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Back to Normalization or Conflict with China in Greater Central Asia? Evidence from Local Students' Perceptions

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Over the past few decades, China has been engaged in development projects and soft power initiatives in many regions of the world. In some cases, the perceptions are distinctly positive. The negative perceptions are at times accompanied by protests and other forms of dissent. Several quantitative and qualitative studies have been done in this regard in Greater Central Asia (GCA), but comparisons across GCA countries are rare. This paper fills the void. Survey analysis, desktop research of materials of various languages and qualitative interviews were used. In particular, we present a unique set of primary survey data conducted among university students in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. Our findings are generally in line with public opinion research's findings in other parts of the world where China's surging influence is felt by locals. While locals see the positive contribution from China to their societies, there are also various level of awareness of China's influence in different spheres. If China continues to interact more through the bazaars and road constructions, it will embed itself deeper into the local Central Asian imaginations. The future elites of GCA might not necessarily see the rising influence of China in the framework of "great game" competition between Russia and China. Rather, China's relations with GCA is just back to a kind of "new normal" which both regions had enjoyed back in the 19th century.

Keywords: public opinion, Greater Central Asia, China, survey analysis

Analysis of primary survey data collected among university students in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan shows that China's surging influence is felt by locals in Greater Central Asia (GCA). If China continues to interact more through the bazaars and road constructions, it will embed itself deeper into the local imaginations. The future elites of GCA might not necessarily see the rising influence of China in the framework of "great game" competition between Russia and China. Rather, China's relations with GCA is just back to a kind of "new normal" which both regions had enjoyed back in the 19th century.

Over the past few decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been engaged in development projects and soft power initiatives in many regions of the world, including Southeast Asia, Latin

America and Africa (Chen and Duggan 2016; Hartig 2015; Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin 2014). On this, there is existing literature on how local populations perceive China and the Chinese people (Liu, Huang and Lu 2012; Liu and Chu 2014; Le Corre, Sun, Sy and Trinkunas 2015). In some cases, the perceptions are distinctly positive. The negative perceptions are at times expressed through protests and other forms of dissent. Several quantitative and qualitative studies have been done in this regard in Greater Central Asia (GCA), but comparisons across GCA countries are rare. This void needs to be filled urgently, because China's contemporary connections to GCA are deepening through various development projects and soft power initiatives. The crux of this paper, therefore, lies in exploring whether locals in GCA have similar perceptions of China as in other parts of the world, and whether these perceptions would allow us to foresee the potential for conflicts or normalized relations with China in the future.

Geographically, GCA covers Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Starr 2005 and 2008). To determine how China as the "other" is perceived in GCA, one should begin with the question of how each GCA state perceives and defines itself in the region. This is connected to the national narrative of each GCA state and how Asia and China are represented in such national narrative. In every GCA country there are slightly different representations of China traditionally, historically, politically and even regionally. To provide only two examples: The Fergana Valley, which is densely populated and part of three countries' territories (i.e., Tajikistan, Uzbekistan Kyrgyzstan) is traditionally a hot spot of interregional trade, and has historically a different image of China than Kyrgyz people from the Taldybulak Mining region who criticize China for environmental problems. The same could be observed about the Kazakhstani locals at the Ili River in east Kazakhstan who heavily criticize China for water shortages. They are different from those who live in Almaty or Astana who conduct business with their Chinese export and import partners. In addition to regional variations of perceptions towards China, one could find differences between people of various socioeconomic backgrounds, such as labours, middle-class business people, intellectuals and elites working for the political establishment (Chen 2015).

Although variations of attitudes towards China can be found based on regional, socioeconomic and other factors, this paper argues for the importance for studying national narratives of one's country and China as "the other" as well as how such narrative would affect public opinion. One could ask what kind of forces at play could constantly affect, consolidate, or challenge the national narrative. Such forces could come from the GCA's local media or China's diplomatic tools to affect Central Asian's views (Burkhanov and Chen 2016). Take Beijing's much propagated One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative in recent years for instance. Beijing is branding OBOR as evidence of China's goodwill and intention to integrate its Central Asian neighbours into joint economic prosperity (Chen and Jiménez-Tovar 2017; Clarke 2016). Coupled with economic assistance, Beijing is active in public diplomacy. It is seeking to show a benign image of China to Central Asia and the rest of the world through Confucius Institutes (CIs). CIs do not only promote the learning of Mandarin and Chinese culture. CIs have also been increasingly used by the Chinese government as channels to convey Beijing's strategic narrative on initiatives such as OBOR (Hartig 2015; Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin 2014).

The above examples depict a complicated process in which Central Asians come to know China and the Chinese, and further form various perceptions of China as the "other" vis-à-vis perceptions of their own countries. When an individual is asked his or her views of China, only a sub-set of these latent perceptions will be readily available for an individual to make inferences from and then decide how one should treat China. Some individuals' views remain personal, while others are aggregated to become a kind of collective public opinion on China (Rousseau 2007).

The forces at play involve exchanges at the private level, public discourse as well as higher political deals. There is state-sponsored influence from Beijing to exercise its influence in Central Asia as well as local Central Asian forces to either embrace or reject Chinese influence in various

fronts, ranging from media, trade and investments. Understanding this complex combination of Chinese programs of soft power and a local Central Asian willingness to comprehend a Chinese neighbour with whom cultural, economic and political links are undeniably growing is not an easy task. To study public opinion in Central Asia on such a topic, however, is difficult because of the various constraints of carrying out politic-oriented opinion surveys therein.

This paper presents the analysis of a unique set of primary survey data, comparing several small-scale survey results conducted among university students in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. These countries share borders with China and/or have some economic, cultural and political exchanges with China. Tajikistan is missing because we have no local contacts there to assist us in conducting the survey. Turkmenistan is still repressive and does not allow research of such a nature. Also, the contact between the Turkmenistan people and Chinese is far less than that of the other surveyed countries.

