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Sinophobia and Sinophilia in Central Asia after the Collapse of the Soviet Union (1991–2023)

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Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian region was considered a backward and underdeveloped area. However, following the dissolution of the USSR, this region attracted increasing attention from Beijing due to its energy significance and geopolitical proximity to China. Consequently, China gradually established relations with the countries of this region, aiming to maintain political and social stability domestically and especially in the Xinjiang region. Although the people of Central Asia initially welcomed China's presence due to Beijing's proclaimed efforts toward regional development, over time, a sense of Sinophobia began to emerge among the populace. This study, focusing on China's relations with the countries of Central Asia, poses the question: What factors have contributed to the rise of Sinophobia and Sinophilia in this region? Employing descriptive and analytical methods, and through an examination of existing data and evidence, the research argues that economic, military, political, and cultural factors have functioned dually—on one hand, intensifying anti-Chinese sentiment in these societies, and on the other, fostering a sense of Sinophilia.

Keywords: *Central Asia, China, Sinophobia, Sinophilia, Soviet Union Collapse.*

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1. Introduction

The onset of China's reform era and open-door policy, along with the country's rapid economic growth and, on the other hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of Central Asian countries, collectively expanded Beijing's sphere of interests across Eurasia. This expansion has, in turn, created new security challenges for China in relation to Central Asia, thereby granting the region a special place in China's national security doctrine.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, China quickly redefined its long-standing suspended strategic plan and foreign policy toward Central Asia. Given the potential instability in the Xinjiang region, reopening borders and prioritizing economic development was a bold move for Beijing. Eastern Turkestan, or Xinjiang, is perceived by Chinese authorities as a threat to the country's territorial integrity. Due to its strong historical and ethnic ties with Central Asia, it has consistently been viewed as a potential source of unrest. Moreover, a significant portion of China's energy resources is located in this region, adding to its strategic value. Therefore, in an effort to protect this region, China's multidimensional policy in Central Asia is based on three principles: resolving border disputes with neighboring countries, establishing friendly regional relations, and preventing the hegemony of any singular power. From Beijing's

perspective, the dominance of a single hegemonic power in Central Asia could complicate its security environment (Mihalka, 2007).

China's next major policy toward Central Asia has centered on efforts to improve both its own economy and security, as the economic development of Central Asia could simultaneously present attractive and dangerous prospects for China's underdeveloped and remote border regions. Chinese leaders, especially after the Tiananmen Square unrest in 1989, realized the importance of investing in economic development in both Xinjiang and Central Asia (Sutter, 2008).

The third pillar of China's doctrine regarding Central Asia reflects its growing desire to play a role in the global security system. To assert itself effectively on the international stage, China must first solidify its influence in Central Asia. Although energy resources in this region are important to China, they have not played a decisive role in shaping its strategy toward the region, being overshadowed by other political and strategic considerations. Consequently, China can be seen as the third pole in the regional power game, alongside the United States and Russia, creating a balance of power in Central Asia. According to many analysts, China views Central Asia through the lens of national security; Russia sees it as part of its sphere of influence; while the United States engages with it opportunistically (Shah Mansouri & Shamiri, 2010).

2. Literature Review

Previous research relevant to this study includes the following:

Shariatinia (2012), in an article titled *"China and Central Asia: A Shift in Geo-Economics,"* addresses the consequences of China's presence in Central Asia. He argues that China's increasing influence in the region has transformed the dynamics of power and wealth and ushered in a new era in the traditional rivalry among great powers. According to him, there are early signs of a strategic will on the part of China to expand its sphere of influence from geo-economics to geopolitics.

Amir Ahmadian (2013), in an article titled *"Goals and Strategies of China's Foreign Policy in Central Asia,"* discusses the determinants of China's foreign policy strategy in the region. He highlights various dimensions of China's foreign policy goals, asserting that they are based on economic objectives, energy needs, competition with major powers, and the security of China's western provinces—especially Xinjiang.

Peyrouse (2016), in a work titled *"Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia,"* uses surveys and field interviews to examine Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asian countries. He concludes that there is no clear response to the phenomena in the region, as Sinophilia and Sinophobia often coexist, even within the same individual. Ultimately, he argues that Sinophobia is on the rise (Peyrouse, 2016).

He (2017), in the article *"The Sleeping Dragon Is Gathering Power,"* explores the roots of Sinophobia in Central Asia. He conducts historical analysis combined with ethnographic interviews to investigate the origins of modern-day Sinophobia. Based on this, the author concludes that conspiracy theories—especially in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—are prevalent. He suggests that due to China's land acquisitions in the post-Soviet era, many believe China intends to take over Central Asia. However, he considers this idea highly exaggerated and attributes such views to Soviet-era propaganda and a general lack of public awareness due to political isolation (He et al., 2017).

