

COMPREHENSION OF CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND ITS EFFECT ON UZBEKISTAN

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.20.2.09>

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ABSTRACT

The paper primarily aims to reveal the processes behind the establishment of the diplomacy of the Belt and Road Initiative and its place in the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, its achievements and present problems. This paper is the result of a study of domestic and foreign literature, political

views and the impact of this international initiative on the socio-political, economic and cultural development of the region. It demonstrates the importance of Belt and Road diplomacy for the foreign policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan using the historicism and comparative analysis methods, and an interdisciplinary approach. A retrospective analysis of the stages of the establishment of Belt and Road diplomacy, its place and

role in the development of Central Asian countries in the context of recent history and international relations is done. The study also reveals the dynamics, state and existing problems of the relations between Uzbekistan and both Central Asian and other countries within the framework of the Belt and Road concept, and issues of cooperation in the political, economic and cultural sectors.

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Belt and Road initiative, regional initiatives, political economic and cultural cooperation.*

Introduction

Central Asian countries are actively striving to integrate into the modern international system. Characteristics of the geopolitical position and environmental conditions of Central Asia demonstrate the importance of the region in international relations. Uzbekistan plays a key role in increasing the effectiveness of Central Asia's economic integration into the global geopolitical space. It is essential for Uzbekistan to take its rightful place in world politics and economy, ensure its own security and sustainable development and expand foreign economic ties, including attracting foreign investments.

In this context, the Strategy for the Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021, initiated by the country's president, is of paramount importance. It places special emphasis on the issues of "strengthening the independence and sovereignty of the state, creating a belt of security, stability and good neighborliness around Uzbekistan and consolidating the country's international image."¹

Several platforms and dialog formats have emerged and continue to show annual improvement in Central Asia's international relations system. In particular, the existing bilateral and multilateral dialog formats, i.e., Central Asia + Japan, Central Asia + Korea, C + 5, the European Union and Central Asia, Central Asia + Russia, are quite intense. However, the Belt and Road megaproject, initiated by China, also maintains an active presence in the economic and cultural life of the region. It is designed to promote the economic and diplomatic integration of China with 65 countries of Europe, East, South, Southeast and Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. The Belt and Road project appeals to the countries of Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa to coordinate diplomatic efforts, standardize and combine trading platforms, integrate the financial sector and develop international cultural and educational programs. It is important to note that the Belt and Road program will favor the interests of the countries within its geopolitical space, in the absence of any political conflict or confrontation.

As one of the active initiators of the Belt and Road project, Uzbekistan is committed to regional and global integration processes, a mutually beneficial economic space, and the advance in modern international relations. It is possible to study and apply the experience of foreign policy of the leading developed countries through the prism of the public Silk Road diplomacy. This fact can be used in the national interests of Uzbekistan in its foreign policy. In this sense, the study and comprehensive analy-

¹ *Sobraniye Zakonodatelstva Respubliki Uzbekistan*, No. 6, 13 February, 2017.

sis of the Silk Road diplomacy is one of the most crucial and most pressing issues. A scientific analysis of the Silk Road diplomacy will help determine the place and role of Uzbekistan in the global world and in the region, find ways to further strengthen it, and develop new relevant development concepts.

In this regard, the purpose of this paper is to reveal the essence of Silk Road diplomacy from the modern international relations perspective and the significance of this mega-concept for the countries of Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, as well as to demonstrate the country's initiatives in the framework of this project, its achievements and problems in the foreign policy sphere. The paper highlights Uzbekistan's foreign policy, political, economic, transport and cultural relations in the context of the Belt and Road mega-concept.

Historic Approach to New Silk Road Megaproject

The idea of the Belt and Road project was officially proposed on 7 September, 2013 in a speech delivered by President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping at the Nazarbayev University in Astana (Nur-Sultan).² At the same time, the Belt and Road megaproject served as the foreign policy concept for the new Chinese leader. A month later, the Chinese leader first proposed the idea of building the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century in his speech in the Indonesian parliament.³

China approached the launch of this major project on a global scale. In particular, it adopted a completely new concept of economic and cultural diplomacy, which reflects all the components of the Eastern tradition and encompasses Eurasia, Central Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, and Africa. This megaproject is inscribed in recent history as one of the large-scale global strategies of the 21st century.

