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Policy Recommendations for Promoting the Development of Cross-Border E-Commerce between China and Central Asian Countries

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Abstract: As the core area of the entire Belt and Road, Central Asian countries' prosperity has a direct bearing on the smooth implementation of the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The trade and economic relations between China and Central Asia are developing entirely within the worldwide economic globalization trends. In this research, we analysis the several problems that exist in the development of cross-border e-commerce between China and the Central Asian five countries at the first. And then we put forward four countermeasures for the Chinese government and enterprises investing abroad to promote the cross-border e-commerce transactions between China and the countries along the Belt and Road.

Keywords: Central Asian countries, the Belt and Road, cross-border e-commerce, policy recommendations

1. INTRODUCTION

China's Belt and Road Initiative is a magnificent national strategy for seeking development in China global layout at the new century. The initiative is a political strategy, and followed by an economic policy. With the global e-commerce booming, the development of the Belt and Road cannot be separated from the "Internet Silk Road" construction. According to statistics from *Comprehensive Department of the Ministry of Commerce*, the size of China's import and export trade in 2016 reached 24.3 trillion CNY, down 0.9% ^[1]. Data from *the China Electronic Commerce Research Center* shows that in 2016 China's cross-border e-commerce market rose by 24% year-on-year and reached 6.7 trillion CNY. The proportion of cross-border e-commerce in total turnover has risen from 6% in 2010 to 28% in 2016, and is estimated to hit 38% by 2020 ^[2]. In other words, cross-border e-commerce has become an important driving force for China's foreign trade growth and boosting the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative. For countries along the Belt and Road, cross-border e-commerce will increase new vitality into their multilateral security cooperation and provide an opportunity for their economy growing by leaps and bounds.

The Silk Road economic belt has very obvious characteristics in terrain. That is both ends are connected with the prosperous European economic circle and the developed East Asian economic zone respectively. However, in the middle part of the economic belt, there is an economic backward zone between northwestern China and Central Asia ^[3].

Central Asia, as described in this paper, refers to a narrowly defined geographical concept and only includes five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The five Central Asian countries, located in the center of Eurasia, are the strongholds of the Belt and Road, guarding the land access in Asia and Europe ^[4]. This region is adjacent to the northwestern of China. And the total length of the common border between China and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan together is up to 3,309 kilometers ^[5]. From an economic point of view, Central Asia is an economic depression area in Belt and Road and the overall economic development lags behind. In view of the domestic political environment, all five Central Asian countries are in a period of social and economic transition. The government regard domestic economic construction as the primary task at present and formulate series of development strategic plans for their economic development and improving people's livelihood. However, the randomness of the authorities'

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intervention in economic policies has greatly fluctuated the investment environment^[4]. In terms of resource endowment, as one of the world's three major energy centers, Central Asian natural gas reserves reached 11.8 trillion cubic meters, accounting for 6.2% of the world. Proven reserves of 4.28 billion tons of oil, accounting for 2.1% of the world total reserves^[6]. Non-ferrous and rare metals storage capacities are also substantial. Uranium storage is the highest in the world. In addition, this area also has good conditions for developing oasis agriculture and animal husbandry. And cotton production has unique advantages. Therefore, Central Asia is called Strategic Resources Base in 21st century^[5]. In trade cooperation perspective, China has become the most important cooperative partner of Central Asian countries in trade and investment now since the establishment of the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* in 2001. According to the data from *Economic and Commercial Counselors' Office of the Chinese Embassies in Central Asia*, China is the largest trade partner of Kyrgyzstan^[7], Turkmenistan^{[8], [20]} and Uzbekistan^[9]. And it is Tajikistan^[21] and Kazakhstan's^[22] second largest trade partner, also is Kazakhstan's^[23] largest source of imports and the largest source of direct investment in other four Central Asian countries except Kazakhstan^{[7], [8], [11], [24], [25]}.

