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KAZAKH-CHINA RELATIONS: BALANCING IN PREVENTING REGIONAL DOMINATION

As Kazakhstan and China celebrated thirty years of establishment of bilateral relations recently, a brief analysis of the bilateral state-to-state relations indicates to the overall stability and forward momentum. Several significant developments were witnessed both in China and in Kazakhstan and in the bilateral relations, specifically in their respective material capability build-up, exertion at the regional levels, expanding economic ties and strengthening institutional contacts, but also to the rising popular discontent on several issues. This article recounts first the major developments in these two countries and how the bilateral state-to-state relations flowered in different areas of diplomacy, economy and energy fields. Nevertheless, several problems also beset the bilateral relations, including regional balancing efforts, rising nationalism, Uighur issue, cross-border river sharing, rising debt and others, the resolution of all of which could determine future trajectory of these ties. It is argued here that following its “multi-vector” policies, Kazakhstan has been balancing both the traditional player Russia and a rising China to see that no single power is able to dominate the regional security situation.

Key words: Kazakhstan, China, bilateral Relations, Belt and Road Initiative, economic Relations

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Қазақстан-Қытай қатынастары: аймақтық үстемдіктің алдын алуды теңгерімдеу

Қазақстан мен Қытай жақында екіжақты қарым-қатынастың орнауының 30 жылдығын атап өткендіктен, мемлекеттер арасындағы екіжақты қарым-қатынастарды қысқаша талдау жалпы тұрақтылық пен алға қарай серпінділікпен дамып жатқандығын көрсетеді. Қытайда да, Қазақстанда да, сондай-ақ екіжақты қарым-қатынаста, әсіресе олардың материалдық әлеуетін арттыруда, аймақтық деңгейде күш салуда, экономикалық байланыстарды кеңейтуде және институционалдық байланыстарды нығайтуда бірқатар маңызды өзгерістер болды, алайда бірқатар мәселелер бойынша халықтың наразылығы да өсті.

Бұл мақалада осы екі елдегі негізгі оқиғалар және екіжақты мемлекетаралық қатынастардың дипломатия, экономика және энергетиканың әртүрлі салаларында қалай өркендегені сипатталған. Дегенмен, екіжақты қарым-қатынастарға бірнеше мәселелер кедергі келтіретіндігі айтылады, соның ішінде теңгерімге жету жолындағы аймақтық күш-жігер, ұлтшылдықтың күшеюі, ұйғыр мәселесі, трансшекаралық өзендер сияқты, қарыздың өсуі және т.б. олардың шешілуі осы байланыстардың болашақ траекториясын анықтауы мүмкін. Бұл жерде Қазақстан өзінің «көпвекторлы» саясатын ұстана отырып, аймақтық қауіпсіздік жағдайына бірде-бір державаның үстемдік ете алмайтынын қамтамасыз ету үшін дәстүрлі ойыншы Ресейді де, өсіп келе жатқан Қытайды да тепе-теңдікті сақтайды деген пікір айтылады.

Түйін сөздер: Қазақстан, Қытай, екіжақты қарым-қатынас, Бір белдеу, бір жол бастамасы, экономикалық қарым-қатынас

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Казахстанско-китайские отношения: балансирование по предотвращению регионального доминирования

Поскольку недавно Казахстан и Китай отметили 30-летие установления двусторонних отношений, краткий анализ двусторонних отношений между государствами указывает на общую стабильность и поступательный импульс. Как в Китае, так и в Казахстане, а также в двусторонних отношениях произошел ряд значительных событий, особенно в их соответствующем наращива-

нии материального потенциала, усилиях на региональном уровне, расширении экономических связей и укреплении институциональных контактов, а также росте народного недовольства по ряду вопросов.

В данной статье рассказывается об основных событиях в этих двух странах и о том, как расцветали двусторонние межгосударственные отношения в различных областях дипломатии, экономики и энергетики. Тем не менее, некоторые проблемы также препятствуют двусторонним отношениям, в том числе региональные усилия по уравниванию, растущий национализм, уйгурский вопрос, трансграничное разделение рек, растущий долг и другие, решение которых может определить будущую траекторию этих связей. Здесь утверждается, что, следуя своей «многовекторной» политике, Казахстан уравнивает как традиционного игрока Россию, так и растущий Китай, чтобы убедиться, что ни одна держава не может доминировать в ситуации с региональной безопасностью.