The current Silk Road project covers 38.5% of the Earth's land area and 62.3% of the world's population. These countries produce 30.0% of the world's GDP and 24.0% of all consumer goods.⁴ In addition, this large geopolitical space contains 75% of the world's energy reserves.

The Silk Road Economic Belt exemplifies the long-term perspective of Eurasian infrastructure and economic cooperation and includes six international economic corridors:

1. New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELBEC).
2. China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC).
3. China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC).
4. China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC).
5. Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC).
6. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

These economic corridors aim to extend through the entire Eurasian space, however the economic potential of the countries within this trade space varies.

The Belt and Road project strategy includes the combination of two routes: land and sea. The land section starts from Xi'an and extends to Lanzhou and Urumqi, through Central Asia to the Middle East, and then continues on to Europe. The marine portion originates from Guangdong and passes through Hainan Island to the Indian Ocean. The two routes will merge in Venice.

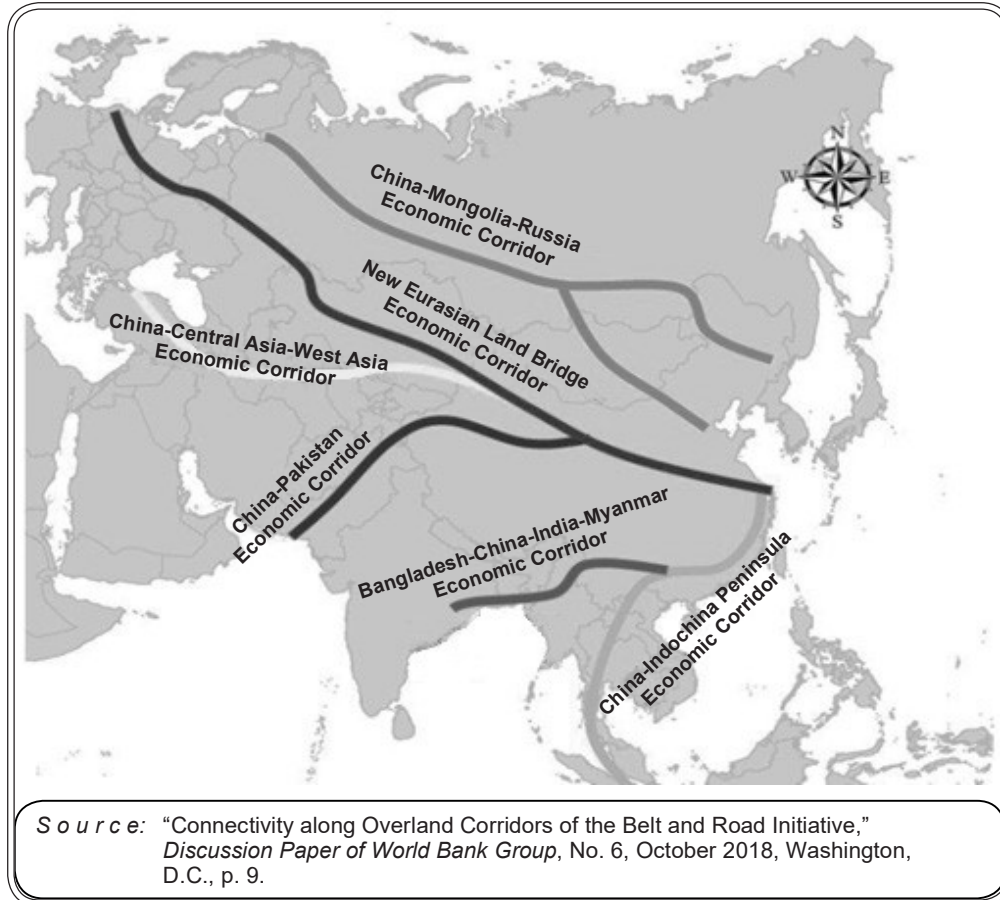
² See: *Interpreting Belt and Road Initiative*, ed. by Qin Yucai, Zhou Guping, Luo Weidong, Zhejiang University, 2017, p. 12.

³ See: *Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament*, Asian China Center, 3 October, 2013, available at http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm, 10 November, 2013.

