

Colleen Wood, Columbia University
Harriman-IMEMO Conference

Research Memo: “Balancing Global Powers, Balancing Domestic Pressures: Multi-Vector
Diplomacy in Central Asia”

April 4 2019

Multi-vectorism has long been the dominant frame for analyzing Central Asian foreign policy. In theory, multi-directional diplomacy deftly leverages the region’s geographic and geopolitical position to balance relations with major world powers — Russia, China, Turkey, India, the U.S. and the EU — for political, security, and economic gains. But multi-vectorism as a lens for analysis is elite-centered and so underestimates the effect of domestic constraints that have been consequential in shaping foreign policy in Central Asia. Even in Kazakhstan, with its considerable state control, the government has been forced to contend with and respond to grassroots pressures, suggesting that foreign policy is more than purely the product of elite calculations about threats and opportunities from abroad.

In this memo, I consider the domestic complications of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan’s relationship with China against the backdrop of the One Belt One Road Initiative and the mass internment of Muslims in Xinjiang. Here I explore several questions: How are Central Asian citizens mobilizing to make foreign policy-related demands, and how do governments respond to unexpected societal demands when dealing with a powerful neighbor? Can Central Asian leaders strategically use these domestic pressures in their dealings with Beijing?

To that end, I first explain the developments in China’s western Xinjiang province and how they relate to Central Asian politics, specifically in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Then, I lay out the multiple strategies Central Asian citizens and non-government organizations have taken to voice concern and make demands on their government’s foreign policy choices. Next I describe the international response to the Xinjiang internment camps and consider how shifts in rhetoric from other countries and international organizations might affect Central Asian leaders’ positions. I compare the possibilities that domestic organizing and international criticism could change Central Asian foreign policy and consider the implications of ignoring bubbling discontent for regional stability.

Mass Internment of Muslims in Xinjiang

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwestern China has long been heavily policed, especially since brief but intense violence in 2009, but Beijing’s strategy for controlling Xinjiang

changed in April 2017 when police began detaining Chinese Muslims in camps.¹ It is estimated that more than one million prisoners are held in these camps; prisoners are mostly Uyghurs, though other groups who live in the region — Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, for example — have also been detained.² Chinese officials have shifted their vocabulary when it comes to describing the camps, at first denying their existence entirely and in October 2018 shifting to describe them as “vocational re-education centers.”³ The Chinese government maintains that the camps are part of a long-term project to Sinicize Islam to make the religion more compatible with socialism and less of a security threat.

International Pressure on China

As of yet, there has been relatively little criticism of the internment camps from the international community, compared to other recent large-scale human rights abuses such as ethnic cleansing and forced resettlement of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), consisting of 57 member states with large Muslim populations, first condemned Myanmar for targeting its Muslim population in May 2018 and adopted a resolution in March 2019 to take Myanmar to the International Court of Justice.⁴ In contrast with this sharp position, the OIC has remained totally silent about China’s treatment of Muslims.

Turkey remains the only Muslim country to criticize China for its detention of Uyghurs and other Muslims, with a Turkish foreign ministry spokesman making a statement on February 10, 2019.⁵ Other majority-Muslim countries have avoided confronting China on the issue, and some have even praised China for its position. At the UN Human Rights Council meeting in November 2018, Malaysia spoke to China’s “many achievements in human rights” and Syria pressed China to continue to counter “extremist religious movements.”⁶ Terror-related narratives gained

¹ Shohret Hoshur and Joshua Lipes, “Authorities in Xinjiang’s Kashgar Detain Uyghurs at ‘Open Political Re-Education Camps’” *Radio Free Asia*, May 9 2019. Accessed April 3 2019: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/camps-05092018154928.html>.

² Aliya Uteuova, “Kazakhstan offers more clues on plight of Kazakhs in China,” *EurasiaNet* March 5 2019. Accessed online April 2 2019:

<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-offers-more-clues-on-plight-of-kazakhs-in-china>. See also Gene A. Bunin, “Kyrgyz Students Vanish Into Xinjiang’s Maw,” *Foreign Policy*, March 31 2019. Accessed online April 3 2019: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/31/963451-kyrgyz-xinjiang-students-camps/>.

³ Ben Westcott and Yong Xiong, “China legalizes Xinjiang ‘re-education camps’ after denying they exist,” *CNN* October 11 2018. Accessed online April 1 2019,

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/10/asia/xinjiang-china-reeducation-camps-intl/index.html>.

⁴ Khin Khin Ei and Roseanne Gerin, “World Islamic Group Votes to Take Myanmar Rohingya Abuses to International Court of Justice,” *Radio Free Asia*, March 5 2019. Accessed online April 1 2019:

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/world-islamic-group-votes-03052019165111.html>.

