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## **The Belt and Road Initiative and Kazakhstan: A Success Story?**

Carolijn van Noort<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

In 2013, China launched the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) resulting in infrastructural projects that have highlighted new political and economic opportunities along the New Silk Road. Despite its positive outlook, this initiative has also raised concerns about environmental and social challenges in Kazakhstan, one of the countries in this region. To ameliorate this type of concerns, China communicates strategic narratives to elicit positive perception of its vision and action plans. ‘Stickiness’ of this strategic communication evaluates how audiences perceive China’s plans. Endorsements and contestations can be observed by analyzing Kazakh’s news media covering the BRI, particularly through their dissemination of images. Set around literature about global visual politics, this study identifies how the Kazakh newspaper *the Astana Times* project images about the BRI. Moreover, it aims to generate understanding about what aspects of China’s strategic communication ‘stick’ and why. A content analysis of images covering the BRI in *the Astana Times* suggested the overarching theme: The New Silk Road through Kazakh’s eyes: taking ownership of China’s reimagined regional order. This overarching theme is supported by three themes: Kazakhstan as bridge-builder, authority and narrative agency, and the endorsement of the New Silk Road. The results from the media coverage suggest that Kazakhstan is balancing opportunities and fears in its relationship with China, and that it appropriates the soft power of infrastructure to buttress its self-concept as bridge-builder in Eurasia. This study provides novel insights in exploring strategic narrative success and failure by drawing attention to how visual communications produce meaning about identity, state, foreign policy and infrastructure.

**Key words:** *Belt and Road Initiative, China, Kazakhstan, Strategic Narratives, Visuality*

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## The Belt and Road Initiative and Kazakhstan: A Success Story?

### Introduction

In 2013, China launched the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI). As described by China’s official communications, the BRI is a “systematic project” that builds upon “consultation to meet the interests of all”, and moreover, it seeks to “integrate the development strategies of the countries along the Belt and Road.”<sup>2</sup> Kazakhstan plays a special role in the foreign communication of China’s initiative, because on September 7 2013, China’s President Xi Jinping introduced the initiative by delivering a speech at Kazakhstan’s Nazarbayev University titled “Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future”.<sup>3</sup> Building on the history of the Silk Road, President Xi Jinping articulated a vision for “Central Asian countries to unceasingly enhance mutual trust, to consolidate friendship, to strengthen cooperation, so as to push forward the common development and prosperity, and work for the happiness and well-being of the people in the regional countries.”<sup>4</sup> In this proposal, China seeks to improve a combination of interrelated objectives: policy communication, road connectivity, trade facilitation, monetary circulation, and people-to-people exchanges.<sup>5</sup> China’s BRI is comprised of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI). This paper focuses on the SREB, which comprises the land-based Silk Road corridors. In China’s vision of friendly neighbors and partners of good economic standing, it seeks to collaborate on the eradication of “terrorism, extremism and separatism, as well as drug trafficking, transnational organized crime.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, China’s vision of physical and metaphorical connectivity is based upon a sustainable ecological environment. Additionally, China seeks support for the BRI through multilateral institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Community. In short, China’s strategic communication

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<sup>2</sup> Belt and Road Portal. 2015. “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Silk Road.” March 30. Accessed on May 16, 2018. Available at: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/qwfb/1084.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China. 2013. “President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries.” September 7, *FMPRC*. Accessed on January 15, 2019. Available at: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh\\_665686/t1076334.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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of the BRI reimagines the regional order in economic, political, security and cultural terms. This reimagination of a New Silk Road is evaluated in this paper.

Effectively communicating a strategic vision that deals with multiple national identities and interests is a major state challenge. The foreign policy communication of infrastructure investments and projects is used to forge bilateral relations. This then produces subjectivities embedded in narratives about space and time, which are subject to endorsements and contestations.<sup>7</sup> Failure, or partial failure in achieving positive perceptions of foreign policies can be explained through the ‘stickiness’ of strategic narratives. The term ‘strategic narratives’ refers to the “means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.”<sup>8</sup> ‘Stickiness’ of these carefully communicated ‘strategic narratives’ considers the outcome of strategic communication. Stickiness or silence – its alternative – explores public perception by addressing how publics narrate events. One of the ways to measure stickiness is by examining whether and how target audiences co-opt foreign strategic messages in their own communication practices. This draws attention to the perception of strategic narratives which can be explored by addressing the target audiences’ projection practices.<sup>9</sup> The conceptualization of success and failure on a spectrum allows for nuanced understanding of what aspects of the narration ‘sticks’, why this occurs, and specifically why it occurs now. Moreover, ‘stickiness’ or silence of strategic narratives in third-party countries does not necessarily reflect the value of the communication practice. Indeed, the specific media environment in third-party countries shape the dissemination of strategic messages and consequently the ‘stickiness’ of foreign policy communication. Interestingly, ‘sticky’ strategic narratives might reflect elitist consensus as a result of concentrated media ownership, while ‘silencing’ the voices of the people.

Set around literature about global visual politics, this study identifies how a prominent Kazakh newspaper projects images about the BRI.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it aims to generate understanding

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<sup>7</sup> Nye, Joseph S. 1990. “Soft Power.” *Foreign Policy* 80: 153–171.

<sup>8</sup> Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. 2013. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. New York: Routledge. P. 2. See also: Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, ed. 2017. *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

<sup>9</sup> Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. 2013. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> See chapters on Digital Media, Foreign Policy, Identity, Memory and State in: Bleiker, Roland. (eds). 2018. *Visual Global Politics*. London: Routledge. Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. 2013. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. New York: Routledge.

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about what aspects of China’s strategic communication ‘stick’ and why. Communication comprises both verbal and visual elements, and it is the latter that this study particularly draws attention to because “[w]e live in a visual age now. Images surround everything we do.”<sup>11</sup> The visual communication about China’s BRI in the Kazakh newspaper *the Astana Times* is considered as a visual struggle between the meaning of the New Silk Road in Kazakhstan and what this means for China-Kazakh relations. To make sense of these meanings, we must first determine how coherent the concept of the New Silk Road is within Kazakh’s understanding of the ‘Self’,<sup>12</sup> performed by narratives about the past, present and the future. Iver B. Neumann emphasized that “[i]dentity is a key precondition to foreign policy. Maintaining boundaries (territorial as well as social) is a question of identity maintenance, as well as a question of security.”<sup>13</sup> Whether China’s communication of the BRI is ‘sticky’ can be uncovered by examining visual communication in countries along the New Silk Road. This research addresses how elites communicate images about the BRI in Kazakh’s online news media. Their communication practices seek to engage with “the broader international society.”<sup>14</sup> This research explores how the images in *the Astana Times* constitute narratives about Kazakhstan and Kazakh-China relations. It does not investigate how local and or international publics perceive Kazakh’s communication, or how there is a causal mechanism between the images and Kazakh’s foreign policy towards China.

The stickiness of strategic narratives is analyzed by associating visual communication in Kazakhstan with China’s communication endeavors. The edited volume *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*<sup>15</sup> describes in detail what the strategic narratives of the BRI are and how they forge European Union-China relations. In this volume, Van Noort explores China’s strategic communication of the BRI by assessing how images published in the *China Daily* give meaning to the four main aims stipulated in China’s “Vision and Actions Plan”.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bleiker, Roland. (eds). 2018. *Visual Global Politics*. London: Routledge. P. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Steele, Brent. 2008. *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*. Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>13</sup> Neumann, Iver B. 2018. “Identity.” In *Visual Global Politics* edited by Roland Bleiker, chapter 26. London: Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> Steele, Brent. 2018. “State.” In *Visual Global Politics* edited by Roland Bleiker, chapter 43. London: Routledge.

<sup>15</sup> Miskimmon, Alistair, Ben O’Loughlin and Jinghan Zeng. 2019. *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*. Forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China. 2015. “Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road.” *Belt and Road Portal*, March 30. Accessed May 16, 2018. Available at: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/qwfb/1084.htm>.

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<sup>17</sup> In terms of the promotion of connectivity (“Vision and Actions Plan”, aim 1), this was communicated through a combination of mission narratives, legitimacy narratives and counternarratives. The establishing and strengthening of partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road (aim 2) is problematic due to the ambiguity of historical interpretations underpinning this imagined partnership. The setup of all-dimensional, multitiered and composite connectivity networks (aim 3) seeks to align technologically advanced industries, invigorated logistical corridors and the prosperity of economic hubs. And the realization of diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries (aim 4) assumes that China is both benevolent and a facilitator of prosperity. This is further embodied and performed in the presidency of Xi Jinping.<sup>18</sup> These results are used as a visual narrative benchmark for the analysis of Kazakh’s visual communication.

The rest of this paper has been divided into four parts. The first part gives an overview of the case study. The second part sets out the methodology used to ascertain Kazakh’s media projections of the BRI. The third part presents the findings of the research, describing one overarching theme and three supporting themes. The fourth part discusses the findings through the lens of ‘sticky’ strategic narratives. Using this empirical case study, it seeks to understand how strategic narrative success and failure can be uncovered through visual politics. Let us now consider the case study in more detail.

