

# China's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights in Central Asia

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the impact of China's policy on politics and human rights in Central Asia. First, it discusses how Beijing's narrative has supported authoritarianism in the region. Second, it analyzes some of the tools of authoritarianism China has exported to support the political legitimacy of Central Asian authorities and their efforts to monitor their citizens. In conclusion, this article argues that although China has had a tangible impact on human rights in Central Asia, other elements also need to be taken into consideration to understand authoritarian tendencies in the region, including the influence of other foreign actors such as Russia as well as the goals of the Central Asian leaders themselves, who are not passive recipients of Chinese policy but rather have embarked on their own road of authoritarianism since independence.

## Keywords

Central Asia – China – authoritarianism – human rights – democratization

Since the 2000s, China has engaged in a strategy to leverage not only its economic influence but also its political influence in countries where it invests and develops trade relations. One of the components of this has consisted of challenging the principles of democracy and universal human rights, which Beijing claims are Western-centric and tools to constrain China's development, and instead promoting its own paradigm of democracy and human rights under which each state is entitled to revise and frame these concepts using

its own historical, cultural, and local political considerations, in the name of non-interference and peaceful coexistence.<sup>1</sup>

This approach has been clearly demonstrated in Central Asia. Beijing has sought convergences with Central Asian states' approaches to governance and foreign relations in order to minimize uncertainty and to maximize its leverage over governments with similar political systems.<sup>2</sup> China wants to prevent any possibility for political destabilization that it fears the West could initiate in the region through promotion of democracy and human rights and that could impact its interests, in particular its development program in Xinjiang. China also wants to secure its trade and investments in the region, which have grown significantly since the 2000s and are likely to increase further through China's Silk Road Economic Belt initiative, launched in 2013.<sup>3</sup>

To this end, Beijing has endorsed the political authoritarianism of Central Asian regimes, which it views as a bulwark of stability, and has striven to counter efforts to promote democratization and universal human rights in the region which it views as attempts to westernize it. This policy has materialized in Chinese rhetoric endorsing Central Asian policies restricting political rights and restraining opposition activism, including anti-Chinese activism, as well as in the export of technology that enables governments to monitor the population.

This paper analyzes the impact of China's policy on politics and human rights in Central Asia. The first part discusses as an example how Beijing's narrative has challenged the political liberalization that was initiated in Kyrgyzstan shortly after its independence, and instead supported and legitimized authoritarianism, including in other Central Asian states. The second part analyzes some of the tools of authoritarianism China has exported to support the political legitimacy of Central Asian authorities and their efforts to monitor their citizens. In conclusion, this article argues that China has had a tangible impact on human rights in Central Asia but that other elements also

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- 1 K. Brown, *China's World. What Does China Want?*, London, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2017; J. P. Cabestan, "China's new diplomacy: old wine in a new bottle?," in S. Breslin (ed.), *Handbook of China's International Relations*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 1–10; K. Brown, *The World According to Xi: Everything You Need to Know about the New China*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2018; C. Walker, Hearing on "China's Relations with U.S. Allies and Partners in Europe and the Asia Pacific" Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 5, 2018, USCC Hearing\_Christopher Walker\_Written Statement\_April 5 2018.pdf
  - 2 M. Omelicheva, *Democracy in Central Asia. Competing Perspectives and Alternative Strategies*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2015, p. 59.
  - 3 The Silk Road Economic Belt or SREB consists of the trade routes across the Eurasian continent and is part of the broader Belt and Road Initiative.

need to be taken into consideration to understand authoritarian tendencies in the region, including the influence of other foreign actors such as Russia as well as the goals of the Central Asian leaders themselves, who are not passive recipients of Chinese policy but rather have embarked on their own road of authoritarianism since independence.

## 1 Chinese Strategies to Influence Democratization and Human Rights in Central Asia

### 1.1 *The Chinese Approach to Western Values in Asia and Beyond*

Beijing has used the structures that are part of or affiliated with Chinese Communist Party organs and government agencies, such as the Communist Youth League of China, think tanks,<sup>4</sup> and international organizations under its influence, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to call into question the “Western” values of democracy and human rights. It has accused the United States and the European Union of contaminating foreign policy with ideology, using the promotion of democracy and human rights as a tool to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries<sup>5</sup> and extending their influence in order to weaken rival actors.<sup>6</sup> Beijing saw in the so-called color revolutions in the post-Soviet space a Western advance on its own doorstep, and in the Arab springs in the 2010s, the risk of a domino effect capable of impacting its territory.<sup>7</sup> According to the secretary general of the SCO’s Research Center, “to maintain hegemony [in Central Asia], the United States will do its best to contain China [...] and this trend will gradually increase.”<sup>8</sup> The Secretary General further claimed that the strategy of “Westernization” of Central Asia, reinforced by the increased involvement of the United States in the region due

4 N. Rolland, *Commanding Ideas Think Tanks as Platforms for Authoritarian Influence*, Washington, D.C., National Endowment for Democracy, December 2020, [Commanding-Ideas-Think-Tanks-as-Platforms-for-Authoritarian-Influence-Rolland-Dec-2020.pdf](https://www.ned.org/publications/commanding-ideas-think-tanks-as-platforms-for-authoritarian-influence-rolland-dec-2020.pdf) (ned.org).