⁴ See: H. Chin, W. He, *The Belt and Road Initiative: 65 Countries and Beyond*, Fung Business Intelligence Center, Hong Kong, May 2016, p. 2.

Figure 1

Six New Silk Road Economic Corridors



The New Silk Road spans approximately 6,500 km (the length of the historic Silk Road was 12,000 km), of which 4,000 km will be the main route from the Pacific coast of China to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Subsequently, the proposed route will go through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, and Europe is just one step away from there. Both the marine and the land sections will pass through the ancient trade route: from Guangzhou in China along the coasts of Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia to the Red Sea, and to Africa. The new transport corridor is designed to deliver goods from China to Europe in a short time. In order to implement this project, the Chinese government registered the Silk Road Fund in Beijing on 29 December, 2014.⁵ The total fund capital amounted to \$40 billion.⁶

⁵ [<http://www.silkroadfund.com.cn/enweb/23773/index.html>].

⁶ See: J. Rogers, "China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative Challenges Existing Project-Financing Banks for New Asian Development," 7 February, 2017, available at [<https://www.gfmag.com/magazine/february-2017/china-seeks-build-silk-road-project-finance>], 10 March, 2018.

However, a skeptical approach to the project is apparent in the foreign policy of some countries, as well as in specific scientific, statistical and analytical sources. In particular, the leading countries, such as the U.S., Japan, and India, believe that the project is not conceptually significant and does not possess sufficient resources and factors for successful self-realization. This can be explained by the existence of the American Silk Road Diplomacy, launched in 1999,⁷ the Japanese Silk Road Diplomacy, launched in 1997,⁸ and the economic and military competition between India and China in Asia. Consequently, each country's foreign policy prioritizes its national interests.

The modern Silk Road concept, proposed by China, can be considered the new model of international cooperation in the 1 + 65 (China and 65 project participants). The project is facing many specific problems, including the conflict of national interests between states, the problem of interstate borders, inadequate infrastructure (roads and railways, ports, power plants, etc.), the absence of common customs tariffs and the lack of international legal standards.

In terms of SWOT Analysis, *the strengths* of the New Silk Road project initiated by China include macroeconomic stability of the major source of financing (China), global investment projects and availability of cheap labor, among *the weaknesses* are economic differentiation in certain member countries, low production quality in some of the participants, absence of proper planning for major long-term projects. There are also *opportunities*—expanding export opportunities, opening of new markets, attracting investments, implementation of industry, energy and trade megaprojects, the development of intercultural dialog, and strengthening of cultural relations, and *threats*—lack of support for the project from certain leading countries, political instability in a number of member and neighboring states (Iraq, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Syria), the poverty in some of the countries and the lack of participation of large international financial organizations.

Some countries, including Iran, support China's Belt and Road initiative, but this does not, however, mean that the Iranian side is abandoning its political and economic ambitions, since the interests of Iran and China may not always coincide in the future. Iran is, in fact, China's competitor in the Central Asian region in the political, commercial and economic spheres. In addition, Iran is strengthening its position and prestige in the international arena.

On the other hand, China has managed to successfully implement a number of economic projects in a relatively short period of time, "bypassing" its partners' political considerations. These projects include the establishment of transport communications in Central Asia and the development of social and intercultural ties. There is no reason to believe that the situation will be somehow different with the New Silk Road projects.

The Belt and Road Initiative—A New Economic Platform

The New Silk Road is primarily an economic project. Its main goals are to promote mutually beneficial economic development and trade relations.

Central Asian countries need foreign investments to create major economic infrastructure facilities, including railways, highways, logistics centers and free economic areas. Therefore, it is advisable to attract capital from large foreign countries to the Belt and Road project. In terms of economic integration, China, Russia and Turkey are the most acceptable candidates among the major Central Asian economic players. Uzbekistan is making an active effort to participate in this global initiative's economic projects.

⁷ See: M. Rakhimov, "Complex Regionalism in Central Asia: Local, Regional, and Global Factors," *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 19 December, 2018, available at [<https://doi.org/10.22261/CJES.J6Y3O7>], 13 January, 2019.

⁸ See: *Japan's Silk Road Diplomacy Paving the Road Ahead*, ed. by Ch. Len, U. Tomohiko, H. Tetsuya, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Singapore, 2008, p. 206.