Greer (2018), in an article titled *"One Belt, One Road, One Big Mistake,"* analyzes the challenges and issues related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). He evaluates various aspects of the project and states that, based on Chinese Communist Party rhetoric, President Xi Jinping aims to connect BRI to the Party's historical mission of offering a Chinese model of socialism for developing regions. Greer argues that investment decisions are often based on Beijing's geopolitical needs rather than financial rationale and are shaped primarily by the political motives of Chinese planners. He concludes that many of these projects, simply rebranded as part of BRI, lack financial logic and are ultimately doomed to fail (Greer, 2018).

Shi Han (2017), in the article *"Shaping China's Belt and Road Strategy,"* evaluates the project in terms of cost-benefit analysis and its objectives in various countries. The author argues that most BRI-related projects are linked to political agreements through which Chinese state-owned enterprises are granted exclusive bidding rights without competition. These companies are not held accountable in the same way international firms are. He further notes that the high cost of implementing these projects in various countries, especially when funded by

China's low-interest loans, may weaken the host nations' ability to repay their debts (Chase et al., 2017).

3. Theoretical Foundations:

3.1. Decision-Making Models, National Interests, and National Objectives

One of the central concepts in the neorealist theory of foreign policy is national security. Within this framework, a direct relationship exists between national interests and national security, as neorealism defines national interests in terms of national security. According to the objectivist approach of neorealism, national interests become concrete within the framework of national security and are considered independent of the inclinations and perceptions of foreign policy decision-makers. Because the foreign policy of states is fundamentally security-oriented, all decisions, actions, and behaviors can be explained and analyzed in relation to national security. Accordingly, the primary goal is survival within an anarchic international system. States strive to preserve and enhance their security by expanding their influence over other states. Security, in addition to maximizing control over resources and national power, is also ensured and reinforced by influencing how other states utilize their power. This strategy is pursued directly through the creation of asymmetric interdependence via bilateral relations or indirectly through regional and international organizations and institutions (Waltz, 1979).

Due to the significance of China's changing foreign policy, some analysts have categorized China's foreign policy into three discursive periods. In addition to the Mao and Deng Xiaoping eras, the era of Xi Jinping is considered the beginning of a new discursive phase (He et al., 2017). In fact, Xi Jinping's foreign policy continues the development-oriented trajectory established after 1979. However, the country's foreign behavior has diverged from the flexible model of previous decades and is now accompanied by greater political and military assertiveness (Talebi Arani, 2016).

According to Robert Kagan, China currently faces no tangible external military threats and enjoys the most stable borders in its modern history. Therefore, Kagan holds a pessimistic view regarding China's rising military expenditures (Kagan, 2008). In this regard, data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute indicate that China ranks second globally in military spending (Sipri, 2017).

Given that China's development and its transformation into a major global power depend on sustained economic growth, this goal can only be achieved through increased international engagement. In this context, Xi Jinping established the Department of International Economic Affairs within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in October 2012. Its primary function is to coordinate with other domestic institutions to promote international and regional economic cooperation (Talebi Arani, 2016).

Among his other initiatives was the 2014 declaration of the "New Chinese Desirability," which encompassed fundamental economic reforms, most of which were related to international economic interactions. These measures aimed to expand China's influence, increase outbound investment, and ultimately achieve desirable economic growth (He et al., 2017).

3.2. Security and Military Issues

Robert Kagan argues that a common principle in international affairs is that countries, once they achieve economic power, move to develop and expand their military capabilities to protect and advance their interests. China is no exception to this trend and is currently undergoing such a transformation. Having moved beyond Maoist self-sufficiency, China's economy has acquired a wide array of overseas economic interests, with massive investments in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and other regions of the world. As a result, China has become one of the largest consumers of raw materials, from oil and gas to timber and metals (Kagan, 2008).

Although, after Deng Xiaoping came to power, Beijing remained silent for years on territorial and maritime disputes—especially in the South China Sea—to create a strategic window of opportunity, Robert Kagan's theory suggests that historical anxieties inevitably resurface. Accordingly, Xi Jinping has revised Deng Xiaoping's approach in this new era. For instance, during the first meeting between the Presidents of China and Taiwan in 2015 (after 60 years), Xi Jinping stated that political issues cannot remain indefinitely unresolved (Brown, 2017). These changes were not merely rhetorical but also involved concrete actions. Given China's growing overseas interests, the Communist Party has directed the

People's Liberation Army (PLA) to expand its naval, aerial, and ground operations (Allen et al., 2017).

In November 2013, Beijing declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, requiring all aircraft entering the area to notify Chinese authorities. In May 2014, China installed an oil rig in a section of the South China Sea claimed by Vietnam as part of its exclusive economic zone. Continuing this approach, Beijing unilaterally initiated construction projects on several islands claimed by the Philippines (Ekman, 2015), and in 2015, it established a military base on the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea (Callahan, 2017). These actions contrast sharply with Deng Xiaoping's previously low-profile regional strategy. Moreover, from 2002 to 2013, the PLA held an average of six international military exercises annually. However, in 2014, this number surged to thirty exercises, in 2015 to forty-four, and in 2016 to forty-five international drills (Allen et al., 2017).

