaborates on a long-term relationship and cooperation between China and Central Asia while seeking to strengthen their existing cooperation.⁴ In Central Asia, such development takes the shape of the "Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)," an initiative that seeks to integrate Eurasia in terms of infrastructure and transport of goods by land. Together with the "Maritime Silk Road (MSR)," the SREB is part of the BRI that has also reached South America.⁵ China has been using the "benevolence" discourse, arguing that the BRI and other multilateral institutions recently founded by China serve two major purposes. On the one hand, they are vehicles for sharing China's development and wealth with the developing world. On another, they are aimed at making the global order responsive to the needs of rising powers and the global South. Accordingly, Beijing views them as economic tools for

³Most public opinion research on the perception of China's rising influence has been conducted in East Asia, South Asia, and Africa. For instance, there was a joint survey conducted by Korea's East Asian Institute and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2006), a study conducted by the Washington D.C.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies compared elite perceptions and public opinions of China's rise in various Asian Pacific countries; and Afrobarometer survey (2014–2015) followed Asian Barometer to measure public opinion of China in various African countries.

⁴Xi Jinping, "Promote Friendship between Our People and Work Together to Build a Bright Future," Chinese Foreign Ministry, September 8, 2013, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1078088.shtml; and Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014).

⁵Ariel Noyola Rodríguez, "China's 'Silk Road' Enriches its Influence on South America," *Voltaire.net*, May 31, 2015, <http://www.voltairenet.org/article187740.html>; Andrew Korybko, "The Silk Road Stretches to South America," *Oriental Review*, May 20, 2015, <http://orientalreview.org/2015/05/20/the-silk-road-stretches-to-south-america/>.

advancing the ideals of globalization and economic interdependence, with China sharing its economic development benefits with other countries.⁶

The advent of SREB is not only a continuation of, but also an aspiration to upgrade, the existing cooperation. According to the action plan of the BRI, there are five cooperation priorities: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. In Chinese, these five priorities are called *Wutong* (五通), literally meaning “five connectivities,” which can be seen as upgraded aspiration because constructing roads and railways is no longer sufficient; China expects that facilities and infrastructure can also be better connected. In finance, simply making the currency flow between China and Central Asia is insufficient; Beijing wants currency flows to be upgraded to investment flows.⁷ Moreover, under the framework of SREB, there are also attempts to make the tax system more compatible or even to think of a regional integration complementary to the existing agreements.⁸ It is notable that the last priority aims to strengthen people-to-people bonds. In practice, this has been carried out in the form of more exchanges of students and elites. China is also hoping to negotiate for ease of visa policies so that Chinese tourists can have an easy access to Central Asian counties.

Although each Central Asian state is unique and one cannot claim that patterns

China is trying to promote inter-connectivity and common development in Central Asia through the Silk Road Economic Belt.

⁶Obert Hodzi and Chen Yu-Wen, “The Great Rejuvenation? China’s Search for a New ‘Global Order,’” *Stockholm ISDP Asia Paper*, 2017.

⁷Xu Hai-Yan, “丝绸之路视域下中哈合作的机遇与挑战——以哈萨克斯坦国家战略规划为视角 [The Sino-Kazakhstan Cooperation under the Framework of the Silk Road: Opportunities and Challenges from the Perspectives of the National Strategies of the Republic of Kazakhstan],” *学术探索 [Academic Exploration]*, Vol. 3 (2016), pp. 18–25.