5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, ““Zhōngguó +zhōng yà wú guó” jùxíng shǒuci wàizhǎng huìwù,” [China+5 Central Asian Countries Hold First Foreign Minister Meeting], July 7, 2020, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzbzhd/t1798203.shtml>.

6 A. J. Nathan, “China’s Challenge,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1, January 2015, pp. 156–170.

7 M. Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy. An introduction*, London, Routledge, 2013.

8 Den Hao, “Transformatsiya Tsentral’noy Azii pod vliyaniem vneshnikh i vnutrennikh faktorov – kitayskaya ekspertnaya otsenka,” [Transformation of Central Asia Under the Influence of External and Internal Factors – A Chinese Expert Assessment], *Central Asian Analytical Network*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/21730/transformatsiya-czentralnoj-azii-pod-vliyaniem-vneshnih-i-vnutrennikh-faktorov-kitajskaya-ekspertnaya-ocenka>.

to Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, led to the Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and to the riots and second revolution in 2010.<sup>9</sup>

China has set Kyrgyzstan as an example of a country that conducted an inappropriate policy. According to the China Institute of International Studies, a think tank which is administered by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by being an early leader in the Central Asian region in so-called radical democratic reforms and prioritizing political reforms over economic transformation, Bishkek departed from Kyrgyzstan's own reality and from the wishes of its people.<sup>10</sup> This political choice is, therefore, said to be the main source of repeated unrest in the country, which was facilitated by Western-based non-governmental organizations alleged to have been active in all major political crises that have taken place in the country. This includes the overthrow of President Zheenbekov in 2020, which is viewed as the West further weakening regional security.<sup>11</sup>

Considering that Central Asian states have followed a "blind process of Westernization" since independence, China has drawn their attention to the impact of democratization on their stability.<sup>12</sup> This narrative about Central Asia is part of a global Chinese policy that the CCP has named a "smokeless war" (*méiyǒu xiāoyān de zhànzhēng*) against the promotion of foreign and especially Western models and against democracy.<sup>13</sup> According to Zhao Tingyang, a leading philosopher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), democracy has failed to provide a world for all people and is unable to do so as it is inherently flawed by excessive interest in personality, money, and marketing.<sup>14</sup> Hence, an alternate and more suitable system is allegedly required.

9 Ibid; National Office for Philosophy and Social Science, "Zhuǎnxíng shíqí zhōng yà mínzǔ huà wèntí: Xiànzuàng, chéngyīn jí qūshì," [Democratization in Transition Central Asia: Current Situation, Causes and Trends], May 23, 2012, <http://www.nopss.gov.cn/GB/230165/243812/17963658.html>.

10 "Jǐ'ěrjǐsī sītǎn yìhuì xuǎnjǔ wéijī tǒushì," [Perspectives on Kyrgyzstan's Parliamentary Election Crisis], China Institute of International Studies, October 14, 2020, [https://www.ciis.org.cn/yjcg/sspl/202010/t20201014\\_7556.html](https://www.ciis.org.cn/yjcg/sspl/202010/t20201014_7556.html).

11 Ibid.; Central Committee of Communist Youth League, "Wéijī huícháo! Měi xīfāng zhèng qítú liyòng NGO zàicì huòluàn zhōngyà" [The crisis is back! The US and the West are trying to use NGOs to plague Central Asia again] May 10, 2021, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/MANWwzGm7EqSNHKzb4Tr6Q>.

12 Den Hao, "Transformatsiya Tsentral'noy Azii pod vliyaniem vneshnikh i vnutrennikh faktorov – kitayskaya ekspertnaya otsenka."

13 Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy. An introduction*, p. 7.

14 M. Barr, *Who's afraid of China? The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power*, London & New York, Zed Books, 2011.

