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CHINA-KYRGYZSTAN-UZBEKISTAN RAILWAY: AT THE CROSSROADS OF CIVILIZATIONS, GEOPOLITICS, AND TRADE ROUTES

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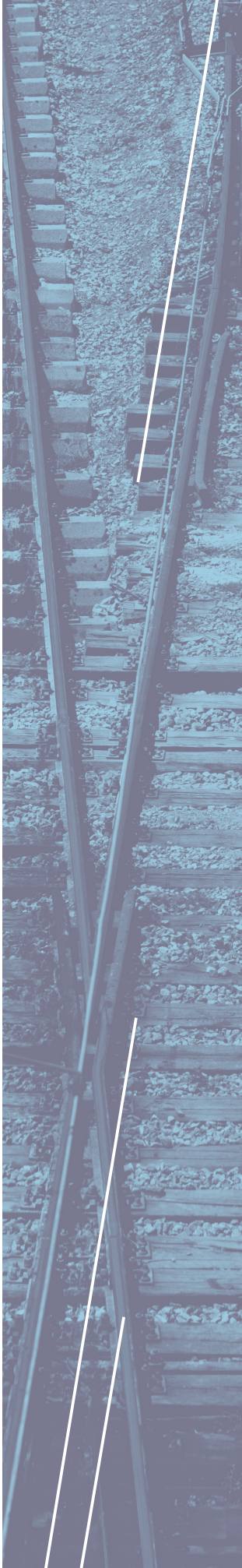
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The policy examines the potential and significant aspects of constructing the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway (CKURW). It explores the evolving intra- and extra-regional conditions that have hastened the negotiations on the project. Furthermore, it thoroughly analyzes the positions and motives of all three parties involved in the project, along with conducting a SWOT analysis of the CKURW. The policy also provides recommendations for ensuring a more sustainable implementation of the future project.

The publication is intended for young experts and consultants, researchers, decision makers, as well as a wide range of readers interested in politics and international relations in the Central Asian region.

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	3
REVITALIZING THE PROJECT: EXPEDITING THE PATH TO COMPROMISE	4
CHANGES IN GEOPOLITICAL STRUCTURE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE REGION	7
WHAT IS IN THE CHINA-KYRGYZSTAN-UZBEKISTAN TRIANGLE?	10
Position of China	10
Interests and position of Uzbekistan	12
Position of Kyrgyzstan	14
OTHER “NON-SUCCESS STORIES” OF CHINA AND SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE CKURW	19
Future risks of the CKURW project and ways to minimize them	22
CONCLUSION	26



INTRODUCTION

Due to its strategic location at the heart of Eurasia, Central Asia assumes a pivotal role in the establishment of regional transportation infrastructure, facilitating the integration of an extensive transport system that spans from China to Europe. Throughout history, the cities of Central Asia served as vital nodes along the renowned Silk Road, an ancient trade route connecting East Asia with the Mediterranean. However, the advent of maritime trade gradually overshadowed the Silk Road, rendering it less favorable due to the perils associated with land-based caravan transportation. Consequently, by the 16th century, the Silk Road had effectively ceased to exist due to geopolitical and geo-economic factors. The discontinuation of the Silk Road, combined with other influences, triggered state decentralization. This resulted in significant regional isolation, both economically and politically, leading to technological stagnation. In the 19th century, the inhabitants of the region experienced the loss of their independence, further exacerbating the consequences of the Silk Road's demise. The disappearance of this historic trade route also severed trade and cultural exchanges among the diverse peoples residing along its path. Notably, the distinguished Uzbek writer Abdulla Kadiri referred to this era as a “dark period.”

By the end of the 20th century, the emergence of newly independent states in Central Asia marked a significant turning point, as they inherited a railway network that primarily connected the region with the Russian Federation, rather than fostering intra-regional connectivity. With the onset of independence, the countries of the region swiftly recognized the importance of developing robust transportation and infrastructure systems, both domestically and in the form of transit corridors. Consequently, in 1996, the proposal for the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway (CKURW) was introduced. However, due to a multitude of factors, including technical, political, and geopolitical considerations, the parties involved have encountered obstacles that hindered the realization of this project over the past 25 years.



REVITALIZING THE PROJECT: EXPEDITING THE PATH TO COMPROMISE

Lively discussions within the trilateral (China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) working group of the parties have recently led to some progress, but a number of issues to reach consensus remain open.

1

First, the problem associated with the choice of route is solved. For Kyrgyzstan, the most profitable option was the maximum length of the route through its territory and the possible connection of the northern and southern economic centers of the country. Beijing, on the contrary, needed a predominantly short route with a minimum number of stops, as well as the possibility of direct access to undeveloped mineral deposits. As a result of the negotiations, the parties came to a general consensus on the route “Torugart – Arpa – Kosh-Dobo – Makmal – Jalal-Abad” with a length of **280 km**.

●
Torugart

●
Jalal-Abad

2

Secondly, a consensus decision was made on the width of the railway track. In this vein, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, like most post-Soviet republics, have a wide railway track of 1.520 mm, while China uses a narrow (European) railway track of 1.435 mm. As a result, the parties agreed that the process of changing wheels could take place around the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, not in the border zone with Kyrgyzstan. The solution will be the construction of an unloading station where two tracks join. The base, most likely, will appear in the city of Kazarman on the border of the Naryn and Jalal-Abad regions of Kyrgyzstan¹.

3

Third, the political implications of the project softened, which was the reason for the delay in construction for decades. It is no secret that Moscow and Beijing consider the Central Asian region as a territory of their geopolitical interests, and therefore directly or indirectly prevented the implementation of major projects here without their own participation in them. However, since 2014, the Russian Federation has become less categorical in relation to the CKURW, due to the deterioration of its relations with the “collective” West. Today, in the context of the crisis in relations with Europe, Russia’s desire has appeared to enter the markets of South Asia.

1. Valieva, Kamilla. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project may start in autumn. We explain why it is important for all countries of Central Asia. “Present Time”, (2022). Access mode: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/proekt-zheleznoy-dorogi-kitay-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-mozhet-startovat-osenyu-obyasnyaem-pochemu-ona-vazhna-dlya-vseh-stran-tsentral-noy-azii/31958781.html>

Although negotiations on this issue have been ongoing for over 25 years, a final consensus has not yet been reached on several technical and financial aspects: the financing of the project, the management structure, transit conditions, and more.

