

# Unraveling China's Aid Strategy Towards Central Asian Countries: The Case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan\*

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**Abstract:** China's burgeoning influence in Central Asia, particularly in economically disadvantaged nations like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, presents a multifaceted phenomenon deserving of deeper analysis. This article delves into the impact of Chinese involvement in these two Central Asian countries, shedding light on the instruments employed by China, such as development aid and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite their economic challenges, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have emerged as key recipients of Chinese aid, receiving grants, concessional loans, and infrastructure projects that have reshaped their socio-economic landscapes. At the heart of China's engagement lies the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, which has positioned Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as pivotal nodes in China's quest for regional connectivity. As Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan navigate their relationship with China, they face the delicate task of leveraging economic opportunities while safeguarding their national interests amidst evolving geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia. This article aims to analyze Chinese influence through development aid and the BRI in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, illuminating both the opportunities and challenges of this relationship.

**Keywords:** China, Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Development Aid

**Öz:** Çin'in Orta Asya'da, özellikle de Kırgızistan ve Tacikistan gibi ekonomik açıdan dezavantajlı ülkelerde artan etkisi derinlemesine analiz gerektiren çok yönlü bir olgu olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu makale, Çin'in bu iki Orta Asya ülkesindeki angajmanının etkisini incelemekte ve bu kapsamda Çin'in kullandığı kalkınma yardımı ve Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi (BRI) gibi araçlara ışık tutmaktadır. Yaşadıkları ekonomik zorluklara rağmen Kırgızistan ve Tacikistan; hibeler, imtiyazlı krediler ve altyapı projeleri aracılığıyla sosyoekonomik görünümünü yeniden şekillendiren Çin yardımının önde gelen alıcıları haline gelmiştir. Çin'in bu ülkelerdeki yardım angajmanının temelinde Kırgızistan ve Tacikistan'ı Çin'in bölgesel bağlantı arayışında önemli düğüm noktaları olarak konumlandırın iddialı Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi yatmaktadır. Kırgızistan ve Tacikistan, Çin ile ilişkilerini sürdürürken, Orta Asya'da gelişen jeopolitik dinamikler ortasında ulusal çıkarlarını koruyarak, ekonomik fırsatlardan yararlanma gibi hassas bir görevle karşı karşıyadırlar. Bu makale, Çin'in kalkınma yardımı ve Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi yoluyla Kırgızistan ve Tacikistan'daki etkisini incelemeyi ve bu ilişkinin ortaya çıkardığı zorlukları ve fırsatları aydınlatmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çin, Orta Asya, Kırgızistan, Tacikistan, Kalkınma Yardımı

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## Introduction

Central Asia has emerged as a focal point of China's foreign policy strategy, particularly evident through its extensive aid initiatives and economic engagements in the region. Since the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, China has actively pursued diplomatic relations with the five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—with the aim of fostering robust bilateral ties. Initially focusing on resolving territorial disputes, China's engagement evolved to encompass broader areas of cooperation, with aid emerging as a crucial tool in bolstering relations with these countries.

China's aid efforts in Central Asia began in earnest in April 1994, marked by official visits of high-ranking Chinese officials and the signing of protocols for in-kind aid support. Over time, China escalated its aid contributions to Central Asian countries, concurrently strengthening bilateral cooperation in areas such as energy, trade, and security. The rapid economic growth of China since the late 1990s further underscored the growing significance of resource-rich Central Asia, prompting China to increase its aid contributions significantly (Tang, 2018, pp. 50-53).

China's aid strategy in Central Asia encompasses various forms, including grants, preferential loans, and export buyer credits. These initiatives aim to address a wide range of development needs, from infrastructure projects to social programs, reflecting China's multifaceted approach to fostering economic and political ties with Central Asian nations. Furthermore, China's engagement with Central Asia within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has provided additional avenues for aid and cooperation, emphasizing the regional dimension of China's aid strategy (Hu Jingtao, 2006; Jarosiewicz, Aleksandra and Krzysztof Strachota, 2013, pp.64-68).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a cornerstone of China's aid and investment efforts in Central Asia, facilitating deeper integration and cooperation between China and Central Asian countries. Under the BRI, China has signed multibillion-dollar agreements for investments and concessional loans, further solidifying its economic presence in the region (Yuan and Wang, 2015, pp.197-201). Notably, as two less developed countries in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have emerged as primary recipients of China's official development assistance in Central Asia, receiving significant grants and loans for various development projects.

