
The Belt's buckle and beyond

**On China's power through its Belt and Road initiative using
the case of Kazakhstan**

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On September 7th, 2013, President of the People's Republic of China (hereafter China) Xi Jinping held a speech at the Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. In his speech, called *Promote Friendship Between Our People and Work Together to Build a Bright Future*, he announced Chinese plans to create an economic belt that would connect the Chinese market to Central Asia, the Middle-East and Europe. It was no coincidence that he made the announcement for this ambitious initiative at a Kazakh university in front of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, since the country would prove to be an important link in them. In his speech, he stated that:

To forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region, we should take an innovative approach and jointly build an "economic belt along the Silk Road". This will be a great undertaking benefitting the people of all countries along the route (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013, para.29).

As mentioned by Xi Jinping, this new economic belt that would connect the economy of China to those in the West, would be a revival of the ancient land-based Silk Road trading routes. Therefore, this ambitious project is known as the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) initiative. Besides this continental initiative, a maritime one was introduced roughly one month later. Introduced by Xi Jinping during a state visit to Indonesia in October 2013, the MSRI aims to link Chinese ports to other ports in Asia and eventually also those in Europe (Chang, 2018). Combined with the *Maritime Silk Road Initiative* (MSRI), it would form the *One Belt, One Road* initiative, later renamed into the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) (Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2016). Despite these two different components, this paper will focus on the continental SREB initiative. However, for the sake of simplicity and a better understanding of the used sources, in the remainder of this paper the acronym SREB initiative will be replaced by the more general BRI. Although, some sources refer to its old name, One Belt One Road (OBOR).

Since its introduction, the BRI has become a central Chinese foreign policy project and has consequently received a lot of attention in the international sphere. However, due to its structure it is difficult to estimate the true magnitude of the initiative. According to Hillman (2018), it is a challenge to provide the exact numbers: "It is a moving target, loosely defined and ever expanding. It includes Chinese investment in roads, ports, and other hard infrastructure. It

includes trade deals, transportation agreements, and other “soft” infrastructure efforts” (para. 2).

More importantly, in addition to its economic scope, the BRI can also be understood in a more political manner. That is, the initiative is potentially a Chinese instrument for increasing the country’s power on the global stage. One could argue that it is a product of China’s rise to becoming an economic and political heavy-weight over the last decades. Moreover, by referencing to ancient Silk Road times, China shows it is dedicated to take an inclusive approach by its desire to develop the initiative in all the countries that are willing to cooperate. Statements by Chinese state officials and policy documents stress the fact that their BRI is not a tool for more global power. In the official white paper that further explains Chinese vision and action to build the BRI, they are eager to put an emphasis on the fact that these plans should be mutual beneficial for all actors involved (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). According to former Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, the initiatives (...) “are the product of inclusive cooperation, not a tool of geopolitics, and must not be viewed with the outdated cold war mentality” (Jianyang, 2015).

This paper will focus on the different Chinese motivations and reasoning behind its BRI, and takes the Central Asian country of Kazakhstan as a case for further analysis. As the largest country of the Central Asian region in terms of land, Kazakhstan holds a key position as the area that will connect China to the Middle-East and Europe. The BRI will pass through “the strategic center of Eurasia, through states in possession of huge energy and mineral reserves and solid demographic base” (Habova, 2015, p. 64). Moreover, Lain (2018) describes the Central Asian region as “the gateway for China’s increasingly diversified land routes to other markets located to the west of China” (p.2).

Kazakhstan will offer a useful study in better understanding Chinese motives behind its BRI because of the different elements that come together in this specific case. In his article, Higgins (2018) explains the importance of Kazakhstan in the Chinese BRI: “The gamble is not only reshuffling global transport routes, but also shaking up Kazakh and global politics as China inserts itself deeper into a region that Russia considers squarely within its area of influence” (Para.5). Kirişci & Le Corre (2015) even state that “Kazakhstan is on the front lines of the ongoing struggle for a new international order” (Para.11). According to Runde (2015), “Kazakhstan is the “buckle” of China’s One Belt One Road initiative” (Para.4). Therefore, this critical case offers us useful insight in how the BRI is put forward in Kazakhstan and teach lessons on how to understand it beyond that scope.

This is necessary to gain a better understanding of the BRI in general. Moreover, while the BRI has been described by some scholars as *grand strategy* (Habova, 2015; Li & Wang, 2015; Rolland, 2017a), it is needed to gain more understanding as to how this strategy is implemented in practice. This study aims to build on the idea that the BRI qualifies as a strategy in conducting this case study research. To produce such a study, this paper will draw on the framework of power as introduced by influential political scientist and assistant Secretary of Defense under former president Bill Clinton, Joseph S. Nye. In the remainder of this paper, Nye's concepts of hard, soft and smart power will be understood as mechanisms for influence when looking at the Chinese BRI in Kazakhstan. More specifically, the ambition of this paper is to investigate whether China is combining hard and soft power elements in Kazakhstan into a strategy that could be understood as smart power.

Therefore, the central question of this paper will be as follows: *How can China's Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan be characterized in terms of Nye's concepts of power?*

The scope of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the effect of the Chinese BRI on Kazakhstan, as well as investigating the question of a larger Chinese ambition. Combining and understanding these two perspectives on the Chinese initiative has become an even more pressing matter in recent weeks, when there are signs that a trade war is starting to form between President Trump's United States and China. As Chinese investments in the United States rise, the Trump administration threatens to impose high tariffs on Chinese product entering the country (Swanson, 2018). Therefore, there is also more at stake for China, that is seeking to connect itself to the global market through the BRI.

To answer the research question, this paper will be structured as follows. The following chapter will be dedicated to a literature review of relevant academic literature to provide a more comprehensive understanding and contextualization of the BRI as well as Kazakhstan's role in it. The next chapter will go over the research design, introduce a theoretical framework using Nye's concepts of power and highlights what sources were used in constructing the case-analysis. The following chapter will be dedicated to the actual case study that discusses the BRI in Kazakhstan. The analysis will consist of two parts, first observing possible hard power and second possible soft power. From that, a chapter will be devoted at the discussion of the findings in the previous chapter. Finally, some concluding remarks will be presented along with recommendation for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Before conducting a case analysis of the Chinese BRI in Kazakhstan, it is worthwhile to mention different concepts that require further attention. The following part will consist of a literature review that seeks to combine both summary of existing concepts and ideas as well as the synthesis needed for investigating this paper's research question.

First, it will introduce a geopolitical theory that is specifically constructed with the use of the Central Asian region. The aim of this exercise is to gain a more historical and theoretical understanding of the geopolitical significance of Kazakhstan, to properly evaluate what its role is in the BRI. Second, the Chinese BRI needs a proper introduction and contextualization. Third, this literature review will put forward Nye's concepts of power that will serve as the basic theoretical framework for the case analysis.

2.1 A geopolitical understanding of Central Asia: Mackinder's Heartland theory

Although the term geopolitics was officially coined by Swedish geographer Rudolf Kjellen in 1899, it was Halford Mackinder who has had the greatest impact on the development of the study of international politics in the twentieth century (Fettweis, 2015). His ideas on the geographic importance of the continental Heartland, as explained in the remainder of this chapter, helped construct the idea that geography can have a substantial impact on how nation states behave in international politics in the 20th century. Moreover, it created the understanding among international politicians that the control of a state entity over a certain area can be strategically beneficial.

In his book on geopolitics, professor of political geography John Agnew (2003) attempts to adopt a single definition for the term geopolitics as the "examination of the geographical assumptions, designations and understandings that enter into the making of world politics" (p.5). Moreover, Agnew (2003) describes the geopolitical dimension of world politics: "The world is actively spatialized, divided up, labelled, sorted out into a hierarchy of places of greater or lesser 'importance' by political geographers, other academics and political leaders" (p.3). Viewed in such a manner, geopolitical importance can be given to each area, including the Central Asia region that Kazakhstan is part of.

One of the most influential geopolitical theories is the Heartland theory as introduced by English statesman and geographer Halford Mackinder. Although introduced in 1904 and further explained in 1919 and 1943, his ideas on geopolitics still hold great value today.

Mackinder put forward his Heartland theory in three different works, of which the first one was his article *The geographical pivot of history* that was submitted to the Royal Geographical Society in 1904. In his article, he constructs his arguments combining historical and geographical examples: “It appears to me, therefore, that in the present decade we are for the first time in a position to attempt, with some degree of completeness, a correlation between the larger geographical and the larger historical generalizations” (p.299). Being a British statesman involved in the great power politics of his time, he makes an argument for the dangers of a rising Russian empire. According to Mackinder, the development of a railroad network facilitates the true power of the vast Euro-Asian area. As shown in figure 1 (Mackinder, 2004, p.312), he labels this Euro-Asian area, at that time largely dominated by the Russian empire, the *pivot area*.

