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How China's Foreign Aid Fosters Social Bonds With Central Asian Ruling Elites

Nargis Kassenova

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China Local/Global

China has become a global power, but there is too little debate about *how* this has happened and what it means. Many argue that China exports its developmental model and imposes it on other countries. But Chinese players also extend their influence by working through local actors and institutions while adapting and assimilating local and traditional forms, norms, and practices.

With a generous multiyear grant from the Ford Foundation, Carnegie has launched an innovative body of research on Chinese engagement strategies in seven regions of the world—Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, the Pacific, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Through a mix of research and strategic convening, this project explores these complex dynamics, including the ways Chinese firms are adapting to local labor laws in Latin America, Chinese banks and funds are exploring traditional Islamic financial and credit products in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, and Chinese actors are helping local workers upgrade their skills in Central Asia. These adaptive Chinese strategies that accommodate and work within local realities are mostly ignored by Western policymakers in particular.

Ultimately, the project aims to significantly broaden understanding and debate about China's role in the world and to generate innovative policy ideas. These could enable local players to better channel Chinese energies to support their societies and economies; provide lessons for Western engagement around the world, especially in developing countries; help China's own policy community learn from the diversity of Chinese experience; and potentially reduce frictions.

Evan A. Feigenbaum

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Summary

The five independent states of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are among the primary recipients of China’s foreign aid. Staple items include buses and tractors; military equipment and police vehicles; and the construction of hospitals, schools, and government buildings. Chinese government agencies also sponsor scholarships for Central Asian students and training programs for Central Asian civil servants and military officers. Such acts of giving are an important facet of China’s foreign policy in its neighborhood and with the rest of the world. They help build relationships by fostering political, social, and cultural bonds at multiple levels (government-to-government, leader-to-leader, and people-to-people).

The Chinese government describes the country’s foreign aid as drawing on “the Chinese nation’s ideal of universal harmony” and “the Chinese tradition of internationalism.” Over the years, Beijing has shaped a distinctive narrative and an evolving set of practices. One feature of its approach is the framing of foreign aid as a form of South-South cooperation, stressing equality as the basis of relationships with other countries. However, this equality rhetoric does not square well with the unidirectional (rather than reciprocal) nature of foreign aid and China’s claims of being a big country obliged with duty, mission, and benevolence that it needs to exercise toward smaller states.

Despite major imbalances of power between China and Central Asian states, Chinese leaders have engaged in regular and carefully choreographed ceremonies of rendering respect to their counterparts in the region. The pomp and circumstance of such meetings and the partnership rhetoric could only partially soften the realities of a hierarchical order, one in which China is the major power and the donor. While Central Asian states cannot reciprocate China’s gifts, they partially give back by meeting China’s political goals by affirming the One China principle and commitment to struggle against ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism.

In rendering aid, China pledges to respect other developing countries’ opinions and their development level and needs. In Central Asian countries, Beijing prioritizes the types of assistance that best address local needs. However, these are local ruling elites who define those to serve their own agendas. Chinese foreign aid helps mitigate deficiencies in their governance, burnish their reputations in the eyes of their constituents and bolster their own prospects and fortunes.

Chinese foreign aid has a strong emphasis on developing interpersonal ties and networks. The participation of Central Asian officials, military personnel, engineers, and others—many of whom have close ties to these countries’ ruling circles—in projects and trainings organized by the Chinese government creates opportunities for social bonding and broader Chinese inroads into local politics. And this Chinese approach resonates well with the emphasis that Central Asian elites place on

interpersonal relations and their cultivation through gifts, favors, and banquets. In this sense, Chinese and Central Asian political cultures have notable overlaps. China has learned to leverage these commonalities to advance its influence.

This relationship involved a learning process. The study of Chinese aid to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan shows how the two sides have continually familiarized themselves with each other's ways and have adapted accordingly. China has adopted an approach focused on the ruling elites of recipient countries. Central Asian governments, for their part, are watching China's rise and Chinese engagement and aid elsewhere in the world and modifying their requests accordingly.

China has learned to vary its Central Asian gift giving based on the different political and elite circumstances that prevail in each country. There has been a continuity of Chinese engagement in Tajikistan, where a single president, Emomali Rahmon, and his elite supporters have held power for decades. Both China and Rahmon and his circles have evolved a pattern of ensuring mutual payoffs from these investments. By contrast, Kyrgyzstan has weathered frequent changes of leaders, sometimes in revolutionary circumstances, that have, on the surface, been disruptive to Chinese efforts to cultivate bonds with local elites. Yet in Kyrgyzstan, too, China has maintained its influence, adapting to each cycle of disruptive political change by tailoring its gifts and offerings, engaging with new faces and a diverse range of elites in power.

Behind the proper appearances and rhetoric, the perceptions and feelings held by both sides are more complicated. Central Asian recipients of Chinese aid are suspicious about the real motives behind this assistance. The ruling elites who solicit and receive these gifts must work extra hard to filter them through local political contexts and conditions because ordinary Kyrgyz and Tajik citizens often express doubts on social media about the intent and goals behind such interactions.

As a result, China's relationships with Central Asian states are complex, friction-laden, and not nearly as harmonious as Beijing likes to portray them. Despite the rhetoric of South-South cooperation, the people of Central Asia sense a new hierarchy emerging and nurture publicly expressed fears that their countries will be overwhelmed by China. Local elites have learned to benefit from Chinese engagement and express gratitude; however, their loyalty is fluid and determined by local power configurations. China will need to continue to adapt, since political change is likely to persist in Kyrgyzstan and eventually to come to Tajikistan as well.

The marriage of material gifts to interpersonal elite social bonds is a distinctive feature of China's approach to Central Asia. This characteristic contrasts starkly with the approach preferred by the transatlantic West, which has tended to anchor its engagement with Central Asia in political norms and principles. The Chinese order is more elastic in accommodating different types of polities, but it clearly and unambiguously serves China's interests. Nonetheless, Beijing's approach also entails riding waves of local resentment that only the region's elites know how to properly manage and navigate.

Introduction

The five independent states of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are among the primary recipients of China’s foreign aid. Beijing unsurprisingly frames these gifts as “selfless help,” aid that includes buses and tractors; military equipment and police vehicles; and the construction of hospitals, schools, and government buildings. Chinese government agencies also sponsor scholarships for Central Asian students and training programs for Central Asian civil servants and military officers. During the coronavirus pandemic, China sent loads of masks, personal protection equipment, and vaccines to the region too.

Such acts of giving are an important facet of China’s foreign policy in its neighborhood and with the rest of the world. They help build relationships by fostering political, social, and cultural bonds at multiple levels (government-to-government, leader-to-leader, and people-to-people). And through the mere act of giving and receiving aid, China and the countries of the region become linked in a hierarchical set of relationships.

But that is not the end of the story. The pattern of Chinese gift giving in Central Asia is, in fact, a two-way street in which Chinese elites have learned a great deal over many years about what local governing elites seek and why, as well as the local political conditions in which these elites operate. During ceremonies of aid transfers and on other occasions, People’s Republic of China representatives convey sentiments of sympathy, support, and solidarity on behalf of the Chinese people, while their Central Asian counterparts express appreciation and gratitude on behalf of their peoples. But due to the authoritarian nature of their political systems, the net result is to tie China’s views of and approach to the region to the needs of elites. In the meantime, many Central Asians remain skeptical of China’s policies and intentions.

This pattern of giving and receiving has established a mutually dependent set of elite relationships that demonstrate how Chinese officials have learned not just to impose Chinese ways but rather have cultivated interpersonal ties with Central Asian counterparts and adapted to their goals and requests, many of which are focused on showcasing to local citizens that these elites are delivering benefits and returns.

China has also learned to vary its Central Asian gift giving based on the different political and elite circumstances that prevail in each country. For instance, there has been a continuity of Chinese engagement in Tajikistan, where a single president, Emomali Rahmon, and his elite supporters have held power for decades. Both China and Rahmon and his circles have evolved a pattern of ensuring mutual payoffs from these investments. By contrast, Kyrgyzstan has weathered frequent changes of leaders, sometimes in revolutionary circumstances, that have, on the surface, been disruptive to

Chinese efforts to cultivate bonds with local elites. Yet in Kyrgyzstan, too, China has maintained its influence, adapting to each cycle of disruptive political change by tailoring its gifts and offerings, engaging with new faces and a diverse range of elites in power.

In all five Central Asian countries, China's foreign aid prioritizes infrastructure projects and training of all kinds as the types of assistance that best address local needs and conditions, but these are also the things by which local elites seek to help burnish their reputations in the eyes of their constituents and bolster their own prospects and fortunes. Indeed, the latter are aimed not just at knowledge sharing but also at developing these interpersonal relationships with ruling elites. The building of such social and political networks has become an important component of China's military, public, and cultural diplomacy in the region. And this Chinese approach resonates well with the emphasis that Central Asian elites place on interpersonal relations and their cultivation through gifts, favors, and banquets. In this sense, Chinese and Central Asian political cultures have notable overlaps. China has learned to leverage these commonalities to advance its influence.

