Is this the center of the global economy?

China thinks it will be. By Ben Mauk
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China plans to convert a landlocked corner of Kazakhstan into an international shipping hub and free-trade zone.
Ben Mauk

“The Trillion-Dollar Nowhere.”
Page 34

Ben Mauk is a writer based in Berlin. His last article for the magazine explored life on a floating village in Cambodia. He was a finalist for the 2018 National Magazine Award in feature writing. This week he writes from the border of China and Kazakhstan, where Khorgos, a small pastoral village, has become a hub of the world’s largest infrastructure project. “I was struck by how vividly Khorgos embodies all these classic contradictions of globalization,” Mauk said. “Many of the people I talked to were excited about the promise of new jobs. At the same time, they complained about corruption, missing wages and the disappearance of relatives into prison camps in Xinjiang.”

Giles Harvey

“The Universalist.”
Page 26

Giles Harvey is a contributing writer for the magazine. His last article was a profile of the short-story writer Deborah Eisenberg.

Brook Larmer

On Money, Page 12

Brook Larmer is the magazine’s On Money columnist and a contributing writer. His last feature was about the tennis star Naomi Osaka.

Tejal Rao

Eat, Page 24

Tejal Rao is an Eat columnist for the magazine and the California restaurant critic for The Times. She has won two James Beard Foundation awards for restaurant criticism.

Jody Rosen

First Words, Page 9

Jody Rosen is a contributing writer for the magazine and is at work on a new book, “Two Wheels Good: A Bicycle History of the World.”

Lisa Sanders, M.D.

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Lisa Sanders is an internist and associate professor at the Yale School of Medicine. She writes the Diagnosis column, which is being developed into a Netflix documentary.

Bruce Schoenfeld

“Bet on It.”
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Bruce Schoenfeld is frequent contributor to the magazine. He last wrote about Mickey Callaway, the manager of the New York Mets.
THE LION-LAR
In the barely inhabited steppes of Central Asia, China is establishing the center of its campaign to dominate the global economy.
HERE

By Ben Mauk
Photographs by Andrea Frazzetta

Previous pages: The night train that runs between Almaty, Kazakhstan, and the eastern terminus, Altyndol. These pages: The Nurkent workers' settlement.
THE EURASIAN POLE of Inaccessibility is a striking name for an absence. It is the point farthest from a sea or ocean on the planet. Located in China just east of the border with Kazakhstan, the pole gets you a good distance from harbors and coastlines — at least 1,550 miles in any direction — into an expanse of white steppe and blue-beige mountain that is among the least populated places on earth. Here, among some of the last surviving pastoral nomads in Central Asia, nestled between two branches of the Tian Shan range on the edge of Kazakhstan, the largest infrastructure project in the history of the world is growing.

About 80 miles from the Pole of Inaccessibility, just across the border in Kazakhstan, is a village called Khorgos. It has spent most of its existence on the obscure periphery of international affairs, and its official population is just 998. But over the last few years, it has become an important node of the global economy. It is part of an initiative known informally as the new Silk Road, a China-led effort to build a vast cephalopodic network of highways, railroads and overseas shipping routes, supported by hundreds of new plants, pipelines and company towns in dozens of countries. Ultimately, the Belt and Road Initiative, or B.R.I., as the project is more formally known, will link China’s coastal factories and rising consumer class with Central, Southeast and South Asia; with the Gulf States and the Middle East; with Africa; and with Russia and all of Europe, all by way of a lattice of land and sea routes whose collective ambition boggles the mind.

Khorgos is a flagship project of this work in progress, an international shipping hub and free-trade zone that its promoters say is poised to become the next Dubai. Thanks to its location at the junction of the world’s soon-to-be-largest national economy and its largest landlocked country, Khorgos has become an unlikely harbinger of the interconnected planet: a zone fully enclosed by the logic of globalization, where goods flow freely across sovereign borders, following corridors designed to locate every human being on the planet within a totalizing network of producers and consumers, buyers and sellers.

Such victories of the global and industrial over the local, isolated and rural are heralded as the inevitable future — if there is to be a future — of our species. What would that future look like? Whom would it benefit? What would it cost? To find out, last July I caught a sleeper train from Almaty, Kazakhstan’s largest city, to the Chinese border, where I woke up in a train yard surrounded by desert.

KHORGOS IS ONE of a cluster of villages encircling a former trading post of the ancient world called Zharkent. From Zharkent, I hoped to arrange a ride to the border. Frescoes of camel caravans flanked the entrance gate on Silk Road Avenue. In a central square stood a rainbow-colored mosque with the sweeping eaves of a Chinese pagoda and an inscription in Uighur enjoining visitors not to forget their past. Next to the mosque was the warren of chopped-up shipping containers that serves as Zharkent’s central market. Taxi drivers hung unhopefully around the watermelon stands.

