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Connectivity, Dependence and Strategic Leverage in Central Asia: China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Reconfiguration of Kazakhstan's Geopolitical Agency

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Abstract:

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in China, launched in 2013, represents the most extensive connectivity project aimed at reshaping the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. This research focuses on the transformation of the BRI in the changing strategic influence of China in Central Asia, with particular emphasis on Kazakhstan as the pivotal transit, energy and digital hub of the region. The study aims to determine the extent to which the BRI-related infrastructure, energy and digital networks have deepened the interdependence between China and Kazakhstan; to determine how these channels of connectivity change the geopolitical stance and agency of Kazakhstan; and to evaluate whether the BRI redefines the role of China, Russia and Western actors in Central Asia. The central research question guiding this study is: *How has the BRI redefined the geopolitical stance of China and strategic autonomy of Kazakhstan in Central Asia?* The connectivity depth model (CDM) is used in analysis and integrates geo-economics theories, infrastructural power and weaponized interdependence theories. Methodologically, the research follows a qualitative case study design. Triangulation of data was done using numerous sources to reduce the obscurity of the Chinese overseas financing. The findings indicate that the BRI has integrated Kazakhstan into Chinese centric transport corridors, pipes and digital systems that have generated high returns on transit efficiency, energy integration and digital modernization.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, geo-economics, connectivity, Digital Silk Road

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in China has been transformed from a programme primarily started as an infrastructure initiative into a wider geo-economic approach that redefines connectivity, trade and political orientations across Eurasia (Jash, 2024). The BRI aims to create integrated transport, energy, finance and digital infrastructure combining the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. In addition to its developmental branding, the BRI is a process where China rearranges the order of regional interdependence and expands its influence on the regions that formerly were influenced by the Russian, Western or local centres of

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power. The Central Asian region, located at the core of Eurasia, and situated between China, Russia, South Asia and Europe, has experienced some of the most significant BRI impacts (Morris, 2024).

Kazakhstan is a state that holds a very strategic position among the Central Asian states. Endowed with hydrocarbon-rich Xinjiang, uranium and rare earth elements, and guided by a long-established multi-vector foreign policy, Kazakhstan has come to be a gateway and testing ground for Chinese ambitions in the region (Vanderhill et. al, 2025). Over the past decade, the expansion of BRI-related infrastructure corridors, energy networks and digital systems has intensified cross-border interdependence. These developments have not only accelerated Kazakhstan's integration into the Chinese-centered connectivity systems but have also transformed its geopolitical choices and strategic options.

Despite the extensive literature on the BRI, must of the existing scholarship tends to focus on infrastructure, energy and digital dimensions, ignoring the relationship among these layers in production of connectivity-based strategic dependence. In addition, there is scanty systematic analysis on how all these types of connectivity are changing the geopolitical position of china, as well as the strategic autonomy of Kazakhstan. The gap restricts our understanding of the BRI changing the balance of power between China, Russia and the Western actors in Central Asia, as well as how Kazakhstan manages these changing relationships.

This study is guided by three objectives; To assess the way BRI is turning Eurasian power relationships by changing the regional connectivity. To determine the extent to which the infrastructure, energy and digital networks intensify the Chinese strategic presence in Kazakhstan. To ascertain the BRI to rebalance the geopolitics between China, Russia and the West in Central Asia. The central research question of this study is; What is the effect of the BRI on the geopolitical position and strategic power of China in Central Asia, especially it is Kazakhstan?

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics

Classical geopolitics primarily focused on military and territorial domination (Mackinder, 1904; Spykman, 1942). In modern literature, however, the transition to geo-economics is observed, in which infrastructure, trade and finance are strategic purposes (Blackwill and Harris, 2022). The BRI exemplifies this logic (Wang, 2024), as its investments expand market access for Chinese companies while simultaneously generating political goodwill and enhancing resilience in the supply chain.

According to Ferdinand (2023) and Callahan (2022), the geopolitics of infrastructures is defined, in which the infrastructures such as roads, railways, pipelines and digital cables create leverage by incorporating China into partner economies. Through the control of nodes, standards and finance, China is practicing networked hegemony, a type of power that is not based on coercion, but instead on connectivity (Jones & Zeng, 2023).

The BRI in Central Asia: Cooperation or Dependency?

Empirical studies present competing assessments of BRI's impact in Central Asia. Developmental economists and multilateral agencies note such tangible gains including less time spent in transit, increased volumes of trade and modernised logistics (Asian Development Bank, 2024; World Bank,

2024). The exports of Kazakhstan to China and Europe have increased and the overland routes are complementary to the sea routes (Amineh, 2025).

