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How BRI infrastructure projects Transform Trade Route across Eurasia

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ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by China in 2013, represents a major attempt to reshape trade routes and economic connectivity across Eurasia through large-scale infrastructure development. Drawing on theories of historical political economy, connectivity, and structural power, this article examines how BRI infrastructure projects transform trade routes between China, Central Asia, and Europe. The study places the BRI within the longer historical context of the Silk Road, arguing that both systems rely on corridor-based trade, node-centered exchange, and the role of political authority in managing mobility and security. Rather than viewing the BRI as a complete break from the past, the article highlights important continuities in how infrastructure supports economic integration and geopolitical influence. Using a qualitative analysis of existing scholarly literature, the article explains how railways, logistics hubs, and multimodal transport corridors reduce trade time, alter spatial patterns of production, and strengthen overland connectivity across the Eurasian landmass. It shows that BRI has not replaced maritime trade but has created complementary overland routes that are especially important for high-value and time-sensitive goods. Central Asia emerges as a critical transit region, gaining renewed strategic importance after decades of economic marginalization. However, the article also demonstrates that infrastructure alone does not guarantee development. The economic benefits of BRI remain uneven and depend on institutional capacity, policy coordination, and domestic governance in participating states. The article further argues that BRI infrastructure functions as a form of structural power, shaping regional economic relations and geopolitical alignments. It concludes that the long-term impact of BRI on Eurasian trade routes will depend not only on physical infrastructure, but also on the quality of institutions, sustainability practices, and inclusive economic policies.

Keywords: Central Asia, BRI, Infrastructure, China, Geopolitics, Silk Road

INTRODUCTION

Infrastructure has long been a central factor in shaping trade routes, state power, and regional order across Eurasia. In political science and international relations, infrastructure is increasingly understood not merely as a technical or economic asset, but as a tool of political economy and geopolitical influence (Strange, 1988; Mann, 1986). Transport corridors, ports, and logistics systems structure access to markets, reduce or reinforce spatial inequalities, and shape the distribution of power among states (Harvey, 2006; Osterhammel, 2014). Control over connectivity has historically allowed dominant powers to integrate peripheral regions, manage flows of goods and people, and project authority beyond their borders.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by China in 2013, represents one of the most ambitious infrastructure-led strategies in modern international politics. Through extensive investments in railways, highways, ports, pipelines, and logistics hubs, BRI aims to restructure trade routes across Eurasia, particularly between China, Central Asia, and Europe (Rolland, 2017; Hillman, 2020). Chinese official discourse presents the initiative as a revival of the ancient Silk Road, linking contemporary infrastructure development to historical

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patterns of Eurasian connectivity (Xi, 2014). From an analytical perspective, this framing highlights the importance of corridors, nodes, and political order in sustaining long-distance trade, both historically and today (Hansen, 2012; Frankopan, 2015).

BRI has generated intense debate within international relations scholarship. Liberal perspectives emphasize its potential to reduce trade costs, promote regional integration, and generate mutual economic gains through connectivity and interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 1977; World Bank, 2019). In contrast, realist and critical political economy approaches interpret BRI as a strategy of power projection, arguing that infrastructure finance and control over strategic corridors enhance China's structural power within the global system (Strange, 1988; Cooley and Nexon, 2020). From this view, infrastructure becomes a mechanism through which states shape the rules, dependencies, and spatial organization of international economic relations.

This article adopts a political economy approach that bridges these perspectives. It argues that BRI infrastructure projects transform Eurasian trade routes through both economic and geopolitical mechanisms. Economically, improved overland connectivity reduces transport time and reshapes supply chains. Politically, it reorders regional hierarchies and alters the strategic importance of transit states. Central Asia is particularly significant in this process. Historically a core region of Silk Road exchange, it became marginalized after the Soviet collapse, only to regain strategic relevance through BRI corridors linking East Asia with Europe (Laruelle, 2018; Pomfret, 2019).

By situating BRI within the longer historical context of the Silk Road and drawing on international relations theory, this article argues that contemporary Eurasian connectivity reflects enduring patterns of power, geography, and institutional control. The transformation of trade routes under BRI is therefore not only a matter of infrastructure expansion, but also of governance, state capacity, and geopolitical strategy.

