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## A Multi-Layered Approach to Sino-Kyrgyzstan Relations

Xuejun Liu

(PhD Candidate, Department of Public and International Affairs, City University of Hong Kong)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) brought Central Asian is a local part of the national political structure, subject to countries into focus. On the national level, the primary the jurisdiction or constraints of the central government, five countries generally have positive attitudes toward the and necessarily acting within the framework of the national BRI. Among them, progressive and close political relations macro legal system. They are not fully independent subjects on the national level facilitate Kyrgyzstan's subnational of international relations, quite different from non-state governmental (SBNG) ties with China. The two states actors such as multinational corporations. Multi-layered signed three documents related to subnational cooperation diplomacy theory starts from the relationship between during the China-Central Asia Summit in 2023. There are domestic politics and international politics. It points out that 25 brother dyads as of this year. At the same time, the local politics, domestic politics and international politics are biggest anti-Chinese protests took place in Bishkek in 2019 nested in each other in international relations, forming a against the work permits for Chinese citizens and China's multilayer network structure. In this multi-layered structure, influence in Kyrgyzstan. These data and facts raise a crucial a complete foreign policy must be reflected at the local, question for this research – How are the Sino-Kyrgyzstan national, and international levels. At the same time, each relations de facto on the national and subnational levels? actor will play a different role, and the foreign policy process By empirically reviewing Sino-Kyrgyzstan relations on is also a multi-layered game process.

each level, this analysis details the feature of asymmetric interdependence in their diplomatic, political, economic, trade, and social and cultural relationships. kolluk kuvvetleri ile ilgili politikalarını koordine etmektir. The paper claims that multi-layered diplomacy, emphasizing the bounded independence of SBNGs, provides a macro perspective to highlight the importance of domestic factors in foreign affairs. Hocking (1993) contended that the local government

### **Emergence of Sino-Kyrgyzstan Relations: Asymmetric Interdependence**

China and Kyrgyzstan have been cooperating in political, economic and cultural spheres and China has held a particular place in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only is China the only non-CIS neighbor of Kyrgyzstan, but she is also an imposing partner due to



China and Kyrgyzstan are bordering countries and have many things to share as neighboring countries, their relations are unequal in varying aspects.

In this regard, Kyrgyzstan was one of the first countries to support and participate in the BRI and there have not been without tensions since 2013 in particular. In the first meeting of the heads of China Plus Central Asia (C+C5) countries, China and Kyrgyzstan joint stated to deepen industrial cooperation, investment, and win-win cooperation in BRI and to increase regional industrial development in sectors such as the digital economy, energy, and agriculture. From the perspective of Kyrgyzstan, China as a giant neighbor is hardly ignored. The National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2040 mentions the importance of China three times and the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) Railway five times. Against this background, President Xi Jinping held talks in Xi'an with President Sadyr Japarov of Kyrgyzstan and announced the elevation of the China-Kyrgyzstan relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership during the China-Central Asia Summit on May 18, 2023 (MFA of PRC, 2023). Although the aforementioned unstable political situation in Kyrgyzstan, the frequently changing government, and Sinophobia spread among the public threatened the Chinese presence in Kyrgyzstan intermittently, bilateral relations between these two states have enjoyed overall stability.

Regarding trade and economic relations, China has remained the leading economic partner of Kyrgyzstan since establishing diplomatic ties. The frequent mutual visits and official agreements by both sides illustrate their economic interdependence. In fact, in December 1991, a high-level Chinese delegation led by the Minister of Commerce and Foreign Economic Relations, Li Lanqing, visited Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan, in order to investigate the various opportunities for bilateral economic and trade relations. China and Kyrgyzstan signed a bilateral investment agreement in May 1992, which came into force in September 1995, following the establishment of diplomatic relations. In April 1994, Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng, accompanied by a delegation of 70 business leaders, visited the Central Asian countries to

establish a basis for commercial and political relations. Li Peng declared that by developing ties with Central Asia, China wanted to show its position in a new political and economic world order (Melet, 1998, p. 237). Besides, China and Kyrgyzstan concluded an agreement to avoid double taxation and tax evasion on June 24, 2002, in Beijing, which came into effect on March 29, 2003. In this phase, China, on the one hand, attempted to reverse its image after the Tiananmen Protests by reaching out to the rest of the world. On the other hand, such prompt and proactive foreign affairs indicate that China has realized the potential significance of the new-born neighboring states in Central Asia.

Kyrgyzstan has had closer economic and trade relations with China since the unveiling of the BRI in 2013. At the same time, the discussion of the debt trap set by China has been thrown under the spotlight. Since 2013, dozens of BRI projects have been implemented in Kyrgyzstan. China accounted for almost half of the USD 5.59 billion in FDI that Kyrgyzstan had attracted by the end of 2019 (China Briefing, 2021). In response to such a remarkable portion, Kyrgyzstan has been looking for other sources of financing, such as Russia or Uzbekistan, to mitigate the amount of Chinese debt being incurred (Rickleton, 2021; Dzamukashvili, 2021). Therefore, the high percentage of Kyrgyz loans owed to China is essential to their bilateral relationship (Van de Kley, 2020).