Critical analyses, in turn, focus on the asymmetric interdependence and debt exposure risks (Cooley and Laruelle, 2023; Rolland, 2024). The political gains of economic dependency can be converted into political power through Chinese policy-bank loans that are usually opaque and collateralised. The bilateral agreements enable China to bargain directly with states and increase bargaining power. According to Jones (2021), BRI financing mechanisms occasionally often bypass domestic accountability structures, strengthening elite-focused governance and increasing vulnerabilities related to environmental degradation and corruption.

Digital Silk Road and Technological Influence

The Digital Silk Road (DSR) creates a new dimension of influence by extending connectivity into technological and digital domains (Khan, 2024). Chinese telecommunication companies, such as Huawei, ZTE and China Telecom, implement 5G networks, data centres and smart city applications, which encourage digital inclusion and the development of e-commerce, they simultaneously long-term dependencies on Chinese equipment and cloud ecosystems (Weiss, 2024; Zhang, 2023).

The DSR is also linked to the trials of digital yuan settlement and the cross-border payment systems, which may pose a challenge to Western financial systems in Kazakhstan (" China, Kazakhstan launch," 2024). The Almaty, so-called smart city pilot, presents the advancement in technology, as well as the weaknesses related to foreign-linked data control.

Multi-Vector Diplomacy and Strategic Balancing

Kazakhstan traditionally adopts multi-vector diplomacy by balancing Russia, China, the EU and the US in order to obtain maximum economic benefits and not to be over-dependent (Kassenova, 2022). The emergence of China under the BRI has however, disturbed this strategic equilibrium. Russia continues to have security and cultural leverage (Zhexiao, 2024), whereas the Western actors promote normative and reform-oriented projects through initiatives including the Global Gateway and US C5+1 Partnership by the EU. These western engagements, however, remain limited in scale and financial competitiveness.

Conceptual Gaps

Existing research exhibits three gaps; Infrastructure, energy, and digital influence are rarely considered because of their influences on each other, as analysed layers. There is little comparative evidence available and there is limited country-level research, especially on Kazakhstan. Normative evaluations polarise on debt-trap and win-win stories, without looking to acknowledging subtler results such as negotiated interdependence.

The research attempts to seal these loopholes with the concept of connectivity depth, which determines the extent to which the economic, infrastructural and digital systems of a state interlace with the strategic architecture of another (Rai, 2022). The influence comes not so much in the form of domination, but path dependency under which integrated systems render the change of policy and economics expensive.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Research Design

The research will be based on a qualitative, interpretivist case study approach, with Kazakhstan chosen as the flagship of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China in Central Asia. This design allows exploring an in-depth examination of how Chinese investments in infrastructure, energy and digital technologies can be converted into strategic impact. Three factors contributed to the choice of Kazakhstan, namely, the geographical position as a land bridge in Asia and Europe; the long-term history of multi-vector diplomacy, a balance between China, Russia and the West; and the relative openness of available institutional and statistical data (Blackwill & Harris, 2022).

The analysis is based on a process-tracing strategy, which analyses the evolution of an economic engagement into structural interdependence and the influence of this on the policy behaviour of Kazakhstan (Callahan, 2022). The interpretivist lens acknowledges that influence is not material but also discursive, constituted by connectivity narratives, institutional learning and policymaking practices.

Data Sources

The research exclusively relies on secondary data that was gathered between 2018 and 2025. Peer-reviewed journals, reports published by World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), OECD and EBRD and the work of regional think tanks, including the Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies and the Carnegie Moscow Centre are considered as academic and policy sources (Cheney, 2019).

These sources are accompanied by official governmental documents such as BRI White Papers (2021, 2023), the Nurly Zhol infrastructure plan of Kazakhstan and the Digital Kazakhstan Programme. The China Global Investment Tracker (CGIT), World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) and IMF Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS were used to provide quantitative data on trade, investment and project implementation. The triangulation of several datasets would address the possible bias especially since there is only partial transparency in Chinese overseas financing (Cooley & Laruelle, 2023).

