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## REVIEW PAPER

# THE IMPACT OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE ON KAZAKHSTAN

Christopher Schagerl<sup>1</sup> , Lana Soldo<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> *University of Applied Sciences Burgenland, Eisenstadt, Austria*

<sup>2</sup> *University of Applied Sciences Burgenland, Eisenstadt, Austria*

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher Schagerl, University of Applied Sciences Burgenland, Eisenstadt, Austria. E-mail: [christopher@schagerl.org](mailto:christopher@schagerl.org) and Lana Soldo, University of Applied Sciences Burgenland, Eisenstadt, Austria. E-mail: [2129001103@fh-burgenland.at](mailto:2129001103@fh-burgenland.at)

## ABSTRACT

In 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was announced in Astana. It was expected to connect as the New Silk Road the producing East and consuming West. In line with this, Kazakhstan introduced a major infrastructure program called "NurlyZhol" to improve the logistic corridor. Now, after almost 10 years after its announcement it is worth seeing whether the country benefited from the programs and whether the expectations set up 10 years ago came true. Besides the literature, the experience of 10 experts in the region was used. Strong involvement of China, politically and economically, supports the development of the logistics corridor. Not only the logistics sector showed growth, potential also for the future, but the agriculture and renewable energy sectors as well might light for the country's economy as to the international experts. Negative impacts, due to hindrances on the land corridor, which goes partially through Russia to Europe, hinders the projects to use their full potential.

**Keywords:** Kazakhstan, BRI, Silk Road, NurlyZhol, EAEU, China



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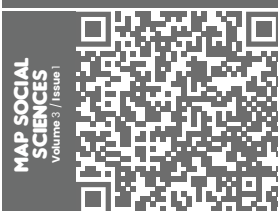
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### Introduction

Kazakhstan has an outstanding situation from various angles. On the one hand, the country has been a WTO member since 2015, but also a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) largely driven from the Russian Federation (Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020). Bordering with large economic players like China and Russia plays an essential role also as a logistics corridor between the producing countries in Asia and consuming economies in Western Europe.

The Belt and Road Initiative, China's flagship program, is an extremely vast one, which has gained the involvement of an important number of countries, has been extensively analyzed, and has a number of different dimensions. The term refers to the formally named "One Belt, One Road" initiative, whereas the "belt" links the countries and the "road" focuses on the new Silk Road promoting trade by removing trade barriers and decreasing cost of doing business (Brakman et al., 2019).

The project was first announced during President Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan in 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2013). On September 7, 2013, he made a speech entitled "Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future" at Nazarbayev University. He proposed to develop cooperation between China and the countries of Central Asia, in particular, by strengthening economic and infrastructural ties between them. The initiative is aimed, as officially stated by the country's President Xi Jinping, at strengthening economic development policy communication and regional cooperation; improving road connectivity (to open up the transportation channel from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea and to gradually form a transportation network that connects East Asia, West Asia, and South Asia); promoting trade and investment facilitation; enhancing monetary circulation and strengthening people-to-people exchanges. Xi Jinping referred to a golden opportunity for the countries of Central Asia (Brakman et al., 2019).

In 2014, Kazakhstan launched a major program "NurlyZhol" aimed at the modernization of national transport infrastructure. The goals of the program are largely in line with those of the BRI: it is mainly focused on attracting state and FDI into core infrastructure and priority sectors of Kazakhstan in order to achieve faster economic growth (Cinar, 2021). It was planned to spend approximately USD 9

billion on developing agribusiness, manufacturing, trade and logistics, tourism, information technology and finance sectors. The creation of "NurlyZhol" program has, among other goals, allowed a swift integration with China's BRI, many of the program's goals reflecting those of the BRI and their success depending significantly on Chinese investments. China praised the creation of NurlyZhol program in Kazakhstan and in 2015, the two countries signed a joint declaration on conjunction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and NurlyZhol (Alibekova, 2016).

Since almost 10 years have passed since the announcement of the BRI initiative it is relevant to gain the understanding of the current situation and whether the preliminary projects objectives have had the expected impact on the Kazakhstani economy. The purpose of this study is to highlight in which areas the plans of the programs were achieved and which areas would require further improvements in order to reach the goals specified about 10 years ago.