Filippo Costa Buranelli, a researcher at the University of St. Andrews, examines the Belt and Road initiative and the mutual interests of Uzbekistan and China from both countries' perspectives. According to him, China should engage Uzbekistan, since it is a "geographical and regional link in Central Asia." From Uzbekistan's perspective, the Belt and Road initiative will facilitate access to the Persian Gulf and expand trade and commercial routes.⁹

Reiner Michael Preiss, a Singapore-based asset portfolio management strategist, published an article in *Forbes* calling Uzbekistan a hidden gem in China's New Silk Road project. From his point of view, Uzbekistan is also "a springboard to the wider Central Asia region as it shares borders with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan. The country's strategic location makes it a key link in China's Belt and Road initiative."¹⁰ Uzbekistan is committed to developing mutually beneficial trade and economic relations with all member countries within the framework of this global project. Attracting new investors and capital, creating a favorable and competitive economic environment and implementing joint foreign projects are the priority tasks of Uzbekistan's new government. The new Silk Road project will create a constructive economic platform for Uzbekistan. The Belt and Road project will help Uzbekistan diversify its direct investment sources and expand access to regional markets through new transport corridors.

China is Uzbekistan's important strategic and reliable partner. Due to historical, geographical and geopolitical proximity, mutual political trust and dynamic economic relations, a solid foundation has been laid for the relations between the two countries. A special role in developing the Uzbek-Chinese relations and further expanding the mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries is played by cooperation within the U.N. and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Uzbekistan and China have established extensive cooperation in the political, trade, economic, credit, financial, cultural and humanitarian spheres. The interaction between Uzbekistan and China is widely recognized by the international community, since agreements based on mutual trust and friendship between the two states testify to the consistently increasing cooperation potential. In view of the impressive size of the economy and geographical proximity, China is one of the three key trading partners for almost every regional state and is one of the largest investors. Between 1992 and 2016, the total annual turnover of China with five Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan) increased 60 times.¹¹

In terms of its economic potential, Uzbekistan has crucial strategic importance in establishing the Silk Road Economic Corridor,¹² since this megaproject will give an impetus to the expansion and consolidation of Uzbekistan's position among the regional states and more advanced neighboring countries and even the world market. According to Yang Bo, deputy director of the Center for the Study of Central Asian Countries at Shanghai University of International Studies, "Central Asia is an important cooperation region. It connects China with Europe, the Middle East and South Asia. Uzbekistan is located in the heart of the region. And the Great Silk Road used to traverse your country."¹³

⁹ See: F. Costa Buranelli, "One Belt, One Road and Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities," in: *The Belt & Road Initiative in the Global Arena: Chinese and European Perspectives*, Springer, Singapore, 2017, pp. 207-230.

¹⁰ R.M. Preiss, "Uzbekistan is the Hidden Gem in China's New Silk Road," 9 September, 2019, available at [<https://www.forbes.com/sites/rainermichaelpreiss/2019/09/09/uzbekistan-is-the-hidden-gem-in-chinas-new-silk-road/#2ec1c0273bd5>], 19 September, 2019.

¹¹ See: "China is Ready to be More Open for the Implementation of the New Project 'The New Silk Road' and to Actively Provide Financial Support for the High-Level Initiatives of the 21st Century," 6 May, 2019, available at [<https://uzanalytics.com/xalqaromunosabat/4539/>], 25 May, 2019 (in Uzbek).

¹² See: R. Koparkar, "25 Years of Uzbekistan-China Relations: Enhanced Economic Engagements Marked by Political Understanding," Vivekananda International Foundation, 16 February, 2017, available at [<http://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/february/16/25-years-of-uzbekistan-china-relations-enhanced-economic-engagements-marked-by-political-understanding>], 8 March, 2018.

¹³ "Belt and Road Initiative—A New Model of International Cooperation," *Siyosat*, 15 May, 2018, available at [<http://xs.uz/uzkr/post/bir-makon-bir-jol-khalqaro-hamkorlikning-yangi-modeli>], 29 May, 2018 (in Uzbek).

