

Contractors and Contiguity: Assessing China's Private Security presence in Kyrgyzstan

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Introduction

The post-Cold War period has witnessed a worldwide trend towards the privatization of military force. Contributing factors include economic globalization, the demobilization of national armed forces, and a rise in the number of failed states and trans-national low-intensity conflicts. In some societies, the proliferation of Private Military (PMC) and Security (PSC) Companies has occurred in spite of a historical aversion to mercenaries. In Europe, the 1648 treaty of Westphalia marked the end of a chaotic period that had seen the continent pillaged by private armies enjoying feudal and ecclesiastical patronage, and portended the era of the nation state and its monopoly on force. In China however, the trauma is more recent in the national memory, to some extent explaining why, despite being one of the first great powers to inaugurate a 'period of strategic opportunity' with large cuts to its national military in the mid-1980s, indigenous PSCs have been slower to emerge.

Security provision by paid professionals has a long history in China, one closely intertwined with the country's martial academies. This dates back at least to the Song Dynasty when armed guards were employed to protect commercial transportation, wealthy individuals and residences, but the practise continued under the Yuan and Ming, reaching its apogee under the Qing Dynasty. The arrival of European powers in the mid-19th Century however had a profound effect on Chinese society. Fragmenting dynastic authority, coupled with piecemeal attempts at rapid military modernization, permitted a class of independent warlord to emerge and engage in a fierce competition for control of the state. These warlords and the mercenaries in their employ, often rapacious and sometimes foreign, became symbols of what is now routinely referred to by Chinese officials and a compliant literati as the country's 'century of humiliation'. With the founding of the PRC, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ended the culture of privatized force and sought to ensure party 'control of the gun', that is to say political control of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Yet the market forces unleashed by the country's economic liberalization and the ushering of China's State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) into international markets, have once again produced a private solution to meet the security needs of Chinese individuals and companies.

Today, there are an estimated-five million Chinese passport holders residing outside China, and thirty-seven thousand Chinese firms operating in two hundred countries.¹ The use of armed force in foreign jurisdictions however sits at the complex intersection of numerous national narratives. Notwithstanding the painful memory of the warlord era, a normative respect for sovereignty and

¹ Jingdong Yuan, China's private security companies and the protection of Chinese economic interests abroad, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (2022), 33:1-2, 173-195, DOI:10.1080/09592318.2021.1940646, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1940646>

non-interference, has been a remarkably consistent pillar of the PRC's official foreign policy since the early-Cold war. The Chinese Foreign Ministry is the international arena's most vocal opponent of overseas military deployments and basing, particularly those of the United States, and its statements have for decades openly denounced Western 'containment', 'neo-imperialism' and the 'colonial mindset'. That hybrid conflict however, including political and economic warfare in the so-called 'grey zone', has been so integral to the PRC's national survival strategy - its 'combative coexistence', has not escaped the attention of observers. Furthermore, increasing flexibility towards the PLA's own force posture overseas, has led to speculation that armed contractors are, or will become, a paramilitary fifth column upholding Chinese commercial and political interests in the developing world.

The term 'private security' however may encompass a range of activities from video surveillance or online delivery of a risk mitigation brief, to terrestrial or maritime armed escort services. There is a notable absence of any Chinese analogue to the large Western and Russian PMCs that have attracted publicity in the past twenty years on account of their battalion size-formations, commercial empires and high-profile cases of collateral damage. Chinese PSCs in Africa and South East Asia have received some negative publicity but the scope of their activities remain constrained, allegedly under direction from Beijing. The activities of the Zhongjun Junhong Group in Kyrgyzstan however, have attracted the attention of researchers, both on account of the company's unusual local privileges and the sensitive situation of the country on Xinjiang's western border. While China's commercial interests in Kyrgyzstan are low by comparison with its ODI portfolios in other regions, they are significant as a proportion of the domestic economy and with the most open civil society in Central Asia, the country is also a lynchpin in the PRC's existential security architecture for its seditious North-Western province. The presence of armed former PLA and PAP servicemen, some of whom have likely served in the former-Lanzhou Military Region, therefore deserves careful scrutiny. Incorporating elements of field research and the author's own observations in Kyrgyzstan, this paper will review the extant literature on Chinese PSCs and examine the Kyrgyz case study in detail, assessing Zhongjun Junhong's uniqueness and relevance as a sub-national actor.

Literature Review

By contrast with scholarship on Western PSCs and PMCs, academic interest in their Chinese counterparts is relatively new and evident only since the mid-2010s. The first PSC in modern China was established by the Public Security Bureau of the Shenzhen Special Economic zone (SEZ) in 1984. Other early franchises include the Beijing Security Service General company and the China Security and Protection Group - both still active. PSCs have recruited almost exclusively from a vast pool of military and armed police veterans that has grown with successive waves of cuts to the PLA's end strength. The exponential expansion of the industry that took place in the mid-2000s was driven by demand in Tibet, rising crime and Beijing's successful Olympic bid.² Chinese media only began to cover the international role of locally-owned PSCs in 2009 however when the passing of the *Regulation on the Administration of Security and Guarding Services*, hereafter referred to as the '2009 regulation', *de facto* legalized mainland PSCs not owned or controlled by the Ministry of Public

² Susan Trevaskes, The Private/Public Security Nexus in China, Source: Social Justice , 2007-08, Vol. 34, No. 3/4 (109-110), Securing the Imperium: Criminal Justice, Privatization & Neoliberal Globalization (2007-08), pp. 38-55 Published by: Social Justice/Global Options Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29768463>

Security (MPS). The first successful maritime escort by a Chinese PSC was in 2012 and the first joint venture between a Chinese and a foreign PSC took place in 2013.³

A 2018 paper by the Berlin-based Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) estimated the number of PSCs operating in China at seven thousand, employing between three and four million personnel, a figure which has been repeatedly cited, along with the study's shortlist of China's ten largest PSCs.⁴ China has experienced a trend towards the privatization of some public security functions but services provided by PSCs are generally limited to close protection; credit recovery and logistics, as well as armoured protection and cyber security.⁵ Due to difficulties traditionally associated with conducting research on the mainland, the most conspicuous trends in the privatization of China's security sector concern those PSCs operating overseas, where to some extent they are more visible.

The expansion of Chinese PSCs in the developing world has, since 2004 when Hu Jintao first used the term, paralleled a broader re-thinking on the defence of the PRC's 'overseas interests'. This was manifest in the establishment of an anti-piracy task force in the Gulf of Aden in 2008 and successive evacuations of Chinese nationals from Libya and Yemen, where emphasis shifted from consular oversight, to the use of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Air Force (PLAAF). China established its first overseas military facility in Djibouti in 2017 and successive Defence White Papers, service reforms and the 2015 National Security Law have continued to prioritize the safeguarding of overseas interests alongside force development.⁶

The announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 portended a deluge of academic and media commentary, scrutinizing China's diplomacy in the developing world. Recent academic interest in Chinese PSCs, appears to be an extension of this genre, and the field's leading scholars are also established names in BRI punditry. In his 2018 book, *China's Private Army*, Alessandro Arduino notes that prior to the BRI, SOE reluctance to pay for trained professionals, negatively affected the industry's development.⁷ In locating the genesis of the modern Chinese PSC however, ascribing too much causality to the BRI, itself less an initiative than a diffuse policy concept, would be an error. Arduino recognises this and also emphasizes developments in the previous decade. While annual flows of Chinese overseas investment peaked under the BRI, it was during the 2000s that the exponential rise took place following the announcement of Jiang Zemin's 'going out' strategy, and the rising number of attacks against Chinese civilians, particularly in Pakistan, prompted a series of consular initiatives by the MoFA and MPS.⁸

The 'Belt and Road' decade saw numerous high-profile attacks on Chinese nationals and businesses: in Mali in 2015 for example, a suicide attack on the embassy in Bishkek in 2016, as well as numerous

³ Xin Tian, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* Vol. 06, No. 02, pp. 205-221 (2020), *Private Security Companies: Emerging Protectors of China's Overseas Interests*, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740020500104>

⁴ Helena Legarda and Meia Nouwens, *Guardians of the Belt and Road: The internationalization of China's private security companies*, Mercator Institute for China Studies August 2018, <https://www.merics.org/en/report/guardians-belt-and-road>

⁵ Alessandro Arduino, *China's Private Army*, Palgrave Macmillan (2018), 140. Susan Trevaskes, *The Private/Public Security Nexus in China*, 49

⁶ United States Department of Defence, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, Office of the Secretary of Defence Annual Report to Congress, 124. United States Department of Defence, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021*, Office of the Secretary of Defence Annual Report to Congress, 74.

⁷ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 46.

⁸ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 36, 43. Akram Khariief, *China's Discreet Game in North Africa – Private Military Companies*, Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, North Africa Office, <https://rosaluxna.org/publications/chinas-discreet-game-in-north-africa-private-military-companies/>

attacks and kidnappings in Iraq, Sudan and Pakistan. As the backlash against China's economic expansion has gained momentum, these have taken on a more overtly political character with opposition or separatist militant groups using attacks to foment discord between national governments and Chinese 'imperialists'.⁹ In the case of nine Chinese workers killed in the Central African Republic in March 2023, some opposition groups attempted to implicate the Wagner Group.¹⁰ The nature of the violence also exhibits regional differences. Pakistan in particular has witnessed a concentration of politically-motivated attacks, while in Africa the tendency has been towards base criminality.¹¹

The BRI approach to crisis management has been rooted in bilateral agreements with host governments. Since the 2007 siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad - Andrew Scobell's own marker for the genesis of China's overseas security industry, the government of Pakistan has allocated significant resources to ensuring the security of Chinese nationals in a country where foreign PSCs have been outlawed since 2012.¹² Similar arrangements can be identified in Algeria, Iraq and Laos.¹³ Where states have lacked either the capacity or will to protect Chinese interests, the use of private contractors fills the gap in local security provision, and statements by Chinese officials have increasingly referenced the sector since the need for overseas security protection in the Belt and Road target region was highlighted by Xi Jinping in 2016.¹⁴

The timing of works such as *China's Private Army* however, cannot be disaggregated from a wider antipathy towards the BRI in Western-leaning media and academia, that has embraced detracting

⁹ Mathieu Duchâtel, Oliver Brauner and Zhou Hang, Protecting China's Overseas Interests The Slow Shift away from Non-interference, SIPRI Policy Paper No. 41, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (June 2014). Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 2. Asif Shahzad, "Pakistan says attack that killed Chinese was a suicide bombing", Article 12th August 2021, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-foreign-min-says-bus-attack-that-killed-9-chinese-workers-was-suicide-2021-08-12/>. Zi Yang, Securing China's Belt and Road Initiative, , Special Report 438 November 2018, United States Institute for Peace, Washington (2018). Al Jazeera, "CAR authorities accuse rebels of killing nine Chinese miners", Article 19th April 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/19/car-authorities-accuse-rebels-of-killing-nine-chinese-miners>. South China Morning Post, "China appeals to Muslims after Al-Qa'idah threat", Article 15th July 2009, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m189kitd>

¹⁰ Mariama Diallo, "Situation in Central African Republic Worrisome, Research Group Says", Article 26 Mar 2023, VoA News, <https://www.voanews.com/a/situation-in-central-african-republic-worrisome-says-research-group/7022758.html> [Accessed 4 Sep 23]

¹¹ BBC Monitoring, "Security implications of attacks on Chinese citizens abroad", BBC Monitoring Insight 27th July 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203mw6i>

¹² Andrew Scobell and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, The Flag Lags but Follows The PLA and China's Great Leap Outward, Chapter 4 in Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA Assessing Chinese Military Reforms, Edited by Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, National Defence University Press (2019), Washington. Legarda and Nouwens, Guardians of the Belt and Road.