With the advance of the BRI, China's interest has been boosted not only in industry cooperation within Kyrgyzstan but also in infrastructure projects across Kyrgyzstan's border. With the support of China, Kyrgyzstan is actively promoting a series of strategic infrastructure construction projects, such as the new North-South highway construction, the Bishkek-Torugart and Osh-Irkeshtam highway reconstruction, the Datka-Keming 500 kV power transmission and transformation project, the Kara-Balta oil refinery project, the Taldybulak and Levoberezhny gold mine projects (Toktorbaev, 2023: 819). While these practices are often criticized as a kind of deep penetration and a primary reason for domestic Sinophobia, they objectively promote socio-economic development and create more job

her sheer presence and size (Melet, 1998: 233). While opportunities within Kyrgyzstan.

As China and Kyrgyzstan are both SCO members, China's social-cultural presence in Kyrgyzstan began to develop through the framework of the SCO as well as bilateral relations. During the period from 1992 to 2012, the two states signed a series of legal documents and organized events with other SCO members, paving the way for their closer social-cultural relations in the era of the BRI (see Table 1).

Signing date	Document
April 23, 1994	Agreement on cultural cooperation between the government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China
June 4, 1996	Joint Declaration between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China
June 24, 2002	Treaty on good-neighborliness, friendship and cooperation between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China
June 24, 2002	Agreement between the government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of income tax evasion
June 24, 2002	Agreement between the government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China on mutual travel of citizens
June 24, 2002	Agreement between the government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the mutual recognition of documents on education and academic degrees
August 14, 2007	Joint Declaration of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the further deepening of relations of good-neighborliness, friendship and cooperation

Table 1 The main international treaties between the Kyrgyz Republic and the People's Republic of China

Source: Министерство иностранных дел Кыргызской Республики

Since 2013, people-to-people and cultural exchanges within the BRI framework have been boosted on the national level, with new progress in terms of cultural

heritage preservation, films and publishing cooperation. At the same time, the Chinese government greatly facilitates educational exchange programs and Confucius Institutes within the BRI framework. In 2013, the number of Kyrgyz students who studied in China reached 2,000, whereas 1,000 Chinese students came to Kyrgyzstan to study (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019: 123). In recent years, China has provided about 1000 scholarships to Kyrgyzstan each year, subsidizing Kyrgyz students and experts to go to China for training or academic visits. So far, more than 4000 students from Kyrgyzstan have studied in China. More than 10,000 pupils and students are learning the Chinese language in Kyrgyzstan, and an increasing number of Kyrgyz people have signed up for the "Chinese Bridge" competition (Toktorbaev, 2023: 819-820). In addition, China has established four Confucius Institutes along with 21 Confucius Classrooms in Kyrgyzstan till 2023 (MFA of PRC, 2023; Aliyev, 2019b). However, according to a field study conducted by Nursha (2018: 139) in Bishkek in 2017, the Kyrgyz students who attend Confucius Institutes' classes want to learn the Chinese language but not the Chinese culture and tradition.

### Sino-Kyrgyzstan Subnational Government Relations

Sister dyads (including provinces/states and cities) are the most fundamental form of subnational government (SBNG) relations. They represent the partnerships established by cities of different countries to develop stable relations based on the mutual understanding of each other's society and culture, and the need to promote mutual economic and trade ties (Amiri & Sevin, 2020; Tang, 2015: 59-68). In contrast to the diplomatic paradigm that the subject is referred to as the state, the subject of city diplomacy is city entities that establish and implement agreements with foreign counterparts. Such agreements consist of longterm cooperation in fields such as education, culture and health, youth exchanges, politics, economy, and science, thereby highlighting the role of SBNGs in global engagement (Zelinsky, 1991: 1-31). Related to the BRI, it

calls for an open and inclusive pattern of sustainable international economic, political, and cultural cooperation and development through multiple types of increased connectivity, which is well-linked with the practice of sister dyads.

In this context, there have been 25 sister dyads established between China and Kyrgyzstan as of September 2023 . From the Chinese side, most of them scatter in western China, such as Xinjiang, Gansu, Shaanxi and Qinghai. Apart from sister cities, five dyads are on the provincial level and one pair (Yangling Demonstration Zone and Moskva District) is on the prefectural level. Among them, 18 sister dyads were established after the BRI was proposed. It is rare to observe such a diversity of SBNG relations between a superpower and a small state.