### **Background Case Study**

China’s BRI is actively debated in the scholarship due to its reach and significant political and economic capital.<sup>19</sup> China’s aspirations for friendly, cooperative and peaceful relations with countries along the New Silk Road are frequently contrasted with geopolitical theories highlighting brewing conflict, competition and dominance. For instance, Chen and Fazilov draw attention to Mackinder’s Heartland theory, Spykman’s Rimland theory and the Great Game, to highlight how

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<sup>17</sup> Van Noort, Carolijn. 2019. “Visual Analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative: Securing Narratives of Regional Geopolitical Order, China’s Identity and Infrastructure Development.” In *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, edited by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Jinghan Zeng. Forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Yeh, Emily T. 2016. “Introduction: The Geoeconomics and Geopolitics of Chinese Development and Investment in Asia.” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57 (3): 275-285. Chen, Xiangming, and Fakhmiddin, Faxilov. 2018. “Re-centering Central Asia: China’s ‘New Great Game’ in the Old Eurasian Heartland.” *Palgrave Communications* 4 (71): 1-12. Sidaway, James D. and Chih Yuan Woon. 2017. “Chinese Narratives on ‘One Belt, One Road’ in Geopolitical and Imperial Contexts.” *The Professional Geographer* 69 (4): 591-603.

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geography has shaped Central Asia politics in the past, the present and can potentially shape the future. Mackinder explained that the “conditions of a mobility of military and economic power” in the “pivot region of the world’s politics”, which is Eurasia or in other terms the Heartland, creates opportunities for world dominance.<sup>20</sup> Spykman countered the Heartland theory in favor of the power of the area around it, the so-called Rimland, to contain the Heartland.<sup>21</sup> The Great Game refers to the lengthy struggle between British India and Tsarist Russia over influence in Central Asia for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>22</sup> The use of each of these theories in modern context assumes an aggressive China that is seeking to expand its sphere of influence. Setting aside geopolitical concerns, China is, according to Chen and Fazilov, pursuing a “gloeconomic strategy for promoting trade, securing energy supplies, and building cross-border infrastructure.”<sup>23</sup> Sidaway and Yuan Woon examined Chinese governments texts and speeches, and noted how prominent Chinese political leaders debunked the geopolitical and gloeconomic rational of BRI.<sup>24</sup> Despite China’s benevolent intentions, the perception of China’s BRI in countries along the New Silk Road cannot be contained by China.

China’s initiative aims to include more than sixty-five countries, which differ considerably in power, interests and historical ties with China.<sup>25</sup> China’s objectives and investments in Central Asia in new infrastructural projects have highlighted political and economic opportunities, but have also raised concerns about environmental and social challenges.<sup>26</sup> Problems include the “rapid rise in the external debts of both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan” and the postponing of China projects that seem to be unfeasible for the moment, disappointing countries in much need of infrastructure investments.<sup>27</sup> Kazakhstan, considered the strongest Central Asian country sitting

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<sup>20</sup> Mackinder, H.J. 1904. “The Geographical Pivot of History.” *Geographical Journal* 23 (4): 434.

<sup>21</sup> Spykman, N. J. 1944. *The Geography of the Peace*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

<sup>22</sup> Hopkirk, Peter. 1990. *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia*. London: John Murray.

<sup>23</sup> Chen, Xiangming, and Fakhriddin, Faxilov. 2018. “Re-centering Central Asia: China’s ‘New Great Game’ in the Old Eurasian Heartland.” *Palgrave Communications* 4 (71): 3.

<sup>24</sup> Sidaway, James D, and Chih Yuan Woon. 2017. “Chinese Narratives on ‘One Belt, One Road’ in Geopolitical and Imperial Contexts.” *The Professional Geographer* 69 (4): 593.

<sup>25</sup> Zhao Hong, 2016. *Trends in Southeast Asia: China’s One Belt One Road: An Overview of the Debate*. Singapore: Yusof Ishak Institute.

<sup>26</sup> Ascensão, Fernando, Lenore Fahrig, Anthony P. Clevenger, Richard T. Corlett, Jochen A.G. Jaeger, William F. Lawrence, and Henrique M. Pereira. 2018. “Environmental Challenges for the Belt and Road Initiative.” *Nature Sustainability* 1: 206-209.

<sup>27</sup> Dave, Bhavna, and Yuka Kobayashi. 2018. “China’s Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative in Central Asia: Economic and Security Implications.” *Asia Europe Journal* 16 (3): 272.

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along the New Silk Road, has a unique relationship with China and plays a critical role in the “new China-Central Asia nexus.”<sup>28</sup>

Energy related topics, with China controlling about one quarter of Kazakh oil reserves, buttress Kazakh-China relations.<sup>29</sup> Operating since 2006, the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline contributes to supplying China’s huge needs for energy.<sup>30</sup> In addition to this resource relationship that includes oil, gas, minerals and hydrocarbons,<sup>31</sup> Kazakhstan plays a critical role in the “China-driven Eurasian Railroad”<sup>32</sup> because the country is conveniently located between China and the European markets. This transport link is boosting economic relations between Kazakhstan and China, connecting the border towns of Horgos in China and Khorgos in Kazakhstan. Chen and Fazilov explain how “[f]ollowing China’s launch of the BRI in 2013, Horgos was upgraded to a city that now covers an area of about 1900 square kilometers, with a population of about 85.000” and pushed China’s investments in building the Horgos railway port.<sup>33</sup> Kazakhstan actively contributes to the reshaping of this special economic zone. Indeed, Kazakhstan is developing “the Khorgos Eastern Gate Special Economic Zone (SEZ), the Khorgos Dry Port and the Khorgos International Centre of Boundary Cooperation (ICBC)” on their side of the border.<sup>34</sup> This project connects Xinjiang in Western China with Central Asia “to provide access for Chinese goods to markets in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa.”<sup>35</sup>

Taking on China’s vision of trade and infrastructure, President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan approved the economic policy Nurly Zhol (“Bright Path”) in 2015 which goal is a “single economic market by integrating macro-regions of the country on the basis of building an

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<sup>28</sup> Chen, Xiangming, and Fakhriddin, Faxilov. 2018. “Re-centering Central Asia: China’s ‘New Great Game’ in the Old Eurasian Heartland.” *Palgrave Communications* 4 (71): 2.

<sup>29</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. P. 173.

<sup>30</sup> Chen, Xiangming, and Fakhriddin, Faxilov. 2018. “Re-centering Central Asia: China’s ‘New Great Game’ in the Old Eurasian Heartland.” *Palgrave Communications* 4 (71): 1-12.

<sup>31</sup> Burkhanov, Aziz, and Yu-Wen Chen. 2016. “Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese Migration.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (12): 2129-2148.

<sup>32</sup> Chen, Xiangming, and Fakhriddin, Faxilov. 2018. “Re-centering Central Asia: China’s ‘New Great Game’ in the Old Eurasian Heartland.” *Palgrave Communications* 4 (71): 8.

<sup>33</sup> Chen, Xiangming, and Fakhriddin, Faxilov. 2018. “Re-centering Central Asia: China’s ‘New Great Game’ in the Old Eurasian Heartland.” *Palgrave Communications* 4 (71): 10.

<sup>34</sup> Altynsarina, Elya. 2018. “Key Belt and Road node bears Potential for much Gain for Kazakhstan, China and Beyond.” October 9. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/10/key-belt-and-road-node-bears-potential-for-much-gain-for-kazakhstan-china-and-beyond/>.

<sup>35</sup> Dave, Bhavna, and Yuka Kobayashi. 2018. “China’s Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative in Central Asia: Economic and Security Implications.” *Asia Europe Journal* 16 (3): 270.

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effective infrastructure hub principle for long-term economic growth in Kazakhstan.”<sup>36</sup> Among the key objectives of this program are the “establishment of an efficient transport and logistics infrastructure for the ‘ray’ principle; development of industrial infrastructure and tourism infrastructure; improving the competitiveness of businesses; export promotion; and the provision of infrastructure projects ‘Roadmap for business-2020’.”<sup>37</sup> The ray principle is explained in a President address: “Like rays from the sun. The new lines built by the people of Kazakhstan will renew our economy and community. They will firmly link all the corners of our country with its centre.”<sup>38</sup> Boosted by catchy slogans such as “Modernization 3.0”, President Nazarbayev seeks global competitiveness by means of a “100 Specific Steps” Nation’s Plan that prioritizes, amongst other, the “new Eurasian logistics infrastructure development.”<sup>39</sup> President Nazarbayev highlights the connectivity of the different priorities: “Remember that investing in construction of roads, buildings and other infrastructure we define the physical and technological shape of our cities for years to come.”<sup>40</sup> In addition to the energy and economic dimension, Kazakh-China relations are shaped by security considerations – in particular due to their shared fight against “the ‘three evil forces’ of terrorism, extremism and separatism.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite the numerous treaties and the portrayed positive outlook, Kazakh-China relations are problematized, among other concerns, due to land reform discussions in 2016, which would increase China’s rights in leasing land in Kazakhstan.<sup>42</sup> A public outcry over land reform in Kazakhstan developed out of fear of China and a cultural attachment to land. According to Lillis, “[f]or their nomadic ancestors, the encroachment of foreigners (first Russian colonial settlers, later

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<sup>36</sup> The Prime Minister of Kazakhstan. 2019. “The State Program of Infrastructure Development ‘Nurly Zhol’ for 2015-2019.” *The Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Official Website*. Accessed on February 12, 2019. Available at: [https://primeminister.kz/en/page/view/gosudarstvennaya\\_programma\\_infrastrukturnogo\\_razvitiya\\_nurli\\_zhol\\_na\\_2015\\_\\_2019\\_godi](https://primeminister.kz/en/page/view/gosudarstvennaya_programma_infrastrukturnogo_razvitiya_nurli_zhol_na_2015__2019_godi).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> National Digital History. 2014. “The Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan ‘Nurly Zhol – a Way to the Future’.” *National Digital History*, December 14. Accessed on February 20, 2019. Available at: [https://e-history.kz/en/contents/view/the\\_address\\_of\\_the\\_president\\_of\\_the\\_republic\\_of\\_kazakhstan\\_nurly\\_zhol\\_a\\_way\\_to\\_the\\_future\\_\\_2647](https://e-history.kz/en/contents/view/the_address_of_the_president_of_the_republic_of_kazakhstan_nurly_zhol_a_way_to_the_future__2647).