Uzbekistan was one of the first to support the initiative of the Chinese New Silk Road project. The republic is interested in multilateral cooperation with China in the framework of the concept of Belt and Road, since China has huge global economic potential. In addition, China held a leading position in international economic relations and Uzbekistan's foreign trade during the two subsequent years (2017-2018).¹⁴ The ancient city of Samarkand is named the industrial and innovative center of the Great Silk Road by the Chinese newspaper *Renmin Ribao*. And Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital, is recognized as an industrial hub due to its high potential in the field of transport communications, production and science. Another major Chinese publication, *The Global Times*, had published a special page that contains information on Central Asian cities along the Silk Road. It shows photographs of Registan Square and photo reports from industrial enterprises created in collaboration with Chinese entrepreneurs in the Jizzakh Special Industrial Zone.

Table 1

Indicators of Trade between Uzbekistan and China, 2017-2018

	Foreign Trade Turnover	Exports to Uzbekistan	Imports from Uzbekistan	Share of Trade with China in Foreign Trade Turnover, %	Growth Rates of Foreign Trade Turnover, %
2017	3,335.8	1,523.3	1,812.5	18.8	33.9
2018	4,429.0	1,937.2	2,491.8	19.2	129.3

Source: Prepared using data of the State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan is implementing a number of major economic projects with the participation of Chinese capital. At the same time, the volume of production of export-oriented goods by Uzbek-Chinese joint ventures has increased in recent years. In addition, it is important to note that political factors have not weighed in the course of almost 30 years of economic relations between Uzbekistan and China, which contributed to dynamic development of bilateral economic relations.

Its location in the economic and cultural center of Central Asia allows Uzbekistan to actively participate in the Belt and Road project and achieve excellent results in international economic relations and world trade. This in turn will allow cities like Tashkent, Samarkand, Ferghana and Bukhara to become major Central Asian economic and logistics centers.

Integration of Central Asia into the International Transport and Communication System within the Framework of the New Silk Road

China is actively involved in infrastructure projects in Central Asia. In particular, the Chinese government assisted in the construction of the Angren-Pap railway. The Angren-Pap railway, which

¹⁴ See: "Vneshnetorgovyi oborot Uzbekistana v ianvare-iiule sostavil \$17,8 mlrd," *Gazeta.uz*, 13 August, 2018, available at [<https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/08/13/foreign-trade/>], 20 August, 2018.

spans 123.1 km, will contribute to the creation of an integrated railway system in Uzbekistan, the establishment of the China-Central Asia-Europe international transit corridor and the continued development of the Ferghana Valley.¹⁵ The ambitious project, worth about \$1,635 million, engaged over 1,000 specialists from the Chinese company China Railway Tunnel Group, over 3,000 Uzbek railway workers, and over 300 electrical engineers. The opening of the Angren-Pap electrical railway line allows for rail and freight transportation between the Ferghana Valley region and other regions of the country. At the same time, the China-Central Asia-Europe route will become the key link in the new international transit railway corridor.¹⁶

The Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China rail corridor is the most important component of the modern Silk Road project. The entire China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project aims to connect China with Eastern Europe through Central Asia, then through Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. If the project is successfully implemented, Uzbekistan will become a key transit country in the region.

Uzbekistan has consistently sustained the work on the continued development of transport communications in the region. Namely, direct air, rail and road links with Tajikistan were restored, and a new Turkmenabad-Forob bridge across the Amu Darya was put into operation. Also, a number of intergovernmental agreements on the construction of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway were signed. In addition, a forum on international cooperation was held in Beijing as part of the Belt and Road strategy, which aimed to extend the Hairaton-Mazar-i-Sharif railway to Herat on 14 May, 2017. The forum was attended by state and government heads of about 30 countries, as well as representatives of almost 130 countries. It was also attended by the U.N. Secretary General, the President of the World Bank, and representatives of other reputable international organizations. The President of the Republic of Uzbekistan attended the ceremony. At the forum, he put forward a number of specific proposals aimed at the practical implementation of the Chinese idea. In particular, Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasized the importance of launching the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway quickly.¹⁷ According to him, the Great Silk Road contributed to the development of trade relations, as well as to the exchange of information between states and regions, the spread of new product and crop types, the mutual enrichment of various cultures, thereby acting as an important means of inter-civilizational dialog. “The Belt and Road project, designed to revive this route, plays an important role in further expanding economic cooperation, creating even more favorable conditions for trade and investment, developing transport and communication infrastructure and partnership potential in agriculture, tourism, education and culture. It provides for the effective use of the developed countries’ capabilities, their assistance to developing countries with growing economies,”¹⁸ the President of Uzbekistan emphasized. As noted by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the key issue is the development of a comprehensive action program for cooperation in establishing transport and logistics routes connecting Central Asia with the markets of South and Southeast Asia and European countries through China and Russia.