Among the drivers was a farmer named Nunur, who had come to Kazakhstan from China in 1962, when he was a young boy and Kazakhstan was a Soviet Socialist Republic. That year, more than 60,000 Chinese Uighurs and Kazakhs escaped to the Soviet Union, crossing with Soviet passports they received from the consulate in Xinjiang and with the apparent cooperation of Chinese border guards. Nunur remembered his parents walking him over red hills at night toward the checkpoint at Khorgos. “They opened the border and let us go into Soviet territory,” he recalled. There were rumors that his relatives who stayed behind were imprisoned or killed. (Nunur, fearing trouble from the authorities, asked that I use only his first name.) His parents, who had raised wheat in China, found work on a collective farm. His mother became a cook while his father learned to drive tractors and Nunur to repair them. He became an expert mechanic. “I’m a master without a diploma,” he said.

I asked Nunur to drive me to a place near the border where we could take in the booming hub of Khorgos at a glance. On the way, we passed his cornfields, apportioned to him after the breakup of the collective farm. Even as Kazakhstan modernized following its 1991 independence, growing rich by regional standards from the sale of oil and outfitting a new capital city with glossy architectural marvels, the eastern border with China remained sparsely developed, its economy dominated by livestock and grain production. Nunur said his village still had no indoor plumbing, and as we left his fields we passed some of the ruins of centralized planning the Soviets left behind: a former winery, a shuttered milk plant.

China’s plans are significantly more ambitious, and they reach far beyond eastern Kazakhstan. The “belt” of the B.R.I. refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt, a tangle of rail and highway routes currently vining their way untidily across the continent from eastern China to Scandinavia. The “road” is the Maritime Silk Road, a shipping lane that will connect Quanzhou to Venice, with prospective stops along the way in Malaysia, Ethiopia and Egypt. To date, at least 68 countries, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the planet’s total population, have signed on to bilateral projects partly funded by China’s policy banks and other state-owned enterprises. Chinese firms are building or investing in new highways and coal-fired power plants in Pakistan, ports in Greece and Sri Lanka, gas and oil pipelines in Central Asia, an industrial city in Oman and a $6 billion railway project in Laos, which in 2017 had a G.D.P. of less than $17 billion. China’s port holdings stretch from Myanmar to Israel and from Mauritius to Belgium. It has spent an estimated $200 billion on B.R.I. projects so far, mostly in Asia, and has implied it will spend a total of $1 trillion on hundreds of projects around the world in the coming years, dwarfing the Marshall Plan by roughly an order of magnitude. When the investments from all the participating countries are combined, the estimated cost rises to $8 trillion.

The B.R.I. is so big and multifarious that describing it can feel like trying to narrate the weather conditions of the entire planet. Some individual components span hundreds of miles and are themselves dauntingly complex and international, like the $68 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or the stalled and scandal-mired Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor. Taken as a whole, the B.R.I. is unfathomable. But I had heard that, at Khorgos, a pioneering outpost, I could get closer than anywhere else to appreciating the scope of its aspirations.

Nunur drove me through his village to an overlook within view of a border sentry post, a few miles from the spot where he crossed into Kazakhstan

This article was researched with support from New York University’s Matthew Power Literary Reporting Award.
almost six decades before. We parked near a small rock-crushing plant above a valley of bright green cornfields. Beyond the fields, through a blue haze, I could see this improbable new crossroads of the global economy.

The Chinese side of the border was easiest to spot. Since 2014, an instant city of 100,000 people, also called Khorgos (sometimes spelled Horgos), has appeared; its dark high-rises glittered in the sun. The Kazakh side of the border was less impressive from afar, but I knew it now hosted a first-of-its-kind free-trade zone, opened on territory shared with China. Behind a copse of cypress trees, I could also make out the gantry cranes of the new dry port — an inland shipping-and-logistics hub for freight trains — that began operating in 2015 and could soon be the largest port of its kind in the world. Adjacent to the dry port was a nascent railroad company town, and other plots nearby were cleared for factories and warehouses to be staffed by some of the future residents of the city of 100,000 that, if all goes as planned, will soon rise to match the one across the border.

The manager of the plant wandered over. He asked whether we wanted to get through the checkpoint, beyond which was the last village in Kazakhstan and, beyond that, China.

We got back in the car and pulled up to two guards who stood at the gate, rifles slung over their shoulders. They looked young and bored. The manager shouted the name of one of them, who walked shyly up to the passenger-side window. It seemed as if everyone in town knew everyone else.