<sup>39</sup> Nazarbayev, Nursultan. 2017. “The President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev’s Address to the Nation of Kazakhstan, January 31, 2017.” January 31, *The Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Official Website*. Accessed on February 12, 2019. Available at: <https://primeminister.kz/en/news/all/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-n-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-31-yanvary-2017-g-14017>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Zhang, Dongmiao. 2017. “China, Kazakhstan eye Stronger Cross-border, Security Cooperation.” June 8, *Xinhua Net*. Available at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/08/c\\_136350731.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/08/c_136350731.htm).

<sup>42</sup> Abdurasulov, Abdujalil. 2016. “Kazakhstan’s Land Reform Protests Explained.” April 28, *BBC Online News*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-36163103>.

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the Soviets) on their ancestral roaming grounds had ended in the death and displacement of millions of people and the destruction of their traditional way of life.”<sup>43</sup> The Nazarbayev’s administration has suspended the land-reforms for the time-being. These protests demonstrate the fragility of Kazakh-China relations.

In addition to these policy connections, China’s strategic communication shapes narratives of themselves as well as the countries along the New Silk Road. According to Nazarbayev’s administration, Kazakh’s national identity draws back over five hundred fifty years, when Zhanibek and Kerey founded the Khazak Khans.<sup>44</sup> This historical narrative is not necessarily convincing to all Kazakh neighbors. Indeed, President Vladimir Putin from Russia neglected its historical relevance, which unsettled the Kazakh people.<sup>45</sup> International recognition of one’s past is important in explaining the ‘Self’ in national and international arena. Steele explains this self-confirming practice through the lens of ontological security.<sup>46</sup> Kazakhstan is actively pursuing activities to secure a consistent identity. While commenting upon the film industry in Kazakhstan, Joanna Lillis mentioned: “History is written by the victors, which in Kazakhstan’s case meant the Russians and the Soviets, but now reinterpreting the past – both recent and distant – is in fashion as Kazakhstan grapples with questions of identity in the present.”<sup>47</sup> This reinterpretation remains a struggle. Nayanika Mookherjee argued that “[h]istory as a usable past is based on a constant struggle between different power blocs which want to impose their idea of the past as the hegemonic and national one.”<sup>48</sup> How China and the BRI fit in Kazakh’s self-confirming practice is to be explored.

## **Methodology**

A content analysis was adopted to help understand how *the Astana Times* communicates images about Kazakh’s identity and visions of a regional order in response to China’s communication of the BRI. The aim of a “qualitative content analysis is to systematically transform a large amount of text into a highly organised and concise summary of key results.”<sup>49</sup> Images are considered visual

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<sup>43</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. P. 174.

<sup>44</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. P. 113.

<sup>45</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. P. 112.

<sup>46</sup> Steele, Brent. 2008. *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*. Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>47</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. P. 10-11.

<sup>48</sup> Mookherjee, Nayanika. 2018. “Memory.” In *Visual Global Politics* edited by Roland Bleiker, chapter 29. London: Routledge.

<sup>49</sup> Erlingsson, Christen, and Petra Brysiewicz. 2017. “A Hands-on Guide to doing Content Analysis.” *African Journal of Emergency Medicine* 7 (3): 94.

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*texts* which latent meaning is to be extrapolated through a systematic analysis. Following Ellingson’s recommendation, this part explains “each element of [the] research process” to ensure the reader of “methodological rigor.”<sup>50</sup>

The Kazakh media environment is steadily growing since independence in 1991, which encompasses both public and private media outlets.<sup>51</sup> Lillis draws attention to the instrumentality of the media to achieve a political agenda: “Astana runs a formidable spin machine to generate positive coverage of Kazakhstan in the Western media.”<sup>52</sup> <sup>53</sup> Considering that several of Kazakh’s news outlets are viewed as government’s extended mouthpieces, this then shapes and constrains its visual communication. This is problematized due to the tensions around media freedom in Kazakhstan.<sup>54</sup> The tight control on content influences the visual communication in Kazakhstan regarding what the BRI is, and what this means for Kazakh-China relations. To portray Kazakhstan as a fair, respectable and legitimate player, Nazarbayev’s administration employs Western Public Relations firms. Lillis commented on Kazakhstan’s lobby for the chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in which the “Kazakh government was notorious for shelling out millions to Western lobbying firms to polish its image: from Tony Blair Associates (the consultancy of the British ex-prime minister, now closed) and Portland Communications [...] to BGR Gabara.<sup>55</sup> This approach to construct favorable images of Kazakhstan to gain political legitimacy reinforces the power of visuals to shape strategic narratives about the state in global politics.

Taking into consideration the complex media environment in Kazakhstan, the online newspaper *the Astana Times* was chosen for this study because: 1) it has wide-ranging publications of articles that discuss the BRI; and 2) most of the articles are written by high-profile individuals, including policy-makers, academics, and corporate representatives, suggesting an elitist perspective on the BRI. *The Astana Times* is “published by Svezhaya Pressa LLP”, it “is registered with the Ministry of Communications and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan”, and it

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<sup>50</sup> Ellingson, Laura L. 2013. “Analysis and Representation Across the Continuum.” In *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 431. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

<sup>51</sup> Burkhanov, Aziz, and Yu-Wen Chen. 2016. “Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese migration.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (12): 2129-2148.

<sup>52</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. P. 9.

<sup>53</sup> [?] Editorial. 2017. “Who Owns Media in Kazakhstan?” May 16, *Ferghana News*. Available at: <http://enews.ferghananews.com/articles/3015>.

<sup>54</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.

<sup>55</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. P. 74.

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publishes biweekly.<sup>56</sup> Having an engaged social media presence, the Twitter profile of *The Astana Times* categorizes its newspaper as follow: “#Kazakhstan’s premier English language newspaper. Est. Nov. 2010. #news, #politics, #business, #culture, #sports, #kz. Updated daily online, printed bi-weekly.”<sup>57</sup> The availability of news in the English language points out that the newspaper is seeking a global readership, considering that the Kazakh and Russian languages are used in local media.<sup>58</sup> The slogan on the website emphasizes this mission: “The Astana Times: Bringing Kazakhstan to the World.”<sup>59</sup> Though the images are of main concern to this research study, the titles of the articles and the captions of the images help situate the sample. In this study, I have chosen not to pursue a document analysis. Future research will be used to determine how *the Astana Times* verbally articulates a sense of ‘Self’ in relation to its neighbor China.<sup>60</sup>

The online database of the *Astana Times* was searched using the keywords ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. Of the initial search conducted on 08-01-2019, a sample of one hundred sixty-six articles were found that mentioned the Belt and Road Initiative or an element of this slogan, such as the ‘Belt’. Articles were only included in the analysis if they had one or more images. Excluding twenty-one articles that had no image resulted in a sample of one hundred forty-five articles. Other search terms such as ‘One Belt One Road’ resulted in two hundred eighteen articles, which is a small increase of the chosen sample. Though China’s project was termed the Silk Road Economic Belt in 2013, and the One Belt One Road in 2014, it is as of 2015 discussed as the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>61</sup> Using the latest terminology is of more relevance to this study, as it provides more informed and advanced perspectives on China’s investments in Kazakhstan. The chosen samples include articles that are published between May 2014 and January 2019. The images in the articles in *the Astana Times* are from different sources including eurasiancommission.org, kp.ru, Kazpravda, dailynews.kz, tengrinews.kz, mfa.kz, Akorda Press, inform.kz, forbes.kz, kazakh-tv.kz, egemen.kz, otyrar.kz, karobardaily.com, worldbulletin.net, refindustry.com, Anastasia

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<sup>56</sup> The Astana Times. 2019a. “About Us.” *The Astana Times*. Accessed on January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/about-us/>.

<sup>57</sup> The Astana Times. 2019b. “@TheAstanaTimes.” *Twitter*. Accessed on January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://twitter.com/theastanatimes>.