¹⁵ See: M. Rakhimov, “The Pap-Angren Railway and its Geoeconomic Implications for Central Asia,” *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 19 April, 2016, available at [<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13354-the-pap-angren-railway-and-its-geoeconomic-implications-for-central-asia.html>], 28 April, 2017.

¹⁶ See: “Elektrifitsirovannaia zheleznaia doroga Angren-Pap—vysokiy rezultat strategicheskogo partnerstva,” Uzbekistan’s National Information Agency, 26 June, 2016, available at [<http://uza.uz/ru/politics/elektrifitsirovannaya-zheleznaya-doroga-angren-pap-vysokiy-r-23-06-2016/>], 26 July, 2016.

¹⁷ See: “Uzbekistan-Kitay: Vysokiye rezultaty sotrudnichestva, osnovannogo na vzaimnom doverii i prochnoy družbe,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 16 May, 2017, available at [<https://mfa.uz/ru/press/news/2017/05/11006/>], 27 May, 2017.

¹⁸ “Shavkat Mirziyoyev vystupil na mezhdunarodnom forume ‘Odin poias, odin put’,” Uzbekistan’s National Information Agency, 15 May, 2017, available at [<http://uza.uz/ru/politics/shavkat-mirziyeev-vystupil-na-mezhdunarodnom-forume-odin-poya-15-05-2017/>], 20 May, 2017.

Since 2017, Uzbekistan's transport system, which complies with international recommendations, has been developing in a stable manner. However, in order to further develop the transport system, it is necessary to foster the investment climate through state-owned private partnership. This will help to develop infrastructure along international transport corridors in the railway industry, create and expand a network of logistics centers and improve and implement technologies and tariffs for transit transportation with neighboring countries.

In June 2018, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution on Strengthening Regional and International Cooperation to Ensure Peace, Stability and Sustainable Development in the Central Asian Region,¹⁹ initiated in a speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the U.N. General Assembly in September 2017. In Paragraph 12 of the resolution, a special place is set aside for the development of transport infrastructure and transit corridors in the Central Asian region, fostering the interaction between all modes of transport, partly through the opening of new roads, railways and air routes.

To this end, Uzbekistan has proposed a number of initiatives to promote sustainable transport systems in the region. In particular, an international conference Central Asia in the System of International Transport Corridors: Strategic Prospects and Unrealized Opportunities was held in Tashkent on the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, on 20 September, 2018. The event was attended by over 300 participants from 37 countries, including representatives of 25 international organizations, financial institutions and leading transport companies.

At the conference, Uzbekistan proposed a number of new initiatives.

- One of them involved the elaboration of a strategy for the development of Central Asian regional transport corridors with the assistance of experts from the World Bank, Asian and Islamic Development Banks, other international institutions and the adoption of a regional program for the sustainable development of the Central Asian transport system based on this strategy.
- The second entailed the creation of an integrated transport management system within the SCO.
- The third included the establishment of the Regional Council for Transport Communications of Central Asian countries, which must become a coordinating structure in solving the existing problems in the transport and logistics sphere.
- The fourth was related to the joint development of transport communications and infrastructure in order to increase the region's tourist attractiveness. This would be facilitated by the articulation of the Concept for the Development of Tourist Hubs in Central Asia jointly with the World Tourism Organization.

