

The Kyrgyz Streetocracy and the Unravelling of the Belt and Road Initiative



Kyrgyzstan

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While the world was struggling over how to respond to the spread of the Coronavirus and how to manage the Chinese cover-up that exacerbated it, an explosive, but little-noticed piece of news came out of Central Asia in late February: the Kyrgyz people had driven a key Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project out of Kyrgyzstan, sending China scurrying to manage the situation.

During his 2019 visit to Kyrgyzstan, Party Secretary Xi Jinping personally signed a trade deal with Kyrgyzstan. The agreement was to establish a free-trade zone on the Sino-Kyrgyz border, thought to be worth over US\$275 million. It would facilitate trade from China across Kyrgyzstan and into the heart of Central Asia. This deal also required Kyrgyzstan to turn over a giant parcel of land, which would host warehouses, hotels, shopping malls, and other facilities, to Chinese control for 49 years. Presented by China as a way to improve the lives of impoverished Kyrgyz citizens, it was instead perceived by them as a Chinese land grab of the types seen and protested against in Kazakhstan throughout 2019. While the endgame is still unclear in Kazakhstan, here it was another victory for the Kyrgyz streetocracy: somewhat surprisingly, One Lead One, the Chinese venture company responsible for the project, withdrew in light of the public protests and returned home.

For Central Asian watchers, this will not come as a surprise. Contemporary Kyrgyzstan was largely founded by the “street,” when, following a series of riots and brutal crackdowns in Osh in the Ferghana Valley in 1990, the Soviet authoritarian leadership in the Kyrgyz SSR was driven from power and Askar Akaev, who began his career as a liberal reformer, was chosen President. Since gaining independence, Kyrgyzstan has continued to be a hotbed of protests, including against China. In March 2002, riots broke out in the southern region of Aksy over a number of issues, including the arrest of Azimbek Beknazarov, the Acting Prosecutor General, who had been taken into custody because of his protest against Akaev’s decision to cede a large swath of disputed land to China in return for absolutely nothing. While the protestors were not successful in stopping the Chinese land grab in that instance, it did change their perception of Akaev and guaranteed they would keep an eye on China and other foreign interference in their still new nation.

In a series of protests over a tainted Parliamentary election in 2005, the Kyrgyz street realized their true power when they drove Akaev from office and the country. They were again successful five years later, when they drove President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who was seen as too closely allied with Russian President Vladimir Putin, from power. The Kyrgyz street made a third large splash in 2012–2013, when it staged a series of anti-government rallies in the Kumtor gold mine region. The gold mine, responsible for upwards of 12% of Kyrgyzstan’s GDP, is 67% owned by Canada’s Centerra Gold, with

the remaining 33% held by the Kyrgyz government. Originally angry at continued foreign control over a key part of their country, they added a complaint of “environmental damage” to their list of grievances against Centerra, an accusation that led the Kyrgyz government to fine them. While the Kyrgyz street in this instance was not able to drive a national government from power, this was not their goal. They simply wanted to draw attention to foreign ownership of Kyrgyz land and the environmental damage it had caused. In this way, they were successful.

Therefore, it is clear to see why the Kyrgyz street turned against the Chinese deal earlier this year: China was taking control of Kyrgyz land, and, in light of China’s long, dark history of environmental destruction, there was no guarantee they would properly care for it. In fact, in late 2019 the Kyrgyz street turned out in Naryn to protest against a Chinese mining company’s poisoning of the local water supply. This continued a spate of anti-Chinese Kyrgyz street actions that had first turned out in 2018 to protest against a power plant, reconstructed by a Chinese company, that failed in the cold and darkness of winter and again made themselves heard in early 2019, when they demanded a reduction in the amount of national money to be paid to China.

Because Central Asia is the key to the success of BRI – the original version was designed to go no further than bringing Central Asia into the Chinese orbit – China’s abandonment of this project is a potentially serious blow to the entire initiative and has to be a psychological shock to the Chinese Communist Party leadership, which portrays itself, as did the Soviet Union, as infallible and inevitable. Moreover, it comes on the heels of a number of other implosions throughout the grander BRI scheme elsewhere in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

In Africa, the situation is even more fraught because several African countries, in light of the economic damage wrought by the onset of the Coronavirus, have demanded debt relief so they will not fall into the same debt trap that caused Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port to be turned over to Chinese control for 99 years. China has not responded to that request. However, it has started a racist campaign against African citizens, whom they are evicting from their lodgings, businesses and hotels in Guangzhou, and likely elsewhere throughout China, accusing them of bringing and spreading the Coronavirus. China previously started similar blame-game campaigns against Italy and the United

States, but they backfired when those nations chose to fight back loudly. In this instance, China's behaviour has led to remarkable scenes of PRC Ambassadors and other Foreign Ministry officials being dressed down in public by their African counterparts, whose countries China has been treating largely as resource-producing colonies for years. This could mark the moment when Chinese influence in Africa begins to wane, as their presence becomes less and less popular among the populations of many African nations. After all, it is this same neo-colonialist attitude that led to the growing anti-Chinese street protests in Central Asia.



Figure 1. From the left, the PRC's Xi Jinping standing with Kyrgyzstan's President Sooronbay Jeenbekov

While China will likely spin this failed project after the fact and to its own people as a victim of the economic fallout from the Coronavirus spread, that is not the message the world should understand. Rather, it should understand that it is possible to stand up to China, it is possible to defeat China, and that people, even in less-than-democratic governments, have the power to stand up, not only to China, but to their own officials. It's the latter, when initiated by a strong Chinese streetocracy, that should frighten the Chinese leadership the most, for that could be the beginning of

the end of CCP rule.

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