

BRI in Central Asia: People-to-People Projects

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ABSTRACT

Along with financing hard infrastructure projects, Beijing also promotes soft power projects in the form of people-to-people initiatives. However, such projects are low priority within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central Asia. The Confucius Institutes, which appear to be an important vehicle for Chinese soft power in the region, are not directly linked to BRI and were launched before and independently of BRI.

Keywords: BRI, China, people-to-people exchange, soft power, Confucius Institute, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

Background and data collection

China had been promoting its soft power through people-to-people contacts and exchanges long before BRI was launched.

This data article provides an overview both Chinese bilateral and BRI projects implemented in Central Asia. Data collection was carried out from August 2018 to January 2019 by one CADGAT researcher from each Central Asian country. Data were harvested from official statistics, local and international media, government press releases, interviews and reports. These sources formed the basis for the collection of news clippings about BRI projects in the main table below. This is not a complete list of Chinese projects in the region but provides an overview of most of them. These data are also available in a unified Excel database at the following address:

<http://osce-academy.net/en/research/cadgat/>

Key findings

Unlike energy and infrastructure, people-to-people projects have been less of a priority for Beijing, and China exercises little soft power in Central Asia.¹ With China's influence in the region increasing, the need to improve Beijing's image is growing.

Financial data are often unavailable for people-to-people projects, except when they involve physical infrastructure such as hospitals or schools.

Number of people-to-people projects and total funding

	Projects	Total funding (mln USD)
Kyrgyzstan	13	46.44
Kazakhstan	7	Information not available
Turkmenistan	5	Information not available
Tajikistan	4	Information not available
Uzbekistan	2	Information not available

¹ Vakulchuk, Roman and Indra Overland (2019) "China's Belt and Road Initiative through the Lens of Central Asia", in Fanny M. Cheung and Ying-yi Hong (eds) *Regional Connection under the Belt and Road Initiative. The Prospects for Economic and Financial Cooperation*.

London: Routledge, pp. 115–133. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329310641>

Definitions

Financing – Sources of funding for each project are identified and presented.

Commercial interests – A project is classified as “commercial”, if the parties promoting it primarily pursue commercial goals.

Strategic interests – A project is classified as “strategic”, if it fits one of the broader categories, particularly strengthening connectivity.

Connection to BRI – If a project is announced publicly as part of BRI, then it is classified as a “BRI project”.

Local project – A project is classified as “local”, if the infrastructure or facility constructed and services provided, are limited to a specific country.

Regional project – A project is classified as “regional”, if it is part of the bigger regional initiative, which includes more than one country.

Bilateral – A project is classified as “bilateral”, if an agreement for project implementation is signed by the Chinese government or a Chinese company, as one party, and one of the Central Asian governments or companies as the other.

Multilateral – A project is classified as “multilateral”, if an agreement for project implementation is signed by three or more parties, including the Chinese or Central Asian governments, multilateral financial institutions (AIIB, China Development Bank, Export-Import Bank of China or New Silk Road Fund) and private enterprises.

Timing	Project	Financing	Project description (commercial vs strategic; connection to BRI)	Local vs regional	Bilateral vs multilateral
KYRGYZSTAN					
27 July 2017	Agreement on mutual cooperation between the state enterprise “Kyrgyz geophysical expedition under the State Committee of Industry, Energy and Subsoil Use” and the Institute of Geomechanics of the Chinese Academy of Geological Sciences of the Chinese Geological Survey of the Ministry of Land and Resources of China.	Information not available.	Strategic. Not branded as a BRI project. On 27 July 2017, a conference was held with the participation of the delegation of the China’s Geological Survey and Chinese investment enterprises located in Kyrgyzstan.	Regional	Bilateral
2017	Memorandum of cooperation between the Xi’an University of Transportation and the Kyrgyz State University of Construction, Transport and Architecture.	Information not available.	Strategic. Not branded as a BRI project.	Regional	Bilateral
2017	Seminar for media professionals from Central Asia.	Financed by China.	Strategic: This seminar strengthens cooperation in the mass-media among Central Asian countries. The cost of training, accommodation and logistics was covered by the Chinese side. Not branded as a BRI project. The seminar was organized by the Ministry of Commerce of China.	Regional	Multilateral
2017	Seminar in Urumqi on cooperation in the sphere of tourism between countries along BRI.	Financed by China.	Strategic: Seminar strengthens cooperation in the sphere of tourism among Central Asian countries and China. The cost of training, accommodation and logistics was covered by the Chinese side. Not branded as a BRI project. The seminar was organized by the Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China.	Regional	Bilateral
2016	Construction of a hospital complex with 150 beds in Ak-Tilek microdistrict, Osh.	Total cost of the project: 26.59 mln USD. Funded by a grant from the Chinese government.	Strategic: 200 people are employed in the construction phase, 110 of whom are local residents. The total area of the plot of land is 25,000 m ² . The built area is 12,500 m ² . It will be able to receive more than 200 people per day. Not branded as a BRI project. Agreement on the implementation of the project for the construction of a hospital complex in Osh city includes provision of office furniture and medical equipment.	Local	Bilateral