Kyrgyzstan's strategic location in Central Asia fosters close ties with China, seen as a pivotal partner for trade (Schulz, 2022). Positioned between China and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan is viewed as a potential corridor for commerce, particularly

for China's consumer goods market in Uzbekistan. China values trade relations with Kyrgyzstan, partly due to concerns over Xinjiang's stability. Economic growth in Kyrgyzstan allows China to export goods from Xinjiang, contributing to regional stability. Both countries prioritize cooperation to leverage Kyrgyzstan's geographic significance and bolster economic ties. Although Tajikistan has a minor role in the region's trade and economic development, China values Tajikistan for its contribution to regional security arrangements despite its small size, primarily due to its strategic location. Tajikistan shares borders with China to the east and has made territorial concessions in the past to resolve disputes. Additionally, it borders Kyrgyzstan to the north and Uzbekistan to the west, having complex relations with both. Crucially, Tajikistan shares a border with Afghanistan to the south, making it a key player in regional dynamics (Hedlund, June 2023).

Despite the opportunities presented by China's aid and investment, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan face a range of challenges in the context of the BRI. In addition to concerns over debt sustainability, public opposition to Chinese investments, limited market size, bureaucratic hurdles and governance issues, it is believed that issues such as the spillover of external security risks and the competition between the US and Russia for dominance over the security order in Central Asia may pose challenges to the effective implementation of BRI projects (Yuan and Wang, 2015, pp. 208-213). Moreover, increasing trade dependency on China raises concerns in academic circles in Central Asia about trade imbalances and vulnerability to economic fluctuations (Shamiev, 2020, pp.76-84), highlighting the need for sustainable and inclusive development strategies in Central Asia.

China's aid strategy in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan reflects its broader geopolitical and economic interests in the region, aimed at fostering closer ties and enhancing its influence. While the BRI presents opportunities for infrastructure development, economic growth, and regional integration, addressing the challenges posed by debt sustainability, public opposition, and governance issues will be essential to ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of China's aid initiatives in Central Asia.

This article is composed of five sections. The first section outlines the theoretical framework and methodology of this study. The second section initiates with a succinct retrospective glance at China's aid history, setting the stage for an in-depth review of its contemporary implications. From humble beginnings to becoming a global economic powerhouse, China's aid trajectory reflects its evolving role on the world stage. This historical backdrop serves as a crucial lens through which we scrutinize China's aid policy towards Central Asia. The third section meticulously dissects China's aid approach towards Central Asia in general, and towards Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in particular, two pivotal nations in the Central Asian landscape. In the

fourth section, we delve deep into the ramifications of China's BRI for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, illuminating both the opportunities and challenges that accompany their involvement in this ambitious infrastructure and connectivity project. The culmination of our analysis in the concluding section endeavors to provide holistic insights into the evolving dynamics between China and Central Asia. By synthesizing the findings on China's aid policies, the transformative influence of the BRI, and their implications for regional development and geopolitics, we offer a panoramic perspective on this complex relationship. In doing so, we not only elucidate the intricate interplay of interests and aspirations but also shed light on the broader ramifications for the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia and beyond. In essence, this article serves as a beacon guiding our understanding of the symbiotic relationship between China and Central Asia, transcending mere diplomatic discourse to unravel the intricate tapestry of aid, development, and geopolitics that binds these regions.

### Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analysis through a comparative case study approach to explore the impact of China's involvement in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with a particular focus on China's aid and the BRI. The methodology is designed to provide a subtle insight of the socio-economic and geopolitical consequences of Chinese engagement in these economically disadvantaged Central Asian nations. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were selected as case studies due to their similar economic challenges and strategic significance within China's Belt and Road Initiative. Both countries have experienced substantial Chinese influence through aid, investment, and infrastructure projects, making them ideal subjects for a comparative analysis. The selection of these cases allows for an in-depth examination of how China's policies and investments impact these two countries in terms of socio-economic and political contexts within the same regional framework.

The qualitative analysis utilized in this study involves comparative analysis. It is designed to identify key patterns and themes related to China's economic and geopolitical strategies, such as the nature of aid and investment, the implementation of infrastructure projects, and the impact of the BRI. Comparative analysis was then used to contrast and compare the experiences of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, focusing on similarities and differences in their responses to and outcomes from Chinese involvement. This methodology combines qualitative analysis and comparative case study to provide a comprehensive examination of China's impact on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. By analyzing both countries' experiences, the study offers insights into the opportunities and challenges of China's engagement in economically disadvantaged countries- Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two strategically important countries from

China's perspective. Due to challenges in accessing firsthand Chinese ODA and economic data—beyond the Chinese White Papers on ODA—this study primarily relies on secondary sources in both Chinese and English.

