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China's brutal crackdown in its north-western province of Xinjiang and growing questions about the dark side of some of its Belt and Road investments is fuelling anti-Chinese sentiment, prompting some countries to explore ways to chart an independent course, and feeding into the narratives of rising populist leaders.

The [incarceration of up to 2,5000 Kazakhs in re-education camps in Xinjiang](#) designed to install Chinese values and loyalty to President Xi Jinping, erase nationalist and militant sentiment, and introduce 'Chinese characteristics' into perceptions of Islam among the region's Uyghur population, a Muslim Turkic ethnic group, has spurred a Kazakh search to cautiously chart an independent course.

An estimated 1.5 million ethnic Kazakhs live in Xinjiang, 200,000 of which obtained Kazakh citizenship after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. In contrast to Uyghurs, they were able to move freely across the Kazakh-Chinese border until 2016 when China stepped up its crackdown in Xinjiang.

Chinese policy also figures in crucial Pakistani elections with a populist contender and former international cricket player Imran Khan demanding [greater transparency in China's US\\$ 50 billion-plus investment in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#), a Belt and Road crown jewel and the initiative's single largest investment. Mr Khan is also demanding a more equitable distribution of Chinese investment among Pakistan's provinces.

Irrespective of whether Mr Khan emerges victorious from the Pakistani polling, he is likely to be a major voice. His call for greater transparency resonates with significant segments of the business community represented by the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry who have been [critical of commercial terms that advantage Chinese companies](#) with reduced benefit to their Pakistani counterparts.

Mr Khan's call for greater transparency is likely to get a significant boost if [Pakistan is forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund to bail out its troubled economy](#).

Major political parties and business organizations in the Pakistani province of Gilgit-

Baltistan have meanwhile [threatened to shut down the Pakistan-China border](#) if Beijing does not release some 50 Uighur women married to Pakistani men from the region, who have been detained in Xinjiang.

The province's legislative assembly unanimously called on the government in Islamabad to take up the issue. The women, many of whom are practising Muslims and don religious attire, are believed to have been detained in re-education camps.

A concern in Tajikistan is mounting that the country may not be able to service its increasing Belt and Road-related debt. With the World Bank and the IMF warning that [Tajikistan runs a high risk of debt distress](#), Tajikistan has seen its [debt-to-GDP ratio](#) balloon from 33.4% of GDP in 2015 to an estimated 56.8% in 2018.

The [emerging stories of Kazakhs released from re-education camps](#) in Xinjiang and a court case a Chinese national of Kazakh descent [accused of entering Kazakhstan illegally after working in one of the detention centres](#) holding hundreds of thousands of mostly Turkic Muslims is forcing the Kazakh government to stand up more forcefully for the rights of its nationals and reinforcing its desire to [steer a middle course between Chinese and Russian ambitions in Central Asia](#).

41-year-old Sayragul Sauytbay is on trial for allegedly illegally crossing the Chinese-Kazakh border to join her husband and two children in Kazakhstan. Ms Sauytbay told the court she had escaped to Kazakhstan after being told by Chinese authorities that she would never be allowed to join her family because of her knowledge of the camps.

Chinese authorities have denied the existence of the camps despite mounting evidence from both official documents and witness accounts. [China's foreign ministry said it "had not heard" of the camps](#).

Ms Sauytbay's defence is attracting attention and spurring anti-Chinese sentiment not only because of her first-hand account of the detention camps but also because of her assertion that she had access to classified Chinese documents that shed light on the sprawling network of re-education centres.

Ms Sauytbay's trial puts the Kazakh government, an important Belt and Road partner, in a bind. She has admitted having illegally entered the country but said she would disappear in

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one of Xinjiang's detention camps if she were returned to China. Ms Sauytbay has requested political asylum in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan has until now to seek to [raise the issue of the fate of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang quietly and cautiously with China](#). Returning Ms Sauytbay would open the government to accusations that it is kowtowing to Beijing and failing to protect its people. Allowing her to stay, would give further credibility to reports on the extent and nature of the crackdown in Xinjiang.

The trial also boosts Kazakh efforts to steer a middle course between Chinese and Russian influence in Central Asia by forging closer ties to European nations and the United States as well as the Muslim world.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev discussed with President Donald J. Trump, on a visit to Washington in January, an "[enhanced strategic partnership](#)" that would strengthen cooperation "on political and security issues, trade and investment, and people-to-people relationships."

[Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev travelled to Washington](#) on a similar mission, seeking US support for his liberalizing economic and political reforms.

Central Asian leaders suggested to European Union High Representative for Security and Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini that they [were looking to Europe rather than China and Russia for assistance in building sustainable economies](#) that can create jobs for the region's mushrooming youth population.

That is not to say that Central Asian nations, most of which are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, do not welcome massive Chinese and Russian investment. They do, but also realize that the investment may improve their infrastructure and enhance security but does not necessarily ensure their ability to sustainably create jobs.

In a sign of the times, [Russian commentator Yaroslav Razumov](#) noted that Kazakh youth recently thwarted the marriage of a Kazakh national to a Chinese woman by denouncing it on social media as unpatriotic.

Quoting Kazakh commentators as blaming Russia for stirring anti-Chinese sentiment in their country, Mr Razumov, in an article entitled 'Ally, but not a friend,' warned that Russia, and by extension China, "must learn to live with this."

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