<sup>58</sup> Burkhanov, Aziz, and Yu-Wen Chen. 2016. “Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese Migration.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (12): 2129-2148.

<sup>59</sup> The Astana Times. 2019a. “About Us.” *The Astana Times*. Accessed on January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/about-us/>.

<sup>60</sup> Building upon the work of: Burkhanov, Aziz, and Yu-Wen Chen. 2016. “Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese Migration.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (12): 2129-2148.

<sup>61</sup> Dave, Bhavna, and Yuka Kobayashi. 2018. “China’s Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative in Central Asia: Economic and Security Implications.” *Asia Europe Journal* 16 (3): 267-281.

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Prilepskaya/Kazpravda.kz, Ortcom.kz, chinadaily.com.cn, Nur.kz, kazembassy.org.uk, total.kz, altaynews.kz, kaziss.kz and kisi.kz.

In order to understand how *the Astana Times* communicates narratives of the Kazakh ‘Self’ and narratives visualizing Kazakh-China relations, the images were reviewed by addressing their compositional modality. The compositional modality explores the “specific material qualities of an image or visual image” including “content, colour and spatial organisation.”<sup>62</sup> Though other modalities, social and technological, are important for the meaning of the images, a focus on the composition will illuminate how communication (e.g. elite perception) about the China’s initiative is visually constituted. Indeed, the visual communication in *the Astana Times* contributes to narratives of a coherent Kazakh identity self-concept and a desirable Kazakh-China relationship. This then provides evidence for whether China’s communication of the BRI is sticky, how and why.

To begin the process, the images were examined for their representation of themes and narratives that were identified in literature discussing Kazakh-China relations. Following this analysis, new categories were identified, and the sample was assessed for their significance. After examining the images several times, there were seven categories identified. The categories were combined in three coherent themes and one overarching theme.<sup>63</sup> The results were then discussed in relation to the existing literature about the visual communication of the BRI, narratives about Kazakh-China relations, and the soft power of infrastructure. There is a potential of bias using an interpretivist research approach. A reflective approach to my pre-understanding, in terms of my “own personal assumptions, professional background, and previous experiences and knowledge” addressed potential predispositions.<sup>64</sup> Future data collection is required to assess the quantitative significance among stakeholders of the Kazakh community.

This section has explained how the research was carried out. The following section will present the results of the content analysis.

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<sup>62</sup> Rose, Gillian. 2001. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. London: Sage. P. 17.

<sup>63</sup> See the steps in Erlingsson, Christen, and Petra Brysiewicz. 2017. “A Hands-on Guide to doing Content Analysis.” *African Journal of Emergency Medicine* 7 (3): 93-99.

<sup>64</sup> Erlingsson, Christen, and Petra Brysiewicz. 2017. “A Hands-on Guide to doing Content Analysis.” *African Journal of Emergency Medicine* 7 (3): 97.

## **Findings**

The purpose of the content analysis was to establish themes attributed to Kazakh's visual communication of China's BRI. Three themes consisting of several categories and an overarching theme emerged from the analysis.

### Overarching theme: The New Silk Road through Kazakh's eyes: Taking ownership of China's reimagined regional order

This overarching theme emphasizes Kazakh's journey to shape the meaning of China's BRI to suit their own national wishes. This is a process that 'appears' to be transparent and taking place in full view of domestic and foreign audiences. China's New Silk Road reimagined in Kazakh news media helps to secure the self-concept of the state, confirms good Kazakh-China relations and places a special role to infrastructure for deepening this partnership.

### Theme 1: Kazakhstan as Bridge-builder

Strong evidence of bridge-building underpinning Kazakh's self-concept was found in the news article images of *the Astana Times*. The term 'bridge-building' is used here to refer to "the activity of improving relationships between people or groups"<sup>65</sup> and fits nicely with the multi-vector approach that "has been a constant of Kazakhstani foreign policy strategy for the last decade and a half."<sup>66</sup> In the literature, the "term 'multi-vectorism' refers to a policy that develops foreign relations through a framework based on pragmatic, non-ideological foundation", meaning that Kazakh's relations with other states "resides exclusively in the potential costs and benefits to Kazakhstan as an inter-state actor."<sup>67</sup> Hanks explains Kazakh's multi-vector approach as a way "of circumventing the hegemony of Russia in the new region, and establishing at least a semi-independent path for Kazakhstan's foreign policy."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> MacMillan Dictionary. "Bridge-building." Accessed on February 26, 2019. Available at: <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/bridge-building>

<sup>66</sup> Hanks, Reuel R. 2009. " 'Multi-vector politics' and Kazakhstan's Emerging Role as a Geo-strategic Player in Central Asia." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11 (3): 257.

<sup>67</sup> Hanks, Reuel R. 2009. " 'Multi-vector Politics' and Kazakhstan's Emerging Role as a Geo-strategic Player in Central Asia." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11 (3): 259.

<sup>68</sup> Hanks, Reuel R. 2009. " 'Multi-vector Politics' and Kazakhstan's Emerging Role as a Geo-strategic Player in Central Asia." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11 (3): 261.

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Friendly bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and China is a significant category in this theme. Images supporting this desirable relationship show Chinese investment in Kazakhstan<sup>69</sup>, state visits of Kazakh President Nazarbayev to China and Chinese President Xi Jinping to Kazakhstan<sup>70</sup>, photo up handshakes<sup>71 72</sup>, and roundtable talks accompanied with senior state officials<sup>73</sup>. Bilateral relations are symbolized through the incorporation of flags, objects such as Chinese porcelain<sup>74</sup> and the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) emblem<sup>75</sup>. A sense of friendliness is revealed through friendly smiles between Kazakh President Nazarbayev and Chinese President Xi Jinping. Collaboration is not only symbolic, but also tangible as the signing of official agreements suggest. A useful example includes an agreement on train freight collaboration, in which the image captured the event in which: “Kazakhstan Temir Zholy national railway company President Kanat Alpysbayev and Director General of China Railways Lu Dongfu signed an agreement [on] April 13 in Beijing to launch a China-to-Europe container train route through Kazakhstan”.<sup>76</sup> Bridge-building on the bilateral scale reveals friendly political and economic relations.

Further analysis showed that bilateral connectivity was not exclusive to Kazakh-China relations. Indeed, articles referring to the BRI discussed Kazakh’s friendly relations with Turkey<sup>77</sup>,

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<sup>69</sup> Uatkhanov, Yerbolat. 2018. “Chinese investor buys major Kazakh automaker.” December 13. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/12/chinese-investor-buys-major-kazakh-automaker/>.

<sup>70</sup> Almashov, Nurbek. 2014. “Nazarbayev Visits China as Countries Sign Investment Deals and Bolster Political Ties.” May 20. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2014/05/nazarbayev-visits-china-countries-sign-investment-deals-bolster-political-ties/>.

<sup>71</sup> Orazgaliyeva, Malika. 2017. “Kazakh, Chinese Leaders discuss Economic Cooperation, mark 25 years of relations in Astana.” June 9. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/06/kazakh-chinese-leaders-discuss-economic-cooperation-mark-25-years-of-relations-in-astana/>.

<sup>72</sup> Orazgaliyeva, Malika. 2017. “Kazakh President attends One Belt, One Road Forum, meets with Leaders in China.” May 16. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/05/kazakh-president-attends-one-belt-one-road-forum-meets-with-leaders-in-china/>.

<sup>73</sup> Witte, Michelle. 2015. “China, Kazakhstan Agree to Align Development Strategies.” May 12. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2015/05/china-kazakhstan-agree-to-align-development-strategies/>.

<sup>74</sup> Leandroer, Frol. 2017. “Largest Chinese bank considering opening Subsidiary in Kazakhstan.” December 12. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/12/largest-chinese-bank-considering-opening-subsidiary-in-kazakhstan/>.

<sup>75</sup> Orazgaliyeva, Malika. 2017. “Kazakh President attends One Belt, One Road Forum, meets with Leaders in China.” May 16. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/05/kazakh-president-attends-one-belt-one-road-forum-meets-with-leaders-in-china/>.

<sup>76</sup> Seisembayeva, Aigerim. 2017. “Kazakhstan, China to launch China-to-Europe Container Train Route through Kazakhstan.” 18 April. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/04/kazakhstan-china-to-launch-china-to-europe-container-train-route-through-kazakhstan/>.

<sup>77</sup> Zhumadilov, Almasbek. 2018. “Kazakh FM visits Turkey, discusses Preparations for Presidents’ Summer Meeting.” April 21. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/04/kazakh-fm-visits-turkey-discusses-preparations-for-presidents-summer-meeting/>.

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Austria<sup>78</sup>, Georgia<sup>79</sup>, and Slovakia<sup>80</sup>, among other countries. The BRI is considered an opportunity, a tangible structure in which transnational cooperation can be (re)imagined. President Nazarbayev echoed China's push for cross-continental collaboration. A useful example is Nazarbayev's comment to the Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili: "There is an opportunity to make Georgia a transit state like Kazakhstan, as well as provide access to Europe through the Black Sea. In addition, there are transport corridors of gas and oil that also pass through Georgia."<sup>81</sup> Kazakhstan is parroting Chinese rhetoric, and molding the opportunity to harness relations with third parties. The images of friendly bilateral relations reinforce this approach.

