

# A Research Note on Central Asian Perspectives on the Rise of China: The Example of Kazakhstan

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*Using Kazakhstan as an example, this research note seeks to address an empirical gap in the understanding of Central Asian perspectives on the rise of China. Theoretically, this article adheres to the constructivist argument in international relations that, to understand the influence of China's rise on world politics, a pure measurement of China's political, economic, and military power is insufficient. What truly matters is how China views itself in the world order and how other countries perceive and interpret China's global position when forming their foreign policy strategies toward China. Asian Barometer and Afrobarometer contain similar instruments that are used to measure East Asian, South Asian, and African perspectives on China's rise. This research note suggests the adoption of similar survey instruments to explore how China is received in Central Asia. We present the results of a pilot test that was conducted in Kazakhstan, where we found that members of the future elites are generally positive about the rise of China. This pattern is not surprising, because future elites in nondemocratic countries tend to incorporate national interests into their value systems. Given the limited scale of the survey, the findings cannot be regarded as definitive; however, they suggest directions for further research. Finally, the matter of how to improve the survey instruments is discussed in the conclusion.*

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Since the emergence of post-Soviet states in Central Asia in 1991, China has sought to foster diplomatic, political, and economic ties with these new states (Schoen & Kaylan, 2014). After nearly two decades of interaction, analysts have observed China's increasing engagement with Central Asia and the country's efforts to incorporate it into its broader strategic goal (Clarke, 2011). Among the most recent and well-known examples of this intent is Chinese President Xi Jinping's advocacy of the establishment of the Silk Road Economic Belt during an official visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013, thereby leading observers to believe that China's concern with Central Asia has reached its highest level (Linn, 2013).

While most of China's initiatives in Central Asia appear to exhibit goodwill and an intention to integrate its neighbors peacefully and cooperatively into joint economic prosperity, there are, nevertheless, various concerns about the implications of China's mounting influence in this region. In the study of international relations (IR), constructivists have often argued that, to understand the influence of China's ascendancy on world politics, a pure measurement of China's political, economic, and military power, as well as its proclaimed intentions, is insufficient (Katzenstein, 2012; Shambaugh & Yahuda, 2008). Instead, what matters is how China views itself in the world order and how other countries perceive and interpret its global position when forming their China strategies (Shih & Huang, 2015; Shih & Yin, 2013).

Research on public opinion and elite perceptions can help to advance our understanding of this matter; however, most studies have been geographically confined to East and South Asian countries. For example, a joint survey conducted by Korea's East Asian Institute and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2006); Liu Kang, Tianjiang Shi, and John Aldrich's National Image Project (2009); the Asian Barometer survey; and the Washington DC-based Center for Strategic and International

Studies (Green & Szechenyi, 2014) compared elite perceptions and public opinions of China's rise in various Asian Pacific countries (Aldrich, Lu, & Liu, 2014; Chu, Liu, & Huang, 2014; Lam, Ganesan, & Duerkop, 2010; Liu & Chu, 2014; Liu, Huang, & Lu, 2012).

In a recent Afrobarometer survey (2014-2015), there appears to be an attempt to follow Asian Barometer in regard to the use of similar survey instruments to gauge public opinion of China in various African countries. The data have not yet been officially released as of April 2015; however, it is clear that increasingly consistent efforts are being made to measure how China is received by people in different parts of the world.

The aim of this research note is to point out the lack of a synchronized effort to explore Central Asian perspectives on the rise of China. This void needs to be filled urgently, because China's connections to Central Asia are deepening. The adoption of similar survey instruments to gauge Central Asian perspectives will allow researchers to undertake systematic comparisons with the data collected from Asian Barometer and Afrobarometer, thus providing a global view of how different states are responding to China's ascendancy to world power. To this end, a pilot test, which was conducted in Kazakhstan, is presented to give us an overview of the future elites' views on China. This also permits us to understand how to improve the survey instruments before carrying out a large-N survey in various Central Asian countries.

The structure of this research note is as follows. First, we review China's increasing interest in Central Asia and address the empirical gap of Central Asian countries' perceptions of China's rise. Central Asian countries differ from one another in various ways, and in the methodological section, we will provide justification for why Kazakhstan was chosen as the starting point for the pilot test. In the empirical findings section, our analysis will entail a comparison with the East Asian and South Asian perspectives captured by the Asian Barometer data. The results presented in this research note are in no way conclusive; however, they pave the way for future research. The question of how to enhance the survey instruments will then be discussed in the conclusion.