This study of China's foreign aid to Central Asia, with a special focus on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, illustrates these features and patterns of interpersonal ties and the building of social and political networks by an adaptive Chinese state. Over the past three decades, the way China uses these outreach strategies has been growing in scope and volume.

The study illustrates a problem of reciprocity in China's foreign aid. While Beijing of course frames its contributions as being "selfless," they reflect political expediency and imply that Central Asians will, in exchange, reciprocate in ways that meet China's political goals. An example is the willingness of Central Asian ruling elites to affirm their commitment to not support what the Chinese government characterizes as "ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism" in Xinjiang, despite the sympathy for Uyghurs and their plight among some segments of Central Asian populations.¹ These elite expressions of fealty to China's political goals in Xinjiang are the required price of doing business, but local elites readily provide them as a token of gratitude. Beyond these requirements, however, the terms of exchange are less clear. China, for example, expects that Central Asian elites will extend their governments' support to Beijing in international fora; in most cases, this can indeed be expected, but such understandings rarely, if ever, take the form of a commitment formalized in an agreement.

The core problem is the gap between the region's elites who China has learned to cultivate cooperative ties with and these countries' broader publics with whom Beijing has had much less success. Faced with a gap between the respective sentiments of Central Asian elites and citizens toward China, Chinese officials have learned to play to elite preferences while counting on these elites to, in turn, keep their citizens onside in terms of Chinese economic and political preferences.

Indeed, while Central Asian officials are happy to benefit from Chinese aid (sometimes misappropriating it), this does not ensure their loyalty.

The results for China can be mixed precisely because Central Asian peoples tend to be suspicious about the real motives behind Chinese gifts. Such suspicions are widespread and are loudly articulated in Kyrgyz society, for instance. Chinese officials may be disappointed by these local attitudes and even by their elite counterparts' behavior, but they prefer to continue rendering aid to keep the appearance of harmonious relations and make inroads in the service of Chinese interests and goals.

As these patterns become institutionalized in Central Asia, including through regional summits that feature highly ritualized expressions of gratitude and loyalty, a China-centered international order is emerging that will challenge many of the transatlantic West's liberal foreign policy preferences. The Chinese approach showcased in Central Asia emphasizes social bonds, while the transatlantic one is primarily embedded in legal and institutional norms and principles. The Chinese approach is more elastic in accommodating different types of elites, politics, and polities. Of course, it also clearly and unambiguously serves China's interests, and this, in turn, can sometimes breed local resentment. How these emerging patterns of political and social interaction between China and Central Asia develop will reveal much about how Beijing's strategies to develop an alternative are faring around the world, and especially in the Global South.

The paper begins by exploring the past, when Central Asians were part of a China-centered tributary system. A second section outlines how present-day foreign aid can be viewed as a modern form of gift giving, exploring the sort of interelite relationships it creates and fosters.

A third section briefly discusses the special features of China's brand of foreign aid, or foreign aid with "Chinese characteristics."² Instead of addressing the structures, conditionality, or levels of transparency in these aid packages, this analysis focuses on their political, social, and cultural aspects. The meanings and symbolism of gifts as well as the accompanying rhetoric and ceremonies are important: they are shaped by long-standing cultural patterns and traditions of statecraft.

The following section gives an overview of Chinese aid to Central Asian countries. It provides detailed accounts of Chinese gift giving to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These are the poorer states of the region, so they attract more aid from China and other donors than other countries in the region like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan do. While there is a major power disparity between China and all Central Asian states, this disparity is especially pronounced in the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Their relatively small size is something these two countries have in common, but at the same time they have vastly different political systems and sociocultural milieus, which makes comparisons of how Beijing interacts with their ruling elites especially interesting.

To tie these findings together, the concluding section compares the emerging China-centered order, based heavily on interelite relational bonds, with the more institutionalized and legal nature of the U.S.-led liberal international order.

China's Tradition of Gift Giving

News stories of China's "selfless help" (known in Mandarin as *wusi fengxian*) to Central Asian governments and citizens, cities, and rural areas are not uncommon.³ Recent examples include the opening of the Luban workshop, a new addition to the growing network of vocational education schools, in the Tajik capital Dushanbe (the first one in Central Asia) in August, and the commitment to send 500,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine along with Chinese doctors, specialized in cataract removal, to Kyrgyzstan announced the same month.⁴ Such acts of giving (which include grants and technical assistance), along with concessional loans, constitute the overall menu of China's foreign aid offerings. As with everything China does in the region, this aspect of its relationships with Central Asia has drawn a good amount of attention. And while there is a growing body of literature tackling the goals and specifics of Chinese foreign aid as an instrument of soft power, this paper explores China's foreign aid to Central Asian countries as acts of mutually supportive gift giving among increasingly interconnected elites.⁵

There is a relational aspect to Chinese foreign aid that reflects a process of learning about how Central Asian elites operate. The French anthropologist Marcel Mauss conceived of "gifts" as serving the purpose of the initiation or maintenance of social relations.⁶ But unlike other forms of gift giving, foreign aid does not presuppose reciprocity, or to be more precise, the reciprocity of an *equal* exchange. Rather, the giver who provides goods can attach certain expectations to its gift, such as a demand for gratitude, an expectation of loyalty in the form of support in international organizations, and a formal acknowledgement of its great power status. The receiver, meanwhile, can leverage the gift for its own purposes, reflecting its own expectations. For both sides, therefore, gift giving in the form of foreign aid represents a social interaction and learning process, not just an exchange of tangible things like scholarships or training programs. The author is not the first to make this argument. For instance, the political scientists Daniel Markovits, Austin Strange, and Dustin Tingley have used the concept of foreign aid to look at practices of Chinese gift giving in the past.⁷

Since the focus of this paper is gift giving, it does not center on concessional loans, which aim for economic gains, not the evolutionary and steady construction of social bonds. What is more, not all gifts from China to Central Asian partners fall under the umbrella of official foreign aid. Among the first presents remembered by Kyrgyz and Tajik citizens interviewed for this study were the "buses of friendship" donated by the city of Urumqi in the 1990s.⁸ Sister cities in China sent humanitarian aid

to Central Asian cities during the coronavirus pandemic. And there are numerous examples of Chinese companies building schools and carrying out other public works projects in Central Asia. However, because this paper is focused on bonds among ruling elites, it primarily discusses official aid. Other types of gifts are important for shaping relations between China and Central Asia, but they have their own dynamic that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Nor is the practice of China-centered gift giving especially new in Central Asia. It is deeply anchored in historical patterns that extend to imperial dynasties and that reflected the Chinese imperial state's construction of a hierarchical political and cultural order on its geographic periphery. Gift giving and exchanges of gifts played an important role in the way the Chinese emperor's court managed relations with peripheral peoples and polities, finding expression in the so-called tributary system. In the past, Central Asian polities and tribes were engaged in the China-centered tributary system, which is often portrayed as being one-directional. Under the Qing Dynasty (which ruled from 1644 to 1911), relations with Central Asian (and other Inner Asian) lords were run by the Ministry of Outer Dependencies.⁹ Notwithstanding the considerable time gap and obvious differences between the ways gift giving has manifested in the past and present, there are intriguing corollaries between these historical and recent patterns.¹⁰

Historically, as the late Harvard historian John K. Fairbank has argued, non-Chinese rulers participated in the Chinese world order by observing the appropriate forms and ceremonies (*li*) in their contact with the [emperor, or] Son of Heaven."¹¹ They or their envoys had to visit the court and pay a symbolic tribute of local products, but they received something in return that helped bolster their power locally and supported their wants and needs. Most notably, they received imperial gifts. During the Qing Dynasty, these staple gifts from Central Asia to China included horses and pastoral products. A famous work by the Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione shows a Kazakh petitioner giving horses to the Qianlong Emperor as a sign of tribute. In return, this delegation and others like it received gifts from Beijing and support that could be leveraged to bolster their positions locally.¹²

As Fairbank has argued, this ostensibly perfect, heaven-mandated hierarchical order was more convoluted on the ground because "the Chinese world order was a unified concept only at the Chinese end and only on the normative level, as an ideal pattern."¹³ Thus, while the Ming Dynasty's court (which ruled from 1368 to 1644) referred to the Timurids of Central Asia as their vassals, the latter considered themselves equals. As the historian Joseph Fletcher summarized the arrangement, "the Ming emperor could suppress his mandate to suit his own convenience so long as his dealings were conducted at a distance and as long as the necessary appearances were preserved in China."¹⁴ The Qing court, too, dealt with the Kokand Khanate on a basis of quasi-equality, while formally considering it a vassal state. And whatever the Qing Dynasty may have told itself, the fact is that the khanate managed to extract major concessions such as arranging for their merchants to conduct trade

tax-free in Xinjiang. Indeed, the khan's emissaries even seem to have collected proceeds from trading posts in Xinjiang on behalf of Kokand.¹⁵