The Silk Road in Historical and Theoretical Perspective:

The Silk Road is best understood not as a single trade route, but as a historically evolving system of connectivity shaped by political authority, economic incentives, and security conditions. From the perspective of political economy, long-distance trade across Eurasia depended less on technological capacity than on the ability of states and empires to manage risk, provide protection, and regulate exchange (Mann, 1986; North, 1990). Merchants rarely traveled the full distance between East Asia and Europe. Instead, trade operated through segmented corridors and nodal cities, where goods, capital, and information were exchanged across political and cultural boundaries (Hansen, 2012; Millward, 2013).

Theoretical approaches in international relations help explain this pattern. Historical institutionalism highlights how stable political structures reduce transaction costs and enable repeated economic interactions over time (North, 1990). Periods of imperial consolidation under the Han, Tang, Abbasid, and Mongol empires corresponded with expansions in transcontinental trade, as these polities provided security, standardized taxation, and maintained infrastructure such as roads and caravanserais (Beckwith, 2009; Frankopan, 2015). Conversely, political fragmentation and insecurity disrupted trade routes and redirected flows toward alternative corridors or maritime routes (Christian, 2000).

The Silk Road also reflected early forms of core–periphery relations. Major imperial centers such as Chang'an, Baghdad, and Constantinople functioned as political and economic cores, while Central Asia acted as an intermediary zone linking multiple systems rather than a passive periphery (Wallerstein, 2004; Hansen, 2012). Control over nodal cities like Samarkand and Bukhara allowed regional powers to extract rents, regulate trade, and exercise influence over wider networks. This nodal logic resembles contemporary logistics hubs and dry ports, underscoring the structural continuity between historical and modern connectivity systems (Frankopan, 2015; World Bank, 2019).

Security was a critical condition for Silk Road trade. Realist perspectives in international relations emphasize that economic exchange is embedded within power relations and coercive capacity (Gilpin, 1987). The decline of Silk Road trade in certain periods was often linked to the breakdown of imperial authority, rising conflict, or shifts in military technology that made overland routes more vulnerable (Beckwith, 2009). Maritime routes gradually gained prominence not solely because of efficiency, but because they offered greater security and lower political fragmentation relative to overland corridors (Osterhammel, 2014).

The Silk Road also facilitated cultural and ideological exchange, reinforcing constructivist insights that material

connectivity shapes identities and norms (Wendt, 1999). The spread of Buddhism, Islam, technologies, and administrative practices across Eurasia was inseparable from trade networks and political patronage (Hansen, 2012; Frankopan, 2015). These exchanges produced shared practices that reduced uncertainty among trading communities, further lowering transaction costs and sustaining long-distance interaction.

In theoretical terms, the Silk Road demonstrates that connectivity is not a natural outcome of geography alone. It is a political achievement dependent on governance, security, and institutional coordination. This insight is directly relevant to contemporary initiatives such as the Belt and Road. Like the Silk Road, modern Eurasian connectivity depends on stable political authority, corridor management, and the ability of states to coordinate across borders. Understanding the Silk Road through political science and international relations theory therefore provides a critical foundation for analyzing how BRI seeks to transform Eurasian trade routes today.

The Belt and Road Initiative: Infrastructure, Connectivity, and Trade Transformation

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formally launched by China in 2013, represents a state-led strategy to reshape Eurasian connectivity through large-scale infrastructure development. From a political economy perspective, BRI reflects the use of infrastructure as a tool to reduce trade costs, reorganize spatial economic relations, and extend state influence across borders (Strange, 1988; Rolland, 2017). Unlike traditional development aid, BRI combines transport infrastructure, energy networks, finance, and bilateral diplomacy within a single, flexible framework (Jones and Zeng, 2019).

In international relations theory, BRI can be interpreted through competing lenses. Liberal approaches emphasize connectivity and interdependence, arguing that improved infrastructure lowers transaction costs and promotes mutually beneficial trade among participating states (Keohane and Nye, 1977; World Bank, 2019). Railways, highways, ports, and logistics hubs reduce transport time and uncertainty, allowing firms to integrate into regional and global value chains more efficiently (Anderson and van Wincoop, 2004). From this view, BRI supports regional integration across Eurasia by facilitating cross-border flows of goods and capital.

Realist and critical political economy perspectives offer a more cautious interpretation. These approaches argue that infrastructure is never politically neutral. By financing and constructing key transport corridors and nodes, China increases its structural power by shaping the physical and institutional conditions under which trade occurs (Strange, 1988; Cooley and Nexon, 2020). Control over connectivity allows states to influence dependency patterns, strategic access, and regional alignments, especially in transit regions with limited alternatives (Gilpin, 1987).