This study benefits from a dual-theoretical approach to analyze Chinese foreign aid during and after the Cold War, drawing on both Realist and Constructivist theories of International Relations (IR). This combination allows for a detailed analysis of the strategic, ideological, and normative factors influencing China's foreign aid policies. Realism in IR theory assumes that states act primarily in pursuit of their national interests, emphasizing power, security, and strategic advantage (Waltz, 1959, pp. 175-177; Morgenthau, 1967, p. 25; Elias and Sutch, 2007, pp. 112-113). To analyze Chinese foreign aid through a realist lens, this study examines how Chinese foreign aid during the Cold War was employed to advance military-political objectives, such as supporting Vietnam in its conflict with the United States and cultivating relationships with Myanmar. It also investigates how China used foreign aid to project power and influence in the Indian Ocean region. The aim here is to assess how China's aid policies were shaped by the competitive nature of the international system, particularly in the context of Cold War rivalries and post-Cold War competition for global influence.

On the other hand, constructivism emphasizes the role of ideas, identity, and norms in shaping state behavior (Wendt, 1999, p. 254; Viotti and Kauppi 2013, p. 39). This study also employs constructivist theory to explore the ideological and normative dimensions of Chinese foreign aid. This involves analyzing shifts in official rhetoric, policy documents, and international development trends. Special attention is given to the establishment of institutions like the Foreign Aid Fund and the Export-Import Bank of China as indicators of a shift towards a more pragmatic approach. Consequently, these are all connected to a wider analysis that aims to explore how perceptions of foreign aid's legitimacy and efficacy have evolved within China and the international community.

## Historical Development of Chinese Aid Policy

China's initial venture into foreign aid began in July 1950 with Mongolia. At the request of Mongolian head of State Khorloogiin Choibalsan, China deployed over twelve thousand skilled workers for development projects including hospitals, schools, and factories in Mongolia (Huaxin Shibao, 2021). By 1959, China had allocated a total grant of 160 million Russian Rubles to Mongolia. During this period, North Korea and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam were also primary beneficiaries of Chinese aid (Luo, 2021).

Over time, China expanded its aid efforts to other Asian nations such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan and Syria. Additionally, China extended support to African countries including Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Congo, Tanzania, Zambia, Somalia, and the Eastern European country Albania (Huaxing ShiBao, 2021). These initial foreign aid efforts were likely motivated by a combination of fostering diplomatic relations and supporting the development of allied nations during the Cold War era. By aiding countries like Mongolia, North Korea, and Vietnam, China aimed to strengthen political ties, expand its influence, and promote socialist solidarity.

Despite advocating respect for recipient countries' sovereignty and avoiding political conditions, as outlined in Premier Zhou Enlai's 'Eight Principles of Economic and Technical Aid' (CIDCA, 2018), China's foreign aid strategy until 1976 was largely shaped by ideological considerations. This ideology-based strategy had three main objectives: countering economic sanctions imposed by the Western Bloc led by the United States, competing with the Soviet Union for leadership within socialist circles, and garnering diplomatic support from Third World nations to replace Taiwan at the United Nations (Kobayashi, 2008). China's diplomatic and aid initiatives during this period yielded significant results. Notably, 23 countries, primarily in Africa, which played a key role in drafting the resolution to restore China's UN seat, benefited from Chinese aid (with the exception of Yugoslavia) (Yuan et al., 2022).

During the 1970s, various factors, such as deteriorating relations with key aid recipient nations, led Chinese leadership to halt aid to Vietnam and Albania while reassessing its overall aid approach (Yuan et al, 2022). Additionally, the substantial strain on the already fragile Chinese economy made foreign aid unsustainable, with aid expenditures reaching a historic peak, accounting for as much as 6.92% of the national budget in 1973 (Xu, 2015). Since Deng Xiaoping initiated China's open-door policy in the late 1970s, the core of China's aid policy until 1995, shifted towards meeting both domestic needs and international obligations, devoid of ideological considerations. Under Deng Xiaoping's reform policies, China's approach to foreign aid has transitioned from primarily political to largely economic. This shift has been reinforced by changes in the administrative structure of state-owned enterprises, which now spearhead foreign aid initiatives, typically through turnkey projects.

Despite initial hesitations, China resumed accepting foreign aid in 1979, signing preferential loan agreements with Japan and subsequently receiving development aid from Western countries. China's entry into the World Bank Group in 1980 further marked its engagement with international aid mechanisms.

While there were internal debates over the continuation of providing foreign aid due to limited domestic resources, the Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party

and the State Council affirmed its importance for diplomatic reasons and national development. However, there was a reduction in aid expenditure, prioritizing projects aligned with China's modernization and reform agenda. Premier Zhao Ziyang's 1983 visit to Tanzania cemented this shift, introducing the "Four Principles of China-Africa Economic and Technological Cooperation." These principles, emphasizing mutual benefit and departing from Mao Zedong's self-reliance ideology, underscored Deng Xiaoping's vision of "common development" and the economic dimension of China's foreign aid strategy. Thus, by the early 1980s, foreign aid had evolved into an economic instrument for China (Johnston and Rudyak, 2018).

