The influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia

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Abstract:

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was announced by president XI in 2013 in Kazakhstan. The initiative which became one of the most ambitious connectivity and infrastructure projects in modern international politics. Central Asian countries occupy strategic position within the initiative due to their geographical position. The region connects China with Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia.

Within the framework of BRI China invested significantly in transportation network, trade corridors and industrial infrastructure of the Central Asian countries. Huge investment in development project of the region enabled China to expand its political and economic influence in the region.

This study is an attempt to examine the influence of the BRI in Central Asia from the perspective of Neoclassical Realism. The central argument of the study is that China's engagement with the countries of the region is driven not only by shifts in the international distribution of power. Rather, by domestic economic imperatives, leadership perceptions, and strategic concerns regarding regional stability. The study analyzes the economic, political, security, and geopolitical dimensions of China's growing presence in the region. At the same time, it assesses implications of BRI for regional states and competing great powers. The article concludes that the BRI has transformed the geopolitical landscape of the region by strengthening China's influence while simultaneously creating new opportunities and challenges for regional actors.

Keywords: BRI, Central Asia, China, Neoclassical Realism, Geopolitics, Connectivit.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history Central Asia had significant position in Eurasian geopolitics. The region is located at the intersection of major civilizations and trade routes. This geographical position enabled the region for a long time to serve as a bridge connecting the East to West and South to North. The new era of the geopolitics of the region started after the end of Cold War. After the collapse of USSR the administrative republic of Central Asia declared their independence. These newly independent republics attempted to pursue their independent foreign policy and diversify their economic and political relationship. These emerging political dynamic in the region created unique opportunities for the great powers to expand their influence in the region. Among other great powers, China has emerged as a significant economic actor after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The economic influence of China in the region intensified over the last two decades. At the end of the 2013 Chinese president Xi Jinping in his visit to Kazakhstan announced about Beijing foreign policy and economic initiative. This initiative further came to be known as the Belt and Road Initiative. The launch of this Initiative marked a major turning point in China's engagement with the countries of the region. The initiative announced by President Xi Jinping envisioned the establishment of extensive infrastructure and connectivity networks linking Beijing with Central Asia and beyond. Given the geographical position of Central Asia the republics of the region became a cornerstone of this initiative.The launch of this initiative and growing presence of China in the region generated a lot of conspiracy and academic debate. The economic development projects of China were perceived by the developing nations of Central Asia as an opportunity to enhance their economic potential through establishment of international trade and reduction of infrastructural barriers. According to some researchers and analyst BRI is a development initiative of China aimed at connectivity and economic growth in the region and beyond. Proponents of BRI contend that

the project is an opportunity for the countries to use development fund and foreign investments to finance their infrastructure and expand their manufacturing capacity (Ding 2026).

At the same time other researchers warn about the growing economic dominance of China in central Asia. According to this discourse while helping countries of the region, Beijing advances its political goals and economic interests in the region (Toktamushev2018). According to this point of view the BRI is a geopolitical instrument of China designed for expansion of Chinese influence in the region.

This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate by examining the influence of Beijing in Central Asia through Neoclassical Realism perspectives. The main argument of this study is that China's increasing influence in the region cannot be explained exclusively by economic considerations. Instead Chinese influence reflects its expanding material potentials, domestic economic demands and broader geopolitical objectives. BRI serves as a strategic tool through which Beijing transforms its economic and political potentials into regional influence considering its long term political and economic interests.

Research methodology

This study mainly employs a qualitative research approach to examine the influence of BRI in Central Asia. The analysis is based on a comprehensive review of academic journals, policy papers, books, analytical reports, and other scholarly literature relevant to the topic. In addition to secondary academic sources, the research closely examines official documents, including multilateral and bilateral agreements, policy statements, and governmental reports from Central Asian republics, and China. Public speeches and statements by political leaders are also analyzed to capture current geostrategic perspectives and diplomatic positions. Quantitative data, such as statistics, trade volumes, statistics and economic indicators, are incorporated where appropriate to support the qualitative findings and provide empirical ground to the geopolitical dynamics under investigation. By incorporating different sources and data, the study offers a nuanced and contextualized understanding of the complex interplay between geopolitical dynamics and internal imperatives of China in shaping its policy towards Central Asia.