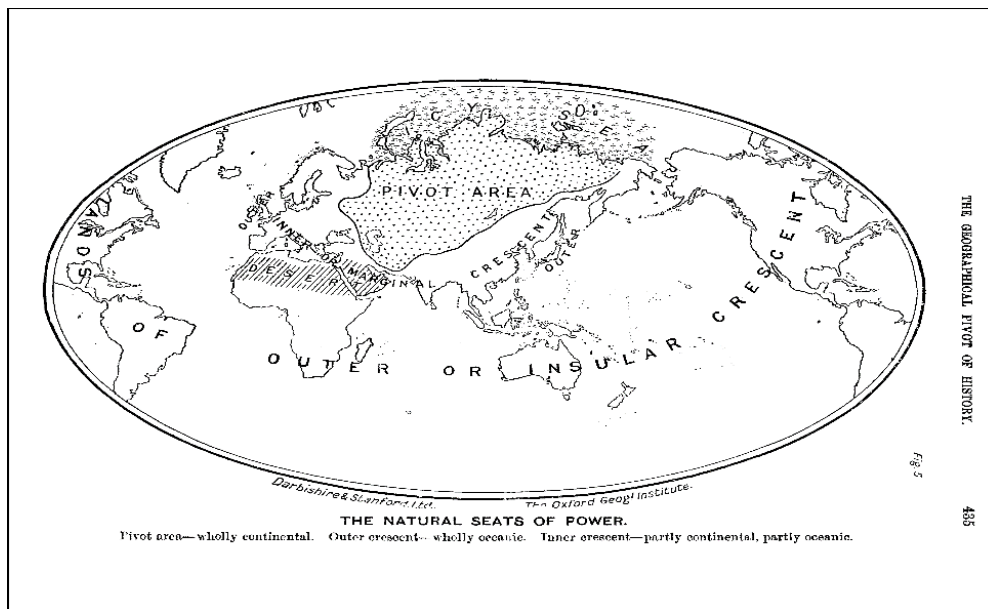


Figure 1. Figure 5. The natural seats of power. Reprinted from “The geographical pivot of history” by H.J. Mackinder, 2004, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170, No. 4, p. 298-321. Copyright 2004 by The Royal Geographical Society.

Outside this pivot area, there is a *great inner crescent* consisting of Germany, Austria, Turkey, India and China. The West-European states, the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan are referred to as the *outer crescent* (p.313). In time, Russian domination of the land-locked pivot area could prove to be a threat for the British empire, that heavily relied on its naval power and capabilities.

Expanding upon his theory, Mackinder reshaped his concept of the pivot area in his 1919 work *Democratic Ideals and Reality*. More importantly, he summarizes his Heartland

theory in three, oft-quoted sentences:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:

Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island:

Who rules the World-Island commands the World (Mackinder, 1919, p.106).

In his work, he further elaborates on the concept of the *World-Island*, which includes the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa. In addition, there exist many smaller satellite islands such as North-America, South-America and Australia that surround the *World-Island*.

In his final work *The Round World and the Winning of the Peace* (1943) the, then 82, Mackinder updated his Heartland theory for a final time. Amidst the chaos of the second World War, he argued that his concept of the Heartland was “more valid and useful today than it was either twenty or forty years ago” (p.603).

In sum, the Heartland theory puts forward that the control over the geographical Eurasia facilitates global power due to its strategic position and vast natural resources. During the 20th century, this idea is reshaped to fit the contemporary realities. For example, one of the most prominent followers of Mackinder’s Heartland theory was U.S. national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. In his influential work *The grand chessboard* (1997), Brzezinski sets out a new global geopolitical perspective after the Cold War area. In his book, he argues that the United States, as “winner” of the Cold War, needs to play a strategic game to outwit potential rivals for world hegemony. Interestingly, he draws on the work of Mackinder by highlighting the importance of Eurasia, stating that the United States should “(...) formulate and prosecute an integrated, comprehensive, and long-term geostrategy for all of Eurasia” (p. 194). Further explaining that “This need arises out of the interaction between two fundamental realities: America is now the only global superpower, and Eurasia is the globe's central arena” (p.194). Brzezinski’s work offers useful insight on how the world hegemon at that time, the United States, should approach the Eurasian area.

In more recent literature the concept of Mackinder’s Heartland has also been linked specifically to the Chinese BRI. In his article, Harper (2017) makes use of the Heartland theory to explain China’s return to Eurasia. He legitimizes the use of the Heartland theory by stating that “in order to potentially understand Eurasia’s future, it is necessary to move away from the experience of the Cold War and instead placing Mackinder’s theories in a new context” (p.27). The core argument of his paper is that China has become the land power of the twenty-first century. Moreover, he argues that the Trump administration’s increasingly

hostile attitude towards China is threatening Chinese maritime routes due to American control over them. Therefore, Mackinder's Heartland is relevant in the present day because "By pursuing such a strategy, Beijing is following the path drawn up by Mackinder, in this case, utilising Chinese land power to challenge American sea power (...) (Harper, 2017, p. 27). Furthermore, he argues that China's BRI should be viewed as more than an economic development: "While the motivations behind these policies are often depicted as being little more than money-making exercises for China, they nevertheless indicate the genesis of a Chinese grand strategy" (p.27).

In an online commentary, Joseph S. Nye (2017) best known for his work on hard, soft and smart power, calls China's BRI *Xi Jinping's Marco Polo strategy*. He argues that geography is still holding value today: "Much has changed in the age of the internet, but geography still matters, despite the alleged death of distance" (Para.15). Moreover, he states that with the BRI "China is betting on Mackinder and Marco Polo" (Para.17). However, Nye (2017) does not agree with for example Harper's opinion on the BRI being a grand strategy, mainly because it holds equal gains and costs: "And while Obor will provide China with geopolitical gains as well as costs, it is unlikely to be as much of a game changer in grand strategy, as some analysts believe" (Para. 22).

2.2 Today's Heartland: The geopolitical significance of Kazakhstan

Before the case analysis, it is worthwhile to provide an introduction on the geopolitical significance of Kazakhstan. The geopolitical significance of Central Asia has already partly been discussed in the previous part using Mackinder's Heartland theory. In the next part, the much-needed contemporary situation of Kazakhstan will be further discussed.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, geographically, the Central Asian area is the gateway for China to the Middle-Eastern and European markets. As Sternberg, Ahearn & McConnell (2017) argue: "Before China can access European markets overland, before goods can flow to West Asia and the Mediterranean and resources return to China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan must be crossed" (p. 55). As such, the geographical location of the Central Asian area is of vital importance for China's SREB initiative.

Under the former Soviet Union, the Heartland fell for the most part under one rule. However, Ismailov & Papava (2010) argue that "The geopolitical transformations of the 1990s have called for fresh approaches to the regional division of the political expanse of

Europe and Asia” (p.18). The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, also meant the independency and sovereignty of the five former soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Importantly, this development led to the believe that Eurasia was open again for contestation, after decades of Soviet rule for most of its parts.

This is also acknowledged by Brzezinski (1997), who in his work stated that “The disintegration late in 1991 of the world's territorially largest state created a "black hole" in the very center of Eurasia. It was as if the geopoliticians' "heartland" had been suddenly yanked from the global map” (p.87). Furthermore, he sketched the situation after 1991, stating that “The new states now controlled vast mineral and energy deposits that were bound to attract foreign interests” (p.93).

Throughout the 1990's, the Central Asian region still was heavily dependent on Russia: “The country remained the largest trade partner for each of the Central Asian states for the first two decades following their independence, importing energy resources and other goods from the region while exporting goods such as refined fuels” (Stratfor, 2018, Para.3). This brings up the following question: where does China fit in to this relative new geopolitical situation in the Central Asian region, and more specifically Kazakhstan? In her article, Kassenova (2017) stresses the fact that Chinese – Kazakh economic relations predate the BRI. The decades after Kazakhstan's independence coincided for a large part with the economic rise of China in the 1990's. This resulted into a situation in which the energy-rich Kazakhstan and the energy-thirsty China had complementary objectives (Kassenova, 2017). It therefore is important to understand that all elements of cooperation that are now encapsulated in the BRI, predate the initiative: “Kazakhstan is unreservedly enthusiastic about serving as a transit area for trade between Europe and Asia. In fact, becoming the bridge between East and West has been its official strategic development project since the early years of independence (Kassenova, 2017, p.111).

According to Duarte (2018), Central Asia provides an opportunity for China: “Central Asia has often been neglected by political commentators, although the region offers extraordinary opportunities for China's BRI policy to deploy and be tested” (p. 20). He does however remain skeptical to the success of China's BRI in Central Asia, for several reasons: “The success of BRI will depend on the receptiveness of Central Asian elites to these projects, as well as the process of institutional reforms, the struggle against corruption, bureaucratic simplification, and the leadership succession” (p.20). It is tempting to view the possible success of the BRI from a Chinese perspective, thereby forgetting that the five Central Asian

states, as well as any other states that are involved in the BRI, are independent sovereign states that can separately decide to what extent they want to meet Chinese influence.

An important contribution to map the risks and opportunities of Chinese investments under the BRI for the Central Asian region has been made by Lain (2018). Like Duarte, Lain (2018) sees Central Asia as a test for China: “(...) Central Asia may be seen as a test case for the BRI as a whole” (p.3). Importantly, she argues that there is a substantial risk for over-connectivity with China: “In Central Asia, China’s economic dominance and surge in investment has been met with both optimism and suspicion, given the likely increase in political and geo-economic influence that might accompany it” (p.4). To counter this, “The Central Asian states would benefit from using Chinese investment to help build up their own economic resilience and independence in order to protect against Beijing’s efforts to leverage the influence it is accumulating” (p.4). The challenge for the Central Asian states is how to approach this. On the one hand, they want to welcome Chinese investment. On the other hand, they do not want to become too dependent on China.

