



THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND KAZAKHSTAN- CHINA RELATIONS: A DECADE OF BILATERAL TRANSFORMATION

Roza Kabulova Turdibayevna

rozakab82@gmail.com PhD, мустақил изланувчи

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in Astana in 2013, has changed the structure of Kazakhstan-China bilateral relations over the past decade. Drawing on trade statistics, infrastructure data, and policy documents, the analysis covers economic cooperation, transport and logistics development, geopolitical positioning, and people-to-people contacts. Bilateral trade grew from \$368 million in 1992 to \$41 billion in 2023; joint infrastructure projects exceeded \$21 billion in value; and more than 15,000 km of transport corridors were upgraded. The article argues that Kazakhstan has managed to align BRI participation with its own development priorities while preserving a multi-vector foreign policy, and that the partnership has produced measurable gains for both sides.

Introduction

Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt at Nazarbayev University in Astana in September 2013. The choice of location was deliberate: Kazakhstan sits at the geographic center of the Eurasian landmass, and its territory provides the shortest overland route between China and Europe. Over the following decade, the broader Belt and Road Initiative grew into a framework encompassing more than 150 countries and 30 international organizations, with over 230 signed cooperation agreements.

For Kazakhstan, the BRI became more than an external project to accommodate. Bilateral relations moved beyond conventional trade into transport logistics, energy, industrial cooperation, finance, and educational exchange. This article traces that shift and evaluates what Kazakhstan's experience reveals about how mid-sized states interact with large-scale international infrastructure programs.

1. Relevance of the study

Three factors make this topic worth examining in detail. First, the BRI is the largest coordinated infrastructure program in modern history. Cumulative two-way investment between China and partner countries reached \$380 billion between 2013 and 2022. A World Bank study found that trade among BRI participants increased by 4.1 percent, foreign direct

investment rose by 5 percent, and GDP in low-income participating countries grew by 3.4 percent. These figures alone warrant close academic attention.

Second, Kazakhstan occupies an unusual position within the initiative. It is both the country where the BRI was first announced and one of its principal beneficiaries. Studying how a mid-sized state with limited geopolitical weight has leveraged a major-power initiative without ceding sovereignty offers methodological value for scholars of international relations and development economics.

Third, the raw trade numbers are striking. Kazakhstan-China trade grew from \$368 million in 1992 to \$41 billion in 2023. The two governments had set a \$40 billion target for 2030; it was reached seven years early. This trajectory suggests that the partnership model is producing concrete economic results, which has implications for other states in the region considering similar arrangements.

2. Historical background and the evolution of strategic partnership

Kazakhstan and China established diplomatic relations in January 1992, shortly after Kazakhstan gained independence. Over the next three decades, the relationship was upgraded in stages: from good-neighborly ties to a strategic partnership, and eventually to what Chinese diplomatic terminology calls an "eternal comprehensive strategic partnership," the highest category in Beijing's hierarchy of interstate relations.

In 2015, Kazakhstan adopted the "Nurly Zhol" ("Bright Path") national development program, which focused on transport and logistics infrastructure. The program was deliberately aligned with BRI objectives, and it became an example of how a national strategy can be synchronized with an international infrastructure initiative without subordinating domestic priorities to external ones.

3. Trade and economic cooperation

China is Kazakhstan's largest trading partner. Bilateral trade reached \$41.02 billion in 2023, exceeding the \$40 billion target set for 2030 by seven years. The two countries have jointly identified 52 industrial cooperation projects valued at over \$21.2 billion; roughly half of these have been completed or are under active implementation.

Kazakhstan has participated in the China International Import Expo for six consecutive years, signing commercial agreements worth approximately \$300 million. A dedicated Kazakh "national pavilion" on a major Chinese e-commerce platform has opened a new channel for Kazakh agricultural and consumer goods to reach Chinese buyers directly.

4. Transport and logistics infrastructure

BRI-related investment has funded the modernization of over 2,500 km of railways and 12,500 km of highways in Kazakhstan. At least 11 international transport corridors pass through the country. In 2023, more than 13,000 China-Europe Railway Express trains transited Kazakh territory.

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, commonly known as the Middle Corridor, has become a strategically important alternative connecting China to Europe while bypassing Russian territory. The Khorgos-Eastern Gates free economic zone has cut customs clearance time to roughly one hour, and freight trains now cover the distance from Lianyungang to Almaty in under six days.

5. Geopolitical and humanitarian dimensions

The BRI has given Kazakhstan additional options for diversifying its transit routes and reducing its historical dependence on Russian transport infrastructure. Kazakhstan has shown that it can participate in the initiative on terms consistent with its own national development priorities, maintaining a multi-vector foreign policy rather than tilting toward a single major partner.

On the humanitarian side, the two countries have introduced visa-free travel arrangements, opened cultural centers and branches of Chinese universities in Kazakhstan, and designated 2024 as the Year of Kazakh Tourism in China. The Green Silk Road program supports Kazakhstan's goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2060.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, the Belt and Road Initiative has reshaped Kazakhstan-China bilateral relations in measurable ways. Trade volumes have grown more than a hundredfold since 1992. Transport infrastructure has been substantially upgraded. Cooperation has expanded into energy, industry, finance, and education. Kazakhstan's experience suggests that a mid-sized state can engage with a large-scale international initiative and extract tangible benefits without sacrificing policy independence. As the BRI enters its second decade, Kazakhstan is likely to remain one of China's most important partners in Central Asia.

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