China has also extended its naval power beyond its immediate region. Beijing justifies this expansion as necessary to protect its economic interests, given that China conducts over $5 trillion in maritime trade annually. Any threat to maritime security could harm its economy; thus, China asserts its right to a substantial naval presence (Shahandeh, 2016).

While protecting economic interests is undeniably a reality, the matter goes beyond that. The expansion of China's military presence is directly related to its geopolitical influence. Beijing has numerous territorial disputes with its neighbors—the most critical involving the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, the Paracel and Spratly Islands, and, most importantly, Taiwan. These disputes could ignite conflict with neighboring states, particularly with U.S. backing. In essence, as China's global economic interests grow and it aspires to attain great power status, a kind of covert security rivalry with the United States has also emerged (Chase et al., 2017).

4. Dimensions of China's Influence in Central Asia

Following the clarification of various aspects of China's soft power development in Central Asia, one essential question emerges: What is the purpose of China's actions and policymaking in this area? In other words, what motivates China's investment in developing its soft power tools in Central Asia? To answer this question, reference to the concept of "influence" in international relations and its multiple dimensions can be illuminating.

Generally, when discussing the influence of great powers, three dimensions of influence can be identified. These dimensions can be classified according to two criteria: the level of visibility and their importance to states:

a) Cultural–Identity Dimension:

This is the most foundational and least visible form of influence. Traditionally, this dimension has not been independently prioritized at the top of states' political agendas. Cultural influence is the deepest and most complex form of power expansion, as it renders the process of influence a social one. When relationships become integrated within the societies of the target region, influence becomes stronger and easier to sustain. In other words, the function of this type of influence is to deepen political and economic relationships and serves as a tool for achieving political and economic outcomes from such interactions (Feyzi, 2011).

b) Economic Dimension:

This aspect of influence pertains to efforts by states to extract economic benefits from the target state. While, from one angle, economic relations and complex interdependence imply a degree of mutual influence, the overarching logic is that states strive to maintain the economic balance in their favor. This transforms the economic dimension into a significant part of influence strategies. Although this type of influence is generally more visible than cultural influence, it can, much like cultural influence, be used to expand political power—or influence in the broadest sense.

c) Political–Security Dimension:

The political-security dimension is the most important and the most visible aspect of influence because it is directly tied to the state's most critical objective—namely, power and security in the pursuit of survival. From a historical perspective, this has been the most traditional form of influence, with roots going back to the European balance-of-power system. While political-security influence has often been equated with the broader concept of influence itself, in the contemporary international environment, it cannot succeed without at least some levels of accompanying cultural and economic influence.

Examining China's relations with Central Asian countries over the past decade reveals that the country has experienced rapid and notable expansion in all three of these dimensions. This includes significant military assistance to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, extradition treaties with both countries, cooperation agreements on combating extremism, separatism, and terrorism with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's "Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure" in Tashkent, and annual joint military exercises with Central Asian states (Karami & Azizi, 2013).

Over the past decade, China has pursued a multi-dimensional policy to expand its influence in Central Asia, with cultural influence as one of its components. In other words, the strategy of developing "spheres of influence" is one traditionally employed by great powers to enhance their international standing. China, too, leverages its soft power in Central Asia as a mechanism for comprehensive influence in the region. Through this effort, Beijing facilitates its national interests in Central Asia and enhances its broader power on the global stage (Azizi, 2014).

5. Sinophobia in Central Asia

Historically, parts of Central Asia have at times fallen under the dominion of Chinese empires, leading to a longstanding suspicion of Chinese intentions. For instance, in Mongolia, it is common to believe that China is working to undermine Mongolian independence to eventually incorporate it into its territory. One of the historical clichés frequently used to express anti-Chinese sentiment is the term "Yellow Peril." The "Yellow Peril" is a longstanding racist ideology in the West targeting East Asians and refers to the worst anti-Asian stereotypes, which emerged alongside the first wave of Chinese immigration to the United States in the 19th century (Billé, 2015).

Since the early 2000s, the People's Republic of China has increasingly become a major player in Central Asia, both diplomatically and strategically—especially through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Economically, China has placed itself among the largest trading partners and investors in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. This growing presence has directly challenged Russia's traditional influence and has weakened the roles of the United States and Europe. Thus, China's rise has provoked anxieties and fears tied to profound social transformations in the region over the past two decades. This means that Sinophobia and Sinophilia are now closely intertwined (Laruelle, 2012; Peyrouse, 2012).

As anti-Chinese sentiments continue to spread across all levels of society in Central Asia—and as racial stereotypes are increasingly circulated in public media—some local politicians interpret this as part of broader xenophobic tendencies. Nonetheless, they claim that historical reasons have driven deeper cooperation with China. Meanwhile, political elites often favor enhanced relations with Beijing, viewing China's large-scale investments—usually with minimal political conditions—as highly attractive. However, economic grievances and nationalist sentiments can create a volatile environment that no Central Asian government or Chinese policymaker should ignore.