⁸Meruert Makhmutova, “Kazakhstan: Perspectives on Eurasian Integration,” European Council on Foreign Relations, June 8, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian_integration_kazakhstan; and Li Shangjing, “One Belt, One Road, Many Risks,” *Asian Legal Business*, December 18, 2015, <http://www.legalbusinessonline.com/features/one-belt-one-road-many-risks/71290>.

observed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan will represent those in other Central Asian countries, analyzing these two countries provides valuable insights into the SREB. Both countries border China and facilitate more exchanges than other Central Asian nations.⁹ Though Tajikistan also shares a border with China, its decade-long civil war has weakened the bilateral interactions until recently. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are more repressive and closed, which hinders comprehensive exchanges with China.¹⁰ While interactions with China occur in various domains, the main areas for cooperation in Kazakhstan lie in the construction of roads and railway lines and the development of its oil industry in the Caspian Sea. In Kyrgyzstan, exchanges with China mostly take place in the trade sector. Before the launch of SREB, various bilateral agreements and platforms offered by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as well as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) had prompted security, economic, and cultural cooperation.

While at the governmental level, rhetoric released by China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan appear to be supportive and demonstrate that the SREB matches well with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's respective development plans,¹¹ the views of locals toward China's rising visibility and influence in their countries tend to be mixed with positive and negative narrations. Conflicts between Chinese and local workers are not unheard of in public discourses. Fears of the influx of Chinese tourists and workers into Central Asia "ruining" the local environment, job market, and even

⁹Aleksandra Jarosiewicz and Strachota Krzysztof, *China vs. Central Asia: The Achievements of the Past Two Decades* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 2013); Soledad Jiménez-Tovar, "Limits of Diaspority in Central Asia: Contextualising Dungan's Multiple Belongings," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 3, (2016), pp. 387–404; and Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies* (Washington D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2009).

¹⁰Chen Yu-Wen and Olaf Günther, "China's Influence in Uzbekistan: Model Neighbor or Indifferent Partner?," *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 17, (2016), pp. 11–14.

¹¹Zhao Yating, "一带一路背景下中国战略支点的选择——以中国同哈萨克斯坦的战略合作为例 [Choice of Strategic Pivot of China in One Belt One Road: Take Strategic Cooperation between China and Kazakhstan as an Example]," *新疆社会科学* [*Xinjiang Social Sciences*], Vol. 6 (2015), pp. 75–80.

national security can be read in local newspapers.¹² Conducting a nationwide survey based on random sampling would be helpful in understanding the local perceptions on China's initiative and influence.

University students can be considered potential elites of their countries, since normally people who have access to higher education in Central Asia come from at least a middle-class background with family and relatives who might be political, business, or intellectual elites. Studying the views of potential elites in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is meaningful, because these people are more likely to have the capacity and networks to affect sociopolitical changes that would direct their countries' future development. Existing literature focuses a lot on geopolitical and economic aspects of China-Central Asia cooperation.¹³ Using our academic connections in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, we conducted some small-scale surveys and expect that our study can complement existing ones by delving into the local perceptions. This might also provide a clearer view of the status quo of "people-to-people bonds" between China and Central Asian countries.

How do Central Asian Future Elites View China?

Our survey instruments were mostly adopted from the Asian Barometer survey, a well-known large-scale project that investigates public opinions about politics in East and Southeast Asia. Using similar survey instruments allows us to have a systematic basis for comparison, not just in our focused area of Central Asia, but also with survey results from East and Southeast Asia.

¹²Aziz Burkhanov and Chen Yu-Wen, "Kazakh Perspectives on China, Chinese and Chinese Migration," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 12 (2016), pp. 1–20.

¹³Jarosiewicz and Krzysztof, *China vs. Central Asia: The Achievements of the Past Two Decades*; Laruelle and Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies*; Chen and Günther, "China's Influence in Uzbekistan: Model Neighbour or Indifferent Partner?"; Paulo Duarte, "The Dragon in its Backyard: The Chinese Question in Central Asia," *Revista Estudos Políticos*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2014), pp. 639–659; Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor* (London: Hurst & Company, 2012); and Sébastien Peyrouse, "Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2016), pp. 14–23.