“Give me some sunflower seeds,” the manager said. The guard pulled a bag from his pocket and poured seeds into the manager’s cupped hand until it overflowed. The manager explained that we wanted to see China. The guard shrugged and raised the boom gate.

Two miles beyond the checkpoint, across a valley of farmland, a tangerine ridge signaled the start of China’s largest territory, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. The border was somewhere in the valley beneath us. If we kept going, we would arrive at the Chinese sentry post we could just make out at the top of a train of switchbacks. We didn’t test it, however. In recent years, the Chinese government has erected the most advanced police state in the world in Xinjiang, targeting the region’s Turkic Muslims, especially its Uighur ethnic group, who make up about half the region’s population. As part of what Chinese Communist Party literature describes as “de-extremification” efforts to combat terrorism, authorities have created an exclusion zone of state surveillance, arbitrary mass internment, brainwashing and torture that covers an area more than four times the size of Germany and includes a population almost as big as Australia’s. According to the United States State Department, between 800,000 and two million people, or up to 15 percent of Xinjiang’s Muslim population, have been incarcerated in a growing network of more than 1,000 concentration camps.

You couldn’t see any of that from our perch at the border. Everything looked peaceful. To our left, a shepherd’s path ascended into white-capped mountains where herdsmen grazed sheep and cattle in summer, far above the fields of corn and sunflowers. To our right, beyond the ridge, the high-modernist future of international commerce was springing up out of the ground. You could squint and imagine you were looking at a time-lapse photo of the entire history of collective human activity, from the first wandering goat-herder all the way to the present.

CHINA HAS NEVER released any official map of Belt and Road routes nor any list of approved projects, and it provides no exact count of participating nations or even guidelines on what it means to be a participant. But this fuzziness may be one of its defining advantages. Rather than a list of megaprojects and bilateral deals, some of which might stumble or fail, the B.R.I. can be understood as a vaguely visible hand guiding all the interlocking developments in infrastructure, energy and trade where China plays any kind of role.

It is also a framework through which China’s leaders can present virtually any component of its foreign policy, from a soda-ash plant in Turkey to China’s first foreign military base, in Djibouti, as part of a nonthreatening vision of what party representatives like to call “win-win” global development. In recent years, China has floated several expansions of President Xi Jinping’s initial Belt and Road vision that make its scope seem all but limitless: the “Digital Silk Road” into the frontiers of the virtual, the “Pacific Silk Road” to South America, and the Arctic-crossing “Silk Road on Ice.” Xi himself has meanwhile extolled the merits of globalization at Davos and worked to brand his “project of the century” as a natural extension of the spontaneous trade routes that once laced across the Eurasian continent.

Critics have described the B.R.I. as a new kind of colonialism or even part of a strategy of “debt-trap diplomacy,” seducing cash-poor countries with infrastructure projects that are unlikely to generate enough revenue to cover the interest on the loans that funded them. That is the unhappy situation at the China-funded Port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, which the China Harbor Engineering Company took over after Sri Lanka fell
behind on debt service. The Center for Global Development lists eight countries that face high risk of “debt distress” from B.R.I. projects that they can’t afford.

Kazakhstan is poised to play a literally central role in China’s plan. The B.R.I. was first announced in Astana, at a 2013 ceremony attended by Xi and Kazakhstan’s longtime president, Nursultan A. Nazarbayev. At the same event, Xi and Nazarbayev also celebrated the opening of a joint gas pipeline and signed $30 billion worth of trade and investment agreements. Although in the past Kazakhstan’s economy has tended to orbit Russia’s, in 2007 China edged out Russia as Kazakhstan’s top importer, and some critics fear that the B.R.I. is leading the country deeper into economic vassalage. “Some people think that China is too big,” Nygmet Ibadildin, an assistant professor of international relations at Kimep University, in Almaty, told me. “Kazakh people want a win-win with the B.R.I., but in these situations China wins more often.”

Even in a country with few meaningful democratic rights, there are risks to courting foreign investment. In 2016, a proposed law that would have permitted parcels of farmland to be leased to Chinese companies sparked nationwide protests, leading Nazarbayev to table the measure.

Since the dry port’s inaugural train passed through in 2015, Khamzin said, companies who manufacture goods in China have begun to recognize the advantages of a modernized overland trade route across Asia. The dry port has transferred John Deere combines to Azerbaijan, he claimed, and Hewlett-Packard parts to Western Europe. He added that it may be much cheaper to ship containers by sea, but it can take more than three times as long, and air transit is the most expensive by far. By contrast, a container passing through Khorgos can travel from a Chinese point of origin to Europe in about 14 days, faster than the sea and cheaper than the air. “We’re going to be a central distribution point,” he concluded. If all goes well, according to company forecasts, in a few years Khorgos Gateway will be the largest dry port in the world.

