

“Unlike other countries in the region, there is not a single Belt and Road Initiative project in Kyrgyzstan,” the prominent sinologist from Kyrgyzstan, ex-Foreign Minister, and ex-SCO Secretary-General Muratbek Imanaliev analyzes drawbacks of China-Kyrgyzstan relations especially for CABAR.asia

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Why is there no anti-Semitism in the UK?

Because we do not consider them smarter than us.

Today, we observe the worst relations with China for the entire independence period and the poorest foreign relations with China among the Central Asian states. *Suffice to say, unlike other countries in the region there is still not a single project under the Belt and Road initiative in Kyrgyzstan.* The altered by coronavirus world is likely to observe an updated version of the Initiative. But are we ready for that?

We would be wrong to attribute actions and their intermediate results merely to the so-called sinophobia. There are many other domestic and foreign policy complications. But let's try to address sinophobia per se.

Causes of Sinophobia

Negative public sentiment in Kyrgyzstan over the country's relations with China are caused by two factors today.

The first has to do with the sluggish legacy of the past:

1. Some folk art and public ethnology works are interpreted in a way to form certain, often distorted, ideas about the past relations of Kyrgyz people with the Chinese. That certainly extrapolates into the present. The historical enemy image formed based on the above works does not correspond to the real documented history of long-time Kyrgyz-Chinese relations. For example, it is acknowledged that there have been no wars between Kyrgyz and Chinese. Surely some conflicts and clashes did take place, but there was never an all-out war like there were between the Kyrgyz and other

peoples, at least no war is documented in renowned historical sources. Moreover, at the beginning of the “Dzhungar campaign” in 1757, the Qing Emperor Xuan Ye sent a message to the Kazakh sultans and Kyrgyz manaps with a proposal to take part in this war; the offer was accepted by the latter.

2. There is a significant influence of Soviet outreach and awareness-raising campaigns, the remaining negative publicity, and the corresponding environment formed back then. Those were established during the Sino-Soviet confrontation in the 60s and 70s, which were also known to be accompanied by border conflicts.

The second factor is of a modern origin and was formed over the independence years.

1. The noteworthy feature here is the generally negative reaction of both policymakers and the population to the outcome of the Kyrgyz-Chinese border negotiations and the signed documents. It is still widely accepted that Kyrgyzstan has ceded significant territories to China. “China’s territorial assertiveness”, according to nearly all political and social opinion leaders, is not, however, the main cause of the cessions. Most Kyrgyz citizens consider “venality”, corrupted country’s leaders and officials, to be both the major cause and the pressing problem. The context retains its informational power, influences China’s image-building, and forms a public opinion on issues of China-Kyrgyzstan relations. It often becomes a topic for political and media manipulations in addressing political problems, including personal ones.
2. Having said that, the issue of foreign media “loading information” on Kyrgyzstan also resonates both thematically and substantively. The array of negative information about China, including everyday life, habits, customs of the Chinese, not to mention domestic and foreign policy issues, is vast and likely to increase. The more China succeeds, the more “yellow journalism” and critics it gets; an ambition to use the shortcomings and mistakes of Chinese officials for China’s negative image-building.



Could China Be Softening Stance on Kazak, Kyrgyz Minorities?

The framework of Kyrgyzstan-China cooperation often witnesses challenges in the activities

of Chinese companies. Clashes between local residents and Chinese workers have become more frequent particularly in the mining industry. The recent two incidents causing negative repercussions - in Salton-Sary and At-Bashy - entailed both economic and political, albeit intangible and invisible to the public eye, consequences.

The charges usually come down to the so-called “uncontrolled export of national property”, the debt levels to China, the rising number of Chinese citizens illegally residing in the country, and Kyrgyz-Chinese marriages. The charges are inspired by a rumor that all this is supported by the Chinese government and is an important element of its foreign policy. The activity of certain public organizations and individual politicians using anti-Chinese themes in their interests create excitement in the country. The anti-Chinese rhetoric will be definitely used in one form or another during election battles.

The special subject for public discussion is the future of China and its domestic and foreign policies, especially concerning its neighbors. Of the various topics discussed, the so-called “*Chinese demographic and economic expansion*” is the most common. The expansion issue, some policymakers and experts believe, has a historical origin, i.e. such as the policy of both imperial (for centuries) and republican (before the CCP) China. The “coronavirus” topic has been added to the list, mainly concerning the origin of the disease.

On the other hand, there are many people that, in a very positive way, argue on the rather high level of state and ethnic discipline shown by the Chinese during the epidemic. People highlight the courage of Chinese doctors, medical staff, and scientists in these critical and turbulent times.

This indicates a slight expansion of the positive information space about China, specifically in those areas of the state and human activity, where China’s success is undeniable.

Kyrgyz youth shows great interest in China, and the young people studying in Chinese universities note the stability of the situation in the country, the tolerance of the Chinese, and no chauvinistic and nationalist attacks against them. Many young men and women of Kyrgyzstan envisage their future as lying in China.

Public views of China

Considering all the information on our neighbor, there are two views of China “stuck” in the social awareness of individuals.

The first is the ever-growing “fear” of China, which in the minds of some population

segments appears as a world hegemon and aggressor in the future. (We should note, however, that the “American fear” of China and the “Kyrgyz fear” are different in content and quality).

The second is ever-increasing somewhat admiration of China’s achievement. It is accompanied by Kyrgyz citizens’ growing interest in history, culture, traditional medicine, and national sports of China, and the Chinese language.