Our questionnaire was prepared in both Russian and English. It contained 14 questions and could be filled out in either paper format or online. In the summer of 2014, the first survey, which can be seen as a pilot test, was administered twice in Nazarbayev University in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. The first pilot test was filled out by 61 (out of 200) respondents, and the second test was completed by 89 (out of 199) respondents. These two pilot tests gave us a chance to improve on some of the questions and add more suitable questions for our research purposes. In the spring of 2016, we completed the final version of the questionnaire which comprised 23 questions. In addition to demographic questions (e.g., gender, citizenship), the respondents were asked about their perception of influence by select countries that have been active in the regional politics of Asia (e.g., the United States, Japan, and China). While 23 questions might not allow for sufficient details to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the respondents' views on China, this is the best we could achieve because it is difficult to distribute this type of survey in Central Asian countries; scholars who were willing to cooperate usually allowed only very limited time to complete the survey with their students.

In Kazakhstan, we distributed our final questionnaires through scholarly networks and connections in the spring of 2016. As the pilot test had been conducted in the new Kazakhstan capital, Astana, in 2014, we sought to conduct the new survey in the old capital, Almaty, in 2016 to diversify our pool of respondents. 62 university students filled out the questionnaires in the end. In Kyrgyzstan, we hired a local research assistant who first helped obtain permissions from various universities before distributing the questionnaires. In the end, we gathered 340 observations for analysis. As the two pilot tests conducted in Astana in 2014 contained fewer questions than the survey conducted in 2016, it is not possible to directly

compare the results of the two surveys. However, whenever possible, we refer to the results in 2014 to investigate any longitudinal differences.

When asked which country has the greatest influence in Asia, the answers from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan differ. In the 2016 Almaty survey, China significantly outperforms Russia, which echoes the pattern

University students
in Kazakhstan and
Kyrgyzstan have
expressed divergent
attitudes towards
China.

Table 1. Which Country Do You Think Has the Greatest Influence in Asia?

	Kyrgyzstan 2016		Kazakhstan 2016	
	Now	In 10 Years	Now	In 10 Years
Japan	10 (2.9%)	12 (3.5%)	2 (2.7%)	6 (8.2%)
China	116 (34.1%)	162 (47.6%)	48 (65.8%)	49 (67.1%)
India	2 (0.6%)	2 (0.6%)	2 (2.7%)	0 (0%)
Russia	147 (43.2%)	84 (24.7%)	14 (19.2%)	12 (16.4%)
USA	30 (8.8%)	16 (4.7%)	6 (8.2%)	4 (5.5%)
South Korea	3 (0.9%)	7 (2.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.4%)
Turkey	25 (7.4%)	27 (7.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Saudi Arabia	7 (2.1%)	5 (1.5%)	1 (1.4%)	1 (1.4%)
Others	0 (0%)	15 (4.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
No response	0 (0%)	10 (2.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	340	340	73	73

Source: Compiled by the authors.

observed in the pilot tests conducted in Astana in 2014. In Kyrgyzstan, the respondents consider Russia as having a greater influence on their country than China. The main reasons for this difference are border issues and migration patterns.¹⁴ As mentioned before, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan share borders with China, and there are some disagreements regarding the border delimitation of China with both countries. However, Kazakhstan seems to be more concerned about the possibility of a secessionist attempt in the north that would echo Ukraine's 2014 problems. Kyrgyzstan does not share a border with Russia and therefore has less concern in this regard. Notably, Kyrgyzstan's economy is largely sustained by migrants working in Russia, Turkey, and the United States. Although some Kyrgyzstani petty traders also go to China, the importance that China has in Kyrgyzstan's economy is less prominent than it is in Kazakhstan.

When asked about their predictions for the next decade, Kazakhstani respondents' views are similar to their view of the current situation, that is, China has a more significant influence in Asia than Russia. Interestingly, Kyrgyzstani respondents believe that Russian influence will largely decline and be overtaken by China in 10 years (see Table 1).

