

Central Asia: The Vanguard in Jointly Building the “Belt & Road” Community of Shared Future for Mankind

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The Silk Road originated in China, while Central Asia served as the crossroads of the Eurasian region. In 140 BC, during the Han Dynasty, Zhang Qian embarked on a mission to the Western Regions, present-day Central Asia. He paved the way from the East to the West, completing a challenging journey. President Xi proposed constructing the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) in Kazakhstan, making Central Asia the starting point and the first western station of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Central Asia has always been at the forefront of building the BRI, setting an example for constructing a community with a shared future for humanity.

Keywords: Central Asia, The Belt and Road Initiative, the community of shared future

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Introduction

Central Asia is a region that includes five countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. The Central Asian area is strategically important and has been a focus of study for geopoliticians for a long time. Halford Mackinder (1962) described it as the 'heartland of the world,' suggesting that the power controlling this region could thereby control the 'World-Island' and ultimately the entire world. As a vital hub of the ancient Silk Road trade network, Central Asia holds dual significance for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): it serves as both a principal gateway and a core component (Zhang, 2015). Different countries are engaged in geopolitical competition in Central Asia, including China's BRI, Russia's influence maintenance, and the geopolitical interests of the United States. From an economic perspective, the Central Asian region possesses abundant oil, natural gas, and other mineral resources. These resources are strategically significant for many countries, especially China, Russia, and Europe. China, as one of the world's largest energy-consuming countries, requires a continuous increase in energy supply to meet the demands of domestic economic growth. From a national security perspective, China considers Central Asia a critical factor in maintaining the stability and security of its western regions, especially in ensuring the national security of Xinjiang. There are strong ethnic and religious ties between the Uyghur people of Xinjiang and the Central Asian region, which transcend national borders and may impact the stability and security of Xinjiang.

The Central Asian region boasts abundant agricultural resources, energy reserves, and minerals. However, its development potential could be improved by adequate infrastructure connectivity, both within the countries and across the region. China is viewed as a crucial foreign investor, capable of enhancing the region's infrastructure connectivity and bolstering the growth of its manufacturing sector. As China's global influence gradually expands, Central Asian countries aspire to benefit from China's rapid growth and hope to achieve economic spillover effects. Therefore, the leaders of these countries actively support and participate in the BRI. While infrastructure development assumes a central role, the BRI encompasses policy dialogue, unobstructed trade, financial assistance, and interpersonal interactions (Huang, 2016). The BRI has had a profound impact on Central Asian countries. These effects are complex and multi-dimensional, encompassing opportunities for economic development and infrastructure construction (Bird et al., 2020; Li et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022), as well as issues related to political independence, regional security, and the enhancement of international status (Physica et al., 2020; Xuanli Liao, 2021; Dave & Kobayashi, 2018). Orazgaliyev (2019) argued that the Central Asian states reaped advantages from the rivalry among global actors, as this led to the expansion of their export routes, consequently strengthening their independence both in political and economic spheres. These factors collectively shape the future relationship between Central Asian countries and China. Zhang et al. (2022) propose a new indicator framework with five dimensions: policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, and people-to-people. The framework emphasizes the BRI's focus on interconnectivity.

While aiming to enhance connectivity and cooperation globally, the BRI has also sparked criticisms, including concerns about debt traps, environmental degradation, and cultural influence (Horn et al., 2020; Hafeez et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2023). Taking debt traps as an example, the BRI is not a philanthropic program. The financing for BRI projects primarily involves interest-bearing loans. This implies that such borrowing might be a risk to the financial stability of the borrowing nations. Notably, low-income countries have faced significant debt

challenges linked to investments made under the BRI. This suggests that while the initiative seeks to create economic opportunities, it also raises significant challenges and complexities in the regions it affects. According to Li et al. (2015), the intensification of human activities might also exacerbate the water crisis in Central Asia. This could further deteriorate the already fragile ecological environment in the region and lead to accelerated energy consumption, posing a threat to the region’s sustainable development.