### Literature Review

The BRI is a major factor in the development of the regions it passes through. As one of the key elements, shaping the direction of development of these regions at various different levels, it has spurred a considerable amount of both positive expectations and opportunity-related optimism, but also lots of pessimism, ranging from mild concerns to strong fear. Almost ten years after the first announcement of the initiative, it seems interesting to evaluate its factual impact on Kazakhstan, one of its major participants, and one of those expected to benefit the most from it. The core of the BRI is the development of several new trade routes connecting China with the rest of the world, with infrastructural projects implemented all along it. However, the BRI is also frequently referred to as one of the major instruments of China's influence, in particular via investment projects, in which China acts as a creditor. Kukeyeva and Dyussebayev (2019) point to the opportunities and risks of the BRI for Kazakhstan to achieve a more diversified economy, but also emphasize the importance for Kazakhstan to assert its interests against an overly influential partner.

Jue and Wallace (2021) express concern about the increasing dependence of the BRI participants on China and its economy and the risk of falling into a debt trap for many of them. In addition, Zogg (2019) points to Kazakhstan's more cautious approach to Chinese investments compared to

other countries in the region and a stronger position it is in, which would allow it take advantage of the BRI more cautiously, despite the general opacity characteristic of the Chinese presence in the country. A relevant background on the foundations of the BRI is also provided by Brakman, Frankopan, Garretsen, Van Marrewijk, and Shakhanova, Garlick (2020). Czerewacz-Filipowicz (2019), in particular, focuses on the Eurasian Economic Union as part of the BRI.

Economic exchange between China and Kazakhstan has been in active development, in particular since 2000. Kazakhstan is the largest recipient of FDI from China among the CIS countries, and one of the key recipients of investment in the framework of the BRI (SamrukKazyna, 2018). The new economic corridor over the Eurasian region covers more than 30 countries from Eurasia to the Baltic and Pacific region (Gelvig, 2020). Some projects cover both regions – the EAWU as well as the EU (CzerewaczFilipowicz, 2019).

According to the World Bank, Kazakhstan is likely to be among larger beneficiaries of the BRI. First of all, this is due to its location: it is a land-locked country, and consequently, its dependence on the quality of cross-border transport for exchange with other countries is high. This raises two issues for Kazakhstan. The first one is maintaining the quality of its own trade routes, which the country has already been investing into, and which is expected to benefit considerably from FDI in the framework of the Chinese initiative, coupled with substantial investments from the Kazakhstan's government. The major benefit of the BRI for Kazakhstan is supposed to be the improvement of national trade routes. In addition, the BRI has also been expected to contribute greatly to the easing of the second issue related to Kazakhstan as a large land locked country: the quality of infrastructure in surrounding countries. Indeed, Kazakhstan's exchange with the rest of the world has been hindered by a rather low quality of transport infrastructure in the neighboring countries. This is an issue, which would be more challenging to resolve via the country's own state investment. China's focus on connecting its western and central regions more effectively to Europe and to West Asia provides an opportunity to address this issue. In addition to the improvement of infrastructure, providing opportunities for better connection of Kazakhstan to the surrounding regions and to global trade, thanks to such development of trade routes and facilitation of trade procedures (customs, tax, financial), Kazakhstan has been ex-

pected to pick up a part of the trade flow between China and Europe, as well as between China and West Asia (World Bank, 2020).

### Methodology

The questions to be answered are in which sectors the country has benefited over the last years and which sectors have growth potential over the coming years, in particular, for international companies or companies from the EAEU.

Certainly, it was interesting to understand whether the targets the companies set up themselves 10 years ago were fulfilled or where variance to the previous expectations appeared. Additionally, extra focus was given to the aspect of whether (according to the experts' opinion) Kazakhstan has benefited from being a member of the EAEU.

As the influence of the BRI is vast and complex, and manifests itself in many interrelated areas, expert interviews were chosen as a qualitative research method to take into account the most significant recent developments, such as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Based on the cumulative experience and knowledge of experts who have seen and studied the changes caused by the BRI up close and on the spot, it is possible to capture their worldviews and future expectations. In connection with this, 10 experts were interviewed.

In order to receive an unbiased and objective result of the study, the particular attention was given to the interview of partners from different industries. Relevant long-term knowledge of the Central Asian region of about 10 years was the key criterion when choosing sample. The experts interviewed are from the logistics sector, professional services, such as consulting companies or risk advisers, but especially companies with long-term local presence. The interviews were conducted via physical meetings, phone calls or other electronic communication tools. The interviews were conducted in Russian and English languages and translated by the author. Two respondents answered the questions in written.

