

Why Central Asia Is Betting on China's Belt and Road

Central Asian countries are betting on the BRI for long-term benefits, despite the apparent risks.

By Umida Hashimova

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The transfer of Hambantota deep-water port in Sri Lanka to China through 2116 set off alarm bells across Asia. Those already warning that China's ambitious infrastructure development project, the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), was nothing more than political encroachment disguised as economic projects had found their clearest evidence yet. Some, even among the 65 countries covered by the BRI, cautioned about threats to sovereignty.

Nevertheless, other BRI participant countries — like those in Central Asia — remained unperturbed by the fallout of the developments in Sri Lanka. The support of these countries toward the BRI remains not only unwavering, but their leaderships advocate for wider and multi-layered involvement within the initiative.

The Central Asian countries — in particular Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan — are still struggling to establish viable economies following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The desolate crumbling infrastructure built to be connected with Russia exclusively has contributed to the region's economic downturn. At the same time, the economic developments of the Central Asian states are not equal: Kazakhstan has fared the best in this quartet, while Kyrgyzstan the worst. Kazakhstan's GDP per capita is [\\$7,700](#) with its economy highly dependent on [hydrocarbon exports](#), while Kyrgyzstan's GDP per capita is [\\$1,077](#) and the equivalent of [30 percent](#) of GDP comes from remittances of labor migrants working predominantly in Russia.

Central Asian countries are in need of large-scale investments and the BRI intends to do just that. So far, three railroad connections in the region have been completed under the BRI banner: [Pop-Angren](#) in Uzbekistan, [Uzen-Bereket-Gorgan](#) traversing Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran, and [Khorgos dry port](#) in Kazakhstan that connects China and Kazakhstan. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad had been under discussion for almost 20 years but stalled over Kyrgyzstan's complaints that the project lacked benefits for Bishkek. Recently the parties resumed cooperation with renewed energy to complete the project. The Pop-Angren railroad will become a part of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan rail link once completed. While the railroad is in the making, China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan recently [launched](#) a highway connecting the three countries. Although Tajikistan is not a part of any proposed rail link, China invested in the 350-km [Dushanbe-Chanak](#) highway that connects the north of the country with the capital, Dushanbe.

It is important to understand that for Central Asian states these infrastructure projects are not merely grand investments, but also tickets to join a global trade and geographic reorientation toward market economies in Western Europe, South and East Asia, and beyond. The Central Asians hope that Chinese aid will unite the region economically and open doors to larger projects with greater global attention.

China-Central Asia relations are unique in part because Central Asian countries can play the role of stabilizer with regard to China's Xinjiang province. The Uyghurs who reside in Xinjiang are linguistically and culturally close to Central Asians and witnessed Central Asian states gaining independence in the 1990s. As Central Asians were building their nationhood, among Uyghurs it stirred up feelings of victimhood and drove some to rise up against the Chinese government. The Chinese government was in turn troubled by the [support](#) rendered to Uyghurs by the populations of newly independent Central Asia. Even prior to the 1990s, the Soviet government through its bases in Tashkent and Almaty employed [stratagems](#) to infiltrate Xinjiang with the aim of annexing the region into the Soviet Union. China naturally could not ignore that history of sabotage and was eager to neutralize any threats on the Central Asian border.

Now the scene has changed: Central Asian states are a major partner in China's attempts to alleviate threats emerging from the ["three evil forces"](#) – terrorism, separatism, and extremism. This partnership was first institutionalized as the Shanghai Five in 1996, later renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Chinese investments built additional incentives for Central Asian officials to adhere to China's policy toward the Uyghurs. Law enforcement bodies in Central Asian began to take the toughest measures when Uyghurs are found [violating](#) laws and prevented their nationals from rendering support to Uyghurs' separatist sentiments.

China's infrastructure investments in Central Asia also have the purpose of [evening out](#) economic disparity in China's regions. Xinjiang, in addition to being politically restive, is also economically behind compared to China's other regions. Because China wishes to preserve social stability and enhance national unity, it created the Xinjiang-Central Asia nexus to turn Xinjiang into a major regional economic hub for Central Asians wishing to do business with China.

The Central Asian states and China appreciate similar values, which inevitably contributes to a strengthening of their ties. They qualify economic development and increased economic livelihood as the [guarantor](#) of peace and stability. Liberal values of freedom, democracy, and human rights are [not viewed as priorities](#). Even at the societal level, Central Asians are a relatively communal society just like China as opposed to the individual-centric system that dominates Western societies.

China's energy imports from Central Asia is another area where the countries will remain interdependent. Turkmenistan is China's largest natural gas supplier. In 2016, it supplied [21 percent](#) of China's natural gas imports. Uzbekistan, although on a smaller scale, supplied [2.6 percent](#) of China's imports of natural gas in 2016. Kazakhstan supplied [0.8 percent](#) of China's import of crude oil in 2016. Given that

Chinese dependence on oil and gas imports will [continue](#) to grow, energy cooperation will help maintain a strong connection to Central Asia.

The economic interdependencies and security cooperation between Central Asia and China, as well as Beijing's role as a major financier of infrastructure and connectivity projects has prompted regional leaders to propose additional layers of cooperation that can actively feed into their domestic development agendas. Kazakhstan officially established points of [confluence](#) in its national *Nurly Zhol* infrastructure plan with China's BRI. In addition, [Uzbekistan](#) and [Kazakhstan](#) are seeking opportunities that go beyond physical infrastructure, building sustainable relations in industry, science, and cultural domains. Kyrgyzstan expressed a strong [interest](#) in emerging as the digital hub in the region by connecting to the fiber-optic lines of China's Digital Silk Road.

China's involvement in Central Asia has not been all smooth sailing. Not everyone is enthusiastic about China's growing presence in the region. The general Central Asian populace is suspicious of Chinese, fearing that the much more numerable Chinese will overrun the Central Asian region. Sinophobia is apparent across the region, nowhere more apparently so than in Kazakhstan, which in [2016](#) witnessed protests in multiple locations across the country against a proposed law rumored to allow foreigners to own Kazakh land. As recently as in February 2018, Chinese Council to Kazakhstan Zhang Wei found himself publicly [explaining](#) to the media that China was not seeking hegemony and encouraged fostering understanding between the countries, covertly complaining of working visa restrictions Chinese citizens were facing.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's [address](#) at the 19th Congress of China's Communist Party in October 2017 affirmed China's move toward the center stage of global power, indicating China's long-term plans. For Central Asians, this dominance and absence of other countries able to offer a grand investment strategy to fill the vast vacuum of critical infrastructure have predetermined their reverence toward China. Central Asian countries, without access to open seas and limited transportation infrastructure, are betting on the BRI for long-term benefits and hoping for a diversification of the initiative in the future.