However, Lain (2018) is overall optimistic about the impact of the BRI for Central Asia on a conceptual level:

(...) the beauty of the SREB and the BRI is that although they advocate integration, they do not stipulate how it should be achieved. Instead, “integration” is a catch-all term for greater economic cooperation, which is the essence of the connectivity Beijing wishes to achieve. This helps to combat a super-imposed “regionalism” that many other international actors and organizations have often taken (p.10).

Further analysis of how China is putting forward this tactic of vagueness will be given in this paper’s case study.

It is also needed to introduce possible Kazakh motives for welcoming the Chinese BRI. Importantly, Batsaikhan & Dabrowski (2017) make two valid arguments that, although Kazakhstan has substantial natural resources, its poor geographic position is not helping the country’s economic development. First, he argues that the Central Asian region is “distant from the major centers of world economic activity” (p.299). Second, he points out that all countries of the region are landlocked, with Kazakhstan even being the single largest landlocked country in the world. Overcoming these two problems advanced by Batsaikhan & Dabrowski (2017) might seem insurmountable by Kazakhstan alone. However, as has been proven by the developments in recent years, the Chinese BRI might be the answer for them.

The continental part of the Chinese BRI seeks to reach foreign markets, inevitably crossing the greater Central Asian region. This offers great opportunities for Kazakhstan to benefit from catching the new economic wind that the BRI brings.

2.3 Understanding China's Silk Road Economic Belt initiative

To better explain the vital role and position of Kazakhstan to the Chinese BRI, the initiative itself must be further explained and understood. Moreover, it should be placed into a larger framework of Chinese economic development and foreign policy. Therefore, two important Chinese political developments also require further attention: the rise of President Xi Jinping to absolute power and the creation of the *China dream* concept.

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Xi Jinping revealed his plans for the continental component of the BRI during his landmark 10-day visit to four Central Asian states: Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Szczudlik-Tatar, 2013). Just like revealing Chinese plans for the maritime component in Indonesia, the location of Kazakhstan seems to be strategically chosen. On maps like the one shown in figure 2, that provides an overview of the land and maritime components of the BRI, the Central Asian region, with Kazakhstan as the most prominent country is China's geographic gateway to the middle-eastern and European markets.

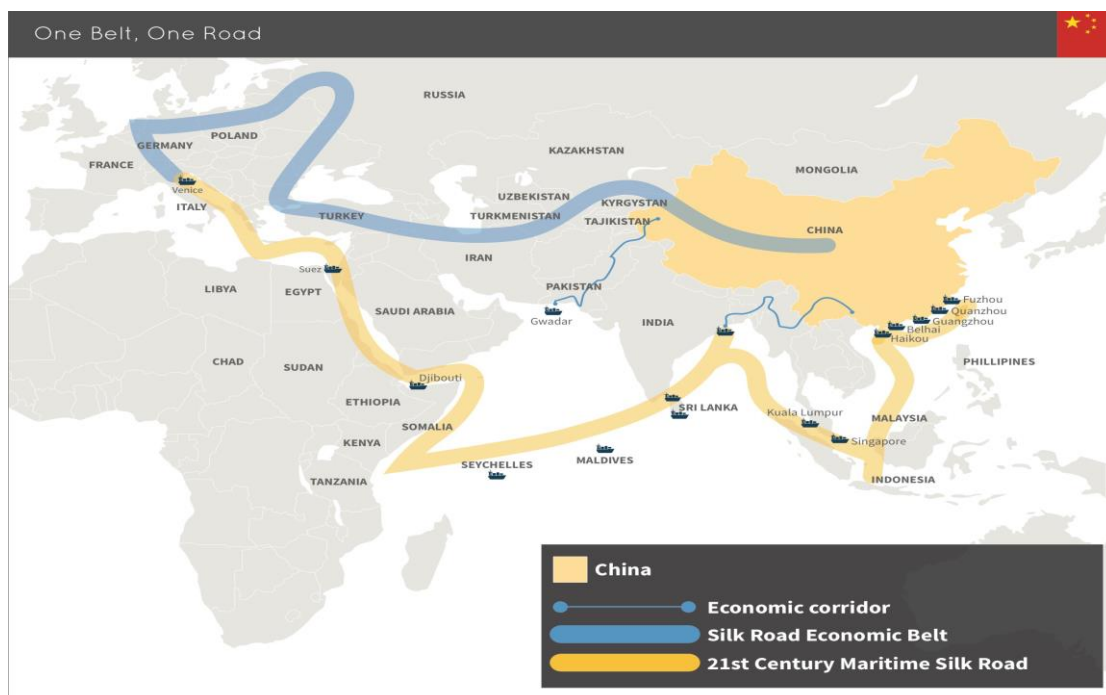


Figure 2. [no original description] Reprinted from "Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative," by P. Cai, 2017, Lowy institute for international policy. Copyright 2017 by Lowy institute.

Like its historical processor, the BRI is not an actual road but more of an infrastructure-trading network. It consists of a maze of infrastructure tools such as roads, railways and pipelines as well as trade agreements and strategies. However, it is a challenge to provide actual data on the size of the BRI. Most observers put forward roughly the same numbers that once completed, the combined land and maritime routes would encompass roughly two-third of the world population and accounts for one-third of worlds GDP, with over 70 countries formally joining in Chinese agreements (Fasslabend, 2015; Hillman, 2018; Swaine, 2015). As put forward by different observers, there is a distinction to be made between the BRI's basic and advanced level of understanding. According to Griffiths (2017):

At the most basic level, One Belt, One Road (OBOR) is a collection of interlinking trade deals and infrastructure projects throughout Eurasia and the Pacific, but the definition of what exactly qualifies as an OBOR project or which countries are even involved in the initiative is incredibly fuzzy (Para.2).

Campbell (2017) also attempts to define BRI at a basic level: "The basic idea is to make it easier for China to trade with the world, at a time when its economy is slowing, with the happy corollary that the world will find it easier to trade with each other" (Para.4). Rolland (2017a) also argues that the BRI is an attempt to respond to mounting challenge of China's economic slow-down in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008-2009:

China's leaders had begun to worry that their long-standing development model, with its heavy emphasis on investment, exports, and state-owned enterprises, had outlived its usefulness and that a new approach was needed, one that would give a greater role to consumption and competition (p.131).

Besides this basic economic rationale, the BRI can also be understood at a more advanced political level. According to Fallon (2015), there is a close connection between the BRI and President Xi Jinping's concept of the China dream. This concept can be interpreted in several ways, but understood in terms of global politics, it is the vision of "(...) the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (...) (Kuhn, 2013, para.6). Li and Wang (2015) refer to the concept as a way to stimulate China's "economic prosperity, national revival, people's happiness, and social harmony" (p.169). The concept of the China dream already existed when Xi Jinping took power but he carefully incorporated it to be his government's main objective. As Ferdinand (2016) states: "Since Xi Jinping became leader, China's foreign policy has moved from riskaverse caution to optimistic 'dreaming' about a better world in which China will have recovered its rightful place" (p.955).

Understood in terms of power politics, one could argue that the realist interpretation of the China dream symbolizes the vision that China should be a dominant world power, or at least play a role in shaping its future. (Ferdinand, 2016). Understood in these terms, the BRI can be viewed as a tool to help achieve the expectations set by this concept of the China dream. Moreover, linked to the concept of the China dream, the continental part of the initiative's name, Silk Road Economic Belt, is conveniently linked to the ancient Silk Road that once connected China to the West, creating "an apparent allusion to the ancient trade and cultural routes between China and Central and South Asia, Europe and the Middle East (...)" (Szcudlik-Tatar, 2013, p.2). In their work on the relationship between the BRI and the China dream, Li & Wang (2015) argue that the concept of the China dream serves as "an ideal of China" and that the SREB initiative "serves as the strategic support to realize the "China Dream"" (p.170).

Considering this domestic political motivation, in recent years a lot of attention has been given to understanding the BRI as a Chinese grand strategy rather than solely an economic initiative. In his article on grand strategy, van Hooft (2017) provides an excellent definition of grand strategy:

Grand strategy is the highest level of national statecraft that establishes how states, or other political units, prioritize and mobilize which military, diplomatic, political, economic, and other sources of power to ensure what they perceive as their interests. Depending on one's theoretical perspective, these perceived interests focus the most minimal goal of ensuring the state's survival, pursuing specific domestic interests or ideational coalitions, or establishing a specific regional or global order (Para.1).

This idea of the BRI as grand strategy is supported by Rolland (2017b), who states that "BRI is a "grand strategy" that is meant to serve China's unimpeded rise to great-power status" (p.119) by arguing that:

The concept sets the general long-term direction for China and seeks to mobilize and coordinate the use of all available national resources (political, economic, diplomatic, military, and ideological) to pursue internal (economic development) and external (diplomacy and national security) objectives in an integrated way (p.119).