Nevertheless, within the framework of the “development of the Western regions” program, China has actively begun to implement railway projects, and to date, the railways have practically reached the border of Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan, in turn, builds new railways within the country, modernizes old ones, and practically completes the process of electrification.

ESSENTIALLY, THE RAILWAY CONNECTION WILL DEPEND ON THE COMPLETION OF THE KYRGYZ PART OF THE PROJECT. TO DO THIS, IT IS NECESSARY TO BUILD 450 KM OF TRACK (OF WHICH 280 KM IS THE KYRGYZ PART): FROM CHINESE KASHGAR TO UZBEK ANDIJAN.



Source: The map was prepared by “Uzbekiston Temir Yollari” as part of the presentation of the CKURW to the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan².

It should also be noted that for the entire 25-year period of project development, the participating countries have come so close to its implementation for the first time. So, within the framework of the Samarkand summit on September 14, 2022, a trilateral agreement was signed. With the document, the parties established the procedure for financing and distributing costs for the feasibility study.

2. The first stages of the implementation of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway project were announced. “Gazeta.uz”, (2022).
Access mode: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/12/16/uzb-kg-china/>



Since the autumn of 2022, Chinese specialists have been working on the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic to develop a feasibility study, and since January 2023, a project office has been operating in the Kyrgyz Republic. In April 2023, the PRC Design Institute prepared preliminary results, but the final project will be ready in July-August this year.

Based on this, within the framework of this work, we intend to analyze the international situation that led to the activation of the project, the positions of the countries participating in the CKURW, the international experience of the PRC in implementing major railway projects in some countries, and on this basis draw conclusions that allow us to predict potential problems and obstacles to its practical implementation.



CHANGES IN GEOPOLITICAL STRUCTURE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE REGION

As one of the leading representatives of the geopolitical school, H. Mackinder once said that the “Heartland” of Eurasia, which includes most of Russia and Central Asia, plays a decisive role in the balance of power on our planet³. However, the insufficient development of land transport communications that would connect Europe with the regions of Asia hinders the economic development of all countries of the continent. The ongoing, deep political and economic processes in Central Asia dictate the need to reorient logistics flows and formulate and develop new, efficient transport corridors.

The issue of creating new routes to/through Central Asia became especially acute in connection with the unleashing of Russia’s war in Ukraine and the blocking of northern routes. For China, the construction of continental routes is being updated due to their trade war with the United States, which is also moving to the maritime space. China believes that under the current conditions, the new route could significantly change the structure of the Eurasian transport network. **At the same time, the main prerequisites for the formation of new routes are the following:**



The unavailability of existing routes with the growing needs of the world economy, while the new route, which is being formed in the light of the Belt and Road initiative, will be the solution to many problems. “The new railway line with a total length of 5470 km will be much shorter than other routes: China-Mongolia-Russia-Belarus-EU (8650 km); China-Kazakhstan-Caspian Sea-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey-EU (9120 km); China-Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Turkey-EU (10170 km); China-EU sea route (more than 10 thousand km)”⁴.



If earlier China, considering the huge transport and logistics potential of Kazakhstan, relied on Astana, then the “January events” in Kazakhstan and the subsequent blocking of the northern routes due to the crisis in relations between the West and Russia prompted Beijing to reconsider its priorities in the field of transport, due to which the planned construction of a third railway between China and Kazakhstan is temporarily frozen. Moreover, delivery goods through routes over the territory of Kazakhstan to Europe takes a long time – from 15 to 17 days.

3. Megoran N., Sharapova S. Mackinder’s “Heartland” Helps or Hinders Us in Understanding Central Asia. “Central Asia and the Caucasus”. No. 4(40), 2005. P. 8.

4. Abdulkirimov, Bakhtiyar. The PRC-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway line will make an important contribution to the prosperity of the region. Anadolu Agency, (2023). Access mode: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/world/railway-China-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-will-make-an-important-contribution-to-prosperity-of-the-region/2777775>



The main routes for the supply and delivery of goods from China pass through the maritime territory of a geopolitical competitor (India), which has high risks. And the transport routes that China proposes to implement pass through developing countries, with which it is easier for China to negotiate due to their certain economic dependence.



There are 3 main corridors on the territory of Eurasia. Two of them North and South directions face serious problems.



- 1. The Northern corridor** through the territories of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, which are already closed due to the war in Ukraine, most likely for a long period.
- 2. The Southern Corridor** due to security problems in Afghanistan, difficulties of modernization of obsolete railways in Iran, which require both resources and time, cannot yet be realized.
- 3. The Central Asian corridor** is now considered the most optimal, safe route, which greatly attracts the attention of the Chinese side and literally pushes the Chinese authorities to take decisive steps in its implementation. China sees a great advantage and prospects in this project. In this regard, it is more interested in the speedy implementation of this project than other states.




Rapidly growing trade with countries located along the OBOR road (CA, Middle East, Europe). Currently, the total volume of goods annually imported by China as part of trade with the outside world is more than 5.94 trillion USD,⁵ and the total volume of trade between China and Europe exceeds 856 billion USD⁶. In 2022, the volume of China's trade with the states of the Middle East exceeded 310 billion USD, and Beijing imports another 50% of its oil from this region. The volume of China's trade with Central Asia at the end of 2022 amounted to 70 billion USD. In total, this amounts to about 1.2 trillion USD of trade turnover.

Thus, China's desire is well justified in terms of economic benefits. It also meets the geopolitical interests of Beijing, which intends to firmly gain a firm foothold in developing countries, where it will have relatively moderate competition with other global actors.

5. China's foreign trade volume tops 42 trillion yuan in 2022. (2023). «CGTN». Available at: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-01-13/China-s-foreign-trade-volume-tops-42-trillion-yuan-in-2022-1gynu28Ekfe/index.html>

6. Yihan Ma (2023). Trade balance of the European Union with China from 2012 to 2022. «Statista.com». Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/257155/eu-trade-with-china/#statisticContainer>



At the same time, the change of leaders in Central Asia and their pragmatism in resolving existing discrepancies on the basis of a reasonable compromise creates a huge opportunity for the practical implementation of the project. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan managed to agree on almost all the problematic points of border issues in a mutually acceptable consensus. Given the lack of access to sea routes, the expansion of the railway network throughout the territory of Central Asia would be a strategic way out for both countries from the impasse associated with limited external transport links. The new railway will strengthen the strategic position of the two countries in the region and, by connecting it with neighboring countries such as Iran, Pakistan, India, and China, will become an important prerequisite for economic progress.