Analytical Framework: Connectivity Depth Model (CDM)

The study employs the Connectivity Depth Model (CDM), combining geo-economics and infrastructural theories of power (Farrell and Newman, 2019; Blackwill and Harris, 2022). The conceptualisation of influence by CDM assumes that it is a cumulative process in three interconnected dimensions:

- Physical connectivity: Transport networks, dry ports and railways (e.g., Khorgos Gateway) that connect Kazakhstan with BRI networks.
- Energy connectivity: Oil and gas pipeline, renewable energy relationships and integration of energy grids between Kazakh resources and Chinese demand.
- Digital connectivity: 5G network, fintech systems and information systems integrating the digital infrastructure of Kazakhstan into the Chinese technology base.

These dimensions are mutually reinforcing: the more one domain is integrated, the more other domains become dependent, creating structural coupling, which in turn adds to the strategic leverage of China (Dekker et al., 2020).

Indicators and Evaluation Criteria

The study evaluates China's influence using three criteria:

- Intensity of activity: Measured through bilateral trade, foreign direct investment (FDI) and number of projects (Ferdinand, 2023).
- Institutional embeddedness: Measured through the use of Chinese technical standards, governance frameworks and finance structure.
- Strategic leverage: Observed through policy alignment, discourse and Kazakhstan's balancing behaviour with regard to China, Russia and the west.

Table 2 – Key Indicators of BRI Engagement in Kazakhstan (2018–2024)

Indicator	2018	2020	2022	2024	% Change
Bilateral Trade Volume (US$ bn)	11.7	13.9	21.2	24.5	+109%
Chinese FDI Stock (US$ bn)	13.3	16.4	22.7	26.8	+101%
BRI Projects (Cumulative)	42	57	72	89	+112%
China's Share of Total Trade (%)	11.8	14.2	17.6	18.9	+7.1 pp
Freight Volume via Khorgos (mn tons)	6.1	8.9	12.4	14.8	+142%
Renewable Energy Projects (Chinese partnership)	2	4	7	10	+400%

Sources: CGIT (2024); World Bank (2024); Kazakh National Statistics Bureau (2024); AIIB Database (2024).

As the table demonstrates, there is a strong increase in trade, FDI and infrastructure cooperation. Freight using Khorgos has increased two-fold, underscoring Kazakhstan's growing role as a continental logistics hub. The rise in renewable energy projects further indicates a strategic shift towards long-term energy cooperation and sustainability-oriented integration.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Difficulties encompass the transparency of Chinese financing, making it difficult to determine the amount of debt financing conditions and embedded conditionalities. Moreover, the exercise of power under BRI, which is usually indirect, facilitated by institutional adjustment and not coercion (Jones & Zeng, 2023). The BRI projects have a long maturation cycle thereby limiting causal inferences. Triangulation maximises validity, as it considers the interdependence patterns not deterministic results.

From an ethical standpoint, the research utilizes only published data which makes it transparent and reproducible. It is not a polarised analysis that Kazakhstan is not a spectator in this game, but as an active actor playing the BRI engagement as a means of modernising infrastructure, increasing trade and ensuring strategic freedom (Kassenova, 2022).

CHINA'S BRI AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF KAZAKHSTAN'S GEOPOLITICAL AGENCY

This paper suggests the BRI has established a layered regime of connectivity, a multi-layered assimilation of physical, energy corridors and digital systems that inculcates Chinese influence in Kazakhstan without politically compelling it. This institutional connectivity grants China a regional advantage, denies Kazakhstan strategic maneuverability and slowly alters the geopolitical balance

in Central Asia, away from Russia and the Western influence. Table 1 shows the major BRI projects in Kazakhstan across the transport, energy, renewable and digital sectors to explain these dynamics. Through these projects, the economic, technological and institutional tools overlap and make Kazakhstan a key hub in the broader Eurasian strategy of China (Vitalis, 2023).

Table 1 – Representative BRI Projects in Kazakhstan

Project	**Sector**	**Estimated Value (US$ bn)**	**Lead Partner(s)**	**Strategic Significance**
Khorgos International Centre	Logistics Trade	1.9	China Logistics Group & Kazakh Temir Zholy	Flagship dry-port; land-bridge integration
Nurly Zhol–BRI Rail Modernisation	Transport / Infrastructure	3.5	China Rail Construction Corp.	Reduces east–west transit to 15 days; increases freight volumes
Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline	Energy	6.8	CNPC & KazTransGas	Secures stable gas flows; reinforces Chinese energy security
Zhanatas Wind Farm Project	Renewables	0.25	China Power & EBRD Co-Finance	Diversifies energy mix; green BRI showcase
Huawei Smart City Initiative (Almaty)	Digital Connectivity	0.6	Huawei & Kazakhtelecom	Launches Digital Silk Road; expands data infrastructure

Source: ADB (2024), World Bank (2024), Kazakh Ministry of Industry.