⁵ “‘Shame for humanity’: Turkey urges China to close Uighur camps,” *Al-Jazeera*, February 10 2019. Accessed online April 2 2019:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/humanity-turkey-urges-china-close-uighur-camps-190209202215688.html>

⁶ Nathan Vanderklippe, “Canada, Western countries condemn China at UN for repression of Muslims,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 6 2018. Accessed online April 2 2019:

traction, and on February 22, Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Bin Salman defended China's use of internment camps in Xinjiang, citing China's "right to carry out anti-terrorism and de-extremization work for its national security."⁷

Western countries have been slow to react to news reports of internment camps and forced labor in Xinjiang. In November 2018, U.S. Senators Marco Rubio and Bob Menendez submitted a bill titled "Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act" for consideration. The bill would dedicate new resources to documenting abuse of Muslims in Xinjiang and apply travel and financial sanctions against Chinese officials responsible for policies in Xinjiang under the Magnitsky Act. The bill was resubmitted in January and has picked up steam in American media with US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi expressing a desire to "call out" Beijing for its human rights abuses.⁸

Domestic Organizing and Pressure in Central Asia

The winter after news of co-ethnics being imprisoned in Chinese internment camps made its way into Central Asian media over the past several months, citizens and NGOs in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan busily organized protests and information campaigns.

In Kyrgyzstan, there were a handful of small protests organized in the capital in December and January to draw attention to the plight of ethnic Kyrgyz and Uyghurs detained in Xinjiang. On December 20, 2018, a crowd of about 150 people gathered near the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek for a protest led by nationalist group Kyrk Choro. Leaders of Kyrk Choro called on the Chinese government to explain why it had arrested ethnic Kyrgyz and decided to hold them in camps; the group also demanded that the Kyrgyz government expel any Chinese found to be staying in the country illegally.⁹

To the north in Kazakhstan, civic organizers faced more challenges in planning rallies. Information about the scale of the Xinjiang internment camps has caused a shift in public opinion about China, though; this shift is due in part to foreign-funded media as well as local

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-canada-western-nations-condemn-china-at-un-for-repression-of-muslims/>

⁷ Cristina Maza, "Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman Defends China's Use of Concentration Camps for Muslims During Visit to Beijing," *Newsweek*, February 22 2019. Accessed online April 1 2019: <https://www.newsweek.com/saudi-arabia-mohammad-bin-salman-defends-china-concentration-camps-muslims-1340592>.

⁸ Joshua Lipps and Gulchehra Hoja, "Pelosi Signals Strong US Congress Concern Over Uyghur Political 'Re-education Camps,'" *Radio Free Asia*, February 13 2019. Accessed online March 29 2019: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/pelosi-02132019162108.html>.

⁹ Colleen Wood, "Why Did Kyrgyz Stage a Protest Outside the Chinese Embassy?" *The Diplomat*, December 29 2018. Accessed online April 2 2019: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/why-did-kyrgyz-stage-a-protest-outside-the-chinese-embassy/>.

human rights organization Atajurt's digital press conferences. Atajurt has published thousands of YouTube videos to draw attention to ethnic Kazakhs who have been detained in China.¹⁰

The iterative nature of efforts to raise attention about Uyghurs' plight in internment camps suggests a new pattern, in which the boundary between "real" and digital politics is not so neat. The boundaries between issue areas are also not perfectly defined, and public conversations about human rights abuses in Xinjiang and complaints about governments' foreign policy responses are largely taking place online and tapping into recent grievances to gain traction. In Kyrgyzstan, one noteworthy element is that social media users link news from Xinjiang with criticism of Chinese economic development projects and soft power initiatives. One widely shared meme declared "Don't let anyone take your land;" the image depicted a strong fist adorned with a Kyrgyz flag stopping a spindly hand marked by a Chinese flag from grabbing several factories.¹¹ Some Central Asians see loans and investment from One Belt One Road as predatory, a concern with historical precedent. The risk of being in debt to China recalls the controversial Sino-Kyrgyz border demarcation process that involved Kyrgyzstan handing over 1250 square kilometers of land to China in 2002.¹² The discursive pattern linking Sinophobia, the Xinjiang internment camps, and Chinese development projects reveals that these protests are building on a wider base of grievances than any single issue.

Responses from the Top

According to traditional expectations grounded in multi-vector diplomacy analysis, Central Asian leaders should be making policy decisions based purely on elite calculations about great power.

Certainly, comments from Central Asian leaders have tended to reflect a respect for China's internal affairs. On December 19, Kyrgyzstan's president Sooronbay Jeenbekov commented on the issue. "The ethnic Kyrgyz in China are citizens of China, who obey the laws of their country," Jeenbekov said. "How can we intervene in their domestic matters? We can't."¹³ Although Kyrgyz officials have remained muted toward the camps, the winter's demonstrations in Bishkek led to cooperation between migration services and the nationalist group that organized the protests regarding the legal status of Chinese labor migrants and the quota for

¹⁰ See their YouTube page here:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5uns79sHr1AZiUw1ikV7PQ/videos>.

