

**THE IMPACT OF THE NEW SILK ROAD INITIATIVE ON THE ECONOMIC
GEOGRAPHY OF CENTRAL ASIA**

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Abstract: The New Silk Road—officially known as China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—has become a transformative force in reshaping the economic geography of Central Asia. This paper analyzes how transport infrastructure, trade routes, and investment flows under the BRI are altering regional connectivity, economic hubs, and spatial development in countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The research assesses major transport corridors, logistic hubs, and emerging economic zones, while also addressing geopolitical, environmental, and debt-related concerns.

Keywords: New Silk Road, Belt and Road Initiative, Central Asia, economic geography, transport corridors, regional connectivity, spatial transformation

The **New Silk Road**, launched in 2013 as part of China's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, aims to enhance global connectivity through infrastructure investment and trade facilitation. Central Asia, positioned at the heart of Eurasia, plays a crucial geographic and strategic role in this initiative.

Historically, the region served as a central artery of the ancient Silk Road. Today, the BRI revives this legacy through new railways, highways, pipelines, and special economic zones that reshape the region’s economic geography. This paper explores how these developments are redistributing economic activity, influencing trade patterns, and reconfiguring spatial linkages within Central Asia.

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, including:

- **GIS mapping** of BRI-related transport infrastructure and economic zones;
- **Quantitative trade data analysis** from the World Bank, ADB, and national statistics (2013–2023);
- **Case studies** of Kazakhstan’s Khorgos dry port, Uzbekistan’s transport corridors, and China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway project;
- **Policy analysis** of national development strategies in relation to the BRI.

Infrastructure Development

- **Kazakhstan** has emerged as a key hub with projects like the **Khorgos Gateway**, part of the **China–Europe rail corridor**, reducing shipment time from 45 to 15 days.
- **Uzbekistan** has upgraded roads and border posts, expanded **Navoi Free Industrial Economic Zone**, and signed logistics and energy agreements with China.
- The **China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway**, though under construction, is expected to provide a southern BRI corridor connecting China to Iran and Turkey via Central Asia.

Economic Zone Formation

- **Special Economic Zones (SEZs)** have been established near borders and transport nodes, stimulating regional investment (e.g., FEZ “Navoi”, “Khorgos Eastern Gate”, “Sugd” in Tajikistan).
- Border towns and inland logistics hubs are becoming **new centers of economic activity**, shifting the urban and industrial geography of the region.

Trade Flows and Investment Trends

- **China-Central Asia trade volume** rose by over 50% between 2013 and 2023.
- BRI investments are concentrated in **transport, energy, and mining** sectors.
- **Logistics and multimodal transit** services have grown, especially in dry ports and rail terminals.

The New Silk Road is **redefining economic geography** in Central Asia in several ways:

1. **Spatial Realignment:** Traditional economic centers are being complemented or replaced by **new transport-linked cities and border hubs**.
2. **Transport Connectivity:** Landlocked Central Asian countries gain more diversified access to global markets, reducing dependency on Russia and Iran.
3. **Economic Diversification:** BRI encourages sectors like logistics, warehousing, and manufacturing, though resource extraction still dominates in some countries.

However, challenges remain:

- **Debt sustainability** concerns exist, especially for smaller economies like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.
- **Environmental risks** from large-scale infrastructure (e.g., railways through fragile mountain regions).
- **Geopolitical tension** due to perceived overdependence on Chinese capital and shifting alliances with Russia, the EU, and Turkey.

The BRI also promotes **regional cooperation** through joint customs systems, transit agreements, and shared infrastructure, potentially fostering long-term stability.

The New Silk Road is significantly transforming the economic geography of Central Asia by improving connectivity, fostering trade, and stimulating spatial development. The region is becoming a **transit and logistics corridor** of global importance, integrating more closely into Eurasian and global value chains.

To ensure sustainable benefits, Central Asian countries should:

- Strengthen **regional coordination** on infrastructure planning and standards;
- Encourage **local participation** and job creation in BRI projects;
- Conduct **environmental and social impact assessments** of large-scale investments;
- Diversify partnerships to maintain **economic and political balance**.

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Long-term success will depend on how Central Asia navigates the opportunities and risks posed by China's expansive infrastructure vision.

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