International transport integration in Central Asia has been gaining momentum in the first two decades of the 21st century, and several international transport routes running through Central Asia were created in the process. The fact that these roads are part of the revival of the Silk Road confirms the project's global significance. The large-scale transport projects emerging in the Central Asian region as part of the Silk Road restoration intensified in 2017-2018. This phenomenon was facilitated by new transformations and modernization processes in the Central Asian region, as well as the establishment of active good-neighborly relations. In particular, the Eurasia Transport Corridor connecting China and Western Europe is slated to be built by 2023. The route will pass from Beijing

¹⁹ See: "General Assembly Adopts Resolution on Strengthening Cooperation in Central Asia," U.N. HQ, New York, 22 June, 2018, available at [<https://unrcca.unmissions.org/general-assembly-adopts-resolution-strengthening-cooperation-central-asia>].

through Nur-Sultan, Moscow and Minsk to Berlin. By 2050, approximately 37 million passengers are expected to be transported along this route.

In addition, in 2016, the China-Kazakhstan section of the Western Europe-Western China international corridor, which became the shortest route to Europe, began to function. The corridor will extend through St. Petersburg-Moscow-Orenburg-Aktobe-Almaty-Khorgos. The megaproject's full-fledged launch is expected no earlier than 2030.

In 2017, representatives of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey signed an agreement on the establishment of the Lapis Lazuli transport corridor. Rail and road routes are slated to connect the city of Turgundi (Afghanistan) with Ashghabad and the Turkmenbashi port on the Caspian Sea.²⁰ Subsequently, the corridor will pass through the Caspian Sea to Baku, then through Tbilisi to Ankara, branching out to Poti and Batumi, and then from Ankara to Istanbul and Kars in Turkey with further access to the European transport system. In May 2018, the first train was launched along the China-Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran route.

China's Belt and Road Initiative is an important project that aims to establish transport links between China and Europe as part of the new East-West corridor. A key link in the transport corridor is the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway.²¹ This project will play a significant role in establishing regular transportation from Turkey to Central Asia,²² China and Iran. Uzbekistan is interested in participating in this project. According to international experts, this route should play a special role in connecting Uzbekistan with Europe.²³ In light of the importance of the above-mentioned facts, the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan On Measures to Improve Transport Infrastructure and Diversify Foreign Trade Directions for the Carriage of Goods for 2018-2022²⁴ was adopted, comprising measures to carry out pilot transit transport of foreign trade goods along the Baku-Tbilisi-Akhalkalaki-Kars route.

According to some reports, the launch of the North-South Corridor project, which will connect St. Petersburg with the Iranian ports of Bandar Abbas and Chahbahar, opens up the way to the Indian port of Mumbai.²⁵ It is important for Central Asia that the transport corridor will simplify cargo transportation through Iran to the Persian Gulf countries. The corridor will allow for an annual throughput of 3-5 million tons of cargo. This transport corridor is of particular importance for Uzbekistan. In view of this, the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev confirmed Uzbekistan's support of the construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat and China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway lines, as well as the development of Central Asia-Persian Gulf, North-South and East-West trans-regional corridors at the SCO summit in Qingdao in June 2018.²⁶ In our opinion, the development of the international

²⁰ See: "Turkmenistan i Afganistan reanimiruiut zheleznuiu dorogu Serkhatabat-Turgundi," Turkmenportal, 23 November, 2017, available at [<https://turkmenportal.com/blog/12616/turkmenistan-i-afganistan-reanimiruyut-zheleznuyu-dorogu-serhatabat-turgundi>], 23 January, 2018.

²¹ See: E.M. Hajizade, "Great Silk Road and the 'Baku-Tbilisi-Kars' Project," *Scientific Journal of Academic Research Conference Newsletter*, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2015, September Issue, pp. 1-17.

²² See: F. Shahbazov, "Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway to Become Central Asia's Gateway to Europe," The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, 7 December, 2017, available at [<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13486-baku-tbilisi-kars-railway-to-become-central-asias-gateway-to-europe.html>], 7 January, 2018.

²³ See: F. Shahbazov, "Will the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Become Uzbekistan's New Connection to Europe?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 14, Issue 130, 16 October, 2017, available at [<https://jamestown.org/program/will-baku-tbilisi-kars-railway-become-uzbekistans-new-connection-europe/>], 10 February, 2018.

²⁴ See: *National Database of Uzbekistan's Legislation*, 4.12.2017, No. 07/17/3422/0349, 31 July, 2018, No. 06/18/5483/1594.

