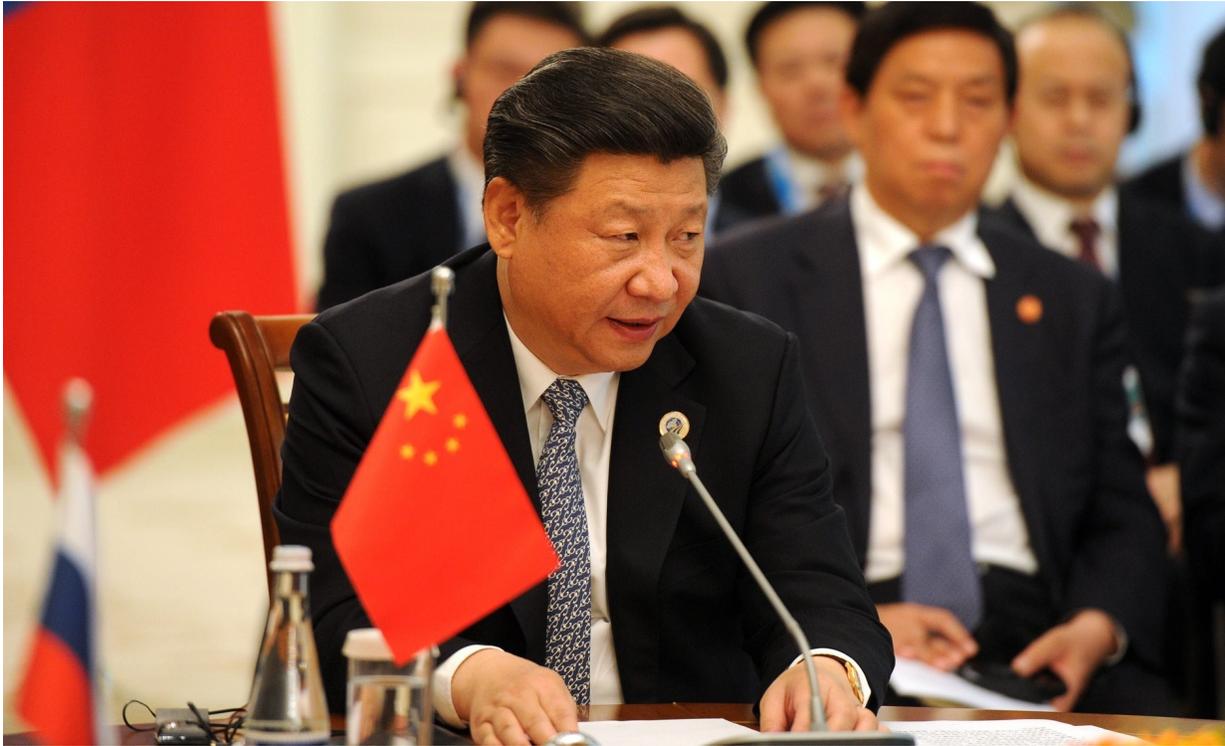


Beijing Binds:

COVID-19 and the China-Central Asia Relationship

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Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping and President of Mongolia Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj. Photo from en.kremlin.ru

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Washington's intensely negative perspective on China has obscured the ability to look in detail at what is going on around the world. While it is true that many are concerned about China's assertive rise and how COVID-19 has been handled, the story is not universally negative. In Central Asia, where countries are increasingly dependent on China economically and are likely to become more so in a post-COVID-19 world, the narrative is a complicated one. Previous tensions have been exacerbated by the virus, while at the same time China has strengthened its presence and relationships. The net result is likely to be an even closer binding between China and Central Asia, notwithstanding the persistent tensions that exist between them.

Patient Zero and Sinophobia

Given their physical proximity, it is interesting to note that none of the Central Asian powers have pointed to China as the source of their initial infections. The one that comes closest to pointing an accusing finger is Turkmenistan, which on February 1 saw a flight from Beijing to Ashgabat redirected to Turkmenabat after a woman on board was taken sick. She was discharged from the plane and placed in quarantine in a tuberculosis sanatorium. However, Turkmenistan has not yet had any officially confirmed cases (and this story was not reported in official media).¹ In contrast, Kazakhstan identified their first cases as coming from Germany on March 9 and 12,² Kyrgyzstan from Saudi Arabia entering on March 12³ and Uzbekistan from France on March 15.⁴ Tajikistan only admitted official cases in late April after there had been repeated reports of people falling sick from pneumonia type diseases, making public tracing of patient zero within the country impossible.⁵ Rumours had circulated for some time prior to these official confirmations about cases, and it is interesting that all appear to have announced their first cases at around the same time.