Callahan (2016) also labels the BRI as part of a Chinese grand strategy, putting forward that the initiative helps to facilitate a global *community of shared destiny*, expanding its sphere of influence. By doing so, "Beijing's peripheral diplomacy is about more than win-win

cooperation in Asia; it also serves as the means to the much larger end of promoting China's new vision of global governance" (p.239). Another perspective is offered by Chinese scholar Li (2016), who argues that the grand strategy aspect of the BRI is to avoid U.S. interference and competition in the Asian-Pacific. According to Li (2016), this explanation of the BRI "is to divert China's strategic attention and resources to engage countries in China's western flank including Central Asia, West Asia, South Asia and beyond, and avoid direct and high-intensity confrontation with other major players in the Asia-Pacific" (p.516). This perspective of avoiding a Chinese-U.S. confrontation links back to the emphasis of Mackinder on continental power in his Heartland theory. This conclusion was also argued by Harper (2017), who stated that:

By pursuing such a strategy, Beijing is following the path drawn up by Mackinder, in this case, utilising Chinese land power to challenge American sea power, a move that serves to illustrate the continued utility of Mackinder's theories in the present day (p.27).

Following the conclusion of Rolland (2017b) that the BRI has certain characteristics of a grand strategy, it seems to have become the normative approach in academic literature on the topic. It is important for scholars to take a next step in further exploring this apparent connection. However, due to transparency issues and unclear Chinese official statements regarding the strategical significance of the BRI, this task is hampered. In his article, Swaine (2015) analyzed Chinese views and commentary on the BRI. He comments on this lack of transparency by stating that:

Chinese sources routinely deny and reject the criticism that China will use the strengthened economic and political ties that could result from the One Belt, One Road initiative to dominate, intimidate, or generally leverage or manipulate other states involved in the undertaking. Many Chinese no doubt strongly believe this (p.14).

According to Berkshire Miller (2017): "Beijing has yet to articulate this vision into a real tangible strategy with measurable benchmarks and, most importantly, critical project oversights and promise of good governance" (Para.7). This lack of transparency and a clearly articulated plan, is also noted by Swaine (2015), who states that the success of the BRI depends on the resources that China is willing to spend on it combined with a good understanding of the needs of participant countries:

For this to happen, the Chinese leadership and the One Belt, One Road supporters

within China must get beyond the rhetoric and slogans and develop an action plan based on sound economic principles and an acute understanding of the needs of the One Belt, One Road participants (...) (p.16).

In his article, Xinsong (2017) also point to governance issues that might be problematic for the future of the BRI: “There is currently a lack of the necessary institutions to ensure transparency, accountability, and meaningful public participation in both China and host countries during the process of OBOR policymaking and project implementation (Para.5). Moreover, he articulates that these problems need attention or the initiative might fail:

Designed to be the “project of the century,” as hailed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, OBOR is a dauntingly complex initiative that demands careful engineering in the beginning. Without tackling the basic governance issues of institutionalization, transparency, and accountability both in China and in the route nations, Beijing may risk OBOR’s failure and threaten its own popular legitimacy in the long run. It would be a blow to China’s dream of rejuvenation and a loss to the prosperity of the world were the project to fail (Para.15).

In sum, the BRI is regarded by many scholars as being part of a Chinese grand strategy. However, due to its lack of transparency and governance issues rooted in the Chinese system, it remains to be seen if the rhetoric and slogans can be translated into a valid, sustainable trading network. To be a success, the BRI does not only require a working infrastructure network but it also heavily depends on responsible and accountable leadership and a transparent, inclusive approach towards partnering countries such as Kazakhstan.

2.4 Joseph S. Nye’s concepts of power

After introducing the Heartland theory for a better geopolitical understanding of the Central Asian region, the geopolitical significance of Kazakhstan and the Chinese BRI, it is necessary to introduce a theoretical framework for the analysis in the remainder of this paper. Therefore, a vital question for this paper is how the BRI in Kazakhstan should be understood.

Mackinder’s Heartland theory does give a proper historical contextualization of the geopolitical significance of Central Asia as being part of his Heartland. However, in order to investigate Chinese intentions through its BRI, it is necessary to revisit a concept central to geopolitics: power.

Therefore, previously mentioned Joseph S. Nye’s work on power in the international realm can help better understand how the different concepts of power can be linked to the

BRI. Nye is best known for his introduction of soft and smart power. Central to his ideas on traditional hard power is the understanding that “power means an ability to do things and control others, to get others to do what they otherwise would not” (Nye, 1990, p. 154). Furthermore, he argues that “(...) the ability to control others is often associated with the possession of certain resources, politicians and diplomats commonly define power as the possession of population, territory, natural resources, economic size, military forces, and political stability” (Nye, 1990, p.154). When this idea of traditional hard power is linked to Mackinder’s Heartland theory, the two are unmistakably related. In Mackinder’s believe, the state that would take control of the geographical Heartland, would benefit from its strategic position and natural resources.

In contrary to hard power, Nye introduces a new aspect of power politics in the international community. This new form, soft power, essentially “(...) occurs when one country gets other countries to *want* what it wants” (p. 166). Summarized by Fedirka (2017): “Traditionally, hard power includes things like geography, natural resources and military might. Soft power consists of components like technology, education, culture and economic ties. Conceptually, hard power is about coercion, and soft power is about persuasion” (Para. 3).

According to Nye, this new form of power is more capable to explain the post-Cold War reality of a more globalized and interdependent world system: “In general, power is becoming less transferable, less coercive, and less tangible. Modern trends and changes in political issues are having significant effects on the nature of power and the resources that produce it” (p.167). As Mackinder (1919) wrote himself: “every century has its own geographical perspective” (p.21).

Besides Nye’s introduction on soft power, he also introduces a third form of power: smart power. Nye (2013), defines smart power as “the ability to combine hard and soft power resources into effective strategies” (p.7). He sees hard power and soft power as elements that every state has. However, it is the conversion into strategies that lies at the heart of the concept of power itself. According to Nye (2013), power conversion for states simply means that they are “(...) converting the full range of their power resources into strategies that produce the outcomes they seek” (p.8). Therefore, smart power can be seen as the outcome of combining hard and soft power recourses: “The first step to smart power and effective power conversion strategies is an understanding of the full range of power resources and the problems of combining them effectively in various contexts” (Nye, 2013, p.8).

In his article, Nye (2013) also suggests that China is actively applying this form of

smart power in its foreign policy “(...) at the other extreme in terms of population size, China, a rising power in hard economic and military resources, has deliberately decided to invest massively in soft power resources so as to make its hard power look less threatening to its neighbours” (p.8). In an article in the South China Morning Post, Andreea Brînză (2016) makes the effort of applying Nye’s concept of smart power to China’s BRI. She describes the BRI as “the supreme mixture of soft and hard power, something similar to Joseph Nye’s idea of smart power” (Para. 1). She continues by explaining that the BRI should indeed be viewed as a smart power strategy with Chinese characteristics: Covering a large amount of investments and projects, (...) the “One Belt, One Road” initiative became an umbrella for all Chinese investments outside the country and the perfect vehicle to propagate China’s soft power strategy” (Para. 6). Interestingly, she sees China as the only global power that is actually combining hard and soft power recourses into a global smart power strategy in combination with globalization through its BRI:

The US and Japan used their soft power by riding the momentum of globalisation, but China improved this strategy, combining under the same rhetoric both soft power and hard power (in the form of investments and free trade agreements) strategies, with the ultimate goal of expanding China’s role on the world stage (Para. 9).

As put forward in the previous part of this paper, there has been substantial attention to the idea of the Chinese BRI being grand strategy rather than an economic initiative. However, apart from Brînză (2016) no one has made the connection to Nye’s idea of smart power. Therefore, the objective of the case study part of this paper is to use these concepts of power and analyze which elements are used in the specific case of the BRI in Kazakhstan.

Chapter 3: Research design & Methodology

After establishing the scope of this paper, it is needed to describe how this research will be constructed to answer the main research question. The research objective for this paper is as follows: it seeks to find how the Chinese BRI in Kazakhstan can be characterized, using Nye’s concepts of hard, soft and smart power as criteria. At this point in time, the outcomes of the BRI as well as the means to achieve these outcomes are still very much unclear. However, using Kazakhstan as a case, some patterns can be identified. There are two levels of understanding the BRI: practical and conceptual. The economic effect of the BRI is measurable on a practical level. This means that Chinese influence on infrastructure projects and funding can in theory be understood through empirical, quantifiable observations.

However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the BRI is troubled by transparency issues. This makes quantifiable analysis of available data problematic. Therefore, this paper seeks to approach the BRI on a more conceptual level to answer the question how the BRI in Kazakhstan can be characterized. This will be achieved through a qualitative study using the BRI in Kazakhstan for an instrumental, within-case analysis.

This paper expects to find that the synergy of the BRI's hard power resources and soft power diplomacy results in the acknowledgment of it being a smart power strategy, using Kazakhstan as a critical case example.

3.1 Operationalization of Nye's concepts of power

Through its BRI, China is exercising a certain amount of power. However, how should Nye's conceptual ideas on power be translated into an analytical tool in the following chapter? Before constructing a case-analysis using these concepts, it is required to have a better understanding of them as analytical tool.