## China's Increasing Ties with Central Asia

In the first decade after the birth of the post-Soviet states, China's engagement with Central Asian states focused on security and economic matters. Regarding security, Beijing worked with Central Asian states to strengthen the new borders and prevent any separatist developments, particularly secessionist movements among the Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang region. In 2001, this security cooperation was further institutionalized by the founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which aims to curtail the development of the so-called three evils: ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism (Chen, 2010; 2014). Economically, China imports raw materials and natural resources (oil, gas, and minerals) from Central Asia, while Central Asia imports consumer goods and finished products from China (O'Neill, 2014; Shambaugh & Yahuda, 2008). Between 2009 and 2010, China overtook Russia and the European Union (EU) as Central Asia's leading trading partner.

The incentives for China to foster relationships with Central Asia include stabilizing its Western backyard, securing access to Central Asia's natural resources to fuel Chinese growth (O'Neill, 2014; Shambaugh & Yahuda, 2008; Syroezhkin, 2009), and establishing a safe, low-budget, and convenient transit route to China's main trading partners in Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East (Clarke, 2014; Linn, 2013). Moreover, as Russia has traditionally wielded great influence over Central Asia, China intends to moderate, counter, or dilute Russia's dominance by nurturing relationships in this region.

Central Asian states generally do not oppose embracing China, because they hope that such engagement will benefit them economically. In addition, using China to balance the dominance of Russia is in the interests of the Central Asian states. For instance, the new gas pipelines that are under construction will offer alternatives to the Russian transport monopoly in the region. Pumping Turkmen gas to China through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan will eventually enable the direct transportation of Kazakh gas from the Caspian Sea to China (Idrissov, 2014; O'Neill, 2014).

Despite Central Asia's and China's mutual interests in fostering

relationships, their engagement is not without limits. Central Asian countries do not desire an extremely close relationship with China for fear that overdependence will lead to a loss of autonomy. Thus, Central Asian countries normally prefer to adopt a low-key, moderate approach to China (Linn, 2013).

At the policy level, most Central Asian governments recognize the importance of China to their own countries' development, but the general public in Central Asia does not necessarily view China in the same manner. The Central Asian public has expressed discontent and mistrust of the Chinese living in Central Asia (Laurelle & Peyrouse, 2012; Sadovskaya, 2007; Syroezhkin, 2009). This resentment is due in part to the vast wage disparities that exist between Chinese and Central Asian laborers in local infrastructure industries. Chinese laborers are often seen as taking jobs away from locals, and the influx of Chinese goods into Central Asian markets is perceived as a threat to local products.

Under Xi and Premier Li Keqiang, several new diplomatic initiatives have been proposed, including the much-publicized revival of the ancient Silk Road as a way to stimulate regional cooperation. While these new diplomatic efforts have a strong economic focus, one can also see China's ambition to use a soft, peaceful approach to mitigate Central Asia's distrust and to create an image of China as a benign, modest partner. This aim is politically crucial for China because it feels encircled and threatened by American allies in the Pacific region and is experiencing increasing conflicts in this sphere. Consequently, China has an interest in projecting itself as a cordial neighbor in Central Asia.

However, the question of precisely how local elites and the public perceive China's various behaviors and engagements with Central Asian countries has been under-researched. Laurelle and Peyrouse's (2012) book is useful with regard to bridging this gap. Using in-depth interviews, as well as analyses of the political, academic, and popular discourse in the five former Soviet states in the region (i.e., Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan), Laurelle and Peyrouse (2012) discover that although these states' views of China vary, they tend to converge when it comes to China's economic significance to the region.

Laurelle and Peyrouse's work provides a strong foundation for further exploration in this research stream. This research note proposes that the next step should be a systematic construction of survey data that allow for comparison not only across the Central Asian region but also with data from Asian Barometer and Afrobarometer. We will now explain how a pilot test of survey instruments was conducted in Kazakhstan.

### **Using Kazakhstan for the Pilot Test**

The pilot test was conducted in two phases at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan during the summer of 2014. The participants were a group of Nazarbayev University students and staff who responded to the survey before and after a visit to China. Some justification of the selection of Kazakhstan and Nazarbayev University is needed.

