

China's Silk Road Economic Belt and the Shifting Balance of Power in Central Asia: A Case Study of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy Realignment

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Abstract

China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) has emerged as a transformative force in the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia since its inception in 2013. While the existing literature has evaluated the economic impact of the mega-project, research on the foreign policy adjustments of the individual states has been limited. This paper explores how Uzbekistan reorients its foreign policy approach in response to the SREB, balancing the US, China and Russia. It also discusses the opportunities and challenges presented to the recipient state in the milieu of SREB. This study discusses the shifts in the foreign policy of Uzbekistan since its independence in 1991. Furthermore, it also aims to highlight the role of SREB in the changing geopolitical dynamics and shifting balance of power in the region. The data used in this paper is collected from different secondary sources like books, articles etc. and the design of the research is case study. This study infers that SREB has made Uzbekistan transform its foreign policy from isolationism to economic engagement and regional integration. Although some concerns regarding debt trap are there, but the region is experiencing a clear shift in the balance of power due to increasing economic of China. This research contributes to the emerging geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia and foreign policy realignment of individual states in response to these shifts.

Key words: Balance of power, connectivity, economic integration, China's SREB, geopolitical realignment.

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a historic initiative initiated by China in 2013, is a revolutionary global plan that seeks to boost connectivity and promote economic cooperation among a massive geographic network of countries (Feingold, 2023). Spanning both the "Belt" i.e. the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the "Road" (marine) elements, this plan foresees an interconnected network of infrastructure investment and development with the ability to redefine regional and global trade patterns. In addition to its economic ambitions, the BRI is also an important foreign policy tool for China, enabling it to project its rising economic power and seek its strategic interests across the globe (James McBride, 2023). The rapid economic rise of China has required it to develop new markets and ensure stable trade routes, and the BRI successfully fulfills this requirement while providing an alternative system to the current international system (2018).

Central Asia occupies a key location in the SREB strategy with its special geographical position as the important land bridge between the economic giants of the East and West (Fanie

Herman, 2013). The geographic positioning of the region makes it a strategic asset for great powers seeking to exercise their geopolitical influence and marking it as their sphere of influence. It also offers geoeconomic advantages to the stakeholders for the abundance of natural resources (Rekha, 2014).

Traditionally, this area was a connecting point for trade on the ancient Silk Road and in China's attempts to revive these links, Central Asia certainly remains a focus region in its broader vision of connectivity. Also, the considerable number of natural resources in the region, especially hydrocarbons such as oil and gas, adds to its strategic importance considering China's increasing energy needs. In many respects, the BRI is the globalization of a strategy that had been implemented in Central Asia for many years earlier under the name "Shanghai Five." Under Xi Jinping, the said regional approach was transformed into a brand that served as the expression of Chinese foreign policy (Pantucci, 2021).

The interaction between two dominant global powers i.e. Russia and China highlights the evolving power dynamics in Central Asia. The SREB functions to advance multiple Chinese objectives as foreign policy serves as a direct extension of domestic goals. The Belt is consistent with China's security principles that prioritize common security through economic collaboration while interacting with Central Asian security dynamics. The landlocked Central Asian Republics (CARs) expect economic growth which will contribute to long-term regional security benefits. The Belt's financial prospects can lead to greater regional partnerships to address the diverse challenges faced by these states (Richard Ghiasy, 2017).

The SREB serves as a key component of Xi's "neighborhood diplomacy" under the BRI framework which aims to improve relations with neighboring states through public infrastructure development in energy and transportation. In this way, it is a framework for economic statecraft that uses China's strengths—its enormous financial reserves, low-cost loans, engineering expertise, and production and construction capacity—to gain political clout and establish a new globalization agenda on Chinese terms. It also serves to promote China as a revitalized, agenda-setting force both domestically and internationally. There is an implied ideological component to the BRI as well. It poses a de facto threat to the model of economic development that Western states advocate, which mainly avoids public infrastructure in favor of structural and regulatory reforms as well as technical aid in areas like health and education. Although Russia has resisted Beijing's attempts to use a free trade pact to turn the SCO into an economic force; the SREB provides China with another framework for growing its economic might (Group, 2017).

By using Uzbekistan's foreign policy realignment as a case study, this article aims to answer the following main research question: How has China's SREB affected the balance of power in Central Asia? The article first gives a historical overview of Uzbekistan's foreign policy development since gaining its independence. Next, it looks at the main goals and how SREB is being implemented in Central Asia. The paper then examines Uzbekistan's involvement in the SREB, emphasizing the country's foreign policy development and its diplomatic contacts with significant regional and international powers. This study then assesses how Uzbekistan's experiences indicate broader changes in Central Asian power dynamics.