BRI's most visible impact on trade routes is the expansion of overland corridors linking China with Europe through Central Asia. China–Europe freight rail services have reduced transport time compared to maritime routes, making rail competitive for high-value and time-sensitive goods such as electronics and machinery (Pomfret, 2019; Hillman, 2020). While maritime trade remains dominant for bulk commodities, overland rail complements sea routes by diversifying transport options and reducing reliance on maritime chokepoints (World Bank, 2019).

Central Asia occupies a strategic position in these transformations. Historically a core region of Silk Road exchange, it became economically fragmented after the Soviet collapse. BRI has reinserted the region into Eurasian trade by investing in railways, border infrastructure, and logistics hubs, particularly in Kazakhstan (Laruelle, 2018; Dave, 2018). However, world-systems and dependency perspectives caution that transit alone does not guarantee development. Without industrial upgrading and institutional reform, Central Asian states risk remaining transit economies that capture limited value from connectivity (Wallerstein, 2004; Pomfret, 2019).

Overall, BRI demonstrates that contemporary trade route transformation is driven by the interaction of infrastructure, state power, and institutional capacity. Like the historical Silk Road, modern Eurasian connectivity depends not only on physical routes, but also on governance, security, and political coordination across regions.

Central Asia in the Belt and Road Initiative: Transit, Power, and Uneven Development

Central Asia occupies a central position in the overland component of the Belt and Road Initiative due to its geography, historical legacy, and political structure. From a geopolitical perspective, the region functions as a strategic transit space linking China with Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and South Asia (Mackinder, 1904;

Laruelle, 2018). Classical geopolitical theory highlights that control over land corridors across Eurasia has long been associated with strategic influence, a logic that remains relevant in contemporary infrastructure politics (Agnew, 2003).

From a political economy perspective, Central Asia's role in BRI reflects the importance of transit states in global trade systems. Infrastructure investments in railways, roads, border terminals, and dry ports reduce transport costs and increase the reliability of overland trade routes (Anderson and van Wincoop, 2004; World Bank, 2019). Kazakhstan has emerged as a key beneficiary, hosting major logistics hubs such as Khorgos and modernizing its rail network to capture transit revenues between China and Europe (Dave, 2018; Pomfret, 2019). These developments have repositioned the country as a critical node in Eurasian trade networks.

However, international relations theory suggests that transit status also creates new vulnerabilities. Dependency and world-systems perspectives argue that regions positioned primarily as transit zones may capture limited value unless they develop productive capacity and institutional strength (Wallerstein, 2004; Cooley, 2012). In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, BRI-related infrastructure has improved connectivity but has not yet generated significant industrial spillovers, raising concerns about debt sustainability and long-term development outcomes (Hurley *et al.,* 2018).

Security considerations further shape Central Asia's role within BRI. Realist theory emphasizes that infrastructure corridors require political stability and coercive capacity to function effectively (Gilpin, 1987). Overland routes pass through areas vulnerable to political unrest, border disputes, and transnational threats, making state control and regional cooperation essential. China has therefore combined infrastructure investment with security engagement, including border management cooperation and regional diplomacy through organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Aris, 2011; Laruelle, 2018).

Central Asia is also a site of great-power interaction. BRI intersects with Russian-led integration projects such as the Eurasian Economic Union, creating both cooperation and competition (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017). While China and Russia share an interest in regional stability, their economic strategies differ, shaping how infrastructure and trade governance evolve. European actors, meanwhile, increasingly view Central Asia as part of broader connectivity and energy diversification strategies, further complicating regional dynamics (Borrell, 2020).

Overall, Central Asia's experience under BRI illustrates a key theoretical insight: connectivity reshapes regional importance but does not automatically produce development. Infrastructure enhances transit capacity, but political institutions, economic policy, and geopolitical context determine whether trade route transformation leads to inclusive growth or reinforces dependency.

Europe and the Belt and Road Initiative: Trade, Standards, and Strategic Adjustment

Europe represents the western terminal of the overland Belt and Road corridors and plays a crucial role in shaping the political and economic outcomes of Eurasian connectivity. From an international political economy perspective, Europe is not merely a destination market for Chinese exports, but an active regulatory and normative power that influences how infrastructure-driven trade integration unfolds (Strange, 1988; Farrell & Newman, 2019). The expansion of China–Europe rail connectivity has increased the speed and reliability of trade, particularly for manufactured and intermediate goods, strengthening interdependence between European and Chinese economies (Pomfret, 2019; Hillman, 2020).