First, Kazakhstan is a leading player in Central Asia and is geographically close to China.<sup>1</sup> Although Central Asian countries perceive China differently, Laurelle and Peyrouse (2012) note that these states' views of Beijing's economic role in Central Asia converge. This is particularly evident in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic downturn when China increased its investment amid Western countries' withdrawal of investment in Central Asia. Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian countries were all affected by it. Therefore, how people in Kazakhstan feel about China can serve as an indicator of how people in other Central Asian countries perceive China.

With regard to Kazakhstan in particular, it is vital to note that there are no up-to-date data related to citizens' perceptions of China. In 2007,

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<sup>1</sup>In its regional leadership role, Kazakhstan actively supports regional economic integration, as evidenced by its investments in various regional infrastructures, such as the East-West Highway from China to Europe. Kazakhstan also works to convince other Central Asian states, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, to participate in economic integration and to reduce their protectionist policies in order to better connect the entire region internally, as well as with the outside world (Idrissov, 2014; Linn, 2013). Using Kazakhstan as a starting point for the survey analysis is thus justifiable.

one survey investigated citizens' views on Chinese migrants (Sadovskaya, 2007; Syroezhkin, 2009). While the results were interesting, the survey did not tackle the same kind of question we seek to answer here, which is more related to the perceived influence of China as a rising regional and global power. To compare the data collected from Asian Barometer and Afrobarometer, we simply need to start a synchronized effort to ask similar survey questions in Central Asia.

Regarding the selection of Nazarbayev University, it is a new university that was created as a personal initiative of the Kazakhstani president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, in 2009. Nazarbayev University is regarded as an elite university in Kazakhstan, and it aspires to become a leading educational and research center in Central Asia. The Chinese president, Xi Jinping, delivered a speech entitled "Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future" at Nazarbayev University in September 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013). In this speech, he advocated the aforementioned idea of a Silk Road Economic Belt to foster greater regional integration. The significance of Nazarbayev University is, therefore, evident.

Moreover, since Xi delivered the talk, Nazarbayev University has served as a seed university that facilitates further exchanges between China and Kazakhstan. For example, the Chinese Ministry of Education organized and sponsored the aforementioned visit of Nazarbayev University students, staff, and faculty to China in 2014. During the week-and-a-half tour, the participants visited Urumchi, Shanghai, Beijing, and Xian. The participants' only expense was their flights; the Chinese government covered the remaining expenses. We tested the survey instruments with the participants of this China tour. As the sampling is biased, the result can give us only an impression of how a small group of potential future elites in Kazakhstan perceive China. As mentioned, we also hope that this pilot test will enable us to understand what needs to be improved before a large-N survey is carried out.

Initially, 200 participants planned to join the tour; however, only 199 did. The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire (pre-trip survey) in a predeparture briefing, as well as an almost identical question-

naire (post-trip survey) after returning to Kazakhstan. The pre-trip questionnaires were distributed in paper format, while the post-trip questionnaires were distributed online. The questionnaires were prepared in two languages: English and Russian.

Asian Barometer and Afrobarometer use similar survey instruments to gauge their studied populations' views on China. In fact, the Afrobarometer survey is more recent, and its instruments appear to be largely borrowed from Asian Barometer. Accordingly, the instruments and question designs of our pilot test were mostly adopted from the Asian Barometer survey, allowing for an empirical comparison of the results.

In addition to demographic data (e.g., gender, citizenship, and ethnicity), the respondents were asked about the perceived influence of select countries in Asia. Of the 200 participants, 61 completed the first round of the survey, yielding a response rate of 30.5%, and 86 of 199 participants completed the second, post-trip survey, yielding a response rate of 43.3%. Among the 61 respondents to the pre-trip survey, 48 (78.7%) had not visited China. The demographic characteristics of the respondents to the two surveys were virtually identical. There were more females than males. An overwhelming majority of the respondents held Kazakh citizenship and self-identified as being of Kazakh ethnicity. The pre- and post-trip survey results show similar patterns on various issues, as discussed in the next section.<sup>2</sup>

## Findings

### Country with the Most Influence in Asia

The survey results show that most respondents believed that China has the most influence in Asia. Given that many Central Asian states fall

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<sup>2</sup>It is impossible to compare pre-trip and post-trip data, as all questionnaires were filled out anonymously. However, some respondents did state that they completed both questionnaires.