Inclusive regional collaboration is a second category that is significant in this theme. The BRI was frequently mentioned in articles discussing the meetings of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Images endorsing these legitimate organizations show a combination of group photos of state leaders and foreign ministers<sup>82</sup>, roundtable proceedings and opinion pieces<sup>83 84 85 86</sup>. These regional interactions are not exclusive to Chinese involvement. Indeed, the meeting of the C5+1 dialogue comprises the "foreign ministers of the five Central Asian states" and the "U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry" in which

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<sup>78</sup> Zhumadilov, Almasbek. 2017. "Kazakh FM meets Austrian President, attends OSCE Ministerial in Vienna." December 9. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/12/kazakh-fm-meets-austrian-president-attends-osce-ministerial-in-vienna/>.

<sup>79</sup> Orazgaliyeva, Malika. 2017. "Kazakh-Georgian Presidents Discuss Bilateral Cooperation." June 14. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/06/kazakh-georgian-presidents-discuss-bilateral-cooperation/>.

<sup>80</sup> Zhumadilov, Almasbek. 2018. "Slovak Prime Minister visits Kazakhstan, attends Business Forum." November 19. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/11/slovak-prime-minister-visits-kazakhstan-attends-business-forum/>.

<sup>81</sup> Orazgaliyeva, Malika. 2017. "Kazakh-Georgian Presidents Discuss Bilateral Cooperation." June 14. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/06/kazakh-georgian-presidents-discuss-bilateral-cooperation/>.

<sup>82</sup> Altynsarina, Elya. 2018. "Nazarbayev calls for Greater Multilateral Economic Cooperation within SCO." June 12. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/06/nazarbayev-calls-for-greater-multilateral-economic-cooperation-within-sco/>.

<sup>83</sup> Turebekova, Aiman, and Anuar Zhanabayev. 2016. "FM Idrissov: Security and Stability Have Become Milestone Tasks of SCO." May 26. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/05/sco/>.

<sup>84</sup> Seisembayeva, Aigerim. 2018. "Kazakh FM attends SCO ministerial ahead of June Summit, meets Chinese counterpart." April 26. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/04/kazakh-fm-attends-sco-ministerial-ahead-of-june-summit-meets-chinese-counterpart/>.

<sup>85</sup> Uatkhonov, Yerbolat. 2016. "EAEU Seeks Deeper Cooperation with Key Integration Organisations." June 1. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/06/eaeu-seeks-deeper-cooperation-with-key-integration-organisations/>.

<sup>86</sup> Jianwei, Gong. 2016. "10 Years under the flag of CICA." June 17. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/06/10-years-under-the-flag-of-cica/>.

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they discussed the cooperation in the areas of water, transport and energy.<sup>87</sup> This article is included in the sample, because the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Erlan Idrissov is cited as follows: “President Nursultan Nazarbayev calls it Great Eurasia, which will bring together the Eurasian Economic Union, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the European Union in a single integration hub. Central Asia should be an integral part of this continental economic cooperation.”<sup>88</sup> The combination of photo op handshakes, group photos and roundtable dynamic suggests successful regional collaboration that is a key ingredient to execute the Chinese initiative. The composition of the rooms in these images is ceremonious, completed by the use of flags and floral designs. Bridge-building is therefore performed on bilateral and regional scales with the invitation of extra-regional participants.

The international scale is embodied in images of international institutions including the World Bank<sup>89</sup> and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.<sup>90</sup> This then reinforces Kazakh’s self-concept as bridge-builder who works with established and new cooperation formats.<sup>91</sup>

### Theme 2: Authority and Narrative Agency

The performance of authority, and related to this, the issue of narrative agency also stands out in the data sample. The term authority refers here to “[t]he power to influence others, especially because of one’s commanding manner or one’s recognized knowledge about something”.<sup>92</sup> Narrative agency is considered here as the “human action of ‘grasping together’ experiences and events in a way that brings together order and disorder.”<sup>93</sup> This theme is concerned with the narrative agency of those who have political and administrative power, those who are considered

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<sup>87</sup> Nurbekov, Altair, and Malika Orazgaliyeva. 2015. “Security, Connectivity, Water Management Discussed at C5+1 Ministerial Meeting in Uzbekistan.” November 2. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2015/11/security-connectivity-water-management-discussed-at-c51-ministerial-meeting-in-uzbekistan/>.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Shayakhmetova, Zhanna. 2018. “World Bank Group: Human Capital, Diversification can be drivers of Kazakh Growth.” June 25. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/06/world-bank-group-human-capital-diversification-can-be-drivers-of-kazakh-growth/>.

<sup>90</sup> Zhussupova, Dilshat. 2018. “EBRD, EU and China commit to Investment Cooperation and Connectivity in Central Asia.” November 19. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/11/ebrd-eu-and-china-commit-to-investment-cooperation-and-connectivity-in-central-asia/>.

<sup>91</sup> Gorbunova Mariia L. and Igor D. Komarov. 2017. “Emerging Integration Projects in Eurasia: A Search for New Cooperation Formats?” *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies* 15 (3): 229-247.

<sup>92</sup> Oxford English Living Dictionaries. 2019. “Authority.” *Oxforddictionaries*. Accessed on: January 17, 2019. Available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/authority>.

<sup>93</sup> Meretoja, Hanna. 2014. “Narrative and Human Existence: Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics”, *New Literary History* 45 (1): 98.

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experts in their field, and *he* who is considered the father of the Kazakhstan nation: “papa” Nazarbayev<sup>94</sup>.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev as the father of Kazakhstan is a significant category emerging in this theme. The images project compositions reinforcing the leader’s autonomy to speak to the people, as well as on behalf of them to foreign audiences. His narrative agency is visually performed through a number of images. A notable example is the 31st plenary session of Kazakhstan’s Foreign Investors’ Council, encompassing “heads of 35 multinational companies and international organizations such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development”.<sup>95</sup> This image shows a roundtable while the proceedings of the meeting are largely broadcasted on screens. The projection of President Nazarbayev on two big screens reinforces his authority to speak. Another useful example is an image depicting President Narbayev who is speaking to an audience comprising of the “diplomatic corps accredited in the country”.<sup>96</sup>

Another category supporting this theme are the many images depicting photo shots that are, assumable, provided by the authors and interviewees themselves. This category surfaced mainly in opinion pieces and interview articles. The posing images are identified as a range of individuals who have considerable knowledge of the subject area, including Ambassadors, scholars and public officials. This is exemplified in the images of Kazakh Ambassadors. Take for instance, the portrait of the Ambassador of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the Republic of Poland Margulan Baimukhan<sup>97</sup> and the image of Kazakh’s Ambassador in Beijing Shakhrat Nuryshev.<sup>98</sup> Profile photos of Chinese high representatives are similarly projected, including the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of China to Kazakhstan, Zhang Hanhui<sup>99</sup> and the Chinese

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<sup>94</sup> Isaacs, Rico. 2010. “ ‘Papa’ – Nursultan Nazarbayev and the Discourse of Charismatic Leadership and Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan.” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 10 (3): 435-452.

<sup>95</sup> Seisembayeva, Aigerim. 2018. “Foreign Investors Council focuses on Modernisation Efforts.” June 7. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/06/foreign-investors-council-focuses-on-modernisation-efforts/>.

<sup>96</sup> Turebekova, Aiman. 2016. “Kazakh President Says Crisis Provides New Development Opportunities.” March 3. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/03/kazakh-president-says-crisis-provides-new-development-opportunities/>.

<sup>97</sup> Seitzhan, Galiaskar. 2017. “Kazakhstan, Poland build on 25 years of Relations, says Kazakh Envoy.” September 1. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/09/kazakhstan-poland-build-on-25-years-of-relations-says-kazakh-envoy/>.

<sup>98</sup> Sabayeva, Gulbarshyan. 2015. “Border Does Not Divide Kazakhstan and China, But Brings Them Closer, Says Kazakh Ambassador in Beijing.” May 18. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2015/05/border-does-not-divide-kazakhstan-and-china-but-brings-them-closer-says-kazakh-ambassador-in-beijing/>.

<sup>99</sup> Abdulova, Zhanara. 2015. “Eurasian Economic Union Beneficial for both Region and China, Beijing’s Envoy Says.” January 28. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2015/01/eurasian-economic-union-beneficial-region-china-beijings-envoy-says/>.