This relatively late link did not, however, stop a wave of Sinophobia sweeping through the region in January and February as people went down the

route of attacking ethnic Chinese they saw in the markets. Whilst early rumours that violence in early February in Masanchi, south Kazakhstan between Dungan (ethnically Han but religiously Sunni peoples who have lived in the region for over a hundred years) and Kazakhs was related to COVID-19 inspired Sinophobia proved false,⁶ there were reports of violence against Chinese in markets in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan⁷ and Tajikistan.⁸ In Bishkek, Parliamentary Deputy Kamchybek Zholdosbaev made a speech in Parliament about how Kyrgyz should avoid contact with Chinese citizens and all those in the country should be forced to wear masks.⁹ On January 29, a train in the south of Kazakhstan was stopped and two Chinese nationals on board booted off when a panic set in that they might have the virus. They tested negative.¹⁰

Reflecting a broader anger against China in the country, in mid-February the announcement was made to cancel the At-Bashi logistics center in Kyrgyzstan. The US\$280 million project was signed during a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping the year before and had faced massive protests.¹¹ It was not entirely clear from reporting whether the Kyrgyz government or company withdrew the project, but it was obvious that it was the volume of local protestors that drove the decision. Described as an articulation of fear of Chinese land-grab, the project's collapse is a net loss to Kyrgyzstan as it would have helped restore some of the country's role as a regional trade hub. There is no evident link between the project's cancellation and COVID-19, but doubtless it played into the background of protestors views.

Medical Aid Flows Both Ways

Sinophobia was not, however, the pervasive view amongst government across the region, with the Uzbek,¹² Kazakh¹³ and Kyrgyz¹⁴ governments all sending various volumes of medical aid to China during the first half of February. The Turkmen government sold one million masks to China at around the same time.¹⁵ In late January early February, they all gradually severed their physical connections with China, closing direct borders, air

routes and setting bans on arrivals from China. These measures were imposed as much of the world was severing its contacts with the Middle Kingdom as the full measure of the COVID-19 outbreak across China became clear.

It did not take very long for the tables to turn. By mid-March, the Central Asians were facing their own outbreaks and started to seek support and aid from China. The Kyrgyz Security Council met and decided to request support from Beijing.¹⁶ Beijing quickly reciprocated the donations, with aid starting to arrive by the end of the month. In the first instance it was mostly to Kazakhstan¹⁷, Kyrgyzstan¹⁸ and Uzbekistan¹⁹ (the three countries that had admitted they were suffering from the disease), but testing kits and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were also handed over on March 30 (a full month before Dushanbe reported cases) by Chinese officials to their Tajik counterparts at the Karasu (or Kulma) border post.²⁰ Turkmenistan remains a black hole of information.

And this munificence has continued, with repeated flights of aid from both regional authorities across China (Xinjiang seems a natural leader, but lots of other regions have provided support as well) as well as the business community. The Jack Ma foundation followed up on an earlier promise of support to Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members by sending planeloads of aid to all Central Asian members.²¹ Companies with large footprints in the region like Huaxin, Sany, Sinopec, China Construction, China Road and Bridge Company (CRBC) and many more, provided money or PPE (often through the local embassy). One shipment to Uzbekistan was sent by a group of mostly Chinese defence companies using Uzbek military aircraft to distribute PPE to security officials and front line medical staff.²² In late April, the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek handed over PPE and medical aid to the State Border Guard Service.²³ By mid-May, the PLA got into the action, sending supplies to their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.²⁴ The Uzbek colonel receiving the aid in Tashkent noted that this was the

first medical aid from abroad that the Uzbek Armed Forces had received.²⁵

Even before the aid (some of which was sold rather than gifted, though from open reporting more seems given than purchased), Chinese doctors were heading to the region or providing regular video conferences with their local counterparts to share their experiences. For example, a group from Xinjiang did a 15-day tour of Kazakhstan in early April.²⁶ The Ministry of Public Security (MPS) representative in Tashkent met with his local counterparts to discuss how China had implemented its lockdowns.²⁷ The China Petroleum University, who is responsible for the Confucius Institute in Khujand, Tajikistan, launched the translation in Russian of a manual to help deal with COVID-19.²⁸ In Uzbekistan, a telemedicine system was set up between Jiangxi and Tashkent to help provide sharing of experiences.²⁹ Similar exchange structures have been suggested in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The SCO has also played a growing role, interestingly beyond the security space with which it is most commonly associated. On March 22, SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov wrote an effusive letter to remote learning firm Weidong Cloud Education. A company with a strong footprint through MoUs already around the region, Norov praised the firm's contribution to member states' ability to respond to COVID-19.³⁰ In mid-May, the SCO co-hosted a seminar with Alibaba to connect Chinese doctors from the First Affiliated Hospital of Wenzhou Medical University with their SCO counterparts. Potentially reflecting language preferences, the session did not include Indian and Pakistani experts, but did include Observer member Belarus and Dialogue Partner Azerbaijan.³¹

