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How realistic is Belt and Road Initiative for Kyrgyzstan and Central Asian Countries?

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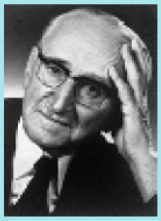

Kiyalbek Akmoldoev

How realistic is Belt and Road Initiative for Kyrgyzstan and Central Asian Countries?

Diskurs 2022 - 5

How realistic is Belt and Road Initiative for Kyrgyzstan and Central Asian Countries?

Kiyalbek Akmoldoev

Abstract

Due to the geographical location of the Central Asian countries and Kyrgyzstan, which do not have direct access to the sea, there is a dependence on the transport route via Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus to trade goods with the European market. The Chinese BRI project would offer an alternative for Central Asian countries to connect economically with European, Middle Eastern and West Asian countries. However, turning away from Russia and toward China holds potential for conflict. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to analyze the BRI projects in Central Asia and predict how realistic it is to implement them without the "permission" of the Russian Federation. In doing so, it takes a closer look at the strategic interest for China in Central Asia and how the BRI project in Kyrgyzstan is performing. The SWOT analysis points to a win-win situation, which, however, comes with a warning to be cautious. Particular attention should be paid to financial dependence on China, which could be due to a debt trap.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative, Kyrgyzstan, Geopolitics, Debt-Trap, Silk Road Route

Author

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How realistic is Belt and Road Initiative for Kyrgyzstan and Central Asian Countries?

1. Introduction

The main problem of Central Asian countries and Kyrgyzstan for the integration of world markets especially European markets is being geographically “Land-Locked” and having no access to the sea. The nearest port is Pakistan which has no infrastructure and roads to Central Asian Countries.

To reach European markets for buying and selling goods, Central Asian countries use the route which passes through Kazakhstan – Russia – Belarus to the East European countries. This route is the single monopoly that makes Central Asian countries to be dependent on Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan while exporting or importing their goods and services from the European Union. After the “Special Operation” of the Russian Federation to Ukraine, the political and economic relations between Russia and western countries have sharply become worse. The western sanctions and other trade and financial restrictions on Russia had an indirect effect on the economic and political situation in the Central Asian region. Once the only gate to the European markets was closed to the Central Asian countries, these countries were looking for an alternative route to reach the European markets. One of them was the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which includes mostly logistical and infrastructural projects from China to the European markets bypassing the Russian Federation.

On the 15th of September 2022 in the city of Samarkand at the next meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), was signed a trade and cooperation agreement between China – Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan regarding the construction project of the section of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway (Zhochao, 2016). This project also can be included in one of the most strategic railways that were part of the Belt and Road initiative. It is not a coincidence that after signing this document, the border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan started. Which was interpreted by the public idea in Kyrgyzstan as the reaction of Russia against this railway project.

It is obvious that Russia does not want to lose control over the Central Asian countries and give it to China which is trying to keep and cooperate with the Central Asian countries through the BRI projects.

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the BRI projects in Central Asia and try to predict how it is realistic to apply them without Russian Federation's "permission". It is obvious that when Central Asian countries are landlocked and cannot reach the world markets through the monopoly route, the Chinese BRI projects will lead them to integrate with European, Middle Eastern, and west Asian countries. In addition, BRI projects would facilitate trade relations with all the mentioned countries in long run.

2. Why Central Asia is strategically important for China?

China sees Central Asian countries and all of the region as a gate to the European, Eurasian, and Middle Eastern countries. The starting point of the BRI road and railway projects is Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan which has the border closest border to China. So the only way to export Chinese goods to Europe is to restore the old historical "Silk Road Route" which cannot be done without the Central Asian countries. That is why for China, Central Asian countries play a very significant role in the realization of BRI projects.

Another interest of China in Central Asian countries is the energy and mineral resources of this region. Especially in Kyrgyzstan, Chinese mining companies are working in the mountains to produce gold and other minerals. China needs the energy, oil, and gas of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It has invested in huge hydroelectrical power projects in Tajikistan as well (Yan, 2019).