Looking back at the definition of a grand strategy by van Hooft (2017), given in the previous chapter of this paper, it becomes apparent that this concept can be directly linked to the concept of power in the international realm: "Grand strategy is the highest level of national statecraft that establishes how states, or other political units, prioritize and mobilize which military, diplomatic, political, economic, and other sources of power to ensure what they perceive as their interests (van Hooft, 2017, Para.1). As such, Nye's concepts of hard, soft and smart power serve as a classification of sources of power exercised by a state. However, a distinction has to be made between the understandings of power. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Nye (2011) describes power as an ability. In an earlier explanation, Nye (2006) describes that this ability can be exercised in three ways: "coercion (sticks), payments (carrots), and attraction (soft power)" (Para.1). The first two can be classified as hard power, with sticks being military coercion and carrots being economic incentive. In other words: power is understood as an act of certain behavior between all involved actors.

Alternatively, power can also be exercised through certain recourses. This understanding can also be seen in the scholarly debate about the BRI being a grand strategy. Nye (2011) keeps his understanding on power resources rather vague, thereby contributing to the conceptual ambiguity of soft power: "In general, the types of resources that are associated with hard power include tangibles like force and money, while the resources that are

associated with soft power often include intangible factors like institutions, ideas, values, culture, and perceived legitimacy of policies.

Commenting on this ambiguous understanding on soft power resources, Raimzhanova (2015) proposes an alternative framework. Although he describes his model as “*work in progress*” (p.10), it offers a clear framework that can be adopted for the remainder of this paper.

In his pyramid model, he makes a distinction between three categorizations of soft power resources. The first level consists of actors “this addresses the persons/organization that create and implement the soft power initiatives” (p.9). The second level refers to the spheres in which the soft power is created such as in foreign politics, domestic politics, sports or tourism. The third level “addresses the specific instruments/vehicles through which the soft power is activated/instrumentalized?” (p.9). This can be done through laws and policies, agreements and programs such as cultural diplomacy and nation branding.

Following this framework on soft power resources, a more specific framework can be constructed for soft power to serve as an analytical tool. At the first level, the actors that can be identified in the BRI are the Chinese and Kazakh state. In the authoritarian China, the state is the initiator of the top-down BRI. In Kazakhstan, authoritarian President Nursultan Nazarbayev remains firmly in power. Because the BRI is an international initiative, the second level of sphere will be foreign politics. Most important for this analysis is the framework’s third level. This paper will take the cultural diplomatic aspect of the BRI’s official documents as its narrowed-down soft power framework for the case study in the next chapter. In his book chapter on cultural diplomacy, Lenczowski (2009) defines it as “(...) the use of various elements of culture to influence foreign publics, opinion makers, and even foreign leaders” (p.77). He continues by introduction a variety of cultural instrumental tools of which the most important are the promotion of ideas and history, but also include tools such as arts, educational exchanges and gifts.

However, Lenczowski (2009) introduces another understanding of soft power that Raimzhanova’s (2015) pyramid seems to miss: the desired objectives in a specific situation. Lenczowski (2009) lists three of these objectives that are noteworthy: enhancement of international relations, conditioning for subsequent political messages and political power projection. These objectives also have to be taken into account when constructing the case study. Now that the ambiguous concept of soft power has been broken down into a more feasible framework, the next step is gather significant data for the analysis.

3.2 Data collection

In terms of the collection of data, this paper mostly relies on critical documentary analysis. The actual data collection will vary for the different chapters of the analysis. The first part will focus on an overview of the economic hard power resources of China through its BRI in Kazakhstan. To achieve this, reported data from the Kazakh National Welfare Fund Samruk-Kazyna (Samruk-Kazyna hereafter), which owns most important companies in the country including the national railway and the state oil and gas company, will be used. The second part of the analysis will focus on soft power using cultural diplomacy. For this part, important primary sources can be found in the official statements, speeches and documents published by the Chinese state. In the discussion chapter of this paper, the results of the introduced data will be further interpreted to evaluate hard, soft and smart power elements.

However, transparency is an issue when looking at the scope of China's BRI in Kazakhstan. As Kassenova (2017) mentions:

Although there is considerable public interest in the plan to link the Silk Road Economic Belt and Bright Path and in the possible implications of such a massive inflow of Chinese investment and business know-how, there is no publicly available detailed information about the contents of the list, project descriptions, and financial arrangements (p.113).

Instead, this paper will only focus the analysis of hard power elements in two Kazakh infrastructure projects that are linked to the Chinese BRI in order to gain a better understanding of the economic dimension of influence. Together, it remains to be seen if these hard and soft power elements can be qualified as a smart power strategy.

To conclude, this paper will adopt hard power as the conceptual idea of sticks and carrots, with the emphasis on financial carrots in Kazakhstan. Nye (2006) argues that "Whether soft power produces behavior that we want will depend on the context and the skills with which the resources are converted into outcomes. Therefore, to measure the implementation of Chinese soft power through its BRI in Kazakhstan, this process will need to be properly analyzed.

3.3 Challenges for research

The most prominent challenge for this research is how to understand the BRI as a smart power strategy. Nye's (2013) definition states that smart power means "the ability to combine hard and soft power resources into effective strategies" (p.7). Therefore, the objective of this paper might seem to investigate if China is indeed converting the full range of its power resources into the BRI in Kazakhstan and beyond. This might seem like a reasonable objective for the hard power elements, since this only requires identification of coercive military and economic resources in the specific case of Kazakhstan. However, this process becomes problematic when looking at the soft power dimension. As mentioned in the previous part of this chapter, there is substantial conceptual ambiguity when looking at the concept of soft power. In short, the concept of soft power is so extensive, that going over all of its resources would be beyond the scope of this paper.

This leads to a choice: keeping the concept of power deliberately vague to better understand its full capability as power resource, or narrow the concept down and allow it to be used as an analytical tool. This paper chooses to first focus on a narrow understanding of soft power, namely through its cultural diplomacy. However, by doing so it automatically fails to grasp the full range of soft power resources that the Chinese might use in promoting their BRI in Kazakhstan. Therefore, it will also use a more conceptual understanding of soft power in order to better serve the research question set out in this paper.

Chapter 4: Case analysis: The BRI in Kazakhstan

The case of the Chinese BRI in Kazakhstan will be based on the concepts of hard and soft power as introduced by Joseph Nye. Analyzing these different concepts of power in this specific case can offer us useful insight in how China uses the BRI to increase its sphere of influence. This is much needed, since a lot remains unclear on Chinese motives of the BRI. In his article, Truman (2016) sketches this current situation of uncertainty in the international realm:

The leaders and citizens of other countries, whether potentially directly involved or not, are justified in being somewhat suspicious of China's motives in putting forward the Belt and Road Initiative. Is this a soft-power initiative, a hard-power initiative, or hard power wrapped in soft power? (p.17).

It is an ambitious undertaking to fully grasp Chinese intention, for there is a lack of transparency in terms of official data and their extended motives are typically not reflected in their official statements and political rhetoric. However, by analyzing certain hard, soft and possible smart power aspects of their influence in Kazakhstan through the BRI, this paper aims to make a small contribution towards a better understanding of the dynamics surrounding the scope of the initiative in the country and beyond.

4.1 China's economic influence in Kazakhstan: BRI infrastructure and financing

In constructing a discussion of possible smart power in the specific case of Kazakhstan in the next chapter of this paper, it is needed to first gain a better understanding of its hard power resources. There are unmistakably tangible economic influences to be identified in the Chinese BRI in Kazakhstan. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Nye uses the carrot and stick metaphor to explain how hard power is exercised. With the BRI being an economic initiative, understanding its possible hard power through an economic lens instead of military seems only logical. Therefore, how is China increasing its economic influence in Kazakhstan? In investigating this, it is needed to analyze what the China under the BRI has contributed to Kazakhstan on an economic level.

Chinese investment in Kazakhstan under the BRI umbrella has three main components: the construction of railroads, pipelines and the financing of projects. The Chinese willingness to invest in these three components are all rooted in the idea that Kazakhstan serves as an important hub in realizing the connection to the Middle-East and Europe under the BRI, as the buckle in the Chinese economic belt. In return, Kazakhstan is welcoming Chinese investments under the umbrella of the BRI to diversify their economy. According to Kirişci & Le Corre (2018), Kazakhstan “seeks to diversify its economy away from exporting oil and natural resources and wants to improve its road and rail infrastructures in order to expand its logistics sector” (Para.2).

In 2017, Kazakh National Welfare Fund Samruk-Kazyna, published a report on the BRI and its impact on Kazakhstan. It stated that “Kazakhstan has been one of the biggest recipient of Chinese FDI in Central Asia, with the total FDI stock amounting to USD15.2bln at the end of 2016” (p.14). However, alongside Chinese intentions to construct its BRI in Kazakhstan, it is also worth noting that the Kazakhs are constructing their own infrastructure development program announced by Kazakh President Nazarbayev in November 2014, called *Nurly Zhol* (Lain, 2018). According to Lain (2018), “Its goals sound similar to China's BRI policy: it

focuses on the development of transport, logistics, industry, energy, housing and utilities infrastructure; education; and support for small and medium-sized business activity (p.6). The Kazakh program can therefore directly be linked to the BRI. The 2017 Samruk-Kazyna report even puts forward that:

B&R program implementation in Kazakhstan is expected to be faster than in other participating countries due to substantial synergies with Nurly Zhol program and optimized legal and regulatory framework. The majority of Nurly Zhol projects may be considered as a part of a broader B&R framework, as they directly contribute to the improvement of Kazakhstan's infrastructure and EU-Asia transit potential (p.14).