Table 1  
*What Country Do You Think Has the Most Influence in Asia?*

| Country       | Pre-trip Survey (N = 61) | Post-trip Survey (N = 86) |
|---------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Japan         | 2 (3.3%)                 | 1 (1.2%)                  |
| China         | 42 (68.9%)               | 65 (75.6%)                |
| India         | 0 (0%)                   | 0 (0%)                    |
| Russia        | 7 (11.5%)                | 17 (19.8%)                |
| United States | 1 (1.6%)                 | 3 (3.5%)                  |
| Kazakhstan    | 2 (3.3%)                 | 0 (0%)                    |
| Other         | 7 (11.5%)                | 0 (0%)                    |

Table 2  
*In Ten Years, Which Country Will Have the Most Influence in Asia?*

| Country       | Pre-trip Survey (N = 61) | Post-trip Survey (N = 86) |
|---------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Japan         | 4 (6.6 %)                | 4 (4.7%)                  |
| China         | 41 (67.2 %)              | 72 (83.7%)                |
| India         | 0 (0%)                   | 1 (1.2%)                  |
| Russia        | 2 (3.3%)                 | 2 (2.3%)                  |
| United States | 0 (0%)                   | 0 (0%)                    |
| Kazakhstan    | 1 (1.6%)                 | 2 (2.3%)                  |
| Other         | 0 (0%)                   | 0 (0%)                    |
| No answer     | 13 (21.3%)               | 5 (5.8%)                  |

into Russia's conventional sphere of influence, it is striking that the majority of the respondents viewed China as having a greater influence than Russia (Table 1). The same pattern can be observed in the responses to the question of which country will have the most influence in Asia in 10 years (Table 2). China's influence was deemed to be increasing, while it was predicted that Russia's influence would decrease in the next 10 years.

Similarly, the respondents in most East and South Asian countries that were surveyed by Asian Barometer anticipated the rise of China. The only exception was the Philippines, where the respondents believed that the United States (US) would remain the most influential state in Asia in 10 years (Liu et al., 2012).

Although the findings of this pilot test cannot be regarded as conclusive, they support my argument that a country's actual power might not coincide entirely with its perceived influence. In the case of Kazakhstan, despite China's growing importance for Astana, Russia still has a strong influence on the country both culturally and institutionally (Aitzhanova, Katsu, Linn, & Yezhov, 2014). In real politik, Moscow remains one of Astana's most important partners in strategic terms. However, our survey shows that the future elites of Kazakhstan are already inclined to acknowledge China's dominant influence, and Russia's waning clout, on their country.

Aziz Burkhanov (2014), a Kazakh expert, states that the failure of my survey to reflect Russia's conventional influence in Kazakhstan might be a consequence of Russia's handling of the Crimean and Ukrainian crises in 2014, which made people in Kazakhstan keenly aware of the Kremlin's ambition and gave rise to a desire to distance Kazakhstan from Russia (personal communication, November, 3, 2014). The influence of recent events that could change the locals' views of China should, therefore, be taken into account. Studies in global public opinion, for instance, have found that the impressions of other countries are short-lived and are subject to change. For example, in countries that have experienced terrorist incidents, the public has been found to be more likely to support the war in Afghanistan (Goldsmith, Horiuchi, & Inoguchi, 2005). It is possible that the 2014 Crimean and Ukrainian crises socialized Kazakh residents to change their attitudes toward Russia and China. Hence, even though Russia still has a dominant influence on Kazakhstan, the studied future elites would rather accept Beijing's influence over Moscow's. This speculation awaits further investigation in future research.

### **China's Influence on Other Countries**

An overwhelmingly large number of respondents believed that China's influence on Kazakhstan is positive (Table 3). This result, however, should be interpreted with caution, because the sample in my small survey is not random and suffers from response bias. The respondents

Table 3  
*In General, Does China Have a Negative or Positive Influence on Kazakhstan?*

| Perceived Influence | Pre-trip Survey (N = 61) | Post-trip Survey (N = 86) |
|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Very positive       | 4 (6.6%)                 | 5 (5.8%)                  |
| Positive            | 32 (52.5%)               | 27 (31.4%)                |
| Somewhat positive   | 21 (34.4%)               | 50 (58.1%)                |
| Negative            | 1 (1.6%)                 | 4 (4.7%)                  |
| Very negative       | 0 (0%)                   | 0 (0%)                    |
| No answer           | 3 (4.9%)                 | 0 (0%)                    |

undertook a trip that was partly sponsored by the Chinese government; therefore, their tendency to have a positive impression of China is likely to be high. The question of whether the views of potential future elites represent those of the rest of society requires further investigation. I return to this question in the next section but first compare my results with the Asian Barometer data.