The main security concern for the China is western Xinjiang region where China trying to control and fight the Uighur separatist groups. Since the Uighur and other ethnicities who live in Xinjiang have the same historical root and religion, China has a concern that these separatist groups might have support from the western neighboring Central Asian countries. In this way, throughout the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and bilateral cooperations, China is making sure that Central Asian countries support the territorial integrity of China. BRI projects in Central Asia are significant for China in this regard (Chen & Aminjanov, 2020).

Within the mentioned security issues above, for China is important to have politically, and economically stable countries. That is why the stability and economic development of Central Asian countries are crucial for China. Trade and economic development is the key to peace and stability and BRI projects in the region somehow contribute to peace and development in the region.

3. BRI projects in Kyrgyzstan

There are 3 main roads and 1 main rail road BRI project that are financed and done by China in Kyrgyzstan. They are Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart, Osh-Batken-Isfana, Bishkek-Osh alternative road projects, and China – Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan railroad project.

a. Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart road project.

Fig. 1: Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart Road Rehabilitation Project

Source: Ministry of Transport and Roads of the Kyrgyz Republic
http://piumotc.kg/en/projects/

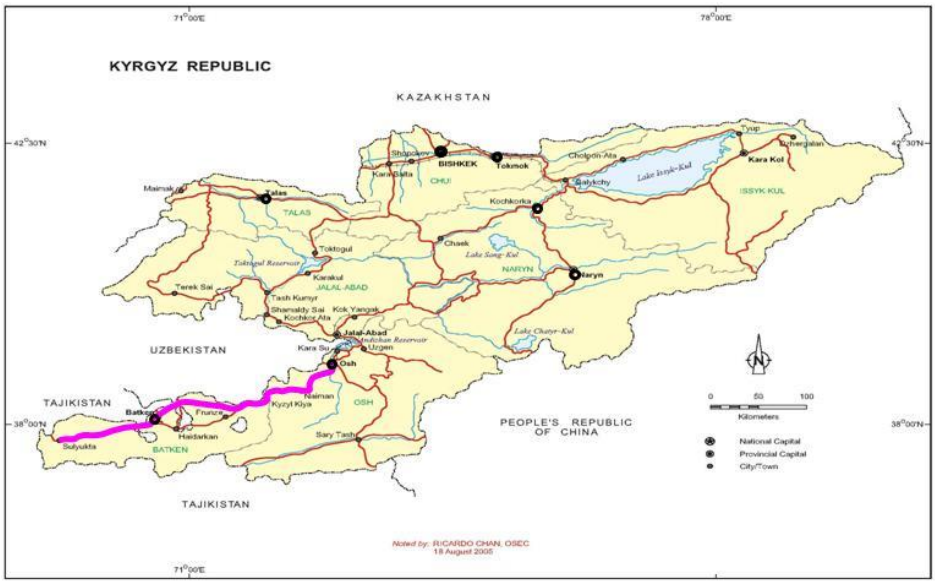
One of the major arteries in the Kyrgyz Republic is the Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart Road, which is also a section of the CAREC (The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation) Transport Corridor's "Europe-East Asia" route. The route connects the three oblasts of the country, Chui, Naryn, and Issyk-Kul, and allows transit traffic from China across Kyrgyzstan's territory in a north-south direction to Kazakhstan.

Chinese Exim Bank financed 200 million US dollars for this project as a loan for 20 years with a 2% annual interest rate.

b. Osh-Batken-Isfana road project.

Currently, Kyrgyzstan is having a serious problem with ensuring free movement in the border areas of the Batken region and the combined territories with the enclaves of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan located in the territory of Kyrgyzstan. Osh-Batken-Isfana project will alleviate existing problems by building bypass roads along enclaves in neighboring countries. In addition, the repair of the transport corridor will facilitate transport and economic links with the regional center, the regional center (Batken city), and the most remote settlements of the province of Batken with the city of Osh, the southern capital of the country (Mintrans, 2022). This will be achieved through significant reductions in transport costs and travel times, and these under-settled areas will be actively involved in social integration processes and business activities. Second, improving road repairs at the expense of transport links will facilitate the development of regional economic ties between China and other Central Asian Countries. Chinese Exim Bank is the main finance supplier for this project with 91,4 million US dollars.