Figure 1 – China–Kazakhstan Connectivity Corridors

Map highlighting Khorgos, Almaty, and westward rail routes toward the Caspian Sea and Europe, illustrating Kazakhstan's central land-bridge role.

Combined, these projects symbolize the way the BRI functions concurrently in terms of infrastructure, finance, technology and governance embedding China within the long-term geographic development tracks of Kazakhstan and transforming the geopolitical landscape in the region.

Infrastructure and the Reconfiguration of Regional Space

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has transformed Kazakhstan from a marginal post-Soviet economy into a hub of transit over the entire Eurasia and the heart of connectivity. Historically, the infrastructure that existed in the Soviet parts of Central Asia, was oriented along north-south axes towards Moscow and had divided the region into small parts, which were poorly connected internally (Praeger & others, 2024). These flows are re-oriented back to the east-west, labouring Kazakhstan into a web of transport, logistical and energy that physically and virtually ties the region to China.

The Khorgos Gateway, situated on the Kazakh-Chinese border is a good example of such spatial transformation. Once a minor border post, it has evolved into one of the largest inland dry ports in the world, facilitating containerised rail transport between China and Europe (Weiss, 2024). The volume of freight traffic passing through Khorgos increased by 6.1 million tonnes to approximately 15 million tonnes (Kazakh Statistics Bureau, 2024) in the years 2018 and 2024, respectively. It is indicative of the formation of the so-called infrastructure geopolitics, according to which the logistics corridors act as tools of strategic influence (Ferdinand, 2023). Additional projects, such as the Almaty-Aktau multimodal corridor, the Western Europe-Western China Highway (World Bank, 2020), the CAREC railway network, also make Kazakhstan the continental pivot of the BRI. The Asian Development Bank (2024) indicates that Kazakhstan has more than 60 percent of all the BRI transport investments in Central Asia, amounting to over US $35 billion.

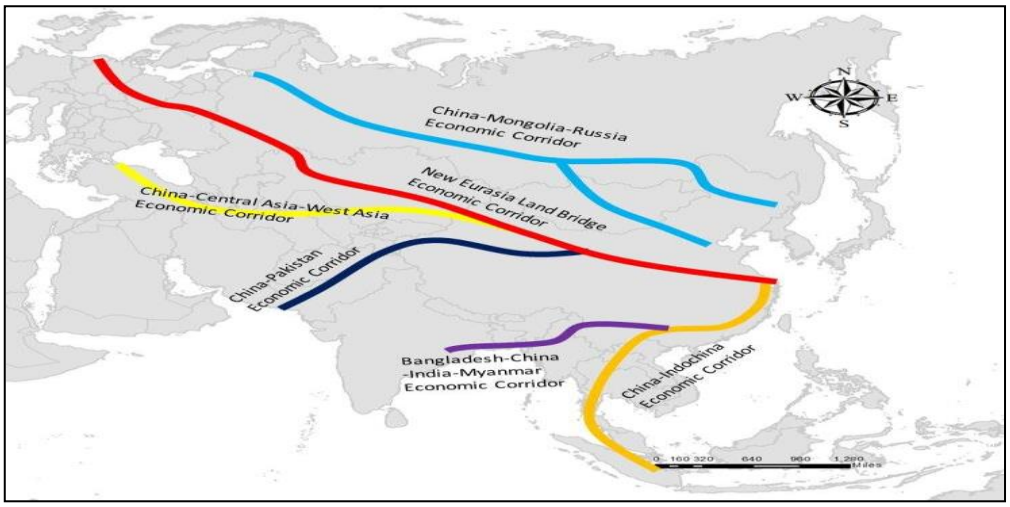

Figure 2 Major BRI Transport Corridors Across Central Asia

Illustrative map showing China–Europe rail via Khorgos, Central Asia–China gas pipeline, and maritime alternatives through Gwadar Port.

While this infrastructure does not only support trade but it also creates path dependency. More than 85 percent of China-Europe rail freight is going through Kazakhstan; positioning the country in a strategic location within the Silk Road Economic Belt (Kazakhstan Ministry of National Economy, 2024). However, this integration is asymmetrical. Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOE), China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC) and China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) control construction, financing and maintenance. Such networked control enables China to

shape operational standards through the notion of the so-called networked hegemony in which power is based on the ability to influence the logistical flows, as opposed to taking possession of the territory (Jones and Zeng, 2023).