This sanguine perception of China's impact is also observed in most East and South Asian countries, including Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. Japan and Mongolia stand out in the Asian Barometer survey data because of their negative perceptions of China's influence (Liu et al., 2012). Japan's negative stance is explained by its long history of political tension with China and the persistent Sino-Japanese skirmishes. Liu et al. (2012) argue that Mongolians' negative perception might originate from their rising fear of China's territorial expansion.

Various studies have found that respondents in Taiwan and Korea are divided, with half viewing China's influence negatively and half positively (East Asia Institute and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2006; Whitney & Shambaugh, 2008). Like Mongolia, Korea and Taiwan have territorial conflicts with China (Liu et al., 2012), but Korea and Taiwan also have much more positive economic relations with China than Japan and Mongolia (Choo, 2010; East Asia Institute and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2006). Economically, Mongolia is overly

Table 4  
*Does China Do More Good or Harm to Asia?*

| Perceived Influence          | Pre-trip Survey<br>(N = 61) | Post-trip Survey<br>(N = 86) |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Much more good than harm     | 7 (11.5%)                   | 24 (27.9%)                   |
| Somewhat more good than harm | 17 (27.9%)                  | 49 (57.0%)                   |
| Somewhat more harm than good | 0 (0%)                      | 8 (9.3%)                     |
| Much more harm than good     | 0 (0%)                      | 0 (0%)                       |
| No answer                    | 37 (60.7%)                  | 5 (5.8%)                     |

dependent on China, which exacerbates its citizens' grievances with China. Despite Korea's and Taiwan's territorial conflicts with China, their political relations with China have actually improved significantly in recent years. Given the long-term economic benefits that residents of Korea and Taiwan can derive from China's rise, the public in both countries is more likely to moderate its stance toward China. Taiwanese and Korean perceptions of China's rise are, thus, more likely to be positive than Japanese and Mongolian perceptions (Liu et al., 2012).

In the pilot test, I asked the respondents whether China does more good or harm to Asia. In line with the Asian Barometer data related to East and South Asia (Liu et al., 2012), most respondents believed that China's rise will do more good than harm to Asia. In the pre-trip survey, 60.7% of the respondents answered this question. None of those who responded to the question believed that China does more harm than good. Rather, 11.5% believed that China does much more good than harm, and 27.9% believed that China does somewhat more good than harm to Asia. The response rate for the post-trip question was much higher, with the majority of respondents agreeing that China has a positive impact on Asia (Table 4).

### **China as a Developmental Model**

While most respondents recognized China's positive influence, they did not believe that China's model is a favorable example for Kazakh-

Table 5  
*Which Country Should Be a Model for Kazakhstan's Future Development?*

| Country       | Pre-Trip Survey (N = 61) | Post-Trip Survey (N = 86) |
|---------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Japan         | 8 (13.1%)                | 11 (12.8%)                |
| China         | 8 (13.1%)                | 11 (12.8%)                |
| India         | 0 (0%)                   | 0 (0%)                    |
| Russia        | 1 (1.6%)                 | 4 (4.7%)                  |
| United States | 2 (3.3%)                 | 3 (3.5%)                  |
| Singapore     | 17 (27.9%)               | 24 (27.9%)                |
| Kazakhstan    | 7 (11.5%)                | 33 (38.4%)                |
| Other         | 0 (0%)                   | 0 (0%)                    |
| No answer     | 16 (26.2%)               | 0 (0%)                    |

stan's development. The respondents were asked to indicate which of the following countries should be a model for Kazakhstan's development: Japan, China, India, Russia, the US, Singapore, Kazakhstan, or others. In the pre-trip survey, a plurality of respondents (27.9%) believed that Singapore should be a model for Kazakhstan. Japan and China had an equal number of supporters and tied for second in the ranking, while 11.5% of the respondents thought that Kazakhstan should follow its own model.

In the post-trip survey, the ranking was slightly different. The majority of the respondents (38.4%) believed that Kazakhstan should follow its own model. Singapore's ranking fell to second, with 27.9% of the respondents asserting that it should be the model. Japan and China tied for third. The US drew little support. India, as an internationally recognized rising power, did not manage to garner any support from the respondents in either round of the survey (Table 5). India's underperformance might stem from its geographic distance and a lack of perception of this country as a powerful or strong state in the minds of the people of Kazakhstan. The US, while viewed as geographically remote, is considered a superpower and is treated with a great deal of suspicion because of Kazakhstan's Soviet heritage. Moreover, as a result of the residual influence of the Russian media on the people of Kazakhstan, they do not support the

US as a preferred model.<sup>3</sup>

While one could interpret the belief that Kazakhstan should follow its own model as an expression of nationalism, it is unclear why the nationalist sentiment dominated in the post-trip survey. This issue should be further explored; however, due to a lack of variables to measure nationalist sentiment in the current survey, it was impossible to assess the impact of nationalism based on respondents' answers. Future research needs to include more variables.

