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BRIEF ANALYSIS

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foreign policy strategy

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# Eurasia Center

## Brief Analysis

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# THE ROLE OF CENTRAL ASIA IN CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY

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## Abstract

In recent years, the ideologies and capacities of states, as well as the visions and competencies of leaders, have emerged as pivotal elements in the realm of international relations. China's current leader, Xi Jinping, has articulated an ambitious vision and approach to foreign policy, which has been embraced by the Chinese state as its official ideology. This study seeks to examine the impact of this foreign policy approach on the Central Asian republics.

Keywords: China, Central Asia, Foreign Policy

## Introduction

In recent years, the visions and strategic approaches of leaders have emerged as a crucial factor in international relations, alongside the ideological and economic capacities of states. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, the revival of the ancient Silk Road and underscored the strategic significance of Central Asia in this endeavor. The New Silk Road Economic Belt (NSREB) initiative has the objective of deepening economic cooperation with Central Asian countries and modernizing the region's infrastructure, with the aim of creating a strategic transit hub between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. This encompasses the development of transportation infrastructure, including railways, highways, and bridge networks.

While offering economic opportunities to Central Asian countries, China's initiative has the potential to alter the regional balance of power. The international developments that have occurred, such as Russia's actions in Ukraine and the United States' focus on conflicts in the Middle East, have created an environment in which China has been able to increase its influence in Central Asia. The region's abundant subterranean resources create a conducive environment for China's strategy of expanding its economic and political influence.

The objective of this study is to examine the foreign policy strategies pursued by China in Central Asia during the tenure of Xi Jinping and to assess the impact of these strategies on the region.



## The Belt And Road Initiative

The Belt and Road (BRI) has become a cornerstone of contemporary Chinese foreign policy. Its origins can be traced back to Chinese President Xi Jinping's "[Silk Road Economic Belt](#)" speech in Kazakhstan in 2013 and his "[21st Century Maritime Silk Road](#)" themed speech at the Indonesian Parliament. The initiative's objective is to establish economic, diplomatic, and cultural connections between China and Eurasia, Africa, and Oceania. The document, entitled "Joint Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," which was officially published in 2015, elucidated the scope and objectives of the [initiative](#).

**Table 1.** Six Economic Corridors

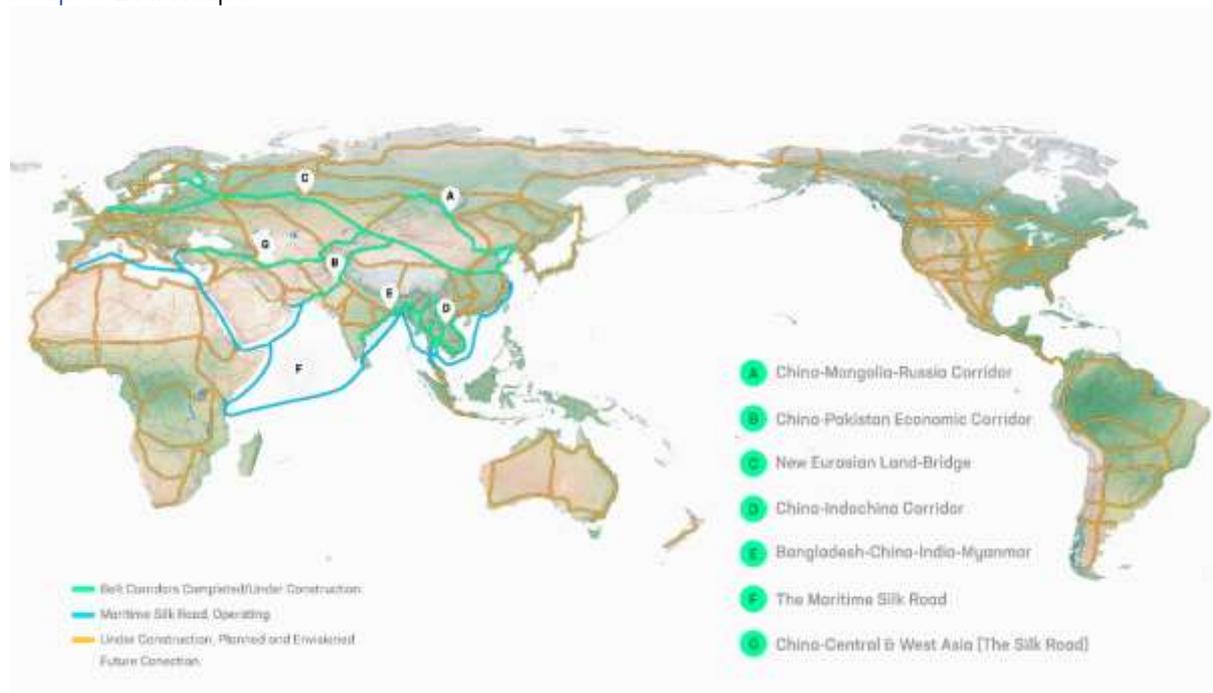
Economic Corridor	Region	Purpose
China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor	China, Mongolia and Russia	The development of transportation and trade networks in northern Asia, coupled with an intensification of energy cooperation with Russia, represents a significant geopolitical objective.
New Eurasian Land Bridge	China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland and Western Europe	The project will facilitate trade between China and Europe, thereby creating a shorter trade route.
China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor	China, Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) and Western Asia (Iran, Türkiye)	The route is of vital importance for the transportation of energy and the facilitation of trade, and it serves to enhance the interconnectivity between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor	China and Pakistan	The objective is to establish a connection between China and the Indian Ocean via Gwadar Port, utilizing a combination of road, rail, and port infrastructure development initiatives.
China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor	China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar	It is recommended that efforts be made to enhance connectivity with countries in Southeast Asia, with a view to facilitating trade and infrastructure cooperation.

Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor	Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar	Connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia, promoting economic cooperation and regional integration.
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Source: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/88408.html>

The BRI's objective is to reinforce global trade networks through the establishment of six economic corridors that will connect Asia, Europe, and Africa. In this context, the "Silk Road Economic Belt," which aims to establish a land route connecting Asia and Europe, and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," which aims to reach Europe by sea from China via Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, represent the two primary components of the initiative. The initiative is centered on three key areas: increased infrastructure investment, trade facilitation, and international cooperation. Collectively, these areas have the potential to accelerate economic [development](#).

Map 1. BRI Maps



Source: <https://brixsweden.org/what-is-the-bri/>

The BRI's dual focus on physical and digital infrastructure distinguishes it as a contemporary development strategy. The construction of 5G networks, fiber optic cables, and data centers by major technology companies such as Huawei as part of the Digital Silk Road initiative serves to reinforce China's digital sovereignty. Furthermore, the establishment of cybersecurity standards and training programs for BRI partner countries serves to reinforce [this process](#). Similarly, the Polar Silk Road (PSR), launched in 2017 as part of the BRI, highlighted China's ambition in Arctic resource extraction and transport. However, its significance has waned due



to geopolitical tensions, economic concerns, and technological hurdles, demonstrating the complex challenges inherent in China's global infrastructure and connectivity [strategy](#).

From an economic standpoint, the BRI has served to enhance China's economic connectivity, linking both its underdeveloped regions and global trade networks. [From 2013 to 2018](#), China's direct investments in BRI partners exceeded 90 billion dollars, while total trade volume reached trillions of dollars. In the initial five-month period of 2024, China's foreign direct investment reached a total of [60.2 billion](#) dollars, representing a 16.3% increase when compared to the same period in the previous year. This increase reflects the continuation of a general upward trend in China's global investment strategies, with a notable increase in investments in countries participating in the BRI.

The BRI is designed to promote regional connectivity and global economic integration, with one of its key objectives being to enhance Central Asia's role in the region. This is pursued through the implementation of infrastructure projects, the facilitation of unimpeded trade, the promotion of financial integration and people-to-people ties, and the development of energy, transport, and communications infrastructure. By reinforcing [Central Asia's](#) role within the overarching framework, the BRI seeks to enhance the efficient utilization of the region's resources and stimulate regional economic collaboration. In this context, Central Asia is regarded as a pivotal node for the advancement of joint policy formulation, economic integration, and cultural exchange as part of a broader network of regional and global [prosperity](#).

The BRI represents a significant effort by China to expand its economic connections, increase its strategic influence, and play an active role in reshaping the global order.

## China's Economic Dominance in Central Asia

China's economic dominance in Central Asia is primarily anchored in trade and energy collaboration. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the volume of Chinese exports destined for Central Asia. From 2021 to 2022, Chinese exports to Central Asia increased by 62%, reaching a total of [16.6 billion dollars](#). These exports are particularly concentrated in diversified sectors, including chemical products, plastics, textiles, clothing, and footwear. It is also noteworthy that China is a significant exporter of automobiles and spare parts. By 2023, these exports had increased by 161% compared to 2022, thereby consolidating China's influence in the automotive sector in [Central Asia](#). This growth is driven not only by China's growing interest in the Central Asian market but also by the weakening of direct economic ties between China and Russia.

