Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on International Law and Legal Policy
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.30478

The Impact of China's "Belt and Road" Initiative on Economic Stability in Central Asia

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Abstract. With the in-depth implementation of the "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) in Central Asia, assessing its comprehensive impact on the region holds significant practical significance. Based on the five-pronged connectivity framework under the BRI, this paper explores the multi-dimensional effects of the initiative on regional stability. Currently, although the resilience of cooperation between Central Asia and China has been significantly enhanced, the region faces severe challenges such as geopolitical games and trust deficits. It is necessary to explore high-quality development paths, accelerate the shift towards high-quality cooperation, and promote the high-quality development of the BRI to consolidate the stable political, economic, and social environment in Central Asia.

Keywords: "Belt and Road" Initiative, China's Policy, Central Asia, Political and Economic Cooperation

1. Introduction

Central Asia's geopolitical strategic value and historical heritage have long placed it at the forefront of international relations research. With the continuous advancement of the "Belt and Road" Initiative in Central Asia, its political and economic effects urgently require academic examination. Existing studies mostly explore the initiative's impact on Central Asia from a single dimension, either limited to listing economic cooperation data or confined to the narrative framework of geopolitical competition, lacking a systematic analysis of regional stability.

This paper attempts to break through the limitations of existing research and examine how the BRI reshapes the foundation of stability in Central Asia through infrastructure connectivity, trade structure transformation, and multilateral mechanism construction. Research shows that the initiative has achieved remarkable results in enhancing regional economic resilience and institutional cooperation, but also faces certain challenges. Through empirical data and policy text analysis, this paper aims to reveal the complex mechanism of Central Asia's stability evolution under the BRI background, providing a new theoretical perspective for understanding the transformation of the Eurasian continental order in the new era.

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2. The role of the "Belt and Road" Initiative in political and economic cooperation between China and Central Asia

Located in the hinterland of Eurasia, Central Asia has historically been a key hub of China's "Silk Road". Today, it has become a frontier for great power competition due to its abundant natural resources and important geographical location. After China proposed the "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the five Central Asian countries were identified as priority cooperation partners. The Second China-Central Asia Summit in 2025 adopted the Astana Declaration and designated 2025-2026 as the "Year of High-Quality Development of China-Central Asia Cooperation", marking a new stage of quality improvement and upgrading in cooperation [1]. The composite regional governance system of "five-pronged connectivity" (policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds) proposed by President Xi Jinping of China has become the pillar of the BRI (The Belt and Road Initiative) framework.

A large number of facts and studies have shown that the stability of a "region" in the political sense is affected by three dimensions: economic interdependence, institutional coordination, and security cooperation. Economic interdependence refers to reducing the probability of conflicts through the diversification of trade and investment. Institutional coordination aims to reduce the uncertainty of conflicts through rule-based cooperation, social adaptability, and cultural inclusiveness. Security cooperation directly eliminates threat sources through military security cooperation. We will comprehensively assess the stability of current political and economic cooperation between China and Central Asia from these three dimensions.

The "infrastructure connectivity" and "unimpeded trade" under the BRI have achieved remarkable results in terms of economic interdependence. In terms of infrastructure construction, efforts are being made to accelerate the diversification of international transport corridors and the transformation of Central Asia into a "land-linked country". The industrial chain is continuously optimized in terms of trade structure: for example, Jiangsu's export volume to the five Central Asian countries reached 11.099 billion yuan in the first half of 2025, a year-on-year increase of 25.8% [2]; the trade volume between China and Central Asia has tripled in ten years, upgrading from energy and minerals to mechanical and electrical products and new energy vehicles, reducing the single dependence on resource exports [3].

In terms of institutional coordination, the "policy coordination" and "financial integration" under the BRI have built a multi-layered mechanism. The first is to consolidate the current strategic alignment and high-level mechanisms, namely the regular holding of the China-Central Asia Summit and the signing of the Treaty of Perpetual Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation, which strengthens political mutual trust. The second is to innovate local cooperation platforms, such as the Nanjing "China-Central Asia Trade Facilitation Cooperation Platform" which provides national-level "one-stop" services. The import and export commodity exhibition co-hosted with Kazakhstan in 2025 achieved a turnover of over 800 million yuan [4].

