



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**China's Economic Influence in Central Asia: An Analysis of the Xi Jinping Era (2013-2023)**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines China's growing economic power in Central Asia during Xi Jinping's presidency, specifically the BRI, trade, investment, and energy. The aim is to evaluate the Chinese economic policies introduced into the countries' infrastructures, financial systems, and political contexts. This study analyses published books and articles, official papers, international trade statistics, and case studies related to Chinese projects in Central Asia. This paper finds out China has raised its economic engagement, creating problems related to relying heavily on loans, adverse effects on the environment, and the labor practices of locals. While China has encouraged regional development, it has also created some economic weaknesses for the Central Asian countries. The recommendation focuses on the diversification of the economic relations, the advancement of the regional integration, and the simplification and the adoption of sustainable development principles to avoid overdependency on China.

**Key Words:** Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), energy cooperation, Trade

As a new power under the unchallenged rule of President Xi Jinping, China has leveraged its economic influence in Central Asia since 2013 to frame the region as one focal point of Beijing's foreign policy, mainly via his signature Belt and Road Initiative (Belt and Road Initiative), which epitomizes Chinese grand strategy for global connectivity and economic integration (Rolland, 2017). In recent years, the value of Central Asia, historically a crossroads for various civilizations and a geographical corridor for trade and energy resources, has given rise to newly found importance in China's global strategy as it tries to gain long-term access to nearby markets while securing available resources where Russia has other plans (Smith, 2021).

This has been along with growing Chinese infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications investments that have not only bolstered Sino-Central Asian economic relations but also, in many cases, reoriented the region economically and internationally towards China (Démurger, 2001). For example, under Xi's management, China has pursued a more overt form of economic statecraft, leveraging financial assistance, credit, and investments to secure strategic foreign policy objectives with the Belt and Road Initiative as one principal mechanism (Pacheco Pardo, 2018).

The Growing economic dependency of Central Asian states on China, harmonized by an expanded Chinese role in territorial security provision (primarily through the SCO), has thus generated concerns about sovereignty, debt sustainability, and conflictual stability that may be implicated in time within this dominant-subordinate relationship. (Kazantsev et al., 2021).

In addition, China has aroused the suspicion among other major powers like Russia and the U.S.A. on flanking possibilities that impend a prospective turn in the regional balance of influence, consequently translating to multilateral cooperation and competition dynamics (Blumenthal & Friedberg, 2022).

This research explores the rise and consequences of Chinese economic influence in Central Asia under Xi Jinping, situating this process within a regional political economy with its mechanisms deployed by Beijing and responses from states in the region, that termed unipolar China during Uzbekistan's development context (Çakan, 2022). This study will expand the current literature on Sino-Central Asian relations by analyzing how China's economic strategies have reshaped the transition of power in that region. It will employ established theories to shape a framework for examining the dynamics of economic statecraft and Regional security complex theory (Zou & Jones, 2019).

The research focuses on the nature and extent of China's economic influence in two key countries, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; it investigates patterns of local resistance or adaptation to Chinese investment activities there while considering how Beijing has adapted its strategic leverage across time (Ameyaw-Brobbe & Amable, 2023). Within the Belt and Road Initiative framework and Central Asia's changing political environment, these developments are analyzed to better understand new insights about China as a rising global power that might have far-reaching and long-term implications for future regional order.

In the end, it will address whether China's economic engagement has had extraordinary advantages but furthermore, opportunities for difficulties that challenge the modification of Central Asia's political and financial paths in one way that remains confused with critical significances for international set-up (Nurgozhayeva, 2020).

## Literature Review

Pradt (2020) *The Prequel to China's New Silk Road: Preparing the Ground in Central Asia. Germany*: This book provides the background information needed to understand China's successful rollout of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the New Silk Road. Decades ago in Central Asia, the groundwork was laid for creating a land route, particularly between China and Western Europe. China has to reach agreements with Russia and the Central Asian republics regarding politics, security, and economy. A lack of political collaboration, a security architecture, and border conflicts must be settled. The 1990s and 2000s saw China engage in successful diplomacy, which is crucial to the success of the BRI today. This book tells the fascinating tale of history's most significant geopolitical infrastructure project (Pradt, 2020). There is a lack of critical analysis on the socio-political impact of China's historical diplomacy in central Asia and foundational roles adopted by contemporary efforts to change the perception of citizenship and governmental modernity in the region. More importantly, there is a gap in understanding how emerging and evolving political and security dynamics influence the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative.

