



CHINA'S EXPANDING INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA THROUGH THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its influence on Central Asian countries, focusing on Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It explores how the BRI has transformed regional infrastructure, trade networks and connectivity since its launch in 2013. The paper analyzes both the positive outcomes such as modernization, foreign investment and closer regional cooperation, and the challenges related to debt, dependency and environmental sustainability. Particular attention is paid to the political and economic dimensions of China's growing presence in the region, including its impact on local governance and public perception. By using a comparative approach and drawing on various case studies, the research provides an overview of how the BRI shapes Central Asia's development path and geopolitical orientation in the 21st century.

In this fast-paced 21st century, only few international initiatives grabbed so much global attention and strategic debate as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed this project in 2013 and BRI is both an economic infrastructure project as well geopolitical rein, which shape of global order through economic integration. BRI represents both opportunities and challenges for five Central Asia states: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The opportunities are chance to modernize infrastructures and integrate into global markets, on the other hand risks are potential costs in sovereignty, debt sustainability and geopolitical balance. For China Central Asia plays an important role in building stronger overland trade routes, particularly through its initiative called "Silk Road Economic Belt". In history the region was a part of Soviet Union and now is being battlefield for influence among global powers such as Russia, China and Western countries. As China increases the number of investments and strives for improving diplomatic relations, this will arise several critical questions: What motivates China for such strong engagement with Central Asian countries? How has the Belt and Road Initiative reshaped political relations and local economies? To what degree does this change disturb existing regional power balances? This paper argues although China introduces BRI as a mutually beneficial development plan, its impact on Central Asia shows more complicated

strategic aims. These include deepening influence and creating economic dependencies, which could reshape region's geopolitical future. This essay will firstly examine existing academic and policy literature on the topic, secondly analyze the BRI through realistic framework, then provide case studies from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It will conclude with assessing a wider influence of these developments on regional autonomy and evolving global competition for influence.

China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Central Asia is undergoing massive economic transformations after China's proposal. Greater connectivity from more than \$40 billion invested in infrastructure, energy and transport projects with countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan since 2013. Although landlocked and remote from global markets previously, now they are better connected than ever before. A good case in point is the China-Europe rail corridor going through Kazakhstan, which cuts delivery times from weeks to less than 15 days. With such projects, Central Asia is starting to take back its ancient role as a Eurasian crossroads, as it did during the days of the Silk Road. However, the benefits have not been equally distributed. Chinese companies hold commanding stakes at strategic logistics points near Khorgos Gateway, for instance, they hold about 90% of the management contracts. Such an arrangement is concerning since local economies stand to become too dependent on foreign companies, with little capacity to control their own strategic infrastructure. While increased trade and investment are good news for governments, much of the local population is in the background. These deals are often awarded to Chinese companies, maintaining jobs levels low and hampering the importation of technology to the region. To boot, the significant loans that are tied to such deals can place pressure on national budgets. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, nearly 40% of foreign debt by the country is held by China's Export-Import Bank¹. That measure of fiscal tension could erode the ability of country to make independent policy decisions, especially if their economy is dependent upon only a limited number of goods.

The Initiative's influence extends beyond that of Central Asia's economic shift; it alters the geostrategic shifts. With its unconditional lending policies and a general reluctance to impose mandatory rules on human rights often set forth by Western bodies, China remains an attractive partner for developing countries. Xi Jinping's 2013 speech at Nazarbayev University, he showcased Silk Road Economic Belt as a model of coordinated growth and strategic partnership². So far this day China signed more than 120 bilateral agreements with Central Asia countries on topics ranging from security partnership to educational cooperation. China has thus been able to build close diplomatic relations with regional administrations who view Chinese assistance as a counterbalance to Russian hegemony and Western passivity. In addition to these, China has enhanced her political clout through the use of soft power by growing the network of Confucius Institutes, teaching chinese language, state funded media and other forms of non-military influence. China's cultural expansion is evident in the increase

¹ National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic, "External Debt Statistics," accessed May 8, 2025, <https://www.nbkr.kg>.

² Xi Jinping, "Promote Friendship Between Our People and Work Together to Build a Bright Future," speech at Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan, September 7, 2013, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/>.

of Confucius Institutes in Kazakhstan from 2 to 6 between 2013 and 2022. China also fosters supportive Chinese perspectives in Central Asia by providing over 3000 positions to train as officials each year, thereby forming sympathetic elite networks within the region. These attempts present China as a peaceful, considerate and helpful partner. However, this increased influence has aroused fears about national sovereignty and dependence. Anti-Chinese investment public protests taken place in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. In 2019, more than 20 cities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan erupted with protests due to political overreaches and land concessions to Chinese companies. The gap between the elite's alignment with China and the growing suspicion of the common people, which is harmful to the BRI's legitimacy in the region, is clearly illustrated in these episodes.