During this period, China's aid approach evolved from providing complete projects and cash donations to offering project management services and training, symbolizing a transition from mere assistance to empowering recipient nations with practical skills. This shift underscored values such as mutual benefit, reciprocity, economic gains, and aligning political interests (Li, 2019). From 1996 onward, driven by rapid economic growth and increased global integration, China adopted a new aid strategy amalgamating economic development with foreign aid to bolster its trade and investment ventures abroad. Bilateral and multilateral aid volumes surged during this period, accompanied by initiatives such as debt relief and concessional loans (Xu, 2015).

When analyzing the aid behavior of China before 1978 from a realist perspective, Chinese foreign aid during the Cold War can be interpreted as a tool primarily aimed at bolstering Beijing's role in the global communist movement and enhancing its own security. The aid provided to countries like North Korea, North Vietnam, and Albania served strategic interests by cultivating alliances and spreading communist ideology. This aligns with realist notions of states prioritizing power and security in their foreign policy decisions. Additionally, aiding countries with ideological affinity helped China counterbalance the influence of the United States and its allies during the Cold War, thus enhancing its own position in the global power structure.

During the Cold War, Chinese foreign aid was often tied to military-political objectives, especially in regions like South Asia. Military assistance to Vietnam against the United States and maintaining good relations with Myanmar can be viewed through a realist lens as part of China's strategy to expand its influence and project power in the Indian Ocean, thereby enhancing its security and geopolitical position. This reflects realist notions of states engaging in strategic competition and power projection to secure their interests and protect their national security.

However, post-Cold War, the behavior of Chinese foreign aid demonstrates a shift influenced by both realist and constructivist factors. Realist principles still apply



in terms of China's pursuit of its national interests, such as economic expansion and diplomatic influence. The resurgence of interest in foreign aid in the 1990s, particularly in the context of the struggle for diplomatic recognition with Taiwan, reflects China's desire to secure alliances and increase its global influence in a competitive international system. For instance, after the mid-1990s, Jiang Zemin proposed a new security concept centered on mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and cooperation. He advocated that international affairs should be addressed through equal consultation among nations and that global challenges should be met with collective efforts (Shih, 2007:8-12). During Jiang Zemin's era, China's foreign aid principles emphasized "mutual benefit and cooperation for common development." This approach aimed to promote not only the economic development and social progress of recipient countries but also to advance economic and technological cooperation between China and these countries, with the goal of achieving mutual development and prosperity (Bi, 2024, pp.38-58).

On the other hand, from a constructivist perspective, Chinese foreign aid during the Cold War can be seen as a reflection of ideological imperatives and efforts to shape the international order based on socialist principles. Aid to communist allies and revolutionary movements served to promote solidarity among like-minded states and advance the communist cause globally. This aligns with constructivist ideas about the importance of norms, ideas and identity in shaping state behavior and international relations.

The shift towards a more pragmatic approach to foreign aid in the post-Cold War era can also be understood through a constructivist lens. The negative evaluation of aid solely for political or ideological reasons reflects changing norms and perceptions within China about the efficacy and legitimacy of such practices. The establishment of mechanisms like the Foreign Aid Fund and the Export-Import Bank of China indicates a reconceptualization of foreign aid as a tool for economic development and cooperation rather than purely ideological or strategic purposes (Xu Hongcai, 2016, pp.1-10). This shift reflects changing norms and discourses within China, as well as evolving international norms regarding development assistance and cooperation.

Overall, the behavior of Chinese foreign aid both before and after the Cold War can be analyzed through a combination of realist and constructivist perspectives, highlighting the interplay between strategic interests, ideological considerations, changing norms and discourses. During the Hu Jintao era, the core diplomatic principle of the Chinese Communist Party shifted towards the concept of a "Harmonious World," which aimed to minimize conflicts and disputes between countries, replacing the previous emphasis on "Peaceful Rise" and "Peaceful Development" from the Jiang



Zemin era (Shih, 2007, pp. 8-12). Hu also made adjustments to China's foreign aid approach, announcing five major initiatives to support the acceleration of development in developing countries. These initiatives covered a range of areas including tariff preferences, debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries, concessional loans, aid to Africa, and the training of personnel from developing countries. In addition to traditional bilateral aid, China strengthened collective consultations with recipient countries at international and regional levels. This was manifested in multiple high-level meetings such as the United Nations Development Financing Conference, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals Summit, as well as platforms like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In these fora, China frequently announced targeted foreign aid policies, increasing assistance in areas such as agriculture, infrastructure, education, healthcare, human resource development, and clean energy (Huang and Tang, 2013, pp. 66-71).