These negative attitudes toward China are particularly strong in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Survey data indicates that more Kyrgyz citizens view China as an economic threat than as a partner, while Russia, Turkey, and the European Union are more widely regarded as essential economic allies. These sentiments are particularly prevalent among Kazakh nationalist activists, who strongly oppose initiatives such as visa facilitation for Chinese tourists.

In Kyrgyzstan, anti-Chinese sentiment frequently sparks protests. Some political leaders exploit these attitudes to mobilize the public against Chinese firms. In August 2011, three Chinese miners were attacked at the Solton-Sary gold mine in Naryn Province. Locals claimed that the Chinese had ignored environmental safety protocols and mistreated Kyrgyz workers. In September 2012, locals in Jalal-Abad attacked a Chinese workers' camp near the Chaarat gold mine. In October 2012, after reports of clashes between Chinese and Kyrgyz workers, protesters halted operations at the Taldy-Bulak Levoberezhny gold field, which was operated by a Chinese company. In 2015, a brawl broke out between Chinese and local workers at a Chinese-owned copper mine in Kazakhstan. While such disputes have occurred with other foreign firms, Chinese companies appear to be disproportionately targeted. One likely reason is their preference for hiring Chinese nationals over local workers, which has fueled tensions. Consequently, Chinese workers are frequently harassed, and Chinese

companies often instruct employees to avoid leaving work sites.

Land distribution has also become a major point of tension in Central Asia. Farmland is scarce in most Central Asian states, making its allocation a potential source of conflict. Nationalists are particularly fearful that land might be sold to Chinese investors. In 2010, opposition activists protested against plans to lease land to Chinese investors in Almaty. In April 2016, following a legal reform that extended land leases to 25 years, mass protests erupted in the cities of Atyrau, Aktobe, and Semey in Kazakhstan. Although the protests were formally against the duration of land leases, they also expressed broader discontent—such as fears of Chinese migration and distrust of Chinese companies—which eventually led to the resignation of a cabinet minister and the suspension of the new law by President Nazarbayev.

During the "Zhanaozen Square" protests in Kazakhstan, after the governor of Mangystau told demonstrators, "We are in the era of globalization—we cannot live in isolation. We must be open," one protester replied: "Does globalization necessarily mean selling the country?" These sentiments, and others like them, have contributed to the rise of Sinophobia in the region (Umirbekov, 2019).

Although Chinese policymakers often base decisions solely on elite oligarchic interests and tend to underestimate the importance of public opinion, the experiences of some Chinese firms in Myanmar and Sri Lanka suggest that such thinking can lead to project delays or cancellations.

As one Central Asian analyst notes, "Most people in Central Asia who harbor strong negative views about China are not powerful, while those in power want to cooperate with China" (International Crisis Group, 2017).

6. Corruption and Lack of Oversight in China–Central Asia Relations

The nature of Chinese investment—especially in large-scale projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—is one of Beijing's key challenges. It is not surprising that the Silk Road Economic Belt lacks any mechanism to prevent corruption, nor are there binding legal frameworks to monitor the implementation of these projects. Although China repeatedly emphasizes its commitment to national oversight standards in loan allocation through institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), reports indicate widespread systemic corruption in Chinese investments across Central Asia. This includes the payment of bribes to high-ranking officials in the region. Chinese investors frequently target highly corruption-prone sectors such as mining, where licenses are often issued illegally and then resold to other bidders. For example, in September 2016, the head of Kazakhstan's Khorgos International Center for Cross-Border Cooperation was arrested for accepting a $1 million bribe. Investigations later revealed that some Chinese investors were involved in these illicit deals.

A major contributing factor to this financial corruption is the lack of transparency in transactions, where companies are selected without competitive bidding. The China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China often provide low-interest loans to Central Asian governments, which are then used to pay Chinese companies for executing ongoing projects in the region. For instance, in 2013, China issued a $385 million loan to the Kyrgyz government so that TBEA, a Chinese company, could rebuild Bishkek's power grid. This caused a public outcry among Kyrgyz MPs, who claimed that the Exim Bank of China had imposed the arrangement. In response, the director of the Electrical Power Centers, General Saladdin Avazov, stated: "If we had the money to rebuild, we would've held a tender. Since we didn't, we were forced to accept Exim Bank's condition."

Despite credible reports about the absence of legal procedures in awarding contracts to Chinese firms, Central Asian governments often defend China's actions. Weak oversight of project allocation, corruption in dealings with China, and the subsequent neglect of environmental concerns have led to protests. For example, in 2012, residents of Aravan in Kyrgyzstan protested against a Chinese cement company after environmental risks were reported. Another case involved a $300 million oil refinery in Karabalta, operated by Chinese firms, which was temporarily shut down following local demonstrations over environmental pollution. Activists in Karabalta noted that residents living near the plant were unable to open their windows due to strong odors and heavy industrial pollution. In 2015, a local resident told the International

Crisis Group, "We are struggling with health problems due to radiation and pollution from the refinery. I have to take my children to the doctor every month. Medical costs have increased, and no one is helping us." Despite public outrage, the plant resumed operations in 2016. Environmental concerns related to Chinese projects also persist in Tajikistan, where cement is still produced using fossil fuels like coal (International Crisis Group, 2017).