The supposedly ideal Chinese order was also compromised by competing and unstable allegiances. Kazakh khans dispatched representatives to and made respectful overtures “both to the Russian Empire in the west and to the Qing Dynasty in the east, creating a complex triadic set of relationships and competing jurisdictions over their lands.”¹⁶ Kyrgyz chieftains sent tribute to the Qing authorities and even helped them quell local rebellions. But later Kyrgyz tribes rebelled against the Qing, when the latter were in temporary decline. As Nicola di Cosmo argues, for the nomads of Central Asia, the acceptance of tributary relations was “a way of ensuring their cultural survival and relative independence against formidable odds” that was “contingent upon and linked to historical circumstances.”¹⁷

While for Central Asians the reasons for entering into this kind of relationship could include seeking protection, gaining more legitimacy in their own political systems, and receiving economic benefits, for the Chinese side it was about organizing the political space and form of the empire, with security and economic interests playing a secondary role.¹⁸

The tributary system is now, of course, part of the distant past. Today there is no “Heaven-mandated order,” no letters of submission to the authority of a capital in Beijing now ruled by the Chinese Communist Party, and no highly ritualized gift exchange ceremonies between China and Central Asian elites. However, certain patterns *can* be discerned. As in the past, aid as contemporary gift giving is an important part of creating and managing political relations, and it signals a mutual recognition of status while allowing Beijing to present its motives and actions as benevolent. Summits and international forums, not imperial and khanate court rituals, are theaters for present-day rituals, which are less rigid but still important for the parties to play their respective roles. Both gifts and ceremonies of gift giving are helping to smooth relations between foreign entities and Beijing's preferred China-centered order.

Foreign Aid as Gift Giving

The political scientist Volker Heins and his collaborators have defined gift giving as “the generous transfer of socially valued objects without any (legal or contractual) guarantee of reciprocation” and have characterized gift exchanges as expressions of social bonds rather than “deferred payback for benefits received earlier.”¹⁹ Framing foreign aid as gift giving raises two questions. Given its one-directional nature (from the donor to the receiver), is there any (synchronous or asynchronous) reciprocity expected by the two sides? What kind of social bonds and political relationships does foreign aid create and maintain, whether in Central Asia or elsewhere?

On the surface, China's extension of foreign aid is a pure gift, an act of self-described generosity that does not require anything in return; that is why it is presented as aid rather than lending or concessional finance. However, the reality is usually more complex and less altruistic. Hans Morgenthau discussed the very different case of U.S. foreign aid in terms of six categories: humanitarian foreign aid, subsistence foreign aid, military foreign aid, bribery, prestige foreign aid, and foreign aid for economic development. All of these, he argued, were tools of foreign policy. He noted that "while humanitarian is *per se* nonpolitical, it can indeed perform a political function when it operates in a political context." Morgenthau wryly observed that much of what is called foreign aid was "in the nature of bribes" from one country to another country.²⁰ But unlike the old-fashioned form of bribery (which had been relatively straightforward transactions in which both sides knew what to expect), he went on to say, now the ideology of foreign aid necessitated pretenses, confused expectations, and created grounds for mutual disappointment. Since it serves the goals of political expediency, foreign aid is, quite clearly, not a one-directional action, but transactions whereby reciprocity is expected but muddied.

Current literature on the political purposes of foreign aid does not discuss it in terms of bribes or transactions; rather it analyzes it as an instrument of power (including soft power) projection. A seminal 2019 report by AidData considers "grants, concessional loans, and non-concessional loans from government agencies, policy banks, state-owned commercial banks, [and] investment funds . . . [as well as] technical assistance and debt forgiveness" as components of financial diplomacy.²¹ Other instruments in China's toolkit involve public diplomacy like cultural and information-based exchanges and forms of elite-to-elite diplomacy. The goals are "to influence the perceptions, preferences, and actions of citizens and leaders in another country—as a means to win over foreign publics and advance its national interests." However, as the authors note, "the process of translating public diplomacy activities into measurable gains is neither straightforward nor quick for Beijing or any other power," a statement that reaffirms Morgenthau's observation.

While the outcome of the provision of aid is not certain, what it signifies is clear: the hierarchical relationship between the giver and receiver. As Tomohisa Hattori argues, focusing his analysis on what foreign aid *is*, rather than what it *does*, "the wide-ranging policy objectives attached to foreign aid are secondary to a more basic role of affirming the social relation in which they are extended."²² By offering aid, a great power like China shows generosity and benevolence to the recipients, an approach that simply adds to China's self-perception of "greatness." By receiving aid, a country in need acknowledges the social order and differences in status compared with the giver.

But China maintains that the world consists of equal sovereign states, and Chinese diplomacy and foreign policy rhetoric make much of sovereign equality. So this hierarchy needs to be cloaked as much as possible so as not to create dissonance with the (semi-mythical) principle of the equality of states in the current international system, which Beijing has trumpeted for decades in part to

equalize its own status in the international order with the richer and once more-powerful countries that designed the prevailing international system after World War II. The blunt way that Morgenthau discussed foreign aid would not be acceptable today, but the reality of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee and the Paris Club shows how the donors, not the recipients, of foreign aid actually do occupy the commanding heights of the international system. China particularly excels in this cloaking exercise, speaking of its aid in terms of co-development and South-South cooperation. And yet, similar to Western powers, China's foreign aid today can be easily characterized by inequality of power.

Foreign Aid with "Chinese Characteristics"

The Chinese government's official documents on the country's foreign aid emphasize its "Chinese characteristics."²³ China's latest 2021 white paper on the topic, called "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era," outlines the "cultural and philosophical origins" of Beijing's approach.²⁴ In its own words, it draws on "the Chinese nation's ideal of universal harmony" and "the Chinese tradition of internationalism." It refers to "the Chinese idea of repaying kindness with kindness," noting that China always remembers any support others provide and is ready to return "the favor of a drop of water in need with a spring of water indeed." It goes on to say that now that "the Chinese nation has forged ahead, moving from poverty and backwardness toward strength and prosperity," it is willing to help "other developing countries' efforts to satisfy their people's aspiration for a better life." Having a "sense of responsibility as a major country," China claims to consider it "a duty to actively engage in international development cooperation" and "a mission to contribute more to humanity."

While the value of reciprocity and self-described claims of kindness, a sense of duty, and benevolence are not unique to Chinese culture, the country's emphasis on foreign aid being embedded in a putative national character and tradition is specific. China represents a great and ancient civilization and has its own ways of doing things, including foreign policy, which the ruling Chinese Communist Party now defines as "socialist diplomacy with Chinese characteristics."²⁵ Beijing is determined to shape a distinctive narrative and practices tied to its foreign aid.

One distinctive feature of Beijing's approach is the framing of foreign aid as a form of South-South cooperation, reflecting its affinity with the Global South, and a penchant for defining the Chinese approach as "essentially different from North-South cooperation."²⁶ Equality as the basis of relationships with other countries is stressed over and over again.²⁷ As the 2021 white paper puts it, China "respects other developing countries' opinions" and "does not launch projects in conflict with its partners' development level and needs." It follows the principle that "projects should be proposed, agreed, and led by recipient countries."²⁸

However, this equality rhetoric does not square well with China's claims of being a big country obliged with duty, mission, and benevolence that it needs to exercise toward smaller states. It is not the equality of status that stands out, but rather the shared membership in the club of sovereign states and the right to noninterference in a country's internal affairs. Thus, the rhetoric of equality and carefully choreographed ceremonies of rendering respect to smaller states and their leaders are aimed at partially softening the realities of a hierarchical order, one in which China is the major power and the donor.

Avoiding OECD-led multilateral donor arrangements, Beijing prefers instead to use China-led multilateral for a with developing states for launching its aid plans. These include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for Central Asia, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, and others, as Patricia Kim has pointed out.²⁹ United Nations summits also present excellent opportunities for announcing impressive aid initiatives.³⁰ The pomp and circumstance of these gatherings of top officials provide a proper setting for the act of offering aid.

The Chinese government has also not adopted the OECD Development Assistance criteria for defining official development assistance, and its foreign aid "is broader in terms of goals and forms of development finance."³¹ From 2013 to 2018, almost half (47.3 percent) of China's self-reported foreign assistance funding was distributed as grants to support small and medium-sized social welfare projects, technical cooperation, and urgent humanitarian aid. Roughly the other half (48.5 percent) was concessional loans "to help developing countries undertake industrial and medium- and large-scale infrastructure projects." The remaining 4.2 percent was allocated as interest-free loans to finance "the construction of public facilities and other projects for improving local people's lives."³²

Not bound by the tenets of traditional donors and ridged metrics, criteria, or aid templates, Beijing feels freer to experiment with approaches that reflect its interpretations of, and adaptations to, local circumstances alongside interpersonal ties with ruling elites. In 2015, it created the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, which it tasked with exploring new approaches to foreign aid in pursuit of higher effectiveness. Thus, there has been some experimentation with the complete project form. In a number of countries, China has also initiated pilot projects with "tendering processes and [has gained] experience in organizing and implementing such projects. Under this model, China provided both funds and technical assistance to those projects, and the recipient countries were responsible for site survey, design, construction, and process management."³³

An item on the menu that makes Chinese aid stand out is the gifting of status structures to developing countries, such as houses of parliaments, other government buildings, and headquarters of international organizations. For instance, China issued a \$200 million grant and built the

headquarters for the African Union in Addis Ababa.³⁴ It also provided \$31.6 million for the new headquarters of the Economic Community of West African States in Abuja, Nigeria. Similar projects include parliament houses in seven African countries: Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Malawi, the Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe. In Central Asia, it is Tajikistan that has benefited most from this form of largesse. Thanks to Chinese aid, these developing states can showcase their seats of power, with buildings that look grand and spectacular with a modern aesthetic.