At the end of December 2017, Iran already announced the beginning of the construction of the Mashhad-Zahedan railway. It will traverse 40 cities in Iran, providing connectivity for Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, allowing them to access the railway and proceed to the port of Chabahar, as well as connect to a unified network of railways leading to Europe. In addition, Tashkent is actively negotiating the construction of the Trans-Afghan Corridor both with the current Afghan authorities and with international financial donors.

*IF THE RAILWAY FROM THE CA STATES JOINS
THE IRANIAN AND PAKISTANI RAIL SYSTEM,
THEN IT WILL CREATE A UNIQUE «TRADE NETWORK»
BETWEEN ALL COUNTRIES ALONG THESE ROADS.*

The delivery time of goods will be accelerated, costs will be reduced, and mutual contacts between peoples will be activated. It will also have a stimulating effect in the development of the involved sectors of the economy, in particular, it will stimulate the development and export of natural resources of the countries of the region, and the activation of international tourism.



WHAT IS IN THE CHINA-KYRGYZSTAN-UZBEKISTAN TRIANGLE?

In the implementation of these efforts, the positions of the participating countries are extremely important.



POSITION OF CHINA

For more than 30 years, China has been one of the major investors and has a track record of implementing giant infrastructure projects in the region. For instance, the China-Central Asia gas pipeline, which was launched in 2009 and is still successfully operating.


The Chinese saying “don’t put all your eggs in one basket” means that there must be alternative options to mitigate potential risks. This sentiment is true even in the transport and logistics sector, which is now in a dependent position. In this regard, China is seeking to establish land routes for the supply of goods, which is associated with increased tensions with the United States, the blocking of northern transport routes due to the crisis in relations between Russia and the West, as well as the precedent of a traffic jam in the Suez Canal. Beijing is aware that Central Asia has every chance of becoming a crossroads of transport corridors, connecting East to West, North to South, providing an unprecedented opportunity for continental and secure connection of China with other parts of the world. In this regard, the countries of Central Asia are considered key links in the main transport hub at the intersection of the above-mentioned routes.

Niva Yau, an expert at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, believes that the CKURW is of crucial importance for China for the following interrelated reasons:

1. advancing its geopolitical interests;
2. securing favorable ties with Central Asian elites for their support of China in Xinjiang⁷;
3. the growing need for ways to access the markets for goods and energy resources in Western Asia, the Persian Gulf and Europe.

In turn, new routes from China to Europe will not only help reduce its dependence on maritime transport, but also significantly increase the export of Chinese goods to foreign markets. At the moment, trains depart from 35 Chinese cities on 57 routes that connect China with 34 cities in 12 European countries.

7. Niva Yau Tsz Yan (2023). China Is Finally Making Progress on the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway. Eurasia Program. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/china-is-finally-making-progress-on-the-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway/>



Number of trains sent between China and Europe



Moreover, if for 2011-2017, a total of 6235 trains were sent ⁸, then in 2021, they numbered almost 15,000. Despite this progress in rail freight, they still only account for over 3% of total trade between China and Europe. In general, the share of railway in bilateral trade between China and the EU in the period from 2011 to 2020 increased from 1% to about 4%.

As expected, Beijing intends in the future to form a “trade hub” of Chinese goods for the countries of Central Asia (74 million), South Asia (1.7 billion) and the Middle East (more than 200 million). In this way, the countries participating in the CKURW project will play the role of a transit point for Chinese goods for their further distribution and delivery to regions such as South Asia and the Middle East. Thus, China will solve the issue of an oversupply of its goods, which will accumulate in connection with the trade war with the United States and the anti-Chinese dumping policy of the West in relation to Chinese goods.

HOWEVER, THE DECISIVE FACTOR IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CKURW IS THE INTEREST OF CHINA IN THE SPEEDY IMPLEMENTATION OF THE OBOR PROJECT. CHINA WILL RECEIVE TANGIBLE BENEFITS FROM SPEEDING UP AND CHEAPER DELIVERY OF ITS GOODS TO WORLD MARKETS, AS WELL AS FROM EXPANDING ITS INFLUENCE AND PRESENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA.

According to the calculations and forecasts of the Chinese side, the implementation of the CKURW will open up a number of opportunities:

- It will establish the southern corridor of the Second Continental Transport Bridge, unlocking fresh market opportunities for the producers of the three countries and enhancing trade exchange among them. It will expand the geography of trade routes from China to Europe and will contribute to the possibility of transporting goods from China through the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Uzbekistan to the countries of the Middle East and Eastern Europe, as well as South Asia in future.

8. In 2018, 4,000 freight trains will be sent on the China-Europe route. (2017). Chinese edition of the People's Daily.



- It will become one of the shortest routes for transporting Chinese goods to the EU. According to forecasts, the reduction of the route from East Asia to the countries of the Middle East and Southern Europe will be about 900 km, and the time will be reduced by 7-8 days (sea delivery per month). At the same time, according to experts, by railway through Russia, Chinese goods reach Europe in 20-25 days, through Kazakhstan – in 15-17 days.
- It will provide an opportunity to process local raw materials and export them to China, using new corridors that reduce the transport component in the price of goods.
- It will bring together the transport hubs of Eurasia and create one of the key integral transport corridors along the OBOR and will make it possible to intensify mutual exchanges between peoples and business circles.

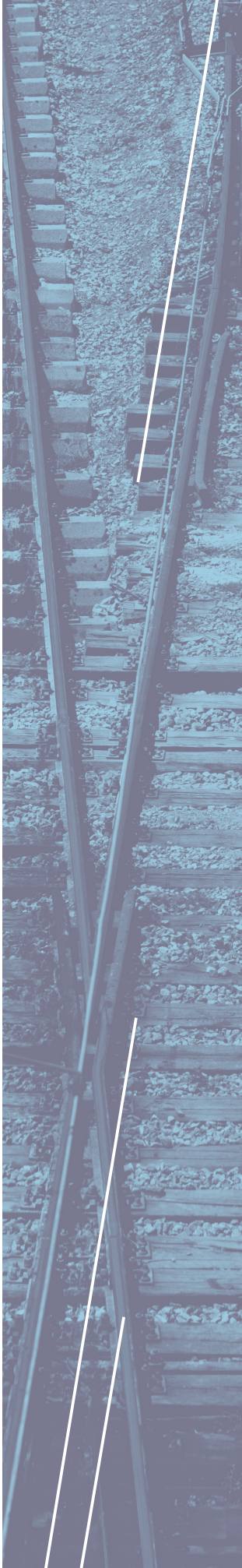


INTERESTS AND POSITION OF UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan, as a country bordering all the states of the region, is able to connect communications not only neighboring countries, but also East Asia with South Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus further with Europe. In this regard, the leadership of the Republic of Uzbekistan pays considerable attention to the development of transport and communication links both inside and outside the country.