In addition, it is plausible that the aforementioned potential influence of the 2014 Crimean and Ukrainian crises has made the respondents less inclined to continue to accept the Russian model as a guide for developing Kazakhstan.

A third possible reason why respondents supported the Kazakh model more than any other model is that Kazakhs tend to compare themselves to other Central Asian countries—not to China—and to believe that Kazakhstan has fared much better than its Central Asian neighbors. In terms of economics, political institutions, and public administration, Kazakhstan is indeed the best-performing Central Asian country. Burkhanov (2014), however, argued that a regional divide exists in Kazakhstan (personal communication, November, 3, 2014). People in southern Kazakhstan are geographically closer to other Central Asian countries and are, therefore, more likely to relate to other Central Asian countries than to those in the north. In sum, the original survey question should be modified to include Central Asian countries for the purpose of comparison and to see whether the rankings change.

Moreover, the regard for Singapore as a model for Kazakhstan's development is intriguing because this result is different from those of the Asian Barometer survey in East and South Asia, which shows a preference for the American and Japanese models. One possible explanation for the present survey's finding is that Nazarbayev and his government have argued repeatedly that Kazakhstan should look at Singapore as a

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<sup>3</sup>This view was expressed by Aziz Burkhanov.

good example to follow.

Although Singapore is not a liberal democracy, it has had outstanding achievements in various domains, such as the economy, public administration, and education. Nazarbayev is known to be an admirer of Singapore's late prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.<sup>4</sup> These governments conducted exchanges, aiming to apply Singapore's experience to help Kazakhstan's development in areas such as special economic zone management (Ministry of Industry and New Technologies of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2013; Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Karim Massimov Official Website, 2014).<sup>5</sup> These initiatives could have affected respondents' understanding of Singapore's importance.

Overall, although China's rising influence was recognized by respondents in the pilot test and by East Asians in Asian Barometer's data, no Asian country considered China's model a favorable example to follow. Liu et al. (2012) found that the US model typically enjoys support in Korea, China, the Philippines, and Cambodia, while the Japanese model is welcomed in Taiwan and Indonesia. The potential reasons for most Asian countries' unwillingness to follow China's model could be that China's experiences and conditions are not deemed applicable to other Asian countries (Liu et al., 2012). It is also likely that Asian countries would like to achieve other goals, such as liberal democracy, which the Chinese model cannot offer (Liu et al., 2012).

## **Discussion of the Case of Kazakhstan**

Two questions are worth exploring after analyzing the results of the

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<sup>4</sup>Interview with Aigerim Bolat of the National University of Singapore. Her job is to facilitate educational exchanges between Singapore and Kazakhstan. The interview was conducted in Singapore on January 26, 2015.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Professor Eduardo Araral of the National University of Singapore. He is a strategic advisor to the Government of Kazakhstan and the Kazakhstani Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Development, Banking, Finance, and State Enterprises. The interview was conducted at the National University of Singapore on January 26, 2015.

Table 6  
*Positions toward China in Different Sectors of Kazakh Society*

| Level                   | Position toward China   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Political establishment | Cautious pro-China approach   |
| Elite                   | Divided but more inclined to be pro-China (possibly following the political establishment)    |
| Public                  | Divided/tend to equate China with the Chinese and to be negative about the Chinese (migrants) |

pilot test. First, do the views of the potential future elites in Kazakhstan represent the views of other sectors of the society? Second, how do their views matter in regard to Kazakhstan's policy toward China?

Although answering the first question requires a large, comprehensive survey, we can identify where our respondents are situated in society. As shown in Table 6, the system in Kazakhstan includes three groups. The political establishment (i.e., ruling elite) is, by nature, authoritarian (or a nominal democracy). Based on various official documents and the speeches of governmental representatives (e.g., Idrissoy, 2014; Nazarbayev, 1997), we can confidently confirm a cautious pro-China stance within the political establishment. The incentives for the political establishment to form a cordial relationship with China are explained in Section two of this research note.