However, following Xi Jinping's assumption of the presidency in 2013, China's foreign policy took on a more assertive stance, departing from the balancing approach of his predecessors (Yang, 2017). In other words, low profiles doctrine promoted by Deng Xiaoping was abandoned (Ferdinand, 2016). Xi introduced four novel concepts into the realm of Chinese foreign policy: a fresh model for relations among major countries, diplomacy with distinct Chinese attributes regarding major nations, the notion of a global community united by shared destiny, and a unique form of international relations (Xie, 2017). However, foreign analysts have different interpretations of Xi Jinping's foreign policy exhibiting several major features:

- 1. Nationalist Assertiveness:** Under Xi's leadership, China's foreign policy has become notably assertive and nationalist, marked by a firm stance on territorial issues and a desire to shape global and regional dynamics in Beijing's favor (Maniyar, 2022).
- 2. Military Expansion and Modernization:** China has demonstrated a boldness in military actions across the Indo-Pacific region, with activities ranging from territorial disputes to rapid modernization of the People's Liberation Army (IIDA et al, 2023).
- 3. Unilateral Agenda Setting:** China shows a tendency to unilaterally shape regional and global norms and question concepts like the Indo-Pacific idea (Heiduk and Wacker, 2022), asserting control over contested waters such as the South and East China Seas (Herlevi and Waidelich, May 2024).

4. **Economic Influence:** China's foreign policy is closely tied to its economic interests, evident in its pursuit of economic gains through multilateral initiatives like the BRI and its willingness to use economic leverage to advance its objectives (ChinaPower Team, 2017).
5. **Aggressive Diplomacy:** China has adopted a more aggressive diplomatic stance, characterized by the "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" approach, which seeks to assert Chinese interests forcefully on the global stage (Yuan, 2023).

Under Xi's leadership, China's pragmatic approach to foreign aid involves a shift away from material assistance towards prioritizing technological support and infrastructure development. This is coupled with efforts to strengthen legislation, increase transparency, and enhance aid efficiency. Regular publication of white papers (State Council of China, 2011; State Council of China, 2014; State Council of China, 2021) on foreign aid elucidates aid principles, scope and modalities. Emphasis is placed on both bilateral and multilateral aid, with institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank playing a crucial role (Xinhuanet, 2021). There's a heightened focus on aid effectiveness, aiming to improve the well-being and livelihoods of recipient countries by establishing industrial parks, investing in infrastructure, and fostering long-term benefits for future generations. Political conditions are avoided in aid provision, with a focus on aligning security interests with global stability and economic governance for fairer and more equitable aid distribution. Additionally, cultural exchange is valued through the establishment of Confucius Institutes worldwide and fostering exchanges in humanities and technology (Su, 2019). In other words, in the Xi Jinping era, China's foreign aid strategy increasingly demonstrates a propensity to integrate security, geopolitical, and geoeconomic considerations into its aid policies (Wang, 2020). Additionally, the BRI has interlaced China's foreign aid with its broader economic initiatives, blurring distinctions between grants, loans, credits, and investments, thereby challenging outsiders' ability to discern between these aid mechanisms (Yuan et al, 2022).

### Aid With Chinese Characteristics Towards Central Asian Countries

Following the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, China promptly initiated diplomatic relations with the five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, aiming to cultivate robust bilateral ties. Initially focused on resolving longstanding territorial disputes, China's engagement with Central Asia expanded to encompass broader areas of cooperation (Mariani, 2013). Aid emerged as a particularly effective tool employed by China to bolster its relations with these countries (Huang and Lu, 2011).

China's engagement with Central Asia through aid initiatives commenced in April 1994, marked by the official visit of late Chinese Premier Li Peng to four Central Asian nations. During this visit, protocols were signed with leaders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, according to which China pledged to provide 1.5 million RMB (the abbreviation of Chinese currency Renminbi) in-kind aid support as a goodwill gesture. Subsequently, late Chinese President Jiang Zemin extended similar aid support during his state visit to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in July 1996. The rapid economic growth of China since 1997 underscored the growing significance of resource-rich Central Asia. In response, China escalated its aid contributions to Central Asian countries while concurrently strengthening bilateral cooperation in areas such as energy, trade and security. This escalation not only entailed an increase in the amount of grant aid but also marked the initiation of substantial preferential government loans. For instance, China disbursed 20 million RMB in cash support to Tajikistan and extended preferential loans of 100 million RMB each to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (Shi, 2013).

