



CENTRAL ASIA September 2019

The visit of Kazakhstan's President in China: bolstering bilateral relations within the Belt and Road Initiative

The official visit of the Kazakh President Tokayev in Beijing on the 11th and 12th of September was aimed to cement bilateral relations and cooperation between Kazakhstan and China, also confirming Tokayev's intention to maintain the traditional orientation in foreign policy based on multivectorialism.

As a matter of fact, Kazakhstan holds strong relations with Russia too, both bilaterally and multilaterally following the adhesion of this Central Asian republic to the Eurasian Economic Union launched in 2015: nevertheless, in this recent Sino-Kazakh summit the countries have decided to upgrade their partnership in a long-term, strategic and comprehensive cooperation (*President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev held talks with Chinese President XI Jinping, Akorda.KZ, September 11, 2019*)

Following the meeting, the sides signed 10 agreements covering cooperation in different issues (aviation, agriculture, customs administration): among them the Memorandum of Understanding on the implementation of the cooperation Plan for the connectivity of the "Nurly Zhol" New Economic Policy and the construction of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" (the overland routes which compose the Belt and Road Initiative and cross Central Asia) will have the major geopolitical relevance. This approach shows Tokayev's intention to follow a line of political continuity with his predecessor, further enhancing cooperation with Beijing: in December 2015, the former President Nazarbayev highlighted the strategic complementarity between these initiatives, which aim to create new transport infrastructures and their integration with the big international railway and roads in order to consolidate the role of Kazakhstan as a political and economic bridge between east and west.

Given its position, Kazakhstan is playing the role of Central Asian pivot within the BRI project as strategic transit country crossed by the Eurasian Land Bridge corridor and by the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor. It is also fully involved in the Khorgos-Aktau railway corridor, connecting the Sino-Kazakh border with the western port of Aktau in the Caspian Sea. Khorgos – opened in 2015 – is the

most relevant “land bridge” which currently represents the main commercial and logistical hub in Eurasia under the BRI label: Kazakhstan has already received \$14,5 billion of China’s Belt investment to realize the network of railways and highways (Central Asia Data-Gathering and Analysis Team, “BRI in Central Asia: Overview of Chinese Projects”, n0.20, 2019, p.3, http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/20_BRI_in_Central_Asia.pdf).

The recognition of existing mutual interests and reciprocal gains (the Khorgos-Aktau railway corridor allows China to lessen the relevance of the BRI’s Russian route, diversifying its export corridors) will further consolidate this Sino-Kazakh strategic partnership. Such a fact is also relevant in the energy sector and based on growing oil and natural gas exports from Kazakhstan to China.

Fabio Indeo –*PhD holder in Geopolitics at University of Trieste and non-resident fellow research at Center for Energy Governance and Security (EGS South Korea).*