¹³ Duchâtel, Brauner and Zhou. BBC Monitoring, Counterterrorism Digest: 30-31 March 2009, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m180u3jv>

¹⁴ CPC News, "Speech by Meng Jianzhu and the representatives of outstanding security guards of the 4th National Excellent Security Service Company", CPC News, 18 October 2016, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1107/c64094-28840814.html> [Accessed 26 Aug 2023]. Shuwen Zheng and Ying Xia. Private Security in Kenya and the Impact of Chinese Actors. Working Paper No. 2021/44. China Africa Research Initiative, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University 2021, Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://www.sais-cari.org/publications>, ChinaPSCKenya.pdf. Sergey Sukhankin, Chinese Private Security Contractors: New Trends and Future Prospects, Jamestown Foundation ChinaBrief, Volume 20, Issue 9, May 15, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Read-the-05-15-2020-CB-Issue-in-PDF.pdf>

counter-narratives such as the ‘string of pearls’ and ‘debt trap diplomacy’.¹⁵ The interest in Chinese PSCs, may be further contextualized by a general trend towards the study of ‘grey zone’ warfare, following the Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, that has seen scholars interrogate the plethora of unconventional foreign policy tools available to a state below the conflict threshold. The citations in both *China’s Private Army* and an RSIS research paper published by Arduino in 2015, evidence the lack of an antecedent literature.¹⁶ Arduino relies on first-hand interviews and media excerpts, and expresses his frustration in attempting to access primary source data.¹⁷ Writing for the CSIS in 2022, Max Markusen notes the lack of ‘wide-ranging studies’ on Chinese PSCs and the subject received no mention in either the 2022 US DoD report on Chinese Military Power nor the US-China Economic and Security Commission report to congress in the same year.¹⁸ The available literature, much of it focusing on Africa, encompasses only a few articles and papers by Dirk van der Kley, Paul Goble, Paul Nantulya, Christopher Spearin, Yang Zi and Niva Yau Tsz Yan, whose work has focused on Central Asia in particular.

The Chinese Private Security Industry

Estimates for the size of the Global market for private security services cited in the literature of the late-2010s range between \$180 and \$240 billion.¹⁹ While they have conceded ground and faced a backlash in some countries, the industry is still dominated by Western-based internationals. Many Chinese SOEs were previously clients of these established market leaders and Chinese PSCs have cooperated with Western, Israeli as well as Singaporean firms both inside and outside China.²⁰ A number of international PSCs are registered on the Chinese mainland and in Hong Kong. Control Risk for example, provides consultancy services on anti-bribery and corruption policy, as well as working with Chinese insurers to bring the latter in line with international best practise.²¹

The 2009 regulation mandated Chinese firms to provide security training to their employees before sending them abroad and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the ministry tasked with oversight of the BRI, now requires a risk and security assessment, prior to the allocation of preferential grants or credits to projects in ‘sensitive countries’.²² A guideline published a decade later by several Chinese ministries, imposed strict training requirements on Chinese companies operating abroad, including a mandatory forty-hour private-sector course.²³ At Beijing’s Public

¹⁵ Arduino, *China’s Private Army*.

¹⁶ Alessandro Arduino, Security Privatisation with Chinese Characteristics: The Role of Chinese Private Security Corporations in Protecting Chinese Outbound Investments and Citizens, Policy Report June 2015, S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies (2015), https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/PR150630_Security-Privatisation.pdf

¹⁷ Arduino, *China’s Private Army*, 58

¹⁸ Max Markusen, A Stealth Industry: The Quiet Expansion of Chinese Private Security Companies, CSIS Briefs January 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/stealth-industry-quiet-expansion-chinese-private-security-companies>

¹⁹ Shuwen Zheng and Ying Xia. 2021. Private Security in Kenya and the Impact of Chinese Actors. Working Paper No. 2021/44. China Africa Research Initiative, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://www.sais-cari.org/publications>, ChinaPSCKenya.pdf. Zi Yang (2018)

²⁰ Arduino, *China’s Private Army*, 36, 144

²¹ Arduino, *China’s Private Army*, 4

²² Arduino, *China’s Private Army*, 136

²³ Niva Yau and Dirk Van Der Kley, The Growth Adaptation and Limitations of Chinese Private Security Companies in Central Asia, The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs (2020), 4, <https://oxussociety.org/the-growth-adaptation-and-limitations-of-chinese-private-security-companies-in-central-asia/>

Security University, international PSCs have, since 2014, offered dedicated training courses for counter-terrorism officials intending to operate abroad.²⁴ These courses are typically supplemented by overseas visits for the retraining of Chinese business personnel, including specific expertise on culture and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) recognition.²⁵ Reporting suggests that China's modest cohort of private security industry associations has also made trips to inspect Chinese companies overseas.²⁶

The figures available for SOE expenditure on private security services are also vague. In 2020, Paul Nantulya cites the \$10 billion given by the Beijing-based China Overseas Security and Defence Research Centre.²⁷ Equivalent to roughly ten percent of Chinese ODI, this is the same as the Phoenix Think Tank figure cited by Arduino in 2018, and it is likely higher today.²⁸ SOE selection of Chinese PSCs mirrors a preference for mainland materiel and labour but Chinese contractors are also genuinely competitive, costing roughly a twelfth of their British, American or Israeli counterparts, according to some reports.²⁹ Chinese security professionals also possess obvious linguistic and cultural advantages and are considered more trustworthy in cases where Chinese corporate information might constitute a state secret.³⁰

Most researchers agree however, that a preference for cost effectiveness over service quality and risk profile, particularly among smaller SOE sub-contractors, impeded the early development of Chinese PSCs.³¹ That the latter have apparently failed to attract the industry's leading talent, not only reflects the absence of a clear Chinese market leader but also uncompetitive pay and benefits. Furthermore, not only do PAP and PLA veterans lack the combat experience of their Western or Russian counterparts, but education levels are also low and the industry suffers from the lack of a centralized union or certification system.³² Turnover rates among contractors can reach sixty-five percent during the New Year holiday and on average, Chinese security managers hold less than five years' experience in the field.³³ It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that Chinese PSCs have been reliant on consular assistance and domestic government support.³⁴

Except where engaged in maritime escort services, Chinese nationals employed by PSCs abroad are generally unarmed.³⁵ In a 2022 paper, Max Markusen emphasizes the distinction between PMCs such as the Wagner Group and non-combatant PSCs, locating the Chinese model firmly in the latter

²⁴ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 5

²⁵ Niva Yau and Van Der Kley.

²⁶ Zhongjun Junhong, "The delegation of the Beijing Security Association visited the Chinese Military Honghaiwei (Laos) Company and the Saisetta Comprehensive Development Zone", Article 20th May 2019, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/Sea/show/id/56> [Accessed 1 Sep 2023]

²⁷ Paul Nantulya, *Chinese Security Contractors in Africa*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/08/chinese-security-contractors-in-africa-pub-82916>.

²⁸ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 23

²⁹ Legarda and Nouwens, *Guardians of the Belt and Road*.

³⁰ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 6, 17.

³¹ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 165

³² Arduino, *China's Private Army*

³³ Nantulya, *Chinese Security Contractors in Africa*. Arduino, A. (2017). *China's Belt and Road Initiative Security Needs: The Evolution of Chinese Private Security Companies*. (RSIS Working Paper, No. 306). Singapore: Nanyang Technological University

³⁴ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 47

³⁵ Today, "China's security guards go where army dares not tread", Article 28 Feb 2017, TodayOnline (2017), <https://www.todayonline.com/chinaindia/china/chinas-security-guards-go-where-army-dares-not-tread> [Accessed 3 Sep 2023]

category.³⁶ This distinction was also acknowledged in the 2009 regulation which, without referencing overseas operations, identified a second category of ‘security companies providing armed escort services’, permitted to carry firearms but not heavy weapons or vehicles.³⁷ In overseas jurisdictions, Chinese PSCs will more likely run contingency safe-houses for clients and conduct unarmed patrolling of Chinatowns, private residences and projects, and do not typically provide services such as armed response, logistics, prisoner interrogation, local force training or supporting combat operations.³⁸ In some tightly-controlled jurisdictions, South Africa for example, Chinese PSCs operate through special-purpose local subsidiaries. Elsewhere, contractors have worked directly with local security companies, providing equipment and intelligence, and occasionally accompanying them on missions.³⁹ In Kenya, where Beiiing DeWe Security Services was awarded the contract to secure construction of the Standard Gauge Railway project, half of the security contractors were recruited directly and half were temporarily transferred from other local security firms. The government also contributed 1,500 armed police officers.⁴⁰

In 2016, unarmed contractors employed by DeWe were deployed to secure more than three hundred Chinese citizens at ten locations in South Sudan after an outbreak of sectarian conflict.⁴¹ The company then enlisted armed South Sudanese auxiliaries, and coordinated with Ugandan Defences forces to conduct extraction via air.⁴² In Pakistan, Chinese SOEs have relied on the national military and local PSCs. While the Pakistani franchise of China Overseas Security Group (COSG) was reported to have held live-fire training for its first-line security guards in 2018, the Chinese PSCs that do operate in the country maintain only a licenced office, otherwise working through local partners.⁴³ A request by the MPS in 2022 to deploy a Chinese PSC after attacks on Chinese nationals in the North of the country and at the Confucius Institute in Karachi, was rejected by the Pakistani Interior Ministry.⁴⁴

Chinese clients have expressed their frustration at the lack of armed contractors.⁴⁵ In 2014, following a dispute with an Iraqi tribal chief, armed villagers stormed and ransacked the compound of a Chinese company while Chinese security guards watched on.⁴⁶ In other cases Chinese companies have simply paid armed groups to go away.⁴⁷ Chinese criminal law is generally applicable to all private Chinese citizens abroad but the carriage of firearms continues to exist in a legal grey area.

³⁶ Markusen, *A Stealth Industry*, 1

³⁷ Kharief, *China’s Discreet Game in North Africa*

³⁸ Yau and Van Der Kley.

³⁹ ADF, *China Turns to PMCs to Protect Its Workers and BRI Investments in Africa*, Article 5th January 2022, ADF Magazine, <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/01/china-turns-to-pmcs-to-protect-its-workers-and-bri-investments-in-africa/>

⁴⁰ Zheng and Xia, 16

⁴¹ Today, “China’s security guards go where army dares not tread”

⁴² Nantulya, *Chinese Security Contractors in Africa*

⁴³ Meia Nouwens, “China’s Use of Private Companies and Other Actors to Secure the Belt and Road across South Asia”, in *Where the Belt Meets the Road: Security in a contested South Asia*, Nadege Rolland, Filippo Boni, Meia Nouwens, Nilanthi Samaranyake, Gurpreet Khurana and Arzan Tarapore, Roundtable in Asia Policy 14.2, April 29, 2019

⁴⁴ Adnan Aamir, “China wants own security company to protect assets in Pakistan”, Article: June 28, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-wants-own-security-company-to-protect-assets-in-Pakistan> [Accessed 1 Sep 2023]

⁴⁵ Zi Yang, *China’s Private Security Companies: Domestic and International Roles*, Publication: China Brief Volume: 16 Issue: 15 October 2016, *China’s Private Security Companies: Domestic and International Roles - Jamestown*

⁴⁶ Zi Yang, *China’s Private Security Companies*

⁴⁷ Zi Yang, *Securing China’s Belt and Road Initiative*

Neither a 2002 *Regulation on the Administration of the Use of Guns by Full-Time Guards and Escorts* nor the 2009 regulation, which legalized firearms carriage for some PSCs on the mainland, clearly reference overseas activities.⁴⁸ Subsequent efforts by the Chinese ministries to codify armed security provision overseas have been equally vague. This includes a *Security Management Guideline* published in 2018 which, while making no explicit reference to their legality, nevertheless recommends the correct handling and storage of weapons and notes that they must be used by contractors only as a last resort and in proportion to the threat'.⁴⁹

International humanitarian law neither prohibits contractors from carrying firearms, nor permits carriage of arms to affect a security contractor's status. This includes the Geneva Conventions and the UN Guidelines on the *Use of Armed Security Services from Private Security Companies*. Furthermore, the International Criminal Court has yet to prosecute a single mercenary and the UN Mercenary convention is considered toothless by observers.⁵⁰ The Chinese government has ratified a 2013 *International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers*, and stated: that it supported 'self-regulation' under the 2008 Montreux Document on *Pertinent International Legal Obligations and Good Practices for States related to Operations of Private Military and Security Companies during Armed Conflict*, to which China and the US, if not the Russian Federation, are signatories. Beijing has also advised the industry to exercise self-discipline by acceding to the International Code of Conduct Association (ICOCA).⁵¹ However, like the Montreux Document on which it was based, ICOCA is unenforceable and as of August 2023, can claim only two Chinese PSCs as members.