Timing	Project	Financing	Project description (commercial vs strategic; connection to BRI)	Local vs regional	Bilateral vs multilateral
2016	The opening of the bookstore “Chance”.	Private.	<p>Commercial: The store sells books in the Chinese, Kyrgyz and Russian languages published in China, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. There are books available on the politics, history, economics, culture and literature of China and books for studying the Chinese language and passing the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) or the Chinese Proficiency Test.</p> <p>On 5 October 2016, a publishing company called Eastern Literature and Art was registered by the Ministry of Justice of Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek.</p> <p>Not branded as a BRI project.</p>	Local	Bilateral
2015	Annual allocation of quotas for Kyrgyz citizens studying at Chinese universities.	Chinese government.	<p>Strategic: In the 2017–2018 academic year, 25 government scholarships were awarded to citizens of Kyrgyzstan. In the 2018–2019 academic year, 15 places were allocated for pursuing bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral programmes at Chinese universities and to do language internships.</p> <p>Not branded as a BRI project.</p>	Local	Bilateral
2015	Joint Kyrgyz–Chinese information project “Window to China”.	Private financing.	<p>Strategic: The Xinhua news agency and the Kyrgyz national news agency Kabar have been implementing the joint project called “Window on China” since 2015. This project helps citizens of Kyrgyzstan learn about the development of relations between the two countries, as well as about Chinese culture and events in China. Information is provided in the Russian and English languages.</p> <p>The project promotes cooperation in the field of mass media and the parties started discussing the possibility of developing satellite broadcasting between the countries along the Silk Road.</p>	Regional	Bilateral
December 16 2015	Agreement between the Ministry of Education and Science of Kyrgyzstan and the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China on cooperation in the field of education.	Information not available.	<p>Strategic: Under this agreement, a number of other cooperation agreements were signed between the universities of Kyrgyzstan and China in 2016–2018.</p> <p>Not branded as a BRI project.</p>	Regional	Bilateral

Timing	Project	Financing	Project description (commercial vs strategic; connection to BRI)	Local vs regional	Bilateral vs multilateral
2012–2017	Construction of a general education school with a Chinese language immersion programme.	Grant from the Chinese government: 7.93 mln USD.	Strategic: The construction of the facility was completed in 2017 and the designed capacity of the school is 600 seats; however, in the 2017–2018 academic year, 1,500 children were enrolled in the school. The Embassy of China supplied it with computers, interactive whiteboards and textbooks for the study of the Chinese language. On 24 April 2015, Bishkek City Hall signed a contract with the EPCZIEN LLC for the construction of a general education school that would include Chinese language studies funded by a grant from China. Not branded as a BRI project.	Local	Bilateral
2011–2014	Construction of residential houses in Osh.	Grant from the Chinese government: 5 mln USD.	Commercial: Construction of two five-storey and one six-storey residential buildings containing 66 apartments in the Anar microdistrict. Not branded as a BRI project. Contractor: Bei Sin.	Local	Bilateral
2007–2017	The Confucius Institute in Kyrgyzstan.	Government of China.	Strategic: Annually, and through the Confucius Institute, a certain number of places are allocated for Kyrgyz students to study at universities in China on a short-term or long-term basis. In order to strengthen cooperation between China and Kyrgyzstan in the field of education, four Confucius Institutes have been established and are operating in the Kyrgyz National University (since 2007), the Bishkek Humanitarian University (since 2013), Osh State University (since 2014) and Jalal-Abad State University (since 2017). Branded as a BRI project.	Local	Bilateral
2007–2013	Construction of a new building for the National Hospital in Bishkek.	Grant of the Chinese government: 6.92 mln USD.	Strategic. A six-storey building is designed for 150 hospital beds. There are four urological departments and one department of ophthalmology. Not branded as a BRI project. The project was implemented by the Zhejiang Institute of Architecture and Design of the People's Republic of China jointly with the Chinese Civil Engineering and Construction Corporation.	Local	Bilateral
KAZAKHSTAN					
2018	200 students from Kazakhstan study in China.	Kazakh government.	Strategic.	Local	Bilateral