It is worth noting that, while Kazakhstani respondents' attention to other countries seems to be limited to Russia and China, Kyrgyzstani

¹⁴Niklas Swanström, *China and Greater Central Asia: New Frontiers?* (Washington D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2011).

respondents' opinions are more diversified. This difference is linked to the more extensive diversification of Kyrgyzstan's economy mostly via petty trade. Dordoi Bazaar in Bishkek is the "economic heart" of Central Asia, where petty traders travelling with goods to be sold in Central Asian local markets meet. From Dordoi, the goods are redistributed and sent not only to other regions inside Kyrgyzstan, but also across the Central Asian region and Russia. Hence, Kyrgyzstani respondents could have become more aware of other countries' influences in Asia, beyond China and Russia. Conversely, Kazakhstan is becoming increasingly dependent on infrastructure development as part of the BRI and foreign investment in oil industry and mining. In both cases, China and Russia are the main actors.

Overall speaking, our respondents believe in Beijing's growing influence over Moscow, which could be interpreted as the respondents' awareness of Beijing's actual rising power. Alternatively, this could indicate the respondents' aspirations for their countries to become more independent from Moscow. China and its relative ignorance of Central Asia (compared with Beijing's emphasis on relationships with East Asia and elsewhere in the world) would provide more freedom for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's autonomy, at least symbolically. If something catastrophic does occur, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan might still prefer to turn to the West rather than the East for help. But for the aspiration to have more political independence, the respondents might wishfully opt to acknowledge Beijing as the country with the largest influence. This would challenge two old assumptions that previous studies tended to point out. The first is that Central Asian elites are reluctant to face the political implications that Chinese presence in the region might have. Second, Russia's presence is more impressed in the minds of Central Asian people.¹⁵ Our respondents belong to the younger generation, and they seem to depart from what these old beliefs would tell us about local perceptions in Central Asia.

Most respondents believe China brings more benefit than harm to Central Asia, with Kyrgyzstani respondents again seeming to be more negative than those in Kazakhstan (see Table 2). For instance, 118 Kyrgyzstani respondents believe that China brings somewhat more benefit

¹⁵Duarte, "The Dragon in its Backyard: The Chinese Question in Central Asia"; Laruelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor*; and Peyrouse, "Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia."

Table 2. Does China Bring More Benefit or Harm to Central Asia?

Numbers of Respondents	Kyrgyzstan 2016	Kazakhstan 2016	Kyrgyzstan 2014	Kazakhstan 2014
Considerably more benefit than harm	51 (15%)	14 (19.2%)	7 (11.5%)	24 (27.9%)
Somewhat more benefit than harm	118 (34.7%)	46 (63%)	17 (27.9%)	49 (57%)
Somewhat more harm than benefit	106 (31.2%)	12 (16.4%)	0 (0%)	8 (9.3%)
Much more harm than benefit	52 (15.3%)	1 (1.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
No response	13 (3.8%)	0 (0%)	37 (60.7%)	5 (5.8%)
Total	340	73	61	86

Source: Compiled by the authors.

than harm, and 106 believe that China brings somewhat more harm than benefit. There are many supporters of both views. Such a difference in local people’s perceptions would reflect not only what China has done in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but also how both countries have behaved to protect their interests. While Kazakhstan has more regulations regarding the founding of new companies, such as environmental analyses and quotas for recruiting local people, Kyrgyzstan, which is more “liberal” toward international companies willing to invest in the country, does not impose such requirements. Consequently, in Kyrgyzstan, Chinese companies have opened their factories to workers mostly from China and pay them higher salaries than the locals. When these companies fail to address environmental issues such as pollution and pollution-related illnesses among the local population, it creates uneasy relationships between the locals and the Chinese.