There is evidence to suggest however that Chinese contractors are armed in some jurisdictions, Myanmar for example, and Papua New Guinea.⁵² While domestic restrictions make it difficult for Chinese security companies operating in high-risk areas to bring firearms from China, security contractors have reportedly armed themselves by acquiring weapons from local sources, in Libya and Iraq for example.⁵³ Clarity however on whether these weapons are in the hands of Chinese, that is to say former-PLA or PAP servicemen, or local nationals, is not forthcoming. Some PSCs claim that the Chinese government merely discourages the carriage of weapons abroad others claim that PSCs are specifically barred by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from employing armed contractors.⁵⁴ While consistent with national policy, this caution also likely reflects prior experiences in the developing world involving armed Chinese nationals, in Zambia in 2010 for example, when supervisors at an SOE fired into a crowd of workers.⁵⁵ In 2018, a Chinese businessman shot the son of a member of the Zimbabwean parliament after the former had been given a deportation order for having previously fired on locals during a pay dispute at a gold mine.⁵⁶ Chinese contractors in Africa have also been

⁴⁸ Sukhankin, *Chinese Private Security Contractors*, 18-20

⁴⁹ Yau and Van Der Kley.

⁵⁰ Carl H. Peterson IV, *Guns-for-Hire: Chinese Mercenaries on the 21st Century Silk Road*, 30 *Wash. Int'l L.J.* 116 (2020), 131, Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/wilj/vol30/iss1/7>

⁵¹ Jingdong Yuan, *China's private security companies and the protection of Chinese economic interests abroad*

⁵² Kevin Pamba, Excerpt from report by Papua New Guinea newspaper *The National* website on 30 January, Reported: 30 Jan 2008, BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m15yppg9b>. Eleven Media Group website (Rangoon), "Myanmar informs Chinese military attaché about army-rebel clashes", BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/flcbk4e3>.

⁵³ Zi Yang, "Mapping China's Small Arms Trade: China's Illicit Domestic Gun Trade," *China Brief* 15, no. 24 (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, December 24, 2015), www.jamestown.org/program/mapping-chinas-small-arms-trade-chinas-illicit-domestic-gun-trade

⁵⁴ Legarda and Nouwens, *Guardians of the Belt and Road*, 10. Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 20, 104.

⁵⁵ Sukhankin, *Chinese Private Security Contractors*, 23.

⁵⁶ Paul Nantulya, *Chinese Security Firms Spread along the African Belt and Road*, *Africa centre for Strategic Studies* (2021), <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinese-security-firms-spread-african-belt-road/>

accused or arrested for immigration violations, attacking locals, illegally training local forces and for the possession of military grade equipment.⁵⁷ These incidents came after decades of controversial clashes between private contractors and civilians on the mainland.⁵⁸

It is however, the assumed relationship between security contractor and ruling communist party, that explains scholarly interest during a decade when the Western analytical community was preoccupied with 'grey zone' and 'white area' warfare, and anticipating the inevitable progression from 'debt trap' to military basing rights. One source of the confusion regarding the regulation of Chinese PSCs abroad, is the fact that the PLA, MPS, NDRC, Chinese Supreme Court and State Council, which supervises SOEs through the State Owned Assets Supervision and Administration (SASAC), as well as the Ministry of Commerce, all appear to have competing claims to their oversight.⁵⁹ The MERICS study concludes somewhat categorically that 'Chinese PSCs are entirely under the control of the Ministry of Public Security'.⁶⁰ This was cited by Sergey Sukhankin who drew a similar conclusion in a 2020 paper for the Jamestown Foundation. Sukhankin however also references the observations of Alexi Maslov, who argues that there is 'no concrete proof that these companies are somehow related to the Chinese state'. Arduino refrains from passing judgement, even though Sukhankin mis-cites him as stating that PSCs are 'neither an extension of the PLA nor an armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party' when Arduino's 2018 article is in fact describing the 'message from Beijing'.⁶¹

It is rather, China's traditional informal networks of social capital, referred to as *guanxi*, that most likely bind these conglomerates to party, former police and army officials, and permit the country's PSCs to be regarded as a fifth column of the Chinese government. In perhaps the most nefarious Belt and Road 'debt trap' controversy, the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, where a debt-equity swap led to a Chinese controlling stake in the port, the Sri Lankan government has insisted on using only local contractors to avoid suspicion.⁶² In another case, the awarding of a customs house surveillance contract to Nuctech, a Chinese provider of surveillance and scanning equipment, by the Mexican government in 2022, attracted attention in US government circles as a potential national security risk.⁶³

This alarmism is unsurprising and by no means confined to China's private security sector. The PLA's 'three warfares' concept intentionally blurs the boundary between war and peace, between politics and realpolitik. Both the 2015 National Security Law and the 2016 National Defence Transportation Law draw all non-state actors to the cause of employing 'relevant security measures as required by national security efforts'.⁶⁴ In many respects, the 2018 management guidelines which subjected

⁵⁷ Nantulya, Chinese Security Firms Spread along the African Belt and Road

⁵⁸ South China Morning Post, "Paper says guards, police clashes on the rise in property deals in China", Article 12 Oct 2007, BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m15p07t8>. BBC Monitoring, "China social unrest briefing 13-26 May 10", BBC Monitoring 26 May 2010, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m18v5eve>. Yonhap News Agency Seoul, "China guards allegedly assault South Korean journalist", Reported: 14 Dec 2017, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1do3o9r>

⁵⁹ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 36.

⁶⁰ Legarda and Nouwens, 9.

⁶¹ Sukhankin, Chinese Private Security Contractors, 21.

⁶² Nouwens, "China's Use of Private Companies and Other Actors to Secure the Belt and Road across South Asia, 17

⁶³ Milenio, "Mexico assigns supervision of 14 customs to firm linked to China's Communist Party", Article 10 October 2022, BBC Monitoring Mexico political press review 31 October 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203ur4u>

⁶⁴ Christopher Spearin. China's Private Military and Security Companies "Chinese Muscle" and the Reasons for U.S. Engagement, National Defence University Press June 2020, 44,

Chinese PSCs operating overseas to the fifty-one percent government ownership required of domestic PSCs in the 2009 regulation, removed some of this ambiguity. The guidelines also designated Chinese PSCs as part of the newly-established Belt and Road *Security Intelligence System* an initiative that superseded de facto information-sharing arrangements already in place among Chinese SOEs.⁶⁵

Chinese PSCs Overseas

There is no comprehensive list of Chinese PSCs publicly available. The MERICS study cites figures from the Chinese press identifying twenty PSCs operating overseas, employing roughly three thousand security professionals.⁶⁶ Arduino cites the Phoenix Thank Tank's estimate, also twenty, but conjectures that a more conservative estimate could reduce that number to twelve.⁶⁷ In 2018, the Centre for China and Globalization claimed that just six Chinese PSCs were certified to operate overseas, predominantly in the maritime security sector.⁶⁸ Other estimates given between 2020 and 2022 include eight by Yingdong Yuan, nine by Akram Kharief and thirty by Christopher Spearin.⁶⁹ A 2023 study by the RAND corporation identifies operations in twenty-nine countries but does not give the number of companies.⁷⁰

In both lists cited by Arduino in *China's Private Army*, the Chinese subsidiaries of G4S and Control Risk occupy the top two positions, followed by DeWe.⁷¹ In other lists, such as that given by Kharief, and Yuan in 2022, DeWe is seen as the *de facto* market leader among Chinese PSCs.⁷² Founded by former-military and police officers who had worked together during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, DeWe's core businesses include training, on-site security and risk assessment.⁷³ The company counts several Chinese ministries and SOEs, among its clients as well as the China Development Bank (CDB) and Hanban, the agency responsible for Confucius Institutes.⁷⁴ The company has a large training facility near Beijing Airport, including a mock-up Middle Eastern town and has reportedly established a permanent 'security camp' in Sudan, the first of its kind by a Chinese PSC overseas.⁷⁵ In 2017, DeWe had more than three hundred contractors working abroad, employing three thousand host-

<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2217673/chinas-private-military-and-security-companies-chinese-muscle-and-the-reasons-f/> [Accessed 1 September 2023]

⁶⁵ Yau and Van Der Kley, 3. Duchâtel, Brauner and Zhou.

⁶⁶ Legarda and Nouwens, 5.

⁶⁷ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 44

⁶⁸ Minnie Chan, "Why a private US military firm is of value to China's belt and road mission", Article: South China Morning Post 15 Jul 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2155353/danger-zone-why-private-us-military-firm-value-chinas> [Accessed 29 Aug 2023]

⁶⁹ Yuan, China's private security companies and the protection of Chinese economic interests abroad. Spearin, China's Private Military and Security Companies. Kharief, China's Discreet Game in North Africa.

⁷⁰ Cortney Weinbaum, John V. Parachini, Melissa Shostak, Chandler Sachs, Tristan Finazzo, and Katheryn Giglio, China's Weapons Exports and Private Security Contractors. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TLA2045-1.html>.

⁷¹ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 45.

⁷² Kharief, China's Discreet Game in North Africa. Yuan, China's private security companies and the protection of Chinese economic interests abroad.

⁷³ Today, "China's security guards go where army dares not tread"

⁷⁴ Nantulya, Chinese Security Contractors in Africa.

⁷⁵ Paul Nantulya, Chinese Security Contractors in Africa. Legarda and Nouwens, Guardians of the Belt and Road, 13. Today, "China's security guards go where army dares not tread"

country contractors, though this figure is likely far higher in Africa where the company is very active and one of the better-researched due to the publicity it received in 2016.⁷⁶

While not listed by the Phoenix Think Tank, VSS Security Group, whose principle client is PetroChina, but which has contracted for CNPC in Iraq and Afghanistan, has also achieved some publicity due to its evacuation of Chinese nationals in Iraq and Sudan.⁷⁷ Founded in Beijing in 2004, Huaxin Zhongan (HXZA), was one of the first Chinese PSCs to receive authorization to provide armed maritime escorts to Chinese-flagged shipping and enjoys a near-monopoly on security for COSCO and China Shipping Container Lines.⁷⁸ HXZA was also the first Chinese PSC to be certified by the ICOCA.⁷⁹ The firm has a network of support offices in the Indian Ocean basin and like VSS also claims to have operated in Pakistan, sourcing local armed guards for Chinese TV crews.⁸⁰

Another Chinese PSC to have allegedly exploited legal loopholes in Pakistan is Hong Kong-based Frontier Services Group (FSG), listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange but with offices in Dubai, Nairobi and Johannesburg.⁸¹ FSG however is not given in the lists of some PSC researchers, Kharief for example. Like the London-based COSG, FSG is a 'hybrid' Chinese PSC - incorporated with the intention of absorbing Western expertise, and is best known for its American founder and minority shareholder, Erik Prince, a former US Navy Seal. Prince's activities in China attracted criticism due to his proximity to the Trump administration and the legacy of Blackwater, the US-based Private Military Contractor founded by Prince, which gained notoriety in the 2000s.⁸² More recently Prince has also been accused of supplying advanced weaponry to Libyan opposition factions and the government of South Sudan, in contravention of US and EU law.⁸³

The acquisition in 2018 of a forty-percent stake by CITIC, China's state-owned investment vehicle, enabled the company to expand operations on the mainland. FSG owns a twenty-five percent share in Beijing's International Security Defence College, which claims to be the largest security training school in the country.⁸⁴ FSG's corporate strategy has also targeted the BRI.⁸⁵ Its Dubai subsidiary targets the African market, and has won contracts with Chinese miners in Nigeria and the DRC, purchased a local aviation firm and conducted security audits for SOEs in Kenya. FSG also retains a presence in Mozambique despite having pulled out of a major logistics contract. The group also has

⁷⁶ Yang Zi. (2018) Securing China's Belt and Road Initiative, 9.