A study by Aryal (2021) Explains the dynamics of Central Asian focus in China's foreign policy strategy, especially after the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It enunciates how China's regional strategic interest has evolved into geo-economic concerns regarding economic cooperation, trade, infrastructure, and energy. Thus, according to the author, the role of Central Asia has grown because it is extremely rich in natural resources and is simultaneously a corridor linking China. The analysis is focused on the impact of China's investments and cooperation formats, which analyze how they contribute to the formation of regional integration in Central Asia, but also worry about the dependency of the states of the region on China. In addition, the article highlights the prospects and obstacles of economic cooperation between China and the Central Asian states as well as the political factors that have influenced the relations between China and these countries, including historical animosities and the presence of other influential players such as Russia

and the USA, etc. Finally, the study contributes a worthy effort to exploring the geoeconomic factors of Chinese foreign policy with a particular focus on the role of Central Asia in changing global strategy (Aryal, 2021). Few analyses have been done on how China's geoeconomic power in CARS affects the internal socio-political agendas and long-term economic independence of CARS apart from regional integration and Russian and American influences.

### **Material and Methods**

The empirical research design employs a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative analysis of policy documents and expert interviews on trade flows and investment volumes. Primary sources will consist of official reports from the Chinese and Central Asian governments, databases of BRI initiatives, and economic statistics compiled by international organizations. The secondary literature will encompass academic journals, publications from think organizations, and news articles. This triangular data makes a comprehensive and healthy analysis of China's increasing economic influence in the region possible.

### **The Sino-Central Asia relations**

There was also no comprehensive study of the China-Central Asia relations before 2013. China, therefore, could have historical interaction with Central Asia, though the ties began to flourish after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Çelik, 2023). The newly mandated Central Asian states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were in the middle of a search for new friends in order to gain economic stability and political independence. As expected, Central Asia has become significant for various reasons, the first of which is geographical proximity, the second being economic cooperation. After realizing this, China quickly began establishing relations with these states. China's relations with Central Asia in the 1990s and the early 2000s were cautious but entirely calculated, where the implicit principal objectives were visible: diplomacy and border management, mainly in terms of the stability of the Western areas, far from the most minor of all Xinjiang (Kılıç Mutlu, 2023).

The Initiation of First Approaches and the Evolution of the Embassy Relations after the USSR Dissolution. The disintegration of the Soviet Union saw China, without wasting much time, start the process of official adoption of the newly formed states in Central Asia. Such relations helped lay the groundwork for future relationships, business, power relations, and security deals with other nations. One more major state concern in the country's early years was the effective resolution, or rather the de facto settlement, of the inherited Soviet border conflicts with China. Among the Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, China entered into negotiations for border demarcation in the 1990s, reducing and stabilizing the relations (Radchenko, 2021).

At the same time, China, for the first time, began to invest in the Central Asian states on a qualitatively different social and economic scale. These first investments were not very large compared to the following ones. However, they were in the areas critical for constructing new geopolitics in Central Asia and for China, the spheres vital for extracting Central Asian resources, energy, and transport. The breakout point in Chinese-Central Asian relations can be considered the 'Shanghai Five' creation in 1996, which was further developed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO suggested a framework for negotiating emerging challenges to regional security and enhancing the actual economic relations, which elucidated China's entrenchment in Central Asia (Bailes et al., 2007). It was developed in the First Political Framework and the Trade Treaties. During the liberalization of the Chinese economy in the mid-1990s and the early twenty-first century, China tried to forge enhanced economic cooperation, mainly regarding oil, gas, and minerals, with the Central Asian states endowed with vast deposits of the said resources. In

the early trade relations, we mainly focused on barter trade of these resources. On the one hand, China imports primarily raw materials from central Asian countries while exporting manufactured products and technology on the other end (Brandt & Rawski, 2020).