### 1.2 *Promoting a New Paradigm of Democracy*

Instead of liberal democracy and a Western system viewed as unsuitable for many countries, China has proposed a system of unique and indigenous democracies based on the specific historical, political, economic, and social context of each country.<sup>15</sup> China's approach is based on a contemporary application of *Tianxia*, – All under Heaven – a concept initiated by the Zhou dynasty and according to which the emperor was the Heaven proxy and should rule all of his territory under the Mandate of Heaven.<sup>16</sup> As a result, China promotes market authoritarianism or authoritarian capitalism,<sup>17</sup> which materializes the ascendancy of order and stability over freedom, of elite governance over democracy and human rights, of economic performance over political reform, and hence focuses on the common good rather than individual rights.<sup>18</sup> Beijing's challenge to Western-style democracy has, however, not meant eradicating the term but instead watering it down with qualifiers like Asian democracy, democracy with Chinese characteristics, or "socialist democracy" that is expected to look different from the Western model and be less permissive and more authoritarian.<sup>19</sup>

Through this approach, China has claimed to promote a foreign policy that respects the principles of cultural pluralism and mutual respect. It is inspired by the Maoist doctrine based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence which call for "mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence".<sup>20</sup> To this doctrine, China has added the four "no", namely no hegemony, no power politics, no military alliances and no arms races.<sup>21</sup> Finally, this concept of democracy would also imply the promotion of a system where no ideological standard predominates and therefore each state has the right to participate equally and on its own terms in the decision-making processes in international fora and consequently resist the so-called Western – and in particular U.S. – hegemony.

15 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "'Zhōngguó +zhōng yà wǔ guó' jǔxíng shǒuci wàizhǎng huìwù."

16 T. Brook, *Great State. China and the World*, London & New York, Profile Books, 2019.

17 S. Halper, *Beijing Consensus. Legitimizing Authoritarianism in our Time*, New York, Basic Books, 2010.

18 M. Barr, *Who's afraid of China? The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power*.

19 Omelicheva, *Asia in the New Millennium: Democracy in Central Asia: Competing Perspectives and Alternative Strategies*, p. 65.

20 Ingrid d'Hooghe, *China's Public Diplomacy*, Leiden Boston, Brill, 2015; Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy. An introduction*.

21 Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy. An introduction*, p. 7.

### 1.3 *Conflating Opposition with Separatism or Terrorism*

Chinese authoritarian capitalism has included the idea of controlling opposition by conflating it with a threat to the security of the state and the people. This approach has been demonstrated through China's narrative on the three evils of "terrorism, extremism, and separatism," disseminated in particular in the framework of the SCO,<sup>22</sup> and considered as main threats to security in Central Asia increased by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>23</sup>

These three concepts of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, although they are on the surface real threats, have been widely criticized by international organizations and human rights activists for the broad and vague way they have been characterized and used to equate particular individuals or groups, including peaceful ones, with a political threat to the state,<sup>24</sup> and hence to justify their repression. Zhao Changqing, Deputy Director of the China's Institute for Social Development of Eurasia and a specialist on Kazakhstan, has conflated opposition parties in Kazakhstan with extremism and with nationalist parties such as *Zheltoksan* and *Azat*, as well as with interethnic conflicts between Russians and Kazakhs in the 1990s and therefore with the risk of Russian separatism and so-called chaos on the streets in the 1990s.<sup>25</sup> This conflation of opposition with nationalism and separatism contrasts with the actual emergence in the 1990s of nearly two dozen diverse political movements and associations, most of which were nonviolent and non-nationalist.<sup>26</sup>

The conflation between protest and disorder is also illustrated by some interpretations of the demonstrations that took place during the events in Zhanaozen in 2011.<sup>27</sup> Although there are still significant gaps in the facts surrounding the events, the undeniable violence between some demonstrators

22 S. Aris, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: 'Tackling the Three Evils'. A Regional Response to Non-Traditional Security Challenges or an Anti-Western Bloc?" *Europe Asia Studies*, vol. 61, n° 3, 2009, pp. 457–482.

23 "Jǐ'ěrjǐsī sītǎn yìhuì xuǎnjǔ wéijī tǒushì."

24 T. Ambrosio, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: An architecture of authoritarianism," *The Foreign Policy Center*, May 24, 2016, [https://fpc.org.uk/sco-architecture-of-authoritarianism/#\\_ftn1](https://fpc.org.uk/sco-architecture-of-authoritarianism/#_ftn1).

25 Zhao Changqing, "Hāsàkèsītǎn zhèngzhì fāzhǎn lìchéng 30 nián," [30 Years of Political Development in Kazakhstan], *Eurasian System Science Research Association*, May 14, 2021, <https://www.essra.org.cn/view-1000-2581.aspx>.

26 B. Junisbai, A. Junisbai "The Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan: A Case Study in Economic Liberalization, Intraelite Cleavage, and Political Opposition."