⁷⁷ Nantulya, Chinese Security Firms Spread along the African Belt and Road.

Helena Legarda, Chinese mercenaries are tightening security on the Belt and Road, Short Analysis, Mercator Institute for China Studies - MERICS (2018), <https://merics.org/en/analysis/chinese-mercenaries-are-tightening-security-belt-and-road>

⁷⁸ Nantulya, Chinese Security Firms Spread along the African Belt and Road. Today, "China's security guards go where army dares not tread". Duchâtel, Brauner and Zhou, 55.

⁷⁹ Nantulya, Chinese Security Contractors in Africa.

⁸⁰ Legarda and Nouwens, Guardians of the Belt and Road, 11.

⁸¹ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 156

⁸² Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 4, 156.

⁸³ Nantulya, Chinese Security Firms Spread along the African Belt and Road. Peterson, Guns-for-Hire, 128.

⁸⁴ Alessandro Arduino. (2019) China's Private Security Companies: The Evolution of a New Security Actor, Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads, NBR Special Report 80, Ed by Nadege Rolland, National Bureau of Asian Research with support from the Daniel Morgan Graduate School of National Security. Yuan, China's private security companies and the protection of Chinese economic interests abroad, 185.

⁸⁵ Legarda and Nouwens, Guardians of the Belt and Road.

an office in Yunnan and in 2022, was awarded the contract to protect the Laos section of the China-Laos Railway.⁸⁶

China's Political and Economic Interests In Kyrgyzstan

FSG is one of six Chinese PSCs, identified by Niva Yau and Dirk Van Der Kley in 2020, as marketing their services in Central Asia.⁸⁷ FSG reportedly opened a Xinjiang office in 2017 and appointed a former vice-President of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), the province's state-controlled paramilitary conglomerate, as head of regional operations.⁸⁸ In 2019, FSG announced a deal to build a training centre in Kashgar in Southern Xinjiang, capable of training eight thousand security personnel annually, in a statement later removed from the company's website and denied by both Prince and the Chinese Foreign Ministry.⁸⁹ The company has announced plans to expand into Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and its representatives have met with Chinese attaches and advertised for positions there.⁹⁰

Central Asia is an important constituency-region of the BRI's Eurasian pillar – known as the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), where China has invested significant political and economic capital, notably in the Kazakh and Turkmen hydrocarbon sectors but also in mining and in the form of sovereign loans for infrastructure. Beijing and Shanghai host numerous annual security sector fora targeting the industry's leading professionals, and the Lianyungang Forum, established in 2015, focuses on Eurasian security, particularly the protection of pipeline infrastructure.⁹¹ Uzbekistan is not only a conduit for Chinese overland imports of Turkmen gas but, owing to its political control of the restive Fergana Valley, crucial for regional stability. Post-Soviet Central Asia has been an epicentre both for Islamic fundamentalism and the localized backlash against Chinese commercial expansionism. Yau and Van der Kley note ninety-seven anti-China protests in the region between 2017 and 2020, for the large part in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with attacks against Chinese interests and nationals, occurring mostly in the latter.⁹²

Kazakhstan has the most vibrant security market with over seven-thousand registered PSCs, and is the only country in the region that has a legal framework regulating PSCs on its territory. Kazakh regulators have also helped develop private security markets in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and

⁸⁶ Africa Intelligence, “Frontier Services Group, founded by Erik Prince, cashes in on Chinese mining and oil firms”, Article 6 Sep 2021, Africa Intelligence.com, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-africa/2021/09/06/frontier-services-group-founded-by-erik-prince-cashes-in-on-chinese-mining-and-oil-firms,109689058-art>. Gali Kurdistan Satellite TV (Sulaymaniyah), BBC Monitoring Iraq: Programme summary of Gali Kurdistan TV news 1300 GMT 28 April 19, BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f200s57u>. Scott Morgan, “China's (Other) Presence in Africa”, International Policy Digest (July 16 2020), <https://intpolicydigest.org/china-s-other-presence-in-africa/>. BBC Monitoring, “Security implications of attacks on Chinese citizens abroad”.

⁸⁷ Yau and Van Der Kley.

⁸⁸ Gerald Roche, “Transnational Carceral Capitalism in Xinjiang and Beyond”, Op Ed, Made in China Journal, https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n6844/pdf/transnational_carceral.pdf

⁸⁹ Christian Shephard, “Erik Prince had 'no knowledge' of training agreement in China's Xinjiang: spokesman”, Article 1 Feb 2019, Reuters.com, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang-idUSKCN1PQ4FJ> [Accessed 15 Aug]

⁹⁰ Yau and Van Der Kley, 4.

⁹¹ Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 143.

⁹² Niva Yau, China's Security Management Towards Central Asia, Foreign Policy Research Institute Eurasia Program, April 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/04/chinas-security-management-towards-central-asia/>.

Uzbekistan.⁹³ Xinjiang Shamo Tewe (SMTW), which is owned by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) and the largest in China's Western-most province, claims to have operated in Kazakhstan since 2013.⁹⁴ Nuctech is also active in Kazakhstan, and has reportedly provided training to customs and border officials, including at the Nur-Sultan international airport.⁹⁵ In Uzbekistan, a number of PSCs function openly but the government has not disclosed how these are regulated.⁹⁶ China Shield, which specializes in risk consulting and intelligence gathering, has hired former-employees from the Chinese embassy in Tashkent and concluded an agreement with a company that was formerly part of the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁹⁷ Another Chinese PSC reportedly active in Uzbekistan is China Security Technology Group (CSTG), incorporated in Hong Kong in 2016 and a member of the ICoCA. Also maintaining offices in Kenya, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Iraq and Mozambique, CSTG is the security supplier for China Oceanwide Online, an insurance platform targeting the Uzbek market.⁹⁸

Of the five Central Asian Republics however it is, as Yau and Van der Kley highlight in 2020, Kyrgyzstan where Chinese private security contractors are most active.⁹⁹ Kyrgyzstan's unique value as a case study for Chinese PSC activity overseas may be understood threefold. Firstly, market penetration relative to the country's size and population, is significant. So too is the security risk for Chinese citizens. Administrations in Bishkek have, since independence, struggled to enforce their jurisdiction across Kyrgyzstan's bifurcated alpine territory, and must contest power with local factions, religious organizations and criminal networks, under the shadow of overbearing neighbours. Finally, the two countries' proximity, separated only by a porous and historically-contested border, means that the normalization on Kyrgyz territory, of former PLA and PAP servicemen, some of whom have likely served in neighbouring Xinjiang, must be understood in an entirely different context to their presence in say, distant and maritime Sub-Saharan and East Africa.

The border demarcation process dominated early post-Soviet relations and modes of political and economic interaction evolved under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which grew out of the 'Shanghai Five' border agreements between Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰⁰ While popular antipathy towards the border settlement has endured, obliging public denials and even resignations from Kyrgyz officials, relations between the two governments have remained strong for most of the past two decades, albeit appearing more strained in the second half of the 2010s. The countries have signed a broad range of treaties, cooperated through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and China-plus-Central Asia forums, and have reciprocated visits by national and provincial-level officials. Xi has lauded Kyrgyz-

⁹³ Marat, *Regulating Private Security Companies in the Central Asian States*, Central Asia Policy Brief May 2012, The Elliot School of International Affairs, George Washington University, 2, http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Policy_Brief_1_May_2012.pdf

⁹⁴ Yau and Van Der Kley, 10.

⁹⁵ Nuctech News, Nuctech Corporate Website, <https://www.nuctech.com/en/SitePages/SeNormalPage.aspx?nk=ABOUT&k=NEWSCENTER&d=248>. Also Author's discussions with a third-party embassy in Kazakhstan, July 2023.

⁹⁶ Marat, *Regulating Private Security Companies in the Central Asian States*, 2.

⁹⁷ Yau and Van Der Kley, 9.

⁹⁸ Yau and Van Der Kley, 9. Zheng and Xia, pp.12-15. CSTG, "Mr. Tan Feng, President of the China Security Technology Group, is present at the opening ceremony of the Pakistan branch", CSTG Corporate Website News 1 Dec 2018, <http://www.cstghk.com/en/overseas/390.html>.

⁹⁹ Yau and Van Der Kley.

¹⁰⁰ Xinhua. "China and former Soviet neighbours exchange maps", Article 12 Jan 1996, Xinhua News Agency, BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/x001kawd>

BRI cooperation and all administrations in Bishkek since independence have affirmed the One China Policy and denounced 'separatism' in Xinjiang and Tibet as a matter of protocol. Kyrgyz officials have presented investment 'wish lists', proactively sought Chinese humanitarian aid after disturbances or disasters, and called for the establishment of an SCO Development Bank.¹⁰¹ Grant aid has been allocated directly at the ministry-to-ministry level as well as by individual Chinese companies to local authorities.¹⁰² In 2021, the Kyrgyz Prime Minister stated that China had agreed to restructure a portion of Kyrgyzstan's \$1.8 billion sovereign debt to its policy banks.¹⁰³

The keynote transportation and energy infrastructure investments that now account for the bulk of this debt, were agreed immediately before or after the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative. By 2011, Chinese companies had also secured licences to prospect a third of Kyrgyzstan's gold fields, including the country's second largest deposit at Altynken in the north of the country.¹⁰⁴ Chinese investors have financed a large number of smaller projects: the construction and rehabilitation of cement and stone-processing plants for example, consumer electronics and textile factories. Six hundred Chinese businesses were reported as operating in Kyrgyzstan in 2020, the majority of which were joint ventures.¹⁰⁵

Trade across the shared border dominated economic relations with China during the first decade of the Twenty-First Century. While Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EEU in 2014 decimated the sprawling re-export bazaar complexes in Bishkek and Osh that had benefitted from the country's early-WTO membership, the trade is understood to continue illicitly. Kyrgyz territory is also a transshipment hub for synthetic drugs, opioids and non-ferrous metals, and the opaque relationship between national politics and the Kyrgyz underworld has been exposed in recent years by the high-profile case of Raimbek Matraimov, a Kyrgyz smuggler, dismissed as Head of State Customs in 2016, but who has since emerged as a leading powerbroker.¹⁰⁶ Matraimov, who has publicly threatened Kyrgyz presidents and been linked to assassinations abroad, was briefly detained in 2021 on suspicion of using his Chinese business activities to conduct money laundering.¹⁰⁷

Along with the border settlement, the perceived-omnipresence of Chinese traders and businesses in Kyrgyzstan has been a major source of public animus comparable perhaps, only with that also

¹⁰¹ Tazabek, "Kyrgyzstan backs opening of Shanghai bloc development bank – premier", Article 29 Nov 2013, Tazabek website (Bishkek), <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/flbjlbn1>

¹⁰² 24kg, "Covid-19 Geopolitics: Kyrgyzstan gets Chinese aid worth nearly 6.8m dollars", 24Kg Website (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2024dnw>