Literature Review and theoretical framework

Scholars often divide the literature on the influence of Belt and Road Initiative generally into three categories: developmental perceptions, geopolitical interpretations, and critical approaches (Ding 2026). The development perspective focuses mainly on infrastructure and economic integration potential of BRI. According to this point of view BRI is a mechanism which facilitates regional economic integration. Considering infrastructure deficit as one of the main obstacle to development in the region proponents of BRI argue that Chinese investments contribute to economic modernization of the region. According to this perspective, BRI initiative and its established institution promote interdependence by fostering a convergence of states preferences. Convergence of preferences and interest consequently facilitate mutual growth and win-win cooperation among partner countries (Col, 2018).In contrast proponent of geopolitical lens of the BRI emphasize on Chines power projection through BRI. According to this point of view BRI is a strategic tool designed to expand Chinese influence in the region (Roland, 2017). Scholars within the framework of this perspective mainly focus on geopolitical dimension of Chinese investments and strategic partnership within BRI. Other studies point to the critical consequences China's growing dominance in the region and beyond. This group of scholars mainly focuses on concerns related to debt dependency, environmental consequences and asymmetrical engagement (Bräutigam, 2020). From this perspective increasing economic dependence on Chines investments is the main concern. This is a critical consequence that facilitates political leverage for China. There is bulk of research on BRI and Chinese foreign policy towards Central Asia. However, a significant gap remains regarding the combination of systemic and domestic explanations of Chinese behavior. This article is an attempt to addresses this gap by employing Neoclassical Realism approach. Applying Neoclassical Realism allows researcher to analyze how China's material capabilities and domestic priorities jointly shape its engagement with Central Asia.

Theoretical Framework

Neoclassical Realism as a theoretical perspective emerged at the end of the 20 century. The main point of this paradigm is as an attempt to bridge the gap between structural realism and foreign policy analysis. Structural realism highlights the impact of the international distribution of power on state behavior. While Neoclassical Realism argues that systemic pressures are filtered through domestic institutions, elite perceptions, and state capacity before being transformed into foreign policy outcomes. Neoclassical realists assume that states

respond to the uncertainties of international anarchy by seeking to control and shape their external environment (Rose, 1998).According to prominent scholars of Neoclassical Realism such as Gideon Rose (1998), Randall Schweller (2004), and Steven Lobell (2009), state behavior cannot be understood exclusively through systemic variables. Neoclassical realism emphasizes on the role of policymakers, strategic priorities of a state, and domestic circumstances in foreign policy. In compare to other theories neoclassical realist explains foreign policy as a policy rather than a process (Rodríguez, 2024).

The main arguments of Neoclassical Realism are:

The international system remains anarchic.

States seek security and survival.

Relative power influences state behavior.

Domestic variables mediate systemic pressures.

Foreign policy outcomes reflect both external and internal factors.

Applying Neoclassical Realism to the study of Chinese BRI in Central Asia provides researcher a comprehensive understanding of the BRI. From the perspective of neoclassical realism at the systemic level, China's rise as a major power has increased its potential to project influence beyond its borders. However, the economic potential alone does not explain why Beijing has invested hugely in the economy and development projects of Central Asia. In addition, the role of domestic factors, including economic reorganization, industrial overcapacity, energy concerns, and leadership ambitions, play a crucial role in shaping Chinese policy towards the region.The region is perceived by Chinese leaders as one of the key strategically important area for several reasons. The primary reason for growing interest of China towards the region stems from its geographical position. Central Asia serves as a vital transit route that connects China to Europe. Also enhancing engagement with the countries of the region provides access to the energy resources necessary for sustainable economic growth of China. Furthermore China is interested in maintaining stability in Central Asia. The stability in the region is vital for the stability in Xinjiang, a region considered highly sensitive by Chinese policymakers.

Thus from a Neoclassical Realist perspective, implementation of the BRI reflects China's strategic response to both external opportunities and domestic imperatives. Growing economic potential of China in last two decades enabled it to enhance its economic presence beyond its border. Thus domestic considerations influence the specific form and direction of its foreign policy.