Fig. 2: Osh-Batken-Isfana Road Rehabilitation Project



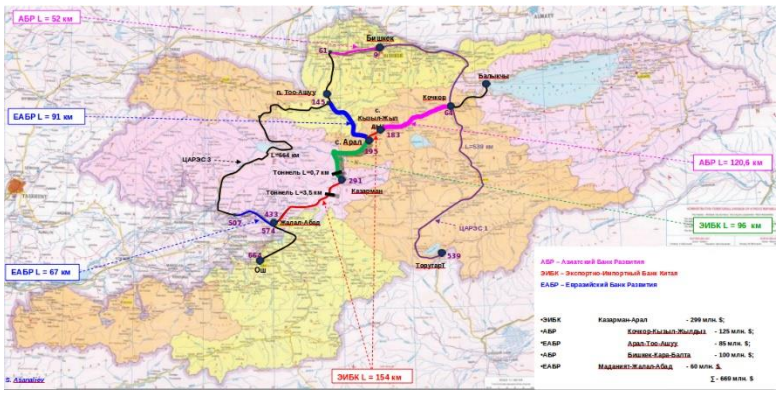
Source: Ministry of Transport and Roads of the Kyrgyz Republic
http://piumotc.kg/en/projects/

c. Bishkek – Osh Alternative Road

The Bishkek-Osh road makes up about one-third of Kyrgyzstan's core network of international road corridors, connecting the country with Kazakhstan in the north, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in the south, and the People's Republic of China in the southeast. It spans 4 of the 7 states and serves approximately 2 million people. It is the only direct surface connection between the southern and northern parts of the country and is critical to maintaining the social, political, and economic integrity of the country.

The total costs of infrastructure projects financed by China in Kyrgyzstan go as high as USD 2.2 billion (Mogilevski, 2019). Almost all the projects in this list have been financed through concessional loans.

Fig. 3: Bishkek – Osh Alternative Road



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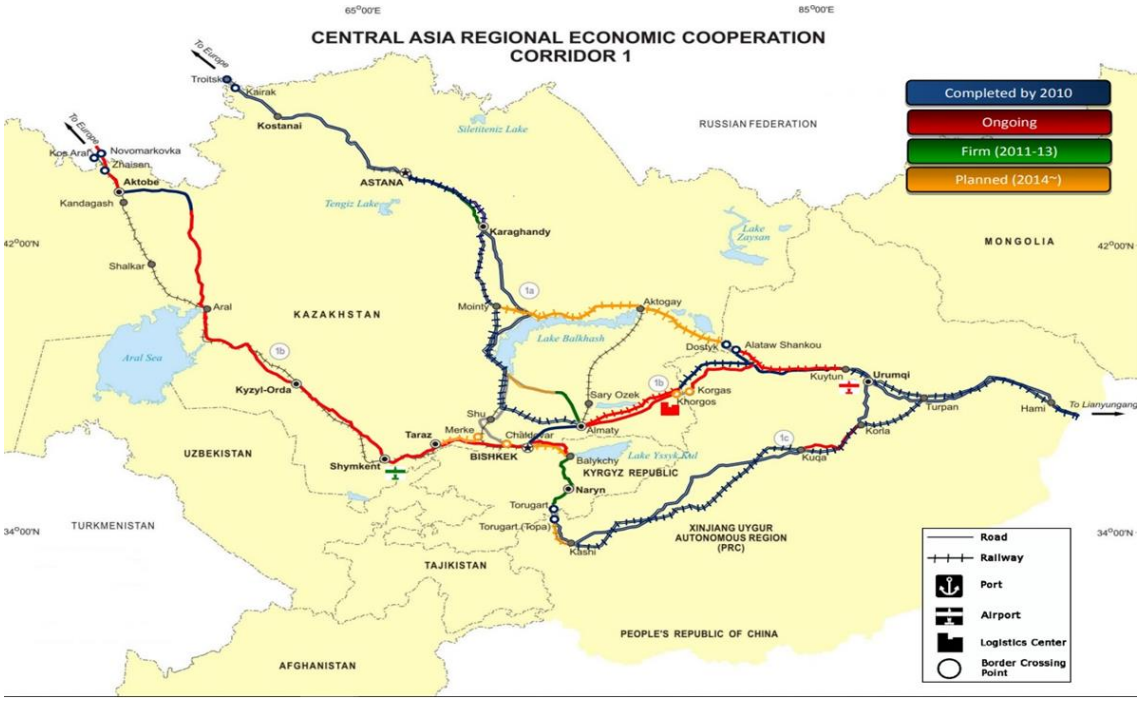
4. SWOT Analysis of BRI projects in Central Asia