The development of transportation and communication infrastructure is a key priority for both the former and current leaders of the country. However, their approaches differ significantly. The first president, while recognizing the significance of transport and logistics systems in regional development, prioritized political stability and security over close economic integration due to the geopolitical situation in the region and the world at that time. Consequently, unresolved issues were postponed for more opportune times. In contrast, the current leader, in shaping the strategy for the development of New Uzbekistan, places greater emphasis on addressing previously unresolved problems, including the issue of regional integration.

In his speeches from prominent platforms, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Sh. Mirziyoyev, has consistently emphasized the significance of this railway for the peoples of Central Asia and China. The leader of Uzbekistan held a series of talks with the leadership of China and Kyrgyzstan. As a result of these efforts, since 2017, the forming of trilateral meetings of country delegations under this project has been launched and the parties managed to resolve many problematic issues.



Today, Uzbekistan has the highest density transport communications system in Central Asia. For transport support of foreign trade operations, corridors are used in the direction of the ports of the Baltic States, European countries, the Ukrainian port of Ilyichevsk, the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi, and the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. However, the isolation of Central Asia within the continent hinders the integration of Uzbekistan into the system of international economic relations. Therefore, the creation of new transport corridors in all geographical directions remains a priority. In this process, the CKURW project has become one of the constant topics on the agenda of the Uzbekistani leadership in meetings with the leaders of China and Kyrgyzstan. In addition, to speed up this issue, the country's leadership involved all the related structures of the state, from relevant government agencies to analytical circles.

Moreover, several state programs and strategies have been adopted at the national level in order to form and develop the regulatory and infrastructure framework for the implementation of the project. In particular, on December 2, 2017, President Sh. Mirziyoyev approved the "Comprehensive program for improving the transport infrastructure of Uzbekistan and diversifying foreign trade routes for the transportation of goods for 2018-2022.", according to which, already at the beginning of 2018, Uzbekistan launched transit traffic along the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. Today, Uzbekistan exports 10% of its goods to other markets via this route. In addition, Tashkent held 5 major international events on the development of transport and communication systems. At the initiative of Uzbekistan and with the support of other SCO member countries, a format of bodies in charge of the transport system of the Organization was launched.

Tashkent is aware of the strategic importance of the CKURW project and believes that its implementation in practice:

- will provide an opportunity to enter new markets and, most importantly, turn the region into an important transport and logistics hub on an international scale⁹;
- will provide an opportunity not only to make a profit as a transit country, but also provide a shorter route, facilitating mutual trade operations with both the PRC and the countries of the APR, and with the countries of South Asia, the Middle East and further Europe.
- will gain access to the ports of the countries of the Caucasus, the Middle East, and North Africa. An increase in trade through this railway will lead to an increase in the GDP of states, which will facilitate and diversify the export of their products to world markets.

9. Abdulkerimov, Bakhtiyar. (2023). The PRC-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway line will make an important contribution to the prosperity of the region. Anadolu Agency. Access mode: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/мир/ж-д-магистраль-кнр-кыргызстан-узбекистан-внесёт-важный-вклад-в-процветание-региона/277775>



POSITION OF KYRGYZSTAN

The lack of a transport system both inside and outside the country remains one of the significant shortcomings of the Kyrgyz economy.

THE CURRENT AUTHORITIES ARE AWARE THAT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A TRANSPORT INTERCHANGE OPENS UP A NUMBER OF NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR BISHKEK IN ACQUIRING REGULAR SOURCES OF INCOME, IN CONNECTION WITH WHICH THEY GIVE PRIORITY TO INCREASING THE COUNTRY'S TRANSIT ROLE, INCL. BY LAUNCHING CKURW.


In this regard, unlike the previous presidents, who saw more of a "Chinese threat" in the CKURW project, the current president S. Zhaparov is seriously aware of the importance and urgency of the railway for opening completely new trade and economic opportunities and leveling the transport impasse. For this reason, the CKURW is included in such strategic documents as The National Development Program of the Kyrgyz Republic until 2026, which states that "first of all, it is necessary to resolve the issue of launching the construction of the strategic project "China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway" in the coming five-year period."¹⁰ In addition, in the National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2040, plans are set that "in the period up to 2023, agreements will be reached and construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway section will begin"¹¹.

AS ONE CAN SEE, IF THERE ARE ALTERNATIVE FLAGSHIP INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS IN UZBEKISTAN, THEN FOR KYRGYZSTAN THE CKURW IS PRACTICALLY A PRIORITY AND EXTREMELY NECESSARY LOGISTICS PROJECT.

Considering the fact that during the period of independence in Kyrgyzstan there was no construction of railways, the construction of the CKURW will become a stimulating factor not only for providing jobs,

10. National Development Program of the Kyrgyz Republic until 2026, p. 43 // <http://www.stat.kg/media/files/3d033353-7e05-42ec-a282-8722459f5c31.pdf>

11. National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2040 // <http://www.stat.kg/ru/nsur/> p.112



but also will initiate the formation of a large construction infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan. In addition, it will “attract” other involved sectors of the economy in the country, which will allow to receive additional income and expand the sector of the economy.

In addition, Kyrgyzstan has large deposits of metals and minerals. However, the lack of the necessary infrastructure, as well as the railway linking the northern and southern regions of the republic, hinders the development of these resources and the development of extractive industries. In this regard, the government of Kyrgyzstan has begun construction of the Balykchy – Kochkor – Kara-Keche railway, which is planned to be connected to the CKURW¹².