Chinese ambitions in Kazakhstan under the BRI's umbrella, are best illustrated using two exemplary infrastructure projects: the Khorgos Gateway and the Kuryk seaport. The 2017 Samruk-Kazyna report identified both the Khorgos Gateway as the Kuryk seaport as key Kazakh logistic projects in the BRI's network.

The Khorgos Gateway is a dry-port on the China-Kazakhstan border. Its purpose is to be a trading network hub, functioning just like an actual seaport would. Instead of ships, "huge, Chinese-made cranes load containers onto trains" (Higgins, 2018, Para.3). Ironically, the Khorgos Gateway is situated near the Eurasian pole of inaccessibility, which is the furthest point from any sea. (Shepard, 2017). Therefore, one could argue that this ambitious infrastructure project also holds a symbolic value for both Kazakhstan and China: it is their way of "embracing what they see as the new frontier of global commerce" (Higgins, 2018, Para.3). However, according to Shepard (2017), the seemingly poor geographical position of the Khorgos Gateway is in fact a strategic position: "Sitting right at the heart of an emerging network of trans-Eurasian rail lines, which directly connect 27 cities in China with 11 cities in Europe, goods flow in from China to be consolidated and transshipped to destinations all over the Eurasian landmass" (Para.4). The Khorgos Gateway project costs around US\$230 million and can process over 16,000 shipping containers daily (Samruk-Kazyna, 2017).

Importantly, during the 2017 Belt and Road Summit in Beijing, the Chinese state-owned shipping company COSCO and the Chinese state-owned Lianyungang Port Logistics signed an agreement to take a combined 49 percent share in the project. According to Shepard (2017), "The linking up of major players in China's shipping industry with the Kazakh dry port shows the developing synergy between Kazakhstan's Nurly Zhol infrastructure building program with China's Silk Road Economic Belt" (Para.3).

The second infrastructure project, the Kuryk seaport project is designed to “significantly increase Kazakhstan’s marine transit capacity” (Samruk-Kazyna, 2017, p.14). According to First Deputy Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, Askar Mamin, the Kuryk seaport “is an important link in the transport and logistics system of the Trans-Caspian international transport route. It will give a powerful impetus to the development of transit-transport potential of Kazakhstan and contribute to the “New Silk Road” project implementation” (Government of the republic of Kazakhstan, 2016, Para.4). According to data from an update Samruk-Kazyna report from January 2018, the Kuryk seaport met its target of 1,000,000 tons of cargo for 2017 already in October. However, there is no insight in how this project is financed other than Forbes analyst Rapoza (2017) claiming it “was funded in part by Chinese capital” (Para.22).

In summarizing the effects of the BRI in Kazakhstan, the Samruk-Kazyna updated 2018 report also comes up with potential spillover effects of the initiative on Kazakhstan:

Consequently, B&R [BRI] is forecasted to contribute additional 4.5%-7.0% to Kazakhstan’s GDP growth by 2021, creating over 200,000 new jobs. In addition, the country’s economy will considerably benefit from ongoing infrastructure improvements, with total investments size reaching more than USD7bln over next five years (p.10).

Moreover, Kazakh Minister for Investment and Development Zhenis Kasymbek said in a speech in February 2018 that there are currently 51 joint Chinese-Kazakh industrial projects with a total value that exceeds 27 billion dollars. The main fields of cooperation are in the oil and gas, chemical, energy, mining, metallurgical, agricultural and machine-building sectors. (Agencia EFE, 2018).

Importantly, the 2018 Samruk-Kazyna report also states that “China-EU-China transit freight container traffic increased almost two times, amounting to 201,000 TEU, compared to 105,000 TEU in 2016. For 2018, transit container traffic is expected to reach 340,000 TEU” (p.8). This can be seen as the direct result of Chinese investments in the infrastructure network of Kazakhstan combined with achievements from the Nurly-Zhol program. It continues by stating that “An exponential growth in transit container traffic is primarily attributable to the successful launch of Khorgos dry port and Kuryk seaport that significantly improved efficiency and freight delivery times” (p.8). As we have seen, China has a substantial stake in both infrastructure projects. And these investments are paying off because

Kazakhstan's infrastructure network sees an increase in transit container traffic from China to foreign markets, thereby directly serving Chinese needs.

According to Kazakh minister for investments and development, Kassymbek (2018) "70% of all land transit between the EU and China currently passes through Kazakhstan. This will only increase as the New Silk Road -- a program that includes growing transport, energy and communications links -- continues to develop" (Para.2). Moreover, the 2018 report also notes another infrastructure report financed by a Chinese financial institution to highlights China's BRI commitment in Kazakhstan: "In October 2017, Astana LRT, an entity established to develop Astana's transport and logistics infrastructure, received approximately USD1.6bln from the China Development Bank to finance the construction of light rail system in the city, reinforcing China's strong B&R commitment" (Samruk-Kazyna, 2018, p.10).

4.2 Chinese BRI soft power in Kazakhstan and beyond

Alongside direct Chinese investments in Kazakh infrastructure projects which can be identified as being hard power carrots, there is also a possible soft power dimension of the BRI. A valuable perspective in this attempt to grasp the BRI in terms of soft power is that of Chinese state official statements and official documents regarding the initiatives. In the next part of this analysis, rhetoric and slogans regarding the BRI in Kazakhstan and the initiative will be observed to investigate whether there they can be understood as soft power resource. Since the basic principle of soft power is to convince others to want what you want, official documents are a valuable source of information since they clearly articulate Chinese motives.

Three specific documents will be analyzed, with each roughly two years in between them: Xi Jinping's 2013 speech in Astana introducing the BRI, the 2015 official Chinese document on vision and action for the BRI and Xi Jinping's 2017 keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

An obvious point to start is Xi Jinping's speech *Promote Friendship Between Our People and Work Together to Build a Bright Future* that was mentioned in the introduction of this paper. With the understanding of soft power through a narrowed-down framework of cultural diplomacy introduced in the theory operationalization part of this paper, it's now necessary to take that approach to properly interpret this historical speech.

This 2013 speech was the first time the idea of the BRI was officially put forward by the Chinese regime. However, how did it serve soft power towards Kazakhstan? Importantly, the actual location of the speech was the Kazakh capital of Astana in the presence of Kazakh

President Nazarbayev. Therefore, besides the fact that it introduces the Chinese ambitions for its BRI to everyone present, it can be viewed as a direct exchange of thought from Chinese leader Xi Jinping to Kazakh leader Nazarbayev. According to Lenczowski's (2009) framework, the promotion of ideas and history can be viewed as two of the most important tools for practicing soft power. How did Xi Jinping's speech put these two tools into practice?

First, Xi Jinping puts a lot of emphasis on history. He refers to the ancient silk road as the starting point of Kazakh-Chinese bilateral relations by stating that Kazakhstan has always been in the center of exchanges between Western and Eastern civilizations:

Kazakhstan, sitting on the ancient Silk Road, has made an important contribution to the exchanges between the Eastern and Western civilizations and the interactions and cooperation between various nations and cultures. (...) The exchanges and mutual learning thus made possible have contributed to the progress of human civilization (Para.8).

Moreover, he states that the experiences of the ancient silk road laid the foundation for today's relationship between China and other countries that were part of it:

Throughout the millennia, the people of various countries along the ancient Silk Road have jointly written a chapter of friendship that has been passed on to this very day. The over 2,000-year history of exchanges demonstrates that on the basis of solidarity, mutual trust, equality, inclusiveness, mutual learning and win-win cooperation, countries of different races, beliefs and cultural backgrounds are fully capable of sharing peace and development. This is the valuable inspiration we have drawn from the ancient Silk Road (Para.11).

At this point in his speech, Xi Jinping shifts from history to the promotion of ideas. This also brings up Lenczowski's desired objective of cultural diplomacy being conditioning for subsequent political messages. He starts by stating that:

Over the past 20 years and more, the relations between China and Eurasian countries have developed rapidly and the ancient [*sic*] Silk Road has gained fresh vitality. In a new way, it is taking the mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Eurasian countries to a new height (Para.12).

Importantly, before actually introducing the BRI, he dedicates a part of his speech to clearly state China's peaceful intentions in the Central Asian countries:

China is committed to the path of peaceful development and the independent foreign

policy of peace. We respect the development paths and domestic and foreign policies chosen independently by the people of every country. We will in no circumstances interfere in the internal affairs of Central Asian countries. We do not seek to dominate regional affairs or establish any sphere of influence (Para.15).