After that Phillippe Mayring's qualitative content analysis method was applied. It was chosen as one of the most structured and theory-guided approaches in order to provide the most accurate analysis. Categories were formed applying the inductive method (first suggested in the 6<sup>th</sup> addition of Mayring's Qualitative Content Analysis), defined

and delimited (Mayring, 2015). Finally, the interpretation of results with regards to the research question was conducted. The application of such method allowed a structured and rule-guided analysis of the material based on clear instructions aiming to achieve the most validity, reliability and objectivity of the research. In order to receive supplementary information for this article existing literature on the BRI and the Silk Road with a focus on Kazakhstan was reviewed as a secondary source of information. The literature in Russian was translated by the authors.

### Results

Further into the integration of China – Kazakhstan cooperation, four key areas have been defined. The first area corresponds to the development of a transit corridor, creation of logistical centers in Kazakhstan, and the facilitation of customs, tax, financial, and other processes related to trade. The second area of cooperation corresponds to joint projects in various industries. In September 2015, the decision to relocate 51 Chinese factories to Kazakhstan was announced. The projects will receive investment from the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The third area of cooperation relates to science-driven and high-tech sectors and includes collaboration at the level of scientific institutes and universities, as well as joint enterprises. The fourth area of cooperation is agricultural sector. By 2016, 19 joint projects were planned for implementation or under implementation, in particular, in such sectors as deep processing of agricultural products: meat, oil-bearing plants, grain crops, tomatoes; and construction of feeding stations. The products are then planned mainly for export to China (Alibekova, 2016).

Indeed, one of the key goals of China with the BRI is increasing its own economic and political power and making the participating countries interdependent with the Chinese economy (Jue & Wallace, 2021). And, as countries with considerable differences in size and economic potential build joint projects, it is important for the lesser power to avoid losing its economic and political autonomy, considering its interests (Kukejeva & Dyussebayev, 2019). Kazakhstan is thus faced with considerable opportunities presented by the BRI, but, in order to fully benefit from them, a strategy protecting the county's interests while working with such a powerful partner seems necessary.

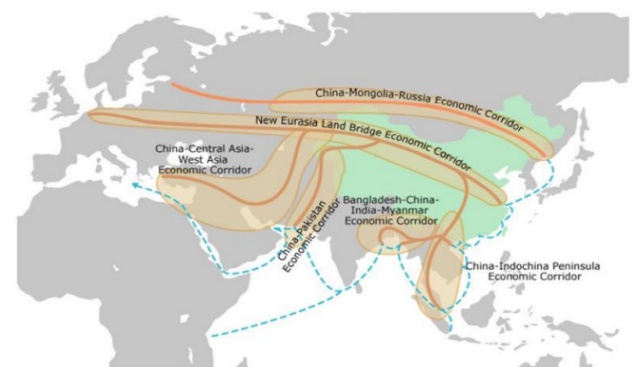
The BRI has thus been expected to have a

number of positive effects on Kazakhstan, including the development of its transit potential, modernization of its internal and surrounding transport infrastructure, raising trade turnover, attracting investment into various industries and reducing the dependence of economy on natural resources exports, as well as an overall GDP increase (Amrebaev, 2017).

The regions, located along the three routes of the BRI passing through Kazakhstan, and, in particular, main transport hubs of these routes, have been expected to benefit the most from the new and upgraded infrastructure, as well as from the increasing trade flow.

For Kazakhstan, China is an important partner, creditor, and investor. However, Kazakhstan also has a major place in the implementation of the BRI, mainly due to its location, but also to its level of economic development and rich natural resources. Indeed, two BRI corridors pass through Central Asia to connect China to Europe and to Iran and West Asia via five routes, three of which go through Kazakhstan. The first corridor passes through two railroads, one through Kazakhstan and Russia and the other through Kazakhstan and Turkey. The second corridor goes through three routes, out of which one goes through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:**  
*The Belt and Road Initiative (World Bank, 2020).*



Source: Xinhua News Agency; Hong Kong Trade Development Council

The Eurasian Land-bridge BRI Corridor connecting China to Europe uses two routes, both of which pass through Kazakhstan. **Route 1:** China (different cities, Urumqi, Alashankou); Kazakhstan (Dostyk, Mointy, Astana, Petropavlovsk); Russia (Yekaterinburg and Moscow); Belarus; Poland and finally Duisburg in Germany (Duisburg). This route mainly benefits the North East of the coun-

try. It passes through Dostyk in the Almaty region, which is one of the main regions of the destinations of the BRI investment in the country. It is located at the border with China; Mointy in Karaganda region; Kazakhstan's capital Astana, and Petropavlovsk (North Kazakhstan region) in the north of the country, at the border with Russia.