Infrastructure development took a leading position in the main sphere of interaction between China and the Central Asian states. The initial projects included the construction of roads, railways, and pipelines, all of which were planned to provide China with better access to the region, both commercially and politically. (Melnikovová, 2020). The 2006 launch of the oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to China indicated China's welcome as it endeavored to diversify its oil imports to avoid being stuck in seas that may be physically barricaded by any conflict. Similarly, the late 2000s construction of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline underscored China's dominance in the economic sphere in Central Asia.

Some of these initial ventures and infrastructure projects were profoundly important for the growth of Central Asia and, at the same time, safeguarded and strengthened China's economic and power position in the region. Measures established during this period were the foundation for more creative endeavors under Xi Jinping, particularly by the BRI. One should consider this historical background to consider the continuity and changes in China's policy towards Central Asia and the increasing economic reverse dependence of the Central Asian states on China.

### **The Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

SCO has nurtured the relations between the PRC and the Central Asian nations. The SCO is said to have been formally established in 2001. However, it was called the Shanghai Five and was created in 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The stated primary objectives of the Shanghai Five were to address border control issues and develop cooperation in the Five Country area in the framework of the post-Soviet era. Uzbekistan joined in 2001, which led to the formation of the SCO as it embraced the SC yet included the economic and political (EJAZ, 2023). Concerning Central Asian states belonging to the SCO, it is clear that this organization has unambiguous meaning for China regarding the consolidation of interstate relationships. As a multilateral organization, the SCO provides China with a broad forum for a dialogue with Central Asian states on various issues, from security to economic relations. Since the creation of SCO, China has reached its fundamental objectives of improving its relations with the Central Asian countries, simultaneously ensuring cooperation to counter issues of concern that include terrorism, separatism, and extremism; these are referred to as 'the three evils' by China (Abbas et al., 2024).

Security cooperation is one of the main spheres of SCO interactions. The organization has undertaken many counterterrorism cooperation military exercises to tighten regional security. However, for China, which views the organization as a security regime, the SCO has averted the diffusion of extremism and separatism from Central Asia to its volatile Xinjiang province. This is also in tune with China's overall foreign policy of non-interference in its neighbors' internal affairs to advance its agenda of contributing to providing security in the region without being regarded as overly dominant. In the economic field, the SCO members enabled China to expand its trading and investment cooperation with Central Asia. The organization does not spearhead major economic initiatives but offers a platform through which member states can deliberate. The SCO has also supported infrastructure projects that are usually funded and executed by 'Belt and Road' initiatives between China and individual Central Asian states (Tüfekçi, 2024).

The given organization has politically benefited China by allowing it to reign over the Central Asia region and regulate the presence of other giants such as Russia and the United States. Despite this, by being a member of the SCO, China has been able to export its interests toward regional integration and development through policies such as the BRI

under the multilateralism framework of the organization. The SCO is also a political forum for diplomacy where China can enhance its political relations with Central Asian leaders, consequently garnering their backing for the Chinese-led regional projects (Yuan, 2023).

### **Primary Objectives of China in Central Asia**

They emphasize energy security, stability in the region, and sea lanes of communication. Several essential factors define China's strategic concerns that underlie its activities in Central Asia. Of all the clauses, energy security is arguably the most important. Central Asia has many natural resources, particularly oil and natural gas, greatly enhancing China's fast-growing economy. Ensuring regular supplies of these resources has been important for China, which has devoted a vast of capital to the development of energy resources, such as the pipelines that link Central Asia with China (Tang & Joldybayeva, 2023).

Another security interest that is very important to China is the maintenance and enhancement of regional stability. Due to its closeness to Xinjiang, which has an enormous population of Uyghur and has time and again been volatile, stability in Central Asia is a crucial concern for China's domestic security. To avoid any changes that may lead to instability in the region and that may threaten its economic and security interests, China pursues friendly relations with the Central Asian governments and supports their economic development (Sciorati, 2020). Other transport facilities include trade routes. Central Asia is equally strategic for Chinese imports and exports to Europe and the Middle East. Establishing overland facilities to encourage the transit of goods across the Central Asia region serves a bigger purpose in China's strategy of expanding its transit routes other than the sea routes, which are most often threatened by confrontation (Wani, 2020).