Economic Influence of the BRI in Central Asia

Economic engagement with member nations is the core dimension of China's strategy within BRI. Therefore after the launch of the initiative by president Xi the Chinese investment in the region increased significantly (Economic Research Institute, 2023). The Chines investment included infrastructure projects such as railways, highways, logistics centers, industrial parks, and energy pipelines.After announcement of BRI all Central Asian countries signed cooperation agreement with China. Further in 2019 China president Xi had bilateral meetings with the head of the states of the Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan where he discussed with the head of the countries implementation of BRI project. At the end of the meeting, parties signed bilateral statement for further close cooperation within the BRI (Muratbekova, 2019). China invested in numerous projects including construction of the plants, reconstructing irrigation system and transportation projects in the region. Since the beginning regional development was one of the most important aspects of china BRI initiative (Cai 2017). Among other republic of the region Kazakhstan become a major hub within the initiative due to its strategic location and extensive transportation networks (Brobbey & Amable, 2023). As the largest economy in the region with a strategic location Kazakhstan became the key partner in implementation of BRI (Cui, & Valentinovna, 2025). The Khorgos dry port and associated logistics infrastructure have transformed Kazakhstan into a key transit corridor linking China with Europe.

Chinese investment in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan particularly focused on transportation and energy projects. Chinese investment in transport infrastructure of these countries improved the connectivity in the region. However these investments increased economic dependence on Chinese financing. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are comparatively financially fragile Central Asian states which faced repayment challenges (Muratalieva, 2024). China became one of the biggest trading partners for most of the Central Asian republics. Over the last two decades trade relations between Beijing and countries of the region expanded significantly.

China's investment on transport and connectivity projects facilitated cross-border trade and enhanced economic interdependence.At the same time implementation of the BRI projects contributed to China's domestic economic objectives. Creating external markets for Chinese industries, decreasing industrial overcapacity, and promoting economic development in western China were the key objective of China.

Security Dimensions of Chinese Engagement with Central Asian countries

Historically Central Asia has been considered a potential source of danger for Chines empires. Central Asia has always been one of the key factors behind the decline and rise of Chinese states. For this historical memory the region is strategically important for Beijing (Niva Yau, 2020). Therefore a security consideration is one of the key factors that shape Chines policy towards the region. From the perspective of Beijing stability in Central Asia is essential for maintaining security and stability in its Xinjiang province.In particular, the potential threat of transnational terrorism and extremism emanation from Afghanistan reinforced China's growing interest in security cooperation with Central Asian republics. In the context of perpetual political instability in Afghanistan Beijing expanded security cooperation, and counterterrorism initiatives with Central Asian republics. Therefore one of the key dimensions of SCO organization is security cooperation particularly focusing on terrorism, separatism and extremism (Zhuangzhi, 2007). Central Asian countries as members of this interdependence project benefit from the project and have shared interest with other countries. BRI gives the member states an opportunity to enhance their economy through infrastructure development and external investment. From the perspective of the official authorities of China intensive economic relationships will establish closer political and cultural relations which can lead to a new way of mutual respect and confidence between the states (Sagi and Istvan, 2018). Nevertheless there are different perspectives regarding China's endeavor behind BRI. While some studies depict peaceful rise of China through BRI, other studies interpret it as a policy that designed to enhances China's growing dominance in the region. Along its economic involvement in last two decades China increased its security cooperation through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. The role of joint multilateral platform like Shanghai Cooperation Organization is significant in security cooperation between China and countries of the region. Through stability and security in central Asia China will not protect only its economic interest, but its other main strategic goal is to prevent the instability in its north western border. China's influence in Central Asia increased in military diminution following its economic diminution. So the economic presence of China is interlinked with it's increasingly security role.Thus, combination of these engagements enables China to address security concerns while strengthening economic relations with the countries of the region.