¹⁰³ 24kg, "Kyrgyzstan to overpay 34m dollars as China restructures debt", 24.kg website (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c20277gy>

¹⁰⁴ BBC Monitoring "China's Uighur delegation in Kyrgyzstan to study mining prospects", Kyrgyz Media summary, BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/60039994>

¹⁰⁵ Kyrgyz National Television, Programme summary of Kyrgyz TV 'Ala-Too' news 1300 gmt 2 Dec 20, BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2027r3f>

¹⁰⁶ Vesti, "Kyrgyz police alarmed by synthetic drugs from China", Article 27 Feb 2018, Vesti.kg (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dovzj1>

¹⁰⁷ Vesti, "Kyrgyz MP rejects corruption allegations against brother", Article 22 Nov 2019, Vesti.kg (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2019o51>. Kloop.kg, "Kyrgyz leader 'has become hostage' of influential ex-official", Article 17 Sep 2020, Kloop.kg (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2021q01>. Kloop, "Kyrgyz police bust group laundering money to China", Article 2 Nov 2020, Kloop.kg (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c20256sc>. Kaktus Media, "Kyrgyzstan drops criminal case against ex-customs official", Article 15 Apr 2021, Kaktus Media website (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c202i3v4>

witnessed in Kazakhstan. Since the early-2000s, Chinese nationals and businesses have been the targets of assassinations, kidnappings, mutilation, arson and industrial action, including the obstruction of the arterial roads leading to the Chinese border. The Kyrgyz have protested the poor quality of Chinese products, environmental damage caused by Chinese trucks and businesses, the privileged status of Chinese traders and intermarriage with Kyrgyz women. According to an Oxus Society report, over fifty-six anti-Chinese protests have taken place since January 2018, including during the pandemic, when Kyrgyz MPs called for spot checks on all-Chinese nationals in country, as well as during the so-called 'October Revolution' of 2020, when Chinese workers at the Ishtamberdy mine were expelled by protestors.¹⁰⁸

Kyrgyz authorities have been obliged therefore to balance this animosity, partly historical but undoubtedly perpetuated by Russian-language media, with their appetite for Chinese capital. Kyrgyz officials have deported Chinese workers for visa violations, suspended operations at Chinese mines and in 2016 arrested the director of the Chinese-owned Zhongda refinery on corruption charges.¹⁰⁹ The government also drastically scaled down a 2018 'smart city' surveillance project with Huawei Technologies, following public outcry.¹¹⁰ Yet officials have also publicly defended China's economic role in the country and repeatedly guaranteed the security of investments. While Kyrgyz civic society is still considered the freest in Central Asia, the authorities have gradually reduced the public space available for Uighur advocacy groups and organizations.¹¹¹

Like the other four Central Asian Republics, Kyrgyzstan's security relationship with China is quite different from that which the country maintains with the Russian Federation. Defence engagement, materiel and aid has focused almost exclusively on border security and arms sales do not challenge Russian dominance of Kyrgyz inventories, itself a relatively modest market.¹¹² Since the two countries conducted their inaugural bilateral exercise in 2002 - China's first overseas, ministers, Chiefs of Staff and other defence officials have made regular visits to each other's capitals and to military installations on opposite sides of the border, a formality since the 1997 Shanghai Five agreement on border demilitarization. Commanders from the Lanzhou Military Region, renamed the Western Theatre Command in 2016, have consulted with regional governors in Osh and Naryn, and during the pandemic Kyrgyzstan was one of several armed forces which received medical aid directly from the Chinese Defence Ministry.¹¹³ While this was delivered by air, material aid to the Kyrgyz MoI and MoD, off road vehicles for example, has often been delivered across the Torugart and Irkeshtam Passes separating the two countries. The movement of Chinese military units across the border has

¹⁰⁸ Yau and Van Der Kley, 2. AKIPress, "Kyrgyz MP urges coronavirus checks on all ethnic Chinese", Article 26 Feb 2020, AKIPress news agency website (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201hm0k>. Turmush, "Kyrgyz villagers protest at Chinese workers returned from quarantine", 17 Mar 2020 Turmush (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201jl4j>

¹⁰⁹ Tazabek, "Envoy points to some gaps in Kyrgyz laws after Chinese firm's alleged violations", Article 30 Nov 2012, Tazabek website (Bishkek), <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/flaukmua>. KyrTag, "Chinese businessman's arrest may worsen investment ties - Kyrgyz expert", 25 Jan 2016, KyrTAG (www.kyrtag.kg) (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/60129942>

¹¹⁰ AKIPress, "Kyrgyzstan annuls smart city project deal with Chinese firms", Article 14 Mar 2018, AKIPress news agency website (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1doylz3>

¹¹¹ BBC Monitoring, "Kyrgyz sympathy for Uighur separatists", Article, 14 Mar 1997, Kyrgyz Emergency Code 1, BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/r002or0m>

¹¹² AKIPress, "Deputy defence chief says Kyrgyzstan to buy military drones", Article 6 Apr 2021, AKIPress news agency website (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c202hgs0>

¹¹³ KyrTag, "Covid-19 Geopolitics: Kyrgyz army gets medical aid from China", Article 18 May 2020, KyrTAG (www.kyrtag.kg) (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201q9e5>

also been normalized by regular bilateral or multi-lateral counter-terrorism training exercises under the SCO.

The extraction by chartered civilian aircraft of more than a thousand citizens from Kyrgyzstan in 2010, was a milestone in the development of China's non-combatant evacuation operations. This was the first time that an embassy had coordinated the evacuation of a large number of Chinese nationals from a hostile environment, in this instance, brutal sectarian pogroms in the south of the country. The aftermath saw a consulate established in Osh and Chinese defence writers calling for further 'military measures' to protect citizens and expatriates abroad.¹¹⁴ Unlike in neighbouring Tajikistan, China has not stationed PLA or PAP servicemen on Kyrgyz territory. In 2005, the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that it would give serious consideration to what was perceived as a request for a Chinese base, in the form of an SCO mission, in Southern Kyrgyzstan by then-acting president Bakiyev, in order to manage a possible spillover of instability from the Uzbek Fergana.¹¹⁵ Rumours of an imminent Chinese base in the south then re-emerged in 2015 as the United States withdrew from the country. Beijing was a vociferous opponent of the USAF tenure at Manas Air Base, which it perceived as a strategic threat to Xinjiang, and had pressured Kyrgyz MPs to end it.¹¹⁶

The Zhongjun Junhong Group

In both 2005 and 2015, the establishment of a permanent military facility would have contradicted the CCP's principled position on the construction of overseas bases. Yet Kyrgyzstan remains well inside China's strategic periphery. The SCO consensus on the 'three evils', forms the basis of Sino-Kyrgyz defence diplomacy and iterations of the One China Policy, have been echoed by public support from every Chinese leader since Jiang Zemin, for Kyrgyz 'sovereignty'. This has often come at crucial junctures: border infiltrations or periods of instability, as well as during Kyrgyzstan's recent skirmishes with Tajikistan, when after an earlier statement of support, the Chinese ambassador in Bishkek was obliged to confirm that Beijing was not taking sides.¹¹⁷ In his address to the China Plus Central Asia (C+C5) Forum in 2021, Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed an ambition to tap the potential of the global private security market and offered Central Asian countries assistance in both 'traditional and non-traditional forms of security', a juxtaposition that leaves the role of China's PSCs in the region open to interpretation.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Global Times, "Chinese military scholar suggests ways to deploy PLA forces overseas", Article 29 Jun 2010, Huanqiu Shibao (Global Times) website (Beijing), BBC Monitoring

<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m18yoa1r>

¹¹⁵ Ta Kung Pao, "Spokesman says China to consider sending troops to Kyrgyzstan", Article 30 May 2005, Ta Kung Pao website (Hong Kong), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m13uxqv>

¹¹⁶ Kyrgyz Public Education TV, "Kyrgyz Public Educational Radio and TV "Apta" programme summary 1400 gmt 9 Jul", Kyrgyz public educational TV 9 Jul 2005, BBC Monitoring,

<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/50072157>. People's Daily, "China urges US military to withdraw from air base in Kyrgyzstan", Article 15 Jun 2007, Renmin Ribao website (Beijing), BBC Monitoring,

<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m15gwqkx>

¹¹⁷ CCTV, "China 'highly concerned' by Kyrgyzstan's domestic situation", China Global Television Network (CGTN) website (Beijing) 17 Oct 2020, BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/f2023s20>.

AKIPress, "Chinese envoy denies supporting Kyrgyzstan in Tajik conflict", Article 22 Sep 2022, AKIPress news agency website (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203rf52>

¹¹⁸ BBC Monitoring, "Security implications of attacks on Chinese citizens abroad".

A report by Erica Marat in 2012 put the number of PSCs registered in the country at three hundred and fifty, with roughly fifty active, providing personal bodyguard services and protecting property from gas stations to supermarkets.¹¹⁹ An attempt to legislate stricter control of firearms in 1996, followed the Russian and Kazakh leads, but its effectiveness varies widely across the country.¹²⁰ Successive episodes of instability, also lead to a rise in the use of neighbourhood militias, including in the capital Bishkek.¹²¹ Indeed, largely due to the poor performance of local police during the 2010 riots, attempts were made to reform and downsize the service, expanding the pool of recruits for the security industry.¹²²

In 2019, Niva Yau gives the figure of four hundred local PSCs, presumably including some inactive.¹²³ In the same year, the Kyrgyz news website Kaktus Media dismissed stories of Chinese PSCs in Kyrgyzstan as unsubstantiated fabrications by the Russian media, corroborated by the Kyrgyz government as ‘groundless’ reports.¹²⁴ Writing for *The Diplomat* in 2021, Paul Goble notes the attention the subject has received from Russian analysts, but states that Chinese ‘private military companies have not yet appeared in Kyrgyzstan’.¹²⁵ In both cases, plausible deniability is contingent on the use of the term ‘military’ company and whether the contractors in the employ of Chinese PSCs are Chinese nationals or local Kyrgyz, but this was nevertheless an unusual remark to make as an abundance of evidence points to the presence of Chinese PSCs, the Zhongjun Junhong Group (ZJG) in particular, on Kyrgyz soil since at least 2016. In 2019, only Zhongjun Junhong and the China Security and Protection Group (CSPG) are given by Niva Yau as operating in Kyrgyzstan.¹²⁶ Yau and Van Der Kley again list CSPG in their 2020 report for the Oxus Society. While described as being linked with the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) and present in other markets such as Laos and Cambodia, the authors are uncertain however as to whether CSPG is active in Kyrgyzstan despite having reportedly established an office there in 2013.¹²⁷

The Zhongjun Junhong Group was founded in 2010 by Wu Guohua, a former PLA Colonel. Born in 1955 in Southern Beijing, Wu is two years younger than Xi Jinping. Wu’s son has described his grandfather’s eldest brother as one of the ‘earliest revolutionary soldiers’ and Wu Guohua may be considered a ‘princeling’ in this sense.¹²⁸ At age fifteen, Wu joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and, graduating from the PLA Armoured Corps Academy, would go on to fight in the Sino-Vietnamese War and take part in the seminal ‘802’ military exercises in Northern China in 1982. In October 1990, he attained regimental command within the 65th Group Army.¹²⁹ Wu’s Baidu profile

¹¹⁹ Marat, *Regulating Private Security Companies in the Central Asian States*, 3.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ Niva Yau, ‘Chinese Private Security Moves Into Central Asia’, Article 3 Jul 2019, *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/chinese-private-security-moves-into-central-asia/> [Accessed 5 Aug 2023]

¹²⁴ Kaktus Media, ‘Kyrgyzstan denies China to send security guards for investors’, Article 26 Aug 2019, Kaktus Media website (Bishkek), BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201111i>. Kyrgyz Television 1, ‘Programme summary of Kyrgyz TV ‘Ala-Too’ news 1300 gmt 26 Aug 19’, Kyrgyz Television 1 (Bishkek) 26 Aug 2019, BBC Monitoring, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2011mbd>

¹²⁵ Paul Goble, ‘Is China About to Deploy Private Military Companies in Central Asia?’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 18 Issue: 49 (2021), <https://jamestown.org/program/is-china-about-to-deploy-private-military-companies-in-central-asia/> [Accessed 15 Aug 2023]

¹²⁶ Yau, ‘Chinese Private Security Moves Into Central Asia’.