Central Asia also has the importance that is associated with its strategic location as the trade and energy bridge. The regions are strategically situated as a bridge between China, Europe, and the Middle East in terms of transport of goods and energy. This is because China has been putting more effort into its central Asia regions to construct railway, Highways, and pipeline networks. These projects promote trade and align Central Asia more to be connected with the economic structures of China while decreasing its reliance on Russian connections and increasing its dependency on Chinese markets and funding (Fatima & Zafar, 2020).

### **The BRI Countries of Central Asia**

This article provides an overview of the Belt and Road Initiative and its importance on an international level. The BRI has been a grand vision of China's President Xi Jinping since 2013, connecting Asia via overland and maritime silk roads to Europe, Africa, and beyond. It has the vision to restore and diversify the historical Silk Road system, the series of routes for the exchange of goods between Asia and the European and African continents by the land and sea routes. BRI covers over 60 countries with over 60% of the world's population and a third of the global GDP (Hillman, 2020).

Thus, in Central Asia, the vectors of the BRI development perfectly correlate with China's strategic priorities. It seeks to create a communication network that will improve the region's integration, promote the interface between the interior and exterior regarding trade, and ensure adequate provision of energy resources for the growth of China. The BRI also seems to further engorge Central Asia into the global economy, with China at the core of this integration. Thus, the critical strategy of China in developing roads, railways, and pipelines is to create a mega-economic corridor from the western province of China across the heart of Central Asia to Europe (Vadlamannati et al., 2023).

According to many authors, the construction of numerous facilities in the infrastructure sphere in Central Asia is associated with the activities of the BRI. Such work includes the development of railways, highways, and energy pipelines that open up Central Asia's connection with other regions. For instance, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway plan aims to establish direct rail connectivity between China and Central Asia and beyond, not only cutting transport costs and time duration (Xuanli Liao, 2021).

The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway can be viewed as one of the important projects carried out under the framework of the BRI that indicates China's further intentions to increase connectivity within the region. It is intended to serve as a transport corridor between China and Central Asia and stretch into Europe. The given project also helps advance trade and simultaneously enhances China's economic dominance in the region by integrating Central Asia into the trade networks. The Central Asia-China gas pipeline is another Belt and Road initiative megaproject. This pipeline that carries natural gas from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan to China is essential for China. It breaks China's overdependence on seaborne transportation and ensures an adequate and reliable supply of natural gas for the economic growth of the country (Nurgozhayeva, 2020).

Effect on connectivity of the regional structure and integration of the economy. The BRI has played an essential role in developing Central Asian countries and changing connectivity and the region's economic landscape. By enhancing transport connectivity and energy, BRI has enhanced the distribution and sales of goods and services. These projects have also contributed to enhancing the centrality of Central Asia in the new globalization process, with the Chinese factor being major. At the same time, the scholarly and political discourse has sprung a new concern regarding the continued rise of the region's entanglement with China, mainly in trade and investment (Yu, 2023).

### **Financial Tools of the BRI**

The state-owned banks and financial institutions of China have a significant role. The BRI has a mainly financial logic. Chinese state-owned banks and financial institutions stand at the heart of BRI operations. They provide the requisite funds to finance the expansive infrastructural initiatives under the BRI, generally in credit and equity. Two primary funding sources for BRI are the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China, which offer billions of dollars in credit facilities to Central Asian countries (Soboleva & Krivokhizh, 2021).