**Route 2:** China (different cities, Urumqi, Khorqas); Kazakhstan (Altynkol, Almaty, Shu, Zharyk, Zhezqazghan, Saksaulskaya, Aktau); Azerbaijan (Baku, Ganja, BeyukKesik); Georgia (Gardabani, Tbilisi); Turkey (Kars, Istanbul) and Europe. The second route passes through Altynkol and Almaty in Almaty region bordering China, then Shu (Zhambyl region in the south of Kazakhstan), then heads west through Zhezqazghan in Karaganda region, Saksaulskaya in Kyzylorda region, Shalkar (Aktobe region), Beyneu and Aktau (Mangistau region) at the Caspian Sea shore.

One of the three routes of the corridor connecting China to West Asia also passes through Kazakhstan, although only through Almaty and Altynkol in Almaty region bordering China.

Consequently, in terms of infrastructure development in the framework of the BRI project, Almaty region is expected to be the largest beneficiary in the country as the main point of entry for transport going from China to Europe and to West Asia. North-eastern regions of the country are also supposed to take an important part in the BRI, namely Karaganda region, Astana and North Kazakhstan. Zhambyl region in the south of the country, as well as some western regions—Kyzylorda, Aktobe and Mangistau are also located among the major routes of the BRI (World Bank, 2020).

As for agricultural investment projects, the main destinations are the regions located at the border with China, in the eastern part of Kazakhstan, and those located along the main BRI routes. These are, for instance, East Kazakhstan region (e.g. with the construction of a meat processing plant), Almaty region (beef production plant project), Aktobe region (beef production); North Kazakhstan region (oil-bearing plants and grain processing); Kyzylorda, East Kazakhstan and West Kazakhstan regions with tomato processing plants projects (Alibekova, 2016).

Major industrial investment projects planned in the framework of the BRI are more evenly spread all over the country, namely: the production of meth-

anol and ammonia, as well as products based on them; The first stage of polypropylene production by United Chemical Company LLP, which is a subsidiary of Samruk-Kazyna; modernization of the Atyrau oil refinery (construction of a deep oil refining complex & construction of a complex for the production of aromatic hydrocarbons), all three in Atyrau region; production of elevators and lift equipment by Kazakhstan lift-building company KazLift (Almaty); cement production plant DANAKE Corporation in Kyzylorda region; production of phosphorus trichloride and glyphosate; production of methanol and ammonia, as well as products based on them, both by United Chemical Company (a subsidiary of Samruk-Kazyna); production of potassium sulfate; spindle production by Factory POSH-Taraz; project of the FEZ Chemical Park in Taraz, all five in Taraz FEZ in Jambyl region; polyethylene terephthalate waste processing and staple fibre production in the BAD-AM industrial zone (Turkestan region); construction of a mining and processing plant on the site of the Tymlay deposit in the Kordai region; reconstruction of the Kazakhstan Electrolysis Plant in Pavlodar region; construction of a plant for the production of fuel assemblies by Ulba in East Kazakhstan region; manufacture of Anhui Jianghuai Automobile brand cars (SaryarkaAvtoProm, Motors, CMC) in Kostanai region; modernization of the Shymkent oil refinery (Aminjonov et al., 2019).

The Reduction of dependence of the economy on natural resources is one of the key goals of Kazakhstan, as the country's economy has been for long highly dependent on its rich resources, in particular, hydrocarbons. The BRI has been seen as a chance to reduce this dependence. Developing the country's transit potential and investing in joint ventures in its various industrial sectors would indeed allow it to diversify the economy (Kukeeva & Dyussebayev, 2019). On the other hand, there are also doubts about the positive stimulus for the country's economic, being highly dependent on oil and its export along with mineral resources. It is questionable how the country benefits from being majorly a logistic hub for Chinese products being transported to the consumers in the West (Cinar, 2021). Also from the interviewed experts' side infrastructure projects, such as the dry ports Khorgoz or the improvement of the Caspian Sea port of Kurik, were mentioned. However, in addition to several expected positive effects, the BRI has also raised a number of concerns for Kazakhstan.