¹²⁷ Yau and Van Der Kley, 10.

¹²⁸ Zhongjun Junhong, ‘Wu Xueyan, general manager of China Junhong Group, was elected as the 2022 Beijing Role Model annual list’, Article 18th Jan 2023, Zhongjun Junhong Website <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/366> [Accessed 10 Aug 2023]

¹²⁹ Baidu, Wu GuoHua’s Baidu Profile, Baidu.com, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%90%B4%E5%9B%BD%E5%8D%8E/19067419> [Accessed 5 Aug 2023]

also states that he participated in the ‘the organization and command work of Beijing's quelling of counter-revolutionary riots’, in Tiananmen Square in 1989, presumably as a Lieutenant Colonel. The 65th Group Army, now the 81st, was one of several formations that infiltrated the city covertly and assembled in the Great Hall of the People before spilling out onto the square.¹³⁰

In 1997, Wu transferred to the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau and also participated in security work for the 2008 Olympics. Zhongjun Junhong was formed out of the Beijing Security Services Group, a company established within the PAP to protect SOEs in China.¹³¹ Wu is described as the chairman of ZJG, and has appeared at numerous security sector fora in China.¹³² His son Wu Xueyan, also plays an important role in the company. A law graduate who describes himself as being born into a family of ‘revolutionary soldiers’, Wu Xueyan is referred to as ZJG’s ‘general manager’ and is a public face for the company, appearing on state television and giving interviews.¹³³ In 2023, he was awarded the honour of ‘top ten role model for young people’, a theme activity hosted by the Propaganda Department of the CCP’s Beijing Municipal Committee.¹³⁴

Various news articles authored by the company make inconsistent references to sixteen subsidiaries, forty-four and even a hundred branches across China.¹³⁵ The ZJG website advertises personal bodyguard services, metro and bus station security, security provision at shopping malls and at upscale residences.¹³⁶ ZJG has provided security and site surveillance for the Asian games, the 2022 Winter Olympics, National People’s Congress, APEC summit as well as the 60th and 70th Anniversary Day parades.¹³⁷ The company also responded to the flooding disaster in Henan Province in 2021, donating materials and participating in flood prevention and rescue activities.¹³⁸

The group’s core business is maritime escort. This is so innate to corporate culture that in articles relating to activity in other sectors, employees of the company continue to refer to themselves as ‘Sea Guards’ or ‘Coast Guards’. Zhongjun Junhong is a member of the Maritime Security of the China Shipbuilding Association and its website claims that it has built eleven maritime escort support bases

¹³⁰ Baidu, Wu GuoHua’s Baidu Profile.

¹³¹ Baidu, Wu GuoHua’s Baidu Profile. Yau and Van Der Kley, 7.

¹³² Baidu, Wu GuoHua’s Baidu Profile.

¹³³ Zhongjun Junhong, “Wu Xueyan, general manager of China Junhong Group, was elected as the 2022 Beijing Role Model annual list”.

¹³⁴ Zhongjun Junhong, “Wu Xueyan, general manager of China Junhong Group, was elected as the 2022 Beijing Role Model annual list”.

¹³⁵ Zhongjun Junhong, “Wu Xueyan, general manager of China Junhong Group, was elected as the 2022 Beijing Role Model annual list”. Zhongjun Junhong, ““China Security” special report: Under the "Belt and Road" initiative, the Chinese military "going out" Junhong!, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website Article 27th April 2019, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/208> [Accessed 11 Aug 2023]. Hai Wei, ‘Security Agency Hai Wei’, Hai Wei Facebook Page, Facebook.com, https://www.facebook.com/haiwei.kg/?locale=en_GB

¹³⁶ Zhongjun Junhong, “The Chinese Junhong Group plans to build a second operation system based on Tianjin”, Article 22nd Oct 2020, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/311> [Accessed 17 Aug 2023]

¹³⁷ Zhongjun Junhong, “Wu Xueyan, general manager of China Junhong Group, was elected as the 2022 Beijing Role Model annual list”. Zhongjun Junhong, “The Chinese military has successfully completed the task of supporting the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, and once again displayed his heroic sons and daughters”, Article 24th March 2022, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/353> [Accessed 6 Aug 2023]. Hai Wei, Corporate video on Hai Wei Security Services’ Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/haiwei.kg/?locale=en_GB [Accessed 19 Aug 2023].

¹³⁸ Zhongjun Junhong, “The Chinese Junhong Group rushed to the aid of Henan's disaster-stricken areas, donated materials and participated in flood prevention and rescue activities”, Article 29th Jul 2021, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/342> [Accessed 29 Jul 2023]

in Belt and Road countries.¹³⁹ The company has reportedly set up four branches in Tianjin and was seeking to establish an ‘operations command centre’ in the port, presumably for maritime operations.¹⁴⁰ Wu Guohua has also interacted with the Hong Kong Ship Owners Association and in 2019, was invited to meet with the Taiwan Security Association, to discuss protection of the island’s ocean-going fishing vessels, the safety of China-Europe freight trains and the protection of Taiwanese businessmen on the mainland.¹⁴¹ During his visit Wu met with the Chief of Taiwan Aviation Police and the Deputy Director of the Kaohsiung Party Department of the Kuomintang.¹⁴²

Like the Frontier Services Group, ZJG has embraced the Belt and Road Initiative writ large. Executives, including Wu Guohua, have represented the company at Belt and Road seminars in China and hosted and engaged with foreign delegations in Beijing, the African Union in 2015 for example, and the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2018.¹⁴³ In 2019, ZJG featured on the front cover of *China Security Magazine*, with the caption ‘Under the Belt and Road initiative, the Chinese Military going out Junhong!’.¹⁴⁴ The company is a member of the Overseas Investment Union of the Investment Association of China, an industry association with more than two thousand members as well as the China Overseas Investment Federation (CIIA).¹⁴⁵ ZJG also claims to have established a professional standard setting body, *Overseas Security Guardians*, jointly with the China Overseas Investment Union, for the ‘in-depth advancing of national One Belt and One Road strategy’, appearing to offer a three-tier certification system.¹⁴⁶

In 2023, the company’s website states that the company has fifteen overseas liaison offices and operations in thirty-three countries.¹⁴⁷ Articles on the company’s website mentions activity in Cambodia, Somalia, Kenya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Mozambique and the UAE.¹⁴⁸ The company is very active in Laos, and its role in preventing an armed robbery in 2023, received considerable amplification in Chinese media.¹⁴⁹ Where the company discusses its onshore operations, Kyrgyzstan

¹³⁹ Zhongjun Junhong, “China Railway Construction Group signed a Eurasian strategic cooperation agreement with China Junhong Group”, Article 19 Nov 2018, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/184> [Accessed 15 Aug 2023]

¹⁴⁰ Zhongjun Junhong, “The Chinese Junhong Group plans to build a second operation system based on Tianjin”.

¹⁴¹ Zhongjun Junhong, “The two sides of the strait join hands to jointly protect the New Silk Road”, Article 31 Aug 2019, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/222> [Accessed 19 Aug 2023]. Baidu, Wu GuoHua’s Baidu Profile.

¹⁴² Zhongjun Junhong, “The two sides of the strait join hands to jointly protect the New Silk Road”.

¹⁴³ Overseas Guardians Junhong, “China Military Junhong Group participated in the 2016 Chinese Enterprises Going Global Risk Conference and the Belt and Road Risk Management Forum”, Article 28th March 2016, Overseas Guardians Junhong Corporate Website, <http://www.osgjh.com/news/jituanayaowen/27.html> [Accessed 7 Aug 2023] Baidu, Wu GuoHua’s Baidu Profile.

¹⁴⁴ Zhongjun Junhong, “China Security special report: Under the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese military going out Junhong!”

¹⁴⁵ Hai Wei, Corporate video on Hai Wei Security Services’ Facebook page. Baidu, Wu GuoHua’s Baidu Profile.

¹⁴⁶ Overseas Guardians Junhong, “About Us: Galloping Globe, Guarding Hope”, Overseas Guardians Junhong Corporate Website, <http://www.osgjh.com/en/about/15.html> [Accessed 10 Aug 2023]

¹⁴⁷ Zhongjun Junhong, “Company Introduction”, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/> [Accessed 1 Aug 2023]

¹⁴⁸ Zhongjun Junhong, “Silk Road New Observer bilingually published in Chinese and Russian, the Kyrgyzstan Security Company of the Group’s Hai Guard takes root in Kyrgyzstan to escort Chinese-funded enterprises”, Article 21st Sep 2016, Zhongjun Junhong Company Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/> [Accessed 17 Aug 2023]. Baidu, Wu GuoHua’s Baidu Profile. Zhongjun Junhong, “Wu Xueyan, general manager of China Junhong Group, was elected as the 2022 Beijing Role Model annual list”.

¹⁴⁹ Zhongjun Junhong, “The deeds of the Honghai Guard of the Chinese Army guarding the China-Laos Railway have been reprinted by various media, causing strong concern in the society”, Article 26th Jun 2023, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <http://www.osgjh.com/news/jituanayaowen/66.html> [Accessed 31 Jul 2023]

is typically mentioned at the top of country lists, implying its significance as a market. The website describes Kyrgyzstan as its 'bridgehead base' promoting the 'development plan of Central Asia', suggesting specific regional ambitions under the Silk Road Economic Belt.¹⁵⁰ ZJG is thought to have branched into Kyrgyzstan in December 2015, with a staff of just under three hundred.¹⁵¹ Triton Security Service Liability Company, a ZJG subsidiary operating in Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Pakistan and other countries, then signed a memorandum of security work with the Kyrgyz Interior Ministry and the joint venture, 'Hai Wei', meaning simply 'overseas' in Mandarin, was approved for a local weapons license.¹⁵²

In 2019, Niva Yau cited an article by the MPS published in *China Security* magazine, which stated that in the three years since Zhongjun Junhong had established itself in Kyrgyzstan it had secured more than twenty clients.¹⁵³ The list provided is given again in Yau's 2020 report and includes a number of SOEs as well as the Chinese embassy in Bishkek. Zhongjun Junhong was said to have signed an agreement in 2018, with China Railway No.5 Engineering Group to safeguard construction sites along the long-anticipated China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway.¹⁵⁴ This project has been under trilateral negotiation for more than twenty years and the signing of yet another agreement at the 2022 SCO Summit in Samarkand, has perpetuated an all-too-familiar optimism that construction of the railway is imminent. Unlike Huawei's laying of fibre-optic cables across the same border, which reduced Bishkek's internet dependence on Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation, the Sino-Uzbek proposal has been regarded as a threat to national sovereignty by Kyrgyz officials who have petitioned for a different route that incorporates the country's northern provinces.