Starting from June 2001, China expanded its aid efforts to Central Asia within the scope of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It began providing substantial amounts of preferential export buyer credits. For example, during the 2004 SCO Summit held in Tashkent, China suggested offering a total of US\$ 900 million in preferential export buyer credits to member countries (Shi, 2013). At that time, Chinese President Hu Jintao entered into ten agreements with his Uzbek counterpart, which encompassed various areas. Notably, these agreements included a US\$ 2.4 million assistance package and a concessional credit line from China amounting to US\$ 36.5 million over a twenty-year period. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in late 2012 and Xi's assumption of the presidency in 2013, China has shifted away from Deng Xiaoping's policy of maintaining a low profile to adopt a more assertive stance in foreign affairs. There has been a notable emphasis on promoting Chinese solutions to global challenges and cultivating an image of responsible leadership. Consequently, China has begun to prioritize environmental issues and social responsibility in its aid efforts. While economic interests remain paramount, there is a growing recognition of the need for comprehensive planning in foreign aid programs to advance both political and economic goals. Additionally, heightened strategic competition with the USA has prompted China to incorporate security, geopolitical, and geoeconomic factors into its development cooperation strategies. It is evident that China must now align its foreign aid with broader strategic objectives and enhance the efficiency and accountability of its development financing processes (Yuan, 2023, p. 9; Owens, 2023). Following Xi Jinping's assumption of office, the implementation of the BRI

facilitated a deeper integration of China's aid efforts in Central Asia. Xi Jinping solidified this integration by signing multibillion-dollar agreements for investments and concessional loans during visits to the four Central Asian capitals (Kassenova, 2022). According to Chinese sources, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan stand out as the primary recipients of China's official development assistance in Central Asia. Notably, Uzbekistan received over 50% of this aid, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan collectively received 40% (Feng, 2020). Initially, Sino-Uzbek technical and economic cooperation projects focused on sectors such as healthcare, education, agriculture, water, and transportation. However, a recent unconditional grant of US\$ 40 million from China to Uzbekistan is anticipated to fund social projects related to energy and agriculture (Lillis, 2022).

As China's aid primarily operates on a government-to-government basis, it strategically fosters close personal relationships with key leaders to further its longstanding economic and security interests in Central Asia. Given the comparatively weaker economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, they are particularly susceptible to political instability. Consequently, China tailors its aid to these nations to cater to the needs of local elites, who, in return, support Chinese interests and help mitigate public concerns about growing Chinese influence.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, China has allocated nearly US\$ 400 million in grants between 2013 and 2017 for various significant projects. These include the construction of infrastructure such as the Congress Hall and guesthouses in the Ala Archa State Residence, as well as the provision of 1205 tractors and the renovation of roads in Bishkek. Furthermore, China forgave Kyrgyzstan's debt for a loan used in constructing a paper factory. Additionally, China extended a US\$ 386 million loan to finance the Bishkek Power Plant, with the renovation work being carried out by the Chinese firm Tebian Electric Apparatus. Moreover, China has provided military and security assistance to relevant institutions in Kyrgyzstan (Kassenova, 2022). Despite the frequent changes in regime witnessed in Kyrgyzstan, China has consistently managed to establish agreements with the new ruling elite by providing tailored and substantial aid, crucial for the new Kyrgyz administration to maintain power. Given that the new administration typically comprises experienced Kyrgyz politicians, China adeptly adjusts to the evolving situation. China's persistent efforts to cultivate personal relationships with politicians through gift-giving have enabled it to navigate numerous political uncertainties successfully.

In Tajikistan, China's aid totaled approximately US\$ 1.8 billion between 2005 and 2017 (Abduyaliev and Bustillo, 2020), primarily in the form of loans, which have already reached around US\$ 1.5 billion, constituting 50% of Tajikistan's total public

debt. Under the framework of the Belt and Road initiative, China has extended a US\$ 360 million grant to the Tajik government for the enhancement of the highway from Kulob to Bokhtar. Some analysts speculate that this grant may entail concealed conditions, such as mining concessions (Najibullah, 2019).

Certain analysts speculate that the grant could include undisclosed terms, such as concessions related to mining, tax exemptions for Chinese companies, and potentially even the donation of agricultural land (Abduyaliev and Bustillo, 2020). Critics of the BRI argue that Chinese loans or grants may not lead to genuine development in Tajikistan and could instead perpetuate its dependency on aid once the BRI is concluded. As previously mentioned, there appears to be a convergence of interests between Chinese firms and the Tajik elite (Abduyaliev and Bustillo, 2020).