Security cooperation directly addresses traditional and non-traditional threats. In this dimension, the BRI has taken measures to deepen non-traditional security cooperation and large-scale people-to-people exchanges to build social resilience, achieving results such as the China-Central Asia security cooperation network cracking down on terrorist forces and the mutual visa exemption between China and Uzbekistan.

A series of initiatives implemented by the BRI targeting the "three dimensions" have systematically enhanced the social stability of Central Asia. However, there are some challenges in the sustainability of policy implementation: the imbalance of trade structure makes trade vulnerable to fluctuations in commodity prices; the different policies of the United States, Western countries

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and other countries towards Central Asia have become "third-party interference" in China-Central Asia cooperation; the weakened influence of Russia has led to a power vacuum, and non-traditional security threats persist.

3. The economic impact of the "Belt and Road" Initiative on Central Asia

Before the proposal and implementation of the "Belt and Road" Initiative, trade between China and Central Asian countries was relatively monotonous due to various factors such as infrastructure, geopolitics, and regional security. This monotony was more obvious in terms of commodity structure and trade methods. Data shows that between 1996 and 2013, the average intra-industry trade index between China and Central Asian countries was always below 0.2 [5]. In terms of trade structure, Central Asian countries mainly exported primary products such as raw materials to China, while China's exports to Central Asia were dominated by industrial manufactured goods. This relatively single and unbalanced economic and trade structure has to a certain extent limited the potential of economic and trade cooperation between the two regions and brought many problems such as unbalanced import and export trade, trade frictions, and high economic risks.

With the continuous cooperation between China and Central Asian countries, the bilateral trade structure has been continuously improved in recent years. In 2022, China's imports of agricultural products and energy and mineral commodities from Central Asia increased by more than 50% year-on-year; at the same time, China's exports of mechanical and electrical products to Central Asia also achieved a growth of 42%. In the same year, the cross-border e-commerce trade volume between China and Central Asia increased sharply by 95% year-on-year, and nearly 300 enterprises from Central Asian countries settled in China's e-commerce platforms. High-quality products from both sides have begun to enter each other's markets.

Data for the first half of 2023 further shows that in addition to traditional energy trade, industrial products such as machinery and equipment and their parts, televisions and electrical equipment accounted for the main position in China's exports to Central Asia. Exports of pulp and textile-related products also increased significantly, among which exports of sugar-related products surged by 1677.64% and textile products such as plant textile fibers increased by 1169.12%. At the same time, China's imports of optical, photographic and other instruments and equipment and their parts from Central Asia increased by 1532.51% [5].

While the "Belt and Road" Initiative has brought certain economic impacts to Central Asia, it has also promoted the economic stability of the region.

3.1. Infrastructure construction

In the context of economic globalization, the restructuring effect of infrastructure construction on the regional geographical and economic pattern has become increasingly prominent, which profoundly affects the regional economic spatial organization and industrial development model. Infrastructure construction cooperation under the "Belt and Road" Initiative is mainly reflected in two dimensions: the diversification of international transportation networks and the upgrading of hub strategies.

Especially in the construction of international transport corridors, diversification of transportation is the future development trend. China-Europe Railway Express has formed a trunk network of "China-Kazakhstan-Russia-Europe". Among them, the "Wuwei South-Tashkent" high-quality freight train launched by Gansu Province in 2025 is representative. The whole line is 4000 kilometers long, the transportation time is shortened to 6 days, and the logistics efficiency is improved relying on the

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bonded overseas warehouse system [6]. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway will gradually develop the region into an important transportation hub node in Eurasia. In terms of hub strategy, the "multi-directional connectivity" plan implemented by the Uzbekistan government is a typical case. The plan builds modern logistics hubs with Tashkent and Navoi as core nodes, further connecting to ports in the Arabian Sea. The completion of this corridor will not only save regional logistics costs but also greatly improve the international logistics accessibility of Central Asia.