Out in the shipping yard, wild dogs sniffed at stacked containers. It started to rain. A train had just pulled into port, and workers in yellow slickers were jogging out to meet it. Friendship between nations notwithstanding, Chinese border authorities are tight-lipped about freight schedules. The port sometimes learns about an impending arrival only an hour before it appears on the horizon, whereupon a swift ballet of machine and human movement begins. A siren blared as a gantry crane
began to creep toward me through the mist. The three 41-ton cranes straddled six rail lines — three are the narrow-gauge rails that stretch across the post-Soviet world from Helsinki to Ulaanbaatar; three are the standard gauge used in both China and Europe — and from my perspective they appeared to tower impossibly over the mountains around us. From a dangling control booth, a crane operator lowered containers onto their beds with dull-eyed expertise.

The national railway company of Kazakhstan owns 51 percent of Khorgos Gateway. The remaining 49 percent is split between two Chinese state-owned companies. Khamzin viewed China’s participation not as economic imperialism but as proof of the port’s likelihood of success. The Chinese, he explained, “are the kind of people that if they saw no commercial opportunity, they wouldn’t invest here.”

Such arrangements are less one-sided in Kazakhstan than in some of the more debt-strapped B.R.I. countries, so it’s very unlikely that what happened in Sri Lanka will happen here. But Chinese investments have in all likelihood muffled Kazakhstan’s response to the crackdown in Xinjiang.

Each train that arrives at Khorgos has to pass through the Chinese region, which is home to 24 million people, including more than 12 million Uighurs and about 1.5 million Kazakhs. Although political unrest has troubled the region for decades, including, in recent years, a spate of knife attacks and bombings by Uighur separatists, authorities in Xinjiang have responded with brutal asymmetry, rounding up hundreds of thousands of Uighurs alongside thousands of ethnic Kazakh and Kyrgyz residents in a sweeping internment drive the scope of which rivals Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Their “offenses” range from open displays of religious belief — wearing a beard, praying in public, owning a Quran or refusing to smoke or eat pork — to simply traveling with or even speaking to relatives abroad. For those not yet detained, Xinjiang has become a dystopian zone of extralegal checkpoints, patrols, GPS tracking and random home inspections.

Some experts say the camps and other security measures are partly in reaction to the increased freight traffic across Xinjiang, much of which now comes through Khorgos Gateway. “The role of Xinjiang has changed greatly with the B.R.I.,” Adrian Zenz, an academic expert on China’s minority policy, told me. China’s B.R.I. ambitions have transformed Xinjiang from a fringe territory into what party leaders call a “core region” of development. That’s why awareness of the camps among people in places like Kazakhstan was such an issue, Zenz said. “It has significant potential to cast a very negative light on the Belt and Road.”

After my tour of the dry port, I headed a mile down the road to Nurkent, a newly built town of low bungalows and apartment blocks. For all its symbolic importance, Khorgos Gateway is still a modest operation; if it were a United States seaport, its 2018 throughput would place it somewhere around the 26th-largest in the country, beneath the ports of Mobile, Ala.; Boston; and Gulfport, Miss. There are just 190 employees, which Khamzin said was close to capacity, and most of them live in Nurkent, alongside railroad workers, police officers, border guards, customs officials and other agents of the new frontier. Except for the cawing of crows nesting within an apartment building’s crumbling gables, the town was silent. During a visit to the region in 2016, Nazarbayev predicted the population would grow and merge with Zharkent to form a large city, but this was hard to visualize. The site of a planned expansion was marked by roundabout with a tiered silver gateway — the “2001” obelisk as imagined by Frank Gehry — through whose arch I could see only an untended field of scrubland.

As I stood looking at the archway, a car pulled up. A man in straw hat and sandals hoisted himself out of the passenger side. “I guard this place,” he said. He uncoiled a hose on the ground and began watering the grass around the gate. “This is the double door to the future of Nurkent, where the city will rise up.”

KHORGOS’S OTHER MAJOR landmark is a boomtown of open borders known as the International Center for Boundary Cooperation, or I.C.B.C., which China and Kazakhstan established in 2011 about six miles from the dry port. Here it is not only the goods that move freely back and forth but also the people. In this duty- and visa-free zone, Kazakh citizens willing to brave the hourlong wait at customs control are permitted to enter a walled section of the Chinese side of Khorgos across the border to buy cheap linens and electronics, and Chinese tourists may enter a walled leisure area inside Kazakhstan to buy souvenirs and eat Kazakh delicacies like shashlik and laghman.

