

A first-hand look at how ordinary people in Central Asia benefit from cooperation with China

By Wendy Win

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- Many local people in Central Asia hope that their countries will be more than just a transit point, but also a hub that boosts regional and even global trade
- Many people in Central Asian countries dismissed rumors following the launch of the **Belt and Road** initiative that hype up a "China invasion"

Historically, the five countries forming modern day Central Asia have all borne witness to changes brought on by trade and connectivity from the ancient **Silk Road**.

Like thousands of years ago, Central Asia is a transit point. As the world faces increasing trade protectionism, it is refreshing to see multilateral projects between China and Central Asian countries, which open up the possibilities of exchange and cooperation between neighbors.

While Chinese companies have been investing huge sums to create and update transportation links among the countries, this reporter has found multilateral projects are welcomed by the local people as opportunities to improve their lives and connect them with a bigger world.

Most of the local people interviewed by the Global Times remain largely optimistic about projects from China's Belt and Road (B&R) initiative due to the potential to boost development, create employment opportunities and offer an economic boost.

Many local people hope that their country will be more than just a transit point but a hub for regional growth, not only for the five Stans of Central Asia to boost trade among themselves, but with China and the rest of the world.

Multilateral cooperation

Kazakhstan remains a bridge between East and West. Cooperation has been mutually beneficial. Against the backdrop of the Belt and Road initiative, the country has developed its state program "Nurly Jol" (Bright Future).

Both countries are on the same page about developing transportation corridors, which not only helps to drive industries and create jobs, but also allows the nations to connect with their immediate neighbors.

Very much like China helping Uzbekistan with the construction of the Kamchiq tunnel, which connects the more rural East with the capital, the Khorgos-Almaty-Aktau railway not only increases speed and volume of trade, but also helps to open up multiple projects across various industries.

While Kazakhstan generates 60 percent of the region's GDP, the other four Central Asian countries have also been important places for Chinese investment as part of the B&R initiative due to their strategic location as intersections and connection points between China and Europe.

Infrastructure construction projects in these countries not only facilitate the transportation of goods from China, but also link these countries to the rest of the world.

China is a major trading partner and makes investments in not only transportation infrastructure but also energy, agriculture, healthcare, power lines, telecommunications and more.

Business happens in both directions. Chinese banks have been supplying favorable loans for these countries in key projects, and collaboration results in joint exploration for resources and access to China's experience in business ventures.

A railway linking China with the south of Kyrgyzstan and the 24 million-consumer market of Uzbekistan is under discussion. Support for Kyrgyz infrastructure projects has been continuous and trade between China and Kyrgyzstan has grown enormously.

Since 1992, China has provided grants to Kyrgyzstan for financing projects. Trade turnover between the two reached over \$1 billion in 2015. The Chinese presence is visible with billboards showing Huawei phones and special economic development zones.

Aigul Kubatbekova, the owner of Salam Travel and the Apple Hostel chain in Bishkek, studied at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. She not only hopes for the best between China and Kyrgyzstan, but also views the B&R initiative as a good way to connect China to Central Asia.

Like Aigul, many young people from the B&R countries have studied or are planning to study Chinese in China. This growing relationship helps to boost an array of opportunities.

Since tourism remains the key focus for Aigul, she hopes for greater cooperation and travel between China and Kyrgyzstan.

While traveling in Karakol, the local driver Taalai, who is familiar with local trade and the local stores at the bazaar, gave a quick insight into how quickly trade has become important between China and Kyrgyzstan.

"You see these clothes, shoes, household appliances and electronics? Eighty percent come from China," he said.

Kyrgyzstan imports more than it exports. Taalai said Chinese goods are relatively inexpensive and OK in quality, so they are preferred by the local community.

In 2015 and 2016, there were small-scale protests in Kyrgyzstan against an influx of foreign goods, which the locals regarded as hurting local business.

When this reporter asked him about the severity of past protests and whether he is worried that it would hinder future growth, he mentioned that there will always be groups of opposition. "I'm mostly concerned about developments which cannot happen without cooperation," said Taalai.



A friend in need

During the week this reporter was touring in Turkmenistan, the local newspaper Neutral Turkmenistan reported on "TAPI" — a pipeline linking gas-rich Turkmenistan with Afghanistan, Pakistan and India — in great detail. Locals say that one of the reasons for Turkmenistan to embrace China is that Turkmenistan could diversify its export routes and economy.

From Turkmenistan's point of view, Russia has always been the biggest customer of Turkmenistan's natural resources. For this reason, the establishment of gas pipelines helps the country to seek alternatives.

Furthermore, new pipelines are conducive in attracting investments and know-how in order to increase domestic hydrocarbons production and develop new gas fields.

Elias, the local guide, does not believe that this TAPI move is in any way a method for his country to lessen Chinese influence.

He explained that local people do not view the Chinese presence with negativity, because China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has been investing in Turkmenistan for many years, and the CAGP (Central Asia Gas Pipeline) Sino-Turkmen pipeline, which dates back to 2009, has significantly helped to break a monopoly faced by Turkmenistan.

"China is our biggest customer. They come, they buy our gas and then talk about building roads. Hopefully China can build for us a fast train linking our capital with all corners of our country," he said.

Elias hopes that transportation would be built to cut down travel time, and link major cities and towns in his country with the rest of Central Asia.

Such projects also exist in Tajikistan, the poorest of the five countries. As the recipient of many **AIIB** (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) supported projects, local driver Arvis, who frequently drives along the Pamir highway, described how a China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) project linking the capital of Tajikistan all the way to Chanak at the Uzbekistan border is something that Tajikistan needs. The highway cuts through much of the country, linking major cities such as Istaravshan and Khujand.

"China is also working on hydropower plants, power lines and more. China pays much of the cost. We pay too and things are easy for both of us," said Arvis.

It is a shared opinion that the projects not only benefit both sides by opening up regional corridors and reviving the ancient Silk Road routes, they are also about seeking partnership against the backdrop of a world that is seeing increasing unrest and a stagnating economy.

Hyped up paranoia

People told the Global Times that any opportunities, initiatives and openness should be welcomed since there are always more chances for stakeholders to complement each other and seek win-win scenarios. Connectivity and cooperation is needed, against the current global backdrop of protectionism.

There hasn't been any shortage of hyped-up paranoia about the China-proposed development strategy.

Imported Chinese products were initially seen by some local people as competition for local goods. Some scholars voiced concerns that the projects might not be beneficial for ordinary

people.

While it is easy to smear an ambitious open project as a "China invasion," such rumors have been dismissed by many people.

Since the beginning and even before many projects commenced, there have been voices claiming that the B&R projects wouldn't be successful, given that projects of this scale involve multiple players. But while multilateral cooperation can entice opposition, aiming for win-win situations and having concrete examples of improvements in infrastructure is more and more seen as one of the many ways to ensure greater connectivity and understanding between countries in the region and around the world.