7. China's Military Bases in Central Asia

To prevent regime collapse, curb Islamic extremism, and combat drug trafficking, China has expanded its military presence in Central Asia and established military bases to safeguard its interests. In this regard, Beijing has launched an operational military base in Tajikistan, with a likely second base located in the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan. This Chinese base, situated 12 to 14 kilometers from the Tajik–Afghan border and 30 kilometers from the Tajik–Chinese border in the Gorno-Badakhshan region, overlooks a key gateway from China into Central Asia and lies close to the strategic Wakhan Corridor—one of the main arteries for China's Belt and Road Initiative.

China's military cooperation with Afghanistan and Central Asia began around 2016, with the opening of the Tajikistan base and possibly a second base in Afghanistan occurring around 2016–2017 or even earlier. The Tajikistan base was not China's first assertion of sovereignty-related power in the country. Previously, Tajikistan had transferred part of its territory to China as a form of debt repayment. These military bases serve both military and non-military purposes, including protection of the BRI and China's multi-billion-dollar investments, and rapid response to Islamist threats in the region.

Given China's growing influence and the resulting dependence of Central Asian states, further increases in Chinese military bases in the region should not be ruled out. Although Beijing may officially deny the existence of such bases, their presence aligns well with China's broader security strategy. Thus, the military base in Tajikistan—whether a standalone facility or part of a broader network of Chinese infrastructure representing security cooperation across Central and South Asia—clearly illustrates Beijing's resolve to defend its vital interests wherever they may be (Tasnim News, 2019b).

China believes that strong regimes are the best instruments for managing potential internal unrest. Accordingly, during uprisings or protests in the region, Beijing has firmly supported hardline responses by local governments—such as in Andijan (Uzbekistan, 2005), Zhanaozen (Kazakhstan, 2011), and Gorno-Badakhshan (Tajikistan, 2012).

8. China's Influence in Central Asia

As China's presence in Central Asia has expanded, the local populations have expressed both fear and hope in various ways, ultimately forming a delicate balance between the two. Eric McGlinchey of George Mason University, drawing on twelve years of survey data, reached intriguing conclusions. He argues that while China's role in the Central Asian economies has brought both positive and negative outcomes, many people in the region remain undecided. Responses of "I don't know" to approval questions ranged from 19.9% in Tajikistan to 42.2% in Uzbekistan.

Sebastien Peyrouse of George Washington University notes that despite its growing influence in Central Asia, China is increasingly concerned about Sinophobia and its impact on Chinese investments and political ambitions. As a result, the Chinese leadership has attempted to use soft power strategies—such as Mandarin language education and cultural promotion—to advance its model of political stability in the region. However, these efforts are highly state-driven and are unlikely to be effective unless backed by independent civil society organizations in China. Thus, many people in Central Asia do not hold favorable views of China (Shapiro, 2019).

Chinese investments and loans have triggered suspicion in many local communities. Fears of mounting public debt, debt-trap diplomacy, and concerns that China may seize land or natural resources in exchange for loans have intensified anti-Chinese sentiment.

After 1991, the elites and ruling classes of the newly independent Central Asian republics generally viewed China with fear and suspicion. These sentiments may have roots in Soviet propaganda from the 1960s to the 1980s that portrayed China negatively. Additionally, China's growing economic involvement in the region—especially the leasing of farmland to Chinese farmers—has further reinforced such perceptions (Tasnim News, 2019a).

When speaking with Central Asian government officials, one often hears reassurances like "The China issue is long-standing, and everything is fine with China." However, such remarks should not obscure the risks posed by increased debt burdens, lack of transparency in many dealings, economic disruption, and the influx of Chinese laborers into regions experiencing a flood of capital.

Furthermore, Central Asian countries have generally not looked beyond the BRI to develop more sustainable economies, which poses a problem. While the BRI could transform Central Asia into a major transit corridor, infrastructure development alone does not provide long-term employment for the region's populations. With projected population growth in the coming decades, unemployment rates are expected to rise (Stronsky, 2018).

China's growing presence can be seen, for example, in the modernization of Bishkek's thermal power plant in Kyrgyzstan by the Chinese contractor TBEA. This $386 million project, funded through Chinese credit, ended in failure when the plant exploded just six months after its completion in August 2017, leaving many residents of Bishkek without heat or electricity. Andrew Higgins observed that Kyrgyz officials agreed—under Beijing's recommendation—to work with TBEA, a company with grand ambitions but little experience in power plant construction. The debacle sparked public outrage, criminal proceedings against former officials, and media scrutiny of China's business practices in Kyrgyzstan.