Ключевые слова: Казахстан, Китай, двусторонние отношения, инициатива «Один пояс, один путь», экономические отношения

Introduction

Three decades ago, when the then Soviet Union disintegrated, Kazakhstan was one of the 14 independent republics, but made tremendous progress in sovereign nation building. While China was embarking on its reform and opening-up policies since 1978 and in 1992 intensified such efforts by the famous Deng Xiaoping “southern tour” of attracting investments, Kazakhstan was also regrouping and in 2012 began the 2030 Kazakhstan Strategy for economic development, innovation and enhancing strategic profile and in 2017 formulated Strategy 2050. The 2017 EXPO on green technologies provided a window for Kazakhstan to diversify from fossil fuel exports to preserving the ecology. A National Investment Strategy for the period 2018-2022 was also announced. A shift from central planning to market oriented reforms and accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2015 made Kazakhstan a power house and its GDP increased by more than 20 times and reached a per capita of about \$11,600 (as against China’s about \$11,000) and poverty reduced to less than a quarter of the population. Kazakhstan also instituted a National Oil Fund (of \$28 billion) to benefit on a long-term basis on the export of energy resources. Thus, Kazakhstan is poised for all-round development, while China has become the second largest economy in the world.

However, unlike China which retained its authoritarian political structure, political democracy began to take roots in Kazakhstan with the introduction of gradual electoral reforms, including reservation for women and youth in the electoral lists of political parties, introduction of parliamentary opposition, relaxing the criterion for registration of parties from 40,000 to half of that number, allowing organising of peaceful assembly of people, direct

elections of mayors (akims) and strengthening local government institutions and participation.

Kazakhstan’s political legitimacy globally also increased with its nuclear disarmament measures of shutting down Semipalatinsk test site, dismantling of over a thousand nuclear weapons, ballistic missile silos, and radioactive materials, besides actively participating in the multilateral institutions such as United Nations, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organization, Shanghai Cooperation organization, Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia and others. These have widened the appeal of Kazakhstan to the outside world. On the other hand, while China expanded its outreach through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Global Security Initiative and others, its assertiveness raised concerns for the neighbourhood and beyond in these three decades.

As both celebrated thirty years of establishment of diplomatic relations, a relevant Chinese proverb can be cited, viz., *sanshi nian hexi, sanshi nian hetong* [every thirty years things go to the opposite]. While both enjoy elevation in bilateral relations to “strategic partnership” to that of the current “permanent comprehensive strategic partnership”. Yet, a number of geopolitical and geostrategic issues have emerged including China’s “dual circulation” strategy of less dependence on exports, emphasis on domestic consumption in the light of the ongoing “decoupling” process with the United States and its allies. The ongoing Ukrainian war is also redefining the emerging global and regional orders.

Bilateral Relations

At the most fundamental level, China and Kazakhstan share a long 1782 km long border (with Russia about 7,598 km) which sometimes provides

opportunities like cross-border trade, investments or facilitating construction of energy pipelines or other times political problems. In 1996, Kazakhstan and China signed the first border agreement on Strengthening Confidence in the Military Field in Border Areas, and the Agreement on Mutual Reduction in Border Areas in 1997. In 2002 they signed a border demarcation agreement. These have stabilized the borders.

Seven boundary crossings exist between China and Kazakhstan, viz.,

- “Jeminay-Maikapchagai connecting Xinjiang with north Kazakhstan;
- Tahcheng-Bakhty connecting Xinjiang with northern side of Kazakhstan;
- Alashankou-Dostyk/Druzhba;
- Khorgas-Khorgos crossing (where approximately 280 km long Jinghe- Yining- Khorgas railway line was also built);
- Dukart- Kulzhart,
- Muzart- Narynkol, and
- Ahey tubiek- Alekseevka (Kazakhstan border crossings, 2022).

Two railway border crossings have been made to facilitate trade and people-to-people contacts at Dostyk-Alashankou and Khorgos. A third is also being planned between Baktu port in Tacheng, Xinjiang and Abai Oblast in Kazakhstan (Chengfan Zh., 2022). These have enhanced connectivity between China, Kazakhstan and Europe in recent times.