Financial dependence is a minor concern for Kazakhstan, other areas of potential inequality

of benefit from joint projects have risen some questions. As the BRI has not been very transparent on its projects, there have been concerns related to the local labor and businesses, which might be hurt by the inflow of workers and stronger businesses from the powerful neighbor. Indeed, Chinese businesses might bring their own workforce with them, and offer more competitive prices in the market, which would create difficulties for local population and companies (Zogg, 2019), (Ecological Civilization and the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China, n.d.). The real conditions, under which joint projects are implemented and in which measure they take into account Kazakhstan's interests is a matter that remains to be analyzed (Kukeyeva & Dyussebayev, 2019).

In addition to the concerns related to the growing influence of China over Kazakhstan and challenges for the local workforce and businesses, there have also been concerns related to the environmental issues. As China has adopted a new ecological civilization model, which is aimed at reducing pollution in the country, (Ecological Civilization and the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China, n.d.) there is a danger of particularly polluting businesses being relocated to other countries. Consequently, environmental impact of Chinese plants relocated to Kazakhstan needs to be closely examined.

There has also been a geopolitical concern related to the parallel development of the EAEU project aimed at the creation of a common economic space, which would provide freedom of movement, goods, services, capital, and labor among Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Even though the BRI and the EAEU do not directly contradict each other, Kazakhstan would need to pay particular attention to the coordination between the projects in the framework of the two different integration processes in order to avoid conflict (Kukeyeva & Dyussebayev, 2019). The mutual dependence between the BRI and the EAEU was also emphasized by the experts' side. In particular due to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine Kazakhstan's position as a logistics corridor gains attention while Kazakhstan is viewed to be a hub for the whole Central Asian and Caucasian region, nonetheless the EAEU is dominated by its largest participant – the Russian Federation. Trade routes are increasingly avoiding Russia. The neighboring countries gain attention, such as Mongolia or Uzbekistan for instance.

The interviewed experts also see a future strong potential, besides infrastructure projects, in the agricultural and renewable energy sector. The customs union within the EAEU is of support here, which ensures simplified customs processes throughout the region, movement of people and goods through the markets.

### Conclusion

The BRI has been expected to have a considerable influence on Kazakhstan at several different levels and in different areas. As most of the projects are focused on the infrastructure and cross-border cooperation, its impact has been expected to be rather uneven for different regions of the country.

As noted above, Kazakhstan can be considered one of major elements of the BRI, and the BRI, as one of the main phenomena for the development of Kazakhstan. Thus, it is expected to influence Kazakhstan in a number of different ways and areas.

The result of the improving infrastructure would be lowering of shipment time and trade costs, general increase of FDI (in particular, in non-energy sectors, such as agriculture and processed foods, transport machinery, and processed metals), growth of exports in other categories than energy resources, and rise of the country's GDP. As Kazakhstan is a EAEU member, together with Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, the country should benefit from the Union's aims on the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor among the member states (Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020).

While many countries that take part in the BRI might see their dependence on China as their major creditor increase considerably, Kazakhstan has aimed at keeping the share of Chinese investments in the projects in its territory at a certain limit (Zogg, 2019). However, the real impact of the BRI on the growth of China's influence on Kazakhstan remains to be seen.

The BRI project is thus a source of great opportunities for Kazakhstan, but it needs to be managed carefully in order for the country not to become dependent on a politically, economically and culturally powerful partner, which China is for many countries in the BRI.

A clear strategy of economic diversification would also be needed in order to ensure that Kazakhstan's participation in the BRI contributes to the decrease of the country's focus on natural resources, which has been one of its major goals and which is a considerable challenge to achieve. The country's authorities would need to make sure that the investments flow into the industries other than natural resources, and, in particular, hydrocarbons extraction and sale (Louthan, 2022). As for the exports, several areas show strong potential. Besides infrastructure projects, the agricultural and renewable energy sectors have high perspectives for the future.

In general, the country seems to benefit from both – the participation in the BRI, while China's influence will probably continue to increase, but also from the EAWU with the easier transfer of capital, goods, services and people. In particular for the logistics sector the integration into the EAWU is useful. Further infrastructure projects along the Silk Road are expected to realize. The negative aspects of the limitations and sanctions on the Russia-based corridor may be offset with the reorganization of trade routes bypassing Russia. This might bring further light on the Middle Corridor. As for international companies Kazakhstan and the neighboring countries present themselves as a good opportunity for further investments.

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