Experts also point out the prominence of training of all kinds as part of China's foreign aid. Beijing began running these programs in 1953 for trainees from a select group of friendly countries and gradually expanded their scope and scale. "By the end of 2009, China had run over 4,000 training sessions of different types for developing countries, attended by some 120,000 people, including interns, managerial and technical personnel and officials. These trainees were from over 20 fields, including economy, diplomacy, agriculture, medical and health care, and environmental protection."³⁵

The programs are aimed at knowledge sharing, but also, very importantly, at developing personal relationships (*guanxi*). Lena Benabdallah, a political scientist, has studied such network building through training and visits as components of China's military diplomacy (including security training), public diplomacy (including training for journalists), and cultural diplomacy in Africa (through Confucius Institutes, which are Chinese government-sponsored cultural and educational institutions). She underscores the importance of network building, bonding, and human feeling (*renqing*) in running these training workshops.³⁶

Benabdallah draws on anthropological studies of *guanxi* in Chinese culture, particularly the work of the cultural anthropologist Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, the author of *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: On the Art of Social Relationships in China*. In her book, Yang discusses the importance of such gifts and pageantry in the cultivation of personal relationships and the manufacturing of obligation and indebtedness.³⁷ These cultural patterns of interpersonal interactions underpin China's approach to interactions with other nations. They also indicate how local elites are able to leverage their *own* end of these social bonds to push Chinese counterparts to meet their goals and needs.

China's Foreign Aid to Central Asia

China's foreign aid has a global reach, but Beijing primarily focuses on its Asian neighbors and African countries. Between 2013 and 2018, Asia accounted for almost 37 percent of China's total aid and Africa received nearly 45 percent.³⁸ Central Asia is part of China's neighborhood periphery. Three out of five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—are among the SCO's co-founders. All five of the region's countries are enthusiastic participants in the Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI), China's flagship infrastructure promotion and construction project. Unsurprisingly, they are among the primary recipients of assistance from China.

The provision of Chinese assistance started in the early 1990s, soon after diplomatic relations were established between the People's Republic of China under the Chinese Communist Party and the newly independent Central Asian states in the wake of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. Beijing extended credit to buy goods and equipment from China, which was badly needed amid the major disruptions of supply chains during the unraveling of the Soviet economic system. The Chinese government also provided "selfless help" consisting of gifts from the Chinese people to those of the Central Asian countries.

Building good neighborly relations was of major importance for Beijing, as the Chinese government worried about the security of the western region of Xinjiang. The dissolution of the Soviet Union put an end to the long-time competition between China and Russia for Xinjiang and the hearts and minds of its predominantly Uyghur inhabitants. Threats of Soviet meddling and information campaigns aimed at the Uyghur community were no longer present, and economic interactions across a once-sensitive international border also became possible. However, the appearance of independent states of people groups sharing ethnic, linguistic, and religious affinities with the Uyghurs could, from Beijing's perspective, potentially create a new set of problems, such as providing inspiration and a support base for activists in Xinjiang.

To develop good neighborly relations and hem in Uyghur activism, therefore, China moved to resolve border questions with three of the new neighboring Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Beijing had to resolve these territorial disputes, which traced back to the border delimitation of the region by the Russian and Qing Empires in the nineteenth century and resulted in armed clashes between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in 1969.

These four parties were very successful in resolving their legacy disputes, mitigating each other's fears, and fostering improved relationships that launched the newly independent states of Central Asia onto a path of stale relations with a giant eastern neighbor. While Beijing fretted about Uyghur activism, Central Asian ruling elites were, in fact, fully on board with Beijing's struggle against, as the Chinese Communist Party puts it, "ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism," which became the core agenda of the Shanghai Five group of countries—including China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.³⁹ When the group added non-neighboring Uzbekistan in 2001, it renamed itself the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an entity that persists to this day and has grown considerably with the addition of India and Pakistan as members and an array of observers and dialogue partners. China, in its turn, was respectful and supportive of these countries' budding independence.

Early SCO meetings took on the form of ritual: a statement by any Central Asian head of state who met with a Chinese counterpart would typically refer to deep-rooted friendship, reaffirm a One China policy (often framed as accepting Beijing's so-called One China principle), and conclude with expressions of a joint commitment to fight extremism and terrorism, as well as gratitude for China's assistance.⁴⁰

In the 2000s, under the umbrella of SCO regional security cooperation, Beijing began to regularly gift aid to Central Asian security and law-enforcement bodies. Gifts included equipment, vehicles, training, hospitals, and housing for officers. This assistance created solid bilateral links between the armed forces, border guards, and police of Central Asian countries and their Chinese counterparts—the People's Liberation Army, the paramilitary People's Armed Police, and the police forces of the Chinese Ministry of Public Security.

Similar to the role played by FOCAC in Africa, the SCO became a platform for announcing big, impressive assistance packages and initiatives—gestures that, from China's perspective, seem worthy of a great power. At the 2004 SCO summit in Tashkent, then Chinese president Hu Jintao made the commitment to provide a \$900 million preferential export buyers' credit line to SCO member countries to help them with social and economic development.⁴¹ At the SCO summit in Yekaterinburg in 2009, he offered a \$10 billion credit line to help Central Asian countries counter the economic slump brought on by the global financial crisis.⁴²

The summits that rotate among the capitals of SCO member states have offered good opportunities for strengthening bilateral relations. Thus, the 2004 Tashkent summit played an important role in enhancing mutual appreciation and support between Chinese and Uzbek leaders. Hu's visit was especially appreciated given the difficulties the Uzbek government was then having with Western institutions. For example, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development had drastically decreased its assistance to Uzbekistan in the run-up to 2004, while the International Monetary Fund had been demanding that Tashkent undertake structural economic and institutional reforms that then president Islam Karimov and Uzbek ruling elites in Tashkent did not wish to make.

During Hu's 2004 visit, the Uzbek and Chinese parties signed ten documents, including an agreement on "selfless help" to the tune of a \$2.4 million assistance package and a concessional Chinese credit line of \$36.5 million for twenty years.⁴³ Hu also became the first foreign leader to address the Uzbek parliament, which was summoned to reconvene for the occasion during its break. The Chinese side also noted with pleasure that the Uzbek special forces guarding a wreath-laying ceremony in Tashkent's Square of Memory used Chinese sniper rifles, provided as part of an earlier aid package to the Uzbek police.

Beijing has continued to use ritualized elite interactions in Central Asia as occasions for announcing new gifts and initiatives. The BRI, for example, was unveiled in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping in a speech on the Silk Road Economic Belt. He did so not during an SCO summit but in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, during a September 2013 tour of Central Asia. In his speech, Xi made references to the SCO, the Russia-backed Eurasian Economic Union, and close Chinese coordination with Russia, but he made it clear that this new initiative was principally a Chinese effort through which Beijing aimed to put itself at the center of a new emerging Eurasia.⁴⁴ By using gifts, favors, and rituals over decades, Beijing had developed a solid foundation of relationships with Central Asian states and their ruling elites as well as a solid understanding of their governing agendas. As a result, the Chinese government no longer felt constrained by the need to coordinate its engagement in the region with Moscow.

In this important 2013 speech, Xi drew extensively on themes of gift giving and benevolence. “Friendship” and “common development and prosperity” were the main themes of his speech, with the words “friends,” “friendly,” and “friendship” appearing roughly twenty-five times.⁴⁵ Xi talked about the “need to pass on our friendship from generation to generation and always be good neighbors living in harmony,” “[the] need to expand regional cooperation with a more open mind and broader vision and achieve new glories together,” and the “need to increase understanding between our people.”

The speech outlined a vision but was short on details. The only, albeit impressive, concrete pledge was in the education sector. Xi announced that in the coming decade China would give 30,000 scholarships to SCO members and host 10,000 teachers and students from Confucius Institutes in China for study abroad programs.⁴⁶ He also signed multibillion-dollar agreements on the provision of investments and concessional loans in the four Central Asian capitals that he visited.

In 2020, Beijing proposed a new and more exclusive engagement platform, “China plus Central Asia.” The first meeting of the Chinese and five Central Asian foreign ministers was reportedly initiated by Beijing and focused on joint cooperation to fight the coronavirus pandemic and deal with its economic impact. The Chinese government expressed readiness to support its Central Asian partners’ efforts to increase agricultural productivity and export organic products to China.