The structure of the paper is as follows: the first part is an overview of the four surveyed countries' own national and regional development status to provide an insight about their self-images and how that could affect their perception of China. After the theoretical and conceptual discussion, the third part introduces our unique set of small-scale surveys and data. The fourth section presents an empirical report in which we get to know how our respondents perceive China compared to other countries. We also discuss whether locals believe that the Chinese model of development can be useful for their countries' growth, as Beijing has shown an interest in aiding the economic development of Central Asia. In the conclusion, we argue that the future elites of GCA might no longer see the rising influence of China in the framework of "great game" competition between Russia and China. Rather, China's relations with GCA is just back to a kind of "new normal" which both regions had enjoyed back in the 19th century.

It is crucial to note that in this paper, while our focus is on the surveyed GCA countries, we also explore whether Central Asians have similar perceptions of China as locals in other parts of the world in cases where we could find relevant literature to support such discussion. Public opinion research on the perception of China's surging influence has been conducted in regions such as East Asia (e.g. Asian Barometer survey), South Asia (e.g., Asian Barometer survey), and Africa (e.g., Afrobarometer survey). Afrobarometer survey partially follows Asian Barometer survey in its instruments. Using similar survey instruments as those in Asian Barometer survey, this paper's findings will allow us to see whether local Central Asians have similar perceptions of China as in other parts of the world, leading us to conclude whether there is something distinctive about Central Asia that portends a different future from other regions' relations with China.

PAN-CENTRAL ASIAN AND NATIONAL NARRATIVES

Except Afghanistan, every Central Asian state was founded in 1991. The states are fairly new and there were no Uzbek, Kyrgyz or Kazakh state traditions. But for centuries, there have been certain narratives about this broadly defined region. If one wishes to apply a diachronic approach to study China in GCA, one must be aware that it is difficult to compare the current situation in GCA with its past. To avoid confusion, we apply a social historical perspective that connect regions and not states to conceive GCA in this study.

The historical past is often used in supporting the new modern statehood and the national narratives can be full of contradictions. For instance, the state founded by Amir Timur (1336 – 1405) was destroyed by the Uzbek Shaybani Khan (1451 – 1510) (Hanks 2014). Despite this, modern Uzbekistan made Amir Timur the founder of the modern Uzbek statehood. This historical evidence does not disturb the Uzbek national narrative much as national narratives can be full of contradictions.

Individuals encounter China differently and have divergent views of China. Despite those differences, there are some common views shared by these different groups of people, supported by deeply embedded images of China, the regional historical memory of China, and national narratives

about one's country and others. This is not to say that embedded memory and narrative have directly led to a perception of the others. Rather, it is the process of social interactions between these national narratives, imaginations and constant interactions with the outside world that allows a state to learn, understand, update and decide how it can (re)define "itself" and differentiate itself from the external other.

In this context, it is vital to distinguish between two traditional concepts about China in the minds of Central Asians: "China as a state" and "Chinese as a culture". For the first concept, the notion of *khitoj* is used. *Khitoj*, is a Turkic word known in Central Asia, referring to China as a state, an entity of power, government, trade and industries. Another term *čin*, which also refers to China, was introduced to Central Asia through trade along the Silk Road from China to the rest of the world. The concept is closely associated with notions of the people of China or the Chinese (Olimova 2008: 67). The *čin* reception is recorded in classical Farsi literature with connotation of a distant country, a place of "strange" people and magical creatures, homeland of porcelain and tea, as well as the birthplace of skilled artists, craftsmen, and beauties. This conception is mostly prevalent in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan while in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the notion of China as *khitoj* is more dominant. Even so, however, Kyrgyz and Kazakh know the word *chynmachyn* as a denomination of China as a culture which has the same root as the word *čin* in Persian and means Qing empire.

Apart from traditional notions of China in the minds of Central Asians, it is necessary to understand the contemporary national narrative of each Central Asian state and how China is placed in each national narrative. To do so, we begin by examining national elites in Central Asian countries (Li 2016), as they are either the progenitors or followers of national narrative. All Central Asian countries have a second generation of national elites with similar characteristics. Many have family background as nomenklatura in the former Soviet era. They are not necessarily rich in the conventional sense, but their positions allow them to be exempt from the hardship of life, offering them social security and continuous prosperous status in the society (Kryshtanovskaya and White 1996). Current Central Asian elites know the iron curtain only as a narrative. They were educated during the 1990s and often heard of alternative political systems (e.g., regional unity during the Soviet times from 1924-1991; pre-war Afghanistan before 1979) only as a narration of their parents. These national elites have one common motive: security for the region and a two-fold interest into the future: one is an outward intention to look for a brighter future abroad, and the other is strongly oriented to accommodate with local conditions in their own countries. But even if a large portion of current students seek a way to study or work in the West, in prosperous Arabic countries and or in East Asia, most of them come back to their original country decades after, often close to retirement. They all seek their own benefit, aspiring to have influential positions in government (local and state) as well as in the private sector. They see themselves as future elites of the local region, the state and even on transnational level as mediators in international organisations. But their primary motivation is economic. They believe they will have a better job and a higher income if they study at the university level.

Accordingly, we target university students in this study because they share some similarities with current elites. Due to their wish for political and social security, they are mostly supportive of national agendas and act in the interests of them because they believe that changes imply turmoil, as exemplified in civil wars in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. These unpleasant examples live in the memory of the people and are reminded to them through daily news on countries such as Afghanistan and Syria.

The surveyed university students can be considered up-and-coming national elites in Central Asian countries. They all have their own respective attitudes toward China, supported by the national narratives in each country. Below we examine how each national narrative place itself vis-à-vis the Chinese other.

China in Kazakhstan's national narrative

Some, but not mainstream Kazakh-language media (e.g. Zhas Alash) tend to be rather anti-Chinese.