Two “views” qualify as antagonistic representations and exist in parallel, not being synthesized and at the same time not interfering with each other.



Muratbek Imanaliev: China Is a University That Is Impossible To Graduate From

The contributing factors for both views are a lack of fair and accessible information in Russian and Kyrgyz, primarily from Chinese sources, the lack of communication and related awareness-raising, cultural and humanitarian affairs.

Over the independence years, attitudes toward China have slowly but surely changed for the better. We cannot assert, however, drastic positive metamorphoses. The general negative has turned from a “historical enemy” to a “chief expansionist”, or rather, not so much changed as there were labels replaced.

All of the above are evidenced in all population segments in Kyrgyzstan, yet there is a difference in approaches often determined by the social and political status and personal relations with China. The outliers are entrepreneurs, those who sent their children for education in China, and those who see the perspective.

The political elite and government officials form their opinion depending on the foreign policy orientation, the political and economic ties with Chinese counterparts, having credible or biased information on China, and what is happening in the world. Though, their political and humanitarian moods are contradictory regardless of China and depend not so much on their speculative understanding but on “conversations from the outside”.

The Parliament, responsible for the country's international relations as a political authority, is off-site the foreign policy bounds, including Chinese issues. *An integrated parliamentary position on China is yet to be constructed; parliament members form individual views on China and perceive the neighbor purely on the grounds indicated above. But at the same time, the parliamentary group on friendship with China is one of the largest comprising 68 people.*

China's membership in the UN as a permanent member of the Security Council, the "nuclear" club and G-20 memberships do not provide a framework for understanding the significance of the "Chinese" factor in relations with Kyrgyzstan, at least politically globalized conscious parameters towards forging Kyrgyzstan's "Chinese policy". Forging positions are based on simple "arithmetic" indicators – the population of China, the armed forces, gross domestic product, state budget, foreign aid, the number of Chinese citizens in the country, and their activity.



Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO, June 2019, Bishkek, source: www.president.kg

Kyrgyzstan's engagement in the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is yet to be conceptualized, primarily in terms of rationale that ensures full and productive cooperation within the organization's framework. So far, there is only a possibility of using the cooperation-rivalry format between Russia and China. The SCO is generally perceived by policymakers and expert communities in Kyrgyzstan as a kind of international political

tool of China's foreign policy. The perception has been introduced from outside and not a brainstorm of local politicians.

The change of leadership in China did not inspire any analytical modeling of future cooperation with China's new leaders.

Considerable importance for governmental structures are attached to the fact that, unlike Western countries, China makes no claims on the range of issues like human rights, the issues of the investment, and the legal environment in Kyrgyzstan, among others. The current claims are made in a soft, laid-back manner for now, although it became hard for China to mask the growing discontent.

Our country's economic and financial services consider China as an investment and grant assistance source only.

The law enforcement and security agencies have formed a more advanced position, somewhat looking up to China's related structures in their activities and development of a national judicial and penal system, especially in punishing perpetrators. Besides, they perceive China as a partner in providing financial and other assistance. Another perceptual component of China's positive image lies in the fight against criminal activity, drug trafficking, terrorism, and other crime manifestations. Kyrgyzstan endorses China's practices in this area.

Business entities show great interest in cooperation with China, due to several advantages like geographical proximity, similarities in economic behavioral culture, Chinese partners not requesting for preconditions, particularly those related to the legal status and economic responsibility. But at the same time, the cooperation with Chinese entrepreneurs, along with other foreign entities, is not precluded from doing a shadow and illegal business.

Instead of a conclusion

Expert analysis of the "Chinese problem" is non-existent since there are no essential think-tanks in Kyrgyzstan and competent sinologists remain a great challenge.

The few experts who seem to be working on the "Chinese" track rely mightily on materials of Russian and Western think-tanks. And they basically reflect the position of foreign experts with reference to the Kyrgyz situation.

Having an excellently trained sinological staff remains a challenge that will take years to address.

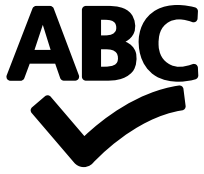
The growth of anti-Chinese sentiments, the spontaneous emergence of social structures trying to control the so-called Chinese migration, the increasing clashes between residents of the Kyrgyz villages, and Chinese workers cannot be artificially taken out of the general context of xenophobia's growth in Kyrgyzstan. The latter is rooted in the problems of economic decline, social unrest, enduring backwardness, corrupted officials, among others. Such provocations are often made by dishonest politicians.

We cannot, however, shift the guilt away from Chinese entrepreneurs and workers regarding the legality of their stay in Kyrgyzstan, the enforcement of laws and other regulations of the country.

Economic cooperation, often accompanied by semi-criminal actions, without the use of cultural and humanitarian means, such as the exchange of people, own analytical developments, cultural days, i.e. active use of "soft power" on both sides, will hinder the enhanced and meaningful partnership and mutual understanding. For example, clubs dedicated to Chinese national sports such as Wushu, Kung Fu, theaters of Chinese cuisine, the society of Chinese literature could be opened in Kyrgyzstan. Literally a few people in Kyrgyzstan, know the Nobel Prize winner writer Mo Yan. A greater encounter of Aitmatov and other famous Kyrgyz writers' works would be of Chinese reader's interest. The joint production of films dedicated to the common struggle of the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Chinese against the Dzungarian Khanate would be a fascinating project.

We absolutely need to reframe some of the essential components of Kyrgyzstan-China relations, most notably to strengthen the cultural and humanitarian aspects. The creation of a national sinological research center and the development of our own China journalism should be pursued.

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