The joint statement the foreign ministers adopted at the meeting is remarkable for the way in which the Central Asians simply accepted the use of preferred Chinese diplomatic linguistic forms and ritualized expressions. It refers to “a new type of interstate relations characterized by mutual respect, equal cooperation, and mutual benefit”—a common Chinese turn of phrase. The parties, it said, “intend to further build up cooperation within the UN and other international institutions, as well as financial structures, together to confront global and regional challenges, firmly uphold a

multilateral approach, oppose interference in the internal affairs of other countries, defend international justice, promote the world order and the system of global governance in line with fair and rational development.”⁴⁷

The latest regional assistance package Xi announced was at a virtual summit to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of bilateral ties between China and Central Asian countries in late January 2022, during which China offered additional gifts and benefits. In his remarks, titled “Joining Hands for a Shared Future,” the Chinese president pledged 50 million more doses of Chinese-produced vaccines, 1,200 government scholarships, a grant of \$500 million in support of livelihood programs, and “5,000 seminar and workshop opportunities to help Central Asian countries train professionals in health, poverty reduction for agricultural development, connectivity, information technology and other fields and strengthen the driving force for self-generated development.” He also proposed that the two sides hold a forum commemorating people-to-people friendship and increase the number of sister cities between China and the five countries to 100 pairs within the next decade.⁴⁸

A Two-Way Street

But these many Chinese gifts are not as selfless as Beijing wishes them to appear. China clearly expects an implicit, and sometimes explicit, return on its investment, not least in terms of Central Asian ruling elites’ support for China’s positions and interests. And yet Central Asian leaders are nobody’s fools. The Chinese government does not simply inject these gifts into a political and social vacuum. They are tailored to the goals and needs of local ruling elites, which also happen to differ from country to country based on political circumstances and conditions.

The best way to see this Chinese adaptiveness in action is to compare the cases of two countries that differ markedly in political complexion. The first case is Kyrgyzstan, where Beijing’s influence has steadily increased despite frequent changes of government, sometimes in revolutionary circumstances. The second is Tajikistan, which has had a stable political status quo for decades based around one man (Rahmon) and his family, associates, local regional compatriots, and extended circle of ruling elites.

The Case of Kyrgyzstan

The joint communique establishing diplomatic relations between China and Kyrgyzstan was signed in January 1992; it is a short document that clearly reflects preferred Chinese language and a Beijing-centric agenda. It stated that the two governments agreed to develop “friendship and cooperation on the basis of the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual

nonaggression, noninterference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence." These are the so-called "five principles of peaceful coexistence" at the rhetorical heart of Chinese foreign policy.⁴⁹ The Kyrgyz side recognized the Communist-led government of the People's Republic of China as the only legitimate government of China and Taiwan as an inalienable part of China—a stance consistent with Beijing's One China principle. Bishkek promised not to establish official relations with Taiwan in any form.⁵⁰

In 1996, the parties signed a joint declaration that took Kyrgyzstan's commitments to a new level. The document stated that the parties would refrain from participating in any military-political alliance or from concluding any third-party treaty or agreement aimed at the other side. Kyrgyzstan also committed reciprocally to not allow the use of its territories for carrying out any actions infringing on its partner's state sovereignty, security, and public order. It emphasized that China and Kyrgyzstan were against separatism in any form—a formulation clearly directed at Beijing's concerns about Uyghur activism—and would not allow any organizations and forces to carry out separatist activities aimed at the other side in their territories.⁵¹

In return for not officially dealing with Taiwan and not supporting Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, Kyrgyzstan received assurances of its own security and promises of cooperation in all areas: security, economics, science and technology, culture, education, healthcare, information, tourism, sports, and more. However, the aid that China offered throughout the 1990s was rather minor compared to that of other big players. Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akayev, offered an overview of relationships with major powers in his memoirs; he noted aid received from the United States, European countries, and Japan, while the section on China, albeit highly complimentary toward Beijing, did not bother to even mention assistance.⁵²

Akayev's memoirs reflected Kyrgyz respect for China and its successes and Bishkek's acknowledgment of its growing international status. Akayev described China as "a rapidly developing modern country with thousands of years of history, like a most powerful source of light beaming multi-century wisdom." He also gave an interesting account of his personal relationship with then Chinese president and Chinese Communist Party leader Jiang Zemin. Both leaders quoted Chinese poets and philosophers, danced the waltz (to show an affinity for Western social graces), and sang Russian songs (to showcase shared regional cultural connections fostered by a period of Sino-Soviet friendship).⁵³

Akayev emphasized the respect rendered to him by Chinese leaders. The frequency of his meetings with high-level Chinese counterparts was second only to those he held with Russian presidents and prime ministers. While Akayev was especially skilled at establishing and maintaining warm interpersonal relations with foreign officials, all subsequent Kyrgyz heads of state have also found ways to enjoy Beijing's favors and hold regular meetings.

With the establishment of the SCO in 2001, China started providing military and security aid to Bishkek on a regular basis. In 2002, the Chinese Ministry of Defense gave construction materials and instruments, office equipment and furniture to its Kyrgyz counterpart (worth 8 million yuan).⁵⁴ Notably, the transfer took place half a year after the bloody Aksy events, when the police used violence against peaceful protesters upset with the arrest of their fellow countryman politician Azimbek Beknazarov and the transfer of land to China as a result of the 1999 border delimitation treaty. Despite the political crises and changes of governments that followed, Chinese donations of vehicles, means of communications, and other equipment to the Kyrgyz army and police became a staple of bilateral cooperation. Over the years, Chinese agencies have also hosted trainings for thousands of Kyrgyz officers.⁵⁵

The SCO cooperation umbrella provided a convenient setting for the Kyrgyz side to seek security assistance and the Chinese side to render it. The Akayev government could procure some essentials for the military and police, and Beijing scored points as a big friendly neighbor and a fellow member-state helping Kyrgyzstan to take care of its security.

China's consistent readiness to help and emphasis on the development of interpersonal relations in various sectors can be seen as a way of mitigating significant uncertainties in Kyrgyz politics. The 2005 Tulip Revolution and ousting of Akayev could have disrupted relations the bilateral relations. China viewed "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space as "contagious and illegitimate political changes."⁵⁶ However, the Chinese government quickly adapted to the new situation and government. In fact, the new people in power were not that new. The newly minted president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, had been prime minister prior to the Aksy events. Other leaders of the Tulip Revolution used to hold top positions under Akayev and had interactions with Chinese partners.⁵⁷

In December 2006, Bakiyev participated in a ceremony acknowledging China's gift of 1,205 tractors. On behalf of the Kyrgyz people, he expressed gratitude to the Chinese people, noting that it was the biggest international aid project for Kyrgyzstan's agricultural sector.⁵⁸ Unlike Akayev who cultivated the image of being highly educated and refined, Bakiyev liked to be seen as a tough manager and practical man of action and "concrete deeds," aimed at the improvement of people's lives.⁵⁹

In 2007, Bakiyev's government requested that China help it with hosting the SCO summit in Bishkek. Beijing went ahead with allocating 35 million yuan to finance the construction and furnishing of the Congress Hall and guest houses in the Ala Archa State Residence. In an interview with a local media outlet, a Chinese embassy officer mentioned that, apart from financing, the Chinese side was putting pressure on the Chinese company to do a timely and high-quality job, allowing Bakiyev to showcase the new construction and a "modern" profile for Bishkek.⁶⁰

The top Chinese officials involved in the project pulled out all the steps to underscore that the project was a high priority and to ensure its timely completion, including frequent personal visits to the construction site by the Chinese ambassador and increases in the number of laborers and their working hours. The Chinese government also provided thirty cars and street cleaning trucks, worth a total of 24 million yuan.⁶¹

But this was no simple show of Chinese benevolence. After all, in playing to Bakiyev's needs, Beijing helped shore up his position in the wake of its erstwhile ally Akayev's fall from power. Bakiyev's rule was notable because corruption and nepotism in Kyrgyzstan reached new heights on his watch. He placed his family members in some of the most lucrative positions in the country; not surprisingly, some of these positions involved close economic and financial links to Chinese largesse, investment, and gifts. Bluntly put, Bakiyev's domestic political needs meshed well with Beijing's need to adjust to the new ruling elite that resulted from the change of power in Bishkek.

Bakiyev appointed one of his brothers as trade representative in the Kyrgyz embassy in China and put his younger and most-trusted son Maxim in charge of the Central Agency for Development, Innovation, and Investment, the agency responsible for attracting and overseeing investment and development assistance including from China. Initially, Chinese partners did not appreciate this state of affairs, but they soon adapted, showing how Kyrgyz political elites could compel Chinese gift givers to adjust to local realities. For instance, when Maxim Bakiyev led a Kyrgyz delegation to Beijing for negotiations, the Chinese side reportedly felt offended by "the nepotism of sending a dictator's son to negotiate state-to-state agreements."⁶² This discontent was reflected in the lower rank of the Chinese counterparts involved in the talks (deputy ministers instead of ministers). Yet China dealt with Maxim nonetheless. Its ostensible objections to nepotism and corruption were outweighed by its need to adapt to the changed local political realities.