For instance, intellectuals such as Murat Auezov who was the Kazakh ambassador in Beijing usually asserts openly anti-Chinese statements in Kazakh-language media, evoking images of Chinese people as a peril or a natural disaster etc (Burkhanov and Chen 2016; Sadovskaya 2007; Syroezhkin 2009; Laurelle and Peyrouse 2012). In addition, Kazakhstani film industry has taken a keen interest in historical films, which depict the legendary past of the Kazakh nomads (e.g., *The Nomad*, *Myn Bola*) (Isaacs 2015). In these historical films, we may see some of elements of anti-Chinese sentiment, but most of this negative narrative focuses on Dzungars, rather than Chinese. The plot mostly centres around Kazakh Khanate and its wars with the Dzungars as well as some border conflicts with China that resulted from these wars. Having said this, it is vital to note that the anti-Chinese sentiment from media and films to Kazakhstan's national narrative is rather minimal and mostly limited to a fraction of the Kazakh-language societal discourse.¹

Overall, Kazakhstan's national narrative is made by the president and his inner circle of advisors, promoting the concept of religious tolerance, multi-nationality and multi-culturalism, openness for investments and the willingness for cooperation with any multinational organisation (e.g., Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, European Union, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) (Darden 2009: 207-221; Yemelianova, 2014; Burkhanov and Chen 2016). That said, Kazakhstani national elites are pretty much interested in the present and into business-making.

Kazakhstan has a more open economic and trade market compared with other Central Asian countries. Whereas state services do not necessarily provide people with good jobs due to a weak system, trade and joint venture investments as well as export and import business promise the most prosperous future. The way into the national elitist echelon in Kazakhstan is however, complex. After 1991, most state properties were privatised. This was the time when former directors of huge state companies became well-known oligarchs. Strong networks and well-connected families are key to success (Clarke 2014). The tribal affiliation, which was mostly forgotten during the Soviet period became important again. Many middle-class people left Kazakhstan for Russia and Europe. Others chose to make a living through their connections to China. Xinjiang was not only the first step but also a vital one. Probably Kazakhstani merchants gained more from China's Western Development Plan than the Uyghurs in China. Based on the national elites' preferences and the aforementioned nature of bilateral exchanges, national elites in Kazakhstan could have relatively more positive stance on China. We will test whether this hypothesis is true in the latter empirical analysis.

China in Kyrgyzstan's national narrative

Kyrgyzstan is one of Asia's democracies although it is a very weak one. There is no single national narrative propagated by the president and his advisors. Rather, there are conflicting forces that all seek to influence the formation of a national narrative for Kyrgyzstan (Berdikeeva 2006).

Kyrgyzstani approach in the 1990s was liberal, open-minded and strongly international (Han 2014; Zhao 2016). The country's elites were hoping to use tourism to develop the economy. However, afterwards, younger national elites found a more family-oriented political parliament that closed its structures to the public (Radnitz, 2010; Wooden 2014; Engvall 2016). Unrest followed, new leaders came to power and these gave momentum for the establishment of new national narrative (Radnitz, 2010; McGlinchey 2011). This narrative was strongly anti-China because of environmental problems in the Taldybulak region, where China explored and exploited some gold mines and because of border disputes, that 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 (Wooden 2014; Wooden 2013). We thus hypothesize that in Central Asia the Kyrgyz opinion is probably the most critical one towards China. We will see if our survey data can reflect this later.

China in Uzbekistan's national narrative

Uzbekistan's break-away from the Soviet Union was rather isolationist. It isolated itself from other Central Asian states, forming no customs union with the others. Uzbekistan has a highly regulated market economy with high taxation and closed investment environment (Darden 2009: 200-204). Moreover, the country's job market follows the principle of sinecures (Engvall 2016), meaning that a family buys into an office, a doctor's position, a teaching position and others. Due to the restrictions in the market economy, most lucrative positions are in state services, such as education, legal and medical services. The strict family-network-based economies allow only those who can buy into a position to study in universities. Most students follow the national narrative, preferring to stay in state services. Only a few opt for self-employment in businesses such as gastronomy and construction works. Some middle-class citizens also seek life abroad in two major directions: the Islamic world and the West. Entry to China is a third and more recent option. To succeed abroad, they have to master languages such as English, French, German, Arabic and recently Chinese. Apart from their middle-class status which facilitates their way out of Uzbekistan, these group of people usually also have certain religious (e.g., being a Muslim) or ethnic affiliations that makes them easier to move to the Islamic world, the West or China.

China in Afghanistan's national narrative

Recently, the new leaders of Afghanistan have declared that their country is a major transit zone of Central Asia. They remind the outside world of the Silk Road and its Afghan heritage. If the security situation can be stabilised further, Afghanistan might see itself as the pivotal bridge between India, China, Iran, northern Central Asia and Russia as well. Afghanistan's bridging role is recognised by area experts, such as Frederick Starr. In Starr's 2005 article in *Foreign Affairs*, for instance, he called for the creation of a "Greater Central Asia Partnership for Cooperation and Development" (GCAP). For Starr, Afghanistan is the pivot point as it is not only a bridge between southern and northern GCA, but also a bridge between GCA and the Middle East (Starr 2005 and 2008; Clarke 2013).

As a buffer state, Afghanistan contains four major regions and influence spheres. In the north, Afghanistan has a Turkish and Uzbek focused population. The eastern part shares many commonalities with Pashtun Pakistan (NWFP). In the south, the influence of India is strong. In the western part of the country, we found the influence of Iran. In our survey, we were only able to find local collaborator in Herat, a major urban centre in western Afghanistan. Herat is mainly a city of traders.² Commercial orientation has been inscribed into the minds of their local elites for centuries. That is why most residents of Herat follow very closely changes in the nation-states and societies around Herat keeping an eye on prospects for gain and profit. They know through the news about infrastructure projects connecting Afghanistan with Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan and China. At the same time, their knowledge is driven by other resources such as arts, music and movies coming from culturally influencing regions like Iran, India and Turkey. This combination of economic and cultural orientation is prevalent in most of the students in Herat. We will discuss whether and how such regional character would affect our survey in Afghanistan later in the empirical analysis.