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Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Zhang Xiao.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, executive people in organizations such as the Kazakhstan European Bank for Reconstruction and Development<sup>101</sup>, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific<sup>102</sup>, and the Library of the First President of Kazakhstan – Leader of the Nation (Nazarbayev Centre)<sup>103</sup> are given a platform at *the Astana Times* to express their views of Kazakhstan, while drawing reference to the regional opportunities that the BRI offers. Another example of what is assumed by legitimate narrators consists of political analysts and leading figures at research centers. This is certainly true for the image of Frank Evers, who is deputy head of the Centre for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Research<sup>104</sup> as well as the independent political scientist, Adil Kaukenov.<sup>105</sup>

A third category that constitutes this theme is the visualization of epistemic communities. The term ‘epistemic communities’ refers to here as “a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area.”<sup>106</sup> Professionals are provided a platform to speak at forums, roundtables and meetings, and their narrative agency is a result of their recognized knowledge. This is exemplified in the images of the “Trans-Caspian Trade and Transit-Corridor East-West forum at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) of Johns Hopkins University”<sup>107</sup>, the EU-Eurasia-China Business Summit hosted by the Economist and the Greek-Eurasian Business Council, which “brought together over 500 representatives of governments,

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<sup>100</sup> Zhang, Xiao. 2018. “Belt and Road: Path of Mutually Beneficial Development and Shared Prosperity of China and Kazakhstan.” September 11. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/09/belt-and-road-path-of-mutually-beneficial-development-and-shared-prosperity-of-china-and-kazakhstan/>.

<sup>101</sup> Preimanis, Agris. 2018. “EBRD and Kazakhstan: Trusted Partners.” June 13. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/06/ebrd-and-kazakhstan-trusted-partners/>.

<sup>102</sup> Akhtar, Shamshad. 2016. “Regional Economic Integration Is Key to Development Success in Central Asia and the Caucasus.” January 29. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/01/regional-economic-integration-is-key-to-development-success-in-central-asia-and-the-caucasus/>.

<sup>103</sup> Shaimerzhanov, Timur. 2015. “Iran at the Crossroads.” April 22. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2015/04/iran-at-the-crossroads/>.

<sup>104</sup> Evers, Frank. 2018. “Responsibility. Initiative. Intermediation. Kazakhstan’s Efforts in European Security Matters and OSCE.” June 22. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/06/responsibility-initiative-intermediation-kazakhstan-efforts-in-european-security-matters-and-osce/>.

<sup>105</sup> Kaukenov, Adil. 2016. “Is Kazakhstan Able to Bring Together EAEU and EU?.” May 10. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/05/is-kazakhstan-able-to-bring-together-eaeu-and-eu/>.

<sup>106</sup> Haas, Peter M. 1992. “Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination.” *International Organization* 46 (1): 3.

<sup>107</sup> Turebekova, Aiman. 2016. “Kazakhstan Supports New Silk Road and One Belt, One Road Initiatives, Official Says.” May 5. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/05/kazakhstan-supports-new-silk-road-and-one-belt-one-road-initiatives-official-says/>.

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universities, transnational and logistics companies”<sup>108</sup>, the Kazakhstan-United Kingdom Investment Forum<sup>109</sup> and the EBRD 2016 annual meeting and business forum.<sup>110</sup> In addition to these meetings held in the United States, the United Kingdom and Greece, *the Astana Times* emphasized the Kazakh strength in hosting these type of debating platforms. Indeed, the Astana Club is a celebrated venue for these events, decorated in turquoise and yellow, the colors of both the Kazakh flag and Nazarbayev’s political party Nur Otan. Astana’s Club third annual meeting hosted “more than 60 participants from 28 countries, including prominent politicians, scholars and leading experts, [to speak] about global policy issues requiring resolution, sanctions confrontations and prospects of cooperation in the great Eurasian landmass.”<sup>111</sup> The following year, international representation increased, gathering professionals from 33 countries.<sup>112</sup> Adding to this category is public relations material of forums including the Petersburg International Economic Forum<sup>113</sup> and the Boao Forum for Asia.<sup>114</sup>

### Theme 3: Endorsement of the New Silk Road

Further analysis showed that the images in *the Astana Times* endorse China’s communication of connectivity envisioned in the New Silk Road. In China’s declarations, connectivity is considered as having physical, policy, and metaphorical dimensions. The newspaper images engage with all three dimensions, especially the physical dimension. *The Astana Times* embraces China’s idea of Silk Road connectivity using images, and adapts them to suit its own vision of Kazakh’s future.

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<sup>108</sup> Zhumadilov, Almasbek. 2017. “Athens Forum emphasises Kazakhstan’s Role in Silk Road of the 21st century.” October 13. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/10/athens-forum-emphasises-kazakhstans-role-in-silk-road-of-the-21st-century/>.

<sup>109</sup> [?] Published in *The Astana Times*. 2017. “Kazakh-British Investment Forum Participants sign Agreements, enhance Cooperation.” November 10. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/11/kazakh-british-investment-forum-participants-sign-agreements-enhance-cooperation/>.

<sup>110</sup> Turebekova, Aiman. 2016. “Kazakhstan’s Investment Climate Discussed in London, as EBRD Projects Positive Growth for Its Economy in 2016.” May 15. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/05/investment/>.

<sup>111</sup> Shayakhmetova, Zhanna. 2017. “Astana Club’s Third Meeting focuses on Viability of Cooperation in Eurasia.” November 15. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/11/astana-clubs-third-meeting-focuses-on-viability-of-cooperation-in-eurasia/>.

<sup>112</sup> Satubaldina, Assel. 2018. “Geopolitical Rivalry, Terrorism among Threats facing Eurasia, Nazarbayev tells Astana Club.” November 14. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/11/geopolitical-rivalry-terrorism-among-threats-facing-eurasia-nazarbayev-tells-astana-club/>.

<sup>113</sup> Omirgazy, Dana. 2017. “Int’l Political, Business Leaders discuss One Belt, One Road initiative at St. Petersburg Economic Forum.” June 6. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/06/intl-political-business-leaders-discuss-one-belt-one-road-initiative-at-st-petersburg-economic-forum/>.

<sup>114</sup> Zhumadildayev, Aidarbek. 2018. “AIFC discusses Perspectives of Cooperation at Boao Forum for Asia.” April 25. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/04/aifc-discusses-perspectives-of-cooperation-at-boao-forum-for-asia/>.

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The first category that emerged from the data sample and shaped this theme is the celebration of physical connectivity. The physical and policy dimensions of China's BRI refers to logistical corridors that connects mainland China with Kazakhstan. There are various news articles engaging with this category, especially with regards the celebration of the development of the Khorgos dry port.<sup>115 116 117</sup> Kazakh's indirect policy response to China's BRI is the economic policy, Nurly Zhol. There are images of forum speakers, trains and meetings where people stand around an architectural model that represents the plans envisioned for Khorgos. In addition to the Khorgos Eastern Gate, there is an image of the Aktau Port in the Caspian Sea.<sup>118</sup> One article shows images that capture the proceedings of a meeting titled 'The 2015 Diplomatic Train to Khorgos – Where the East meets the West 19<sup>th</sup> October 2015'.<sup>119</sup> The images enhance Kazakh's self-perception as a logistical hub and intermediary between the East and the West. The central location of Khorgos is considered as an economic opportunity and a win-win solution for the region. This is emphasized by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Erlan Idrissov who rejected the assertion of a New Great Game: "These comparisons are outdated and have nothing in common with the modern Kazakhstan and our vision of the situation," and "Kazakhstan has been advocating for abandoning the philosophy of the Great Game and embracing the philosophy of the Great Gain for all."<sup>120</sup> Indeed, images such as the celebration of the new railway service connecting Amsterdam in the Netherlands and Yiwu in China positions Kazakhstan in a unique geographical location.<sup>121</sup> These images mirror China's logistical vision of BRI and firmly places Kazakhstan at the center of action.

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<sup>115</sup> Turebekova, Aiman. 2016. "'Khorgos-Eastern Gate' Intends to Create Favourable Business Environment for Investors." February 15. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/02/khorgos-eastern-gate-intends-to-create-favourable-business-environment-for-investors/>.

<sup>116</sup> Altynsarina, Elya. 2018. "Key Belt and Road node bears Potential for much gain for Kazakhstan, China and beyond." October 9. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/10/key-belt-and-road-node-bears-potential-for-much-gain-for-kazakhstan-china-and-beyond/>.

<sup>117</sup> Omirgazy, Dana. 2017. "Kazakhstan Railways: More Comfort, Better Safety, Bigger Opportunities in light of Silk Road's Reincarnation." December 4. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/12/kazakhstan-temir-zholy-more-comfort-better-safety-bigger-opportunities-in-light-of-silk-roads-reincarnation/>.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Nurbekov, Altair. 2015. "'New Dubai' on Kazakh-Chinese Border Set to Change Trans-Eurasian Trade." October 22. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2015/10/new-dubai-on-kazakh-chinese-border-set-to-change-trans-eurasian-trade/>.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Dyussebekova, Zhazira. 2018. "New Train Freight Line connects the Netherlands, China via Kazakhstan." March 13. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/03/new-train-freight-line-connects-the-netherlands-china-via-kazakhstan/>.

