

**The New Silk Road – One Belt One Road and the Republic of Kazakhstan:
Geopolitics, geoeconomics and national and geopolitical identity aspects**

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ABSTRACT

The present article is devoted to the problem of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) as one of the principal initiatives for trans-Eurasian integration currently being promoted by the People’s Republic of China, in the light of the interests and aspirations of the Republic of Kazakhstan as one of its key participants. Proceeding from the empirical evidence on the subject matter, the researcher reflects on the potential impacts and challenges provided by the OBOR to Kazakhstan’s geopolitical and geo-economic strategy and identity. It is assumed that the Republic of Kazakhstan may both gain additional geo-economic clout through participating in the OBOR and overturn the balance among its geopolitical and geo-economic partners (including Russian Federation and the European Union). In so doing, the key takeaway from the discussion is that Kazakhstan should seek to develop a more balanced and holistic position toward its geo-economic and geopolitical partnerships in Greater Eurasia, so as to avoid potentially negative consequences for its overall strategic position.

KEYWORDS: Geo-economics, Greater Eurasia, China, Kazakhstan, One Belt One Road.

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Introduction. The increase in China's economic and political power globally has had a range of direct repercussions for its closest neighbors, including the Republic of Kazakhstan. In particular, the expansion of international economic and political involvement of the official Beijing has found one of particular manifestations in the form of the New Silk Road / One Way One Road (OBOR) project, inaugurated in 2013 by President of People's Republic of China Xi Jinping and presented internationally as a practical continuation of ancient and medieval trade routes spanning, and bringing together, various regions of Greater Eurasia whilst facilitating their interdependence [1]. The OBOR as a new incarnation of the archetype of the Silk Road would for its part be intended to contribute to a new situation of interdependence in Eurasia – the one which would now be connected to China's growing infrastructural and foreign investment capacity [2]. In effect, transportation hubs and networks being developed in the context of the OBOR's institutional arrangements are assumed to bring about a more cost-effective and mutually advantageous form of exports of goods from China to Eurasian, and ultimately European, markets [3]. Hence the development of the OBOR has been considered to be one of the key priorities in China's geopolitical strategy, with the respective initiatives being accorded an outsized importance with regard to Chinese foreign policy in the regions of Greater Eurasia [4].

The advantage of the New Silk Road project is that it will create a new road and transport infrastructure, modernized communications and new trade and economic hubs along its entire length between China, the Asia-Pacific region, and Europe. Its efficiency, safety and increased competitiveness lies in the fact that it is supposed to create clusters of interconnected trans-Eurasian corridors. The prototype of the project is the ancient road transport of the Great Silk Road, which functioned without failures due to permanent military excesses, economic cataclysms, or inconsistencies in tariff charges. In those cases, the goods were simply transported via alternative routes. That is why the development of the New Silk Road within the OBOR initiative has been marketed by Beijing as a key step toward ensuring peace and stability throughout Eurasia.

In this context, the Republic of Kazakhstan should be viewed as one of the key directions of implementation of the OBOR project, since the country, by virtue of its geographical position and sheer landmass, cannot but serve as the principal route and/or hub of the new project as far as developing land transportation networks through Eurasia is concerned. Of course, any influx of China's foreign direct investment (FDI) into strategic projects involving transportation and related infrastructure will have a profound, albeit indirect, geopolitical impact on the country's position in the region and worldwide. In addition, the problem of the impact of a possible entanglement into the OBOR-related integration structures will raise the question of Kazakhstan's national and geopolitical identity as the country attempts to maintain a balanced role within the course of post-Soviet Eurasian integration [5] while maintaining pragmatic relations with the countries of the global West, most notably, those of the European Union. [6]. With this in mind, the research question to be addressed in this article has to be posed in the following manner: "What are the actual and potential impacts of participation in the OBOR for the Republic of Kazakhstan as far as the former's geopolitical, geo-economic, and national and geopolitical identity-related aspects are concerned?" Hence, the present article provides an overview of major trends in

Kazakhstan's participation in the OBOR while attempting to evaluate their repercussions for the country's geopolitical and geo-economic interests, as well as national and geopolitical identity formation.