Additionally, the nature of China's trade with Central Asia is multifaceted. To illustrate, the principal components of this trade are border trade, trade conducted



through the Xinjiang Production and Construction Association, and the activities of Zhejiang merchants. China is pursuing a strategy of reinforcing its trade relations with Central Asia through the implementation of state-sponsored projects and investment in infrastructure with the objective of facilitating further trade development. The establishment of special economic zones and industrial parks in Xinjiang serves to reinforce China's trade network in [Central Asia](#).

One of the significant factors influencing the economic structures of Central Asia is China's infrastructure investments in the region. The growing economic potential of the region and China's objective of consolidating its economic hegemony are significant factors influencing the increase in China's trade with Central Asia. In this context, developments in energy trade and logistics networks in the region have also been accelerated.

## KAZAKHSTAN

The economic relations between Kazakhstan and China are defined by the trade of energy resources and natural materials. China represents a significant export destination for Kazakhstan, with exports to that country accounting for approximately 20% of the total in 2023. The primary exports are oil, copper ores, iron ores, and radioactive chemicals. China continues to represent one of Kazakhstan's most significant export markets.

China is also a significant source of imports for Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan imports a variety of products from China, including machinery, automotive parts, textiles, and electronics. In 2023, [17% of Kazakhstan's total imports](#) originated from China.

## KYRGYZSTAN

The trade relationship between China and Kyrgyzstan is predominantly characterised by imports of textiles, footwear, machinery and plastic products from China, while Kyrgyzstan exports aluminum, copper, iron and steel, as well as animal skins, to China. In the initial three-month period of 2024, the total value of trade between the two countries reached [4.815 billion](#) dollars, with China's exports to Kyrgyzstan amounting to [4.163 billion](#) dollars. In contrast, exports from Kyrgyzstan to China reached a mere [22 million](#) dollars, underscoring the significant imbalance in trade.

The lack of a coastline and high dependence on imports contribute to an increase in the trade deficit with China. China represents Kyrgyzstan's most significant import partner, with the Kyrgyz economy exhibiting a pronounced dependency on imports of machinery and electronics.

## UZBEKISTAN

From 2016 to 2020, China held the position of Uzbekistan's largest trading partner. However, due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia



overtook China in 2021 and 2022, making it Uzbekistan's primary trading partner for those years. Nevertheless, in the first half of 2023, China regained its leading role in trade with Uzbekistan, once again becoming the largest source of imports and the second-largest destination for [exports](#).

In 2023, the total bilateral trade volume reached 14.033 billion dollars, reflecting a remarkable year-on-year increase of 44.9 percent. China's exports to Uzbekistan amounted to 12.389 billion dollars, marking an impressive rise of 67.2 percent. In contrast, imports from Uzbekistan to China were valued at 1.644 billion dollars, which showed a decline of 27.8 percent. This shift in trade dynamics highlights the fluctuating economic interactions between the two nations in recent years, with China solidifying its position as a key trading partner once again [in 2023](#).

## TAJKISTAN

Trade between China and Tajikistan represents a relatively minor component of Tajikistan's total exports. However, economic relations between the two countries have exhibited a discernible trajectory of growth over the years. As of 2024, China's exports to Tajikistan are primarily composed of machinery, electrical equipment, clothing, footwear, and iron and steel products. In contrast, Tajikistan's primary exports to China are ores, cotton, and animal skins.

By the conclusion of 2023, Tajikistan's exports to China had reached approximately [245 million dollars](#), while China's exports to Tajikistan had reached 1.2 billion dollars. In comparison to the preceding year, the bilateral trade volume increased by 10% in 2023, reaching a total of 1.2 billion dollars. China represents [14%](#) of Tajikistan's imports. Cooperation in the development of infrastructure and trade corridors has the potential to facilitate the growth of economic relations between the two countries.

## TURKMENISTAN

Trade relations between China and Turkmenistan are distinguished by a notable degree of interdependence, particularly within the energy sector. The primary exports from Turkmenistan to China are natural gas and oil, which collectively constitute a significant proportion of the country's total exports to China. Furthermore, China exports a range of products to Turkmenistan, including machinery, iron and steel, electrical machinery, and vehicles. In Turkmenistan's trade with China, energy represents the primary source of export revenue for the country.