However, geographical proximity and ethnic cross-border movements have created problems in bilateral relations. The pan-Turkic movements in the past several centuries and policies of China towards its ethnic minorities such as Uighurs have complicated regional security issues. In the 1960s border crossings from Ili Prefecture to Kazakhstan was heavy, with over 60,000 people crossing from Tacheng area in what was termed as “Yi-Ta incident” (Ding-dong Zh. and Hong-bo X., 2004). In recent times, a number of friction points emerged with China’s clampdown on the Uighurs in Xinjiang. For instance, in April 2018, Sairagul Sauytbay, an ethnic Kazakh Chinese citizen, fled to Almaty where a court refused in August for her extradition. She revealed that several thousand people in Xinjiang were detained, a charge mentioned by the United Nations report on one million incarcerations in the region. Again, on January 14, 2020, a Kazakh woman Farida Qabylbek demonstrated in front of the Chinese Consulate at Almaty protesting against her husband’s detention in Xinjiang. Qaster

Musakhanuly and Murager Alimuly as well have complained against the maltreatment meted out to Uighurs in Xinjiang (Kazakh Woman Demands Release of Her Husband, Told Protest Illegal, 2019). In another case, Qaisha Aqan testified at Zharkhent in eastern Kazakhstan bordering Xinjiang on November 12, 2019 that she escaped torture in Xinjiang. Similar were the travails of Murager Alimuly and Qaster Musakhanuly (Ethnic Kazakh from Xinjiang Pleads with Court to stay in Kazakhstan, 2019).

These were compounded by the nationalist sentiments running high in China. For instance, in an article on “Why Kazakhstan is eager to return to China” published at sohu.com, mentioned that Kazakhstan has been a historical part of China and that its leaders paid allegiance to China. Such views were protested by Kazakhstan which summoned the Chinese envoy to lodge protest against such irredentist views (Kazakhstan summons Chinese ambassador in protest over article, 2020).

China began addressing cross-border issues under the overall rubric of “Three Evils” (that is separatism, extremism and splittism) (Jiang H., 2019) and had pushed through such agenda in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and other bodies and insisted other countries, including Kazakhstan to follow, surprisingly without diplomatic reciprocity (China, Kazakhstan to jointly crack down on the ‘three evil forces,’ resolutely oppose interference by external forces, 2022). The ground reality is that cross border violent incidents have increased in the larger Eurasian region, triggered by cross-border flow of drugs, trafficking, and small arms transfers (Burnashe R., 2007). The situation in Afghanistan, post 9/11 events and two decades of counter-terrorism campaigns have not yielded significant positive changes. The recent United States withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan further increased the sense of uncertainty in the region. The SCO and its counter-terror campaigns are then seen as a part of “stabilising” the region (Hao D., 2021).

However, Kazakhstan has to balance the increasing influence of China and Russia in the Eurasian region (Amrebayev A., 2022). China’s agenda in the SCO is to build a “community of shared future” (Zhuangzhi S., 2021). Although never clearly and explicitly elaborated by the Chinese leadership, as with many terms dished out in the past, this is seen as building partnership and a cushion against the vagaries of the international and regional orders. For Kazakhstan, it needs to steer clear of any overarching influence and intrusion in its region.

Another cross-border issue that has the potential to derail bilateral relations is the water sharing issue. Kazakhstan is dependent on two main rivers Ili and Irtysh, in addition to 18 small rivulets, flowing from the east to west. Irtysh is the 5th longest Asian river of about 4248 km flowing from Mongolia, China, Kazakhstan and Russia. Due to heavy use of water upstream by China for agriculture, industrial use and household use due to heavy Han migration, Ili River was discharging only 236 cubic meters of water per second in 2012 that is five times lower in 2005, according to an estimate. In 1999, without informing the lower riparian state Kazakhstan, China built a 300-km long Kara Irtysh-Karamay canal in Xinjiang that diverted 800 million cubic meters of water per year to Ulungur Lake water. This has serious consequences to the 13th largest lake in the world, the Balkhash Lake, that receives 80 percent of water from the 1400 km long Ili River (Stone R., 2022).

Even though China and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on Cooperation in the Use and Protection of Transboundary Rivers in 2001 and revised it in 2011, this did not lead into any meaningful resolution on sharing waters on the Irtysh and Ili Rivers (Trilling D., 2022). In the talks, it is reported that China insisted on “fair use” of water, mainly based on the population factor, even though such talks remained inconclusive. Kazakhstan’s arguments are based on protecting the fragile ecology and for irrigation purposes. The relative fragmentation of Central Asian states on water issues provides a chance for China to stall progress in the resolution of water disputes (Zakhirova L., 2013).