The OBOR and the Republic of Kazakhstan: geo-economic and geopolitical dynamics

In order to start the discussion on the significance of the OBOR for Kazakhstan, it is worth noting that the country was the site of the first announcement of the new geo-economic initiative, as it was at September 2013, during a visit to the Republic of Kazakhstan, when President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, speaking at Nazarbayev University (Astana), first presented the countries of Eurasia with a proposal to jointly develop a trans-Eurasian transportation and infrastructure network, then referred to as the Silk Road Economic Belt [7]. From the very outset of the realization of the OBOR's initiative, the focus would be placed on Kazakhstan's potential as both a route and a hub for a new process of China-led Eurasian economic development, with China's FDI and state financing instruments being applied to that end. Thus, in 2014, an agreement was reached between Kazakhstan and China to implement a program for the development of production facilities in Kazakhstan [8], including investment projects in the chemical industry, mining and metallurgical sector, mechanical engineering, infrastructure, energy, agro-industrial complex, light industry, oil refining, production of building materials, and information technology. Still, the principal attention of Chinese policy makers and investors has been oriented toward utilising Kazakhstan's transit potential, with the rise of a new city of Khorgos as a key transportation hub being highly peculiar in that respect [9]. This earlier inconspicuous border township in eastern Kazakhstan has become an essential chain in a modern infrastructure currently being created on the Kazakhstani-Chinese border for the accelerated passage of cargo flows. Technologically, the dry port forming key part of the complex is a powerful terminal at the Altyntkol station, which is equipped with modern transshipment equipment, the latest automated system for accounting for wagons and containers, and provides a full range of services in the processing, storage and transshipment of cargoes crossing the border between the Republic of Kazakhstan and China. In effect, the largest dry port in Central Asia is strategically located on the territory of the special economic zone "Khorgos - Eastern Gate", spanning the respective points across the border, while further infrastructural integration with China is taking place there. In particular, in 2018, the Urumqi-Khorgos high-speed railway was commissioned. In the information field of the PRC, it has already been called "the central part of the New Great Silk Road starting in China" and "a strategic railway for all border states" [10]. While Khorgos and its area have enjoyed substantial publicity, overall, the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan has become a principal part of cargo transportation route network being developed as part of the 'New Silk Road': furthermore, the respective programme of infrastructural development has been integrated with Kazakhstan's own 'Shining Path' plan of the country's infrastructural transformation [11]. This may be seen as an expression of a high potential for infrastructural development cooperation between the two countries, with the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev pursuing the conjunction of the two development programmes since the very beginning of the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative [12]. In that sense, one

may opine that the rise of the OBOR has been perceived as a major driver of Kazakhstan's overall infrastructural renovation, as sought after by the country's political elite. Currently, Kazakhstan plans to invest an additional USD 20 billion in transportation and logistics projects, with a view to connecting to the intercontinental highways "Western China - Western Europe" and "China - Iran" by 2025, which will turn Kazakhstan into the most important Eurasian transport and logistics hub connecting the North and the South, West and East of Eurasia, the countries of the European Union, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia [13]. Such a potential geo-economic breakthrough may hence be viewed as a major component in Kazakhstan's interest toward the OBOR-based cooperation with China.

Geopolitically, the Kazakhstani leadership may be interested in further development of the country's involvement with the OBOR on the basis of the following considerations. In the first place, the Kazakhstani elite may be interested in increasing the country's involvement in the OBOR as a means of balancing its commitments to both the post-Soviet Eurasian integration (represented by the Eurasian Union) and the cooperation with the West. A key intimation of this perspective was given by Nazarbayev during his address at the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (Beijing, April 2019), where the Kazakhstani leader outlined his vision of the '3-D' (three-dialogue) nature of contemporary geopolitical reality, which he then presented in the form of three layers of international dialogue. According to Nazarbayev, the first one would affect the global level (the dialogue between the United States, Russian Federation, China, and the European Union). The second dialogue is necessary at the level of Eurasia in order to unite the potentials of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, hence being a specifically regional geopolitical dialogue. Finally, the third dialogue should contribute to a systemic economic cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union, the European Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [14]. It is in this respect that Nazarbayev would then make a call on the European Union to join forces with the Eurasian Union in mutually cooperating with the OBOR to that end. In this context, Nazarbayev's speech could be viewed as a programmatic statement on the necessity to transcend the dichotomies and contradictions of regional political and economic integration in Greater Eurasia, implying that the OBOR would be taken as one more pragmatic direction of economic and political cooperation in the continent, as far as Kazakhstan would be concerned.