Political and Diplomatic Influence of China in Central Asia

From the realists perspective the world politics is always and necessarily a field of conflict among actors pursuing power. Maximizing power and expansion are the core interest of the states in order to survive (Karlis, Polemis, 2019). So the multilateral engagement within BRI is not exception. The growing engagement of China with the Central Asian countries is driven primarily by national interest of China. Access to the natural resources of the Central Asia and security concerns are the key motivation behind China's engagement with the countries of the region (Ong, 2005). Involving Central Asian countries to BRI will positively affect the western region of China. Beijing wants to stabilize its western border through investment on the development project in neighboring Central Asia. Ong (2005) particularly mentions control of radical Islam near Chinas western border and access to Central Asia hydrocarbon resources as major interest of China in Central Asia. China's engagement with the countries of the region within the framework of the BRI has increased its political influence across the region. High level visit and growing economic engagement strengthened diplomatic and political ties. China involved Central Asian countries in multilateral economic forums and economic engagements which illustrates the close partnership of China with the region. The growing economic and political engagement with the countries of the region reflects China's enduring engagement with the region. In compare with the other great powers Chinese approach is not based primarily on military alliances. Beijing emphasizes development investments, and connectivity projects as instruments of influence.

Geopolitical repercussions

The geopolitical landscape of the region significantly changes in the context of growing Chinese influence in the region (Laruelle, & Peyrouse, 2012). Indeed Chines presence in Central Asia has changed the regional balance of power. Given historical and cultural ties Russia maintained predominant influence in the region

(Cooley, 2012). Through security arrangements, economic ties, and cultural connections Moscow traditionally was the key external player in the region. However, China's increasing economic presence is surpassing that of other external powers. Yet Russia remains a major security actor in the region, during the last two decades China's presence in Central Asia sharply increased. But there is not direct competition between Russia and China for control of power in the region. One of the biggest concerns of Moscow is its limited economic footing in the region. China replaced Russia in many areas of economic cooperation and became a dominant actor in the region (Asiryan, 2020). China's economic influence through BRI and its military presence indicates that Beijing's political role is increasing hand in hand with its economic influence.

BRI is often viewed as a China Marshal plan which is expanding its political influence through investing in the development project (Sagi and Istvan, 2018). Implementation of this strategy will help China not only to enhance its economic integration with countries but it will also provide China a platform for projecting its political influence (Antonina, 2015).

From other side increasing economic dominance of China in the region resulted in a more multipolar regional order. The multi vector foreign policy of Central Asian states allowed them to leverage competition among major powers. Balancing between major powers facilitated them to maximize their economic and political benefits.Growing economic engagement of China with the countries of the region opened new page in the Great game over the dominance in the region. Other external powers including India, Turkey, the European Union, and the United States changed their strategies towards the region. The growing Chinese presence affected their strategic calculations. The region once again became arena of geopolitical competition. Also Central Asia became the region of multilateral cooperation and connectivity diplomacy.

Conclusion

The Belt and Road Initiative enhanced the role of China in Central Asia and shaped the geopolitical dynamic in the region. Through huge infrastructure investment, bilateral trade, and diplomatic engagement, China has emerged as a leading economic actor in the region. From the Neoclassical Realism this transformation integrates systemic power shifts with domestic motivations and leadership perceptions.Chinese dominance is going to increase step by step through investment on different projects. The Chinese economic project through BRI is interlinked with its political strategy. The Central Asian region is strategically important both for solving the domestic security problem of China and strengthening its position in the region to balance the influence of geopolitical powers. For implementing these agenda China uses various bilateral and multilateral platforms of cooperation with Central Asian countries. BRI is the most ambitious project of China for implementation of Chinese grand strategy in Central Asia. Beijing is taking small steps to maximize its power and dominance in the region through BRI.Growing Chines presence in the region is not limited to the factor of its growing capabilities. Rather it reflects also strategic concerns regarding connectivity, energy security, regional stability, and economic development. Given geographical location of Central Asia and its natural resource it will remain critical arena for the implementation of current and future Chinese projects within BRI. As countries of the region are pursuing multi vector foreign policy it will allow them balance the growing influence of external powers. The future of Central Asia will depend on how countries of the region balance their relationships with competing external powers. In this context it is essential for these countries to safeguard their own sovereignty and development objectives.

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