The other two groups are the elites and the general public. According to Sadvskaya (2007), the general public is inclined to equate China with the Chinese or with Chinese migrants. Although the views of Chinese migrants vary among respondents with different educational levels and from different geographic locations, the overall public opinion of the Chinese (and thus China) is more negative than positive. This finding is in line with Burkhanov and Chen's (2015) discourse analysis of newspapers in Kazakhstan, which found that private newspapers take a more skeptical stance than state-sponsored newspapers regarding Kazakhstan's relationship with China.

At the elite level, intellectuals and experts consisting of scholars,

writers, and philosophers belong to an older generation that is deeply influenced by the Soviet-era education. A new and younger group of elites representing business interests gradually arose after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the founding of the new state of Kazakhstan. Syroezhkin (2009) observes a divide between these elites' positions toward China. Some are alarmists, while others lean toward the political establishment's position, supporting further engagement with China. However, Syroezhkin does not explore further whether this divide is related to a generational difference.

While the elites appear to be divided, at least part of the elites want to adopt the positions held by the political establishment, which might have led to the internalization of the official pro-China discourse. Such a development would not be surprising, because the elites in nondemocratic countries tend to aspire to become part of the establishment, and not to challenge it or be outside of it. This pattern is even more clearly displayed by potential future members of the elite, who are either the offspring of the current elite and political establishment or aspire to join these ranks. Even if such individuals are initially more ambivalent and reserved toward China, like the public, they might conceal their preference and attempt to demonstrate support for national interests that are more in line with the pro-China discourse. This motivation might explain why the future elites in my small-scale survey demonstrated an inclination to support the pro-China discourse.

The views of the future elites and the public do matter for Kazakhstan's handling of China relations. First, the political establishment needs the support of the society to legitimize its authority. Second, the structure of the political system permits flows of communication and exchanges of interests between the political establishment and the rest of society. Specifically, the political composition of Kazakhstan blends personal kinship interests with the various vested interests (e.g., business and bureaucratic) of society (Clarke, 2014; Issacs, 2011). This characteristic, which some scholars call neopatrimonialism, gives some business elites (e.g., the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs) formal and informal access to the political establishment and has a potential influence on the country's handling

of China relations (Clarke, 2014).

Unlike the elites, the public has no direct method of influencing official policies. However, the public's reactions to how Astana deals with its relationship with China have been shown to have an impact on official policies. For example, in late 2009 and 2010, a controversy arose regarding the proposed lease of Kazakh government land to China for agricultural purposes. The public protested and expressed concerns that the ruling elites might have been bought off by Chinese interests in a bid to jeopardize Kazakhstan's interests. The deal was eventually put on hold, indicating the importance of public opinion in Sino-Kazakh relations.

## Conclusion

The political establishment in Kazakhstan appears to be keenly aware of the country's international and domestic stance and interests. Internationally, the political establishment has devised a multi-vector foreign policy that allows Kazakhstan to befriend all the important players in world politics, such as Russia, China, the US, and the EU. Kazakhstan is a vast country in terms of its size; however, as measured by various other indicators, such as economic power and political clout, Kazakhstan is a small player in world politics. Its geographic proximity to China and Russia makes the ruling elite aware of the necessity to strike a balanced relationship with its giant neighbors while maintaining the country's sovereignty and independence. Its multi-vector foreign policy enables it to achieve this. Furthermore, this policy signals to countries around the world that Kazakhstan is on good terms with many countries, and this helps to boost the country's image in global politics.

Kazakhstan's strategy to befriend neighboring powers has been successful so far. Both China and Russia are able to achieve their various strategic goals in Central Asia without any major confrontations arising. However, Moscow's recent moves to start various economic initiatives, such as the 2015 Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), reveal Russia's intention to regain its economic clout in the region. The EEU's protectionist

nature does not meld well with Beijing's idea behind the Silk Road Economic Belt and the goal to foster greater regional integration. Kazakhstan continues to use its multi-vector strategy by participating in both the EEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt. However, the dynamic in the region is fluid. If China decides to increase its involvement in Central Asia, Kazakhstan's approach will not be sustainable.