Hypotheses

The above discussion leads us to surmise that how China as the "other" is situated in the national narrative of each Central Asian country determines whether China is perceived positively or negatively by the locals in each country. China as the "other" is supporting Kazakhstan's national narrative for building up a stable and relatively open economy while it is a "spoiler" in Kyrgyzstan's national narrative. We hence first hypothesize that Kazakhstani respondents' perceptions would be more positive towards China than those perceptions from Kyrgyzstan.

Our second hypothesis concerns Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan was the first country after the fall of the Soviet Union that had a national narrative built upon Amir Timur's idea of state-rule: "Strength in justice". In all realm of politics, Uzbekistan insisted on its own way without interference from Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia or China. After its accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001, interestingly, Uzbekistan's original attitudes towards China changed a bit, making itself more opening to China. However, overall, we hypothesize that respondents from Uzbekistan might still have a quite distanced perception towards China compared with other GCA countries.

Lastly, Afghanistan is a war-torn country and yet it has a long history of relations to China. The state does not significantly interfere with the commerce of its inhabitants. However, Afghanistan's interregional infrastructure is weak, and the state has no capacity to ensure safety inside Afghanistan. China has, nevertheless, tried to reach out to Afghanistan through development initiatives. We therefore hypothesize that Afghan respondents might have few clues about Chinese investments and influence in their country.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA

We use mixed methods including survey analysis, desktop research of materials of various languages (e.g., Chinese, Russian, German, English) and qualitative interviews. Regarding the survey analysis, we compare several small-scale survey results conducted among university students in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. One can consider the sample as a group of future elites who are educated and can be relatively more internationalised than the rest of the society. Among these four surveyed countries, Kyrgyzstan is the only country which can be categorised as a weak democracy by some international benchmarks. Others are authoritarian regimes. Studying the views of future elites in these authoritarian regimes or weak democracies is meaningful because future elites in these regimes are more likely than normal citizens to have come from elite families and/or with elite ties. They have potential to effect socio-political changes that can determine their country's future development.

We adopt our survey instruments mostly from the Asian Barometer survey, a well-known large-scale project that investigates public opinions in East and Southeast Asia. While it is true that this paper does not compare the survey results in Central Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia, the data provides such possibility for cross-regional comparative analysis in the future. That is why we aim to use similar survey instruments.

Our questionnaire was prepared in Russian and English for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. As for Afghanistan, the questionnaire was prepared in Persian and English. Depending on the situation in each surveyed country and school, we sometimes used online survey and other times paper questionnaires.

In summer 2014, the 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 some of the questions for our research purpose. In spring 2016, we decided on the final version of the questionnaires. In total, each questionnaire includes 23 questions. In addition to demographic questions (e.g. gender, citizenship), the respondents were asked about their perceived influence of select countries that have been active in the regional politics of Asia (e.g. USA, Japan, China). While 23 questions do not allow sufficient detail to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the respondents' thoughts on China, this is the best we could achieve because it is difficult to distribute such kind of surveys in Central Asian countries. Those who were willing to cooperate usually permitted very limited time to complete the survey with their students.

Respondents

In Kazakhstan, we distributed the questionnaires through our scholarly networks and connections in spring 2016. As the pilot test had been conducted in Astana in 2014, we sought to conduct the new survey in the old Kazakhstan capital, Almaty, in 2016 to diversify our pool of respondents. Sixty-two students studying at KIMEP University (formerly the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research), Kazakh-German University and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University completed our questionnaires online.

While the 2016 survey only managed to collect 73 observations, it is important to note that we have compared the result with the aforementioned pilot test conducted in Astana in 2014 where 150 observations were collected. The patterns of data shown in the 2016 survey and the pilot test are similar. In the latter analysis, we only show the result of the 2016 survey.

In Kyrgyzstan, we hired a local research assistant who first helped obtain permission from various universities before distributing the questionnaires. The research assistant was able to conduct the survey in five universities. At I. Arabayev Kyrgyz State University, the survey was administered to students of mathematics, physics and computer science, and at N. Isanov Kyrgyz State University of Construction and Transportation, the survey was administered to students of industrial and civil construction, property management, municipal services and construction surveying. At I. Ahunbaev Kyrgyz State Medical Academy, students of the medical faculty, paediatric faculty, and faculty of dentistry completed the survey, and at J. Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University, our survey was carried out in the Kyrgyz-Chinese Department, Faculty of Mathematics, Informatics and Cybernetics. Lastly, at Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, the survey was administered to students in the faculties of veterinary, sociology and the Kyrgyz-Chinese faculty. In total, we obtained 370 returned questionnaires

Among the 370 respondents in Kyrgyzstan, the majority (340) of them were citizens of Kyrgyzstan, 11 were from Kazakhstan, 11 were from Uzbekistan, four were from Turkmenistan, three were from Tajikistan, and one respondent did not clearly express his/her citizenship. In this article, we focus on analyzing the 340 Kyrgyz citizens.

In Uzbekistan, with the help of a local scholar, we collected data from 255 students at the Nukus city branch of Tashkent Pediatric Medical Institute, Karakalpak State University, Nukus branch of Tashkent State Agrarian University, and Nukus branch of the Uzbek State Institute of Arts and Culture. Nukus is not Tashkent nor Samarkand but the capital of a multi-ethnic autonomous region (see Figure 1). Up to 2016, it was the only region where social scientists could conduct limited field work or surveys. In all other parts of Uzbekistan during the Karimov era (1991 – 2016), social scientific activities were deemed suspicious and we had not access to other regions.

Insert Figure 1 here

In Afghanistan, a local assistant used his own networks to distribute questionnaires in both high schools and universities in the city of Herat (see Figure 1). Our 215 respondents include students in Tawhid Private High School, a public school called Wazir Fatih Khan High School, faculties of Clinical Psychology, Law and Economics in Eshraq Private Higher Education Institute, as well as students at faculties of Dentistry, Economics and English Literature in the University of Herat, the only public university in the city of Herat.