The SREB and Central Asia

China's SREB encloses a broad strategy with various goals such as improving economic relations, infrastructure development, trade or investment activities, and energy safety, security, or reliability across the whole network of affiliated countries (Feingold, 2023). The focus of the initiative towards the Central Asian region is on the "Belt," that is, Belt part of the SREB which is the overland component vital for the linkage between China and the Europe and the rest of the world around Eurasia. The intention behind this project is to construct a contemporary Silk Road, strengthening the economic relationship and movement of goods, capital, and people on the continent (2018).

The strategic significance of Central Asia in the context of the SREB is highly vital. The region acts as a major transit corridor which connects China with Europe, West Asia, and South Asia. This Central Asia region is very important for the vision of the SREB that aims at developing trade routes which are efficient and low cost (Peña, 2021). Moreover, the region's large reserves of hydrocarbons oil, gas in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan create growing concerns for China's energy security. To sustain the supply of energy resources during the development of the economy, China is investing heavily in the Central Asia- China gas pipelines (Amrita Jash, 2024).

While operating under the framework of the SREB, China has Central Asia focused investments. The groundwork of these ideas is construction and improvement of transportation facilities which are crucial to greatly improving the efficiency of the linkages (Amrita Jash, 2024). Additional major focus of investment is the supply of crucial energy resources such as the Central Asia-China gas pipeline (Yellinek, 2023).

Moreover, the SREB initiative has incentivized the construction of new industrial zones and other related activities intended to promote trade within the area. These developments signal the determination from China to expand further into Central Asia's economically vital regions to capture their strategic resources for the triumph of the SREB (Farkhod Aminjonov A. A., 2019).

Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy Trajectory: A Historical Overview

Ever since Uzbekistan became independent in 1991, the country has been following a formal foreign policy. The foreign policy is characterized by a clear set of goals and principles designed to protect national security and sovereignty, while adopting a multilateral approach for international engagement (Weitz, 2018). One more approach in the foreign relations of Uzbekistan has been proactively to seek not to become too reliant on any single external actor (Tolipov, 2022). Following years of Soviet subjugation, the newly sovereign Uzbekistan precisely adopted a guarded policy regarding its foreign relations, balancing Russia, China, and the West (Toktogulov, 2022).

In the pre-SREB period (before 2013), Uzbekistan's relations with the world and other regional powers were considered complicated centered on sometimes supportive and other times antagonism. Alongside Russia, maintaining Soviet era economic and security ties with them made sense, and so did the extensive influence on other Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan (Kobilov, 2024). Russia has long held strong influence over Central Asia, and Uzbekistan was no exception. The shared Soviet legacy initiated various interconnections across different fields making it easier to partner with Russia during the early years of independence for Uzbekistan (2025).

Uzbekistan's relationship with China prior to the SREB was more restrained and centered on trade and energy collaboration (Khitakhunov, 2022). Unlike some of its Central Asian neighbors, Uzbekistan does not share a direct border with China, leaving landlocked Uzbekistan without a border chokepoint retrenchment. As a result, China had less impact on Uzbekistan than Russia did, prior to the development of the SREB. China's geographic distance from Uzbekistan and the latter country's prioritization of its relationship with Russia severely limited the scope of relations between China and Uzbekistan (Meena, 2025).

The dynamic between Uzbekistan and the United States was marked with fluctuation for the years leading up to 2013. As the US was highly focused on counter terrorism during Afghanistan's war, Uzbekistan's proximity to Afghanistan greatly increased the country's value as an ally, elevating its importance to the US. However, this had periods of inconsistency as the alliance went through phases of cooling (Blackwood, 2023).

Uzbekistan's relationships with its fellow neighboring CARs prior to the SREB were typically complicated, characterized by border conflicts, difficulty in dealing with common water resources, and degrees of cooperation varying from country to country. Cooperation at the regional level was often thwarted by past grievances and competition for scarce resources. The legacy of

Soviet border demarcations and the uneven distribution of natural resources further created tension among the newly independent countries (Zhunisbek).

When Islam Karimov was in the power in Uzbekistan until 2013, his country's traditional foreign policy was often described as being in part isolationist and leaning on hardline self-reliance. Karimov himself was a staunch advocate for national sovereignty and lorded it over tightly knit police states for over 25 years (Toktogulov, 2022). His approach was not very welcoming for the broader and deeper regional integration.