BRI

A bright spot in the bilateral relations, however, is the entry of the BRI since 2013 that appeared to resolve Kazakhstan’s landlocked nature by seemingly converting it into a trans-national transportation hub. The fact that China’s President Xi Jinping chose Astana to announce the BRI in September 2013 indicated to the geostrategic location of Kazakhstan. For Kazakhstan, however, its overall political and economic stability is a key consideration in joining China’s BRI projects as it is conducive for the construction of Transcaspian transit corridor (Saltybayev Y., 2018).

As a result of the BRI construction, at present, there are 6 highways, 9 railways, 4 air corridors and 20,238 kilometers of pipelines passing through Kazakhstan, including 12,318 kilometers of natural

gas pipelines and 7,920 kilometers of oil pipelines (Amrebayev A., 2022). The BRI has over 56 projects related to energy, mining, transport and logistics with an investment of nearly \$25 billion, accounting for about 7.8 percent (as compared to 8 percent from Russia, 11 percent from the US and 42 percent from Europe) in Kazakhstan (Ziwen Zh., 2022).

Notable investments from China in Kazakhstan include Zhongfu Investment Group into oilseed processing worth \$1.2 billion in 2016, MangistauMunaiGas (50 percent) of about \$2.6 billion in 2009, the construction of Kazakh portion of Central Asia-China gas pipeline worth \$6.7 billion in 2009, Ekibastuz GRES-2 Power Plant in 2016, Eurasian Land bridge Railway corridor, Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline with \$3 billion in investments in 2006 Kazakhstan Khorgos-Aktau railway Caspian to China link and others (Sternberg T., Ahearn A. and McConnell F., 2017). Energy pipelines and investments by China have strengthened the bilateral relations (Zhigang G. and Li J., 2015). For instance, prior to his visit to Astana in September 2022, President Xi Jinping reiterated the “rock-solid” and “permanent comprehensive strategic partnership” between the two countries. He mentioned the economic projects as being “a strong driving force for economic and social progress in Kazakhstan” (Jinping X., 2022).

Economic Relations

The construction of the BRI in Kazakhstan and beyond have strengthened the economic relations, although such relations precede the BRI projects. For instance, the China-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee, established in 2004, has been instrumental in expanding economic relations between the two countries (Peyrouse S., 2008). Spread of the market mechanisms and reductions in tariffs have benefited China and Kazakhstan from an estimated 0.02 percent and 0.68 percent, to an estimated 0.17 percent and 3.30 percent for the respective parties (Yu L., Yingkang L. and Shuiping Q., 2016). Of all the Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan stood out as the largest trading partner of China (Melet Y., 1998). For instance, Ambassador Shakhmat Nuryshev, Kazakhstan’s envoy to Beijing stated that trade has increased over 70 times in the last three decades to over in 2021 to \$25 billion and the BRI has over \$21 billion in allocations for infrastructure and other projects in Kazakhstan. After the pandemic hit the world, President Xi Jinping made Astana as his first visit abroad for a summit meeting

(China-Kazakhstan Relations: Kazakh ambassador to China says bilateral ties at ‘unprecedented levels, 2022) Likewise, Zhang Xiao, China’s ambassador to Kazakhstan praised the “pragmatic cooperation” between the two countries (Xiao Zh., 2022).

Much of such economic cooperation is witnessed in the energy sector that provided complementarities to China and Kazakhstan (Lianyong F. and Jianfeng Sh., 2016). According to Lydiya Parkhomchik, China’s forays into Kazakhstan’s mining sector took several forms, including:

(a) onshore and offshore exploitation of hydrocarbons under long-term concession agreement,

(b) cross-border oil and gas pipelines construction for delivering resources to China,

(c) modernization of domestic oil refinery (Shymkent) and construction domestic gas processing plant (Zhanazhol) (Parkhomchik L., 2016).

In the energy sector, where much progress was made, China exhibited several interesting features. It pursued “two track” [双轨] process of promoting China-Kazakhstan and China-Central Asia routes to diversify its imports. Secondly, China explored several avenues for investments in the energy sector of the region as a whole. Thirdly, the Chinese government and the foreign ministry facilitated active inter-state relations for the smooth transfers of energy resources. The party-state system integration in China provided structural benefits in the process by projecting state owned enterprises. Fourthly, China undertook regional diplomatic initiatives to further such energy interests. For instance, at the SCO’s 2001 summit meeting it was decided on “promoting bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation” and at the Bishkek summit meeting of the SCO in 2007, energy cooperation between Kazakhstan, Russia and China was formally included that led to the formation of a unified energy market. Fifthly, China promoted innovative methods to secure energy resources such as “loan for oil” of extending loans for stable and long-term supplies. Sixthly, China’s energy diplomacy was geared to overcome “China threat” theory in energy investments abroad (in the light of the failed bid of CNOOC to takeover Unocal of the US in the 1990s). Seventhly, China nudged the international community to bring reforms to the international energy order that is led by the US, and tried to diversify towards Kazakhstan, Russia and other countries.

