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BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN CENTRAL ASIA: DEVELOPMENT OR DEPENDENCY?

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Abstract. This article highlights China's initiative, which is called Belt and Road Initiative and its influence on Central Asian countries, mostly focusing on Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It shows how BRI transformed regional infrastructure, trade networks and connectivity from beginning in 2013. Addition to economic and political impacts, the paper also discusses the initiative's relevance to

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global development agendas, especially SDG 4-Quality Education and SDG 17-Partnerships for the Goals. Studies show how China educational exchanges, scholarship programs and cultural cooperation efforts contribute to human capital development in Central Asia, at the same time expanding China's soft power in these regions. Also, article highlights China-Central Asia partnerships within BRI framework, through assessing how these kind of collaborations support or challenge SDG 17 principles of equitable, transparent and mutually beneficial cooperation. Through using comparative approach and drawing on various case studies, this research provides an overview of how BRI shapes Central Asia's development path and geopolitical orientation in the 21st century.

Keywords: *Belt and Road Initiative, Central Asia, China, development, dependency, infrastructure, economy, environment, regional politics, educational, opportunities, policies, program.*

Introduction

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 (Yu, 2023). For China Central Asia plays an important role in building stronger overland trade routes, particularly through its

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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 (The Diplomat, 2020). 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

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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. According to National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic (2025) in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, nearly 40% of foreign debt by the country is held by China's Export-Import Bank. 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.

Geopolitical and Soft Power Dimensions

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 (2013) states that Silk Road Economic Belt is a model of coordinated growth and strategic partnership. 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-

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military influence. China's cultural expansion is evident in the increase 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.

Education, SDG 4, and Human Capital Development

The Belt and Road Initiative has gradually shaped the educational landscape of Central Asia, related to SDG 4 - Quality Education. By introducing scholarship programs, academic exchanges and the establishment of Confucius Institutes, China has created new opportunities for students and young specialists from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These initiatives promote the development of human capital and cross-cultural learning, which are indispensable for long-term regional development.

The purpose of China is to create a structure where all the governments of BRI states organize policies in education. Efforts are also being taken to make bilateral, multilateral, sub-regional agreements and cooperate on different policies. All the BRI countries are expected to work together on opportunities and problems faced by the students in development and use of optimal resources. It is also intended to emphasize

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the importance of teachers who teach Mandarin language to meet their demands in the BRI countries. Likewise, to improve student exchange programs emphasis is laid upon startups, news and social media, (Bowen Xu, 2021).

Four Programs have also been launched under the BRI education initiative.

1.The first one is Silk Road 2-way Student Exchange Improvement. The aim is to make China a popular educational destination and to promote talent, enhance and ensure security, health and success to foreign students studying in China.

2.The second program is ‘Silk Road Cooperation in Running Educational Institutions and Programs Enhancement’ the focus is on professional and technical colleges to cooperate with other business and industries units.

3.The third program is for Silk Road Teacher Training Development. The aim to organize teacher and principal training visits. Other certification courses are available with the objective of ensuring equitable distribution of resources and balanced development of education among BRI countries.

4.The Silk Road Joint Education and Training Enhancement Program is the fourth one which encourage universities in the region implement joint education and training programs that are important in order to meet the Belt and Road countries’ vital development demands, in fields such as languages, transportation, architecture, medicine, energy, environmental engineering, hydraulic engineering, bio-sciences, marine sciences, ecology protection, and cultural heritage preservation.

The BRI program likewise also 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

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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 impacted. (State Committee for Ecology and Environmental Protection of Uzbekistan, “Environmental Assessment Report on Angren-Pap Railway Project, 2016). The majority of BRI projects go through inadequate EIAs resulting in severe deforestation, water loss and irreversible ecological damage. In Kazakhstan, among others, whose BRI debt includes financing for another of worst regional SO₂ emissions, the coal power station, which is called Ekibastuz GRES-2. 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.

Debates, Criticism, and Dependency Risks

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

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regional integration (Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2025) The BRI provides development without interfering in domestic politics according to this perspective. Yet these gains are not uncomplicated. 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.

Conclusion

Although China publicly presented BRI as mutually beneficial and development program, it has deeper strategic aims when analyzed in Central Asian context. This article 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

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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.

The philosophy of China underlying BRI represents "peace and development" and a "future for humanity" which is demonstrated in all areas, including education, which will have an important positive impact on all BRI countries. 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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