In addition, it is crucial to point out that the Kyrgyz’s less welcoming attitudes toward China is a result of the domestic development of Kyrgyzstan itself, not just the Kyrgyzstani-China problem. The Kyrgyzstani approach in the 1990s was liberal, open-minded, and highly international. The country’s elites hoped to use tourism to develop the economy. However, afterwards, younger elites decided on an increasingly more family-oriented political parliament that closed its structures to the public. Unrest followed, new leaders came to power, and all these gave momentum to the establishment of a new national narrative. This narrative was strongly anti-China because of environmental problems in the Taldybulak region, where

China had explored and exploited some gold mines and because of border disputes, which were settled by President Askar Akayev with some losses of Kyrgyz territory. Even if these losses were minimal and environmental problems were domestic because of a weak environmental law, the civil society supported a strong nationalist sentiment. As such, the Kyrgyz opinion towards China is probably the most critical one in Central Asia.

The Kyrgyz opinion toward China is more negative due in large part to its governance defects.

We attempted to use statistical tools, such as cross-tabulation and correlation, to understand what factors might be related to such a schism of views regarding China's contribution to Central Asia. Variables explored include the respondents' gender and employment situation, whether the respondents have family or relatives in China, whether they have visited China or

traveled abroad (within and beyond the Commonwealth of Independent States), the frequency at which the respondents follow news of other countries, and their Internet usage. In Asian Barometer's surveys conducted in East Asian and South Asian countries, these factors have shown a partial effect on different perceptions about China. However, in our analysis of the data for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, we cannot identify a clear factor for the Central Asian respondents' opposing stances toward China.

China's Attractiveness in Central Asia

Interestingly, our survey results suggest that most Kazakhstani and Kyrgyzstani respondents were unaware of the BRI, although a greater percentage of Kazakhstani respondents (31.5 percent) had heard of it than the Kyrgyzstani respondents (13.8 percent) (see Table 3). The results indicate that the Chinese initiative has yet to reach the radar of the surveyed university students. When asked about their frequency of reading the news and using the modern sources from which they might obtain information about China, an overwhelming majority of the respondents in both countries check the news and use the Internet daily or at least once a week (85 percent in Kazakhstan and 79.4 percent in Kyrgyzstan). Nevertheless, the

Table 3. Have You Heard of China's Belt and Road Initiative?

	Kyrgyzstan 2016	Kazakhstan 2016
Yes	47 (13.8%)	23 (31.5%)
No	240 (70.6%)	44 (60.3%)
Not sure	51 (15%)	6 (8.2%)
No response	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)
Total	340	73

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 4. Have You Heard about Chinese Investment in Your Country?

	Kyrgyzstan 2016	Kazakhstan 2016
Yes	156 (45.9%)	51 (69.9%)
No	119 (35%)	17 (23.3%)
Not sure	60 (17.6%)	4 (5.5%)
No response	5 (1.5%)	1 (1.4%)
Total	340	73

Source: Compiled by the authors.

news in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan omits much about the BRI and provides only general information about China.¹⁶ This might largely explain why many respondents lack the awareness of the Chinese initiative.

While the knowledge of specific Chinese initiatives is weak, respondents from both countries are generally aware of Chinese investments in their countries (see Table 4). It is obvious that a higher percentage of Kazakhstani respondents are aware of Chinese economic footprints than Kyrgyzstani respondents. Chinese interactions with Kazakhstan center on large-scale economic cooperation and investments, while those with Kyrgyzstan focus on petty trade interactions, which might explain our survey results.

A similar result is found in the respondents' awareness of where to learn the Chinese language (see Table 5). Relatively speaking, our respondents are more aware of where to learn Chinese than about Chinese investments in their country. Such awareness is related to the fact that, as

¹⁶Burkhanov and Chen, "Kazakh Perspectives on China, Chinese and Chinese Migration."

Table 5. Do You Know Where to Learn Chinese Language in Your Country?

	Kyrgyzstan 2016	Kazakhstan 2016
Yes	260 (76.5%)	65 (89%)
No	52 (15.3%)	5 (6.8%)
Not sure	26 (7.6%)	5 (4.1%)
No response	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)
Total	340	73

Source: Compiled by the authors.

mentioned at the outset of this article, many people are keen to do business related to China, either by starting their own petty trade exchanges or by working as translators or employees in Chinese companies operating in Central Asia. This provides the impetus for the locals to have knowledge of where to find opportunities to learn Chinese.