Energy Corridors and Resource Interdependence

A second level of strategic depth emerges through energy infrastructure. The oil, gas and uranium resources available in Olamare constitute a critical component of the long-term energy security of China. This is represented by the China-Kazakhstan Oil Pipeline and the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline which is a part of the Beijing continental diversification strategy that aims to counter maritime weaknesses referred to as the "Malacca Dilemma."

The oil pipeline that runs through 2200 km between Atyrau and Alashankou in Xinjiang provides around 20 million tonnes of crude oil per year, which is about one out of every ten percent of Chinese oil imports (CNPC, 2023). Kazakhstan is a supplier and a transit hub which pipes more than 35 billion cubic metres of natural gas annually (IEA, 2024). While this diversification reduces Kazakhstan's dependence on the Russian infrastructure and gives Astana more political power, it simultaneously makes the company even more dependent on Beijing.

Table 3. Energy Export Orientation of Kazakhstan (2013–2024)

Destination	2013	2018	2024	Change (%)
Russia	49%	38%	27%	-45%
China	13%	25%	33%	+154%
EU	28%	26%	29%	+4%
Others	10%	11%	11%	—

Sources: IEA (2024); KazMunayGas (2013–2024); World Bank Energy Data (2024).

Beyond trade, Chinese companies are also direct investors in extraction and processing. CNBC has interests in large oil fields and China General Nuclear Power Group (CGN) makes long term uranium deals with Kazatomprom (Zhexiao, 2024). It is also through energy partnership that political influence becomes institutionalised, such as the 2019 China-Kazakhstan Energy Dialogue Framework, where the national strategies are aligned and Beijing turns into a part of the domestic energy planning (Kassymov, 2024).

Digital Silk Road and Technological Enmeshment

Digital Silk Road (DSR) which was formally introduced in 2015 is a further expansion of China into the telecom, e-commerce and digital governance. Kazakhstan has emerged as a key testing ground due to its high digital literacy and policy initiatives such as Digital Kazakhstan 2020 programme (Wang, 2024).

Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE have constructed the 5G networks in Kazakhstan, while Huawei's Safe City systems are installed in Almaty and Astana, incorporating AI-based surveillance and traffic control. Although these systems allow to enhance efficiency, informational asymmetry is being established, with core data being hosted on Chinese servers (Weiss, 2024). Digitalisation extends into finance through platforms such as Alipay and UnionPay, which facilitate Yuan-denominated cross-border transactions. In 2023, the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC)

piloted the settlement of digital Yuan (AIFC, 2024). The cooperation of the satellites within the framework of the Beidou system additionally integrates Chinese spatial infrastructure into the governance of Kazakhstan, uniting technological interdependence (CNSA, 2023).

The integrated infrastructure, energy and digital complex generates a dependency loop which is cumulative, so that the economy and technological infrastructures of Kazakhstan are becoming more aligned with Chinese standards - a contemporary manifestation of structural power by connectivity (Zhang, 2023).

Normative Power and Discursive Convergence

BRI power is not only limited to material but also to normative and discursive power. The policy discourse in Kazakhstan has increasingly adopted Chinese framing, emphasizing terms as connectivity, mutual development and shared prosperity. In 2016, the Nurly Zhol-BRI Coordination Committee was formed, which combines domestic and external infrastructure planning within the unified policy discourse (Kazakh Presidential Administration, 2023).

It is an indication of soft balancing, where states internalise the elements of the discourse of dominant partners with the aim of gaining economic benefits and maintaining autonomy (Cooley, 2022). This alignment is promoted by cultural diplomacy, which includes Confucius Institutes and the presence of the story in localized media narrative, defining the BRI in the institutional and public discourse of Kazakhstan.

Strategic Balancing and Agency

In spite of the increasing economic interdependence, Kazakhstan has been pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy (Khan, 2024). The government has security relations with Russia, economic relations with China and institutional relations with the Western actors. Western capital is drawn in through initiatives such as the AIFC and Kazakhstan is involved in discussions like C5 + 1 and C5 + EU in order to retain strategic flexibility.

Nonetheless, asymmetries persist. In 2024, Chinese loans constituted 16 percent of the external debt of Kazakhstan and Chinese companies owned the major part of logistics and energy infrastructure (IMF, 2024). Digital Silk Road growth poses technological sovereignty and cybersecurity issues. Kazakhstan copes with such pressures in a pragmatic way taking advantage of Chinese integration to modernise the infrastructure and linking BRI corridors to other routes such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, to mitigate overdependence.