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, improved connectivity enhances economic interdependence and can promote cooperation through shared commercial interests (Keohane and Nye, 1977). European firms benefit from reduced transit times, diversified supply routes, and access to inland Chinese markets, while European logistics hubs such as Duisburg and Lódz have emerged as key nodes in Eurasian rail networks (World Bank, 2019). These developments support the view that infrastructure can deepen regional integration beyond formal trade agreements.

However, European responses to BRI have been shaped by concerns rooted in realist and critical political economy approaches. European policymakers increasingly view infrastructure as a strategic asset linked to sovereignty, security, and long-term dependency (Gilpin, 1987; Cooley and Nexon, 2020). Investments in ports, rail terminals, and energy infrastructure have raised fears of asymmetric interdependence, where control over critical nodes may translate into political leverage (Strange, 1988; Farrell and Newman, 2019). These concerns have led to greater scrutiny of foreign investment and the

introduction of EU-level screening mechanisms.

Normative power theory further explains Europe's emphasis on rules, standards, and sustainability (Manners, 2002). The European Union promotes transparency, environmental safeguards, and regulatory harmonization as conditions for connectivity projects. In this context, BRI has prompted the EU to articulate alternative frameworks such as the "EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy," reflecting an attempt to shape Eurasian integration according to European norms rather than reject connectivity outright (Borrell, 2020). This illustrates how trade routes are governed not only by infrastructure, but also by competing regulatory and normative models.

Eastern and Central Europe occupy a particularly complex position within BRI. Some states have actively engaged with Chinese infrastructure investment, viewing it as a source of capital and development. Others have aligned more closely with EU regulatory concerns, highlighting internal divisions within Europe (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017; Hillman, 2020). These dynamics show that Europe is not a unified actor, but a contested political space within Eurasian connectivity.

Overall, Europe's engagement with BRI demonstrates that trade route transformation is shaped as much by regulatory power and political choice as by physical connectivity. Infrastructure may enable trade, but standards, institutions, and strategic calculations determine how integration is governed and who benefits from it.

Conclusion: Connectivity, Power, and the Transformation of Eurasian Trade Routes

This article has examined how the Belt and Road Initiative reshapes trade routes across Eurasia by situating contemporary infrastructure development within a longer historical and theoretical framework. Drawing on political economy, geopolitics, and international relations theory, it has argued that connectivity is not a neutral or purely technical process, but a deeply political one shaped by power, institutions, and strategic choice (Strange, 1988; Mann, 1986). The comparison between the historical Silk Road and the modern BRI demonstrates important continuities in the role of corridors, nodes, and political authority in sustaining long-distance trade.

From a liberal perspective, BRI infrastructure projects reduce trade costs, shorten transit times, and strengthen economic interdependence between China, Central Asia, and Europe (Keohane and Nye, 1977; World Bank, 2019). Overland rail corridors complement maritime routes by offering faster and more reliable options for high-value and time-sensitive goods. These developments support arguments that connectivity can promote regional integration and economic cooperation. However, liberal outcomes depend on effective institutions, regulatory coordination, and domestic governance capacity, conditions that vary significantly across Eurasia.

Realist and critical political economy approaches highlight the strategic dimensions of BRI. Infrastructure investment functions as a form of structural power by shaping the physical and institutional conditions under which trade takes place (Strange, 1988; Cooley and Nexon, 2020). Control over transport corridors, logistics hubs, and financing mechanisms enhances influence over transit states and regional economic flows. This is particularly evident in Central Asia, where renewed connectivity has increased strategic relevance but also created new dependencies and vulnerabilities (Laruelle, 2018; Pomfret, 2019).

The historical analysis of the Silk Road reinforces a key theoretical insight: trade networks expand and endure when supported by political stability, security provision, and institutional coordination (North, 1990; Beckwith, 2009). The decline of earlier overland routes following political fragmentation and the rise of maritime alternatives illustrates that infrastructure alone cannot sustain connectivity. This lesson is directly applicable to BRI, where the long-term success of Eurasian corridors depends on governance quality, debt sustainability, and regional cooperation rather than construction volume alone.

In theoretical terms, the transformation of Eurasian trade routes under BRI reflects an ongoing struggle over the organization of global connectivity. Infrastructure enables trade, but power, norms, and institutions determine its distributional outcomes. The future of Eurasian integration will therefore be shaped not only by physical corridors, but by the political choices that govern how connectivity is managed, regulated, and shared across regions.

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