That said, another factor potentially facilitating Kazakhstan's readiness to partake in the OBOR would be that of strengthening a comprehensive cooperation with China across a variety of directions, some of which would not have a direct geo-economic dimension. For instance, the problem of rapid economic development of China's border areas poses a potential threat to the maintenance of the environmental balance within Kazakhstan, which would spur the Kazakhstani government to seek greater opportunity for cooperation with China on that subject [15]. Subsequently, the development of the notion of 'Chinese Ecological Civilization' in contemporary China has led to a substantial emphasis on aspects of environmental cooperation within the OBOR's policy documents [16]. Thus Kazakhstan would be interested in developing trans-border cooperation with China on the basis of aforementioned principles

to ensure that the interests of the country's environmental balance be taken into consideration. However, one may note that industrial and infrastructural projects associated with the OBOR and pursued by Chinese entrepreneurs in the territory of Kazakhstan have been found to have a detrimental impact on the environment, with the problem of trans-border water resources (especially the ones of the Irtysh River) being especially sensitive [17]. At the same time, Kazakhstan is likely to view the OBOR as a major component of the country's strategic security cooperation with China, especially the one taking place within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [18]. In particular, the issues related to perceived threats on the part of Islamic fundamentalist groups and movements have been raised by both Kazakhstani and Chinese representatives in connection with their negotiations on the OBOR-related issues [19]. The fact that the Xinjiang Autonomous Region would be an essential part of the OBOR-related transportation routes going through the Kazakhstani territories may be viewed as a major factor in an ambivalence felt by some Kazakhstanis regarding the scope and the content of such cooperation, which is in turn likely to be reflected in terms of their attitudes toward the OBOR [20]. This would then enable one to reflect on the problematic status of an increased security cooperation with China from the standpoint of the Turkic identity facet of the Kazakhstani national and geopolitical identity [21].

The OBOR and Kazakhstan's national and geopolitical identity: key problems

Notwithstanding the aforementioned, the essential problem associated with Kazakhstan's involvement with the OBOR would concern the country's national and geopolitical identity dilemma as posed by the process of greater integration with China that further unfolding of the infrastructural development initiatives would inevitably bring about. The key problem with the OBOR as far as the Kazakhstani national and geopolitical identity concerned is that of the supposed unbalanced increase in Chinese economic and social power within Kazakhstan, as reflected in a perceived 'invasion' of Chinese entrepreneurs and workers taking part in the projects affiliated with the initiative [22]. A number of researches have registered the evidence of mounting Sinophobia, with Kazakhstani respondents indicating their mistrust of the Chinese growing as a result of the latter's increased economic prominence and personal visibility [22; 23]. The Kazakhstani experts have recently enumerated the increased visibility of China-affiliated economic and infrastructural projects as one of the key factors responsible for the rise in Sinophobia's incidence among the Kazakhstani population, on par with those of negative attitudes toward Beijing's policy in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region and 'negative' historical memory concerning past historical encounters between the Kazakhs and the Chinese [24]. At the same time, the development of official narratives about the OBOR purports to emphasise the positive identity impact of the initiative's interaction with the Kazakhstani national project as the latter would be presented as adhering to an archetype of an 'intermediary' between the East and the West [25]. Thus, Kazakhstan's Minister of Foreign Affairs (2012-2016) Erlan Idrissov would summarily reject any analogy between the increased involvement of China in Central Asia and the late-19th century 'Great Game' taking place between the Russian and the British Empires, positing that "Kazakhstan has been advocating for abandoning the philosophy of the Great Game and embracing the philosophy of the Great Gain for all" [26], in which