Caveats of the survey

First, as it is difficult to collect data, our sampling is not random, rendering it impossible to estimate the “response rate” in each country. The small number of observations collected does not qualify for real statistical inferences. Also, as it is commonly known, survey method and public opinion research often simplify rich information into standardized categories (Schaffer 2014). Bearing these caveats

in mind, it is vital to interpret and generalize our data with caution. Qualitative interviews and desktop research of materials of different languages are used to assist the interpretation of data and enrich our analysis.

For our survey in Afghanistan, the respondents are in Herat, Afghanistan's western city (see Figure 1). As noted earlier on, Afghanistan's regions are under different sphere of cultural influences. In Herat, the influence of Iran is huge. Iran should have been included in the survey options with the benefits of hindsight. However, when we designed the questionnaires for Central Asian countries, we tried to keep our survey options consistent for all surveyed countries, and did not foresee that our survey would have been conducted solely in Herat, the only place where we could find research cooperation.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

When asked, which country has the biggest influence in Asia now, China is perceived to have sizable influence and its influence will even grow in ten years. In Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Russia is still seen as the biggest player in Asia, with China's influence comes in second. In Kazakhstan and Afghanistan, China has outnumbered Russia already. In ten years, however, respondents all agree that China's influence will rise and surpass that of Russia (Table 1).

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

	Kyrgyzstan		Kazakhstan		Uzbekistan		Afghanistan	
	Now	In 10 Years	Now	In 10 Years	Now	In 10 Years	Now	In 10 Years
Japan	10 (2.9%)	12 (3.5%)	2 (2.7%)	6 (8.2%)	11 (4.3 %)	17 (6.7 %)	8 (3.7 %)	12 (5.6 %)
China	116 (34.1%)	162 (47.6%)	48 (65.8%)	49 (67.1%)	74 (29 %)	92 (36.1 %)	85 (39.5 %)	73 (34 %)
India	2 (0.6%)	2 (0.6%)	2 (2.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0 %)	4 (1.6 %)	9 (4.2 %)	28 (13 %)
Russia	147 (43.2%)	84 (24.7%)	14 (19.2%)	12 (16.4%)	89 (34.9 %)	51 (20 %)	15 (7 %)	23 (10.7 %)
USA	30 (8.8%)	16 (4.7%)	6 (8.2%)	4 (5.5%)	24 (9.4 %)	27 (10.6 %)	80 (37.2 %)	63 (29.3 %)
South Korea	3 (0.9%)	7 (2.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.4%)	7 (2.7 %)	13 (5.1 %)	1 (0.5 %)	2 (0.9 %)
Turkey	25 (7.4%)	27 (7.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	13 (5.1 %)	4 (1.6 %)	8 (3.7 %)	10 (4.7 %)
Saudi Arabia	7 (2.1%)	5 (1.5%)	1 (1.4%)	1 (1.4%)	4 (1.6 %)	5 (2 %)	9 (4.2 %)	2 (0.9 %)
Others	0 (0%)	15 (4.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0 %)	6 (2.4 %)	0 (0%)	2 (0.9 %)

No/ unclear answer	0 (0%)	10 (2.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	33 (12.9 %)	36 (14.1 %)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	340	340	73	73	255	255	215	215

While Kazakhstani respondents' attention to other countries seem to be limited to Russia and China, Kyrgyzstani, Uzbekistani and Afghanistani respondents' opinions are more diversified. Regarding Kyrgyzstan, this should be related to the relatively more diversified economy that Kyrgyzstan has via petty trade (Chen and Jiménez-Tovar 2017). Bazaars are places where petty traders travelling with goods to be sold in Central Asian local markets meet (Kaminski and Mitra 2012; Spector 2017). This could explain why Kyrgyzstani respondents are more aware of other countries' influences beyond Russia and China.

The survey in Uzbekistan shows that next to Russia and China, the USA is perceived to be influential in Asia now and in ten years. Other countries play very minor roles for the respondents. The prevalent national narrative of a strong and self-confident Uzbekistan that has its own way to follow and its own future to decide (see also result in Table 6) may explain that Uzbekistani respondents are only willing to recognize the great powers of Asia and the world.

It is also interesting to note that the result from Afghanistan presents quite a different picture from what we found in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Here, Russia's influence is perceived much lower than that of China and the US. Like in Kazakhstan, China has now greatly outpaced Russia and the US in Afghanistan. It is intriguing that while respondents believe China and the US will still be influential in ten years, their impact will slightly reduce and the influence of Russia, India and even Japan will increase in ten years. Overall, if we compare this result with studies conducted in other parts of the world, Central Asian views are not too different from the majority (but not all) of other countries' views found in existing public opinion research. Locals in East Asia, South Asia and Europe also have shown their anticipation for the continuous rise of China (Liu, Huang and Lu 2012; Liu and Chu 2014; Le Corre, Sun, Sy and Trinkunas 2015).

In addition, Central Asian respondents' perception of India, another rising global power is interesting. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, respondents do not perceive India as an influential player in Asia at all. The story is different in Afghanistan. Indians' development and infrastructure projects certainly leave an impression for the locals. For instance, Indian engineers built the Salma dam, the largest dam in Afghanistan. This Indian influence has left an impression for our respondents in Herat, a town of traders and economically-orientation residents.

What does it mean if people think that China will be influential in the next 10 years?

Central Asia has one common feature that can be found in every country - the bazaars. It is the heart and the brain of every city. It is the backbone of every national economy and the labour market for informal and formal traders (Karrar, 2017; Chen and Jiménez-Tovar 2017; Kaminski and Raballand 2009). The bazaar is a barometer of the society and the first and foremost sign of peace and stability. When in 1999 after the Tashkent bombings all bazaars were closed for a while people really understood how dangerous it had become. When it came to demonstrations and uprisings, bazaars are where these socio-political actions took place. Chorsu bazaar in Tashkent, for instance, is known as the largest opposition point outside the Uzbekistani parliament.