At the same time, the Kyrgyz public has long been suspicious of the CKURW, considering it a useless piece of infrastructure that allows China to encroach on its sovereignty and use it as an instrument of Chinese expansion. For example, there were fears that the construction of the railway itself would attract more Chinese migrants¹³. Moreover, given the potential of the economies, two of the three countries – Uzbekistan and China – will benefit significantly in the short term. Kyrgyzstan, in the absence of financial resources, and with a small export potential, may experience fewer benefits. For comparison: the foreign trade turnover between Uzbekistan and China in the absence of a common border reached 8.9 billion USD in 2022¹⁴, while the same indicator for China and Kyrgyzstan bordering each other for the same year, according to the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, is about 4.07 billion USD¹⁵. Furthermore, if Uzbekistan demonstrates a notable increase in its exports to China, whereas Kyrgyzstan has yet to achieve substantial progress in this regard. It is worth noting that the issue of shadow trade and smuggling at the Kyrgyz Chinese border points is still not resolved.

**UNDOUBTEDLY, THE MAIN
CHALLENGE IN IMPLEMENTING
THE CHINA-KYRGYZSTAN-UZBEKISTAN RAILWAY
(CKURW) LIES IN ITS FINANCING.**

12. Podolskaya, Daria (2022). The President got acquainted with the construction of the Balykchy-Kara-Keche railway. “24. kg “. Access mode: https://24.kg/vlast/249080_prezident_oznakomilsya_sostroitelstvom_jeleznoy_dorogi_balykchi_kara-keche/

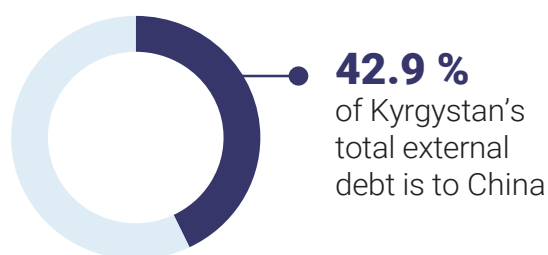
13. Niva Yau Tsz Yan (2023). China Is Finally Making Progress on the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway. Eurasia Program. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/china-is-finally-making-progress-on-the-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway/>

14. Business ties between Uzbekistan and China are being strengthened. (2023). “Kun . uz “. Access mode: <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2023/04/26/delovyye-svyazi-mejdu-uzbekistanom-i-kitayem-ukreplyayutsya>

15. Trade turnover between China and Kyrgyzstan exceeded \$4 billion (2023). “CGTN “. Access mode: <https://russian.cgtn.com/news/2023-03-13/1635165959770845186/index.html>



Initially projected at a cost of 2 billion USD, the construction expenses have surged to 5 billion USD¹⁶ by 2023. For instance, Chinese Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Jiang Yan, clarified that China would not provide financial backing for this project. Furthermore, he emphasized the necessity of joint efforts in achieving this common objective.¹⁷ Various financing models have been considered, including transferring the road to China under a concession arrangement, establishing a joint venture, implementing a “resources in exchange for investments” scheme, or obtaining a loan from the Chinese side. Bishkek and Beijing are also exploring options such as pursuing a public-private partnership framework. It is anticipated that the party attracting investments will gain operating rights over the road and subsequently transfer it to Kyrgyzstan after recovering their expenses. However, no official announcements regarding the final decisions have been made by the involved parties.



Among various factors, it is noteworthy to highlight that Bishkek carries a substantial burden of external debt, primarily owed to China. As of July 2022, Kyrgyzstan is approaching a critical threshold, with a debt of 1.7 billion USD to the Exim bank of China, accounting for 42.9% of its total external debt compared to other creditors. The public debt management strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2022-2024 sets a limit of 45% for the maximum debt owed to a single creditor, and the overall public debt should not exceed 70% of the GDP. The peak of debt payments to China is expected between 2025 and 2027, followed by a gradual decline, and by 2035, Kyrgyzstan is obligated to fully repay its debt to China.

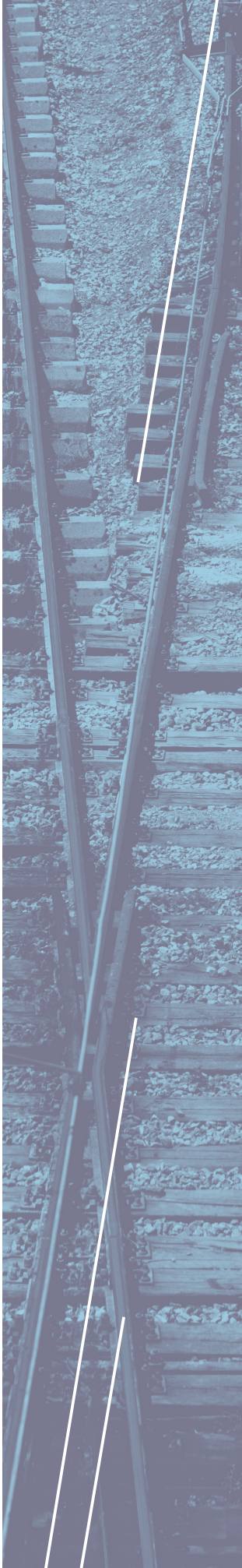
Kyrgyzstan is not yet ready to take loans under state guarantees or transfer mineral deposits as its contribution to the project. China, being the main initiator and potential investor of the project, is also in no hurry to allocate loans for its implementation.

As highlighted by independent researcher G. Roberts¹⁸ from London, it is plausible that the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway (CKURW) project could further escalate Kyrgyzstan's already substantial debt to

16. A feasibility study for a railway project on the route Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China has been completed. (2023). "Kursiv.media". Access mode: <https://uz.kursiv.media/2023-05-07/zaversheno-teo-proekta-zh-d-uzbekistan-kyrgyzstan-kitaj/>

17. Construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway may begin in autumn. (2022). "Gazeta.uz", Access mode: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/05/21/railway/>

18. Roberts, Harry. (2019). «The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway Project: How Much Does Kyrgyzstan Stand to Benefit?» CABAR Asia, Available at: <https://cabar.asia/en/the-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway-project-how-much-does-kyrgyzstan-stand-to-benefit>



China and potentially result in a 'debt trap.' This, in turn, poses a significant risk, including the potential reinforcement of sinophobic sentiments among the population. In essence, the implementation of the project may require the Kyrgyz authorities to cede management control of the railway or the country's mineral resources to the Chinese side.