To sum up, the implementation of BRI has helped Central Asian countries' economy to thrive, that will be of great significance to China's geopolitical security and energy security. The rest of this paper is organized as follows: In section two, we investigated three major problems that exist between China and Central Asian countries in cross-border e-commerce transactions through the integration of online data and interview with cross-border e-commerce participants. Then, we put forward some policy suggestions to the government and enterprises for promoting cross-border e-commerce development better in section 3. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. PROBLEMS IN DEVELOPING CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE WITH CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

We concluded that there are three major challenges of China in the process of cross-border e-commerce trade cooperation with Central Asian countries by reading the literatures published by scholars and related reports. Specifically, Central Asian national information development level is relatively low, its infrastructure construction such as logistics and transportation are lagging behind and also its e-commerce market is still not perfect.

2.1 The level of informatization development in Central Asian countries is generally low.

Telecommunications network connectivity is the basis of the "Internet Silk Road" construction. but this foundation is weak in the countries along the Belt and Road, especially in the five Central Asian countries. For example, in terms of communications network, only Kazakhstan has better domestic communications infrastructure and a higher Internet penetration rate. From the *Internet World Stats'* data, we found that the number of Internet users in Tajikistan accounted for 20.5% of the total population as of June 30, 2017^[18]. This proportion is only higher than Turkmenistan and Afghanistan in Asia. Besides the Tajikistan's Internet speed is slow and the price is expensive, 2M bandwidth Internet access costs about 1,000 US dollars per month^[10]. Turkmenistan's Internet penetration rate is about 18.0%. There are about 20,000 network users in total now and most of them are group users such as state organs, public institutions and diplomatic organizations^[8]. In addition, although Kyrgyz informatization development is more advanced than other Central Asian countries, it is more difficult to install fiber-optic cables in mountainous country as here. So more than 70% of Internet users are gathered in the capital Bishkek^[7]. With regard to electricity, as a result of power shortage of four to five billion kilowatt hours per year, the Tajikistan's government imposed power-cut measures in autumn and winter. The power will be supplied nine hours a day in some areas. In winter 2015-2016, most cities supply electricity

each day for only six to ten hours. Many remote rural residents even only use electricity for two or three hours a day^[10].

All of the above data shows that the overall level of informatization construction in the five Central Asian countries is relatively low. That is reflected in two aspects: the imperfect information infrastructure construction and the insufficient information services development.

2.2 Transport and postal infrastructure in Central Asian countries are underdeveloped.

The main problem in the transportation field of Kazakhstan is the facilities overuse. For railways, locomotives and wagons suffered heavy wear and tear with a loss rate as high as 72%. Almost a third of freight wagons and a half of locomotives have been used for more than twenty-five years. In the aspect of highways, the overall infrastructure is backward. Roads have been not maintained for a long time. Only about 37% of the national highways and 9% of the local highways are in good condition, and most of them are Grade III highways. Freight car's loss rate is about 60%. its service life is more than twelve years^[12].

In Tajikistan, the territory of the mountainous area is up to 93%. Complicated terrain makes road construction more difficult. Statistics show that the total length of the roads in Tajikistan is 13,700 km, but almost all of which were constructed during the Soviet era^[10]. Due to the lack of funds, the Tajik government failed to make the necessary investment in road maintenance. Coupled with the successive years of war and the frequent destruction of natural disasters such as landslides and debris flows, the road was severely damaged and difficult to access. There is only one land border crossing between China and Tajikistan, and it is located in a plateau with an average altitude above 4,000 meters. The customs clearance time is only six months each year because of the bad weather and geography conditions. Furthermore, the port's cargo volume is small and not fully utilized. Therefore, the major bulk commodities trade between China and Tajikistan needs to bypass the other countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. It will take more time, cost more money and be more vulnerable to neighboring countries^[10].

Turkmenistan's domestic postal infrastructure is also developing slowly. There are only about one hundred post offices in whole country and courier parcels are usually not delivered on time^[8].