a. Strengths

BRI projects have 3 main strengths for the Central Asian countries. They are; connectivity, development, and getting out of the land-locked position. With connectivity, it can be said that not only the economic and political relations between China and Central Asian countries will increase, but also all the countries from China to Europe will have good economic and political relations. BRI projects can turn geographically Central Asian countries from being land-locked to land-licked. This is the only alternative way to the Russian route to European markets.

Fig. 4: Status CAREC Corridor 1



Source: Ministry of Transport and Roads of the Kyrgyz Republic

http://piumotc.kg/uploads/documents/CAREC-Corridor-1-map.pdf

Belt and Road Initiative has the philosophy of "win-win" conditions. Mostly China is implementing these projects with bilateral agreements with each country in the region. In this case, trade can stimulate the increase in the welfare of the countries in which this logistical infrastructure is built. When providing this finance for the Central Asian countries, China does not ask or demand for any internal reforms as US and EU demand like human rights, democracy, environmental protection, and good governance.

Nearly 400 Chinese firms and 170 Chinese-Kyrgyz joint companies were active in 2019 in Kyrgyzstan. Since 2013, China has made 38 investments and contracts worth 4.34 billion US dollars in Kyrgyzstan, with 2.5 billion dollars going to the energy sector, 1.69 billion to the transport sector, and 150 million to metallurgy (Taliga, 2021).

b. Opportunities

These BRI projects are good opportunity for both China and Central Asian countries for regional stability, integration with the world markets, and cheap infrastructure. There is no other way than accept this financial support for the logistic projects of China since they are cheap and solve the local and international logistic problems of the Central Asian countries.

c. Weaknesses and Threats

The most significant threat and weaknesses are – aid dependency and trap. The share of Chinese dept to Kyrgyzstan among the total foreign debt is 44 %. There is a threat that if Kyrgyzstan won't be able to pay back the debt, China might take the actives of the country like in the case of Sri Lanka and Tajikistan (Jaborov, 2018).

The money that is given as a loan to Kyrgyzstan is actually paid back to China through the Chinese road construction companies. They even bring workers from China and rarely hire local people. This is somehow creating a negative opinion among the local people about China.

Keeping the balance between the geopolitical powers like Russia and China for the Central Asian countries may not be easy and this is another weakness for them (Indeo, 2020).

5. Conclusion

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative projects play a very crucial role in the development of Central Asian countries. However, there is geopolitical pressure from Russia to balance China. It is hard to get out of the Russian dependence on the Central Asian countries. Russia has a military base in Tajikistan and in Kyrgyzstan. Almost all the Central Asian countries are members of Russian lead "*NATO*" called the Organization of Collective Security (OCS) and the Eurasian Economic Union which is the economic side of the union. Besides the economic and military ties, Russia is also trying to keep the Russian language as an official language of communication. Last but not the least, more than 1 million Central Asian people are working as a migrant in Russian Federation and sending money to their families in their home countries. That is why it is hard for Central Asian countries to realize Chinese lead BRI projects without counting the interests of Russia. In addition, through the SWOT analysis, we have seen that the benefits of these projects are a "win-win" situation. However, Central Asian countries including Kyrgyzstan should be aware of the debt-trap diplomacy risks of China.

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