Timing	Project	Financing	Project description (commercial vs strategic; connection to BRI)	Local vs regional	Bilateral vs multilateral
2018	Cooperation dialogue between the rectors of China and Kazakhstan within the framework of the 11th Educational Exchange “China-ASEAN” in Guizhou Province (China).	Information not available.	Strategic: The memorandum of cooperation was signed by the Abai National Pedagogical University and the University of China–Nanjing Normal Pedagogical University and the School of International Education at Tianjin Polytechnic University. This document provides for the exchange of researchers and doctoral students and the advanced training of professors and teachers. The organizer of the “Dialogue” was the Consulate General of China in Kazakhstan.	Local	Bilateral
2016	China International Forum on Cross-Border Education, held in Haikou, Hainan Province, China.	Information not available.	Strategic: 1. China National Commission for UNESCO. 2. Department of International Cooperation and Exchange, Ministry of Education of China. In order to develop international cooperation in the recognition of foreign educational documents between Kazakhstan and China, a memorandum of cooperation between the Centre for the Bologna Process and Academic Mobility of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Chinese Centre for Academic Degrees and Development Education of the People’s Republic of China was signed.	Local	Bilateral
2012	Confucius Institute in Karaganda.	Information not available.	Strategic.	Local	Bilateral
2011	Confucius Institute in Aktobe.	Information not available.	Strategic.	Local	Bilateral
2009	Confucius Institute in Almaty.	Information not available.	Strategic.	Local	Bilateral
2007	Confucius Institute in Almaty.	Information not available.	Strategic.	Local	Bilateral
TURKMENISTAN					
September 2018	Turkmen culture days in China.	Information not available.	Strategic: The event contributes to sharing knowledge about Turkmenistan with China and promoting the culture of Turkmenistan among the Chinese public. Not branded as a BRI project.	Regional	Bilateral
July 2018	Opening of the Turkmenistan visa centre “The Silk Road”, in Beijing.	Information not available.	Strategic: The visa centre will boost cultural and economic exchanges between China and Turkmenistan, further enhancing their cooperation in various fields. The centre was organized and financed by the Embassy of Turkmenistan in China and by the Beijing Sungxiong Foreign Service Company. Branded as a BRI project. The media and some officials linked it to BRI.	Regional	Bilateral

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Timing	Project	Financing	Project description (commercial vs strategic; connection to BRI)	Local vs regional	Bilateral vs multilateral
September 2016	Study of Chinese language in Turkmen secondary schools.	Information not available.	Strategic: Reinforcement of the soft power of China through its language. Not branded as a BRI project.	Local	Bilateral
August 2015	Chinese Culture Day.	Information not available.	Strategic: The event promoted the culture of China. Due to the isolation of Turkmenistan, the event had a local character. Not branded as a BRI project.	Local	Bilateral
October 2014	China Chu-Tian Centre for Turkmenistan Studies at the China University of Geosciences.	Information not available.	Strategic: The Centre provides research and knowledge about economic, cultural and political aspects of Turkmenistan, as well as its natural resources. The Centre was opened in October 2014 at the China University of Geosciences in Wuhan, which is the capital of central China's Hubei Province. Yes, branded as a BRI project.	Regional	Bilateral
TAJIKISTAN					
Planned	Construction of Saikhun in Tajikistan.	Information not available.	Strategic and commercial: A new city is to be built on a 14,000-hectare area in the desert near Khujand in northern Tajikistan, the country's second-largest city. It will include 19 residential areas, 17 schools, 31 kindergartens, 40 sports centres, 140 shopping and services centres, a transport terminal and various social facilities. It is also said to provide housing and jobs for some 250,000 people in the near future, helping to reduce the number of Tajik citizens working abroad and lessen Tajikistan's dependence on remittances as an engine of growth. Dushanbe has invited China's Tebian Electric Apparatus Stock Co., Ltd. (TBEA) to take part in the construction of Saikhun, the first new city to be built in Tajikistan since the country became independent. This project is being presented by the authorities as a BRI project.	Local	Bilateral
Planned	Industrial zone of Tajikistan and China.	Information not available.	Strategic and commercial: A reported 500 mln USD is to be invested in the industrial zone of the town of Istiklol. Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the project "Industrial zone of Tajikistan and China" in the field of mining between the International Company on Tachen Resources of the Xinjiang Uygur region and the Ministry of Industry and New Technologies of the Republic of Tajikistan.	Regional	Bilateral