However, long before the SREB, Uzbekistan tried to improve relations with its Central Asian neighbors. It also looked for closer cooperation with some international players. At the same time, it maintained a balanced position towards the great powers such as Russia, China and the US (Cancarini, 2017).

Uzbekistan and the SREB: A Case Study of Foreign Policy Realignment

Uzbekistan's involvement in the SREB from its inception constitutes a particularly interesting example of foreign policy reconfiguration in response to China's grand initiative. In the early years, while President Islam Karimov ruled, Uzbekistan hedged its bets on the SREB. However, with the accession to power of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the position of Uzbekistan changed radically with the enthusiastic embrace of the Chinese investment in infrastructure. Uzbekistan officially joined the BRI in 2016. It became evident that Uzbekistan is going to be an active participant to this grand project. Mirziyoyev viewed the SREB with so much optimism for the regional integration and economic development (Husanboy, 2023).

Several concrete SREB projects in Uzbekistan demonstrate the real effect of the project on Uzbekistan's infrastructure, economy, and connectivity. Its Kamchik Pass rail tunnel, a massive infrastructure project, has enhanced country and regional connectivity through transport (Husanboy, 2023). The gigantic China-Central Asia gas pipeline network with multiple lines running across Uzbekistan indicates the close energy cooperation between the two countries (Amrita Jash, 2024). Furthermore, the planned China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway has the potential to significantly boost Uzbekistan's position as a transit country, offering a shorter route for Chinese European trade and access to West and South Asian markets (Meena, 2025). The upgrading of transport infrastructure made possible by the SREB is estimated to cut shipping times for Uzbekistan, potentially triggering a sharp rise in its exports (Lin Xiaoyi, 2023).

Foreign policy priorities of Uzbekistan have in fact shifted because of its active participation in the SREB. Economic diplomacy has been increasingly accorded significance with Uzbekistan actively seeking to leverage its geographical position as a key regional transit and logistics hub (Weitz, 2018). The economic cooperation with China has been particularly significant, with China emerging as Uzbekistan's largest trade partner and a prominent source of foreign investment. The deeper economic integration is the reciprocal benefits that accrue from Uzbekistan's participation in the SREB (Tolipov, 2022).

Even as its relations with China under the SREB have increasingly become crucial, Uzbekistan has nonetheless continued not to drop its multi-vector foreign policy, but to balance its relations with the other great powers such as Russia and the US with great care. The strategic partnership with Russia continues to be the foundation of Uzbekistan's foreign policy, and security and energy cooperation with the two continues unabated. Meanwhile, however, Uzbekistan has also sought to have its relations with the US and the rest of the Western powers continue or even increase as it seeks to diversify its external relations. This balancing act is a product of Uzbekistan's traditional reluctance to become overly dependent on a sole external power even as it actively joins the China-led SREB (Hugo von Essen, 2024).

Table: Key SREB Projects in Uzbekistan

Project Name	Sector	Estimated Investment Value	Impact
Kamchik Pass Railway Tunnel	Transportation	455 million USD*	Improved domestic and regional connectivity, facilitating trade.
China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline (multiple lines)	Energy	Over 14 billion USD (estimated)**	Strengthened energy cooperation with China, providing a vital export route for Uzbekistan's natural gas.
Proposed China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway	Transportation	N/A	Potential to transform Uzbekistan into a major transit hub, enhancing connectivity with China, Europe, and other parts of Asia, aligning with its regional hub aspirations.

Note: Adopted from The World Bank Report (ICR00005103)* & The people's map of Global China**

Shifting Balance of Power in Central Asia

The SREB, as in the case of Uzbekistan, has played a significant role in the evolving power dynamics of Central Asian relations. China's increasing economic and political influence in the region cannot be negated, much of it being based on the vast investments and infrastructure development undertaken under the SREB. China's increasing economic influence translates into increasing political influence. The reason is that CARs are increasingly dependent on the Chinese trade, investment, and loans (Lindley, 2022).

However, the rest of the Central Asian countries view China's influence in the region through the SREB with mixed perceptions (Amrita Jash, 2024). While these nations are opening to developments sponsored by SREB investments, some of them like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, are far more vulnerable to China's lending strategies (Meena, 2025). These states raised questions regarding their long-term financial dependence on China. The suspicion of debt-trap is there. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan view themselves as targets to China's lending and investment strategies, raising fears of compromising their sovereignty due to potential debt-trap (Laruelle, 2017).