Similar to its actions in Kyrgyzstan, China has undertaken prominent infrastructure ventures in Tajikistan, including the construction of the US\$ 14 million six-story House of Officers and the initiation of the 49.7-meter-tall Tajik parliament building. Additionally, construction of a fifteen-story government complex valued at 1.5 billion RMB was commenced (Asia-Plus, 2020). Furthermore, to bolster personal relationships between leaders, China has invested significant resources in building roads, schools, and a reservoir in the region where the current Tajik president originates from.

## **Economic Restructuring Through the Belt and Road Initiative**

Major projects in Central Asia under China's BRI predominantly focus on multimillion-dollar infrastructure endeavors. These include initiatives such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan highway, the China-Tajikistan expressway, the China-Kazakhstan crude oil pipeline, and the China-Central Asia gas pipeline. Meanwhile, China is actively supporting the development of the trans-Caspian international transport corridor. Additionally, efforts are underway to enhance the traffic capacity of existing infrastructure like the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan highway and the China-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan highway. Consultations regarding the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway are also being advanced (Xi, 2023). These initiatives underscore that China's interests in Central Asia are driven not only by political considerations but also by its pursuit of energy security. Through the establishment of gas and oil pipelines and the construction of new transportation routes, China seeks to fulfill multiple objectives. These include bolstering regional security, ensuring a stable energy supply (Li and Wang, 2009), and facilitating the safe transportation of goods between China and Central Asia (Lengauer, 2011).

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the two economically disadvantaged countries in Central Asia, therefore, Chinese economic involvement followed a different pattern in the context of the BRI. So far as the economic relations are concerned, from 2015 to 2019, the total volume of goods traded between China and Kyrgyzstan experienced steady growth, except for a slight decline in individual years. However, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the total volume of goods traded between China and Kyrgyzstan sharply decreased in 2020. According to data from the General Administration of Customs of China, in 2020, the bilateral trade volume of goods between China and Kyrgyzstan was US\$ 2.901 billion, representing a year-on-year decrease of 54.3%. Specifically, China's exports to Kyrgyzstan amounted to US\$ 2.866 billion, down by 54.4% compared to the previous year. China's imports from Kyrgyzstan amounted to US\$ 0.035 billion, down by 47.3% year-on-year (CCPIT, 2021). Meanwhile, bilateral economic and trade exchanges between China and Tajikistan have become intensified from 2015. According to statistics from the General Administration of Customs of China, in 2019, the bilateral trade volume reached US\$ 1.674 billion, an increase of 11.2% year-on-year. Among them, China's exports to Tajikistan amounted to US\$ 1.59 billion, an increase of 11.2% year-on-year; imports from Tajikistan reached US\$ 84.62 million, up 10.1% year-on-year (CCPIT, 2020).

In 2019, approximately 400 Chinese companies and 170 joint ventures between China and Kyrgyzstan were active in Kyrgyzstan (uzima, 2019). Chinese investments and contractual commitments in Kyrgyzstan have totaled US\$ 4.73 billion since 2011 and within this figure, US\$ 2.8 billion has been allocated to the energy sector, US\$ 1.69 billion to transport infrastructure, and US\$ 150 million to the metals industry (China Global Investment Tracker). Meanwhile, up to end of 2021, Tajikistan hosted approximately 300 Chinese companies and six major joint ventures between China and Tajikistan, all actively engaged in various sectors within the country (Chinese Embassy's Economic and Commercial Section in Tajikistan, 2021). Formun Üstü

Chinese investments and contractual commitments have amounted to US\$ 3.33 billion since 2006 in Tajikistan, and within this total, US\$ 920 million have been dedicated to the energy sector, US\$ 560 million to transport infrastructure, US\$ 1.24 billion to the metals industry, and US\$ 610 million to real estate development (China Global Investment Tracker).

Just like in many emerging economies, China is obviously experiencing difficulties to get back to growth rates preceding the Covid pandemic and staying away from mega projects. According to some analysts, Beijing has embraced a new economic strategy for the region, reducing its investment in large-scale infrastructure projects and diversifying its risk in Kyrgyzstan, resulting in a decline in Chinese government-



to-government lending due to concerns over the country's debt burden, while Chinese private investments continue steadily. Major Chinese investments primarily focus on oil refining and gold mining (Van der Klay and Yau, 2021), yet public distrust towards foreign, particularly Chinese, businesses hampers capital inflows (Jones, 2023). Public protests have disrupted production and even led to the cancellation of significant projects, such as a US\$ 275 million logistics center in Naryn region (Putz, 2020). Recent events, including local protestors seizing control of Chinese mines during political unrest, have exacerbated concerns among businesspeople and hindered the new president's efforts to attract foreign investment. Chinese investors in Kyrgyzstan typically comprise first-time overseas investors drawn by markets with low competition (Van de Kley, 2020).