If goods from Turkey reduce, people know that foreign relations with Turkey is cooling. The same can be said about goods from Russia and Arabic countries, etc. Regarding China, Central Asians have noticed years of domination of Chinese goods in the bazaars (Kaminski and Mitra 2012; Spector 2017). Although there are concerns about the low-quality of Chinese products, they know the trade-

off between having their pockets filled and enduring low-quality products from China (Karrar, 2017: 649). If the quality of Chinese goods has improved, this also implies a rise of their own living standards (Alff, 2016: 435). Given that locals look at China through the prism of the bazaar, and that people think that China is going to be even more influential in the next ten years, one can argue that people consider themselves to be in a time of relative stability and security. The respondents have incorporated the economic thinking into their formation of attitudes towards China, and do not let other ideological, religious or ethnic concerns stop them from welcoming interactions with China.

Does China bring benefits or harm to Asia?

Most respondents believe that China's influence is positive, and brings more benefits than harm to Asia (Table 2).³ This result is like those found in other parts of the world. Most of (but not all) East Asia, South Asia, Africa and Latin America also have relatively positive perception of China's impact (Chen 2015; Liu, Huang and Lu 2012; Le Corre, Sun, Sy and Trinkunas 2015). This does not mean that there is no criticism against China in these areas. In comparison, studies on European countries appear to show more paradoxes. For instance, Germany and Italy have received more Chinese investments than other European countries, but percentage of their locals perceiving China positively is rather low (Le Corre, Sun, Sy and Trinkunas 2015).

From a historical perspective, Central Asians' views of China have changed over time. This temporal aspect is not measured in our survey. Even so, it is important to understand the changing perceptions of China in Central Asia.

China's image in the Soviet Union was positive until the death of Stalin. After 1956, the tensions between these two communist powers escalated. In the 1960s, the Red Army patrolled along the border with heavy weapons. Boris Yeltsin put this period to an end in the 1990s. Central Asians growing up during that time were taught that China is a threat and that masses of Chinese people could be mobilised to cross the Eurasian borders. Anti-China metaphors such as the "yellow peril" and the sarcastic calling of "China the heavenly" (*Khitaj nebesnaja*) were not unheard of. Only the generation before the 1960s might still remember the pro-Chinese attitudes that they used to have, looking at China as a country that won the anti-imperialistic fight, succeeded with a communist revolution and that the Chinese were hard-working people.

Table 2. Does China bring more benefits or harm to Asia?

	Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Afghanistan
Much more benefits than harm	51 (15%)	14 (19.2%)	67 (26.3 %)	61 (28.4%)
Somewhat more benefits than harm	118 (34.7%)	46 (63%)	91 (35.7 %)	111 (51.6%)
Somewhat more harm than benefits	106 (31.2%)	12 (16.4%)	41 (16.1 %)	41 (19.1%)
Much more harm than benefits	52 (15.3%)	1 (1.4%)	43 (16.9 %)	0 (0%)
No/unclear answer	13 (3.8%)	0 (0%)	13 (5.1%)	2 (1%)
Total	340	73	255	215

Respondents of our surveys, however, are mostly aged between 20-30. This young generation, born

in the late 1990s, has limited knowledge of the Soviet Union and how China was seen during the Soviet period. Most of their parents were born in the 1980s, during which Sino-Soviet tensions had calmed down and Sino-Soviet relations were returning to normalcy. The increasing economic exchanges between China and Central Asia, albeit not without critique, is generally considered crucial for boosting Central Asian economy and accumulating personal wealth. This can explain why most respondents perceive China as bringing more benefits than harm. In particular, Kazakhstan has the highest percentage of respondents believing in China's positive contribution. This is related to the fact that Kazakhstan has developed a more economy-oriented national consciousness and is a comparatively stronger economic player in Central Asia. China as a business partner and investor stabilises the Kazakhstani national narrative. This is further supported by one of our expert interviewees who observes that even though there are both implicit and explicit anti-Chinese sentiments in certain Kazakhstani media and films, they "almost never transmit to actual policies. State-to-state and business cooperation between Kazakhstan and China is not ideal but remains very positive and solid. There is some occasional criticism of Kazakhstani businessmen and elites working closely with China in the Kazakh-language newspapers, but the impact of this criticism remains very limited."⁴

Relatively speaking, the percentage of people who believe in China's positive contribution is slightly lower in Kyrgyzstan than elsewhere. This could largely be attributed to, first, the relatively nascent national narrative developed in the country as noted earlier on. The domestic problem of Kyrgyzstan exacerbates the problem as it invites an anti-China sentiment (Chen and Jiménez-Tovar 2017). There is a narrative about a strong fear of territorial takeover from China. Moreover, the Osh riots have given many locals an understanding of a Kyrgyz state being very vulnerable that cannot cope with own problems.

The relatively less positive impression of China as shown in our respondents should not be interpreted as a factual Kyrgyzstani-China problem but as a lack of consciousness in the national narrative and a feeling of insecurity within Kyrgyzstan. This confirms what we explained in the beginning: The Central Asian perceptions of the 'others' must be read through the understanding of how each Central Asian state perceives itself first. This finding also confirms our first hypothesis that Kyrgyzstani respondents' perceptions of China would be more negative than Kazakhstani respondents' perceptions.

Awareness of China in terms of economic, political and cultural influence

In our survey, we have three questions that can indirectly help us gauge how the respondents know about China in terms of its economic, political and cultural influence. The question on whether respondents have heard about Chinese investments in their country detects awareness of China's economic influence. In Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Afghanistan, the percentage of respondents who know about Chinese investments in their countries outnumber those who never heard about Chinese investment. Chinese economic interactions with Kazakhstan and Afghanistan centre on large-scale economic cooperation and investment. Trade with Kyrgyzstan focuses on petty trade interactions in the private level (Zhaparov 2008; Kaminski and Raballand 2009). This might explain why there are slightly more awareness of Chinese investments in Kazakhstan and Afghanistan than in Kyrgyzstan.