The Triangular Balance: China, Russia and the West

The trend towards a triangular balance in the geopolitical relationship in Central Asia is rising. The Russian control is crashing due to economic stagnation and the war in Ukraine (Callahan, 2022). The capital size required of the western actors in terms of their normative reform is not able to compete with the infrastructure-based strategy of China. In this aspect, BRI can be understood as a form of functional hegemony that incorporates material incentives with discursive legitimacy (Rolland, 2024). So, rather than imposing overt control, China reshapes regional order through connectivity, integration and strategic management of interdependence.

From Infrastructure to Influence

The findings indicate that the Belt and Road Initiative is not only the network of infrastructure construction but an interlayered power system that reanimates the Chinese geopolitical role in Central Asia. Through the network effects, Beijing does not run like the traditional outlets of coercive diplomacy or empire, but is more of an embedding force, preferably merging monetary, technical, physical networks to the local economies of the partner states (Khan, 2024).

In case of Kazakhstan, the BRI exemplifies this approach, where material gains such as roads, pipelines and digital networks are accompanied by a discursive discourse of mutual prosperity and shared development ("China, Kazakhstan launch." 2024). As a result, the project alters geopolitics to be a contest of connectivity rather than a contest of territory whereby infrastructure forms the medium through which political relationships are formed.

The experience of Kazakhstan is emblematic of such broader shift. By placing itself within the BRI corridors, the country can enjoy unmatched access to trade and investment, but at the same time internalizes the Chinese technical standards, logistical systems and financial norms. The standard diffusion process, which can be observed in the case of railway gauge alignment, digital platforms and energy contracts, results in path dependencies that persist beyond individual projects. Consequently, the relationship evolves towards systemic integration rather than remaining confined to transactional cooperation.

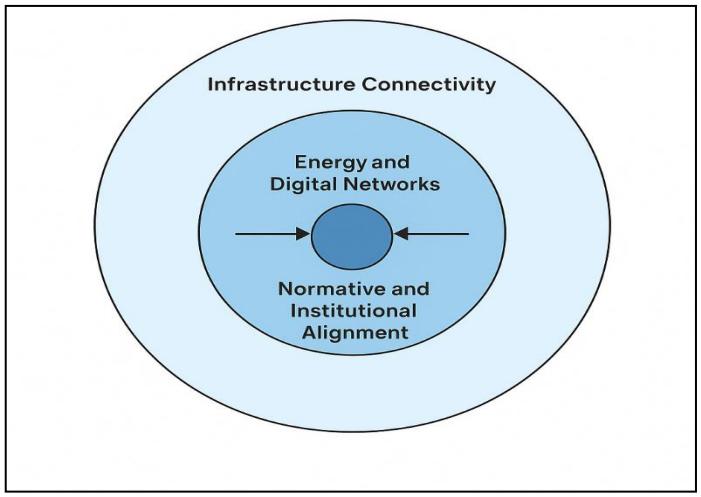

Figure 3 Conceptual Model of Embedded Geo-economics Influence

(Infrastructure connectivity Outer layer - Energy and Digital Networks Normative and Institutional Alignment Core layer - Infrastructure connectivity, Energy and Digital Networks Illustrative diagram with three concentric layers of influence: The arrows are moving towards the inward direction as a representation of a growing dependency and lesser autonomy.)

China's Strategic Leverage in Central Asia: A Recalibrated Posture

BRI has transformed the strategic orientation of China in Central Asia as a peripheral power to central power in shaping the regional order. This transformation operates through three mechanisms that interrelate with each other.

First, economic centrality: China has emerged as the largest trading partner for all Central Asian states including Kazakhstan, with bilateral trade of more than US$41 billion in 2024 (IMF, 2024). By monopolizing major hubs of transit and logistics, Beijing is establishing itself as the irreplaceable gateway to the Eurasian trade flows.

Second, energy interdependence: Through negotiating a long-term deal to access hydrocarbons and uranium resources in Kazakhstan, China has taken a step to reduce its reliance on maritime chokepoints in its energy supply. The pipeline system and refineries create a grand energy line connecting the entire continent and strengthening the strategic independence of Beijing at the expense of the maritime powers like the United States.