A United Nations human rights panel describes the entirety of Xinjiang as a “massive internment camp,” but that didn’t stop workers I met at the dry port from suggesting I cross into China by way of the I.C.B.C. Khorgos Gateway and the I.C.B.C. are the products of special economic development zones set up in coordination with China: industrial and
commercial arenas designed to foster jobs and investments. There are dozens of such zones within China — the first, Shenzhen, is now a megacity of more than 12 million people — but Khorgos is the first to exist partly outside China’s own borders. That will soon change. Chinese officials have announced plans to build 50 more international zones in countries from Algeria to Vietnam.

At Khorgos, the I.C.B.C. seems intended to complement the dry port’s vision of frictionless trade with an equivalent vision of borderless commerce, even if most Kazakhs understand the project as a wholesale depot for cheaply made Chinese goods. A popular hustle among shopkeepers from Almaty is to hire one of the locals who wait outside the I.C.B.C., and who are euphemistically called “carriers,” to help circumvent the weight limits on imports. By all accounts, customs officials tend to look the other way.

My state-assigned guide picked me up at my hotel in Zharkent in a sleek Mercedes sedan that he drove as if we had just robbed a bank. “Are you nervous?” he asked, laughing, as we careered around a watermelon truck. His name was Marat Abaiuly. If the I.C.B.C. was the most important of China’s outposts in Kazakhstan, Abaiuly was its ambassador, the handsome liaison to opinion makers and potential investors. He made his power known by blowing through checkpoints with a friendly honk, or, if necessary, by leaping out of the car to grip the soldier on duty by the forearm.

It was 10 in the morning, and a line of wholesalers and hopeful carriers had formed beyond a fence topped with concertina wire. Bus drivers reclined inside their open cargo holds, chain-smoking and preparing to nap through the day. Inside the customs-control building, a construction worker was destroying the tile floor with a jackhammer. Improvised lines of ruble formed around the rubble.

China is said to be spending billions of dollars building up its side of Khorgos. By contrast, Kazakhstan’s share of the I.C.B.C. is mostly a dream of the future. Projects like a constellation of luxury hotels, a sports complex and a Disneyland-style theme park called Happy Land Khorgos have languished for lack of funding. Fields of rubble and stalled construction projects are scattered among the few small retail buildings and the yurt-shaped gift shops that are the Kazakh side’s most distinctive feature.

In recent years, the name Khorgos has instead become synonymous among Kazakhs with smuggling rings and high-profile corruption cases. In 2011, authorities arrested the head of customs at Khorgos as part of a larger takedown of a $130 billion smuggling ring. In 2016, the former head of the I.C.B.C. was caught on tape accepting a $1 million bribe for a construction bid. Locals do not tend to figure in these public scandals, but based on the crowds I saw in front of the border checkpoint, informal gray-market carrying at Khorgos seems to have replaced animal husbandry as the region’s main line of work. “Most locals work at the I.C.B.C. carrying cargo,” the chief executive of an Almaty-based truck transport company later told me, describing the work as a kind of pseudolegal smuggling. “That’s how they make money.”

Abaiuly arranged for an I.C.B.C. van to drive us across the open border into China, where the main attractions for visiting Kazakhs are four large, windowless malls. The malls are honeycombed with shops where women of all ages and a few older men sell underwear, electronics and an array of other inexpensive products under fluorescent lights. One mall was dedicated entirely to fur coats, a gift of ritual significance in Kazakhstan, particularly between in-laws at weddings. It was early, and there were no customers anywhere. Floor after floor of identical shops stood empty, their racks of odorless pelts doubled and tripled by wall-length mirrors.

Some workers I met were Chinese citizens from Xinjiang. I had heard that, in some towns, even talking to a journalist is considered grounds for detention, so I didn’t say much, and I was relieved to come across an outspoken furrier from Kazakhstan, Zhannur Erkenkyzy, who had worked at the border for six months. She got the job because she could speak Chinese, Russian, Uighur and Kazakh. She was also the store’s model, she said, and she showed me her Instagram page, on which she appeared nestled inside the furs of minks, foxes and beavers, although at the moment she was wearing no fur at all, just a black cocktail dress that reflected no light.

Erkenkyzy said she worked seven days a week unless she happened to ask for a day off. The time involved in crossing the unpredictable border meant that the job occupied most of her waking life, of which one highlight was catching thieves. “When we see a shoplifter, we put on red armbands and beat them with sticks,” she said excitedly. Abaiuly interrupted, whispering in low, snappy Russian: “Why are you saying such nasty stuff about us to the reporter?”