27 In May 2011, local oil and gas workers went on strike to protest unpaid danger pay and demand better wages and working conditions. The strike was declared illegal by a local court, allowing the company to fire more than 2,000 employees who decided to occupy the city's central square in protest. After several months of strikes, clashes between protesters and police attempting to disperse them resulted in the deaths of 11 people,

and the police has allowed Chinese analysts to equate peaceful protesters with threats to national security and stability from terrorist and extremist forces. They have instrumentalized the Zhanaozen events to deliberately question the principle of freedom of assembly and the right to protest, instead praising the ability of the president of Kazakhstan to send military force to stop demonstrators.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, the Chinese narrative praises the policy of countries that have not replicated what it views as the mistakes of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>29</sup> According to Deng Hao, the secretary general of the SCO Research Center, Central Asian countries have launched a purposeful fight against extremist forces and have taken strict preventive measures against the growth of the opposition.<sup>30</sup> Kazakhstan has been held up as an example thanks to former President Nazarbayev's ability to take tough measures to keep stability and order, and to his ban on some Western-funded non-governmental organizations and strict control over their activities, to his extreme distrust of Western propaganda, and to his choice to implement reforms based on the principle of "economy first, then politics."<sup>31</sup>

## 2 Chinese Efforts in Practice in Central Asia

China's policy of promoting its alternate concept of democracy has manifested into initiatives to legitimize local governments by validating rigged elections, to fund local political figures or parties likely to develop pro-Chinese policies, and to initiate technological cooperation concerning population surveillance.

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according to official sources, and many more according to non-governmental sources. The government claimed that the police had been attacked by "bandits" (*khuligany*), while the protesters claimed that the police had fired on unarmed protesters. For more details, see D. Satpayev, T. Umbe, "The protests in Zhanaozen and the Kazakh oil sector: Conflicting interests in a rentier state," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, no. 6, 2015, pp. 122–129; "They shot to kill: the massacre of Kazakhstan's striking oil workers, eight years on," *Open Democracy*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/they-shot-to-kill-the-massacre-of-kazakhstans-striking-oil-workers-eight-years-on/>.

28 "30 let politicheskogo razvitiya Kazakhstana v otsenke kitayskikh ekspertov," [30 Years of Political Development in Kazakhstan Assessed by Chinese Experts], *Central Asian Analytical Network*, May 20, 2021 <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/21861/30-let-politicheskogo-razvitiya-kazahstana-v-oczenke-kitajskih-ekspertov>.

29 Den Hao, "Transformatsiya Tsentral'noy Azii pod vliyaniem vneshnikh i vnutrennikh faktorov – kitayskaya ekspertnaya otsenka," "Jǐ'ěrjǐsī sītān yìhuì xuǎnjū wéiji tōushì."

30 "30 let politicheskogo razvitiya Kazakhstana v otsenke kitayskikh ekspertov," Den Hao, "Transformatsiya Tsentral'noy Azii pod vliyaniem vneshnikh i vnutrennikh faktorov – kitayskaya ekspertnaya otsenka."

31 Zhao Changqing, "Hāsàkèsītān zhèngzhì fāzhǎn lìchéng 30 nián".

The frequent summit meetings between Chinese and Central Asian authorities and the congratulations given by China to the presidents in the region for their landslide election victories have been symbolic actions designed to confer legitimacy on the incumbent powers. Beijing's support for Central Asian political elites has been reflected in its efforts to challenge the concept of free and fair elections as supported, for example, by the OSCE, and in the promotion of a concept of elections that instead focuses on respect for domestic laws, whether or not they are in compliance with international standards. This approach has been implemented through the development of alternate election monitoring missions, particularly through the SCO. The SCO did not adopt the code of conduct used by most other international observers and did not sign the Declaration of Principles for International Observation.<sup>32</sup> Instead it has countered the conclusions of the OSCE and other Western election monitorings that have systematically documented evidence of misconduct and fraud in elections in Central Asia with its own conclusions which have methodically endorsed the conduct of elections in the region as free and fair. This has even included elections in Turkmenistan, known for its lack of political opposition and the dire status of human rights. In 2018, the SCO stated that Turkmenistan's parliamentary election took place in accordance with the requirements of the electoral legislation of the country and the country's international commitments, and it did not report any violations that would have questioned the election's legitimacy.<sup>33</sup>

In 2020, the SCO observation of elections in Tajikistan illustrated this strategy once again. The SCO stressed that each state is entitled to develop its own specific approach towards democratic processes, including elections, and praised the conduct of the elections for being in full compliance with the country's domestic legislation. Further, the SCO observer mission noted that the elections were competitive, transparent, and included active participation of civil society members, allowing citizens to make an independent and conscious choice.<sup>34</sup> The mission conclusion that the elections were open, free, and legitimate contrasted sharply with the conclusion of the OSCE that "the presidential election took place within an environment tightly controlled by state authorities and characterized by long-standing restrictions on fundamental

32 See the Electoral Knowledge Network, *Declaration of Principles for International Observation*, <https://aceproject.org/electoral-advice/dop>.

33 "SCO issues statement following parliamentary election in Turkmenistan," *Azernews*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.azernews.az/region/129327.html>.