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Physical connectivity is not only envisioned in the form of logistical corridors, *the Astana Times* communicates an image of Kazakhstan as a modern and architecturally advanced place. This imagination mirrors, to a certain extent, China's visual communication of economic hubs. Indeed, images depict Kazakh's capital, Astana, as a futuristic place that has been carefully designed.<sup>122</sup> The image of the Nazarbayev Centre in Astana replicates this view.<sup>123</sup>

A second category is concerned with the metaphysical aspects of BRI's aspired connectivity. Imagined connectivity recurred throughout the dataset. This is exemplified by the images making up of the Kazakh and Chinese flags<sup>124</sup> as well as the Kazakh and the United Arab Emirates flag.<sup>125</sup> Other images showed the world ball with connecting lines.<sup>126</sup> <sup>127</sup> Images relating to people-to-people exchanges envisioned in China's BRI were not particularly prominent. One article conveyed the events at Astana's Confucius Institute, where they were hosting a photo exhibition about Capitals of the Silk Road.<sup>128</sup> Group photos of children participating at this event, which is part of the Global Silk Road Forum and Silk Road Mayors' Forum, is a rare example of cultural connectivity. A cultural view of the Silk Road was depicted in a photo of the magnificent Kalyan Minaret in Bukhara, Uzbekistan.<sup>129</sup> The adventurous image of the Silk Road is embodied in the journey of the explorer Jacek Pałkiewicz.<sup>130</sup> Overall, these results indicate that the cultural dimension of China's BRI is not of significant visual importance to the elites (and editorial staff) at *the Astana Times*. Though a revival of the Silk Road provides excellent tourism opportunities,

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<sup>122</sup> Altynsarina, Elya. 2018. "Astana supports international cooperation, peace, security, experts attest." June 8. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/06/astana-supports-international-cooperation-peace-security-experts-attest/>.

<sup>123</sup> Witte, Michelle. 2015. "Kazakh PM, FM Address Newly Established Astana Club, Stress Commitment to Win-Win Cooperation in Central Asia." November 13. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2015/11/kazakh-pm-fm-address-newly-established-astana-club-stress-commitment-to-win-win-cooperation-in-central-asia/>

<sup>124</sup> Orazgaliyeva, Malika. 2016. "China Invites Kazakhstan to G20 Summit in September." January 21. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/01/china-invites-kazakhstan-to-g20-summit-in-september/>.

<sup>125</sup> Beer, Mark. 2018. "Belt and Road Initiative: One Vision of Justice." April 20. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/04/belt-and-road-initiative-one-vision-of-justice/>.

<sup>126</sup> Editorial [?]. 2018. "External News in Brief." July 10. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/07/external-news-in-brief-29/>.

<sup>127</sup> Editorial [?]. 2018. "External News in Brief." October 9. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/10/external-news-in-brief-35/>.

<sup>128</sup> Shayakhmetova, Zhanna. 2018. "Astana's Confucius Institute promotes Cultural Ties, launches Courses for Children." May 10. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/05/astanas-confucius-institute-promotes-cultural-ties-launches-courses-for-children/>.

<sup>129</sup> Satubaldina, Assel. 2018. "New chapter in Uzbekistan opens Opportunities for Region." September 12. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/09/new-chapter-in-uzbekistan-opens-opportunities-for-region/>.

<sup>130</sup> Zhumabayeva, Kamila. 2016. "New Silk Road Explorer Plans to Travel Seven Countries." December 2. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2016/12/new-silk-road-explorer-plans-to-travel-seven-countries/>.

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the news articles draw more visual attention to the physical connectivity of China's initiative to boost Kazakh's economy and political relations.

In summary, these results suggest the overarching theme: the New Silk Road through Kazakh's eyes: taking ownership of China's reimagined regional order. This is buttressed by three themes: Kazakhstan as bridge-builder, authority and narrative agency, and embracing the New Silk Road. The next section interprets these findings and discusses the 'stickiness' of China's strategic communication of the BRI in the case of *the Astana Times*. It will consider why this occurs, and why it occurs now. It will specifically focus on the soft power of infrastructure in forging bilateral relations.

## **Discussion**

The results suggest that China's communication of the BRI is relative 'sticky' in the case of Kazakh's newspaper *the Astana Times*. The visual communication reveals Kazakh's coherent approach to adapt China's communication of the BRI by buttressing their own preferred political narratives about themselves, in relation to China and on infrastructural development.

In terms of the promotion of connectivity ("Vision and Actions Plan", aim 1),<sup>131</sup> the images depict Kazakh's bilateral relations and its participation with regional cooperation and international institutions such as the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Moreover, the images depict affairs on the state-level and the non-state level, with the epistemic communities legitimizing policy discussions. In contrast, there are no counternarratives present in the data sample of *the Astana Times* that would antagonize bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and China or with Russia – which makes sense in light of Kazakh's multi-vector approach.<sup>132</sup> Establishing and strengthening partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road (aim 2) is actively embraced. Indeed, Kazakh-China relations are buttressed by several positive images. Additionally, Kazakh's partnerships with other Silk Road countries are revived and/or reinforced visually. Regarding the setup of all-dimensional, multitiered and composite connectivity networks

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<sup>131</sup> See China's Vision and Action Plans in: National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China. 2015. Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road. *Belt and Road Portal*, March 30. Accessed May 16, 2018. Available at: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/qwfb/1084.htm>. Conclusions discussed in Van Noort, Carolijn. 2019.

<sup>132</sup> Hanks, Reuel R. 2009. " 'Multi-vector politics' and Kazakhstan's Emerging Role as a Geo-strategic Player in Central Asia." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11 (3): 257-267.

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(aim 3), Kazakhstan welcomes its position as a transit/logistical corridor for trade, and jumps at the infrastructure investments made available by BRI with the notable example of the economic hub in Khorgos. In terms of the realization of diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries (aim 4), it is the *independency* of Kazakhstan that particularly stands out in the data sample. Specifically, the images suggest a Kazakh-first agenda with a clear set of policies befitting the country's progress, with the notable example of the Nurly Zhol economic policy. This then explains the role of China in Kazakh-China relations as a facilitator of prosperity, more than its benevolent appeal. China does not engage with Kazakhstan out of compassion, instead, the images forge narratives about economic partnerships. The images suggest that this economic and political convergence is welcomed among the elites in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, it is striking how the BRI is embodied and performed in the presidency of Xi Jinping as well as in the presidency of Nursultan Nazarbayev. Both leaders are characterized as major players of the New Silk Road with a commanding vision that allows for the vision and action plans to materialize.

Perceived along a spectrum of success and failure, China is relatively successful in strategically communicating narratives of the Chinese 'Self' and the meaning of infrastructure in forging bilateral relations. The images in *the Astana Times* mirror the historical ambiguity observed in the *China Today*,<sup>133</sup> directing the focus of the New Silk Road in the present and into the future. The remaining part of this section discusses Kazakh-China relations and how visual communication is used to balance opportunities and fears, and it explores further the soft power of infrastructure in forging bilateral relations.

Kazakh-China Relations: Balancing Opportunities and Fears

The images in *the Astana Times* suggest that Kazakhstan carefully balances opportunities and fears created by the BRI with ideas of the 'Self'. Kazakh elites navigate fears of Sinophobia that are arising from China's investments in physical infrastructure and Chinese migration to Kazakhstan. There are already incidents in Kazakhstan between Kazakh and Chinese workers, which can potentially grow due to the "growing Chinese migration and potential formation of Chinese

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<sup>133</sup> Van Noort, Carolijn. 2019. Forthcoming.

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enclaves” in Kazakh cities.<sup>134</sup> Dave and Kobayashi conducted interviews with elites in Central Asia and noticed that “they face populist pressure of assuring their citizens that Chinese investments are working for the economic development of the nation and dispel anxieties about China’s ‘creeping expansion’ and ‘voracious appetite’ for energy and natural resources in the region, which have fueled anti-Chinese sentiments.”<sup>135</sup> Their analysis corresponds with the themes identified in this study. *The Astana Times* uses creative liberty to mold visual narratives of Kazakh-China relations that reinforce the strength of Kazakhstan to shape this relationship. This strategy corresponds with the literature that observed “elements of balancing and bandwagoning in coping with their relations with” China.<sup>136</sup>

Kazakhstan’s response to China’s New Silk Road is shaped by a history of Russian and Soviet dominance. This is not only of the past; perceptions of an aggressive Russia continue to this day. Lillis draws attention to the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union, “which alarmists were decrying as a grandiose bid by Russian President Vladimir Putin to revive the Soviet Union by another name.”<sup>137</sup> Russia’s tense relations with Ukraine shape public opinion about regional collaboration – some calling it a new colonialism.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, Kazakhstan is forging supportive visual communication to ensure control of its identity-narrative within a twenty-first century regional order. Kazakh’s strategic communication of the ‘Self’ is carefully aligned with its foreign policy. This is reflective of Kazakh’s relation with Russia as well as with China, because the “[n]eighbouring two giants makes the ruling elite aware of the necessity of striking a balanced relationship.”<sup>139</sup>

Opportunities originating from China’s BRI are openly embraced in *the Astana Times*. Taking into consideration China’s vision of the “China Dream”, Kazakhstan seems to dream up its own past with a prosperous present and future. The “China Dream” refers to a “successful,

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<sup>134</sup> Chen, Xiangming, and Fakhrmaddin, Faxilov. 2018. “Re-centering Central Asia: China’s ‘New Great Game’ in the Old Eurasian Heartland.” *Palgrave Communications* 4 (71): 11.