Back on the Kazakh side, we wandered the yurts, which were staffed by Chinese clerks who spoke no Russian or Kazakh. Tourists were milling about inside one of them, browsing rows of instant coffee, jade eggs and taxidermic hawks and antelopes. Outside, a row of golf carts and one stretch limousine waited to take the tourists back. I watched a group of women in
ankle-length skirts cross a moonscape of rocks, heading toward China and dragging uselessly wheeled luggage behind them. When I asked Abasylu about the prevalence of the carriers, he smiled. “On that subject I cannot speak,” he said.

At an outdoor restaurant, I met a _shashlik_ cook who lived inside one of the yurts where Chinese tourists ate. He left and re-entered the I.C.B.C. once a week to stay out of legal trouble, and said it was cheaper than living anywhere else.

**ONE WAY TO READ** the history of Central Asia is as a record of interactions between the mounted nomads who were long the primary occupants of the Eurasian Steppe and the sedentary populations who lived among them. As late as the 1930s, the dominant activity on the steppe was pastoral: herding sheep, goats and other livestock. Herders roamed in large, shifting clans on either side of the Tian Shan and Altai ranges, traveling on horseback and occasionally fragmenting or forming political alliances. These nomadic hordes proved unconquerable until the late 18th century, when they began to fall to Chinese conquest and, in what is now Kazakhstan, to Russian — later Soviet — rule.

In 1929, the leaders of the Soviet Union determined that Kazakhstan’s pastoral work force would go to work on farms. This forced collectivization was framed as a civilizing mission to modernize a population whom many Russians had long viewed as primitive barbarians. Land formerly devoted to grazing was irrigated and turned over to wheat production, with the immediate result that around 90 percent of the country’s livestock died. The subsequent famine caused the deaths of one-quarter of the population of Kazakhstan and anywhere from one-quarter to one-half of all ethnic Kazakhs, a human-made catastrophe that ended nomadism as it had been practiced in the region for thousands of years. Kazakhs became a minority in the nation the Soviets had founded in their name.

Nomadic pastoralism remains central to Kazakh mythology — Nazarbaev describes himself as “the son, grandson and great-grandson of herders” — but as a practice it has retreated to the periphery of the country’s economy. Most of the surviving herdsmen in this part of Kazakhstan practice a form of seminomadism known as transhumance, alternating between winters in a low-altitude village and summers in a pasture, or _zhailau_, in the mountains. I wondered how those in the mountains above Khorgos were reacting to the economic foment that had emerged around their winter homes. One morning I visited a village of herdsmen in the Zhongar Alatau, a northern stretch of the Tian Shan named for the last nomadic khanate to rule over the steppes of western China.

It was Friday, and most of the men were at the village mosque. I asked the local damkeeper’s son, who said his name was Turar, to take me farther into the mountains where families graze their herds throughout the summer. I got into Turar’s old Lada four-wheel drive, and we rattled and bounced up the edge of a steep bank that commanded a wide prospect of sand dunes and crumpled foothills. Hawks gyred overhead. I thought to myself that the beauty of Kazakhstan defied description, but Turar, who had lived here all his life, managed to capture its pristine emptiness. “It’s like a screen,” he said cryptically. Then, to clarify: “Like a computer. Like the Windows screen.”

To reach the _zhailau_, we left Turar’s car at the dam where his family controls the flow of snowmelt and mountain spring through a Soviet-era irrigation canal. Before long, we arrived at an emerald slope where a single yurt sat embossed in alpine lushness. Turar said this area was called the Black Gorge.

A friend of Turar’s emerged from the yurt, blinking at the sun. His name was Arsen Akhatay, and he’d been napping. Every spring, he helped drive
“Many people from the village work at the border as carriers,” he said. “There are many official jobs but also many unofficial.” All things being equal, he said, he wanted an official one. When he graduated, he planned to enroll at the military institute in Almaty to become a border guard.

On our drive down the mountain there was nothing to displease the eye, and before long we arrived at yet another small mountain village of white birches and potato gardens. Turar parked the car by a water pump and introduced me to a former classmate, a Kazakh named Zholaman Tashimkhan, who had come out to greet us.

We sat on the curb near the pump. Like Arsen, Tashimkhan spent most of the summer up in the mountains, but he was older and had already been drawn to the jobs at the border. He worked for a year for the railroad, a good job that is hard to come by through normal channels — “I used my connections,” he said, and laughed — but then his sister’s husband found him work as a carrier. “It’s not an official job,” he said. “Not a public job.”