But while Chinese officials adapted to Bakiyev's style, the people of Kyrgyzstan ultimately did not. Angered by the corruption and nepotism of Bakiyev's rule, they ousted him from power and then from the country in 2010, much as they had ousted Akayev five years earlier.

The new Kyrgyz president, Almazbek Atambayev, was an erstwhile oppositionist, and he, too, proved to be successful in cultivating good ties with China during his term (2011–2017). In a 2021 article (written after he was overthrown and then locked in prison), Atambayev reminisced about how China helped Kyrgyzstan—and by extension, Atambayev himself—during difficult times. Between 2013 and 2017, Beijing provided almost \$400 million of "selfless help." He mentioned reaching a preliminary agreement with Xi on the creation of a development fund similar to the Russian-Kyrgyz Development Fund, and he added that, in light of China's economic might, the Kyrgyz government asked it to allocate not less than \$500 million to this fund.⁶³

Atambayev faced a problem, partly inherited from his profligate predecessors, of a growing debt load, so he turned his attention as president to addressing this problem in his relations with Beijing. In his prison memoir, he also made the telling remark that China “simply wrote off multimillion dollar debts of Mozambique, Yemen, Zimbabwe, and some other countries” and claimed that Beijing wrote off the Kyrgyz debt for the loan issued for the construction of a paper factory in Tokmok, saying that this favor “was just a beginning.”⁶⁴ In fact, in 2015 the Chinese government agreed to write off most of the accrued interest (10.1 million yuan), while the debt (60.2 million) and the remaining interest (4.1 million yuan) were restructured.⁶⁵ Reportedly, the Kyrgyz government had been asking the Chinese partners to turn the loan into a grant, but the Chinese side found this request unacceptable.⁶⁶ Irrespective of accuracy, Atambayev’s remarks reflect the mutual learning process Central Asian elites and Chinese gift givers undergo in their relations: like his predecessors, he learned not just to *expect* but to *direct* China’s largesse. Beijing, for its part, decided to restructure and partially forgive the debt to help a *new* Kyrgyz ally.

Atambayev’s term was also marked by security developments that had a serious impact on China-Kyrgyzstan relations. The United States and other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization were preparing for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, then scheduled for 2014. As a result, China’s security aid to Kyrgyzstan increased. Thus, in 2013, the Chinese Ministry of Defense provided Kyrgyzstan with military vehicles and communications equipment worth \$17.5 million, and the next year China gave another \$6.5 million in military aid, including funds for building houses for Kyrgyz military officers.⁶⁷

In contrast to Atambayev, his successor Sooronbay Jeenbekov (in office from 2017 to 2020) got off to a very bad start with China. In January 2017, an accident took place at the Bishkek power plant, leaving residents of the capital city without heat during the coldest days of the year. The plant had been recently renovated by the Chinese company TBEA (formerly known as Tebian Electric Apparatus) with financing from a \$386 million loan provided by Export-Import Bank of China in 2013 during Atambayev’s tenure. In response to the public outcry, the Kyrgyz authorities launched a high-profile investigation and accused former prime minister Sapar Isakov of corruption. TBEA managers were also detained, but later released. And there were demands to conduct reviews of other Chinese companies working in the country.⁶⁸

The scandal left a bitter aftertaste on both the Chinese and the Kyrgyz sides. In the words of Atambayev, whose motives in saying so were partly cynical, “the government of Kyrgyzstan managed to catastrophically spoil the relationship with its great neighbor. In order to discredit and imprison Sapar Isakov, they fabricated a case on [the] new power plant in Bishkek.” Atambayev recalled how in April 2018, at a meeting with Xi on the island of Hainan, the Chinese leader asked him, “What started the anti-Chinese hysteria under your successor? After all, we help you selflessly. We want your country to develop and prosper.”⁶⁹

But because China had learned to be adaptive rather than rigid and since the Atambayev-to-Jeenbekov transition was not the first that Beijing had dealt with in Bishkek, the Chinese government persisted despite the scandal. For one thing, China continued to provide aid to Kyrgyzstan. In June 2018, it gave a grant of \$70 million, \$55 million of which was allocated for the reconstruction of roads in Bishkek, while the rest (\$15 million) was slated to support the archeological restoration and conservation of the ruins of Balasagun, Kum-Dobo and Mynakeldi.⁷⁰

Jeenbekov, much like his predecessors, sought to leverage this ongoing Chinese support for his own political ends. He tried hard to mitigate the damage and missed no opportunity to endorse cooperation with China. In the aftermath of widespread anti-Chinese rallies in the center of Bishkek in January 2019, he said that those who want to spoil relations and undermine stability will be punished in line with legislation and that Kyrgyzstanis “should be grateful to the Chinese side for cooperation and assistance.”⁷¹

In June 2019 during Xi’s state visit to the country, Jeenbekov thanked China for its support for a water purification project, a quality-of-life project that he could leverage to boost his own political standing. He even quoted “an old saying in China” that “while drinking water one should think where it comes from,” promising that Kyrgyzstan would never forget this valuable assistance. He stated Kyrgyz support for Beijing’s policy toward national minorities—a coded phrase for accepting China’s demand for support on Xinjiang—and awarded Xi with the Manas Order of the First Degree “for a huge contribution to strengthening cooperation and great support for Kyrgyzstan.”⁷²

On the eve of the summit, a significant China-Kyrgyz cultural event took place. The Chinese National Opera House presented its original opera production of *Manas* at a theater in Bishkek, using the Kyrgyz national epic as a basis for restoring and building relations with Jeenbekov’s beleaguered regime. The epic *Manas*, an oral narration about the warrior who unified forty Kyrgyz tribes and his descendants who battled for the independence of Kyrgyz lands, lies at the core of the country’s national identity. Kyrgyzstan’s flag features forty rays symbolizing these forty tribes.⁷³ The country boasts statues depicting Manas and avenues named after him. Its main airport in Bishkek also carries the name of Manas, and there is a Manas University in the capital too. To stress ritual fealty to the idea of good neighborliness, Chinese officials emphasized that the epic is part of a “shared” cultural heritage. According to the Xinhua News Agency, “it has been sung for centuries in Kyrgyzstan, [among ethnic Kyrgyz in] China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and [along] parts of the ancient Silk Road.”^{74,75}

In October 2020, Jeenbekov, like Bakiyev and Atayev before him, was ousted from power by a wave of post-election protests. The new head of state, Sadyr Japarov, moved to the top straight from prison, where he had been serving a term on kidnapping charges. Amid the chaos, Chinese businesses were

targeted for ransom nationwide. Chinese officials abstained from comments except for expressing concern about the safety of Chinese citizens. As a sign of his displeasure, Xi did not send a telegram to congratulate Japarov on winning the elections.⁷⁶

The new president should never have been Beijing's cup of tea. For decades, Japarov had operated in Kyrgyz politics on a populist nationalist agenda. After coming to power, he targeted foreign companies, though he notably abstained from targeting the Chinese firms in the country. His relatives and associates are reported to have close ties with Chinese businesspeople, providing yet another example of how successive waves of Kyrgyz political elites have leveraged connections to a willing China as a source of domestic power, profit, and patronage. The new president's brother, Sabyr Japarov, sold his shares in a coal mine to Chinese investors in 2007. His long-time friend and ally Adyl Junus, a native of Xinjiang, prior to joining politics and becoming a Kyrgyz parliamentarian, had four mining enterprises with Chinese partners.⁷⁷ Eventually—and in a continuation of the prior pattern—China-Kyrgyzstan relations normalized, despite yet another chaotic regime change.

Japarov's term has coincided with the coronavirus pandemic, during which Kyrgyzstan has become one of the main recipients of China's humanitarian aid in the region, a step that has helped Japarov build an image as a champion of public welfare and health. The Chinese government sent single-use masks, respirator masks, and personal protective equipment for medical workers. It also provided Sinopharm vaccine doses. One such vaccine transfer took place in March 2021 at Manas Airport. The ceremony was a high-profile occasion, attended by Kyrgyzstan's prime minister, first deputy minister of foreign affairs, and first deputy minister of healthcare and social development. Chinese Ambassador Du Dewen said, "in the context of a huge domestic demand for a new vaccine," China's aid to Kyrgyzstan demonstrated "the deep friendship of the Chinese government and people towards the government and people of Kyrgyzstan." In return, Japarov's then prime minister, Ulukbek Maripov, underscored that China, "having overcome its own difficulties, became one of the first countries to provide vaccines Kyrgyzstan with a vaccine" and further noted that "the Chinese vaccine has received wide recognition in the international community."⁷⁸

In addition to government-to-government donations, various Chinese governmental and nongovernmental actors provided humanitarian aid to Kyrgyz partners. For example, the city of Bishkek received medical supplies from the Association of Construction and Finishing Materials of Guangdong Province.⁷⁹ Similarly, the Chinese Ministry of Defense sent KN95 masks to counterparts in the Armed Forces of Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁰

On these occasions, China's foreign aid was, yet again, framed as a gift from the people of China to the people of Kyrgyzstan; however, this assistance has favored particular locales and constituencies—

namely, those close to the local ruling circle. In Kyrgyzstan, that has meant the capital city of Bishkek and the “southern capital” city of Osh. The “north-south” cleavage has always been strong in the Kyrgyz politics, with the top political elites maintaining and using their regional networks to stay in power.⁸¹

Bishkek, for instance, has benefited from Chinese grants for the development of its road system. The first phase completed in 2022 included the reconstruction of forty-nine roads, six bridges, and one overpass.⁸² The choice of Osh also has an economic rationale that can benefit any Kyrgyz regime in power, since it is the main entry point into Kyrgyzstan along the corridor between Kashgar in Xinjiang and Central Asia’s Ferghana valley. Two major Chinese BRI projects in Central Asia—the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan International Highway and the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway—pass through Osh. Not surprisingly, the only Chinese consulate in Kyrgyzstan located outside the capital is in this southern city (however, its work has been temporarily suspended since August 2019).⁸³

China’s gifts to local people included one of the biggest hospitals in Central Asia. Beijing extended an offer to build a hospital in the aftermath of the tragic 2010 interethnic tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbek residents in southern Kyrgyzstan. It allocated nearly \$26 million for the construction project and also provided equipment and training for Kyrgyz medical workers and technicians. Roughly a year and a half before he would lose his post, Jeenbekov attended the opening of the hospital in April 2019 in his capacity as president.⁸⁴

In May 2018, the Chinese government gave a grant of \$390,000 for the reconstruction of the central square of Osh.⁸⁵ In November 2016, the mayor’s office in Osh received a new Toyota Land Cruiser 200 and an ambulance from Chinese diplomats. The SUV gift raised some eyebrows in the city. The press reported that the previous year, the mayor had wanted the office to buy a new car, claiming that its service life had expired, but he had had to renounce its purchase due to public criticism pointing out that the car had been bought only two years earlier.⁸⁶

Overall, the Kyrgyz media’s coverage of Chinese gifts features both the official narrative of gratitude and informal popular sentiments of skepticism and suspicion. Common narratives question the motivations behind these acts of giving and remind fellow Kyrgyz citizens that there is “free cheese only in a mousetrap.” The media warns Kyrgyz people to “beware those bearing gifts,”⁸⁷ but Kyrgyz politicians persist in seeking and receiving gifts from China because these gifts serve so many domestic and parochial purposes—feathering their nests, rewarding their families and associates, building their political bases, and portraying them to the public as champions of progress who can “deliver the goods.”

The Case of Tajikistan

Tajikistan presents an entirely different story. Whereas China has adapted again and again in Kyrgyzstan, leveraging its gift giving to build relationships with and satisfy the needs of successive waves of ruling elites, there has been just one ruling clique in Dushanbe for a generation.

China's relations with Tajikistan got off to a slow start compared with Beijing's ties with other Central Asian states because a civil war broke out in the new country in 1992. By March 1993, however, Rahmon, who was then the freshly elected chair of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan, visited Beijing and signed a joint declaration on the main principles of the relationship. In this document, the government of the People's Republic of China supported the Tajik government's efforts to establish peace and stability, and Tajikistan recognized Taiwan as an inseparable part of China and promised not to establish official contacts with it, mirroring and adopting Beijing's One China principle.⁸⁸

The focus of the bilateral relationship in the first half of the 1990s was on China and Tajikistan's territorial dispute and the delimitation of the border. Tajik leaders participated in these negotiations and signed the Shanghai Five declaration in 1996. Once an agreement was reached and the political situation in Tajikistan stabilized, the development of bilateral cooperation proceeded much more quickly from this slow start.

In October 1997, the first fifteen Chinese passenger buses and specialists to help use them arrived in Dushanbe, followed the next year by a grant of 54 million yuan to acquire more buses. These vehicles carried a sign that said, "buses of friendship between Tajikistan and China" in the Chinese and Tajik languages and became a recognizable feature of the city. In November, the governments signed the first state credit agreement for the reconstruction of a tobacco factory in Dushanbe.⁸⁹

In July 2000, China's then leader (Jiang) made the first official Chinese state visit to the country. Tellingly, since 1993, he had held twelve personal meetings with Rahmon. Jiang stated that the Chinese government would provide 20 million yuan in aid to help with the country's post-conflict economic recovery.⁹⁰ At the same time, a Chinese military delegation headed by the commander of the Lanzhou Military Region in northwestern China visited Tajikistan, offering a "gift" of 5 million yuan. By 2004, the total sum of Chinese grants approached \$20 million.⁹¹

As in the case of Kyrgyzstan, much of this Chinese foreign aid was rendered under the umbrella of multilateral SCO cooperation. Tajik military officers and border guards went to China for training. Tajikistan received hundreds of millions of dollars in concessional loans and grants to build transport and energy infrastructure. Beijing also contributed 105 vehicles, including eighty buses, five garbage trucks, and twenty executive cars for the 2008 SCO summit in Dushanbe.⁹²

However, the SCO framework was not able to accommodate the growing bilateral security cooperation between these two regimes. Both governments worried that Islamic militants would threaten them from Afghanistan. In 2016, China, together with Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, set up the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism to handle these shared concerns. Thus, in addition to the SCO, there emerged another platform for Chinese assistance to Tajikistan's efforts at building antiterrorism capabilities, including through joint antiterrorism training and personnel training.

The same year, the Tajik public learned from the media that Chinese paramilitary troops affiliated with the People's Armed Police were helping to guard the Tajik-Afghan border in the Wakhan Corridor, and apparently the governments had been able to keep it secret for some time until Western press reports broke the news. It was also reported that China was to build ten new border posts in Tajikistan (the news was later removed from the website of the local Asia Plus news agency).⁹³ In October 2021, Tajik officials announced that China would finance the construction of an outpost for a special forces unit of Tajikistan's police, the so-called OMON (Special Purpose Mobile Unit) forces. The Chinese Ministry of Public Security was to spend \$9.4 million on the facility before turning it over to Tajik control.⁹⁴

China's deep involvement in Tajikistan's border security, and particularly the presence of a Chinese outpost on its territory, marked a geopolitical shift in the region, since Beijing, despite speculation about, for example, plans to set up such a facility in Kyrgyzstan, had never done so in the region before.⁹⁵ Maintaining secrecy around this arrangement for so long would not have been possible in Kyrgyzstan with its vibrant media and vocal society.

But the principal feature that makes Tajikistan different from neighboring Kyrgyzstan is its extremely stable political regime under Rahmon, who has been firmly at the helm for almost three decades. Whereas the Chinese government has had to build relations with a changing cast of Kyrgyz presidents, the opposite has happened in Tajikistan, with Rahmon instead working to maintain consistently good relations with a changing cast of *Chinese* leaders—Jiang, Hu, and now Xi. The latter was awarded the Order of the Crown, Tajikistan's highest decoration, in 2019.⁹⁶

Prior to the war, Emomali Rahmon had been a collective farm chairman in Kulyab (now Kulob) region, one of the poorest rural areas in southern Tajikistan. He was elevated to power by the "Kulyabi faction," drawing on its networks in law-enforcement bodies interconnected with criminal groups, that was able to outplay other regional factions.⁹⁷ Once the war was over, he could leverage foreign aid pouring into the country to enrich himself, reward loyal associates, prop legitimacy as a national leader and bestow goods on the Kulob region, in particular his native Dangara village.

China's economic and security assistance that helped Rahmon to keep the country afloat is discussed above. In addition, has gifted a number of status-raising buildings to adorn Rahmon's "seat of power", the capital city of Dushanbe. The first such building was the House of Officers (Dom Ofitserov) of Tajikistan's Ministry of Defense.⁹⁸ Beijing offered roughly \$14 million to construct a six-story building (in place of the demolished House of Officers built by Soviet architects in the 1930s). In June 2012, Tajikistan's then minister of defense, Sherali Khairulloev, and the chief of the general staff of the People's Liberation Army, General Chen Binde, placed the first stone in its foundation. Before the ceremony, they discussed further cooperation, including training of personnel for the Tajik army in China.⁹⁹ The House of Officers, unveiled a few years later, was imposing in size, even when compared with the nearby Ministry of Defense building.

The Chinese government also offered its Tajik ruling elite partners a grant of \$215 million to build new structures for the parliament and other government entities. An agreement was reached in September 2017 during Rahmon's state visit to China, and in October 2018 Rahmon and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang initiated the construction of the seventy-meter-tall parliament building and a fifteen-story government complex.¹⁰⁰

These new outsized Chinese buildings replace cozier, if older, Soviet ones. The Tajik ruling elite is clearly proud of the change it has been able to showcase by leveraging Chinese support, offering these structures up to the Tajik public as examples of how the country, under their leadership, is keeping pace with trends and forces of modernization. These are new symbols of Tajik sovereignty—meeting a major Tajik symbolic political goal but one that could only be achieved by harnessing Chinese financial support. The irony of having one's national government buildings financed and built by a foreign power is not really lost on the Tajik public, however. On Tajik social media, ordinary citizens often express both their dismay, calling the grants "handouts," and worry by fretting about the national security implications of such deals including suspicions that these "Chinese" walls will have listening bugs installed in them.¹⁰¹

By contrast, Atambayev of Kyrgyzstan also received an offer from the Chinese government to build government buildings for his country. However, he refused the offer and asked his Chinese partners to give a grant for the reconstruction of roads in Bishkek instead, meeting a rather different locally defined goal of political success.¹⁰² If he had accepted, the public in Kyrgyzstan's very different political context (with its multiple regime changes), might have revolted yet again. At a minimum, public outcry would have been guaranteed. In these two cases, China's different so-called gifts and favors have reflected the varying political requests and constraints on local leaders, ruling elites, and partners.