<sup>135</sup> Dave, Bhavna, and Yuka Kobayashi. 2018. “China’s Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative in Central Asia: Economic and Security Implications.” *Asia Europe Journal* 16 (3): 275.

<sup>136</sup> Burkhanov, Aziz, and Yu-Wen Chen. 2016. “Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese Migration.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (12): 2131.

<sup>137</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. P. 90.

<sup>138</sup> Lillis, Joanna. 2019. *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. P. 94.

<sup>139</sup> Burkhanov, Aziz, and Yu-Wen Chen. 2016. “Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese Migration.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (12): 2131.

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modern China” which meaning is simultaneously “vague, inspirational and open-ended.”<sup>140</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to control the meaning of the China Dream, but this is limited to national boundaries.<sup>141</sup> Indeed, China “cannot make other states give up dreams which conflicts with its own.”<sup>142</sup> China’s communication about the BRI seems to identify clear pathways for joint success, and seeks to reinsure other governments of its good intentions. The images in *the Astana Times* suggest self-determination and the positive appraisal of dreaming up identity-narratives that are embedded in a past, present and future that empower the Nazarbayev’s administration. Despite the fact that China and Kazakhstan refer to different pasts – that is in China’s case the CCP and the historic Silk Road, and for Kazakhstan particularly the Khazak Khans and to a lesser extent the historical Silk Road – these historical narratives help buttress Kazakh-China relations. Indeed, self-determination is a critical factor for navigating bilateral relations. Elites are wary of the delicate past of Kazakhstan with regards to autonomy. This urges the projection of visual narratives that ensure and safeguard the physical and cultural dimension of the nation-state. That this narrative balancing is not always successful is a result of ‘dreaming’ that resembles too much of CCP talk.<sup>143</sup> This is problematic for achieving and maintaining positive perceptions of Kazakh-China relations and a sovereign Kazakh state.

The Soft Power of Infrastructure

Kazakhstan strategically engages with the promise of infrastructure in forging beneficial relations with its neighbors. The soft power of infrastructure helps in explaining Kazakh’s identity as bridge-builder to others. Indeed, China is not the only actor aware of the power of infrastructure narratives; Kazakhstan promotes infrastructural development as a solution to socio-economic, security and environmental issues. In particular, Kazakh’s Nurly Zhol’s economic policy and presidential communication thereof corresponds in many ways with China’s communication of the BRI. Kazakhstan positions itself with this communication practice at the heart of Eurasia – as the

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<sup>140</sup> Ferdinand, Peter, 2016. “Westward ho – the China Dream and ‘One Belt, One Road’: Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping.” *International Affairs* 92 (4): 943 and 944.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ferdinand, Peter, 2016. “Westward ho – the China Dream and ‘One Belt, One Road’: Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping.” *International Affairs* 92 (4): 957.

<sup>143</sup> See discourse analysis of Kazakh newspapers: Burkhanov, Aziz, and Yu-Wen Chen. 2016. “Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese Migration.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (12): 2139.

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metaphorical “buckle” of China’s Economic Silk Road Belt.<sup>144</sup> Geography is pertinent in Kazakh’s image-building. Kazakhstan presents itself as a bridge-builder, and with that image takes ownership of the connectivity envisioned in China’s communication of the BRI.

Despite the appeal of the Modernization 3.0 vision, investments and developments in infrastructure are performances of hard power. Oliver Stuenkel emphasizes how financial means and economic growth are forms of hard power – though they might serve a soft power purpose that persuade rather than command.<sup>145</sup> He argues that “[s]oft power thus blurs a complex relation between behaviors, resources and strategy, and it falsely implies using hard power as a synonym for command power and hard power resources, and soft power as a synonym for co-optation power and soft power resources.”<sup>146</sup> Indeed, explaining infrastructure from a soft power perspective hides the complexity of behaviors, resources and strategy that shape actual events. Kazakhstan’s pivotal location between China and the European markets and the Kazakh’s substantial oil reserves empowers Nazarbayev’s administration. This then influences the visual communication of President Nazarbayev in relation to China and the visual importance attributed to infrastructure.

In terms of visual narratives of infrastructure projects, it is surprising that the data sample from *the Astana Times* lack well-defined images of geographical maps. Images of the world ball in *the Astana Times* are abstract and do not point out Kazakhstan’s central place on the Eurasian map.<sup>147</sup> In comparison, Kazakhstan takes – visually – a central position in the maps of the Silk Road Economic Belt.<sup>148</sup> Drawing links from Kazakhstan to East, West, North and South directions would reinforce Kazakh’s sense of ‘Self’ as a bridge-builder due to its geography. Visual ‘silence’ regarding this geographical dimension undermines Kazakh’s potential to secure the ‘Self’ in a connected regional order, especially because the connectivity metaphors in China’s political speech acts “conjure up imageries of flows, connectivity, linkages, and mobilities.”<sup>149</sup> Mirroring

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<sup>144</sup> Zhumadilov, Almasbek. 2017. “Athens forum emphasises Kazakhstan’s role in Silk Road of the 21st century.” October 13. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/10/athens-forum-emphasises-kazakhstan-role-in-silk-road-of-the-21st-century/>.

<sup>145</sup> Stuenkel, Oliver. 2016. “Do the BRICS possess Soft Power?” *Journal of Political Power* 9 (3): 353-367.

<sup>146</sup> Stuenkel, Oliver. 2016. “Do the BRICS possess Soft Power?” *Journal of Political Power* 9 (3): 356-357.

<sup>147</sup> Editorial [?]. 2018. “External News in Brief.” July 10. *The Astana Times*. Accessed on: January 8, 2019. Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2018/07/external-news-in-brief-29/>.

<sup>148</sup> For example: Xinhua [editorial]. 2018. “Belt & Road: City of London ‘A Committed Partner’.” *China Daily*, June 17. Accessed on: February 21, 2019. Available at: <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/articles/184/8/2/1529204395374.html>.

<sup>149</sup> Sidaway, James D, and Chih Yuan Woon. 2017. “Chinese Narratives on ‘One Belt, One Road’ in Geopolitical and Imperial Contexts.” *The Professional Geographer* 69 (4): 595.

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these connectivity metaphors in visual narratives (e.g. images in news media) would amplify Kazakhstan's pursuit in communicating the soft power of infrastructure.

Taking into consideration the opportunities and fears arising from close Kazakh-China relations, the soft power of infrastructure in *the Astana Times* aims to cushion this public perception. Noticeable silence on the historic Silk Road that underpins China's BRI reinforces the metaphorical meaning of the term; its vagueness supports the self-determining activities of China and Kazakhstan.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the current study was to review how a prominent Kazakh newspaper projects images about the BRI, and to generate understanding about what aspects of China's strategic narratives 'stick' in this visual communication. This study has shown that Kazakhstan balances opportunities and fears in its relationship with China, and that it appropriates the soft power of infrastructure to buttress its self-concept as bridge-builder.

The data from *the Astana Times* suggest that Kazakhstan uses their narrative agency to construct narratives about themselves and in relation to others, while building upon China's communication of the BRI. The 'stickiness' of China's contributes to Kazakh's presentation of itself. This then helps in securing both China's identity-narrative as well as that of Kazakhstan. Evidence of stickiness in this case study refers to elite perceptions. The voices of normal citizens are silenced in the area of, for example, the land reforms and energy relations. The perceptions about these issues are potentially more contentious, though research suggests both Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia.<sup>150</sup> This perception could be further evaluated by considering the relationship between the Chinese migrants with the Kazakh and Russian ethnicities living in Kazakhstan.<sup>151</sup>

Together, these findings reveal how visual politics are played out in the international arena. Furthermore, this study provides novel insights in exploring strategic narrative successes and

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<sup>150</sup> Peyrouse, Sebastien. 2012. "Power Differential and Security Issues in Central Asia: Threat Perceptions of China." In *Eurasia's Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics: Rivalry or Partnership for China, Russia and Central Asia?* Edited by Robert E. Bedeski and Niklas Swanstrom, 92-107. Abingdon: Routledge. Laruelle, Marlene, and Sebastien Peyrouse. 2012. *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor*. London: Hurst.

<sup>151</sup> Burkhanov, Aziz, and Yu-Wen Chen. 2016. "Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese Migration." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (12): 2129-2148.

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failures by drawing attention to the visual dimension in the projection and reception of strategic narratives. Indeed, ‘stickiness’ and silence can be explored by analyzing news media images in third-party countries.

The scope of this study was limited in terms of the case study and the data sample. Other countries along the New Silk Road were not included in this study, neither were other newspapers in Kazakhstan. Instead, this study pursued an in-depth study of the visual communication about the BRI in *the Astana Times* – considered as a mouthpiece of the elites from- and living in Kazakhstan. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study complements the research agenda of global visual politics literature by exploring images of identity, state, foreign policy as well as infrastructure in a detailed empirical study.

Further work could compare the visual communication of Kazakhstan with that of Uzbekistan to explore how leadership and economic capacities underpinning narrative agency shape the ‘stickiness’ of China’s strategic narratives. The author proposes an interdisciplinary and regional network that brings together stakeholders from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to carry out this research.