The varying assessments of the BRI range from admiration to criticism, influenced by geopolitical positions, economic interests, and strategic objectives. Countries that might benefit economically could view it favorably, while those wary of strategic encirclement or dependency may be critical. To reduce negative perceptions of the BRI, it is crucial to explore three core questions: (1) What are the basic principles of the BRI, specifically the foundational ideas and objectives of the initiative? (2) What are the construction goals of the BRI, and what specific objectives and outcomes does the initiative aim to achieve? (3) How does the BRI address its essential directions, and in what manner does the BRI select and prioritize critical areas and directions for its development? We aim to provide a comprehensive and objective understanding of the BRI to mitigate misunderstandings and opposing views.

Mutual benefit and win-win cooperation are the fundamental principles of China-Central Asia cooperation in practicing the community of a shared future

During the construction of the BRI, Central Asia has always been a pioneer and a model. Tajikistan was the first country in the world to sign a document with China on the cooperation of the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ (SREB). China and Central Asian countries have achieved ‘three full coverages’ – comprehensive coverage of strategic partnership relationships, full implementation of the community of shared future for humanity at the bilateral level, and full coverage of signing documents for jointly building the BRI.

This is mainly due to the high complementarity of national interests between China and Central Asia. We are neighbors, and China is the most significant or primary source of investment for Central Asian countries. China is a major manufacturing country with prominent industrial development and technological advantages. Central Asia is rich in energy and resources, with a notable demographic dividend. It is one of the youngest regions in the world, with an average age of 27.6 years, and has a distinctive advantage in manufacturing labor costs. The Central Asian region does not have direct access to the sea, resulting in substantial transit transportation costs, accounting for 70%-80% of exported products’ prices. China’s strong capabilities in railway and infrastructure construction and the development of the China-Central Asia train services will bring tremendous benefits to the development of Central Asia.

Their shared development strategies strengthen the cooperation between the BRI and Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan’s ‘Bright Path’ new economic policy, Tajikistan’s National Development Strategy up to 2030, Kyrgyzstan’s Development Strategy up to 2040, Uzbekistan’s Action Strategy on Five Priority Development Directions, and Turkmenistan’s ‘Revival of the Silk Road’ initiative are all aligned with the BRI. This alignment improves collaboration and value creation in construction.

The rapid progress of the BRI in Central Asia can be attributed to the strong cooperation between China and Central Asia. The BRI has been advanced in Central Asia through high-level government promotion and head-of-state diplomacy. Furthermore, the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization and the China-Central Asia Summit provide a high-level, multi-faceted cooperation mechanism and platform for the joint construction of the BRI between China and Central Asia.

The goals of the B & R construction: High standards, sustainability, and benefiting the people's livelihood

Central Asia collaborates with China in building the BRI, aiming for high standards, sustainability, and benefits to people's livelihoods. This partnership is people-centered, focusing on eliminating poverty, increasing employment, and improving living standards, ensuring that the fruits of cooperation benefit all people. Belt and Road cooperation in Central Asia mainly involves energy, infrastructure, and agriculture. The China-Central Asia gas pipeline operates stably, along with the China-Europe, China-Central Asia rail services, and the thriving China-Uzbekistan Pengsheng Industrial Park. China Power Construction Corporation has built the largest wind power project in Central Asia – the Zhanatas 100MW Wind Power Project in Kazakhstan. China Energy Construction has built the largest cement plant in Central Asia and the Shaanxi-Uzbekistan economic and trade cooperation Longi Green Energy, the most prominent photovoltaic project of a Chinese company overseas, in Uzbekistan. New energy vehicles from companies like Yutong and BYD support the green development of friendly Central Asian countries!