¹¹ See the image, shared here on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/kadir.kocyigit.1232/posts/1927116850657070>.

¹² Bruce Pannier, "Central Asian Land and China," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, May 2 2016. Accessed online April 1 2019: <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asian-land-and-china/27711366.html>

¹³ "Jeenbekov o kitajskikh kyrgyzakh: Eto grazhdane Kitaya, my ne mozhem vmeshivat'sya," *Radio Azattyk*, December 19 2018. Accessed online April 2 2019: <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/29664421.html>.

foreign workers.¹⁴ Moreover, Kyrgyz officials' request that China dispense \$56 million in investments in "grant" form rather than as a loan package suggests that authorities are cognizant of public opinion toward China.¹⁵

Kazakhstan has developed a similar strategy of outwardly relegating the fate of ethnic Kazakhs in China to an "internal matter" that should not be interfered with. Meanwhile, Kazakh diplomats have pursued backdoor diplomacy to negotiate the release of several thousand co-ethnics and several dozen co-nationals from internment camps.¹⁶

But Kazakhstani authorities' response to digital mobilization about Xinjiang suggests that the government is carefully watching domestic organizing taking place on social media. In February 2019, an Almaty court found Serikzhan Bilash, who was leading the human rights organization Atajurt, guilty of leading an unregistered organization. At the time he was fined 252,000 tenge (\$670). Less than a month later, Bilash was arrested and this time charged with attempting to incite ethnic hatred.¹⁷ Bilash faces ten years in jail for this charge, though he was transferred from jail to house arrest in March 2019.

Implications: What's at stake for Central Asian governments?

Perhaps it is not much of a puzzle that Central Asian leaders have not spoken up against China, given ever-increasing economic dependence on their neighbor and the potential military threat China poses. But subtle shifts in domestic policy and foreign policy framing suggest that officials from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are beholden to more "vectors" than just global powers. Domestic organizing, both online and on the streets, has not compelled leaders in these countries to entirely reconsider their relationships with China. But it is telling that grassroots forces have not been ignored.

Silencing Bilash with large fines or house arrest has not made Atajurt or the broader campaign against the imprisonment of Chinese Muslims fade away quietly. Within a day of Bilash's arrest, Atajurt's YouTube page uploaded several hundred videos submitted by Kazakhs expressing

¹⁴ "Gosorgany i 'Kyrk Choro' proveryali dokumenty inostrantsev na predpriyatiyakh Bishkeka," *Kaktus News*, February 15 2019. Accessed online April 2 2019: https://kaktus.media/doc/386885_gosorgany_i_kyrk_choro_proveriali_dokymenty_inostrancev_na_predpriyatiyah_bishkeka.html

¹⁵ "Kyrgyzstan asks China for grant instead of loan," *EurasiaNet* February 28, 2019. Accessed online April 1 2019: <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-asks-china-for-grant-instead-of-loan>

¹⁶ Meyirim Smajyl, "O zaderzhannykh v Kitaye kazakhstantsakh rasskazal Atamkulov," *TengriNews*, March 4 2019. Accessed online March 29 2019: https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/o-zaderjannyih-v-kitae-kazahstantsah-rasskazal-atamkulov-364439/.

¹⁷ "Xinjiang Activist Detained in Kazakhstan, Accused of Sowing Discord," *Radio Free Europe*, March 10 2019. Accessed online March 29 2019: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-xinjiang-activist-detained-accused-of-sowing-discord-/29813145.html>.

support for Bilash and demanding for his release.¹⁸ Videos have been posted in a smattering of languages, many recorded in English, in an attempt to get the attention of outsiders who might be in a better position to put pressure on Kazakhstan's government. Moreover, the digital support for Bilash cemented his name as a public figure in Kazakhstan; while the regime feels compelled to silence dissent, any further mistreatment of Bilash or censoring of social media materials about Xinjiang risks arousing backlash.

In Kyrgyzstan, the rhetorical strategy of combining Xenophobic images with historical concerns about sovereignty, economic development, and identity-based affinities is noteworthy. This practice of linking issues may not have shifted foreign policy at the highest level, but it did convincingly show officials in Bishkek that protests are building on a wider base of grievances than previously thought.

To conclude, in this memo I have considered how citizens of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are mobilizing to make foreign policy-related demands, specifically about their countries' relationship with China against the backdrop of the One Belt One Road Initiative and the mass internment of Muslims in Xinjiang. Even in Kazakhstan, with its considerable state control, the government has been forced to respond to societal pressures, suggesting that foreign policy is more than purely the product of elite calculations about threats and opportunities from abroad. This complicates the traditional, multi-vector narrative about Central Asian foreign policy, suggesting the need for new theories in which citizens have a meaningful voice.

¹⁸ See the Twitter hashtag #FreeSerikjanBilash here <https://twitter.com/hashtag/FreeSerikjanBilash?src=hash>