

# Central Asia Should Be At The Heart Of America's 'New Silk Road' Policy

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As President Xi Jinping presided over a power consolidating 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, he also highlighted his trademark “Belt and Road” initiative (BRI). The aim is to build infrastructure projects that may reformat the Eastern hemisphere as we know it, and boost Chinese economic and political power.

Needless to say America needs to keep an eye on this.

Earlier this year a Chinese freight train made history by being the first to travel from China to the United Kingdom. London joined a list of 14 other European cities now linked to China by rail. This extraordinary feat makes Western Europe much more accessible for the Chinese industry. The long journey from China to the UK took 14 days and crossed 7,500 miles. One of the countries this freight train spent several days transiting during its journey was Kazakhstan.

It should be no surprise that Kazakhstan is a key part of the BRI. It is the world's 9th largest country by size, and is located right in the heart of the Eurasian landmass. When it comes to trade and transportation, it is almost impossible to avoid the metaphor, now widely used by reporters and officials alike, that Kazakhstan is a “buckle” for the BRI.

The BRI was announced by Xi Jinping in 2013. Its goal is the construction of road and sea connections (highways, bridges, pipelines, fiber optic cables, railroads, airports, and ports, etc.) between China and countries in the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and eventually to Europe.

There are two main components of BRI: a land component and a maritime component.

There are many strategic reasons why the U.S. should be wary of the maritime aspects of BRI. China is extending its reach to places not traditionally associated with Beijing's influence—like Sri Lanka. There are worrying cases of China injecting itself in the local economy and politics in an unhealthy way, such as in Africa.

However, the overland component of BRI through Central Asia is different in a couple of ways. First, unlike with many of the countries being impacted by the maritime component of BRI, China has a history of trade and economic activity in the region, dating back to the millennia-old Silk Road. Central Asian countries, including what is known today as Kazakhstan, have played an important role in trade and transit for centuries. China's role in this is nothing new.

Secondly, many of the countries in Central Asia face economic challenges and need to improve infrastructure. This is a result of decades of Russian and Soviet control. Chinese investment in local infrastructure is not only welcome—it is often needed.

This is why the U.S. should view China's BRI in Central Asia with an open mind.. However, the choice for the U.S. is not binary: the U.S. does not have to wholeheartedly support the BRI in the region, nor does it have to pursue a policy of undermining or blocking it.

The answer is somewhere in between. This is particularly the case as U.S. partners like Kazakhstan, which for historical, geographical and cultural reasons, have to balance their relations with Moscow, Beijing, and Washington, DC.

Where China's investments in Kazakhstan are legitimate, transparent, and within the rule of law, the U.S. should acknowledge that BRI could present opportunities. After all, projects spawned from BRI could help Kazakhstan increase its regional trade and connectivity while boosting economic opportunity. This, in turn, can boost regional stability, especially as Uzbekistan is increasingly open to foreign investment in the aftermath of the isolationist and draconian rule by the late President Islam Karimov.

This could also boost U.S. economic activity in the region. The U.S. companies' investment in Kazakhstan's energy sphere runs in tens of billions of dollars, and there is potential for more. And there are also additional trade and investment opportunities. U.S. exports to Kazakhstan totaled more than \$1 billion in 2016. If China becomes more transparent with its bidding process, U.S. firms could stand to gain a lot too with BRI projects.

However, as a friend to Kazakhstan, the U.S. should caution Astana from agreeing too easily to Chinese investment and BRI initiatives that could undermine its national sovereignty. Secretary Rex Tillerson recently noted that BRI projects

occasionally suffer from questionable infrastructure financing that may create unsustainable debt obligations for countries which undertake them

U.S. policy makers are still playing catch up with what BRI means for American interest in Central Asia. Hopefully, this will change. Under President Trump, the U.S. sent a delegation to China's recent BRI summit for the first time.

With President Trump's new strategy in Afghanistan, it is inevitable that Central Asia will play an important role as part of the regional approach.

There are a lot of areas with China that should concern the U.S., but BRI should not be viewed as a zero sum game—especially in Central Asia. The U.S. needs a pragmatic approach to BRI. Countries like Kazakhstan need an engagement with China's BRI — with their eyes open.

For too long the U.S. has been ignoring the Central Asia. This must change. The Central Asian region has been, is, and will continue to be an area of great geopolitical importance for the U.S. And in this region, Kazakhstan is America's best partner.

The sooner policy makers in Washington realize this, the better for everyone.