



**STRATEGIC CONNECTIVITY AND REGIONAL DIPLOMACY:
UZBEKISTAN'S ROLE IN CHINA–CENTRAL ASIA–CIS RELATIONS IN
THE EMERGING EURASIAN ORDER**

Ji Pengshu

*Member of the Board of Directors, Deputy General Manager and Chief Physician, Henglun Oral Medical Technology
Group Co., Ltd., China
E-mail: jps23@tsinghua.org.cn*

Abstract

The transformation of Eurasian geopolitics has significantly reshaped relations among China, Central Asian states, Russia, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). As global economic and political power becomes increasingly dispersed, Central Asia has emerged as a strategic region connecting major international markets through infrastructure, trade, and diplomatic cooperation. This article examines the evolving architecture of regional cooperation, emphasizing Uzbekistan's growing role as a facilitator of connectivity between China, Russia, and neighboring CIS countries. The study argues that transport corridors, institutional dialogue, and balanced foreign policy have become essential instruments for strengthening regional resilience in a multipolar international system.

Keywords: China, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Russia, CIS, Belt and Road Initiative, strategic connectivity, regional diplomacy, Eurasia, international relations.

Introduction

The international system is undergoing profound structural changes characterized by the emergence of multiple centers of political and economic influence. Rather than being dominated by a single global power, contemporary international relations increasingly reflect a multipolar order in which regional actors play a greater role in shaping economic integration and security cooperation.

Within this context, Central Asia has become one of the most strategically important regions of Eurasia. Located at the intersection of East Asia, Russia, South Asia, and Europe, the region has transformed from a peripheral geopolitical space into a vital corridor for international trade and infrastructure development. The growing engagement of China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), alongside Russia's continued regional influence and the expanding diplomatic activity of Central Asian states, has created a new framework of interstate cooperation that extends beyond traditional alliances. Among the Central Asian republics, Uzbekistan occupies a particularly significant position due to its geographic location, demographic potential, and increasingly proactive foreign policy. The country's emphasis on regional cooperation and economic openness has strengthened its role in emerging Eurasian partnerships.



Theoretical Perspective: Strategic Connectivity in Eurasia

The concept of strategic connectivity has become increasingly relevant in international relations. Unlike traditional geopolitical approaches focused primarily on territorial control, strategic connectivity emphasizes infrastructure networks, transportation systems, digital communication, and institutional cooperation as instruments of international influence.

In Eurasia, connectivity projects perform several functions simultaneously:

- facilitating international trade;
- strengthening regional economic interdependence;
- reducing logistical barriers;
- creating new investment opportunities;
- increasing geopolitical flexibility for participating states.

Consequently, transport infrastructure has evolved from a purely economic asset into an important component of foreign policy and regional diplomacy.

China's Expanding Economic Diplomacy in Central Asia

China has considerably expanded its engagement with Central Asian countries through large-scale infrastructure investments, industrial cooperation, and financial partnerships. The Belt and Road Initiative remains the primary framework through which Beijing promotes regional connectivity, seeking to establish efficient transport routes linking Chinese production centers with European and Middle Eastern markets. One of the most significant developments has been the institutional consolidation of the China–Central Asia Summit, which has become an important diplomatic platform for coordinating long-term cooperation. Recent agreements have emphasized infrastructure development, green energy, digital transformation, and trade facilitation, reflecting China's intention to build comprehensive partnerships rather than focusing exclusively on transportation projects. This approach demonstrates an evolution from investment-driven diplomacy toward broader regional institution-building.

Uzbekistan as a Regional Bridge

Uzbekistan's foreign policy has increasingly emphasized constructive engagement with neighboring states while simultaneously strengthening relations with major international partners. This balanced diplomatic approach enables the country to diversify economic cooperation without becoming overly dependent on any single external actor.

The construction of the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway represents one of the most strategically important infrastructure projects in recent years. The railway is expected to create a shorter land route connecting East Asia with Central Asia and potentially with European markets through additional regional transport networks.



Beyond transportation efficiency, the project is expected to generate several broader economic benefits:

- expansion of logistics centers and dry ports;
- growth of transit-related services;
- increased export competitiveness;
- stimulation of regional industrial cooperation;
- attraction of foreign direct investment.

For Uzbekistan, these developments strengthen its position as an emerging logistics hub within the broader Eurasian transportation system.

Russia's Enduring Regional Influence

Although China's economic role has expanded considerably, Russia continues to maintain substantial influence across Central Asia through multiple channels of cooperation.

Economic ties remain significant, particularly in trade, energy, and industrial collaboration. Labor migration also represents an important dimension of regional relations, as employment opportunities in Russia continue to influence economic interactions with several Central Asian countries.

Institutional frameworks further reinforce Russia's regional role. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) continues to facilitate cooperation in economic, humanitarian, and cultural fields, while the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provides an additional platform where Russia and China jointly participate in addressing security and development issues.

Rather than representing a zero-sum competition, the relationship between Moscow and Beijing increasingly reflects functional complementarity in certain areas. China has become more prominent in infrastructure financing and trade, whereas Russia continues to play an important role in security dialogue and institutional cooperation across the post-Soviet space.

The New Geography of Eurasian Transport

Transportation has become one of the defining elements of contemporary international competition. Global supply chains increasingly depend on reliable multimodal transport networks capable of adapting to changing economic and geopolitical conditions.