Chinese economic involvement in Tajikistan looks similar to that of Kyrgyzstan. Over the past five years, Chinese government lending to Tajikistan has significantly decreased. However, Chinese companies have been steadily increasing their investments, particularly in sectors such as mining, cement, textiles, and agriculture through joint ventures. Unlike loans from the Eximbank, these investments do not require repayment by the Tajik government. Typically, Chinese partners provide the majority of capital investment, while Tajik authorities facilitate land allocation and regulatory approval. In return, the Tajik government often offers tax incentives or land concessions. Chinese investors have notably established export industries in gold, silver, and cement production, largely dominated by Chinese firms. Despite this, major projects face difficulties due to Tajikistan's limited market and challenging business environment. Some Chinese investors have expressed interest in modernizing the Talco aluminum smelter, owned by President Rahmon's family, and participating in Line D, a proposed gas pipeline project. If realized, these projects could significantly impact Tajikistan's budgetary revenues, with Chinese firms' likely holding substantial stakes (Van de Kley, 2020).

Based on the statistics of China's customs agency-GACC, experts claim that there is a clear trend of trade increasingly favoring Beijing. For instance, in 2023, when trade between China and Central Asian states experienced a notable surge, Kyrgyzstan saw a significant 28.8 percent increase in trade turnover with China, reaching US\$ 19.8 billion. Similar to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan's trade balance heavily leaned towards China, with exports to Beijing amounting to just US\$ 80 million. The same year, Tajikistan recorded the highest percentage of gain in trade with China, with a remarkable 54 percent increase compared to the previous year, though its overall trade volume with China remained the lowest among Central Asian states at US\$ 3.9 billion. According to the figures from the GACC, Tajikistan's exports to China constituted a mere US\$ 250 million of the total turnover (Eurasianet, 2024).



## Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that China's aid to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan presents substantial opportunities, such as advancements in infrastructure development, economic growth, and enhanced bilateral relations. In Kyrgyzstan, Chinese aid has enabled significant infrastructure projects and provided debt relief. Similarly, in Tajikistan, aid has supported infrastructure development and economic initiatives through substantial loans and grants. Nonetheless, challenges persist, including potential over-reliance on Chinese aid and the possibility of concealed conditions attached to grants. Therefore, achieving a balance between leveraging developmental benefits and maintaining independent growth is a critical issue for both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are poised to benefit significantly from the BRI, particularly in terms of infrastructure development, energy security, economic growth, trade expansion, and joint ventures with Chinese companies. The BRI's extensive infrastructure investments, including highways, railways, and pipelines, promise to enhance connectivity within the region, facilitating access to global markets. Chinese investments in the energy sector, such as oil refining and gold mining, offer opportunities for diversifying energy sources and bolstering energy security. Secondly, BRI projects are expected to stimulate economic growth by generating employment, attracting foreign direct investment, and fostering trade relations with China and other BRI countries. The surge in trade turnover with China presents avenues for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to tap into the vast Chinese market, diversifying their export base and strengthening their economies. Lastly, joint ventures and investments with Chinese firms in sectors like mining, textiles, and agriculture hold promise for technology transfer, knowledge exchange, and capacity building, further contributing to the development of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's economies.

However, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan face several challenges in the context of the BRI. Firstly, concerns over debt sustainability from Chinese loans and investments pose risks to fiscal stability, especially if projects fail to yield sufficient returns or encounter repayment delays. Public opposition and protests against Chinese businesses could disrupt project implementation and deter investment, potentially leading to delays or cancellations. Secondly, both countries also grapple with limited market size, inadequate infrastructure, bureaucratic hurdles, and regulatory uncertainties, which hinder foreign investment and impede project execution. Political instability, corruption, and governance issues further undermine the effectiveness of BRI projects, deterring investors seeking stable environments. Lastly, increasing trade

dependency on China raises concerns about trade imbalance and vulnerability to economic fluctuations in the Chinese market, potentially impacting local industries and economies. Environmental concerns, including the adverse impacts of large-scale infrastructure projects and extractive industries, add complexity, potentially leading to social unrest and ecological degradation. Addressing these challenges will require concerted efforts to ensure sustainable and inclusive development in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

In summary, Chinese aid and the BRI have presented both opportunities and challenges for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. While they have contributed to significant infrastructure development, energy security, and economic growth, concerns persist regarding their long-term impact and sustainability. To ensure sustainable and inclusive development, transparent governance, effective risk management, and stakeholder engagement are crucial. Additionally, enhancing institutional capacity, improving regulatory frameworks, and promoting social and environmental safeguards are essential to fostering an enabling environment for investment and project implementation. Furthermore, careful evaluation and mitigation of risks are necessary to ensure that Chinese aid and the BRI benefit the people of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and promote sustainable development in the long run.

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