34 "Statement by the observer mission of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation on monitoring the preparations for and holding of the presidential elections in the Republic of Tajikistan," October 12, 2020, <http://eng.sectsc.org/news/20201012/683159.html>.



rights and freedoms, including of association, assembly, expression, media, and harassment and intimidation of dissenting voices... There was no genuine political alternative offered to voters... The electoral process lacked credibility and transparency, including on election day.”<sup>35</sup>

Chinese authorities have also provided material support to Central Asian political elites and political parties that support Chinese interests. In 2018, Kyrgyzstan’s ruling Social Democratic Party was accused of receiving funds from the Chinese Communist Party, as revealed by one of the party’s members, despite the party leader’s denials that it was material support from China to the entire parliament that had also benefited the party.<sup>36</sup> Foreign funding of political parties or personalities are, however, illegal in Central Asia and so direct Chinese government funding is difficult to prove. Moreover, Chinese funding would be a sensitive issue for the public in a region where Sinophobic sentiment is widespread. However, Beijing has used Chinese companies as a more discreet tool to support and provide funding to local elites. This tactic is part of the Extra-Territorial Policies of the Overseas Chinese, known as *qiáowù* (*huáqiáo shìwù*), which consists of incorporating and co-opting diaspora Chinese at all levels of society for the CCP’s goals, and which has allowed the CCP to push Chinese companies and wealthy businessmen to relay Chinese influence into foreign political systems, including through donations. This tactic was exemplified in Central Asia by Kyrgyz President Zhaparov, who in 2020 received one million som from real estate company Hua-Er, chaired by a PRC citizen Huang Jianhong, to support his election campaign.<sup>37</sup>

35 OSCE, *Republic of Tajikistan Presidential Election, 11 October 2020 ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/6/477019.pdf>.

36 “Ideynyets. Kompartiya Kitaya profinansirovala grantom pravayashchuu v Kirgizii socdem. Partiyu,” [The Ideological Hungry. The Communist Party of China financed a grant to Kyrgyzstan’s ruling Social-Democratic Party], *Centrasia*, March 23, 2018, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1521815340>; ““Vopros na million»: Poluchala li partiya vlasti Kirgizii den’gi ot Kitaya?,” [The Million Dollar Question: Did Kyrgyzstan’s ruling party receive money from China?], *Regnum*, March 24, 2018, <https://regnum.ru/news/2395627.html>.

37 T. Umarov, “Opasnye svyazi. Kak Kitay priruchaet elity Tsentral’noj Azii,” [Dangerous ties. How China is Taming the Elites of Central Asia], January 22, 2021, Moscow Carnegie Center, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83701>; “Narushenie zakona. Inostrantsy dali Sadyru Zhaparovu na vybory million somov,” [Law violation. Foreigners gave Sadyr Japarov a million somms for elections] *24kg*, December 22, 2020, [https://24.kg/vlast/177600\\_narushenie\\_zakona\\_inostrantsyi\\_dali\\_sadyiru\\_japarovu\\_navyboryi\\_million\\_somov/](https://24.kg/vlast/177600_narushenie_zakona_inostrantsyi_dali_sadyiru_japarovu_navyboryi_million_somov/).

## 2.1 *Selling Surveillance Technologies*

Chinese support for regional authoritarianism has been significantly strengthened by the surveillance technology that China exports globally, including to Central Asia. This cooperation has been officialized in particular by the establishment of the Digital Silk Road in 2015,<sup>38</sup> a program integrated with the Belt and Road Initiative through which China provides technological and financial support for the development of communication infrastructure and technologies, artificial intelligence capabilities and surveillance technology.

Chinese technology has aroused significant interest in Central Asian countries, which are rapidly developing their own surveillance capacity, including through “Safe City projects” that use facial recognition cameras, data management systems, and control centers to monitor the activity of citizens. In Kazakhstan, President Tokayev praised the facial recognition system that provided the cameras in the cities of Almaty and Shymkent that has, however, been sanctioned by the United States for its role in helping to persecute of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, while Kazakhstan has attempted to balance Chinese ICT involvement by engaging its domestic IT companies in the development of surveillance systems, no Kyrgyz or Tajik company, and few Uzbek companies, have engaged in this sector. Consequently, these three states have relied essentially on foreign companies, a majority of which are Chinese, including Huawei, China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC, a state-owned enterprise), and IZP Group. In Tajikistan, Huawei has provided more than 90 percent of the country’s telecommunications hardware. In 2013, Huawei installed hundreds of CCTVs in Dushanbe as part of a Safe City program and upgraded them in 2019 with a facial recognition system; similar hardware is planned to be installed in all major cities throughout the country. Uzbekistan has cooperated with the Chinese companies Huawei, CITIC, COSTAR, and HikVision to develop a large-scale surveillance network – also through a Safe City project – which so far has been limited to Tashkent. Although Turkmenistan’s cooperation with China is currently less active, both countries have identified telecommunications and AI technologies as areas for cooperation. Some Turkmen IT

38 “Assessing China’s Digital Silk Road Initiative. A Transformative Approach to Technology Financing or a Danger to Freedoms?,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/china-digital-silk-road/>.