There is evidence to suggest that Zhongjun Junhong is already providing security for China Railway in Southern Kyrgyzstan.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, articles on the company's website indicate that ZJG has taken a commercial stake in a special-purpose cement plant venture supporting the railroad's construction.¹⁵⁶ Wu Guohua is photographed visiting this plant in 2019, flanked by Hai Wei guards carrying folding-stock automatic shotguns.¹⁵⁷ In 2023, the general manager of ZJG's Overseas Security Business Centre in Beijing, visited the site to inspect security provision and meet with China Railway's chief engineer.¹⁵⁸ The visit also encompassed the inspection of ZJG contractors at a project operated by Fujian-based Zijin Mining, likely the Altynken gold mine, in which Zijin has a sixty percent share.¹⁵⁹ Yau and Van der Kley's 2020 report references a photograph from *China Security* magazine showing two unarmed ZJG security guards at the Altynken site.¹⁶⁰

As of 2023, Zhongjun Junhong were providing basic perimeter security services for the Zhongda refinery in Kara-Balta, the largest Chinese investment in the country, owned by Shanxi Coal and

¹⁵⁰ Zhongjun Junhong, "Kyrgyzstan coast guard, follow the trend, improve quality and efficiency, layout Central Asia!", Article 8 Jul 2019, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/200> [Accessed 3 Aug 2023]

¹⁵¹ Yau, "Chinese Private Security Moves Into Central Asia".

¹⁵² Zhongjun Junhong, "Silk Road New Observer bilingually published in Chinese and Russian"

¹⁵³ Yau, "Chinese Private Security Moves Into Central Asia".

¹⁵⁴ Yau, "Chinese Private Security Moves Into Central Asia".

¹⁵⁵ Zhongjun Junhong, "China Railway Construction Group signed a Eurasian strategic cooperation agreement with China Junhong Group".

¹⁵⁶ Zhongjun Junhong, "China Railway Construction Group signed a Eurasian strategic cooperation agreement with China Junhong Group".

¹⁵⁷ Zhongjun Junhong, "Kyrgyzstan coast guard, follow the trend".

¹⁵⁸ Zhongjun Junhong, "China Railway Construction Group signed a Eurasian strategic cooperation agreement with China Junhong Group".

¹⁵⁹ Zhongjun Junhong, "Su Li, general manager of the overseas security business center, went to Kyrgyzstan to investigate and guide the work", Article 1 Jun 2016, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/384> [Accessed 9 Aug 2023]

¹⁶⁰ Yau and Van Der Kley, 8.

Chemical Industry, and the second-largest tax-payer in Kyrgyzstan in 2019. Zhongda has been the target of local protests and the site has been one of several Chinese enterprises raided by Kyrgyz nationalist groups.¹⁶¹ Both gate-post guards interviewed by the author at Zhongda, one in his sixties and the other a teenager, were alone, unarmed and wearing generic combat fatigues with no insignia. Both claimed to be locals from Kara-Balta in the employ of Zhongjun Junhong. The author encountered a similar picture at the country's second Chinese-owned refinery at Tokmok which, like Zhongda, has been idle for a number of years, allegedly due to a political contretemps that emerged over the imports of oil from Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation.¹⁶²

Site security at Alтынken however was of a different order with professional guards in their thirties, armed with pistols and overseeing the site's vehicle check-point. The two-man guard team also wore no corporate insignia but claimed to be employees of Zhongjun Junhong. The difference in posture can be explained by the relative remoteness of the mine by contrast with the two suburban refineries, where local police are more able to respond to contingencies. A target for local animosity since its construction in 2012, ZJG would be required to defend Alтынken's employees and property in the event of civil disturbance or a serious attempt to steal unrefined ore. Given the range of armaments available to Kyrgyzstan's numerous criminal syndicates, it is assessed highly likely that ZJG contractors maintain a store of automatic weapons at the Alтынken site.

An article that appeared on the Chinese news website Sohu.com in 2020 but which was subsequently removed, purports to show a diary written by a Zhongjun Junhong employee and while unverified, offers some insight into the company's day-to-day operations in Kyrgyzstan. The entry, the only one in what its author anticipated would be a series, recounts a daily routine in October 2020, one week after protestors in Ala-Too Square in Bishkek stormed a number of government offices.¹⁶³ The contractor alludes to the news of political chaos unfolding in the capital and boasts that members of the 'Sea Guard' were 'on the front line sticking to their posts'.¹⁶⁴ He gives his location as a gold mine near Alabuka, in South-Western Kyrgyzstan, where there are several deposits owned by Chinese companies, including Full Gold Mining, which in 2009 received concessions in return for rehabilitating the Osh-Irkeshtam road. Both the author of the diary and the other member of his two-man security detail, are Chinese nationals, and he states that he had previously worked as a security contractor in Iraq. The account describes the road-mobile escort of 'Chairman Haujin', likely a site manager, to a meeting with a newly-appointed local chief of police.¹⁶⁵

The diary entry also gives some insight into the weapons used by Zhongjun Junhong in Kyrgyzstan. In 2019, Yau stated that the group overcame restrictions on firearms due to the removal of nationality restrictions for weapons carriage, on their government-approved licence.¹⁶⁶ In her 2020 report however she states that it was the establishment of a local joint venture, presumably Hai Wei, that overcame this restriction.¹⁶⁷ According to an article on the company's website, the Kyrgyz Interior Ministry issued a licence in July 2016, authorizing the possession and use of helicopter gunships,

¹⁶¹ Aizat Shailoobek Kyzy, "What a Kyrgyzstan oil refinery reveals about China's Belt and Road Initiative", Article 9 Jun 2021, GlobalVoices.org, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/06/09/what-a-kyrgyzstan-oil-refinery-tells-us-or-doesnt-tell-us-about-chinas-bri/> [Accessed 2 Aug 2023].

¹⁶² Kabar, "Oil refineries idle in Kyrgyzstan – Mamatomorov", Article 24 Jun 2021, Kabar Kyrgyz National New Agency, <http://en.kabar.kg/news/oil-refineries-idle-in-kyrgyzstan-mamatomorov/> [Accessed 31 Aug 2023]

¹⁶³ Unnamed Zhongjun Junhong Contractor, "The Chinese Army Honghai Guards escort the New Silk Road and continue to write a new chapter for the heroes and children of the new era (issue 7)", Article 1st Nov 2020, Sohu.com [Accessed Nov 2020 – since removed but the Author retains an archived copy]

¹⁶⁴ Unnamed Zhongjun Junhong Contractor, "The Chinese Army Honghai Guards escort the New Silk Road".

¹⁶⁵ Unnamed Zhongjun Junhong Contractor, "The Chinese Army Honghai Guards escort the New Silk Road".

¹⁶⁶ Yau, "Chinese Private Security Moves Into Central Asia".

¹⁶⁷ Yau and Van Der Kley, 7.

light armoured vehicles, 100mm light artillery and light weapons of various types.¹⁶⁸ The same article displays two photographs of men in unmarked combat fatigues appearing to train with a first-generation Chinese Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC), the type 63, at an undulating temperate location - undisclosed but unlikely to be on Kyrgyz territory. The ZJG corporate video on Hai Wei's Facebook page also claims that Zhongjun Junhong is equipped with attack helicopters and artillery, but does not indicate in which country.¹⁶⁹

The weapons' licence, photographed and displayed in the article however, permits only limited quantities of short-barrelled weapons, traumatic weapons and smooth-bore weapons.¹⁷⁰ The first batch of weapons stated by the same article as being 'in country', was comprised of only twenty sniper rifles, two submachine guns, and ten pistols, with only folding-stock Saiga automatic shotguns and Makarov pistols visible in the accompanying photographs.¹⁷¹ Another article in 2018 states that the company has its own pistols, submachine guns, sniper rifles and 'armoured protective vehicles' in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁷² According to Yau's 2019 article weapons used by the group are brought in from China.¹⁷³ This would likely be via a logistics centre in Kashgar and the Torugart and Irkeshtam passes. Interestingly however, while the contractor describes his shotgun as a 'Sig-Sauer', the weapons visible in the photographs given in the diary entry as well as in the photograph of Wu Guohua, are Saiga-12 and Saiga 410k magazine-fed automatic shotguns, Russian in origin and also used by the Kyrgyz police.¹⁷⁴ This is the only instance the author can identify in which Chinese nationals are providing armed escort services in Kyrgyzstan though it is highly likely that this contractor's account is indicative of arrangements at other mines, particularly in Southern Kyrgyzstan.

Yau and Van der Kley state that ZJG has supported local Kyrgyz police as well as the national prison system and the company's website boasts that it has 'brilliantly handled a number of major lawless infringement incidents' in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁷⁵ Kyrgyz Mol officials have made public statements thanking ZJG and made visits to site locations, similar to praise the company has received in Laos.¹⁷⁶ ZJG executives enjoy routine contact with the Chinese diplomatic mission in Bishkek and the company claims to have assisted collecting evidence from the scene of the 2016 suicide attack on the Chinese embassy.¹⁷⁷ Slightly smaller than the US embassy to which it is immediately adjacent, the Chinese embassy is, relative to the size of the diplomatic mission, a fortress. A post-2016 renovation now encompasses fifteen-metre high reinforced walls and with layered-perimeter security provided by

¹⁶⁸ Overseas Guardians Junhong, "Coast Guard (Kyrgyzstan) company weapons and equipment are in place", Article 21 Jul 2016, Overseas Guardian Junhong Corporate Website, <http://www.osgjh.com/news/jitunyaowen/36.html> [Accessed 15 Aug 2023]

¹⁶⁹ Zhongjun Junhong, "Overseas Security Guardians", Corporate Video Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Video posted on Hai Wei Security Services Facebook page (2017), https://www.facebook.com/haiwei.kg/?locale=en_GB [Accessed 9 Aug 2023]

¹⁷⁰ Overseas Guardians Junhong, "Coast Guard (Kyrgyzstan) company weapons and equipment are in place"

¹⁷¹ Overseas Guardians Junhong, "Coast Guard (Kyrgyzstan) company weapons and equipment are in place"

¹⁷² Zhongjun Junhong, "China Railway Construction Group signed a Eurasian strategic cooperation agreement with China Junhong Group".

¹⁷³ Yau, "Chinese Private Security Moves Into Central Asia".

¹⁷⁴ Unnamed Zhongjun Junhong Contractor, "The Chinese Army Honghai Guards escort the New Silk Road".

¹⁷⁵ Zhongjun Junhong, "The Honghai Guard of the Chinese military organized security training for the Confucius Institute in Kyrgyzstan to improve its ability to resist overseas risks", Article 24 May 2022, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/358> [Accessed 1 Aug 2023]

¹⁷⁶ Zhongjun Junhong, "Leaders of the public security departments of Kyrgyzstan and Laos expressed their condolences to the Chinese military Honghaiwei to support China's fight against the new crown pneumonia epidemic", Article 17th Feb 2020, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/Sea/show/id/84> [Accessed 8 Aug 2023]

¹⁷⁷ Zhongjun Junhong, "China Railway Construction Group signed a Eurasian strategic cooperation agreement with China Junhong Group".

the Kyrgyz Mol. As observed by the author in 2023, Hai Wei contractors, unarmed but in formal Hai Wei service uniform, appeared to be providing rapid response and vehicle escort services.

Hai Wei's business address is given on its Facebook page as an industrial park in West Bishkek. A walled compound matching the approximate address was conspicuous for the presence of an unmanned guardroom, the absence of any corporate markings and a high-powered communications mast with an assessed range of one hundred kilometres. It is likely therefore that Hai Wei maintains a mobile communications network not only around the city, enabling rapid response to locations such as the Zhunghai bazaar where Chinese citizens have been the targets of criminal and mob attacks in the past, but also out to Chinese-operated sites in Northern Kyrgyzstan, the two refineries for example and Alтынken. With the placement of repeater stations, the observed communications mast, could in theory, sustain operational communications with Southern Kyrgyzstan two hundred miles away. Such is the terrain and transportation network of the country however, that in any event ZIG teams in Southern Kyrgyzstan could only be urgently reinforced from Bishkek, by air, Osh otherwise fourteen hours away by road. No corporate headquarter locations or safehouses, either in the North or the South of the country, are mentioned in articles on the company's website.