Several transport initiatives are reshaping Eurasian logistics:

- the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan Railway;
- the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor);
- railway connections through Kazakhstan;
- digital customs and trade platforms.



The Middle Corridor, in particular, has gained greater international attention as countries seek to diversify transport routes connecting Asia and Europe.

Simultaneously, digitalization is becoming an essential component of transport governance. Electronic customs systems, real-time cargo tracking, and AI-supported logistics management improve efficiency while reducing administrative costs.

These technological developments suggest that future competitiveness will depend not only on physical infrastructure but also on digital connectivity.

Challenges for Regional Cooperation

Despite encouraging progress, several challenges continue to affect regional integration.

Among the most important are:

- uneven infrastructure development;
- differences in customs procedures;
- financing constraints;
- geopolitical uncertainty;
- varying levels of digital readiness.

Addressing these challenges requires greater coordination among governments, international financial institutions, and regional organizations.

For Uzbekistan, continued investment in logistics modernization, digital governance, and cross-border cooperation will be essential for maximizing the benefits of its strategic location.



Future Prospects

The future of China–Central Asia–CIS relations is likely to depend on the ability of regional actors to balance cooperation with multiple international partners while preserving national interests.

Three long-term trends appear particularly significant:

1. continued expansion of regional transport connectivity;
2. increasing digitalization of international trade;
3. strengthening institutional dialogue among Eurasian partners.

Rather than replacing existing organizations, new cooperation formats are likely to complement established regional institutions, creating a more flexible architecture of Eurasian governance.

Conclusion

The transformation of Eurasian international relations reflects the broader transition toward a multipolar global order, in which power and influence are increasingly distributed among several regional and global actors rather than concentrated within a single geopolitical center. In this evolving environment, Central Asia has emerged as a strategically important region where economic connectivity, diplomatic engagement, and large-scale infrastructure initiatives intersect, creating new opportunities for regional integration and international cooperation. The growing importance of transport corridors, digital trade networks, and multilateral institutions demonstrates that the region is becoming an essential component of the broader Eurasian economic architecture.

Uzbekistan's evolving foreign policy illustrates how a medium-sized state can strengthen its international standing through a balanced and pragmatic diplomatic approach. By maintaining constructive relations with China, Russia, neighboring Central Asian countries, and other international partners, Uzbekistan has expanded its role in regional decision-making while enhancing its economic resilience. The country's participation in major infrastructure projects, particularly cross-border transport corridors, together with its active involvement in multilateral dialogue through regional organizations and international platforms, reinforces its position as an important bridge connecting China, Russia, and the wider CIS region.

Furthermore, the development of strategic connectivity extends beyond the construction of physical infrastructure. It increasingly includes digital logistics, customs modernization, sustainable transport policies, and coordinated regional governance, all of which contribute to improving the efficiency and resilience of international supply chains. These interconnected processes create favorable conditions for attracting foreign investment, expanding trade opportunities, and supporting long-term economic modernization across Central Asia.



Looking ahead, the sustainability of Eurasian cooperation will depend on the ability of regional states to balance national interests with collective development goals while adapting to rapidly changing geopolitical and economic conditions. Strengthening institutional dialogue, promoting inclusive infrastructure development, and expanding digital cooperation will remain essential priorities for ensuring stable regional growth.

Ultimately, strategic connectivity is becoming one of the defining characteristics of twenty-first-century Eurasian cooperation. It not only offers new opportunities for sustainable regional development and economic diversification but also contributes to reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the continent by fostering greater interdependence, enhancing regional stability, and creating a more flexible and cooperative model of international relations in the emerging multipolar world.

REFERENCES

1. Maliszewska M., Van der Mensbrugghe D. The Belt and Road Initiative: Economic, Poverty and Environmental Impacts. — Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2019. — Policy Research Working Paper No. 8814.
2. World Bank. South Caucasus and Central Asia: Belt and Road Initiative. Uzbekistan Country Case Study. — Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2020.
3. World Bank. South Caucasus and Central Asia: Belt and Road Initiative. Kazakhstan Country Case Study. — Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2020.
4. Asian Development Bank. CAREC Transport Strategy 2030 Midterm Review. — Manila: ADB, 2026. — 50 p.
5. CAREC Program. Transport Sector Progress Report and Work Plan (2024–2025). — Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2025.
6. World Bank. Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia and South Caucasus. — Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2019.
7. CAREC Program. The Belt and Road Initiative: Reshaping Economic Geography in Central Asia? — Manila: CAREC Program, 2019.
8. National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China. Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. — Beijing, 2015.
9. Shanghai Cooperation Organization. SCO Charter and Official Documents [Электронный ресурс]. — Режим доступа: официальный сайт ШОС (дата обращения: 02.09.2026).



10. World Bank. Regional Cooperation Reduces Poverty and Builds Resilience in Central Asia. — Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2023.
11. CAREC Program. CAREC Corridor Performance Measurement and Monitoring Annual Report 2024. — Manila: CAREC Program, 2025.
12. CAREC Program. Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation— Режим доступа: официальный портал CAREC (дата обращения: 02.09.2026).
13. Government of the People's Republic of China. The Belt and Road Initiative— Beijing, 2019.
14. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Review of Maritime Transport 2024. — Geneva: United Nations, 2024.
15. Asian Development Bank. Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program: Key Achievements 2025. — Manila: ADB, 2025.