When the stage is set, Xi Jinping finally puts forward the idea of the BRI, which he calls an "economic belt along the Silk Road" (Para.19). Immediately after the announcement, he dictates five measures that should be taken for the initiative to be a success: increased policy communication, improved road connectivity, promotion of unimpeded trade, enhancement of money circulation and an increased understanding between our people (Para.20-24). One could argue that putting forward such a comprehensive framework of measures can be viewed as China's desire for normative leadership in the Eurasian region.

To perfectly fit the soft power character of the speech and to highlight the fifth measure of increased understanding between our people, Xi Jinping also announces that:

To facilitate youth exchanges within the SCO framework, China will, in the coming ten years, provide 30,000 government scholarships to SCO member states and invite 10,000 teachers and students from Confucius Institutes in these countries to China for study tours. I hope you will seize these opportunities to come to China for study and exchange.

This proposal can be directly linked to cultural diplomacy soft power, with educational exchange as tool. Xi Jinping concludes his speech by stating that:

China and Kazakhstan are friendly neighbors as close as lips and teeth. Our 1,700-kilometer long common border, two millennia of interactions and extensive common interests not only bind us closely together, but also promise a broad prospect for bilateral ties and mutually beneficial cooperation. Let us join hands to carry on our traditional friendship and build a bright future together.

In March 2015, the combined Chinese National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of commerce issued a white paper with state council authorization that stated China's vision and actions on the combined continental and maritime initiative. In this document, a broad overview of goals and expectations of the BRI is given. It is not only addressed to Kazakhstan and the other Eurasian states but to a global audience. One could argue that it sets out Chinese vision and actions in the long-term goals instead of short-term objectives. The rhetoric in the document can unmistakably be related to that of Xi

Jinping's 2013 speech. However, instead of emphasizing the role of Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states, it clearly seeks to lift its narrative to a more global setting. It explains the BRI to have a global economic purpose by promoting it as the answer to the international financial crisis of 2008-2009 by stating that "Jointly building the Belt and Road is in the interests of the world community" (Para.I), because it:

(...) is designed to uphold the global free trade regime and the open world economy in the spirit of open regional cooperation. It is aimed at promoting orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets; encouraging the countries along the Belt and Road to achieve economic policy coordination and carry out broader and more in-depth regional cooperation of higher standards; and jointly creating an open, inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all (Para.I).

However, economic motivation is frequently alternated with statements about China's opening-up and commitment to increase its normative global leadership:

The Initiative will enable China to further expand and deepen its opening-up, and to strengthen its mutually beneficial cooperation with countries in Asia, Europe and Africa and the rest of the world. China is committed to shouldering more responsibilities and obligations within its capabilities, and making greater contributions to the peace and development of mankind (Para.I).

However, on the topic of financing and funding the BRI, the document is somewhat contradicting. First, it states that "Financial integration is an important underpinning for implementing the Belt and Road Initiative" (Para.IV). The document uses *we should* to address how this financial integration is supposed to go:

We should expand the scope and scale of bilateral currency swap and settlement with other countries along the Belt and Road, open and develop the bond market in Asia, make joint efforts to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and BRICS New Development Bank, conduct negotiation among related parties on establishing Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) financing institution, and set up and put into operation the Silk Road Fund as early as possible (Para. IV).

For the multilateral organizations AIIB and SCO this is understandable to use *we should*, since there are multiple stakeholders. However, the Silk Road Fund is designed to be a

Chinese state-owned fund and therefore seems to be out of place when addressing these joint measures for financial integration.

The document further explains on how China wants to build the BRI on basis of mutual benefit in its framework part:

The Belt and Road Initiative is a way for win-win cooperation that promotes common development and prosperity and a road towards peace and friendship by enhancing mutual understanding and trust, and strengthening all-round exchanges. The Chinese government advocates peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit. It promotes practical cooperation in all fields, and works to build a community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility featuring mutual political trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness.

In the conclusion it is stated that:

As long as all countries along the Belt and Road make concerted efforts to pursue our common goal, there will be bright prospects for the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, and the people of countries along the Belt and Road can all benefit from this Initiative (Para.VIII).

Five months later, on August 2015, a joint declaration between China and Kazakhstan is signed on a new stage in their strategical partnership. In the declaration, it is stated that:

The Two Sides stressed that China's initiative of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and Kazakhstan's new economic policies of the "Bright Road" complement each other, which is conducive to deepening all-round cooperation between the two countries. The Two Sides will take this opportunity to further strengthen cooperation in production capacity and investment (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015, Para.II).

Xi Jinping's opening speech at the 2017 *The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation* almost four years after his initial 2013 speech, offers a good opportunity to track process made since. Again, Xi Jinping opens his speech using the same rhetoric used in his 2013 speech. He is talking in front 29 Heads of State, delegations from 130 countries and 70 international organizations (Kohli, 2018). He starts by introducing the same elements mentioned in his earlier speech: peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and benefit again emphasizing the importance of history. He continues by explaining that the last four years saw an increase in policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people-to-

people connectivity, thereby legitimizing the existence of the BRI itself: “These fruitful outcomes show that the Belt and Road Initiative responds to the trend of the times, conforms to the law of development, and meets the people's interests. It surely has broad prospects” (Para.17).

He also states that China will scale up its financing support for the BRI:

China will scale up financing support for the Belt and Road Initiative by contributing an additional RMB 100 billion to the Silk Road Fund, (...). The China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China will set up special lending schemes respectively worth RMB 250 billion equivalent and RMB 130 billion equivalent to support Belt and Road cooperation on infrastructure, industrial capacity and financing.

As shown in the previous part in this analysis, this means that China will increase its future hard power economic resources for the BRI. Xi Jinping concludes by stating that: “All countries, from either Asia, Europe, Africa or the Americas, can be international cooperation partners of the Belt and Road Initiative. The pursuit of this initiative is based on extensive consultation and its benefits will be shared by us all” (Para.39).

Chapter 5: Discussion of results

The previous chapter's case study gave a brief oversight of possible hard and soft power resources used in developing China's BRI in Kazakhstan. It showed that China is heavily investing in Kazakh infrastructure projects that are vital for ensuring that the goal of reaching foreign markets over land is being realized. Moreover, it systematically analyzed three important BRI documents to identify possible soft power instruments: Xi Jinping's speeches from 2013 and 2017 and the official whitepaper on the vision and actions for the BRI. In the following part, these findings will be critically evaluated to answer the question of how China's Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan can be characterized in terms of Nye's concepts of power.

5.1 Chinese BRI hard power through funding

The main question to determine if should be viewed as Chinese hard power is not *if* China is investing in Kazakhstan through the BRI but rather *how* China is investing.

To see Chinese economic hard power resources in a broader perspective, it is also worth looking at two institutions that provide financial support for the BRI. The first one is the

Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). It was proposed by Xi Jinping during his visit to Indonesia in 2013. The AIIB is a multilateral development bank created by China, which has over 50 member states and a capital base of over US\$100 billion (Callaghan & Hubbard, 2016). According to Xi Jinping, its main goal is to provide capital for initiatives under the Belt and Road (Xuequan, 2015). Importantly, of the US\$100 billion capital base, US\$50 billion is from China, making it the most important stakeholder by far. (Johec & Jenish Kyzy, 2018)

According to BBC China editor Gracie (2015), the establishment of the AIIB is an example of Chinese hard power: “Everyone knew Beijing had money, but the AIIB signalled that it also had the confidence, ambition, determination and vision to build regional institutions to suit its purpose and challenge the US” (Para.2).

However, some analysts have argued that the AIIB holds more of a soft element rather than hard power. Hard power would be direct investment in for example Kazakhstan, but Chinese investing through the AIIB gives the country indirect soft power. Banyan (2013), argues that “For China to step in and build and finance it on its own, however, looks like a sort of colonialism. He states that “An infrastructure bank heavily influenced but not directly controlled by China might have more luck”. With hard power, the goal is to directly influence other actors’ behavior using, in this case, economic incentives. With half of the AIIB’s capital base coming from China, but no direct control over its spending, the argument that it counts as an indirect, soft power instrument seems valid.

Also dedicated towards the goal of providing funding for BRI projects, is the Silk Road Fund. This fund, established in 2014, is a Chinese state-owned investment fund that was specifically established to support the BRI (Tian, 2018). The fund consists of US\$40 billion for equity investments (Johec & Jenish Kyzy, 2018). In this case, China is directly influencing its spending, therefore classifying as a hard power instrument.

As shown in the case study, China is heavily investing in Kazakhstan through funding infrastructure projects such as the Khorgos gateway and the Kuryk seaport, as well as other infrastructure projects that ensure a better flow of Chinese products to foreign markets. To further the claim of the influence of this Chinese hard power projection in Kazakhstan, data on BRI funding found in the 2018 Samruk-Kazyna report states that:

China Development Bank has been the largest B&R funding contributor, accounting for approximately 38% of the total funds, while other four largest state-owned banks

constituted 52%. The share of Export- Import Bank of China stood at 8%, while the Silk Road Fund and other funding sources both represented approximately 1%. (p.6).

If this data is correct, this would mean that 99 percent of the BRI's total funding is being done by Chinese state-owned financial institutions. Therefore, giving China a direct control for economic incentives in BRI projects. Viewed in this light, China has an undeniable hard power influence in the BRI due to its funding structure.