The main problem in Kyrgyz railway network is the severe aging of infrastructure, the average aging rate of the facilities is about 50% to 55%. Among them, the electricity system equipment aging rate is 50%, signal and communication system aging rate is 63%, road maintenance equipment aging rate hit 71%, sleeper aging rate is about 50%. There are more than 30 percent of the railway tracks are overload and over 86 percent of diesel locomotives exceed their service life^[13].

From the above, the long absence of road maintenance and the lack of funding for construction have strongly restricted the timeliness of logistics in the cross-border e-commerce activities between China and Central Asia, and then affected the Central Asian countries foreign trade.

2.3 The development of cross-border e-commerce market in Central Asian countries is not perfect.

From the perspective of the cross-border e-commerce regional market, *China Cross-Border E-Commerce (Export B2B) Development Report 2016* data displays that China's cross-border e-commerce products are mainly exported to European and American area represented by the United States and Canada. Also to the Oceania region, which represented by Australia and New Zealand. While the global emerging markets such as ASEAN, Russia and India all are booming in an all-round way, the cross-border e-commerce market in Central Asia, especially in the five Central Asian countries, continued to weaken.

From the view of product categories in cross-border e-commerce transactions, the monitoring data of *China Electronic Commerce Research Center* shows that the China's major product categories of cross-border

e-commerce exports in 2015 are shown in Table 1. According to the statistics of *China Customs*, the main commodities imported by Central Asia from China are mechanical and electrical products, boiler machinery, rubber products, nuclear reactors, etc. Followed by clothing, shoes and leggings, travel goods and so on. What needs to be clarified is that Central Asian major demand (mechanical and electrical products, nuclear reactors etc.) is not traded through cross-border e-commerce and do not be included in categories of cross-border e-commerce exports. So as for the product category, the demand and supply did not match well.

Table 1. Distribution of China's cross-border e-commerce exports in 2015

Categories	Proportion	Categories	Proportion
3C electronic product	37.7%	clothing	10.2%
outdoor product	7.5%	health and beauty product	7.4%
jewelry	6%	household and horticultural product	4.7%
shoes and bag	4.5%	baby product	3.6%
auto parts	3.1%	lighting	2.8%
Security Monitoring	2.2%	others	10.3%

From the aspects of the Internet corporate development in Central Asia, by March 2017, they officially launched Qoovee.com. It's the first unified cross-border B2B e-commerce platform in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) with only 14,000 registered Users and not yet formed a scale^[14]. At present, the top ten websites of the Central Asian user visits are all foreign companies' websites, and there is not even a local website. This demonstrates that the Central Asian domestic Internet industry development tends to be hollow^[15] and cross-border e-commerce market lacks motivation.

3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING SYNERGETIC DEVELOPMENT OF CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE BETWEEN CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES.

In the last part, we've explored the bottleneck factors which restricting the coordinated development of cross-border e-commerce between China and Central Asian countries. Then, we will propose the following four policy-related suggestions to Chinese government and enterprises.

3.1 Cooperation with Central Asian countries to carry out infrastructure construction.

As mentioned earlier, the inadequacy of infrastructure construction such as communications networks, postal services, transportation or border crossings is an important factor that restricts the trade between China and the Central Asian countries in the process of cross-border e-commerce cooperation. In addition to focusing on our cooperation partners in which with better infrastructures and avoiding wasting our cross-border e-commerce resources in areas where infrastructure construction is particularly poor. What's more, we should give full play to the lead role of the government and take the form of "government cooperative investment, enterprise construction" to participate in the Central Asian countries' infrastructure rebuilding. Helping them to improve their backward infrastructure and foster cross-border e-commerce market. The establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has also alleviated some of the pressure of the enterprises investment risks and financing difficulties in infrastructure. With the support of the AIIB and Silk Road Fund, Chinese government should speed up the evolution of infrastructure and industrial cooperation with Central Asian countries and promote the integration of information applications. Up to now, the Silk Road Fund has signed 15 projects, committed to a cumulative investment of 6 billion U.S. dollars. In addition, it has established a special fund for China-Kazakhstan capacity cooperation with an investment of 2 billion U.S. dollars^[26].