As in Kyrgyzstan, apart from the capital city of Dushanbe, the locality that received special attention and care from China was Dangara, the president's home district. Compared to Kyrgyzstan's Osh region, it is of less apparent strategic value, with its importance determined solely by its status as the birthplace of Rahmon. The Chinese government provided grants and concessional loans to construct roads, schools, and a reservoir in that region, no doubt pleasing the president himself.¹⁰³ Chinese companies TBEA and Power China also constructed schools in Dangara as part of a program for corporate social responsibility.¹⁰⁴

In another similarity, Tajikistan (like Kyrgyzstan) became a major recipient of Chinese masks, personal protective equipment, and vaccines during the coronavirus pandemic. Incidentally, this provision of humanitarian assistance was accompanied by a scandal. In May 2020, city officials in Dushanbe mistakenly posted a photo that inadvertently appeared to show that aid packages credited to a company with ties to the president's family was in fact donated by China before it was mysteriously spirited away after a headline-grabbing photo shoot.¹⁰⁵

Despite a clear imbalance of power and wealth between China and Tajikistan, the Chinese ruling elites made sure to show respect to their Tajik counterparts. Top level meetings are regular, and they are accompanied by much pomp and circumstance. An account from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs of a September 2014 state visit between Xi and Rahmon uses evocative, even melodramatic language to convey the pageantry of such events.¹⁰⁶ The rolled-out silk carpet, the tea reception in the courtyard, and a specially arranged replica of the Grand Bazaar with Tajik specialties showed local ways of statecraft and a mastery of ceremony. The stylistically attuned account is one indication of how compatible, if not shared, the Chinese and Central Asian approaches to such traditional diplomatic displays are. The described scene is also reminiscent of historical encounters between lords in the traditional tributary system

Rahmon's groomed successor, his eldest son Rustem Emomali, who is the chair of the upper house of the parliament (the Majlisi Milli) and the mayor of Dushanbe, is likely to follow the path and style set by his father. As in the case of Kyrgyzstan, the Chinese partners are likely to accommodate him with a successive wave of tailored gifts. In January 2022, in an interview with a Chinese media outlet marking the thirtieth anniversary of Tajikistan-China diplomatic relations, the younger Rahmon expressed gratitude to China for extending "a hand of friendly cooperation" and said the people of Tajikistan agree with the truth of the Chinese saying, "fish live by water and grass, and their hearts choose kindness and friendship."¹⁰⁷

Implications and Lessons

Analyzing China's foreign aid to Central Asia through the prism of mutually supportive Chinese gift giving gives rise to several conclusions. Clearly, Chinese foreign aid has a relational aspect, as it aims at adaptively building ties to ruling elites. This is true both in the case of Kyrgyzstan, which has survived multiple successive regime changes, and Tajikistan, which has had a more stable, enduring regime. Chinese aid creates political, social, and cultural bonds at multiple levels (government-to-government, leader-to-leader, and people-to-people) but especially to local elites, who can then leverage Chinese gifts for their own domestic political goals to help shore up the support of their citizens.

Chinese officials have used gifts to signal sentiments of sympathy, support, and solidarity, while local elite recipients have responded to Beijing with requisite expressions of gratitude and appreciation, even as they use such largesse toward their own ends. Ceremonies of aid transfer have become displays of political theater that are useful to both sides for expressing these feelings, as Chinese officials and their Central Asian counterparts strive to complement one another's goals.

Yet behind the proper appearances and rhetoric, the perceptions and feelings held by both sides are more complicated. Central Asian recipients of Chinese aid are suspicious about the real motives behind this assistance. The ruling elites who solicit and receive these gifts must work extra hard to filter them through local political contexts and conditions because ordinary Kyrgyz and Tajik citizens often express doubts on social media about the intent and goals behind such interactions. These suspicions can and have introduced friction into China's bilateral relationships with Central Asian countries, especially when they result in public scandals as happened in the case of the power plant renovation in Bishkek.

Still, the impact of China's massive investments in fueling closer interpersonal relationships between elite networks should not be underestimated. In some sense, at least, that is the very purpose of Chinese aid. The participation of Central Asian officials, military personnel, engineers, and others—many of whom have close ties to these countries' ruling circles—in projects and trainings organized by the Chinese government creates opportunities for social bonding and broader Chinese inroads into local politics.

At the national leader-to-leader level in particular, top Chinese officials put considerable effort into cultivating interpersonal ties with Central Asian counterparts. No matter who sits in Zhongnanhai or the presidential palaces of the region, Chinese officials' high-level meetings with Central Asian counterparts occur regularly and frequently. This bonding is enhanced by shared efforts to leverage Chinese gift giving for mutual benefit.

Fostering and maintaining these relationships has involved a learning process for China and the variety of leaders that have led Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over the years. The two sides have continually familiarized themselves with each other's ways and have adapted accordingly. China has adopted an approach focused on the ruling elites of recipient countries. Central Asian governments, for their part, are watching China's rise and Chinese engagement and aid elsewhere in the world and modifying their requests accordingly. Public attitudes in Central Asia, as in other parts of the world, shape these efforts by local elites to adapt their asks of China to meet local conditions and political realities.

But Chinese foreign aid has an additional benefit for Beijing: it helps to foster a new, China-centric sense of order. China, by providing such assistance, and Central Asian states, by receiving it, assume positions and roles in a de facto hierarchical international order that reflects some of Beijing's predilections. While China frames its aid as being "selfless," its gifts carry overtones of political expediency and imply a certain reciprocity by the recipients to accommodate China's wants and needs. Affirming or at least acquiescing to Beijing's One China principle and a commitment not to support what the Chinese government characterizes as "separatist, extremist and terrorist" forces in Xinjiang are required, readily provided tokens of gratitude and loyalty on the part of China's Central Asian partners.

This state of affairs has some echoes, however loose, of the traditional tributary system, which was far more interactive than some modern-day caricatures of it tend to portray; these historical arrangements nonetheless solidified a China-centric order. China's self-described pursuit of harmony in the contemporary international system today resonates with the idealized harmony of the tributary system, which incorporated diverse polities into the Chinese world order. The benevolence of the emperor toward smaller lords and peoples rhymes with the ostensible benevolence of contemporary Chinese leaders toward Central Asian counterparts and the corresponding generosity of Chinese aid.

China-led multilateral regional fora, such as the SCO, can almost be viewed as contemporary versions of these historical court receptions. The formal equality of member-states necessitates the rotation of the hosting venue. However, it is China that helps to underwrite the requisite expenses. Central Asians, in turn, adapt to a preferred Chinese form and adopt the Chinese-proposed agenda and many aspects of Beijing's preferred rhetoric. Both Chinese and Central Asian policymakers are highly appreciative of the pomp and circumstance of the SCO and other summitry, which is seen to add to the international image and domestic legitimacy of all.

How adaptive is China? Kyrgyzstan showcases just how much learning has taken place: the Central Asian country has a vocal society, and criticism of government officials and their decisions are a regular feature of public life. Governments are frequently replaced, and ruling elites change.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government and its activities attract particular public scrutiny, and China-related issues can cause a lot of agitation and even mobilize protests. And yet, China has found ways to work with every Kyrgyz leader, tailoring and adapting its gifts to emphasize each one's public priorities, rewarding the regions from which these leaders hail, and building a mutually supportive, materially based relationship.

Ultimately, the resulting relationships are more complex, more friction-laden, and not nearly as harmonious as Beijing likes to portray them. Despite the rhetoric of South-South cooperation, the people of Central Asia sense a new hierarchy emerging and nurture publicly expressed fears that their countries will be overwhelmed by China. Local elites have learned to benefit from Chinese engagement and express gratitude, but their loyalty is fluid and determined by local power configurations. China will need to continue to adapt, since political change is likely to persist in Kyrgyzstan and eventually to come to Tajikistan as well.

The marriage of material gifts to interpersonal elite social bonds is a distinctive feature of China's approach to Central Asia. This characteristic contrasts starkly with the approach preferred by the transatlantic West, which has tended to anchor its engagement with Central Asia in political norms and principles. The Chinese order is more elastic in accommodating different types of polities, but it clearly and unambiguously serves China's interests. Nonetheless, Beijing's approach also entails riding waves of local resentment that only the region's elites know how to properly manage and navigate.

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