Notwithstanding the fact that the overall structure of trade is based on Turkmenistan's energy sector, it is notable that trade between the two countries has increased in recent years. In 2022, Turkmenistan exported a total [of 8.88 billion](#) dollars to China. In 2022, China exported [868 million dollars](#) to Turkmenistan, while in 2023, China's exports to Turkmenistan amounted to [956.88 million](#) dollars.



In conclusion, it can be stated that for Turkmenistan, trade with China plays a critical role in ensuring the country's economic sustainability, particularly given the reliance on energy exports as a source of revenue. These relations contribute to the growth of trade in general and the increase in non-energy products for Central Asian countries.

## Growing Influence in Military and Diplomacy

China's economic ascendance has engendered a desire for enhanced regional stability, particularly in Central Asia. Security concerns, particularly the struggle against the "three evils" religious extremism, separatism, and terrorist violence are of paramount importance to China's interests in the region. These issues are significant for two reasons. First, they impact regional security. Second, Central Asia possesses energy resources that are vital to China's growing energy needs. Instability in the region has the potential to disrupt energy flows from Central Asia to China, which could have a significant impact on the country's broader economic strategies, including its reliance on the region via the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. China is particularly concerned about the potential for instability in Central Asia to spread to Xinjiang, as this could have a destabilizing effect on the region and impact China's economic and geopolitical interests.

In order to address these challenges, China has engaged in both bilateral and multilateral security cooperation with Central Asian states, with the objective of securing energy routes and managing regional unrest. [The Shanghai Cooperation Organization \(SCO\)](#) serves as a critical forum for collaboration, with a particular focus on combating terrorism, extremism, and separatism. Additionally, it provides a platform for economic development and security cooperation. In 1996, a pivotal agreement was reached among China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, whereby their respective borders were demilitarized, marking a significant stride in the realm of regional security cooperation.

Subsequently, the SCO has expanded to include additional member states, such as Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and India, thereby reinforcing its position as a pivotal actor in the regional security architecture of Central Asia. The SCO's scope extends beyond security concerns to encompass economic and political collaboration, reflecting the evolving security dynamics of the region. The SCO's [Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure \(RATS\)](#) plays a pivotal role in combating regional terrorism, exemplifying the group's dedication to maintaining stability and safeguarding the region's economic interests, including its energy resources.

Furthermore, Central Asia is confronted with the additional challenge of [drug](#) trafficking, which serves to exacerbate the prevailing sense of insecurity in countries such as Tajikistan. In order to address this issue, China and Central Asian states have conducted joint military operations, thereby underscoring the significance of regional security cooperation.

In essence, China's engagement with Central Asia is driven by two key factors: economic interests, particularly those pertaining to energy, and the imperative to ensure regional stability. This latter factor directly impacts both China's internal security and its broader geopolitical strategies.

China's military cooperation with Central Asia has increased significantly since 2013, marking a shift from its previous focus on the SCO. [From 2003 to 2016](#), China and the Central Asian states conducted a total of 39 military exercises and 102 high-level meetings. The initial multilateral exercise within the SCO was conducted in 2003. In recent years, China has organized numerous military exercises with various countries, including a significant exercise in 2018 involving [Pakistan and India](#). In 2019, China conducted bilateral military exercises with Central Asian states for the first time, thereby strengthening security cooperation and solidifying its military influence in the region. Moreover, the scope of cooperation has broadened to encompass officer training and arms sales. During the period between [2014 and 2018](#), China provided training to hundreds of law enforcement officers. These developments illustrate the expansion of China's military presence and influence in Central Asia.

Table 2. China-Central Asia Military Cooperation: Exercises and Training

Year	Event/Exercise	Location	Participants	Purpose/Focus
<a href="#">2024</a>	<i>Peace Mission-2024</i>	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	SCO member states (including China)	Counter-terrorism, regional stability, combating extremism
<a href="#">2023</a>	<i>Combined Effort 2023</i>	Tajikistan	China, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan	Joint counterterrorism drills and border security
<a href="#">2022</a>	<i>Tianlong-2022</i>	Kazakhstan	China, Kazakhstan	Air defense, border control, anti-terrorism
<a href="#">2021</a>	<i>Zapad-2021 (with Russia)</i>	Kazakhstan, Tajikistan	China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan	Military cooperation under CSTO/SCO frameworks, border security
<a href="#">2020</a>	<i>Silk Road-2020</i>	Kyrgyzstan	China, Kyrgyzstan	Joint defense training, enhancing military cooperation
<a href="#">2019</a>	<i>Druzhba-2019</i>	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	China, Central Asian partners	Focus on border security, joint combat training

## Regional Dynamics

China's growing involvement in Kazakhstan represents a pivotal aspect of the broader shifts occurring in Central Asia's geopolitical and economic landscape. This shift signals a transformation in the region, where both traditional powers, such as Russia, and emerging forces, including China, are influencing the future of Central Asia. Given its geographical position, Kazakhstan occupies a pivotal role in this



dynamic. However, a more comprehensive view reveals a complex tapestry of interwoven interests and regional security concerns that extend beyond Kazakhstan.