39 N. Kassenova, B. Duprey (eds.), *Digital Silk Road in Central Asia: Present and Future*, *Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies*, June 2021, [https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/files/2021-06/Digital\\_Silk\\_Road\\_Report.pdf](https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/files/2021-06/Digital_Silk_Road_Report.pdf).

companies, such as Dogrulyk HJ, have used Chinese technology for their own “safe city” digital solutions.<sup>40</sup>

China’s export of surveillance technology has also been viewed as a potential tool for Beijing to assert its own control on Central Asian populations. All Chinese companies must abide with article 11 of the Chinese National Security Law under which “all citizens of the People’s Republic of China and any kind of Chinese economic or social structure, including enterprises, have the responsibility and obligation to maintain national security.”<sup>41</sup> Based on this, Chinese companies cooperating with or operating in Central Asia are required to provide any information requested by the Chinese government, including user data and security systems. The risk of losing data sovereignty is increased by weak legislation in the region concerning the protection of personal data privacy. In Kyrgyzstan, several data-abuse scandals were disclosed while little information about the involvement of Chinese ICT was made available to the public.

## 2.2 *A China-Inspired Authoritarian Narrative and Repression in Central Asia*

China’s moral endorsement and export of authoritarian tools have contributed to the framing of Central Asian political authorities narratives and repressive practices.

Thanks to its strong economic leverage in the region, China has pushed Central Asian states to endorse its narrative on issues that it considers sensitive but that are controversial internationally. All states in the region support the one-China principle and so have developed only limited relations with Taiwan. None has publicly condemned or criticized the adoption of national security laws in Hong Kong or the policies against the Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, arguing instead that these issues are internal Chinese affairs.<sup>42</sup> In 2019, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, along with 34 other countries, signed a letter supporting China’s policies in Xinjiang and praising “China’s remarkable achievements” in “protecting and promoting human rights through development.” This letter, which was a response to a letter sent to the United Nations Human Rights Council by Western nations calling on China to halt its interment campaign, further called on “relevant countries to refrain from

40 For more information and details, see Ibid.

41 R. Hoagland, N. Wolkov, A. Karibayeva, “China’s Growing Influence in Central Asia through Surveillance Systems,” *Caspian Policy Center*, p. 8.

42 F. Olmos, “Pleasing China, appeasing at home: Central Asia and the Xinjiang camps,” *The Foreign Policy Center*, November 29, 2019, [https://fpc.org.uk/pleasing-china-appeasing-at-home-central-asia-and-the-xinjiang-camps/#\\_ftn1](https://fpc.org.uk/pleasing-china-appeasing-at-home-central-asia-and-the-xinjiang-camps/#_ftn1).

employing unfounded charges against China.” Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan refrained from signing one of the two letters, caught between the pressures of China on the one hand and of their population on the other hand.<sup>43</sup>

Chinese and Central Asian cooperation has also materialized as actions aimed at preventing anti-Chinese activism. During his term, Kyrgyz President Zheenbekov has responded to anti-Chinese rallies by promising to punish all those whose activities would threaten bilateral relations and calling on citizens to be grateful to Beijing.<sup>44</sup> Central Asian governments have also responded to Beijing’s policy of influence through control and repression of activists involved in defending the rights of China’s Muslim minorities and denouncing the concentration camps in Xinjiang.<sup>45</sup> In Kazakhstan, Serikzhan Bilash, who in 2017 founded the organization Atajurt Eriktileri (Volunteers of the Fatherland) to keep track of ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uyghurs in Xinjiang, was arrested and charged in March 2019 with inciting ethnic hatred; he was only released in exchange for promising to cease his activism for seven years. He was placed on a list of so-called terrorists, preventing him from carrying out essential administrative procedures, and eventually fled to Turkey.<sup>46</sup> The government of Kazakhstan has in general been vocal against anti-China activism, suppressing many peaceful demonstrations and arresting and imprisoning some of their participants.<sup>47</sup> Uzbekistan has pursued a similar policy and prevented Gene Bunin, an Russian-American expert who collected data on the Xinjiang camps, from entering the country in 2020, and prevented a gathering

43 R. Yellinek, E. Chen “The “22 vs. 50” Diplomatic Split Between the West and China Over Xinjiang and Human Rights,” *China Brief*, vol. 19, no. 22, December 31, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-22-vs-50-diplomatic-split-between-the-west-and-china-over-xinjiang-and-human-rights/>.