Timing	Project	Financing	Project description (commercial vs strategic; connection to BRI)	Local vs regional	Bilateral vs multilateral
2017	Cooperation between Khovar and Xinhua.	Public.	Strategic: Improves the image of China and strengthens people-to-people communication. Memorandum on cooperation between the National Information Agency of Tajikistan, Khovar, and the Information Agency of China, Xinhua.	Regional	Bilateral
2009 and 2015	Confucius Institutes in Tajikistan.	Information not available.	Strategic: Improves the image of China and strengthens people-to-people communication. An agreement between the Ministry of Education and Science of Tajikistan and the Headquarters of the Confucius Institute on cooperation in the construction of Confucius Centres: 1. At the Tajik National University in Dushanbe (2009); 2. At the Mining-Metallurgical Institute in Tajik in the northern city of Chkalovsk (2015).	Local	Bilateral
UZBEKISTAN					
2013	Uzbek–Chinese Confucius Institute in Samarkand.	Information not available.	Strategic: The Uzbek–Chinese Confucius Institute under the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies (TashGIV) was established in 2004 on the basis of the “Agreement on Cooperation in Establishing the Confucius Institute in Tashkent” between the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China. Currently, the Institute employs 15 teachers of the Chinese language, 5 of whom are volunteers from the Chinese side and 10 are teachers from TashGIV. The total number of regular students for 2016–2017 exceeded 550 people. Since the establishment of the Uzbek–Chinese Confucius Institute, 3,842 students have been trained. Not branded as a BRI project.	Local	Bilateral
2004	Uzbek–Chinese Confucius Institute in Tashkent (under the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies).	Information not available.	Strategic: The Uzbek–Chinese Confucius Institute in Samarkand was established as a result of the visit of the first president of Uzbekistan to China in 2013. Not branded as a BRI project.	Local	Bilateral

References

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About CADGAT and Central Asia Regional Data Review

The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and the OSCE Academy established the Central Asia Data-Gathering and Analysis Team (CADGAT) in 2009. The purpose of CADGAT is to produce new cross-regional data on Central Asia that can be used free of charge by researchers, journalists, NGOs, government employees, and students, both inside and outside the region. The data articles can be found at <http://osce-academy.net/en/research/cadgat/>

The following CADGAT data articles have been published:

1. Hydroelectric dams and conflict in Central Asia
2. The narcotics trade and related issues in Central Asia
3. Language use and language policy in Central Asia
4. The transportation sector in Central Asia
5. Road transportation in Central Asia
6. Gender and politics in Central Asia
7. Political relations in Central Asia
8. Trade policies and major export items in Central Asia
9. Intra-regional trade in Central Asia
10. Trade barriers and tariffs in Central Asia
11. Holidays in Central Asia. Part I: Laws and official holidays
12. Holidays in Central Asia. Part II: Professional and working holidays
13. Media in Central Asia: Print Media
14. Media in Central Asia: TV
15. Media in Central Asia: Radio
16. Renewable energy policies of the Central Asian countries
17. Wind power potential of the Central Asian countries
18. Solar power potential of the Central Asian countries
19. Hydropower potential of the Central Asian countries
20. BRI in Central Asia: Overview of Chinese projects
21. BRI in Central Asia: Rail and road connectivity projects
22. BRI in Central Asia: Energy connectivity projects
23. BRI in Central Asia: Mineral and petroleum exploration, extraction and processing projects
24. BRI in Central Asia: Industrial projects
25. BRI in Central Asia: Finance and IT projects
26. BRI in Central Asia: Agriculture and food projects
27. BRI in Central Asia: People-to-people projects

CADGAT has also produced a database on Elites in Central Asia, which can be found at <http://osce-academy.net/dbelite/>



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