Gradually, China and Central Asia will work together to establish a network of infrastructure that radiates the major Asian regions and lay the foundation for the cross-border e-commerce exchange and other forms of bilateral trade.

It should pay more attention to the technical supports beyond the investment in equipment and funds. For example, Chinese enterprises should regularly formulate training programs with Central Asian countries' transport professionals and managers to promote mutual communication. Jointly organize training courses on road design concepts, road management and maintenance. This will serve as an intellectual guarantee for promoting the establishment of a unified traffic standard between China and Central Asia. Furthermore, it's also a feasible measure to establish a platform for cross-border transportation information exchange. Chinese enterprises can provide the road planning and advisory services to Central Asian countries through this platform. The online information exchange platform would contribute to reduce the cost of communication between the two parties.

Another point that must be mentioned is that the relevant departments should make investment risk assessment and provide risk pre-warning service to Chinese enterprises that are constructing construction projects abroad. At the same time, Chinese enterprises themselves must strictly abide by the local laws and regulations, strengthen communication with local government to minimize risks ^[4].

We have made some achievements after the government took measures as above policy recommendations. For example, under the framework of the strategic cooperation between China and Kazakhstan, the two sides have reached the intention of 51 capacity cooperation projects, mainly involving transportation infrastructure construction, manufacturing and other fields. The total investment exceeds 26 billion U.S. dollars. Also, the Chinese government has signed agreements or plans with other four Central Asian countries on promoting trade contacts and infrastructure construction. In 2016, there were more than 1,200 columns of China-Europe freight trains transiting Kazakhstan and the amount of rail transport between the two countries reached more than 8.2 million tons. All these have greatly enriched the connotation of China-Kazakhstan economic and trade cooperation ^[22].

3.2 Encourage capable China's Internet companies to "go global" and foster cross-border e-commerce market.

China's Internet industry has enjoyed a good momentum of development. *National Informatization Development Evaluation Report (2016)* data shows that China's national informatization development index ranked 25th among the eighty-eight major countries that participate in the evaluation. The Kazakhstan's index ranked 47th and Kyrgyzstan ranked 63rd. The remaining three Central Asian countries are not on the list. The index evaluates the level of information technology development in a country or region from the five aspects: network infrastructure readiness, industrial and technological innovation, informatization application benefits, cybersecurity assurance and sustainable development. That report also shows that China's Internet companies have obvious comparative advantages in terms of industrial and technological innovation and informatization application benefits. And these two aspects are expected to achieve complementary development with countries along the Belt and Road.

China's Internet companies also have become increasingly competitive in the international arena. Data from *State Administration for Industry and Commerce* indicates that the number of newly registered enterprises in China's information transmission, software and information technology services industry grew from 74,141 in 2013 to 240,413 in 2015, an increase of more than three times. Besides, according to *China Securities Regulatory Commission* statistics, in 2014-2015, the market scale of China Netcom enterprises had increased more than double from 1.493 trillion CNY to 3.184 trillion CNY. And in 2015, four Chinese Internet companies,

namely Alibaba, Tencent, Baidu and JDcom, ranked among the top ten in global market capitalization. Twelve Chinese Internet companies ranked the top thirty in global market capitalization ^[17]. According to *Alexa's* statistics in February 2016, AliExpress, the Alibaba's international trading platform, was ranked in the top 20 websites in the traffic rankings of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. AliExpress is the most popular shopping site in the CIS countries except Kyrgyzstan, surpassing Amazon and eBay ^[15]. As a result, Chinese internet companies have a promising future in the Central Asian market.

Nowadays, some of China's Internet companies have the ability to "go global" already. During their cooperation with the Central Asian countries in cross-border e-commerce business, they'll export the advanced experience of the cross-border e-commerce industry innovation and its efficient application in information technology to help them foster a group of competitive cross-border e-commerce enterprises like China's transportation companies and equipment manufacturers. thus stimulating the development of the Central Asian countries' cross-border e-commerce market.