The Central Asian region, with its unique geographical location, has the potential to become a significant transportation hub connecting Europe and Asia (Davies & Matthews, 2021). In the construction of transportation infrastructure, the China-Europe trains that pass through Central Asia account for nearly 80% of the total number of China-Europe trains. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan combined rail-road transportation operates smoothly, and the normalization of the China-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan highway is accelerated. Negotiations for the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project are steadily progressing. Once the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is completed, the transportation distance between China and Turkey will be reduced by about 900 kilometers. New flight routes between China and Central Asia are continuously being opened, and Xi'an has become the only city in China to have flights to all five Central Asian countries. Regarding air traffic connectivity, the Central Asia to China routes need more robust connectivity and high ticket costs. However, if the more liberal aviation policies proposed in the BRI are adopted, this market could experience significant growth (Wang et al., 2020). Suppose the Central Asia to China routes could achieve a regulatory and operational model similar to Central Asia's ways to other countries. In that case, the number of air connections is expected to increase substantially.

The China-Uzbekistan joint archaeological work in Mingtepa Cit and the restoration of the ancient city of Khiva are progressing smoothly. The cooperation in the 'Belt and Road' archaeological research is being carried out, which has led to the establishment a 'Belt and Road' archaeological laboratory, promoting the international reach of Chinese archaeology. Chinese television shows and documentaries, such as 'A Bite of China' and 'All is Well,' have been translated and introduced to Central Asian countries as part of the cultural exchange and cooperation efforts.

Kazakhstan and the Chinese government plan to sign a mutual visa exemption agreement regarding tourism cooperation. According to the new regulations, travelers entering visa-free will have a stay period of 30 days after entry. Uzbekistan offers a 10-day visa exemption for

Chinese tourists and cooperates with China in establishing the Silk Road International Tourism and Cultural Heritage University. Central Asia has adopted tourism poverty reduction cases promoted by the World Tourism Alliance. The World Tourism Cities Federation’s experience sharing in COVID-19 tourism crisis management and subsequent recovery benefits Central Asian tourist cities.

In the field of security cooperation, China has provided vital support to Central Asian countries in resisting the infiltration of the ‘three forces’, making these countries an essential barrier to China’s maintenance of security and stability in its western regions, and together forming an increasingly close security interest community. Moreover, terrorism can negatively impact any country’s bilateral trade, including trade between China and the five Central Asian countries (Shang, 2020).

Green, technology, and culture are essential directions for the future of the BRI

The future development of the BRI in Central Asia will follow advanced international rules and standards. The objective is to establish a high-standard free trade zone and implement policies that promote a higher level of trade and investment liberalization. The focus will be on “hard connectivity” through infrastructure development, supported by “soft connectivity” through adherence to rule standards. Building a sense of connection among the people of the participating countries is considered a fundamental aspect. Constructing a community with a shared destiny for humanity in Central Asia will prioritize green development, digitalization, and mutual understanding among people.

1. Green Development Cooperation

In the future, China and Central Asia will support the establishment of a China-Central Asia partnership for energy development, expanding cooperation across the entire energy industry chain and further extending cooperation in traditional energy sectors such as oil, natural gas, and coal. China and its Central Asian neighbors are facing complex water issues, considered among the most severe challenges in the countries along the BRI (Guo et al., 2016; Howard & Howard, 2016). In response to unique regional challenges in Central Asia, such as the drying up of the Aral Sea, glacier melting, desertification, accelerated soil erosion, and other urgent issues (Haiyan et al., 2018), the BRI in Central Asia will adhere to green development principles. Practical cooperation will be carried out in areas such as green infrastructure, green energy, green transportation, and green finance, emphasizing the protection of the ecological environment, enhancing the application of carbon-neutral technologies, and strengthening collaboration on renewable energy sources such as hydropower, solar energy, and wind energy.

2. Digital Cooperation

China and Central Asian countries are jointly constructing the Digital Silk Road, further implementing landmark documents such as the “China + Central Asia Five Countries Data Security Cooperation Initiative” and the “SCO Member States’ Concept on Cooperation in the Digital and Information Communication Technology Field.” Collaboration will be initiated through digital infrastructure construction, digital governance, e-commerce, and digital

talent training. Tailored policies will be implemented, mainly taking the lead in cross-border e-commerce, smart cities, and smart tourism, allowing the broader population in Central Asia to share in the benefits of the digital dividend.