context the country's participation in the OBOR should be viewed as reflective of its 'intermediary' geopolitical identity at the centre of Greater Eurasia. Nevertheless, the unease felt by some Kazakhstani citizens over the greater assertiveness of the Chinese as economic players in the country has to be viewed as an opposite of the Minister's optimistic evaluation of the OBOR's full alignment with Kazakhstan's national and geopolitical identity. More specifically, it can be argued that a fuller participation with the OBOR would create a potential source of tensions with Russian Federation as Kazakhstan's principal neighbour to the west, as there is a chance that the development of a strategic engagement with China could jeopardise Kazakhstan's commitment to the Eurasian Economic Union. This is likely to entail a negative attitude on the part of Russia, which may be inimical to Kazakhstan balancing the influence of its western neighbour by resorting to closer strategic ties with China. On the other hand, with the growing prominence of the OBOR for Kazakhstan's international logistics strategy, it may be expected that the country's cooperation with the European Union within the scope of the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRASECA) project is likely to be jeopardised as well [27]. The TRASECA project also includes the Silk Wind Initiative, which aims at constructing new high-speed container routes between the countries of Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, as well as developing and implementing advanced technologies both in the field of electronic information exchange, and in the field of simplifying border crossing procedures and reducing transportation times [28]. The Silk Wind Initiative was launched in 2012 in Turkey, its initial goal being to complete the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars pipeline by 2014; however, this initiative would later begin to be supported by the United States and now fits into the logic of Washington's concept of the New Silk Road, aiming to expand transit routes between Europe and Asia without China's involvement [29]. Hence, Kazakhstan may run the risk of losing either the EU's or China's support in conducting its geo-economic strategy of becoming the principal nexus of trans-Eurasian logistics, which would hence undermine the Republic of Kazakhstan's current geopolitical identity as a neutral and pragmatically aligned Eurasian state.

Nevertheless, the dynamics of the OBOR-based cooperation between Kazakhstan and China would lie more or less smoothly within the larger context of Kazakhstan's attempts at diversifying the structure of its international trade and international economic relations in general. As noted in the World Bank research paper by Guillermo Arenas [30], the recent structure of Kazakhstan's exports and imports has favoured four main destinations, namely, the European Union, China, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member states, both the ones being members of the Eurasian Economic Union and those keeping their distance from that international economic integration community. Throughout 2000-2012, the share of Kazakhstan's exports accounted for by China increased from 3.3 per cent to 17.8 per cent, while that of the Eurasian Economic Union declined from 16.9 per cent to 8.2 per cent, accordingly [30]. In this context, Kazakhstan's enthusiastic reception of the OBOR will have to be viewed in the light of elevated expectations regarding further development of Kazakhstani merchandise exports to China. However, in the next few years, the dynamics would change, with China accounting for 10.3 per cent of Kazakhstan's overall exports as compared to 9.7 per cent for the Eurasian Economic Union as of 2018 [30]. In both cases, however, the European Union remained the key exports destination for Kazakhstan, with 50.4 to 50.9 per cent of Kazakhstani exports heading there

in 2012 and 2018, respectively. Therefore, the extent to which Kazakhstan may be interested in pursuing a protracted engagement with China as the centre of international economic integration is likely to be conditioned by the factor of a relative balance of China as compared to both the Eurasian Economic Union and the EU in the structure of the country's exports-driven economic development.

Discussion. That said, the overview of geopolitical and geo-economic implications of the OBOR for the Republic of Kazakhstan's geopolitical and geo-economic strategies as well as national and geopolitical identity has revealed that the initiative of trans-Eurasian infrastructural and logistical integration championed by China may have a range of both positive and negative repercussions for the Republic of Kazakhstan. In the first place, it may be assumed that Kazakhstan's participation in the project should be seen as an expression of the country's aspirations toward the greater engagement with the present-day initiatives of trans-Eurasian economic integration as the OBOR would be of immense infrastructural and logistical value to developing the role of Kazakhstan as its essential participant. At the same time, the rise of China's influence across Greater Eurasia as brought about by further progress of the OBOR initiative in particular can be taken as evidence of potential issues posed by this process to Kazakhstan's identity as a neutral Eurasian state involved in multiple integration projects on the basis of its pragmatically defined interests. In effect, the progress of the OBOR as a community for trans-Eurasian integration effectively dominated by China may contribute to a possibility of disrupting the equilibrium among poles of integration and cooperation with which Kazakhstan has been eager to develop balanced ties (i.e., Russian Federation, China, and the European Union). The capacity of Kazakhstan to balance effectively between those geopolitical and geo-economic centres should then be considered to be the principal factor responsible for the development of an effective strategy concerning the OBOR and its relevance to Kazakhstan's infrastructural and logistical role in Eurasia. That is why one will have to ultimately consider the OBOR to be a source of both actual benefits and potential issues for Kazakhstan, so that attaining a proper balance between these two aspects of the integration initiative in question may require a more comprehensive and holistic approach on the part of the Kazakhstani leadership

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