Before officially being sister dyads, most of the SBNGs interact with their intended counterparts. It is expected to observe that there are visits between governments or mature non-governmental relations; some even sign agreements on specific cooperation at this phase. For example, while Shenzhen and Bishkek became sister cities in 2016, ZTE, Huawei and other companies based in Shenzhen had already operated in Bishkek as early as 2013 and the two cities signed a Memorandum on strengthening exchanges and cooperation on November 17, 2013 (Foreign Affairs Office of Shenzhen, 2016, 2017). Besides, Xining and Osh City established sister-city relations on August 2, 2016. However, on June 7, 2015, they signed the Letter of Intent on Promoting the Opening of Self-driving Routes from Xining to Osh at the Silk Road City Cooperation Forum. At the same time, Xihai International Travel Agency in Xining signed a Tourism Cooperation Agreement with Munduz International Trade Tourism Company of Osh City (Xining Morning Post, 2015). Thomas and Williams (2017: 124) suggest these more focused non-sister agreements are also far less likely to provoke central-level scrutiny. Hence, they are used by subnational governments to avoid scrutiny by national authorities. Furthermore, they enhance

ve Moldova ise 2014 yılında fona katılmıştır. Fonun temel the close relationship between SBNGs, whereby SBNGs can imply their willingness and pave the way to establish official relations.

Economic cooperation and cultural ties are the significant factors facilitating the establishment of sister relations between the SBNGs of China and Kyrgyzstan. Xinjiang, for example, presented strong economic ambition with Kyrgyz SBNGs before establishing sister relations in 1993. On September 5, 1992, Kashgar City Border Trade Company signed a trade contract with the city of Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic for 160,000 Swiss francs (Chronology of Events in Kashgar City, 2022). Lanzhou and Shaanxi also succeeded in seeking potential sister counterparts, Osh City and Chüy Region during the Lanzhou Investment & Trade Fair and Western China International Fair for Investment and Trade (China Daily, 2012; Northwest Normal University, 2014). Regarding cultural factors, Hubei and Chüy Region had signed a letter of intent to build a joint venture paper mill in Tokmok, Chüy, in 1994, before they became sister provinces on January 23, 1997. The city of Tokmok, where the paper mill is located, was historically known as Suyab Settlement in the Tang Dynasty, the hometown of the famous Chinese poet Li Bai (FAO of Hubei, 1997). As scholars like Baycan-Levent (2010: 1187-1206) put it, the existence of any former relationship, economic benefit, and city characteristic similarity affects the success of establishing a friendship-city relationship.

In conclusion, China and Kyrgyzstan have maintained generally satisfying and smooth bilateral relations since establishing diplomatic relations in 1992 with their motivation and geopolitical environment in Central Asia. As for China, she is dedicated to expanding international and regional trade and building transport connectivity from China to Europe and the Middle East through Central Asia via the BRI. Meanwhile, it is an excellent opportunity for Kyrgyzstan as well as other Central Asian countries to develop themselves by climbing away from the influence

of Russia with the support from China. Therefore, both sides have enough motivation to effectively use the advantages of the BRI framework and stable bilateral relations. Nevertheless, it is hard to overlook the influence of Russia in Central Asia; the long and slow progress of the CKU Railway mentioned above is an example. As a small state, Kyrgyzstan pursues balanced diplomacy among superpowers and significant economies such as the EU (Kitade, 2019: 1-7). As Muhindo and Calenzo (2011: 149) suggest, Kyrgyzstan mostly has to bandwagon rather than balance its diplomatic relations with China.

Therefore, it is wise for Kyrgyzstan to adopt the diplomatic strategy of maintaining peaceful relations with China against the complicated geopolitical background.

However, due to the distinguishing contrast between the sizes of China and Kyrgyzstan, it is apparent to realize the sense of Sinophobia in political, economic and cultural relations. China nowadays is the leading force in Central Asia and has the potential to influence the global vision of mankind. China is becoming a non-traditional superpower representing all aspects in different regional backgrounds. It is also a significant investor and trading partner of Central Asian countries (Aigerim, 2020: 50). Because of Kyrgyzstan's overdependence on China and the fear among the people of the potential flood of Chinese immigrants, the perception of the people toward China's political, economic and cultural expansion is also generally negative (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019: 123; Baş, 2020: 54-55). Pang et al. (2022: 499) argue that China's FDI in contracted projects and mutual visits by national leaders may be the underlying channels for boosting the economic development of the friendship cities. Hence, both sides should seek approaches on varying levels to mitigate such sentiments among the public. By and large, Sino-Kyrgyzstan relations, based on the analysis above, show an explicit feature of asymmetric interdependence on the national level. This leads to Sinophobia in Kyrgyzstan, while this trend seems to be reinforced. For instance, by the end of 2019, Kyrgyzstan's total foreign debt to China exceeded USD 17 billion, accounting for 38.6 % of Kyrgyzstan's total public debt. The massive trade imbalance between China and Kyrgyzstan exacerbates this situation. According to the statistics, in the first two quarters of 2020, China imported

USD240 million worth of products to Kyrgyzstan, while Kyrgyzstan's exported to China totaled USD53 million only (National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyz Republic, 2020). This asymmetric interdependence may spill over to other cooperation. It should be noted that as Sino-Kyrgyzstan relations in political, economic and cultural aspects integrate with each other, analytical convenience should not disguise the sophisticated reality if we expect to have a more comprehensive understanding of their multi-layered relations. To illustrate Sino-Kyrgyzstan relations, the abovementioned analysis is separated into individual facets while they interplay in practice.

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