²⁵ See: N. Protsenko, "The North-South Corridor is a Multimodal Route for Transportation of Passengers and Cargo from Russia's St. Petersburg to the Mumbai Port," A "Window" to the Indian Ocean, 20 February, 2016, available at [https://www.rbth.com/economics/cooperation/2016/02/20/a-window-to-the-indian-ocean_569499], 20 March, 2016.

²⁶ See: "Tsentralnaia Aziia v sisteme mezhdunarodnykh transportnykh koridorov: vzgliad iz Uzbekistana," Uzbekistan's National Information Agency, 11 August, 2018, available in Russian at [<http://uza.uz/ru/society/tsentralnaya-aziya-v-sisteme-mezhdunarodnykh-transportnykh-k-11-08-2018>], 16 August, 2018.

transport system of Uzbekistan should be based on further improvement of political relations not only with the regional states, but also with their extra-regional counterparts. Due to this, Uzbekistan needs to improve its regulatory framework in accordance with the international transport and logistics infrastructure.

Uzbekistan: Sustainable Tourism along the New Silk Road

Tourism is one of the dynamically developing sectors of the world economy. International tourism plays an important role in ensuring sustainable development, the distribution of economic resources, creation of new jobs and fostering international cultural relations.

Uzbekistan is a country with great opportunities and potential for the development of tourism. There are over 7,000 sites of historical, architectural and archeological value in Uzbekistan. Of these, 545 are architectural, 575 historical, 1,457 are related to art, and 5,500—to archeology. 209 of them are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

In recent years, a great deal of attention has been paid to the development of the tourism industry in the republic. Changes within the country are also evident in the tourism industry. The country opened up, accelerated the attraction of investments in this sphere. In particular, a system for registering and issuing electronic entry visas has been introduced in 2018. At the same time, the procedure for obtaining tourist visas for citizens of over 50 countries has been simplified. Moreover, E-MEHMON, an electronic system for the temporary registration of foreign tourists has been created and visa-free entry has been introduced for transit air passengers from 101 countries. Starting on 1 January, 2020, a decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan established a visa-free regime for citizens of the People's Republic of China entering Uzbekistan. In order to further increase the flow of tourists, and with regard to their requests, the number of hotels was increased and favorable conditions were created for the development of transport infrastructure as part of the concept of “noble tourism” and “safe tourism.” Due to the introduction of new rules and the liberalization of the tourist service market, the number of foreign guests has increased.

The number of foreign tourists in 2017 grew by 32.7%, with the actual number of tourists in excess of 2.69 million. In 2015, the number of tourist agencies was approximately 398, while by the end of 2018 their number had grown to 950. In 2018, about 5.3 million foreign tourists have visited the republic, which is almost twice as many as in 2017.²⁷ It should be noted that the changes in the tourism sector are associated with the neutrality of the country's foreign policy, which comprises a multi-vector system of constructive international relations. Uzbekistan's participation in the Belt and Road venture also plays an important role. Thanks to the work carried out under this project, the flow of business visitors to the country has increased. In addition, the number of “pilgrimage tourists”²⁸ from Belt and Road member countries has increased. Among other things, there is active cooperation between the countries of Central Asia on the creation of free tourist routes, as well as on the launch of a Silk Visa for the Central Asian region, an analogue of the Schengen visa of the EU countries.

²⁷ See: “Uzbekistan: Booming Tourism,” Uzanalytics, 10 January, 2019, available in Uzbek at [<https://uzanalytics.com/iqtisodi%D0%B5t/3795/>], 13 January, 2019.

²⁸ “New Voices from Uzbekistan,” ed. by M. Laruelle, Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, 2019, p. 31.

Conclusion

Our study confirmed the active participation of Uzbekistan in the Silk Road Economic Corridor project, which was initiated by China. It had manifested in the following aspects:

- As one of the largest historical projects of the 21st century, it will help to raise the multilateral relations of the Central Asian region with its neighbors to a new level.
- The project will allow the country to enter global markets and contribute to its economic integration with the world economy.
- The Silk Road Economic Corridor will be important and relevant in the formation and development of a sustainable transport system in Uzbekistan and Central Asia.
- The project, which unites 65 countries, will further strengthen economic, political and cultural ties between the countries.

Summing up the results of this study, we can state that the active participation of Uzbekistan in this strategic project due to its key geopolitical and geo-economic location will continue to contribute to the growth of its international prestige.