A few men from the village began to gather around the pump as we talked. Tashimkhan explained that he had worked for a wholesaler based in Zharkent, crossing into the I.C.B.C. four or five days a week to bring household products, mostly bedsheets and linens, back into Kazakhstan. He was paid according to how much he managed to get through customs. On an average day, he might earn $15 or $20 — good money — and occasionally as much as $60. Customs enforcement was lax. “For us, you talk to the official working there, and you just bring things out,” he said.

More villagers had come out to the road until they completed a circle around us. Tashimkhan changed the subject, then joked with a friend that he was starting to think he would regret talking to me. An older man who had been pacing the street squatted down beside us and began conspicuously sharpening a sickle a few inches from my head. Turar suggested it was time for us to continue down the mountain. We got into the Lada and drove off.

THE GREAT COMMONPLACE of our time also happens to be true: The world is more connected than ever before. But if it is more connected, the world is also more administered — its people more coerced and surveilled, more susceptible to the designs of authoritarian leaders and more dependent on the fortunes of mercurial international markets — than at any point in human history. If the first fact has made some parts of the world freer, the second has made the rest of it less so.

A continuing trial at the local courthouse in Zharkent underscored this inversion, which seemed to me to lie at the heart of the developments at Khorgos. The case concerned Sayragul Sauytbay, a Chinese-born Kazakh woman who had fled Xinjiang and was requesting political asylum in Kazakhstan. Before the crackdown in Xinjiang, ethnic Kazakhs freely crossed the border to visit friends and relatives. But in 2016, as crossings became increasingly fraught, Sauytbay’s husband and two children decided to move permanently to Kazakhstan. Sauytbay, who was working in Xinjiang as a kindergarten director, remained in China with plans to join them; the rest of the family became Kazakh citizens in 2017. For more than a year, they met only in the free-trade zone at the I.C.B.C.

On April 5, 2018, without telling anyone, Sauytbay entered the I.C.B.C. with forged identity papers, then slipped into Kazakhstan by posing as a member of a tour group. A few weeks later, she was arrested and charged with entering the country illegally, and then her story began to emerge. Not long her family moved to China, Sauytbay was assigned to work at one of Xinjiang’s notorious detention camps. In her testimony, she described it as “a prison in the mountains,” with high walls and barbed wire that kept in some 2,500 inmates. She said she was forced by authorities to accept a teaching job there, indoctrinating the inmates in state propaganda, and she was warned that the penalty for revealing any information about the camps was death. The authorities confiscated her passport.

At her trial, Sauytbay provided some of the earliest testimony about life in Xinjiang’s camps. Her case made headlines in Kazakhstan’s national newspapers. She was married to a Kazakh citizen and was herself a “returnee,” a member of the diaspora of ethnic Kazakhs the government has been courting for years. But now prosecutors at Sauytbay’s trial were arguing that she should be deported back to China, where she claimed she would be arrested or even killed for having made public her knowledge of the camps.

Most people I met in Almaty seemed to think she had little chance of receiving asylum, much less Kazakh citizenship. The acquittal rate in criminal trials in Kazakhstan is around 1 percent, and hasn’t changed since the days of the Soviet Union. There was also the B.R.I. to consider. Kazakhstan might decide Chinese investment was more important than any international agreements on refugees. It wouldn’t be the first time a country was so swayed. In 2017, Greece vetoed a European Union statement criticizing China’s human rights record at the United Nations, a decision that critics linked to China’s controlling interest not just in Greece’s largest port but also...
in its public power grid. In January, China hosted a Silk Road Celebrity China Tour, inviting journalists from six B.R.I. partner countries — Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka — on a highly choreographed tour of a “vocational center” in Kashgar, another famous stop on the ancient Silk Road. According to the state-run Xinhua news agency, the visitors uniformly “praised the development and stability” of Xinjiang. An editor from Bangladesh singled out the region’s contributions “to the nonoccurrence of violence and terrorism.”

MY LAST DAY in town coincided with what turned out to be the last day of Sauytbay’s trial. About 100 supporters had risen early and driven out from Almaty to the courthouse, which was opposite a park where marble busts of Soviet heroes watched over a playground. When the courtroom opened, the crowd crushed against the glass doors. I made it through with a handful of other reporters thanks to some strategic shoving by a few veteran activists; most of the crowd remained on the courthouse steps.

As the proceedings began, Sauytbay’s lawyer introduced into evidence a copy of the asylum application that she had just filed. Both the judge and prosecutor interrogated Sauytbay, who from behind a clear protective wall related how, when she was arrested by the Kazakh police, an official told her that she would be sent back to China to die and her children would become orphans.