In Uzbekistan, there are more respondents who do not know that China invests in their country than those who know. That might be a result of a relatively weak media in that country. The influential social media in Uzbekistan is widely non-political. Even so, there are still sizable respondents (33.7 %) who actually have heard about Chinese investment in Uzbekistan (Table 3).

Table 3. Respondents Who Have Heard about Chinese Investment in Their Country.

	Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Afghanistan
Yes	156 (45.9%)	51 (69.9%)	86 (33.7 %)	111 (51.6%)
No	119 (35%)	17 (23.3%)	127 (49.8 %)	59 (27.4 %)
Not sure	60 (17.6%)	4 (5.5%)	36 (14.1 %)	43 (20 %)
No/unclear answer	5 (1.5%)	1 (1.4%)	6 (2.4 %)	2 (0.9%)
Total	340	73	255	215

The question on whether respondents know where to learn Chinese language helps evaluate awareness of China's cultural influence. Central Asians' intention to learn Chinese is not only an effect of the efforts of China's Confucius Institute placed in these countries to promote Chinese language and culture. Since the end of World War II learning Chinese was possible for Central Asian students. Chinese movies are known in the International Film Festival for Asia and Latin America in Tashkent. In the 1980s, the films and pictures of Bruce Lee entered the Central Asian Pop culture. Almost at the same time, China opened its economy. Deng Xiaoping's "Rich is beautiful" and the dissolution of the Soviet Union were happening at the same time. When the Soviet Union fell apart, many Central Asians sought to survive in trade and entered the trade market economies with petty trade, which led to a large import of goods from the growing Chinese market in the 1990s. Not only did official relations tighten up but also informal and private communication began to evolve. Chinese businessmen who had a command of Russian began to trade along Siberian and Central Asian railways. Vice versa, Central Asian citizens with Uyghur or Dungan background and/or with relatives on the Chinese side entered the Chinese market.

As a result, except Afghanistan, there are sizable respondents in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan who have the knowledge about where to learn Chinese language in their country (Chen and Günther 2016). Also, except Afghanistan, respondents in other three countries are more aware of where to learn Chinese than about Chinese investment in their country (Table 4).

Afghanistan's uniqueness is related to the special societal orientation of the Herat region which we mentioned previously. On the one hand, Afghan respondents know about the influence of China (as shown in Table 1), but their knowledge of China is in the economic sphere, not the other spheres.

Table 4. Respondents Who Know Where to Learn Chinese Language in Their Country.

	Kyrgyzstan 2016	Kazakhstan 2016	Uzbekistan	Afghanistan
Yes	260 (76.5%)	65 (89%)	116 (45.5 %)	44 (20.5 %)
No	52 (15.3%)	5 (6.8%)	105 (41.2 %)	122 (56.7%)
Not sure	26 (7.6%)	5 (4.1%)	29 (11.4 %)	48 (22.3 %)
No/unclear answer	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	5 (2 %)	1 (0.5 %)
Total	340	73	255	215

The question on awareness of China's OBOR initiative explores whether respondents are aware of recent state-sponsored campaign from China. This question gauges awareness of China's political influence, although OBOR is political to be begin with and harbours economic and cultural sub-initiatives under the grand project.

At the very high political level, Central Asian countries' rhetoric towards China is diplomatic. Most of them do not want to be seen as reluctant to cooperate with China on OBOR these days. Our finding fills a necessary gap as it shows that at the local level, OBOR receives little attention (Table 5). The statistical result confirms the written notes from our local collaborators in all surveyed countries. In these notes, it is mentioned repeatedly that many respondents posed questions about OBOR when filling out the questionnaire. They simply had no clue what OBOR meant.

The lack of awareness of OBOR contradicts China's efforts in propagating OBOR and in claiming that its initiative has received widespread supports. Projects that are developed in the spirit of OBOR are agreed upon between Chinese and Central Asian leaders and elites. In our survey, OBOR is not known by the potential future elites.

Table 5. Respondents Who Have Heard of China's One Belt One Road Initiative.

	Kyrgyzstan 2016	Kazakhstan 2016	Uzbekistan	Afghanistan
Yes	47 (13.8%)	23 (31.5%)	15 (5.9 %)	41 (19.1 %)
No	240 (70.6%)	44 (60.3%)	205 (80.4 %)	135 (62.8 %)
Not sure	51 (15%)	6 (8.2%)	32 (12.5 %)	38 (17.7%)
No answer	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	3 (1.2 %)	1 (0.5 %)
Total	340	73	255	215

Belief in the Chinese model of development

While respondents perceive China's influence as being on the rise in Asia, they do not necessarily believe that the Chinese model of development can be applied for their own country's growth. Rather, many respondents believe that their country should have their own model of development (Table 6). This finding echoes studies on other parts of the world which similarly shows that recognition of China's mounting impact does not necessarily lure countries to adopt the Chinese model of development (Liu, Huang and Lu 2012; Hodzi 2017).

The preference of our Central Asian respondent suggests that most of them care about national stability more than unity among Central Asian states. This is not surprising as these states are still undergoing nation-building process. It is crucial to remember that our respondents are young generations of future Central Asian elites. They all have quite huge self-consciousness of their countries' own future and possibilities because of the national (if not nationalistic) sentiment that has been fermenting for twenty years in the region. The older generation is still nostalgic of the Soviet period, looking at the 1980s as the golden age and having low opinion of their newly state's own national policy. But our surveyed generation has more concrete national consciousness and see their own model as the guarantor for stability in the region. Although scholars and political observers still depict Central Asia as the region where great powers exert their influences and compete, the young inhabitants of the region do not necessarily consider themselves part of the great game in the neighbourhood of Russia or China anymore (which has been different in the 19th and 20th centuries). Our finding echoes Cooley's (2014) perspective that Central Asians are not as passive as the general

great game narrative tends to depict. Actually, Central Asians are active navigators with interests and strategies amid rising foreign influence in the region.

It is equally important to note that in Kyrgyzstan, the Japanese model has some support in the minds of the locals. Several Japanese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been helping Kyrgyz communities. Likewise, Japanese NGOs' presence in Afghanistan also could have made its model of development relatively more prominent in Afghanistan.