While the delicate nature of the dynamics awaits continuous observation, as Clarke (2014) insightfully points out, Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy not only serves the political establishment's international interests, but it also has the virtue of speaking to its domestic constituents. This capacity is clearly exhibited in Kazakhstan's relationship with China. As noted earlier on, the Kazakhstani public and elites are divided over Astana's relationship with China. Unlike the political establishment, which is more pro-China, the public and the elites have more reservations about the Sino-Kazakh relationship. One could argue that, to help the political establishment maintain the legitimacy of its position, the ruling elites have used the multi-vector policy to avoid blame and to take credit. When the public or the elites support the government's undertakings with China, the government celebrates this as an achievement of its multi-vector policy to establish a good relationship with its Chinese neighbor. When society is dissatisfied with the government's handling of certain issues with China, such as the leasing of land to China, the government can avoid blame by arguing that it has never attempted to favor any other country at the cost of Kazakhstan's interest. In addition, the leadership can manipulate public sentiment because it understands that part of the society is skeptical of China. Consequently, the leadership was able to assign blame to China for asking Kazakhstan to lease the land and use public pressure as an excuse to refuse China's demand. Public opinion plays a crucial role in Kazakhstan's handling of China relations and serves Kazakhstan's internal and external interests.

This conclusion supports the argument that, to evaluate whether China's rise will bring peace and prosperity to world politics, it is insufficient to consider Beijing's economic and military capacities only. One must also take into account how other countries view China's role in the

larger scheme of protecting their national interests (Kang, 2009). The political establishment of Kazakhstan can use China to legitimize its rule. The question of whether China's rise is peaceful thus becomes less important than when or how Kazakhstan wants China to be seen as peaceful or as a threat.

The IR field has seen much discussion of the uncertain post-Cold War environment and different states' responses to the rising China. A number of scholars have contended that East Asian and Southeast Asian countries have neither balanced nor "bandwagoned" against China (Cheng & Hsu, 2005; Kang, 2009; Kuik, 2008). Instead, they have tried to keep all strategic options open, allowing for the possibility of both balancing and "bandwagoning" in their handling of China relations. While this study offers only a glimpse of the whole picture, it indicates the need for more scholarly attention to flesh out the logic of Central Asia's strategic responses to China's rise from the perspective of IR theories.

The value of this research stream is not purely theoretical. Methodologically and empirically, this research note has repeatedly stressed the necessity for a large, systematic survey to more accurately capture Central Asian views than the descriptive interpretation offered in the existing literature. In addition to including a large sample for survey analysis, the questionnaire should also include more variables for explanatory analysis. Potential variables include gender, ethnicity, religion, international exposure, and generational differences. Take, for example, gender. It has been found that, in Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia, women tend to perceive China more positively than men (Wang & Yang, 2010). This difference might stem from women's tendency to be less nationalistic and to see other countries more positively than men. The present small-scale pilot survey included more female than male respondents, and the majority of respondents had positive views of China. Whether gender has a significant impact on Kazakhstan citizens' views of China should be explored in future surveys.

In other studies, ethnicity has also been demonstrated to have an effect on perceptual differences regarding China. Wang and Yang (2010), for instance, found that the Chinese in Singapore tend to view China more

positively than the Malays in Singapore. Kazakhstan is a multiethnic country (Spehr & Kassenova, 2012); however, the homogeneous ethnicity of the respondents in the present survey (i.e., Kazakhs) cannot shed light on the ethnicity factor. This question awaits an answer in future research.

Similar to the ethnicity factor, linguistic and religious backgrounds have been shown to affect perceptions of other countries (Wang & Yang, 2010). In Southeast Asia, for instance, Muslims tend to see China less favorably than non-Muslims (Wang & Yang, 2010). Muslims comprise the largest religious group in Kazakhstan (Yemelianova, 2014), but whether religious background plays a role in perceptions of China has not been tested.

In the pre-trip survey, most respondents reported that they had not visited China. In the post-trip survey, an open question asked the respondents about their views of the China trip. Those who indicated their views shared appreciation for and satisfaction with the China trip. Their comments included the following: “The best trip of my life”; “informative, interesting, and joyful”; “I liked this trip very much! It was a great chance to see China in full bloom, learn more about foreign culture, and understand how beautiful and hardworking this country is”; and “Please invite us again; I want to go one more time.” The question of whether exposure to Chinese people or culture has an impact requires investigation. Other studies have explored the impact of international exposure (e.g., the experience of traveling abroad, following news in other countries, and using the Internet) on individuals’ impressions of other countries (Johnston & Stockmann, 2007; Wang & Yang, 2010). By studying these factors, one can gain greater insight into whether cultural exchanges between China and Central Asia could minimize misunderstanding and foster mutual respect to ensure peace in the region.

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