Third, technological and digital growth: Through partnerships involving Huawei, ZTE and the Beidou satellite system, China has integrated itself into the digital structures of Kazakhstan (Vitalis, 2023). This entails an extension of influence to the data governance, financial transactions and cyber infrastructure-areas that the Western or Russian actors find hard to counterbalance.

These mechanisms, combined, enable Beijing to perform what Liu and Chen (2023) define as latent power: the capacity to influence the choice and limitation of others without taking an active part in the process. China does not have to dictate the alignment of policies; it only makes sure that the channels that partners can take are more and more characterized by Chinese regimes.

Kazakhstan's Strategic Ambiguity and the Politics of Agency

Irrespective of this structural imbalance, Kazakhstan is not a weak recipient of the Chinese influence. The foreign policy of the state, articulated through a multi-vector approach, as first explained by the former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, is a complex balancing system, which allows Astana to use conflicting foreign forces for its domestic and strategic benefit (Blackwill & Harris, 2022).

This is in practice to indicate that Kazakhstan is the country that concurrently seeks a relationship with China regarding the BRI, with Russia regarding the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and with the Western institutions regarding the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) of the EU. Such diversified orientation guarantees that there is no monopoly in the economic or political space of a particular power. As President Tokayev has emphasized, Kazakhstan follows the strategy of cooperation without dependence.

However, the asymmetry of materials of BRI partnership limits the freedom of manoeuvre of Kazakhstan (Vanderhill et. al, 2025). The network of Chinese contractors in the construction of infrastructure, increasing the proportion of loans in yuan and the lock-in of the technological systems to Huawei all contribute to the loss of independence in the long term. The dilemma faced by Astana is thus to ensure there is a functional asymmetry i.e. there is dependency but at a political level there is still control.

This delicate balance is exhibited in how Kazakhstan has promoted the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) as an alternative corridor between China and Europe via the Caspian Sea and Turkey. Although nominate complementary to the BRI, the TITR gives Kazakhstan strategic redundancy, lowering dependency on routes controlled by the Chinese.

The Russia–China–West Triangle: Reordering the Central Asian Chessboard

The balance of the external power is changing at a slow but clear pace to reshape many of the geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia. The regime that dominated Russia has lost its influence because of its economic isolation that followed the war in Ukraine (Jash, 2024). Moscow still has security teeth using the CSTO but has no money to compete with the Chinese economic magnetism. The West, by contrast, remains normatively influential but materially peripheral as the projects of the Global Gateway and the PGII models remain limited in scale compared to BRI.

China therefore exists somewhere between the roles of a traditional colonizer and an ideologically driven hegemon, functioning instead as a systemic integrator that is able to combine both infrastructure, finance and discourse into a coherent structure of power. This integrative ability recreates the strategic geometry of Eurasia. Rather than the conventional spheres of influence, the area now turns out to show overlapping connectivity systems, with the networks of China turning out to be the most unified one (Vanderhill et. al, 2025).

The changing order is provided by the shifting hierarchy in Kazakhstan. Although Russia remains its security partner and the EU continues to serve as normative role model, China has turned out to be its economic driving force (Kassenova, 2022). The success of the BRI is not just based on creating roads or pipelines but on creating a new hierarchy of dependency which functions via supply chains, data flow and financial integration. This change symbolizes what Zhao (2024) describes as the "silent emergence of infrastructural geopolitics," wherein power is exercised no longer as the coercion that is visible but as the association that is invisible.

Theoretical Reflection: The Connectivity–Sovereignty Paradox

The growth of the BRI poses a more general theoretical question regarding the relationship between connectivity and sovereignty. Connectivity offers economic opportunities and regional integration but at the same time destroys the sovereignty of the states since they are incorporated into the external relations of control.

The case of Kazakhstan is an illustration of this paradox. The more it becomes a part of the BRI's physical and digital lines, the more its own economy becomes entangled in Chinese logistical lines. This process corresponds to the theory of weaponised interdependence (Farrell and Newman 2019), which argues that states occupying central nodes within global networks can use their status to either exert influence or strategic control over others (Amineh, 2025). However, unlike the Western scheme of coercion by sanction, Chinese influence is made through positive dependence, i.e. provision of public goods that include infrastructure, technology and credit. This difference is analytically significant: the power of Beijing is categorical and not punitive. It is not compliant through threatening to ostracise but rather through providing inclusion within its conditions.