Sauytbay freely admitted she’d escaped China illegally. She was willing to serve a prison sentence. She just didn’t want to be sent back. “There is no reason for me to live if I am not with my children,” she told the judge. Her family sat across the room, near an open window through which we could hear the crowd murmuring outside.

The prosecution had previously rejected any kind of a plea deal. So what happened next was that rare thing: a dramatic courtroom reversal. In a closing statement, the prosecutor cited the outpouring of support the case had received across Kazakhstan. She requested that the judge allow Sauytbay to serve out a period of probation at her husband’s house. “I ask you not to apply deportation,” she said. “I ask you to set her free in the courtroom.” Sauytbay’s eyes went wide. Her lawyer, who seemed stunned, agreed. A few moments later, sounds of cheering rang out on the courthouse steps.

“I was surprised the law was kept,” Rysbek Sarsenbay, a prominent opposition activist, told me later. He reasoned that the government must have weighed the consequences of deporting Sauytbay carefully against the risk of alienating China’s leadership. “Even as a dictatorship,” he said, “Kazakhstan must honor its international commitments.”

Once the judge issued the expected ruling — prosecutors and judges in Kazakhstan rarely disagree — Sauytbay was ushered from the courthouse to the top of the steps, where she embraced her son and thanked President Nazarbayev for his beneficence. A poet took the stage to extemporize a victory verse in Kazakh. The crowd repaired to a restaurant a few miles outside Zharkent, where a spontaneous release party began with the singing of the national anthem. Waiters descended with plates of beshbarmak, a national dish of boiled noodles and horse meat in onion sauce. When Sauytbay arrived, holding her son in her arms, everyone stood up and clapped. She told me she hoped her testimony would “shine a light of hope” for her compatriots in China. “They know there is a country that will always protect them,” she said.

The celebration may have been premature. As Sauytbay later told The Globe and Mail of Toronto, within a day of her release, her sister and two friends were arrested in Xinjiang — they have since disappeared into camps — and in October Kazakhstan denied Sauytbay’s asylum claim. For the time being, she is living at home with her family, but her legal status in Kazakhstan is uncertain.

Even if she manages to avoid deportation, Sauytbay is one of thousands of people with ties to Kazakhstan who have found themselves caught up in Xinjiang’s detention centers. At the release party, I found myself sitting next to a Kazakh woman named Qarlyghash Ziparova, whose nephew, a former Xinjiang official named Askar Azatbek, had disappeared inside the ostensibly neutral free trade zone of the I.C.B.C. Azatbek, who had become a Kazakh citizen a few months earlier, entered the I.C.B.C. in 2017 with a friend, whereupon a group of men drove up in two cars and detained them. The friend was released, but Azatbek was hauled off. They hadn’t even been on the Chinese side, the friend had said. Ziparova tried to complain to authorities in Kazakhstan, but without any luck. The I.C.B.C. told her there was no surveillance video, although she didn’t believe it. She didn’t understand how a Kazakh citizen could be taken away by China like that — without even a trial.

THE ANCIENT SILK Road was equal parts trade route and social network. The routes themselves were in constant flux and administered by no one, and they succeeded through incremental growth and local knowledge in response to changing needs — the exact opposite of the Ozymandian ambitions and sweeping autocratic statecations that characterize the Belt and Road.

For all its potential to create jobs and modernize infrastructures, the project has also created a halo of mass internment camps for the powerless and gray-market economies for the poor. While new official jobs in Khorgos are lifting a lucky few out of poverty, it is far more common to find farmers and herdsmen moonlighting as taxi drivers, security guards or smugglers, part of a precarious network of low-paid freelancers. Such work is susceptible by design to sudden changes in enforcement and depends on a constant influx of disposable workers. It seemed like a high cost for connecting the world.

I hired a taxi to drive me back to Almaty. We took a new highway that opened last year, part of a growing highway system affiliated with the B.R.I. and known as the Western Europe-Western China International Transit Corridor. The highway cuts the travel time in half, from six hours to just over three hours, and driving atop it felt like riding an air-hockey puck. There were no rest stops or gas stations, and the few landmarks I could see stood at an unobtrusive distance. They included an old train station, a pumping station, and a large red eye on the horizon, a dust storm descending the cliffs to our left and crossed the road into empty veld. There were no cars in sight. It was less a road than the idea of a road.

The driver didn’t know anything about the trial whose outcome I had just seen. He had never heard of Sayragul Sauytbay. He was happy to have such a fine new highway on which to drive his customers back and forth between Khorgos and Almaty. Kazakhstan, we agreed, was a beautiful country. He pointed to some fields he said would be full of cattle in the fall, then opened the sunroof and stuck his hand into the night air.