3.2. Energy and industrial chain cooperation

Cooperation between China and Central Asia in energy and industrial chains shows a multi-dimensional expansion trend. In the field of energy structure transformation, Chinese enterprises participate in the development of wind power projects in the Republic of Kazakhstan and promote the implementation of the Tashkent green hydrogen project in the Republic of Uzbekistan [7]. They also assist the country in building a waste incineration power generation system, realizing the electrification transformation of public transportation in major cities, and jointly promoting the construction of regional clean energy infrastructure. Industrial investment has achieved spatial extension from traditional energy to diverse fields: China-Kazakhstan cooperation covers digital technology innovation and agricultural modernization, and the application of Chinese technology has significantly improved Kazakhstan's grain processing capacity; in Uzbekistan, the application of halophyte cultivation technology and efficient water-saving irrigation systems has provided technical solutions for alleviating ecological pressure in the Aral Sea region. This cooperation model has effectively promoted the upgrading of Central Asia's industrial chain and the construction of sustainable development capabilities.

4. Challenges facing the further development of the "Belt and Road" Initiative in Central Asia

China and Central Asia have established a foundation for political and economic cooperation under the "Belt and Road" Initiative. However, in terms of the long-term implementation, the in-depth development of the initiative in Central Asia still faces multiple challenges.

4.1. Intensified geopolitical games

With the increasingly severe global international situation, great power competition has entered a white-hot stage. Central Asia involves the interests and competition of multiple major powers. In recent years, Russia's influence in the international community has declined due to the Ukraine war, which has also weakened its traditional control over Central Asia, giving the United States and Western countries the opportunity to strengthen their penetration in the region. In 2025, the United States, together with Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, launched the "Zangezur Corridor", attempting to build an energy and logistics corridor bypassing Russia. It seeks to bypass Russia's energy and logistics corridors and establish a military path for NATO to directly reach the Caspian Sea, which directly threatens the strategic security of China and Russia in Central Asia [8].

4.2. Escalating regional security risks

Central Asia itself has multiple ethnic and religious conflicts. For example, conflicts between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan due to water resource disputes and undemarcated borders have become one of the triggers for regional unrest. In the game of great powers, China, the United States, and Russia also regard Central Asia as a "buffer zone" for strategic games: the United States attempts to

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use non-governmental organizations to incite anti-China demonstrations; Russia hopes to exert pressure through immigration policies. Faced with this situation, most Central Asian countries have adopted a "balanced diplomacy" foreign policy, but it has certain limitations, such as being unable to get rid of security dependence and economic dependence on major powers.

4.3. Structural dilemma of energy cooperation

Energy cooperation involves not only cooperation between China and Central Asia but also between China and Russia. Insufficient energy mutual trust between China and Russia has become one of the structural dilemmas of energy cooperation. Russia has proposed two routes for the "Power of Siberia 2" pipeline, either through Kazakhstan or Mongolia (with hidden risks of US-South Korea military penetration), both of which have geopolitical risks. While negotiating gas trade cooperation with China, Russia is also negotiating with Japan, South Korea, and North Korea to divert gas sources, attempting to restrain China with energy. Moreover, if the project can be completed, China will form a dependence on Russian energy, which will eventually become a strategic vulnerability.

5. Conclusion

In summary, through "economic connectivity and institutional cooperation", the "Belt and Road" Initiative has significantly enhanced Central Asia's regional stability. Economically, infrastructure connectivity and industrial chain integration have helped Central Asia break through the "land lock", and the diversification of trade structure has enhanced risk resistance capacity. Politically, the "China-Central Asia Spirit" and the summit mechanism have built a new type of regional governance paradigm, and security cooperation has effectively suppressed non-traditional threats. However, great power games and trust crises remain prominent challenges. In the future, it is necessary to deepen the path of "high-quality cooperation":

1. Promote industrial value-added through green digitalization (such as green hydrogen and agricultural technology);
2. Expand people-to-people exchanges to consolidate the public opinion foundation;
3. Improve dispute prevention mechanisms. Only by transforming development dividends into sustainable governance effectiveness can Central Asia be transformed from a "source of turmoil" into an "anchor of stability".

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