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THE CASE OF THE CHINA-KYRGYZSTAN-UZBEKISTAN RAILWAY: THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND UZBEKISTAN'S MULTI-VECTOR DIPLOMACY STRATEGY

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Abstract: *This article examines Uzbekistan's multi-vector diplomacy strategy through the case of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway, a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The study traces the project's historical evolution, economic indicators and geopolitical significance, and reviews the "debt-trap diplomacy" debate in light of Uzbekistan's experience. It concludes that Uzbekistan pursues a strategic balancing policy typical of small and middle powers by simultaneously engaging China, Russia and Western partners.*

Keywords: *Belt and Road Initiative, multi-vector diplomacy, Central Asia, China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, debt-trap diplomacy, strategic balancing.*

XITOY-QIRG'IZISTON-O'ZBEKISTON TEMIR YO'LI MISOLIDA: "BIR KAMAR, BIR YO'L" TASHABBUSI VA O'ZBEKISTONNING MULTI-VEKTORLI DIPLOMATIYA STRATEGIYASI

Annotatsiya: *Mazkur maqolada Xitoyning "Bir kamar, bir yo'l" (Belt and Road Initiative, BRI) global tashabbusi doirasida amalga oshirilayotgan Xitoy-Qirg'iziston-O'zbekiston (XQO) temir yo'li loyihasi misolida O'zbekistonning multi-vektorli diplomatiya strategiyasi tahlil qilinadi. Ishda loyihaning tarixiy evolyutsiyasi, iqtisodiy ko'rsatkichlari va geosiyosiy ahamiyati, shuningdek BRI atrofidagi "qarz tuzog'i diplomatiyasi" munozarasi O'zbekiston tajribasi asosida ko'rib chiqiladi. Xulosa qilinadiki, O'zbekiston yirik davlatlar (Xitoy, Rossiya, G'arb) bilan bir vaqtning o'zida hamkorlik qilish orqali kichik va o'rta davlatlarga xos strategik muvozanat siyosatini amalga oshirmoqda.*

Kalit so'zlar: *"Bir kamar, bir yo'l" tashabbusi, multi-vektorli diplomatiya, Markaziy Osiyo, Xitoy-Qirg'iziston-O'zbekiston temir yo'li, qarz tuzog'i diplomatiyasi, strategik muvozanat.*

НА ПРИМЕРЕ ЖЕЛЕЗНОЙ ДОРОГИ КИТАЙ-КЫРГЫЗСТАН-УЗБЕКИСТАН: ИНИЦИАТИВА «ОДИН ПОЯС, ОДИН ПУТЬ» И СТРАТЕГИЯ МНОГОВЕКТОРНОЙ ДИПЛОМАТИИ УЗБЕКИСТАНА

Аннотация: *В статье на примере железной дороги Китай-Кыргызстан-Узбекистан, флагманского проекта китайской инициативы «Один пояс, один путь» (BRI), анализируется стратегия многовекторной дипломатии Узбекистана. Рассматриваются историческая эволюция проекта, экономические показатели и геополитическое значение, а также дискуссия о «дипломатии долговой ловушки» применительно к опыту Узбекистана. Делается вывод, что Узбекистан проводит политику стратегического балансирования, характерную для малых и средних государств, одновременно развивая отношения с Китаем, Россией и Западом.*

Ключевые слова: *инициатива «Один пояс, один путь», многовекторная дипломатия, Центральная Азия, железная дорога Китай-Кыргызстан-Узбекистан, дипломатия долговой ловушки, стратегическое балансирование.*

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by the leadership of the People's Republic of China in 2013, has become one of the largest geo-economic projects of the past decade, encompassing more than 140 countries [18]. Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, lies at the geographic center of this initiative; alongside expanding infrastructure, trade and investment opportunities for the region, it also raises the risk of growing economic dependence on major powers.

At the same time, since 2016, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has been consistently pursuing a new foreign-policy course based on the principle of "multi-vectorism" — described in the scholarly literature as a strategy of balanced cooperation with China, Russia, the United States, the European Union and neighboring states simultaneously [10; 12; 16]. The purpose of this article is to show, through the case of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway project, how Uzbekistan's participation in the BRI has become a practical illustration of its multi-vector diplomacy.

1. The Belt and Road Initiative and Central Asia: Conceptual Foundations

The BRI comprises two main directions — the overland "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the maritime "21st Century Maritime Silk Road." Scholarly interpretations of the BRI vary: some researchers treat it as a purely economic and infrastructural project, while others regard it as an ideologically driven undertaking of the Chinese Communist Party with clear geopolitical dimensions [19]. For the landlocked states of Central Asia, the BRI is, above all, significant as a means of connecting the region to global trade networks.

2. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway: From Vision to Reality

Although the idea of the CKU railway was first discussed in Paris as early as 1997, the project remained unrealized for nearly thirty years [7]. Real momentum came at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit held in Samarkand in September 2022, followed by documents on the financing model signed at the China–Central Asia Summit in Xi'an in May 2023 [8]. On June 6, 2024, the governments of China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed a trilateral intergovernmental agreement on the railway's construction in Beijing; the agreement was signed by Zheng Shanjie, Chairman of China's National Development and Reform Commission, Tilek Kydyrmaevich Tekebaev, Kyrgyzstan's Minister of Transport and Communications, and Ilkhom Mahkamov, Uzbekistan's Minister of Transport [1; 3].

The 523-kilometre line begins in Kashgar, China, and passes through Torugart, Kosh-Dobo and Kazarman in Kyrgyzstan before terminating in Andijan, Uzbekistan [1; 5]. Construction was ceremonially launched on December 27, 2024, in Kyrgyzstan's Jalal-Abad region, while the financing arrangement — estimated at roughly US$4.7 billion — was finalized in December 2025 [6]. According to the South China Morning Post, the line's ultimate freight capacity could reach up to 15 million tons annually, more than doubling Kyrgyzstan's 2025 capacity [7].

Uzbek officials have repeatedly stressed the project's strategic significance: President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has described the CKU railway as the shortest overland route linking China with Central Asia, one that would eventually open access, via the Trans-Afghan corridor, to the markets of South Asia and the Middle East [3; 9]. This illustrates Uzbekistan's strategy of diversifying transport and trade routes rather than tying itself to a single direction, such as Russia or China alone.

3. Uzbekistan's Multi-Vector Diplomacy: Theory and Practice

In the scholarly literature, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has been described in various ways — as a "geopolitical pendulum," a "regionalist chameleon," a "zigzag policy," and so on [12]. Following the leadership transition from Islam Karimov to Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016, researchers note a departure from isolationism toward active regional engagement [12; 16]. At the same time, core principles of the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept — such as military neutrality and the rejection of foreign military bases — remain in place; what has changed is the scale and intensity with which these principles are implemented [10; 13].

Scholars often compare Uzbekistan's strategy with Kazakhstan's self-styled role as a "Eurasian Bridge": whereas Kazakhstan emphasizes multilateralism and mediation, Uzbekistan projects more of an "independent actor" posture, prioritizing sovereignty and regime security through selective and cautious institutional commitments [14]. Economically, Uzbekistan seeks to address domestic challenges — poverty and scarcity of arable land and water resources — by simultaneously developing trade and economic ties with China, the United States, the European Union, Turkey, South Korea and the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union [11].

4. The "Debt-Trap Diplomacy" Debate and Uzbekistan's Experience

The most widely discussed critique surrounding BRI projects is the concept of "debt-trap diplomacy," first proposed by Indian scholar Brahma Chellaney in 2017 [16; 22]. According to this theory, China extends loans to developing countries on onerous terms with a view to acquiring control of strategic infrastructure — ports, mines and the like — should the borrower default. However, a number of researchers, notably Deborah Brautigam, argue that this narrative, while widespread in media and policy circles, lacks robust empirical grounding and functions more as a "meme" than a documented strategy [17; 19].

Analyses focused on Central Asia show that the debt burden owed to China varies sharply by country: Kazakhstan's debt is considered relatively manageable, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan — buoyed respectively by economic growth and gas exports — face no serious difficulties, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are regarded as the most vulnerable in the region [16]. This divergence can be read as a consequence of Uzbekistan's cautious economic policy of drawing on diverse financing sources rather than relying on China alone.

5. Economic Indicators: Opportunities and Risks

Recent statistics point to rapidly deepening economic ties between Uzbekistan and China. Official data show that bilateral trade reached US$17.2 billion in 2025, accounting for 21.2 percent of Uzbekistan's total foreign trade turnover and making China the country's leading trade partner [21; 22]. At the same time, the trade balance has tilted markedly in China's favor — a pattern that reflects a structural vulnerability in the Uzbek economy and its growing dependence on imports of technological and chemical goods [20].

Uzbekistan continues to diversify its trading partners: in 2025, trade with Russia stood at US$13 billion, with Kazakhstan at US$5 billion, and with Turkey at US$3 billion [21]. These figures confirm that, even as it deepens cooperation with China, Uzbekistan is actively developing other directions to avoid excessive economic dependence on a single partner — the economic dimension of multi-vector diplomacy in practice.

Conclusion

Analysis of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project shows that Uzbekistan treats its participation in the BRI not as an attachment to a single geopolitical direction but as a means of leveraging available strategic opportunities. While expanding infrastructure and trade cooperation with China, the country's leadership is simultaneously developing active ties with Russia, the European Union, the United States and neighboring states — a pattern that fits the "strategic balancing" model described in the literature for small and middle powers [12; 14]. Once construction of the CKU railway is complete, a quantitative assessment of its impact on the structure of Uzbekistan's foreign trade and on the regional transport-logistics architecture remains a promising direction for future research.

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