5.2 The BRI's win-winism: a text-book soft power strategy

In Xi Jinping's speeches and the official whitepaper on the vision and actions for the BRI, *jointly* and *cooperation* are often used keywords. How can these official document and speeches best be understood? In his article, Swaine (2015) argues that:

(...) Xi and other authoritative Chinese sources present it in the most beneficial and non-threatening ways possible, as a historic effort designed to build a network of mutually beneficial economic activities and a larger community of interests (in Xi's words, a "sense of common destiny") among China's neighbors and across the Eurasian continent and the maritime routes between China and Europe (p.13).

By referring to their shared history and culture, Xi Jinping seeks to win the hearts and minds of Kazakhs during his 2013 speech. In the 2015 white paper, other elements of soft power are strategically put forward in trying to convince other countries to want what China wants. From a more critical perspective, the Chinese use vagueness in their advantages by offering the world solutions to a huge variety of problems.

The sense of mutual benefit, openness and inclusiveness that these three documents are trying to achieve, can perhaps best be summarized by the concept of *win-winism*. Swaine (2015) directly links this use of win-win rhetoric to the China dream:

Given its emphasis on "win-win" cooperation, the concept is clearly viewed as a major part of Xi's overall "China Dream" notion of national revitalization through domestic and foreign cooperation, as well as his effort to develop new types of inter-state relations (p.13).

In his book chapter (2018), Chinese economist Angang Hu argues that the BRI symbolizes the beginning of the era of win-winism. He describes the most distinctive features of this new global era:

(...) instead of being unjust, this era is just; instead of being discriminative, this era is

equal; instead of being exclusive, this era is inclusive; instead of being confrontational; this era is non-confrontational; instead of being disruptive, this era is harmonious; instead of being unsustainable and temporary, this era is sustainable and lasting (p. 31).

He furthermore argues that China is now at the economic center of the world and should use this position to promote win-win development. How can this win-winism as soft power best be understood? In their article, Callaghan & Hubbard (2016) state that “The ‘one belt one road’ undoubtedly serves strategic goals for China, but by and large these are common goals for others in the region” (p.117). For example, in Kazakhstan, the BRI has been greeted with great enthusiasm. As showed in the case study, the Kazakh government even responded with their own national infrastructure plan Nurly Zhol.

Kazakhstan’s enthusiasm on the BRI indeed presents a win-win situation. Referring to the arguments made by Batsaikhan & Dabrowski (2017) in the geopolitical situation of Kazakhstan part of this paper, the country is poorly situated being far away from economic centers and mostly being landlocked. Therefore, the BRI enables Kazakhstan to participate in the global economy by dedicating its infrastructure to transfer Chinese goods and their own energy substantial resources. This is best demonstrated using the Khorgos Gateway as an example. As stated, the location of that dry-port is the furthest point in Eurasia from any sea. A place that would otherwise be desolate, is now thriving because of the Chinese BRI.

In sum, the three documents put forward in the case study chapter of this paper did have substantial elements of soft power, thereby classifying as soft power resources. This is best demonstrated by the rhetoric of win-winism, inclusiveness and openness that is projected through these documents. If the overall goal of soft power is to convince others to want what you want, the use of this win-winism is a text-book example.

5.3 Carrots and win-winsim: a Chinese smart power strategy?

This paper’s focus on the question if the Chinese BRI can qualify as a smart power strategy was influenced by statements made by Brînză in her 2016 article. Therefore, the objective of this paper was to evaluate this statement and test if there is truth to it. In his article, Nye (2013) argues that the concept of smart power differs from soft power because it can be an evaluative concept as well as descriptive.

Therefore, for the BRI in Kazakhstan to be a smart power strategy, it had to be evaluated from both hard and soft power perspective. As was discussed earlier in this paper,

smart power strategy by a certain actor can be defined as “converting the full range of their power resources into strategies that produce the outcomes they seek” (Nye, 2013, p.8). Therefore, smart power can be viewed as the positive outcome of combining hard and soft power resources

After analyzing possible elements of Chinese hard power in Kazakhstan, it must be concluded that China is indeed using hard power resources in the form of the financing and funding of infrastructure projects. Moreover, the three official BRI documents from 2013, 2015 and 2017, show the rather transparent ambition of China to implement elements of soft power in its BRI by emphasizing on its framework of openness, inclusiveness and win-winism.

Importantly, answering whether it indeed is a smart power strategy depends on the understanding of its effectiveness in the case of the BRI. One could argue that there are elements of both hard and soft power in China’s BRI. Traditionally, the hard power element was already there. As was clear from first 2013 speech by Xi Jinping, it was never the intention of China to build its own infrastructure network across Eurasia. For them to create their Belt and Road to the Middle-Eastern and European markets, they needed to cross Kazakh territory. Therefore, they needed to include Kazakhstan into the initiative. For this to happen, they used soft power

Only now, Chinese hard power through substantial investments along its Belt and Road, is sugarcoated with an increasing usage of soft power. By doing so, the Chinese are taking a smart road in navigating their road to global normative leader. As Brînză (2016) argues,

(...) China’s greatest achievement wasn’t to envision this project, but to give it a fancy name that increased its appeal. Although sooner or later all great powers, like the US and Japan, have had a policy to sustain the development of the world, none has made it as attractive as China did by rejuvenating its Silk Road narrative” (Para.8).

In the conclusion of his article on smart power, Nye (2009) states that “By complementing its military and economic might with greater investments in its soft power, the United States can rebuild the framework it needs to tackle tough global challenges. That would be true smart power” (p.163). But what if this proposed leadership of the United States in the matters is replaced by China? One could argue that the BRI is one of the instruments used by China to do exactly that: complementing its military and economic might with greater investments in its soft power. Therefore, to describe China’s BRI as a smart power strategy, may only be an observation of the current reality.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

China's rise to power in the international system is undeniable. Among observers, there is little doubt that the BRI's overarching objective is to increase China's influence by economically binding other countries to their cause. Therefore, it is needed to gain a better understanding of how China is shaping this development.

While numerous scholars and observers have already pointed out that the BRI can be interpreted as a Chinese grand strategy, this paper set out to investigate how this grand strategy should be understood in terms of hard, soft and smart power as introduced by the works of Joseph S. Nye. To answer this question, an exemplary case has been made from Kazakhstan to further analyze all three concepts of power in a single case setting. As argued by Nye (2013), hard and soft power are descriptive concepts while smart power can be both descriptive and evaluative. Accordingly, this paper also treated them as such by constructing a descriptive case analysis on hard and soft power and evaluated if China combines them in a smart power strategy.

First, it determined the use of Chinese hard power by evaluating their investments in Kazakhstan under the BRI umbrella. Although Chinese data on actual investments has been proven difficult to find, data from the Samruk-Kazyna reports have given useful insight in how China puts forward its economic hard power in Kazakhstan by using state-owned financial institutions to provide substantial funding. Moreover, the use of soft power has been analyzed using primary state sources that clearly articulated Chinese vision for the BRI. In the specific case of Kazakhstan, it showed that the Chinese use extensive rhetoric to win the heart and minds of its Kazakh audience. Furthermore, it was also noted that as time passed since its introduction in 2013, Chinese rhetoric increasingly focused on the global audience by advocating openness and inclusiveness for all parties that seek to engage with the BRI. Furthermore, the soft power objective of convincing others to want what you want can be best illustrated using the concept of win-winism.

Additionally, the greatest soft power achievement of China's BRI was to put forward the idea of a global community of shared destiny. Its 2015 document and Xi Jinping's speeches make for an attractive story: join China into a future of togetherness and shared benefits. These goals that China set out are more of a global vision than an actual infrastructure trading network. This enforces the idea of the BRI being a grand strategy. This paper has attempted to

take the first step of uncovering this difficult relationship between the use of hard and soft power into something that may be called a smart power strategy. This complex relationship power was illustrated using the case of Kazakhstan. However, Kazakhstan may be thought of as the Buckle of China's economic belt to the West, the belt itself extends far beyond national borders and bilateral relations. Yes, China is able to combine hard power and soft power elements in its BRI in Kazakhstan to form a strategy that qualifies as smart power. However, as shown in the case analysis, this is partly because Kazakhstan is receiving it with open arms. It remains to be seen if the same dynamics apply in other countries along the Silk Road network. Every country has a different political and economic dimension and China might not effectively combine hard power and soft power in all of them. Therefore, further research is needed to unravel this complex field of Chinese hard, soft and smart power in different countries.

The BRI is the most ambitious infrastructure project of the modern world. However, it is still in its early days of development. The BRI is a smart power strategy that is set out for the long run. September 2018 will mark its five-year anniversary. It has made substantial progress in those five years but there has also been doubt over the sustainability of a project so large. In the introduction of this paper, I stated that the BRI might be seen as a product of China's rise to becoming an economic and political heavy-weight over the last decades. Additionally, it can also be viewed as an instrument to continue this rise in the future. In light of recent signs of a trading war between the United States and China, understanding this rise is more relevant than ever. However, how this rise will be shaped depends on if China is going to follow-through on the promises it makes. Will Chinese win-winism be reached if everyone wins or of China wins?

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