These emerging power shifts have a wide-reaching impact on the security of the region, the economic cooperation and integration, and geopolitical stability. China along with CARs have been directly engaged in SCO's Counter-Terrorism Cooperation format which acts as a principal aspect of regional security (Peña, 2021). China aims for deeper economic integration through trade under the framework of SREB. These strategic and economic aspects makeup the complex geopolitical scenario that includes other superpowers, with Russia being the most prominent one (Indeo, 2020).

Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is also an alternative vision of regional economic integration, and the interplay between the SREB and the EAEU sets the geopolitics of Central Asia (Indeo, 2020). The impact of the SREB on regional security and economic connectivity is, therefore, multi-faceted and closely associated with the strategic interests of a number of global and regional actors (Meena, 2025).

Challenges and Opportunities for Uzbekistan within the SREB Framework

Uzbekistan's participation in the SREB opened windows of enormous economic gains and opportunities for the country. The project has greatly improved the trade connectivity of Uzbekistan through the construction of huge transport infrastructure and the facilitation of cross-border trade. As Uzbekistan is a double landlocked country, it will gain much with greater access to the world market through the SREB's rail and road network (Yellinek, 2023). The SREB has also attracted enormous foreign investment from China into the different sectors of the Uzbek economy, including infrastructure, energy, and manufacturing. These investments are making a major contribution to Uzbekistan's economic renaissance and realization of its national development strategy (Husanboy, 2023).

Opportunities there may be, but Uzbekistan also offers a basket of risks and challenges that go hand in hand with its participation in the SREB. These include, for example, debt sustainability. This massive infrastructure development is funded through heavy borrowing hence widely increasing national debt. It also comes with the risk of increased economic dependence on China, given the size and scope of Chinese trade and investment (Lindley, 2022). This in turn would limit the policy opportunities of Uzbekistan and render it more vulnerable to economic dynamics of China. Ecological risks of SREB projects, including potential harm to ecologically vulnerable sites must be weighed very carefully. Sociopolitical concerns, including labor rights violations and migration of Chinese laborers, should also be taken into account (Ruta, 2018). It is to guarantee geographies (and not just states) benefit directly from SREB and human costs are not levied on local populations. Notably, a rise in Sinophobia in Uzbekistan, premised primarily on questions of economic sovereignty, cultural identity, and potential social side effects of Chinese investment.

To overcome these barriers and receive the greatest benefit of the SREB, Uzbekistan has taken a number of measures. Deepening ties with other countries and other international organizations, as diversification of relations is one of the strategic measures to avoid the potential cost of overdependence on China. For the sake of accountability and so as not to raise fears of corruption, the project contracts should be transparent. The compliance with international standards should be made. In addition, the priority should be given to the SREB projects which correspond to Uzbekistan's national development plans and contribute to the sustainable development in the long run (Husanboy, 2023). Uzbek government authorities are also working hard to engage in public diplomacy in order to eliminate fears of the people concerning Chinese investment, playing up mutual benefits and the cooperative efforts by the nation to guarantee its sovereignty and national interests. Through these actions, Uzbekistan aims to utilize its strategic location and the prospects provided by the SREB to pursue its economic development potential while safeguarding its long-term interests (Zakirov, 2025).

Conclusion

To conclude, the impact of the Chinese SREB has singularly shaped the foreign policy of Uzbekistan, which has undergone a transformation toward engagement with China and an attempt to utilize the initiative to enhance economic integration. Under President Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's robust participation in the SREB is an opportunistic effort to gain from the extensive economic infrastructure spending and trade growth that the initiative supports.

Uzbekistan's case illustrates vividly the story of China's growing Central Asian influence and the shifting geopolitical competition and evolving balance of power in the region. The region

is increasingly traversing an intricate path fraught with perilous prospects as China's economic footprint intensifies with the SREB. While the project offers tangible economic opportunities and improved integration for Central Asian states, concerns of debt sustainability, loss of autonomy, and social contract remain salient.

In the years ahead, the SREB's enduring significance for China and the other countries in the region will derive from how these countries will engage with China and other major global and regional actors. The ability to find equilibrium between reaping the economic advantages and protecting the national sovereignty and looming threats is what will make the bright and secure future a reality in the region. Further studies may focus on the social and ecological impacts of SREB projects in Uzbekistan in more detail, assess the sustainability prospects of SREB-associated debt in Central Asia over time, and study the changing sentiments regarding China's role in the development of these nations.

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