As highlighted by Niva Yau, it is notable that China has made a significant error by not providing direct investment but instead pursuing ownership of multiple Kyrgyz mining enterprises as a trade-off for their involvement in the construction of the Kyrgyz site.¹⁹ One such appealing enterprise is the Zhetim-Too iron ore deposit, which holds an estimated value of no less than 50 billion USD. The site, situated in close proximity to the Sino-Kyrgyz border, is located adjacent to a sizable glacier and serves as a crucial water source for Kyrgyzstan's agricultural sector. Consequently, it is susceptible to environmental concerns and the potential risks of pollution. However, the administration of President S. Japarov recently announced plans for the development of this project to be funded by public resources²⁰.

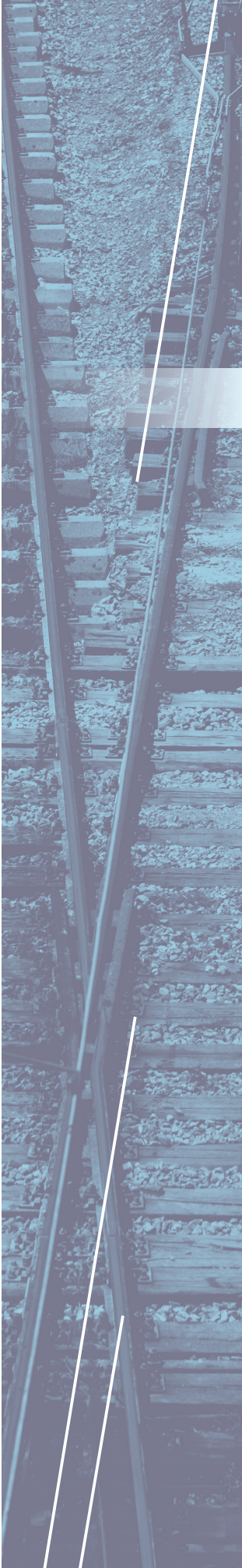
China's reluctance to make concessions and its cautious approach towards investing in the project can potentially be attributed to its aim of securing optimal conditions and minimizing risks. China insists on Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan providing guarantees for loan repayment while imposing stringent technical and environmental standards on the project. Additionally, Beijing stipulates the involvement of Chinese companies in the construction and operation of the project²¹.

Hence, each participant in the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway (CKURW) project holds their own interests and principled stances, underscoring the need to find common ground in order to address the challenges associated with the project's practical implementation. In this regard, it is pertinent to examine the international experiences of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in executing railway infrastructures.

19. Niva Yau Tsz Yan. (2023). China Is Finally Making Progress on the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway. Eurasia Program. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/china-is-finally-making-progress-on-the-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway/>

20. Makanbay kyzy G. (2023). The authorities found funds to develop the Zhetim-Too deposit – Daiyrbek Orunbekov. "24. kg ". Access mode: https://24.kg/vlast/265249_vlasti_nashli_sredstva_narazrabotku_mestorojdeniya_jetim-too_dayyirbek_orunbekov/

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OTHER «NON-SUCCESS STORIES» OF CHINA AND SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE CKURW

The PRC has fairly extensive experience in implementing projects for the construction of railway infrastructure. Here are a few relevant cases for comparison, which turned out to be problematic and difficult to implement.



MALAYSIAN CASE

China has invested in rail projects in Malaysia, including the Bandar Malaysia project and the East Coast Rail Link project. The East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project is part of China's OBOR initiative, which aims to connect the east coast of Malaysia with the western part of the country²². The project is expected to be completed by December 2026 and will reduce travel time from Kota Bharu in Kelantan to Port Klang from 12 hours by road to 4 hours by rail²³.

The 655 km project entailed an investment of about 12 billion USD, of which 85% is financed by the Export-Import Bank of China in the form of a soft loan at 3.25% per annum²⁴. The project was launched in 2017 by the government of Prime Minister N. Razak with China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) as the main contractor. However, in 2018 the project was put on hold by the new prime minister M. Mohamad, who cited suspicions about the cost of the project. M. Mohamad argued that the original ECRL project was overvalued in favor of China and would saddle Malaysia with more debt and interest payments. He also questioned the economic viability and environmental impact of the project, as the road would cut through forested areas and affect wildlife.

After further negotiations, the project was revised and restarted in 2019. In the new agreement, the cost of construction was reduced from 15.8 billion USD to 10 billion USD based on a comprehensive cost analysis²⁵.

22. «East Coast Rail Link (ECRL)». (2021). BRI Monitor. Available at: <https://www.brimonitor.org/case-studies/east-coast-railway-link-ecrl/>

23. Lim, Anthony. (2023). ECRL progress now at 40.81% – Terengganu, Kelantan alignments on track to meet Dec 2026 completion date. «Paultan.org», 5 April 2023. Available at: <https://paultan.org/2023/04/05/ecrl-progress-now-at-40-81-terengganu-kelantan-alignments-on-track-to-meet-dec-2026-completion-date/>

24. Finance Ministry says ECRL can cover its operating cost, pay back loan. News Straits Times, 13 November 2017. Available at: <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/11/302579/finance-ministry-says-ecrl-can-cover-its-operating-cost-pay-back-loan>

25. Sipalan, Joseph. (2019). China, Malaysia restart massive 'Belt and Road' project after hiccups. «Reuters». Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-malaysia-idUSKCN1UK0DG>



China has also agreed to increase the share of local specialists from 30% to 40%, which means more opportunities for local contractors and suppliers. In addition, China has agreed to increase the loan term from 20 to 30 years with a grace period of 7 years, which will ease Malaysia's debt burden. In addition, China agreed to share the operational risks of the project with Malaysia by establishing a 50:50 joint venture between MRL and CCCO to operate and maintain the ECRL²⁶. The alignment has also been changed to avoid sensitive areas and include more states in the rail network.

Why did Beijing agree to such concessions?

One possible explanation is its desire to maintain favorable relations with Malaysia, a significant trading partner in Southeast Asia and a key participant in the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative. Additionally, the People's Republic of China (PRC) anticipated that revising the terms of the project would help alleviate criticism from the local population and opposition, who had accused the previous government of corruption. Through investing in the ECRL project, China would strengthen its economic presence in Malaysia and expand its access to the Strait of Malacca, benefitting from incentives provided by the Malaysian government to facilitate the transportation of Chinese goods through one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. Consequently, the railway negotiations serve as an exemplar of achieving a compromise between China's interests and those of other countries involved in its global infrastructure projects.

At the same time, it should be considered that in comparison to Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia has a more developed economy, a higher standard of living and more developed industrial base.