3.3 The processing and marketing of products should be tailored to Muslim purchasing preferences.

China should take the Central Asian countries' religion into more consideration when conduct the cross-border e-commerce cooperation with them. As is well-known that Central Asia is a multi-religious area dominated by Islam, and more than 80% of the inhabitants are Muslims. Islam has a profound mass foundation a very important influence on the political process, economic development and individual's life in the five Central Asian countries ^[16].

It is very important to fully respect the religious beliefs of Central Asia and to consider the consumption preferences of Muslims for China's cross-border e-commerce enterprises. From the past trade with Central Asian countries, we found that the most popular cross-border e-commerce products in Central Asia are clothing, leggings, handicrafts as well as processed agricultural products, etc. Chinese exporters should conduct adequate market research to understand the needs and preferences of Muslim, so as to determine the product's style, color, material and packaging. In particular, for the processing of agricultural products, such as fruit juice, the production process standards in the target country of export should also be considered. At the same time, we must pay attention to cross-cultural marketing issues.

3.4 Using the Belt and Road information platform to promote the exchange of information, capital and talents among regions.

Chinese enterprises should take advantage of various exchanges platforms to collect demand information, display products and cooperate with each other. And further expand the popularity of China's cross-border e-commerce products and services in Central Asian countries. With these exchange platforms, the Chinese government could actively propel the implementation of the China's Belt and Road Initiative and promote the flow of information, capital and talents across the cross-border e-commerce cooperation countries. At the same time, these information platforms could provide some opportunities to enhance the dialogue between China and Central Asia in the cultural field and deepen mutual understanding.

The forms of information platform mentioned above are various ^[4], such as forums, expositions, fairs, festivals and so on. The influential forums include:

- Euro-Asia Economic Forum, establish a permanent venue in Xi'an
- Continental Bridge Forum (International Law Enforcement Cooperation Forum on Secure Corridor of the New Eurasian Land Bridge), set up a permanent venue in Lianyungang.
- Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum
- Silk Road Mayor Forum

Major festivals and expositions include:

- Silk Road International Festival, is settled permanently in Shaanxi Province.
- Silk Road International Fair
- China-Eurasia Expo, Urumqi.
- Lanzhou Investment and Trade Fair
- Western China International Fair (WCIF)

The 2017 Euro-Asia Economic Forum held in Xi'an has yielded very fruitful results. The organizers held a total of 35 events in four major sections: dialogues, exhibitions, investment negotiations and cultural exchanges. The exhibition area covers an area of 30,000 square meters, 246 domestic and foreign exhibitors, 1,492 international standard booths, attracting 13,000 professional visitors. During the exhibition, 130 intent cooperation projects were signed on-site, more than 500 orders were traded and an expected turnover is about 1.12 billion CNY.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Taking the five Central Asian countries as an example, this study points out that there are mainly three aspects constraints in the process of China's cross-border e-commerce trade with the countries along the Belt and Road by analyzing the related data. Firstly, the level of informatization development in the Central Asian countries is generally low, the degree of network facility readiness and popularity are not high. Secondly, Central Asian countries lag behind in infrastructure construction such as road traffic and postal ports. Thirdly, the development of domestic cross-border e-commerce market in the five Central Asian countries is not perfect. Then, we propose four suggestions for the Chinese government and enterprises against the above three problems and demonstrate some of the efforts that have been achieved. First, the government should encourage the use of state investment and enterprises construction to participate in the infrastructure improvement in the five Central Asian countries. Second, outstanding Chinese Internet enterprises should be encouraged to "go global" and give their own advanced experiences to local enterprises in Central Asia to foster cross-border e-commerce market. Third, Chinese e-commerce exporters should cater to the religious beliefs and preferences of the Central Asia nation in such aspects as product production, packaging and marketing. Fourth, the Chinese government and foreign trade enterprises should make full use of the Belt and Road cooperation platform to promote the flow of information, capital and talents among the Central Asian countries.

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