The structure of BRI financing in Central Asian states is credit, grants, and direct investments. Although grants are rare in China, loans are the most common funding source. Chinese banks provide long-term, concessional loans to Central Asian governments. These loans are fixed to identifiable infrastructure facilities and are usually repaid over long-term horizons. Also, it is worth mentioning that in some cases, Chinese companies also invest directly in projects, either with local partners or as the sole investor, which means that the Chinese capital is deeply entrenched in the region (Davies & Matthews, 2021). Regarding its financial arrangements, the BRI has been seen as a way to plunge Central Asia into a new debt trap. The large amounts of credit have accumulated debt burdens in nearly all the Central Asian countries, making others term these nations indebted to China. Opponents claim that this dependence may make the financial situation of these countries unsustainable, threatened with the inability to repay the owed money to China without agreeing on other conditions, including surrender of critical assets or subordination of economic policies to Beijing's directions (Wilson, 2021).

Trade dynamics is another critical factor that illustrates the changes in the trade volumes and key trading sectors. The total flow of bilateral trade increased significantly after the BRI and Central Asia launch with China. China has emerged as one of the leading

trading partners of the Central Asian states, and trade turnover has been growing steadily over the past ten years. The primary trading industries are oil and gas, mineral and ores, agricultural products, and factory goods. Oil, gas, minerals, and others are exported from Central Asia to China, and the latter pays back with manufactured products, technology, and consumer products (Yu, 2023).

However, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the fact that there are trade balance issues between China and Central Asian states. Central Asia has had an imbalance in exports and imports over the years, exporting low-value-added products, namely primary commodities, while importing high-value-added products. This has predicted the possibility of what may be called the 'Afghanistization' of the Central Asian economies, given their overreliance on China both as an export market and source of imports. This also brings into question the long-term viability of the trade ratio concerning Chinese markets, especially with those Central Asian countries that cannot develop a non-oil economic base and, therefore, cannot afford to cut down investments from China (Xuanli Liao, 2021).

This research findings shows that China has expanded its economic engagement with Central Asia in the capacity of Xi Jinping's presidency, namely, BRI, trade, investment, and energy. Chinese-financed infrastructural development projects have enhanced accessibility. However, some negative aspects include increasing debt burden, environmental impacts, and labor grievances. The economic dominance of China seems to have raised concerns across Central Asian countries about losing control of the economy. However, Chinese participation has not been detrimental to regional development, where the states are paying real attention to balancing this partnership with other options all over the Global Village.

## **Conclusion**

During the Xi Jinping presidency (2013-2023), China's economic power in Central Asia has profoundly changed the dynamics of the area's nature and activities. China has actively improved relations and connectivity with Central Asian countries by participating in BRI and other infrastructure-building programs, energy cooperation, and integration. These investments have allowed Central Asia to grow and diversify economically, making China a vital player in the development of Central Asia. Nevertheless, this growing economic diplomacy has not been without its hiccups. Issues related to the role of debt, opposition to neoliberalism, and the environmental impact have emerged, so Central Asian countries sought to maintain multi-vector approaches to Russia and the United States. While Central Asian countries try to find their place within the relations with China, the question of clear communication and adaptation for addressing local issues is becoming increasingly important. In the future, it will be possible to observe how well the Chinese approach is suited to be changed in order to correspond to the goals and concerns of Central Asian states in order to build trust and constructively cooperate. Concerning the economic, social, and environmentally responsible approach to its investment initiatives, China has to strengthen its strategic position in Central Asia, bringing stability, prosperity, and, hopefully, interconnectivity to the region. New dynamics in this relationship will pose new challenges that we need to work hard to understand to make the cooperation between China and Central Asia entirely beneficial in the years to come.

## **Recommendations**

Therefore, to free their economies from heavy dependence on China, the Central Asian states should engage the other global and regional actors while increasing regional cooperation and expanding intra-CA trade. Enhancing local participation and disclosure for the Chinese-led projects is vital to ensure fairness and sound environmental impacts. Governments also need good controls over debt sources from Chinese investors, especially in the Belt and Road Infrastructural Initiative. Sustainable development and good

governance on foreign investments will mean that such investments are in the nation's best interest and will not have short-term gains since the objective of achieving sustainable development is long-term. By building up these areas of development, these centers will enhance economic power and simultaneously check the hegemonic dominance, which can upset the equilibrium of the region.



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