3. Cultural Interaction and Cooperation

Central Asia is making concerted efforts to establish a more open market for the future. In recent years, the five Central Asian countries have, on the one hand, vigorously opened up their tourism, implementing visa-free policies for foreigners. Uzbekistan, for example, has expanded its list of visa-free countries from 9 in 2019 to over 90. Additionally, Central Asia is actively working on developing regional tourist visas, with the prospect of gradually forming a Silk Road visa that will be applicable across Central Asian countries.

Convenient international tourism transportation will change the landscape of tourism in Central Asia. The opening of the China-Central Asia Tourism Train in the future will directly transport tourists from the world's leading tourist origination country to Central Asia via railway. The introduction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, seamless coordination of rail and road transportation, and the increased direct flights between China and Central Asia will create a convenient tourism transportation network in Central Asia, naturally forming a hub for Eurasian tourism.

International cooperation and exchange in cultural heritage preservation can be promoted through multilateral mechanisms. The Silk Road Museum Alliance and the Asian Cultural Heritage Conservation Alliance are examples of initiatives that have established such mechanisms in Asian cultural heritage. In Central Asia, there will be a widespread promotion of preserving ancient cities, recovering and returning lost artifacts, and making joint applications for UNESCO World Heritage status.

Conclusions

The BRI, a major global infrastructure and economic project initiated by China, naturally evokes diverse reactions. The reason for anxiety among some countries is rooted in the geopolitical implications of the BRI (Chen et al., 2021). These concerns likely stem from the project's scale, its potential to shift global economic and political balances, and the strategic advantages it could confer to China. The paper aims to find a middle ground between extreme admiration and severe criticism of the BRI. This balanced approach suggests a more nuanced understanding of the BRI's impact and intentions beyond simplistic positive or negative portrayals.

Firstly, cooperation between China and Central Asian countries should be based on the essential principle of mutual benefit and win-win. This principle emphasizes the importance of mutual respect and equality, ensuring that all parties involved benefit from the partnership. In the BRI, the Central Asian region has emerged as a leader and benchmark. Tajikistan, as the first country in the world to sign the SREB agreement with China, represents the active participation of this region. The key to this cooperation lies in its comprehensive nature, which includes a comprehensive strategic partnership and documents for jointly building the Belt and Road. This reflects the practice of a community with a shared future for humanity on a bilateral level. The national interests of China and Central Asian countries are highly complementary, with China's strengths in manufacturing and technology perfectly matching the richness of Central Asian resources and their young demographic structure. Moreover, the development strategies of Central

Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan’s ‘Bright Path’ policy and Tajikistan’s 2030 development strategy, are closely integrated with the BRI. Coupled with high-level government promotion and multi-level cooperation platforms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the China-Central Asia Summit, these factors jointly provide a solid foundation for the successful advancement of the BRI in Central Asia.

Secondly, the BRI aims to enhance regional connectivity by constructing high-standard, sustainable infrastructure that benefits people’s livelihoods. The main projects include energy and infrastructure development, such as the China-Central Asia Natural Gas Pipeline, China-Europe Block Trains, significant industrial parks, and renewable energy projects in Central Asia. The transportation infrastructure has improved significantly, especially with the China-Europe Block Trains and new air routes promoting regional connectivity. Cultural exchange and tourism cooperation have also strengthened, as seen in joint archaeological projects, promotion of film and television works, and measures to facilitate tourism, such as mutual visa exemption agreements and cooperation with China in establishing the Silk Road International Tourism and Cultural Heritage University. Collaboration between China and Central Asian countries is crucial for maintaining regional security and stability.

Finally, the BRI will focus on three main areas: green development, technological innovation, and cultural exchange. Infrastructure construction will involve “hard connectivity,” strengthening physical connections such as transportation and energy infrastructure. It will also include “soft connectivity,” which refers to rules and standards that support regional cooperation and development. Lastly, “people-to-people connectivity” will be emphasized through cultural and humanities exchanges to enhance mutual understanding and connections between people of different nations. The BRI will also prioritize green and digital development, including green infrastructure, energy, transportation, finance, digital infrastructure, and e-commerce. Additionally, it promotes cultural heritage protection and exchange through multilateral mechanisms and advances a regional tourism visa system.

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