Local awareness of Chinese presence in Central Asia is mainly shaped by China's expanding economic footprints.

While scholars and observers have not been able to agree on whether there is a Chinese model of development or any official Chinese rhetoric promoting a "China model" for export,¹⁷ we examine the local perception in Central Asia on the Chinese development model here. The reason is that despite all these scholarly schisms on such matters, most would agree that the Chinese development approach has provided an al-

ternative to the Western and U.S.-led approach toward assisting developing countries. Our results show that, despite the respondents' awareness of China's presence in their countries and their understanding of China's

¹⁷For more information about the Chinese model, please see Zhao Suisheng, "The Chinese Model: Can it Replace the Western Model of Modernization?," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 19, No. 65 (2010), pp. 419 and 436; Scott Kennedy, "The Myth of the Beijing Consensus," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 19, No. 64 (2010), pp. 461–477; Chen Ling and Barry Naughton, "A Dynamic China Model: The Co-Evolution of Economics and Politics in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 26, No. 103 (2017), pp. 18–34; and Zhao Suisheng, "Whither the China Model: Revisiting the Debate," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 26, No. 103 (2017), pp. 1–17.

Table 6. Which Country Should be a Model for Your Country's Future Development?

Numbers of Respondents	Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan
Japan	56 (16.5%)	7 (9.6%)
China	25 (7.4%)	10 (13.7%)
India	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Russia	35 (10.3%)	3 (4.1%)
USA	15 (4.4%)	7 (9.6%)
Singapore	22 (6.5%)	9 (12.3%)
Malaysia	6 (1.8%)	3 (4.1%)
South Korea	7 (2.1%)	5 (6.8%)
Turkey	22 (6.5%)	0 (0%)
Saudi Arabia	17 (5%)	6 (8.2%)
My country should follow its own model	129 (37.9%)	22 (30.1%)
Other	5 (1.5%)	0 (0%)
No response	1 (0.3%)	1 (1.4%)
Total	340	73

Source: Compiled by the authors.

certain influences, the respondents do not believe that the Chinese development model is suitable for their countries (see Table 6). We found similar results in our 2014 pilot test.

In Kazakhstan, we see a tendency for respondents to argue that their country should follow its own model of development. As Table 6 shows, the Kazakhstani respondents consider the Kazakhstani, the Chinese, and the Singaporean models the top three models of development. Singapore has fared well because the current Kazakhstani president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and his government have argued repeatedly that Kazakhstan should consider Singapore a good example to follow. The fact that Singapore is not yet a liberal democracy with an internationally known record in economy and public administration has lured Kazakhstan's leaders to examine the Singaporean experience.¹⁸

Although Japan, the United States, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia all have some presence and influence in Kazakhstan, our respondents do not consider it important to follow these countries' developmental models. Also, Turkey might not be a model for Kazakhstan because, since 1991,

¹⁸Chen Yu-Wen, "A Research Note on Central Asian Perspectives on the Rise of China: The Example of Kazakhstan," *Issues and Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2015), pp. 63–87.

Turkey has started a very strong campaign of Pan-Turkism with Turkey as the “bigger brother” of such a narrative. Consequently, Central Asian countries feared Turkish expansion. Similar to our 2014 survey results, the Russian model fared quite badly in our 2016 Almaty survey despite its imprints on the current administration and governance of Kazakhstan. One plausible explanation is that its fragile and declining economy fails to give Russia a good standing in this kind of ranking. The 2014 Crimean and Ukrainian crises also sent an alarming warning to Kazakhstan about its giant neighbor’s political intention; thus, they wish to avoid a Russian invasion into their country. These concerns could have led the Kazakhstani respondents to be less inclined to accept the Russian model as a guide for developing Kazakhstan.

