Protests in Kyrgyzstan and the Silk Roads

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Kyrgyzstan is not exactly an outstanding pillar of the Belt&Road Initiative. But the current political disputes in the Central Asian country, triggered by the rebellion against the outcome of the parliamentary elections on October 4, 2020, cast a spotlight on how vulnerable China's prestigious BRI project is.

Kyrgyzstan is one of the few parliamentary democracies in the region, with an exceptionally vibrant opposition. This has repeatedly resisted authoritarian moves since the end of the former Soviet Union and its independence 30 years ago, most recently ten years ago when democratic reforms were pushed through after the fall of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev under the interim presidency of Roza Otunbayeva.

For the Belt&Road Initiative, Kyrgyzstan is at best a second-ranking transit country for the transportation of goods by road, rail or through pipelines: the main routes between China and Europe pass around it, in the North the "Eurasian Land Bridge" through Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus, in the South the "Middle Corridor" through Azerbaijan and Georgia to Turkey. Kyrgyzstan has neither oil nor natural gas like its Central Asian neighbours Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan. There is the potential for hydroelectric power, i.e. for renewable energy. And there are some other natural resources.

Chinese investors like the state-owned *Zijin Mining Group* are active in gold mining. There are a number of road construction projects with Chinese companies and loans, including the trunk road between the capital Bishkek and Naryn not far from the border with China, where a Special Economic Zone was declared during a visit by President Xi Jinping in 2019. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan is a member of the post-Socialist *Eurasian Economic Union* (EAEU), initiated and dominated by Russia. This in turn is a cornerstone for the tactical alliance between Beijing and Moscow, as it reduces hurdles to the movement of goods on the Silk Roads.

Apparently, the present conflicts are not only about electoral fraud and corruption, but also about the country's geo-political positioning and Moscow's endeavours to enhance its position in competition with China. Representatives and parties of the government are receptive to Russia's desires to advance further integration in the framework of the EAEU. Marat Amakulov, the leader of the *Birimdik* party, which is linked to the beleaguered President Sooronbaj Jeenbekov, is cited in the magazine *The Diplomat* from October 6, 2020, "30 years after our independence it is time to return". However, there is resistance too and the worry that national sovereignty will be compromised as a result.

But there are also strong reservations against China and its increasing influence: Inward migration is registered with growing suspicion, and the Special Economic Zone near Naryn has been buried as quickly as it was set up after anti-land grabbing protests. Given the billions in loans from Chinese state-owned banks, as in many countries along the Silk Roads, there are accusations of "debt diplomacy". And as in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, current evidence once again shows that democratic conditions can bring political turnarounds that can run counter to the stability needed for infrastructure and investment programmes.

There is another aspect that might cause concern in Beijing: The majority of Kyrgyzstan's population is Muslim, and the country has a long border with the Western Chinese province of Xinjiang. There have been complaints from other Muslim countries about the treatment of the Uighur population there. Up to now, officials in Kyrgyzstan have refrained from such criticism. But it remains to be seen how political instability or even a "further revolution," which observers consider possible, will affect the relationship.

Finally, Kyrgyzstan is by no means the only point of conflict on the Eurasian land bridge: The war over Nagorno Karabakh preoccupies the oil-rich Azerbaijan; and the future in Belarus is unpredictable. Up to now these are not (yet) geo-politically charged trouble spots, but they do show that Eurasia is not as stable as it would be necessary for BRI and its success.

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