Only in Kazakhstan, there are more supporters for the Chinese model. Kazakhstan is relatively fonder of the Chinese model because as mentioned previously, China's image as business partner and investor helps to support the Kazakhstani national narrative.

The finding that India plays a role in Afghanistan is not surprising but needs some explanation. India is the country with the highest numbers of Muslim believers in the world, but it is nevertheless stable and multicultural. It is a powerful democracy and has money for development of other regions. As noted earlier, the Indian-built Salma dam brings water and electricity which plays vital role for Herat's economic development. This explains why India wins supports from our Herat-focused respondents.

In Uzbekistan, we find that the respondents also merit the Russian model. This can be explained not solely because of the Soviet legacy that has left a deep imprint in the country's development (Darden 2009: 200-204), but also as the strong influence of Russian culture (e.g., Russian TV programs) in the city of Nukus, where we conducted the survey.

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

Numbers of Respondents	Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Afghanistan
Japan	56 (16.5%)	7 (9.6%)	21 (8.2 %)	43 (20%)
China	25 (7.4%)	10 (13.7%)	19 (7.5 %)	38 (17.7 %)
India	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0 %)	52 (24.2 %)
Russia	35 (10.3%)	3 (4.1%)	28 (11 %)	4 (1.9 %)
USA	15 (4.4%)	7 (9.6%)	7 (2.7 %)	17 (7.9 %)
Singapore	22 (6.5%)	9 (12.3%)	2 (0.8 %)	0 (0 %)
Malaysia	6 (1.8%)	3 (4.1%)	1 (0.4 %)	2 (0.9 %)
South Korea	7 (2.1%)	5 (6.8%)	10 (3.9 %)	1 (0.5%)
Turkey	22 (6.5%)	0 (0%)	11 (4.3 %)	9 (4.2 %)
Saudi Arabia	17 (5%)	6 (8.2%)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)
My country should follow its own model	129 (37.9%)	22 (30.1%)	119 (46.7 %)	41 (19.1%)
Other	5 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	3 (1.2 %)	0 (0%)
No/unclear answer	1 (0.3%)	1 (1.4%)	34 (13.3 %)	8 (3.7 %)
Total	340	73	255	215

Lastly, we should note that we used statistical tools, such as cross-tabulation and correlation, to explore what factors might be related to different views regarding China. We have examined variables such as the respondents' gender and employment situation, whether the respondents have family or relatives in China, whether they have visited China or travelled 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 toward China. However, in our analysis of the collected data among GCA students, we cannot identify a clear factor for the respondents' nuanced stances toward China.

CONCLUSION

Our study confirms the first hypothesis that Kazakhstani respondents have more positive perceptions towards China than Kyrgyzstani respondents. This can be attributed to China's supportive role in Kazakhstan's national narrative for building up a stable and open economy while its role in Kyrgyzstan's national narrative is a spoiler. Our second hypothesis is seemingly confirmed because several of our findings show that Uzbekistani respondents are not as aware of Chinese investments in their country nor OBOR as respondents in other countries. Lastly, the third hypothesis is not confirmed. Afghan respondents are aware of Chinese investment and influence in their country, much more than we expected. This, as said, might be a result of our surveyed region of Herat which has a strong orientation for commerce and trade. Hence, Afghan respondents' knowledge of China is in the economic sphere, not the other spheres. Overall, national narratives of self and China as the "the other" embedded in historical context are important shaper for such varied opinions of China in GCA.

GCA's geographical proximity to China and the recent Chinese ambition to foster closer links with GCA enable more formal and informal interactions between the two sides, in terms of trade, investment, mobility, and cultural exchange. This brings Sino-Central Asian connections towards a normality that already existed back in the 19th century, when state influence was relatively low, and trade was the dominant communication between the regions in Central Asia and China.

What is relatively new is the geographical position of China now. Trade between merchants in 19th century was located in a continuum of Turkish and Persian speaking trade communities between East and West. At that time, China was only located in the east of Gansu corridor. The modern state system, interestingly, brought China directly to the borders of Central Asian States. That makes it necessary to communicate not only with Turkish speaking communities like Uyghurs, Kazakh and Kyrgyz in West China but also with Chinese authorities right after the border. Also studying in China became a relatively promising factor. Due to the Chinese investment situated in GCA now, many Chinese representatives travel or live in GCA. Overall, China gained a new position in GCA following the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the beginning of diplomatic interactions between GCA states and Beijing.

It has only been roughly two decades since China started an active role in GCA again. Central Asian public awareness of China is only starting to increase. The findings reported here are generally in line with public opinion research's findings in other parts of the world where China's surging influence is felt by locals. While locals see the positive contribution from China to their societies, there are also various levels of awareness of China's influence in different spheres. If China continues to interact more through the bazaars and road constructions, it will embed itself deeper into the local Central Asian imaginations. The future elites of GCA might not necessarily see the rising influence of China in the framework of "great game" competition between Russia and China. Rather, China's relations with GCA is just back to a kind of "new normal" which both regions had enjoyed back in the 19th century.

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NOTES

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1. Expert interview with Aziz Burkhanov, December 30, 2017, Professor at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan.
 2. There are quite a lot of literature on the history of Herat and the role trade has been playing throughout history. Trade is seen here both in economic terms and in terms of supporting culture and inter- or trans-cultural dialogue. Some recent studies include Franke (2015), Gammell (2016) and Leslie (2015).
 3. Neither our survey nor the Asian Barometer can capture the nuances of meanings of words such as ‘Asia’ and ‘benefits/harm’. Take the notion of Asia for example. It is understood differently in various periods of history for Central Asians (Gorshenina 2007 and 2014). Our survey question is still valid, however, as what we seek to understand from the respondents is not “where” China plays an important role exactly but how the respondents perceive the general political, cultural and economic influence of China in this broadly defined region.
 4. Expert Interview with Aziz Burkhanov, December 30, 2017, Professor at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan.

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