Persistent Tensions

But all good news must come to an end, and amidst this flood of support and aid there has been a consistent pattern of bad news stories towards China as well. An early one relating directly to the virus was a diplomatic spat at Dushanbe airport in

early February when Chinese diplomats returning to the country refused to be placed in mandatory quarantine.³² But most of the reported stories have focused on Kazakhstan, where the government has had to manage anger around an article that emerged mid-April in China which seemed to suggest that Kazakhstan wanted to “return” to China.³³ Emanating from a clickbait farm in Xi’an, the article was one of many that were published written for a nationalist domestic audience in mind which suggested that most of China’s neighbours were eager to “come back” to China.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, this was not well-received (though curiously did not attract the same sort of attention in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan about which similar articles were also written³⁵), and led to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to haul the Ambassador in for a dressing down.³⁶

The Embassy sought to dismiss the story as a Western concoction,³⁷ but in early May the Ministry in Beijing caused the Ambassador a further headache when they launched a coordinated rhetorical attack with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on a series of U.S. supported biolabs across the former Soviet space.³⁸ Established in the wake of the Cold War, the biolabs were part of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) initiative which sought to decommission safely the many weapons of mass destruction left over from the Soviet Army. The story that circulated was that in 2017 an American team working out of one of these labs in Kazakhstan was studying Coronavirus in bats as part of a U.S. Department of Defence funded programme.³⁹ It takes little imagination to draw a conspiratorial line to the current day.

None of this played well in Kazakhstan, leading to news commentaries which in essence called a plague on both houses – saying Kazakhstan was unhappy with both China and the United States.⁴⁰ This confirmed polling undertaken by a NSF-funded collaborative research project on “The Geopolitical Orientations of People in Borderland States,” which suggested that both the US and China are held in low regard, with Russia only slightly higher as a *primus inter pares* amongst big powers in the

region as far as Kazakhs were concerned.⁴¹ It seems as though some of this tension also spilled over into the medical diplomacy China was providing, with Chinese and Kazakh doctors arguing over the amount of PPE they were using in hospital. The Chinese doctors thought all the staff at hospital should be using high levels of PPE for every patient they were handling, while the Kazakhs responded saying they were following World Health Organization’s guidelines which pointed to its use only in intensive care or patients known or suspected to be infected.⁴²

Get Central Asia Moving Again

Tensions aside, the Central Asians are getting quite keen to get their economies moving once again. The Kyrgyz have asked to open their border posts with China,⁴³ something which must have now happened given the fanfare that was attached to the announcement of a shipload of goods heading from Gansu to Tashkent via Irkeshtam in Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁴ There is further evidence of Chinese agricultural products entering the region.⁴⁵ The Kyrgyz have taken things even further, and sought to renegotiate their debt load with China – as part of a bigger push to re-negotiate their entire foreign debt burden. President Jeenbekov made a direct plea to Xi about this in a phone call.⁴⁶ It is not clear that the Chinese have signed off on this, but given the general trend globally (and China’s statements through the G20 about debt relief⁴⁷), it would be likely that China will extend the repayment schedule at the very least. Presumably, a similar discussion is ongoing with Tajikistan at the very least, though it has not been publicly reported.

The Uzbeks have taken a more pragmatic approach, and instead spoken about speeding up construction of the long-delayed train line between Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China. The Kyrgyz section has held things up, but the Uzbeks now consider it essential to help create a safe corridor for transport in a time of COVID-19.⁴⁸ Reflecting the possibility that the Kyrgyz obstacle might still be in place, and showing further use of COVID-19 rhetoric for potentially political reasons, the Kyrgyz MP

Kenjebek Bokoev said that the virus is a major obstacle to completing the line.⁴⁹ He appears to have been overruled, however, as the Gansu train is reportedly travelling as far as Kashgar on rail, before shifting over to vehicles before picking up a train again at Osh. This demonstration is presumably a push to try to force the conclusion of the discussion with the Kyrgyz side.

A central dilemma to this problem, however, is who is going to do this construction. Many of the Chinese engineers who were working in the region had gone home for holidays before the virus took off, and simply never returned. In early March, officials in Kyrgyzstan were already expressing concern about who was going to complete various road projects around the country,⁵⁰ while the Chinese Ambassador in Dushanbe pointed out that there might need to be delays to ongoing projects given absent staff.⁵¹

For Chinese workers that have stayed in the region the situation is not always a positive one. Chinese workers in Tajikistan lost their temper at local authorities, rioting at their mining site near the northern city of Khujand. Local authorities claimed it was a protest about the fact that they had not been paid in some time, but it seems more likely the men were fearful of their environment and demanding repatriation.⁵² As has been pointed out, it is possible that all of these stories are true as the experience of Chinese workers in Central Asia is a tough one in general,⁵³ and shortly before the fight the Chinese Embassy had reported that the first Chinese national in the country had succumbed to COVID-19.⁵⁴ Long before the government in Dushanbe had accepted its first COVID-19 cases, Chinese contacts in Tajikistan were reporting concerns about the spread of the disease within the country. All of which suggests likely local tensions.