During legal proceedings related to the TBEA case, former Kyrgyz Prime Minister Sapar Isakov and several former officials were charged with corruption. According to the public prosecutor, rigged tenders and inflated project costs resulted in losses exceeding $111 million. Isakov denied that the contract harmed the national interest, stating that neither he nor any other Kyrgyz official chose TBEA—that decision was made by the Chinese government (Tasnim News, 2019c).

Despite the allure of Chinese cooperation—particularly because it does not impose political conditions as the U.S. or Russia often do—some members of Kazakhstan's elite are interested in relations with China to diversify foreign ties, avoid overdependence on Russia, benefit financially through Chinese capital, and use cheap Chinese loans to fund personal and political networks. However, this does not mean the country is ready to become a "colony" of China.

In reality, the stronger and more assertive Beijing becomes, both externally and domestically, the deeper the existential anxiety in Kazakh society grows toward its eastern neighbor. This has shaped a national mindset so cautious that even corrupt political elites dare not cross certain boundaries. Like other Central Asian nations, Kazakhstan prefers to remain poor rather than fall under Chinese dominance. The prospect of crossing this "point of no return" is frightening. As a result, many Chinese initiatives have been blocked by Central Asian partners, impacting both transit trade and the inward flow of goods. Most of the region's rail infrastructure dates back to the Soviet era. These tracks, spanning thousands of kilometers, are incompatible with global standards due to their wide gauge—designed originally to protect Moscow's political, economic, and military interests.

Although Uzbekistan began building its own railways after independence, its network still struggles to meet domestic and regional needs, let alone serve as a transit corridor between Europe and China. Despite the potential of Chinese rail projects in Central Asia, progress has been slow. The rail gauge discrepancy makes cargo transport "costly" and "time-consuming." To address this issue, China proposed building standard-gauge railways connecting China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. However, Tashkent rejected the plan out of fear that it could hinder domestic mobility and create a new invasion route.

In addition to logistical concerns, these railway initiatives—like many other regional connectivity projects—have been hampered by geopolitical divisions. Although all Central Asian countries support enhanced land and rail connectivity, persistent border disputes, water rights conflicts, and deep-rooted ethnic and tribal rivalries have obstructed progress.

Any infrastructure project passing through Uzbekistan is typically met with opposition from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Both countries fear that expanded regional links would strengthen Tashkent's regional dominance. Kyrgyzstan is especially wary that new rail projects could inflame ethnic tensions and increase Uzbek influence along its southern borders. Political instability and latent separatism in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have

only added to the uncertainty surrounding China's future projects in the region.

Nevertheless, neither Astana nor Moscow is interested in scrapping their China cooperation agenda. Kazakhstan sees China as a counterweight to Russian influence. Russia, for its part, views China as a necessary partner to reassert global polarity. Both countries rely on Chinese investment and technology to fulfill their integration plans. Hence, the balance between fear and opportunity remains a persistent theme for both policymakers and analysts alike (Zuenko, 2018).

In Kazakhstan, even proponents of enhanced cooperation with the People's Republic of China under the "Nurly Zhol" (Bright Path) strategy urge caution not to neglect national interests. From the public's perspective, China is seen as an "untrustworthy neighbor" who may abandon or exploit you when you're most vulnerable. This sentiment suggests that ordinary citizens, experts, and elites in Central Asia do not have a favorable long-term view of China. In many post-Soviet countries, public interest is often disregarded in favor of the private interests of oligarchic elites—ruling families, senior officials, businesspeople, and influential stakeholders.

Nevertheless, China-friendly elites, under political pressure, try to avoid focusing on problems in China–Central Asia relations. At times, they even remain silent or downplay the issues. Still, the growing warning narrative in Central Asia is Sinophobia. People increasingly view China's actions as expansionist and neo-colonial. In Kazakhstan—home to the region's lowest population density (18 million people over 2.7 million square kilometers)—and given the nomadic traditions and identity (symbolized by the image of a free horse rider in open steppes), there is deep resistance to land acquisition, cultural dilution, or demographic mixing.

Following a land reform law that allowed Chinese citizens to lease or purchase land indefinitely, the Kazakh public viewed the decision as a sellout of national territory. Widespread protests forced the government to impose a moratorium on the policy. Many in Kazakhstan believe that territorial concessions to China amount to national erasure.

Although China had a detailed plan to expand its regional influence in Central Asia, this growing presence has often been accompanied by controversy, confusion, and consequences—such as fraud, "debt-trap diplomacy," and heightened local dissatisfaction—ultimately exacerbating economic hardship and unemployment (UranKyzy, 2019).

9. Structural Dependence of Central Asia on China

China's dominance in Central Asia has triggered major debates across the region regarding high-level corruption and public demands for transparency—particularly in relation to how Chinese financial aid and loans are spent.