Central Asia's strategic importance has historically rendered it a zone of competition between Russia, China, and other global powers. Russia, the historically dominant force in the region through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), has maintained a substantial military presence and political influence. However, China's expanding economic involvement, particularly through the BRI, is eroding Russia's monopoly in the region. Kazakhstan plays a pivotal role in this process, functioning as a vital connection between China and Europe and the Caspian Sea. This positions Kazakhstan as a critical player in [China's Central Asian strategy](#).

Nevertheless, Kazakhstan's role is situated within a broader Central Asian context. China's investments and infrastructure projects in the region extend beyond Kazakhstan to encompass Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The development of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor and the Central Asia-China pipeline are of great consequence in terms of strengthening China's influence across the region. This infrastructure network enables China to access resources and markets in Central Asia, thereby providing the region with substantial investment while simultaneously fostering economic dependence on China. Consequently, China is rapidly becoming Central Asia's most significant trading partner, exceeding Russia in economic influence.

Russia's historical and strategic interests in Central Asia have been challenged by China's growing economic presence in the region. While Russia continues to regard Central Asia as falling within its sphere of influence, the economic realities of the region have shifted in favor of China, particularly following the launch of the BRI. Notwithstanding this shift, Russia continues to cultivate robust military and political alliances with Central Asia through organizations such as the CSTO and the SCO. These alliances ensure that Russia maintains a considerable degree of influence in the region, particularly in matters pertaining to security.

Nevertheless, the increasing prominence of China presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Russia. On the one hand, China's infrastructure projects and investment in Central Asia may serve to erode Russia's traditional dominance. Conversely, Russia stands to gain from China's investments, which bolster regional stability—a paramount objective for both countries. This equilibrium permits Russia and China to coexist in Central Asia, despite underlying tensions regarding their competing influences. To illustrate, in Kazakhstan, the CSTO's involvement during the January 2022 unrest was consistent with Russia's objective of preserving regional stability, whereas China persisted in advocating for economic initiatives that remained unaffected [by the unrest](#).



## Conclusion

China's foreign policy approach is distinguished by a notable degree of flexibility and pragmatism, as opposed to a reliance on rigid rules. Historically, Chinese leaders have demonstrated the capacity to adapt their policies in accordance with the prevailing circumstances. The diplomatic traditions of the imperial era continue to inform modern China's strategic approaches.

Since assuming office, Xi Jinping has led China in a more assertive and active foreign policy. In addition to enhancing economic power and diplomatic effectiveness, the Xi administration has also employed the use of military force as a foreign policy instrument. Financial diplomacy and investment programs have emerged as key tools in the pursuit of improved relations with countries deemed strategically important. Military actions, including joint exercises and defense cooperation, have also played a significant role in expanding China's influence.

China has made the most progress in the area of economic cooperation. China is pursuing a policy of developing alternatives to Western-centered global systems in a proactive manner. For example, the SCO represents a challenge to NATO's security architecture, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is an alternative to the World Bank, and the Chiang Mai Initiative is a rival to the IMF. These institutions are concrete examples of China's strategy of pursuing alternative structures to those established by Western powers. China employs existing international institutions effectively but is not averse to establishing new structures when they do not align with its interests.

This reflects China's efforts to reshape the system in a manner that aligns with its own interests while simultaneously integrating into the global system. China continues to act as part of the international order while simultaneously constructing alternative structures to overcome the limitations it faces. This further reinforces China's growing influence on the international stage, enabled by its capacity to adapt and transform.

China's foreign policy has a particularly pronounced impact on Central Asian countries in the realms of economics, security, and politics. China is providing substantial financial support to Central Asian states in the form of infrastructure investments and projects, while simultaneously facilitating regional economic collaboration. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, particularly with the launch of the BRI in 2013, China is developing extensive transportation networks that will connect Central Asia to Europe. These projects present significant economic opportunities for the region, offering low-cost financing and technology transfer to Central Asian countries. Furthermore, China's influence in the region is also discernible in areas such as energy security and trade relations. In conclusion, the close relations between Central Asia and China offer significant opportunities for economic development and infrastructure.