The Central Asian economies had been suffering even before the virus hit them full bore. The crash in remittances from migrant labor in Russia has kicked out a major pillar of many of their economies, while the collapse in commodities prices has knocked out another. China made a

coordinated request to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan that they all lower the volume of gas that they are sending, part of a broader slowdown in the Chinese economy.⁵⁵ It is also true that China appears to have increased its oil purchases from Kazakhstan (potentially taking advantage of low prices to fill strategic reserves – something that has been seen in their purchases from Russia as well⁵⁶), this is one of few bright economic lights in the region.⁵⁷ Chinese projects that had been suspended appear to be starting up again and reports are starting to trickle in of Chinese workers returning to complete projects across the region. No one in the region will be looking to Moscow to resolve the economic dilemma that COVID-19 has created, especially given Russia's own difficult situation with the virus at home, as well as the continuing hit from rock bottom oil prices. Rather, the current situation and its fall-out is likely to push the Central Asians into even deeper economic binding with China, and in increasingly innovative ways.

Towards a Chinese e-future

Alibaba (Chinese Amazon.com equivalent) founder Jack Ma's aid towards the region comes after a meeting mid-last year with SCO Secretary General Norov and other Central Asian leaders.⁵⁸ Alibaba's sites are amongst the most commonly used across the SCO space, with a majority of packages travelling into Central Asia and Russia from China emanating from the company in some way. In his meeting with Norov, Jack Ma spoke of creating some 100 million jobs in the next decade and many of these would be in SCO member states.⁵⁹ They have also discussed using the platform's payment tools like AliPay to help facilitate payments across the entire region, as well as finding ways of using the platform to open up Southeast Asian markets to Central Asian and Russian consumers.⁶⁰

While this ambitious talk may be just that, it is in many ways the realization of something that Beijing has long sought to push through the SCO. Over the years, Chinese experts have repeatedly advanced ideas of creating an SCO Free Trade Area, an SCO

Development Bank or other financial institutions. Beijing's stated aim with the SCO was consistently to make it an economic structure rather than a security one. Yet they were consistently stymied by other members. Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan was particularly recalcitrant, and until relatively recently so was Moscow. Through Alibaba and the COVID-19 disaster, China might have found a vehicle to finally advance this goal.

And this is in many ways the story of China's COVID-19 experience in Central Asia. As with much of the world, the narrative is one of acceleration as a result of the virus and its fall-out. Existing trends supercharged as the world spirals into disorder and confrontation. China has long been re-wiring Central Asia into its own orbit. The virus has merely opened up new opportunities, or at least strengthened ones that were already moving in a certain direction. Economic dependence is becoming ever more real, while the underlying cultural tensions remain strong. China continues to have soft power problems in the region, but these are being subsumed by a web of economic and other links increasingly intertwining the region to China. Taking the example of how China's response to COVID-19 has played out in cyber-space with links in e-medicine, e-commerce, e-payments, e-learning and doubtless more shows how wide-ranging China's contributions and links to the region are. In many cases, it might be building on efforts that existed pre-virus, but COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to show how helpful these can also be to the region and increase their uptake. Of course, Russia is still a dominant player (for example agreements across the region through the

Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and common Russian telcos bound by SORM legislation at home means Moscow has great access to Central Asian data⁶¹), but the foundations are being deepened into Chinese digital technologies in a wide-ranging manner across society.

Central Asians of course see this with some concern, and would clearly be interested in diversifying their options. But in the absence of serious commitments which cover the broad gamut of their interests, they will find China an irresistible force. While Secretary Pompeo's visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in early February as the drawbridges were being pulled up with China was actually quite comprehensive in the range of issues that was covered,⁶² all of the media attention pushed by the State Department was about confronting China.⁶³ This push to get the region to more actively fight back against China is a losing battle given physical proximity and economic realities on the ground. Something especially the case when US engagement is done in such a spasmodic and occasional manner. And it has to be said that to some degree there is nothing wrong with the region having a strong relationship with China. It would be strange for the Central Asian powers to not have a relationship with such a powerful and rich neighbour. But the perennial problem is that the scales of control are not tipped in the region's favour, and judging by how the COVID-19 crisis has played out so far, this is unlikely to change going forwards. Beijing will doubtless emerge from the current disaster with stronger links to the region as the Central Asians get sucked inexorably deeper into China's orbit.

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