Chinese financial resources, as part of lucrative Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, have offered opportunities for Central Asian countries in need of major investment to sustain growth. However, these opportunities have come with significant risks. According to 2018 reports, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan rank among eight countries most vulnerable to debt distress, with Kyrgyzstan owing 41% and Tajikistan 53% of their external debt to China. Despite this, borrowing from Beijing has accelerated over the past decades.

The deepening of Tajikistan's relationship with China and the resulting dependency has compelled Dushanbe to defend the controversial transfer of a mining concession to Beijing in exchange for a power plant—despite public backlash. The concession included income tax exemptions and customs duty waivers for Chinese-imported equipment. One Tajik expert warned that "the agreement effectively gives control of our mineral resources to China, and if Tajikistan fails to repay its loans, it will sell off land to Beijing."

In 2011, Tajikistan resolved a border dispute with China by transferring land, reportedly in exchange for debt settlement. Subsequently, 1,500 Chinese farmers were granted land leases in the country. A Tajik sociologist commented, "The door to Chinese influence is the door to political influence." This alarming trend is worsened by the fact that much of the money received from Beijing is being spent on regime vanity projects—like the world's tallest flagpole, the region's largest theater, and a new parliament complex.

The issue of dependency is further exacerbated by the inflow of Chinese labor. According to some estimates, more than 30,000 Chinese migrants arrived in Kyrgyzstan in 2018, many working on BRI-funded construction projects. Tajikistan hosts approximately 150,000 Chinese migrant workers, fueling public

discontent and sparking protests. Demonstrators in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan have demanded fewer work permits for Chinese laborers (UranKyzy, 2019).

As Chinese involvement in Central Asia deepens, concerns are growing about the long-term consequences of the "New Silk Road" or BRI and the resulting foreign dependency on Beijing. China's financial interventions—often channeled through the China Development Bank—typically combine loans, services, and direct investments into opaque packages. These arrangements often include stipulations that at least half of the technology and services under the contracts must be purchased from Chinese firms. They also mandate that Chinese companies provide their own workforce, including laborers. In the long run, this model risks fueling local resentment, as has already occurred in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Asymmetric and unbalanced policies, coupled with Central Asian states' inability to achieve trade parity with China, have led observers and scholars to use terms such as "Chinese capture" and "predatory lending." For example, Tajikistan sold a gold mine for $300 million to fund a power station. In 2011, it officially ceded 1,158 square kilometers of land to China to settle debt obligations. These moves were widely perceived by Tajiks as foreign encroachment and sparked nationwide protests (Vercuiel, 2018).

In Turkmenistan, amid its severe financial crisis, China wrote off Ashgabat's gas shipments as payment for a previous $2 billion loan. As a result, although Turkmenistan is China's largest gas supplier, it received no money in return (Tasnim News, 2019a).

In terms of debt-to-GDP ratios, Kyrgyzstan ranks fifth globally, with Chinese debt comprising 30% of its GDP. Tajikistan ranks twentieth, Turkmenistan twenty-third, and Uzbekistan fortieth. Due to opaque loan contracts and bonds, the true volume of Central Asia's debt to China remains unclear. According to the U.S.-based National Bureau of Economic Research, the debt-to-GDP ratios are: Kyrgyzstan 30.5%, Tajikistan 16.1%, Turkmenistan 13.4%, Uzbekistan 7.5%, and Kazakhstan 3.6%. This places Kyrgyzstan among the most high-risk debtors.

Analysts such as Christoph Trebesch, Sebastian Horn, and Carmen Reinhart argue that "China does not lend for financial return but for access to raw materials and geopolitical leverage." Most Chinese loans are used to pay the wages of Chinese workers and procure Chinese technology and labor. Thus, this credit largely remains within China.

Experience shows that China does not operate based on altruism, meaning that debt cancellation or even deferment is unlikely. Hence, repayment will likely come through mineral concessions and real estate assets. For instance, Sri Lanka leased a port to a Chinese company after failing to repay loans. Similarly, Tajikistan granted China indefinite access to the Kumarg gold mine—containing 50 tons of reserves—in exchange for debt cancellation. This trend has sparked fear among Kyrgyz citizens that Chinese loans might eventually force them to surrender border territory, as they did in 1999 when Kyrgyzstan transferred land to China under a debt agreement.

Despite these concerns, both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have used Chinese loans to modernize key infrastructure (e.g., roads, power plants, electricity networks). Still, part of this borrowing has led to corruption, such as in the Bishkek power plant renovation case.

Tajikistan has used Chinese investment to build facilities for extracting rare metals, gold, silver, and more. While the country is aware of the risks of dependency, it sees little alternative. China has invested about $20 billion directly in Kazakhstan. Chinese firms control around 25% of Kazakhstan's oil output, with 55 joint Kazakh-Chinese projects worth $27.6 billion in sectors like petrochemicals, automotive, transport, logistics, and agriculture.