CENTRAL ASIAN CASES

In Central Asia, there have been at least two grand projects involving Chinese loans which were accompanied by corruption scandals and the arresting of politicians. In Kazakhstan, this is a project called Astana – LRT, and in Kyrgyzstan, this is the modernization of a thermal power plant (TTP) in Bishkek.

The construction of an elevated metro connecting the Republic of Kazakhstan's airport to Astana was envisioned to establish efficient and convenient transportation between the capital's air gates and its center. Initially estimated at a cost of 1.9 billion USD in 2015, the project's budget was subsequently revised downward to 1.5 billion USD by 2019.

26. Tay, Chester. (2019). China will help shoulder ECRL's operational risk. «The Edge Financial Daily». Available at: <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/china-will-help-shoulder-ecrls-operational-risk>



This adjustment was prompted by a reassessment of the project’s profitability and investigations conducted by the anti-corruption service of the Republic of Kazakhstan. These investigations uncovered embezzlement schemes, leading to legal proceedings and the inclusion of several public officials on the international wanted list. By 2021, construction of the elevated metro had been halted, transforming this project into a symbol of corruption in Kazakhstan²⁷.

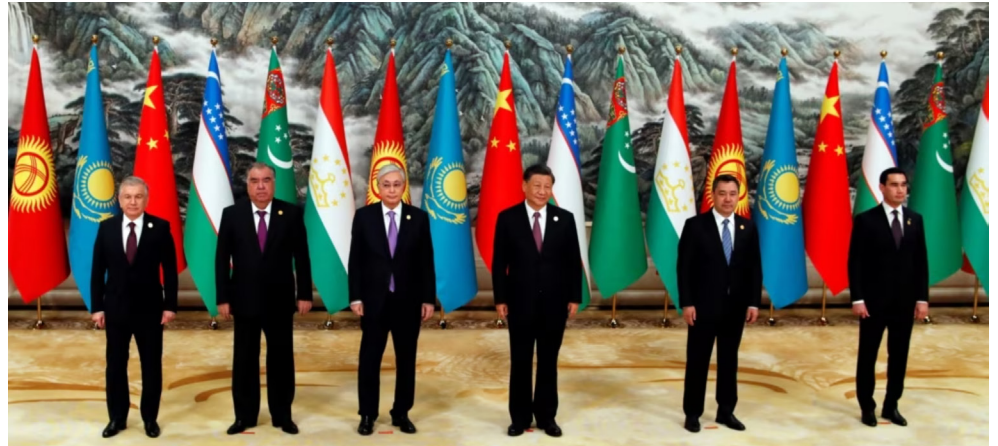
Another instance in Kyrgyzstan pertains to the modernization of a thermal power plant, which was concluded in 2017 with a Chinese loan amounting to 386 million USD. Merely a year following the modernization, not only did an incident occur resulting in the capital being devoid of heat during the frigid January temperatures, but it was accompanied by revelations of corruption and subsequent legal actions involving high-ranking officials. Furthermore, the public did not have access to the document assessing the environmental impact (EISA) of the thermal power plant modernization. It is challenging to categorize this undertaking as a true ‘modernization,’ given that a portion of the power plant still operates with outdated equipment, and the continued use of coal cannot be considered a contemporary measure for mitigating emissions into the atmosphere²⁸.

Based on the above analysis, we propose a SWOT analysis of the CKURW.

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exit of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan from transport isolation • Entering new markets and stimulating trade • Shorter path than already available • Multiplier effect for the economies of the three countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of mutually acceptable funding mechanisms • The construction period will be several years • Difficulties of construction in mountainous terrain • The presence of an unloading station, which will take additional time • Different trading modes • The need to find a compromise with other players in the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will turn the region into an important transport and logistics hub of international scale • Increase in the GDP of states due to the intensification of trade, the creation of jobs, as well as the receipt of transit profits • Reduce transport costs in the price of goods • intensification of exchanges between peoples and business circles • Tourism activation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risks of the corruption component of the project • Environmental risks • The profitability of the project can be long-term • Risks of regulation of migration flows by China • Construction disruption risks • Risks of the debt trap • Geopolitical confusion

FUTURE RISKS OF THE CKURW PROJECT AND WAYS TO MINIMIZE THEM

The Design Institute of China has finished the feasibility study of the railway. As a result of the China-Central Asia summit, which was held in Xi'an in May, a roadmap was signed on further steps in the implementation of the project.




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Previously, Central Asian countries expressed concerns regarding the influx of Chinese goods and its potential negative impact on local businesses. However, over the past 30 years, trade turnover between China and Central Asian countries has increased by a staggering 200 times. By the end of 2022, the trade turnover reached a record high of 70.2 billion USD, with the number of Chinese companies approaching 8,000. Chinese goods and companies have already established a significant presence and saturation in the regional market. Currently, the Central Asian market is not the highest priority for the ambitious People's Republic of China (PRC), as they are increasingly focused on the billion-dollar markets of South Asia, the Middle East, and further into Europe.

However, numerous practical issues remain unresolved, particularly those that directly affect the Kyrgyz public. Matters such as the anticipated influx and accommodation of Chinese workers, the training of local railway engineers, investments in industrial projects along the railway, and the facilitation of Kyrgyz product exports to China, among others, are crucial for ensuring the operational sustainability of the project. Furthermore, there are several pressing questions that necessitate comprehensive answers.

27. How Astana LRT was built and not completed. (2021). " mail.kz ". Access mode: <https://mail.kz/ru/news/kz-news/kak-stroili-i-ne-dostroili-astana-lrt>

28. Muratalieva, Nargiza. (2021). Will Chinese investments in Kyrgyzstan become "green"? « CABAR Asia ". Access mode: <https://cabar.asia/ru/stanut-li-kitajskie-investitsii-v-kyrgyzstane-zelenymi>



Who will provide the necessary financing for project implementation? If it is China, what will be their share of investment and under what conditions will they provide the funding? Are the interests of all parties involved in managing the railway adequately considered? The successful completion of this project hinges upon overcoming the emerging difficulties and effectively addressing the aforementioned challenges.