44 “Ten’ drakona. Kitay nachal aktivno vmeshivat’sya v dela byvshikh sovetskikh respublik. Chem eto grozit Rossii?” [The Shadow of the Dragon: China has begun to actively interfere in the affairs of the former Soviet republics. How does this Threaten Russia?], *Lenta.ru*, May 11, 2021, [https://lenta.ru/articles/2021/05/11/china\\_exp/](https://lenta.ru/articles/2021/05/11/china_exp/).

45 “Your Heart Might Stop’: Kazakh from Xinjiang Threatened After Pressing Chinese Diplomats About Missing Brother,” *RFE/RL*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-xinjiang-kazakhstan-missing-threats-protests/31157124.html>.

46 B. Pannier, “Activist Defending Ethnic Kazakhs in China Explains Why He Had to Flee Kazakhstan,” *RFE/RL*, January 18, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/31051495.html>

47 “Anti-China Protests Staged Across Kazakhstan; At Least 20 Detained,” *RFE/RL*, March 27, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-china-influence-protests/31172596.html>; “Protesters Detained In Almaty After Demanding Relatives Be Released In Xinjiang,” *RFE/RL*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/police-in-almaty-detain-demonstrators-demanding-relatives-be-released-from-detention-in-xinjiang/31251261.html>; “Kazakh Man Gets 10 Days In Jail For Picketing Chinese Consulate In Almaty,” *RFE/RL*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-man-gets-10-days-in-jail-for-picketing-chinese-consulate-in-almaty/31095510.html>.

to commemorate Xinjiang's first president, an ethnic Uyghur. Ethnic Uyghurs in Uzbekistan have no presence in wider society and the country's media does not cover the situation of the Uyghurs in China.<sup>48</sup>

### 2.3 *Extraditing Chinese Activists*

China's goal to cooperate with Central Asia in repressing political opposition has also resulted in the extradition of Chinese activists, mainly on the basis of SCO agreements. According to the SCO, member states undertake to cooperate in the prevention, detection, and suppression of so-called terrorist activities, to exchange information on groups and individuals, and to extradite unconditionally individuals charged with or suspected of terrorism.

This unconditional expulsion and extradition, however, contradicts international standards requiring double criminality in extradition cases, a rule which holds that an act shall not be extraditable unless it constitutes a crime in the laws of both the requesting and requested states.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the SCO agreement allows for the return of any individual who is classified by the country concerned as "terrorist" to their country of origin, which raises red flags regarding Central Asian countries and China where the legal systems are controlled by the government.<sup>50</sup> This concern has been raised by several UN bodies, including the UN Committee Against Torture, which expressed concern that "persons extradited to and from neighboring States do not benefit from legal safeguards against return despite the risk of torture," while in 2007, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed its "deep concern" about the refoulements and extraditions by Kyrgyzstan of asylum seekers from China.<sup>51</sup> Cooperation on extradition has continued since then. In 2015, Tajikistan's parliament approved a Tajik-Chinese agreement on the mutual extradition of suspected and convicted felons. In 2021, lawyers from Uyghur groups brought evidence to the International Criminal Court (ICC) that Tajikistani political authorities cooperate with Beijing to extradite Uyghurs to China and that Dushanbe played a role in facilitating the extraordinary rendition of Uyghurs from Turkey.<sup>52</sup>

48 Olmos, "Pleasing China, appeasing at home: Central Asia and the Xinjiang camps;" C. Rickleton, "Xinjiang Victims Database Curator Barred from Entering Uzbekistan, Twice," *Eurasianet*, March 3, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/xinjiang-victims-database-curator-barred-from-entering-uzbekistan-twice>.

49 *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: a vehicle for human rights violation*, FIDH, August 2012, p. 10, [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/sco\\_report.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/sco_report.pdf).

50 Ambrosio, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: An architecture of authoritarianism".

51 *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: a vehicle for human rights violation*, p. 10.

52 B. Pannier, "Tajikistan Accused of Helping China In Campaign Against Uyghurs," *RFE/RL*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/31309627.html>.

**Conclusion: *Assessing the Impact of China's Strategies and Efforts on Democracy and Human Rights in Central Asia***

China's economic and political engagement in Central Asia has paved the way for it to exert influence concerning the region's political and democratic development in pursuit of its own objectives. Moreover, Beijing's influence is likely to be reinforced by the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and, conversely, by diminishing Western involvement and hence lesser influence in the region.<sup>53</sup> China's relations with the region are also likely to be long-lasting. China has already moved to develop its relations and economic investments with the Taliban since they retook control of Afghanistan. This could actually increase Chinese influence on the neighboring Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which have also developed their own relationships with the Taliban, due to the presence of ethnic minorities in Afghanistan but also due to similar economic security interests as China. China could use its economic leverage with the Taliban to influence economic deals which the Central Asians also hope to have with Afghanistan. Finally, even in the remote chance that China were to lessen its engagement, its legacy in sectors such as surveillance technology would continue to have long-term consequences, allowing Central Asian governments to monitor their populations and bolster their authoritarianism.