Thus these measures to security energy interests in Kazakhstan and other countries led to major energy exports to China. While China and Kazakhstan have almost same amount proven natural gas

reserves, the latter has an estimated double estimated oil reserves compared to the former (Garrison J.A., Abdurahmonov A., 2011). With President Nazarbayev’s declaration on diversification of energy resources, China was able to tap not only Kazakh oil and gas but also uranium. In 1997 a bilateral agreement on energy cooperation furthered this process. The decision in 1997 to build a 3,000-km long energy pipeline between Atyrau in Kazakhstan to Altaw Pass in China, laid the foundation for energy cooperation between the two countries (Liao J.X., 2006). In the same year, China National Petroleum Corporation had bid for Aktobemunaigas fields with 60 percent of production for \$4.3 billion. It also bid for Kashagan oil deposits; and in about 51 percent of Uzen oil fields. During the June 3, 2003 visit of President Hu Jintao energy cooperation was declared as of “strategic significance”. In May 2004 during the visit by President Nazarbayev the Atasu to Alashankou pipeline deal was explored (Qinghua X., 2005). The Kazakh-China pipeline at one time exported 11 million tons of oil in 2011 and about 20 million tons in 2017-19. It was reported that about 20 percent of Kazakh oil is mined by Chinese companies and about 10,900 tonnes (worth \$ 1 billion) are exported to China. However, with a change in priorities towards ecological protection and value-added products, Kazakhstan reduced gas exports in 2014. According to Energy Minister Vladimir Shkolnik, the total gas transmitted through the country in 2013 was about 99 billion cubic meters, but in 2014 reduced to 70 bcm, including that to China.

Also, such energy cooperation faced a few bottlenecks. These include initially the legal barriers imposed by Kazakhstan on trade investment in the energy sector, the legal conflicts brought about by the Customs Union, the weakness of China’s legal system within the framework of international laws on energy cooperation and legal impediments within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Eurasian Economic Union etc (Lei X. and Xiao F., 2014).

However, the most critical problem that Kazakhstan is facing is its mounting debts to China. While China’s loans, aid and investments in Kazakhstan have benefited the latter’s economic growth rates, there is a lingering feeling about the political implications of debt to China. As Kazakhstan received huge loans from China – indeed the 6th largest recipient of such loans – there are concerns about political dependence on China, given many debt-laden countries situation recently, including the meltdown in Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

Conclusions

Three decades of active interactions between China and Kazakhstan have been productive and forward looking. Given the need for Kazakhstan and other newly independent Eurasian countries for nation building, China grabbed the first opportunity to expand bilateral and multilateral ties with the region, a prospect that is absent during the frosty Soviet times. Under the rubric of “Good Neighbours, Good Partners” [与邻为善, 以邻为伴] and “Good, Prosperous & Secure Neighbours” [睦邻、富邻、安邻], China was able to expand relations with Kazakhstan as with other countries. Even though China’s policies sounded unilateral in nature in terms of protecting China’s core interests in relation to Taiwan, Xinjiang and others, and despite minor frictions in bilateral relations related to nationalism, cross-border issues and others, China’s investments and energy imports provided an alternative to a

land-locked and commodity-exporting Kazakhstan. However, larger geo-strategic issues like the ongoing Ukrainian conflict, disruptions and the long-term need of Kazakhstan to preserve its ecology for sustainable development and diversify from commodities to manufacturing and services based economy – have all been contributing to new trends in regional security. Kazakhstan is also wary of both Russia and China in encroaching its regional space and regional dominance efforts. In the light of the above challenges, Astana is following a balanced and multi-vector policy of engagement with several countries. Banking on the CSTO for stabilising the Almaty situation in early 2022, while expressing concerns on the Ukrainian developments and not taking China’s support – are all part of the new-found balancing act of Kazakhstan. It needs to be seen how Astana would ward-off challenges in this regard and steer its economic growth rates and preserve its nascent democracy.

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