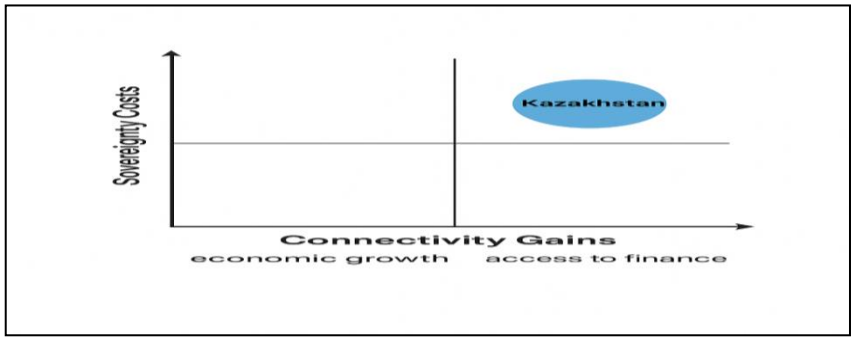

Figure 4 The Connectivity–Sovereignty Paradox

(Illustrative diagram: a two-axis chart showing "Connectivity Gains" (economic growth, access to finance) on the x-axis and "Sovereignty Costs" (policy autonomy, data control) on the y-axis. Kazakhstan sits in the upper-middle quadrant, indicating high connectivity and moderate sovereignty erosion.)

The model is the visualization of trade-off BRI partners inherently face. Such states as Kazakhstan are undergoing fast growth and geopolitical resonance but have to negotiate the limits to their autonomy on a constant basis (Rai, 2022). China therefore relies on the sustainability of its influence by its capacity to sustain the image of mutual benefit, which can be destroyed through increasing dependency without restraint.

Policy Implications and Future Trajectories

In the case of Kazakhstan, it is the strategic imperative of diversification, rather than disengagement. Excessive dependence can be alleviated by balancing the Chinese investment with the Western technological alliance and other regional activities like the Turkic States Organization. Enhancing national strength in project analysis, contract bargaining and cyber control is also necessary to protect sovereignty (Cheney, 2019). Legitimacy in Central Asia in the case of China is linked to the sensitivity of the local agency and social conception. Sustained influence will therefore depend on Beijing's ability to align its connectivity-driven ambitions with priorities, expectations and autonomy of host states in the region.

CONCLUSION

The Belt and Road initiative has transformed the position of China in Central Asia by embedding its interests in the infrastructure of Kazakhstan, its energy networks and its digital frameworks. Instead of using blunt force politically, the BRI establishes connectivity-dependent relationships that generate structural power by providing transportation corridors, oil and gas pipelines, data infrastructure and financial streams. The strategic location of Kazakhstan as the land bridge of the Eurasia continent has positioned it as a significant location where the geo-economics of the twenty-first century is an ongoing event.

This case reveals how international relations have changed whereby power is being exercised through networks, standards and technological ecosystems instead of having control over territory. However, the sustainability of the influence of China ultimately depends on its capacity to uphold the local legitimacy. By further encouraging mutual benefit and support to the strategic autonomy of Kazakhstan, the BRI can become permanently stable, in case Beijing continues promoting the mutual benefit and respect of the strategic autonomy of Kazakhstan. The more Kazakhstan's dependence deepens in the absence of proper safeguards, the more it may opt to get more diversified, undermining the principles of connectivity-based power (Jash, 2024).

Policy Suggestions

For Kazakhstan:

- Decentralize the source of funding by enhancing partnership with the EU Global Gateway, ADB and C5+1 as not to be overly dependent on the Chinese credit.
- Enhance transparency in BRI project contracting and procurement with the aim of reducing corruption and enhancing accountability.
- Enhance digital sovereignty with sound legislation on data-protection and other cloud and cybersecurity capabilities.
- Create strategic back-up through investing in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route as an alternative to the China-centric routes.
- Develop bargaining ability via specialised skills in contract negotiation, regulatory research and geo-economic risk assessment.

For China:

- Expand multilateral co-financing mechanism to increase the level of transparency and limit the expression of geopolitical dominance.
- To enhance the legitimacy, expand localisation and technology transfer.
- Collaborate on information management to solve security issues.

For Regional and Western Partners:

- Provide financially and infrastructure-wise viable alternatives to BRI rather than limiting engagement to normative or rhetorical initiatives. Facilitate regional integration in order to limit over-reliance on one external power.

Altogether, the BRI has changed the geopolitics of Kazakhstan and the results of the future will be determined by the extent to which the interdependence would be organized and equalized between all stakeholders.

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