Yet, Central Asian regimes' authoritarianism do not result from or rely only on Beijing's influence. Other foreign actors, particularly Russia, also question the so-called Western sponsored promotion of democracy and human rights in Central Asia. The proliferation of surveillance technologies illustrates the diverse character of authoritarianism in Central Asia: even though China is the main exporter of this technology, it still has to compete with Russia as well as Western companies, for example in Turkmenistan where the British company Gamma International UK provided FinFisher software that can "track locations of cell phones, break encryption to steal social media passwords, record calls including Skype chats, remotely operate built-in webcams and microphones on computers and even log every keystroke made by a user."<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, the Central Asian states are not passive recipients or mere pawns of foreign actors. To varying degrees, since independence all Central Asian governments have taken an authoritarian path or have become increasingly

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53 Brook, *Great State. China and the World*.

54 N. Nazar, "How Turkmenistan spies on its citizens at home and abroad," *Open Democracy*, August 16, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-turkmenistan-spies-on-its-citizens/>.

authoritarian, and all well before China developed its economic relations in the region in the late 2000s and before Russia recovered some of its influence there under Putin beginning in the 2000s. Moreover, Central Asian leaders have been receptive to the narrative of “going capitalist and staying autocratic,” as it allows them to open their economies to investment without political liberalization and therefore preserve the security of their regimes. In addition, the neo-patrimonial nature of the Central Asian regimes and the corruption of the political elites, some of whom have commercial interests with China, has also led the governments to accept Beijing’s narrative.

Hence, in the current Central Asian political context, efforts to promote democracy and human rights face significant challenges with or without the influence of China. Central Asian leaders have been less and less receptive to efforts by the West to promote democracy and have instead openly asserted their displeasure at what they see as Western interference and blackmailing through economic aid in exchange for democratic reforms and improvement in their human rights records. In addition, Western donors generally have not invested in proportions comparable to China, or even to Russia, and thus have not been able to compete at the same level. Moreover, Central Asian political elites have for their own reasons welcomed China’s narrative on an alternate model of democracy as well as China’s methods of promoting it, which has not tried to publicly impose Chinese views and practices abroad, but instead has promulgated the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, as well as the notion of win-win solution trumpeted through the promotion of the SREB.<sup>55</sup>

The level and sustainability of China’s political influence, however, are not a given in the region. Central Asian political authorities’ positive narrative about China stands in stark contrast with what part of the local populations view as the threat of Beijing’s growing economic influence and political interference in the region. Moreover, the treatment of Muslim minorities has been increasingly and publicly criticized, despite China’s soft power initiatives in the region.<sup>56</sup> In 2019–2020 alone, more than 40 protest actions against “Chinese expansion” took place in Central Asia,<sup>57</sup> a high number in a region where opposition activities and demonstrations are often suppressed. Despite the authoritarianism of the Central Asian regimes, the continued endorsement by Central Asian

55 M. Omelicheva, *Democracy in Central Asia. Competing Perspectives and Alternative Strategies*.

56 “An Increasingly Hard Chinese Soft Power in Central Asia? Reshaping Joseph Nye’s Concept under Authoritarianism,” in K. Nourzhanov, S. Peyrouse (eds.), *Soft Power in Central Asia. The Politics of Influence and Seduction*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2021, pp. 85–116.

57 “Ten’ drakona. Kitay nachal aktivno vmeshivat’sya v dela byvshikh sovetskikh respublik. Chem eto grozit Rossii?”

leaders of Chinese policy in the region, including of its political influence, will depend at least partly on the evolution of public attitudes. Growing Sinophobia in Central Asia worries not only China, but also Central Asian governments who see it as a possible threat to their own hold on power.<sup>58</sup> The latter will have to walk a fine line concerning China's policies in order not to provoke political unrest. Central Asian leaders will not have forgotten that in 2005, then Kyrgyz President Akayev's decision to transfer some portions of Kyrgyzstan's territory to China in order to settle border disputes created an upheaval in domestic Kyrgyz politics and contributed to undermining the legitimacy of his regime, contributing to the "Tulip Revolution" that overthrew him.<sup>59</sup>

In general, the evolution of democracy and human rights in Central Asia lies at the crossroads of multiple actors and factors. China's active policy of influence in the region is certainly one of them, along with the influence of other prominent foreign states like Russia, of international organizations dominated by Beijing and/or Moscow such as the SCO, and with internal factors that themselves feed authoritarianism in the region. All are linked, reinforce each other, and impact politics and human rights in the region.<sup>60</sup>

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58 Sébastien Peyrouse, "Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no. 1 (January 2016): 14–23.

59 M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor*, Comparative Politics and International Studies Series (London: Hurst, 2012), p. 16.

60 Ambrosio, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: An architecture of authoritarianism."