The BRI program likewise raises key environmental and sustainability issues in Central Asia, apart from the economic and political implications. While BRI projects consisting of highways-raised pipeline-level promises economic modernization, their environmental costs remain mostly unconsidered. For example, Angren-Pap railway tunnel in Uzbekistan, built with Chinese funding, did not have a complete Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) done prior to construction which led to more than 400 hectares of forest being cut down as well as local ecosystems being impacted³. The majority of BRI projects go through inadequate EIAs resulting in severe deforestation, water loss and irreversible ecological damage. In Kazakhstan, among others, which whose BRI debt includes financing for another of worst regional SO₂ emissions, the coal power station, which is called Ekibastuz GRES-2⁴. Even though China pledged to stop overseas coal financing in 2021, more than 60 percent of its energy-related investments in Central Asia still target fossil fuels. It comes at a cost to China's efforts to secure its international environmental commitments and poses long-term ecological risks to the region. Moreover, BRI projects are often accompanied by limited transparency as well as environmental irresponsibility. Many local environmental review boards are sidelined for faster bilateral agreements. This eases regulatory enforcement and permits environmental damage to go unchecked in areas already susceptible to desertification and water shortage.

Supporters of Belt and Road Initiative argue that it provides needed infrastructure and economic boost for Central Asian countries with poor access to Western capital. Chinese funding is seen as more practical and faster rather than Western assistance, which comes with political or governance conditions attached. It is quicker and more practical funding that allows these countries to grow their economies and enhance regional connectivity. For instance, in Tajikistan Chinese loans funded the Dushanbe-Chanak highway and thermal power plant which provide electricity for more than one million people, contributing to energy security and regional integration⁵. The BRI provides development without interfering in domestic politics according to this perspective. Yet these gains are not uncomplicated.

³ State Committee for Ecology and Environmental Protection of Uzbekistan, "Environmental Assessment Report on Angren-Pap Railway Project," 2016, <https://eco.gov.uz/en>.

⁴ Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Energy Sector Development Reports," 2022, <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/energo>.

⁵ Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Tajikistan, "Projects Implemented with Foreign Investment," accessed May 8, 2025, <https://investcom.tj/>.

Critics note that some BRI projects are undertaken by Chinese companies employing imported labor and materials, which constrains the local economic impact. A report by the Rhodium Group from 2020 stated: 35% of BRI projects in Central Asia are operating in a state of financial distress and are undergoing debt reprofiling or asset swaps. An example is the 2011 transfer of Zarafshan gold mine from Tajikistan to China's TBEA Group as debt compensation. There are also some fears about mounting debts, particularly in smaller economies such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan which could become overly reliant on Beijing. The country's environmental and transparency standards are also seen as weak, inviting public criticism and questions of long-term sustainability. Because the BRI delivers short-term benefits, however, it could cost the region in terms of long-term economic and possibly political independence.

In conclusion, although China publicly presented BRI as mutually beneficial and development program, it has deeper strategic aims when analyzed in Central Asian context. This essay showed that while the Belt and Road Initiative contributed to improve regional integration, connectivity and offers short-term economic gains, it also may lead to economic dependencies, unequal benefits as well as potential compromises to state sovereignty. According to analysis, BRI projects significantly improved transportation infrastructures, railways and also trade routes, which link Central Asia with Europe and China. The initiatives mostly benefit Chinese economic priorities at the expense of minimal technological sharing with local residents or job opportunities for local communities. Politically the BRI has bettered China's diplomatic relations by deploying its soft power together with loans that demand no specific conditions while diminishing Russia and Western influences in the region. The lack of oversight in the BRI's environmental aspect alongside China's ongoing investments in high-carbon industries creates potential long-term damage to the environment. Both policy-makers and scholars need to deeply understand China's goals while studying the BRI effects throughout the region. Beyond development consequences the initiative directs Central Asia's geopolitical trajectory for its future. Global power competitions might lead Central Asia to encounter trade benefits while risking excessive dependency on China. While the Belt and Road Initiative provides certain development advantages Central Asian states need to exercise caution about their involvement. They need to establish clear visible initiatives that lead to partnership inclusivity and strategy to maintain a sustainable independent future.

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