Likewise, the majority of the Kyrgyzstani respondents believe that Kyrgyzstan should follow its own model. Similar to the Kazakhstani case, one could interpret this as an expression of nationalism or pragmatism, stemming from the understanding that no other country’s model can be easily adopted for the development of another country. It is vital to stress that the young generation covered by the survey has more concrete national consciousness than the older generation, who in the 1990s were still nostalgic about the Soviet period, looking at the 1980s as the golden age and having a low opinion of their states’ new national policy orientation.

Young generations in Central Asia would rather explore their own development models than emulate China.

What makes Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan strikingly different is the relative significance of the Japanese model and the Russian model in the minds of Kyrgyzstani respondents. This is most likely related to Kyrgyzstani migrants choosing Russia as their main destination, many of whom opt to obtain Russian citizenship. As for Japan, several Japanese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been helping

Kyrgyzstani communities. Kazakhstan does not have the same support from Japanese NGOs as Kyrgyzstan. As observed in the 2014 pilot test, our 2016 survey indicated that the respondents did not consider the Indian model at all useful. India’s underperformance might stem from its geographic distance and a lack of perception of India as a powerful or strong state in the minds of the people of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Conclusion

Chinese President Xi Jinping once expressed that China's recent move to establish more multilateral initiatives such as the BRI is "a pursuit not to establish China's own sphere of influence, but to support common development of all countries. It is meant to build not China's own backyard garden, but a garden shared by all countries."¹⁹ Many Western and Chinese news reports and discussions of the "Belt and Road" initiative have shed light on what China can offer the world these days. At the very high political level, rhetoric from the countries involved is diplomatic. Most countries do not want to be seen as being reluctant to cooperate with China.

Although Russia continues to exert its influence in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in various ways, such as institutional design and ways of governance, our survey shows that the respondents are turning their eyes eastwards. However, the Chinese development model has not been seen as the most desirable one. There are several models of development in Central Asia, and China is not the only country offering alternative development models to countries in the developing world. Colonial legacies and preferences from homegrown development models in Central Asia as well as competition from countries such as Japan and Singapore will be a major challenge for China.

It is also worth noting that while respondents are aware of China's rising influence, it remains more of an impression without substance, as they have limited knowledge about Beijing's much-advocated initiatives, which remain at the very elitist level. China's ambition of being able to exercise soft power by showing benevolence is not without limitations. If China wishes to establish its actual influence in global politics, it needs to significantly improve its public diplomacy efforts to increase its visibility beyond political elites in countries within the parameters of the BRI. For instance, an immediate task is to attract local influential media to make more reports on the initiative, instead of issuing only general reports on China. This can be combined with public informational events where local

¹⁹"China's President Xi Jinping's Opening Address of G20 Summit: A New Blueprint for Global Economic Growth," Global Research, September 4, 2016, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/chinas-president-xi-jinpings-opening-address-of-g20-summit-a-new-blueprint-for-global-economic-growth/5543895>.

elites who are actually engaged in relevant business and activities can present their experience to the public. This will not only boost the visibility of China's initiatives in the region, but also make the local elites more transparent and accountable to the public. This is vital for most Central Asian states' model of governance and sustainability of regimes.

It is important to note that local perceptions in Central Asia on China must be viewed with an understanding of how each Central Asian state perceives itself first. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are different in their ways of conceiving their nation-states, and such a divergence likely affects how the respondents view other countries as possible examples of development. Kyrgyzstan has to face political uncertainties that have been created by the substitution of the political elite after two revolutions in 2005 and 2010, whereas Kazakhstan has had only one president since its independence. While Kazakhstan's project of a nation-state is one of a strong state that has equal relations with more developed countries, Kyrgyzstan's project of a nation-state has shifted from time to time with changes in local politics. China, as "the other," is comparatively more of a threat for the insecure Kyrgyzstanis than for the Kazakhstanis. Although China hopes to expand its economic, political, and cultural influence into these countries, it will always face barriers of one sort or another depending on how these Central Asian states and their people situate China in their national narratives.