In Kyrgyzstan, Chinese investment has supported hydropower plants, infrastructure, road construction, and the creation of various companies. Chinese firms are mining gold and have formed dozens of joint ventures in construction and industrial trade. Nearly 40% of Kyrgyzstan's total direct investment comes from China. However, these investments come with conditions: mandatory use of Chinese equipment, hiring of Chinese contractors, and Chinese labor (Tasnim News, 2019c).

In addition to financial aid, gas resources in Central Asia are often bartered for weapons. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan received HQ-9 air defense systems as partial repayment for natural gas exported via the China–Central Asia pipeline. Other military equipment was also exchanged for natural gas in January 2015 to settle Chinese loan-related debts.

Norinco—one of China's seven state-sanctioned arms exporters—was the first to provide pipeline and gas cylinder technology to the region in 2007 and 2009. It also transferred its technology in June 2017 to a Kazakh steel company, Atub, to build Central Asia's largest industrial hub. Another supplier, Poly Technologies—linked to Chinese political elites such as Mao's son-in-law—opened a tire factory in Uzbekistan in June 2017, a move suspected of enabling intelligence collection under the guise of trade (Tasnim News, 2019c).

The intensity of trade between China and Central Asia has created a new structural dependency due to rising debt levels. For example, in Kazakhstan, exports to China constitute 12% of total exports and imports also 12%. In Kyrgyzstan, exports to China are 5.4%, while imports are 33.4%. In Tajikistan, exports are 4.7% and imports 39.1%. In Turkmenistan, 83.7% of exports go to China and imports stand at 8.4%. Uzbekistan sends 17% of its exports to China and imports 23% (Vercuiel, 2018).

Although Beijing and Chinese scholars describe the Silk Road Economic Belt as a joint project among Eurasian states, Chinese officials seldom publicly discuss its geopolitical goals. This silence may serve as indirect confirmation of Beijing's expansionist geopolitical ambitions toward the countries traversed by the Belt and Road Initiative (Tasnim News, 2019b).

10. Conclusion

Central Asia has effectively become a platform for Beijing to pursue its ambitions, secure economic, political, and geopolitical interests, and experiment with its strategies as it grows and matures as a geopolitical power. However, this presence has also brought a host of negative consequences to the region. Although the people of Central Asia initially welcomed independence from Soviet communist control with joy, this enthusiasm quickly faded. Decades after gaining independence, the political leadership in these countries remains largely in the hands of authoritarian rulers carried over from Soviet-era police states. Therefore, little has changed in their political structures. China often seeks partnerships with authoritarian regimes because their power structures closely resemble China's own closed governance system, making such relationships feel more aligned. Consequently, public protests and elite criticisms of China's expansionist ambitions often go unanswered in these countries.

While some political elites occasionally raise concerns about Chinese influence—especially during election periods—these concerns tend to be forgotten once they attain power. In recent years, growing public protests and anxieties over China's economic and political penetration, along with the emergence of Sinophobic movements, reflect a broader unwillingness among Central Asians to fall under any foreign domination, particularly by Beijing. People in this region understand clearly that if tensions erupt in the new global power struggle, they will bear the brunt, and China will offer them no protection. This recognition has eroded public trust in China.

Rising anti-Chinese sentiment may be rooted in the region's long history, significantly shaped by Soviet-era propaganda. Yet China's behavior since Central Asia's independence—marked by broad and deepening involvement and its adverse effects—seems to have confirmed those suspicions. Public concern is especially evident in response to Beijing's exploitation of the region's energy resources and its preference for importing Chinese labor and equipment for local infrastructure projects, often sparking widespread protests.

Overall, it appears that aside from the initial post-independence period, China's presence has not held much appeal for the societies of this region. Available surveys and growing demonstrations suggest that Sinophobic sentiment is on the rise—even among the intellectual class, China garners little enthusiasm.

Based on the findings of this study, the author concludes that the expansion of China's relations with the region has led to a significant increase in Sinophobia. Beijing's cultural, social, economic, and political penetration, fears of ethnic and racial mixing with Han Chinese, anxiety over the erasure of regional ethnic identities, and broader cultural apprehensions have all contributed to rising distrust and hostility. Although Sinophobia and Sinophilia may coexist and even grow in tandem, current evidence suggests that Sinophobia has become the dominant trend among the general public.

Meanwhile, certain segments of the ruling elite—high-ranking officials, presidential family members, and pro-regime business figures—remain interested in ties with Beijing. These elites, driven by political and financial interests, seek to diversify foreign relations, reduce dependency on Russia, gain commercial advantages, and

secure cheap Chinese credit for household or personal benefits. These actors are commonly labeled as Sinophiles.

Although Beijing makes decisions primarily in coordination with the Central Asian elite and oligarchs, it should not treat regional public opinion as a mere buffer. While local elites may support Chinese policies, the extent and cost of such support remain uncertain. Ultimately, if Central Asia hopes to reduce its dependence on China, it must engage with other economic and political powers—particularly those with fewer geopolitical ambitions in the region. As such, Central Asian countries should avoid "putting all their eggs in one basket" and ensure they maintain strategic flexibility in this evolving global landscape.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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