In addition to the numerous countries that have received substantial loans from China, there is a growing concern regarding the repayment of these loans and the potential consequences in the event of a debt default. In Kyrgyzstan, there are already indications of deepening apprehension over Chinese migration and business presence within the country. With a debt level surpassing the capacity of the state budget for repayment and pending additional funding from Chinese creditors, Kyrgyzstan's concerns about falling into a debt trap are well-founded. Given the political, economic, and social implications of such financial arrangements in a nation that has experienced significant divisions in the recent past, the government could face formidable challenges if negative outcomes materialize. It is imperative to address these concerns in order to fully realize the potential mutual benefits, not only for the three participating states in the project but also for fostering enhanced regional integration.

ONE OF THE PROMINENT CONCERNS REGARDING THIS RAILWAY TRACK IS ITS ECONOMIC VIABILITY, ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING CONSTRUCTION IN MOUNTAINOUS REGIONS. THE CURRENT ESTIMATED COST OF THE PROJECT IS TWICE THE INITIAL ESTIMATE, AMOUNTING TO 5 BILLION USD.

Given the present circumstances, achieving short-term payback and profitability is not feasible. The Gibbs firm has further indicated that the investment and operational expenses could be recouped approximately 15 years after the completion of construction. However, it's important to note that this calculation was made when there were no alternative rail links available, particularly through Kazakhstan²⁹.

The current state of affairs, characterized by numerous unresolved issues and unachieved consensus, underscores the urgent need to seek an investor willing to finance this project. Kyrgyzstan, burdened with significant external debt, and Uzbekistan, which holds a keen interest in the development of transportation infrastructure and strengthening regional ties, are lacking the necessary financial resources.

29. Roberts, Harry. (2019). «The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway Project: How Much Does Kyrgyzstan Stand to Benefit?» CABAR Asia, Available at: <https://cabar.asia/en/the-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway-project-how-much-does-kyrgyzstan-stand-to-benefit>



While Uzbekistan can contribute by providing specialists for the construction of the CKURW, securing adequate funding remains a challenge as international organizations have been reluctant to allocate the required resources.

In such a situation, possible ways to solve the financial problem can be:

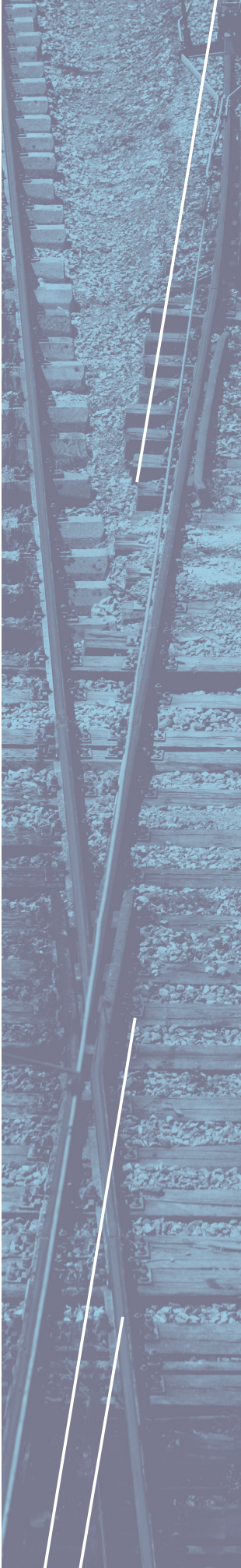
1. creation of an international consortium of various stakeholders, including international financial organizations.
2. the use of a hybrid financing model that combines state guarantees, private investment, and grants.
3. attraction of alternative sources of financing, such as green bonds or digital currencies. It is also essential to reach a consensus among the project participants on all key issues related to its implementation, as well as to consider the interests and needs of the population and the environment along the railway route.

IN GENERAL, THE PREDICTED FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC STABILITY ALONG THE KRU RAILWAY WILL CONTRIBUTE TO THE CREATION OF FAVORABLE CONDITIONS FOR THE ACQUISITION OF ECONOMIC WELL-BEING BY THE POPULATION BY INTENSIFYING PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE BETWEEN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY.

Undoubtedly, the development of railways and in Central Asia will be beneficial not only for regional, but also for non-regional participants. Moreover, the planned “railroad Silk Roads” across the region in the future can contribute to trade and economic growth, improve the well-being of the peoples of the region, enhance mutual contacts, both business circles and ordinary citizens, and integrate Eurasia into one transport and logistics system.

In the commercial realm, projects of this nature typically do not yield immediate and direct returns. Instead, their objectives revolve around generating indirect impacts, such as stimulating business activities and fostering the development of cities and regions, which, in turn, can lead to higher household incomes and increased tax revenues. Moreover, the significance of the road extends to maintaining financial stability by facilitating a continuous flow of funds through transit.

The financing of the project should be diversified through various channels to reduce the dependence of the participating states on a single partner, preempt potential misunderstandings between society and the government, and maintain favorable relations with creditors. Such a strategy can ultimately enhance the overall profitability of the project.



However, it is important to acknowledge the concerns raised by local experts and authorities regarding the potential access of the Chinese side to abundant and valuable deposits in the context of CKURW construction. This raises concerns about the potential risks associated with increased dependence of the regional countries on the People's Republic of China.

Despite the extensive efforts made by the three countries at a high level, the prospects for implementing the CKURW remain uncertain, and the advantages and disadvantages of its implementation are equally balanced. The success or failure of the project largely hinges on a rational, pragmatic, and objective approach that considers the interests of all participating parties, ensuring that none of them face detrimental positions or negative consequences. To achieve the desired outcomes that encompass the interests of all parties, the Central Asian states themselves must engage in concerted and coordinated efforts to effectively implement the project, thereby overcoming their economic and geographical isolation.



CONCLUSION

The examination and analysis of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) experience in executing railway construction projects provides valuable insight that can assist in identifying appropriate resolutions to contentious matters within the scope of Chinese-Central Asian railway initiatives.


Current geopolitical turbulence necessitates a proactive approach from Central Asian nations in seeking collaborative solutions that promote regional integration as a whole, with a specific focus on the successful implementation of the CKURW initiative.

Certainly, there is a possibility of reaching understanding, compromises, and mutually acceptable decisions with the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, achieving such outcomes relies on the careful consideration of crucial factors during the negotiation process and when formulating agreements with the PRC. These factors include conducting a comprehensive analysis, particularly financial forecasts encompassing the project's cost and timeline, while also accounting for potential force majeure events. Prior agreements on all conditions, rights, and obligations of each party throughout the construction and subsequent phases of the CKURW project are equally significant. Skillful legal consolidation of these aspects can ensure the successful completion of the project, mitigating unnecessary costs and deficiencies.



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