In 2022, ZIG reported that it had provided classroom-based security training to teachers at the Confucius Institute at the State University in Bishkek.¹⁷⁸ This came less than a month after a Confucius Institute was attacked in Pakistan. Two years' earlier during the pandemic, ZIG had delivered similar training to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Bishkek. While ZIG offers subscription based report services in the Chinese mainland, the delivery of this content online was, according to its website, a first for the company.¹⁷⁹ Other contracts mentioned by Yau and Van der Kley include security provision at car dealerships, the Jufeng Industry Group – another gold miner, as well as three schools in Bishkek, including the Antonovskaya Military education complex where the company provides video surveillance.¹⁸⁰ Chinese franchises where a contract with ZIG may be assumed but at Yau and Van der Kley's time of writing could not be evidenced are given as China National Gold Cooperation, TBEA, and the Central Asia Gas Pipeline Company.¹⁸¹

Conclusion

The case of Zhongjun Junhong is an informative one for the study of Chinese PSCs abroad. Detailed information on the company and others like it remains difficult to obtain however. In the absence of the headline scandals that have plagued Chinese PSCs in Africa, what Yau describes as a conscious attempt to lower the profile of the company in Kyrgyzstan, implies a degree of sensitivity towards not only pre-existing local hostilities but the increasing portrayal of Chinese PSCs as a potential 'grey zone' threat in the second half of the last decade.¹⁸² This caution is consistent with Beijing's broader

¹⁷⁸ Zhongjun Junhong, "The Honghai Guard of the Chinese military organized security training for the Confucius Institute in Kyrgyzstan to improve its ability to resist overseas risks".

¹⁷⁹ Zhongjun Junhong, "Junhong was invited to organize special safety training for 28 Chinese enterprises of the China General Chamber of Commerce in Kyrgyzstan", Article 26th May 2020, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjhggroup.com/Home/News/show/id/294> [Accessed 19 Aug 2023]

¹⁸⁰ Yau and Van Der Kley, 7.

¹⁸¹ Yau and Van Der Kley, 8.

¹⁸² Asim Kashgarian, "Beijing Behind Rise of Chinese Private Security Companies Worldwide", Article 17 Nov 2021, VOA News, <https://www.voanews.com/a/analysts-beijing-behind-rise-of-chinese-private-security-companies-worldwide-/6317444.html> [Accessed 10 Jul 2023]

policy towards a region integral to Xinjiang's long-term economic and political stability, and likely reflects direct pressure through party channels.

The modernization of China's armed forces and the absorption of the *Revolution in Military Affairs* into PLA doctrine, has replicated that observed in the United States in a number of ways and it must be recognized that the emergence of a vibrant overseas private security sector is entirely consistent with the country's status as a major military-industrial power. The case of ZJG in Kyrgyzstan however also offers some insight into the relationship between certain PSCs, their veteran PLA commanders and the Chinese Communist Party. The absence of 'direction by a state party' is one of the six parameters that define a mercenary under the Geneva conventions. While many PSCs around the world are founded, managed and staffed by former members of their respective national militaries, this distinction becomes increasingly blurred in the case of the Chinese Communist Party. The name 'Zhongjun Junhong' literally translates as 'Chinese Army Red Army' and the company's 'red' credentials are highly visible in its corporate statements and branding, which are replete with the lexicon of Marxist-Leninist-cum-Xin Jinping Thought on the subject of 'national rejuvenation'. Hai Wei's statements describes it as the 'Red Earth' security company, 'defending the Chinese Dream', and its employees as 'heroic sons and daughters', the inheritors of the 'red gene' who are perpetuating the 'red bloodline'.¹⁸³

During his time with the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau, Wu Guohua was an advanced Party Affairs Worker.¹⁸⁴ Zhongjun Junhong has a Party Committee and organizes educational sessions on Xi Jinping thought and the 'instructions and requirements of the higher-level party organizations'.¹⁸⁵ The group's staff in Beijing organize visits to CCP memorials and other sites with revolutionary cachet, the Shaanxi base areas for example, where Wu Xueyan has sponsored underprivileged children.¹⁸⁶ Wu Guohua has made working visits to Kyrgyzstan to implement the spirit of Xi's speeches, on the occasion of the 2019 SCO Summit for example, and the company's statements have also echoed key Foreign Ministry messaging in Central Asia, opposing Western sponsored 'peaceful evolution' and the 'three forces'.¹⁸⁷

Signalling loyalty to the party on China's corporate frontier, is by no means unique to the Zhongjun Junhong Group. What makes the company's presence in Kyrgyzstan significant beyond its ultra-nationalist rhetoric however, are its alleged-privileges with respect to the possession of light and heavy weapons and proximity to the Chinese border. In a country so vulnerable to centrifugal forces, it is unlikely that armed external actors are going to be able to remain isolated from local politics in the long-run. The conversation between the unnamed ZJG contractor and his partner recorded in

¹⁸³ Zhongjun Junhong, "The Chinese Army's Honghai Guard escorted the Silk Road in action", Article 19th Jun 2020, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/299> [Accessed 2 Aug 2023]

¹⁸⁴ Baidu, Wu GuoHua's Baidu Profile.

¹⁸⁵ Zhongjun Junhong, "The Party Committee of the Junhong Group of the Chinese Army carried out in-depth education on the theme of not forgetting the original intention and remembering the mission", Article 1 Jul 2019, Zhongjun Junhong Corporate Website, <https://www.zjjhgroup.com/Home/News/show/id/189> [Accessed 15 Aug 2023]. Overseas Guardians Junhong, "Coast Guard (Kyrgyzstan) company weapons and equipment are in place".

¹⁸⁶ Zhongjun Junhong, "The Party Committee of the Junhong Group of the Chinese Army carried out in-depth education on the theme of not forgetting the original intention and remembering the mission". Zhongjun Junhong, "Wu Xueyan, general manager of China Junhong Group, was elected as the 2022 Beijing Role Model annual list".

¹⁸⁷ Zhongjun Junhong, "Kyrgyzstan coast guard, follow the trend, improve quality and efficiency". Zhongjun Junhong, "The Honghai Guard of the Chinese military organized security training for the Confucius Institute in Kyrgyzstan to improve its ability to resist overseas risks"

the diary entry displays a reasonable understanding of local and national politics and even implies links between team members and the Kyrgyz criminal underworld.¹⁸⁸ The available evidence however suggests that Zhongjun Junhong is not yet a serious political actor in Kyrgyzstan, either independently or under direction from the embassy. The relationship between ZIG and the Kyrgyz Mol appears to be mutually-beneficial and its contractors, many of whom are local Kyrgyz, are not yet deployed in sufficient numbers to represent a challenge to the state or local factions. Indeed, the security contractor in the diary entry appears nervous when travelling by road in Southern Kyrgyzstan and laments how conspicuous he and his partner are as Chinese nationals.¹⁸⁹

The account however, also describes the handover of six employees of the mine, who had been arrested by local police for gold theft.¹⁹⁰ A photograph appears to show the contractor himself addressing, perhaps even reprimanding, the thieves, suggesting that the corporate client has delegated some level of community engagement to its security team. An article posted on the company's website in 2022 appears to describe ZIG employees, apparently unarmed, capturing a further nineteen thieves at Chinese-operated mines in Western Kyrgyzstan. The guard manager, in this case a Kyrgyz national, was rewarded with a cash payment of six thousand Kyrgyz Som, approximately seventy dollars.¹⁹¹

A 2021 report by Kemel Toktomushev and Saipira Furstenberg for the University of Central Asia, examining the relationship between gold mining and social conflict in Kyrgyzstan, included on-site research at the Ala-buka mines. While security contractors are not mentioned, the study notes that in addition to royalties paid at the national level, Chinese companies like Full Gold Mining make direct non-tax payments to regional development funds.¹⁹² The manner in which these funds are distributed has resulted in the villages closest to the mines benefitting the least from their development. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that the deep fissures highlighted in the report, will be exacerbated further still by the construction of the CKU railroad, setting the conditions for armed resistance and sabotage. Indeed, some of the Ala-Buka villagers interviewed in the study state that 'that only through conflict will the mining company and state bodies recognize them'.¹⁹³

In his 2021 article, Paul Goble speculates that Chinese 'Private Military Companies', and here he appears to acknowledge the PMC-PSC distinction, may yet be brought in as a 'scare tactic' to force Kyrgyz authorities to do more to protect Chinese interests.¹⁹⁴ Zhongjun Junhong's boasting about attack helicopters and light artillery is therefore perhaps more than mere bravado. Myanmar, where heavily-armed Chinese mercenaries have reportedly been involved in the country's sectarian conflict, offers at least one example of where 'grey zone' conflicts along China's border have the potential to escalate. In 2013, the director of the MPS anti-narcotics bureau admitted that his department had considered the use of drone strikes after the murder of thirteen Chinese sailors by a criminal gang.¹⁹⁵ In 2021, the Kyrgyz government nationalized the Centerra gold mine, the country's largest tax-payer and exporter, after nineteen years of Canadian ownership and management.

¹⁸⁸ Unnamed Zhongjun Junhong Contractor, "The Chinese Army Honghai Guards escort the New Silk Road".

¹⁸⁹ Unnamed Zhongjun Junhong Contractor, "The Chinese Army Honghai Guards escort the New Silk Road".

¹⁹⁰ Unnamed Zhongjun Junhong Contractor, "The Chinese Army Honghai Guards escort the New Silk Road".

¹⁹¹ Overseas Guardians Junhong, "The Kyrgyz Coast Guard braved hardships and dangers and worked hard to escort the New Silk Road", Article 28 Apr 2022, Overseas Guardians Junhong Corporate Website, <http://www.osgjh.com/news/sudi/61.html> [Accessed 30 Jul 2023]

¹⁹² Saipira Furstenberg and Kemel Toktomushev. "Understanding gold mining and social conflicts in Kyrgyzstan." University of Central Asia – Institute of Public Policy and Administration (IPPA) Working Paper №63, 2021, pp. 1-22, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3896275 [Accessed 1 Aug 2023]

¹⁹³ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Goble, "Is China About to Deploy Private Military Companies in Central Asia?"

¹⁹⁵ Duchâtel, Brauner and Zhou, 3.

Attempting to weigh how China would likely respond to the nationalization of the Alтынken mine, or another major investment, would be little more than speculation and taking into account the reputational risk, Beijing would likely opt for bilateral pressure at the track one level. The presence of heavily-armed PSCs at a facility like Alтынken however would mean that a Kyrgyz administration would be less likely to achieve a *fait accompli*, by taking physical control of the mine prior to negotiation.

China's political influence in Kyrgyzstan remains to some extent a function of its bilateral relationship with Moscow but the degree to which Beijing will show restraint in this regard had, even before the 2022 Ukraine conflict, been clouded by regulatory reform, force modernization and the trajectory of its overseas basing policy. As key nodes on the Silk Road Economic Belt, far from Moscow, with pronounced sub-national cleavages and substantial Chinese holdings of sovereign debt, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remain, *prima facie*, the Central Asian countries most likely to see an armed intervention or the establishment of a permanent military facility, if a serious threat to Chinese interests was identified. Russia's political legacy in the region is disproportionately reliant on its prestige as a military power and at the time of writing, the outcome of the Ukraine conflict and Russia's internal stability, remain crucial variables for the region's future. A negative outcome somewhere along a broad spectrum from international humiliation to the wholesale disintegration of the federation itself, will have significant consequences for Central Asia and China's role in the region. At the very least however, the Ukraine conflict may herald the end of Western 'grey zone' navel gazing and the recognition perhaps, as part of a renewed focus on great power politics, that during specific contingencies in certain cultural contexts, attempting to draw a distinction between state and private actors is meaningless. The relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and its patriotic PSCs may well fit this description.

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