

# New Trends in Central Asian Connectivity

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**Abstract** The main aim of this article is to evaluate the impact of the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and of Uzbekistan's proactive regional policy to promote regional interconnectivity and to develop an "endogenous" cooperation mainly focused on the strategic interests of Central Asian countries. Within the BRI, Central Asia holds a strategic relevance, because this region is crossed by two of the six main BRI corridor projects – the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor and the Eurasian land bridge – which will contribute to improve regional cooperation and connections among these countries. For Central Asian republics, BRI represents an attractive project benefiting of Chinese huge investments aimed to boost infrastructures and to develop national economies. Under Mirziyoyev's leadership, Uzbekistan has undertaken a proactive and constructive regional diplomacy in Central Asia, based on the improvement of relations and cooperation with other Central Asian republics, which has become a key priority of Tashkent's foreign policy.

**Keywords** Central Asia. Belt and Road Initiative. Interconnectivity. Uzbekistan. Regional cooperation.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Uzbekistan: a New Approach Towards Regional Cooperation. – 3 The Belt and Road Initiative: Promoting Interconnectivity in Central Asia. – 4 Conclusions.



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## 1 Introduction

The approach of Central Asian republics towards regional cooperation and integration's initiatives in the economic, political or military fields has been characterized by a combination of factors, which have affected and often delayed the development of a regional interconnectivity. Since their independence, Central Asian states have showed limited interest to develop regional cooperation or to bolster economic integration, primarily because they have privileged the achievement of national interests, which were based on strengthening political sovereignty and economic independence. Central Asian states appeared not interested to promote regional cooperation: the only multilateral institution of cooperation exclusively composed by Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while Turkmenistan refused to join it because of its neutrality policy) was the Central Asian Economic Cooperation, renamed the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in 2001: however, CACO lost this peculiarity after Russia's adhesion in 2004. And the following merger with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC) in 2005 (Tolipov 2005).

Furthermore, the traditional rivalry and mistrust among Central Asian presidents was a key factor which negatively affected the development of a concrete regional cooperation in the post soviet region: as a matter of fact, the former Uzbek President Islam Karimov and Tajik President Rahmon had strained relations (due to border and energy disputes, because Uzbekistan feared the effects of the Tagikistan's hydropower project), while Karimov perceived Kazakhstan's first President Nazarbayev as a rival in order to assume regional leadership (Bohr 1998, 43-56). This attitude mainly affected transboundary relations, because the reciprocal suspicions and hostility has prevented any form of economic and energy cooperation, also undermining the attempts to achieve a definitive and complete solution of the shared border questions (border demarcation, minorities rights, political and legal status of the ethnic enclaves): moreover, also the landlocked geographic position of the region has further hindered its full integration in the economic world system.

In addition to the Central Asia's reluctance, we can also observe that all projects and initiatives based on regional cooperation have been promoted by external players: the Eurasian Economic Union (Russia), a free trade bloc within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (China), the "Modern Silk Road" project based on the development of trade and economic regional cooperation (United States). It is evident that the main rationale of these supranational projects and regional cooperation initiatives is linked to the strategic goals of the proposers rather than the political will to promote Central Asian economic and trade integration.

However, in the last years we can identify important indications that this landscape is progressively changing and the cooperation among Central Asian republics – both bilaterally and multilaterally – is increasing. Uzbekistan’s proactive regional policy and the China’s Belt and Road Initiative project – aimed to develop a growing interconnectivity in the region – can be considered the two main and significant drivers of this ongoing process.

## **2 Uzbekistan: a New Approach Towards Regional Cooperation**

Given its geographic centrality in the heart of Central Asia – sharing a border with the other four Central Asian republics and with Afghanistan – and with the largest population in the region, Uzbekistan benefits of a strategic geopolitical position which allows Tashkent to influence the economic and political development in the region as well as to contribute providing security and stability.

Since 2016 the new Uzbek President Mirziyoyev has worked to resolve disputes over water and border delimitation, also adopting several initiatives to promote and enhance regional cooperation which culminated with the summit of Central Asian leaders held in Kazakhstan in March 2018 (Cornell; Starr 2018, 36).

Under Mirziyoyev’s leadership, Uzbekistan has undertaken a proactive and constructive regional diplomacy in Central Asia, maintaining the profitable multivector strategy in foreign policy aimed to strengthen cooperation with both Russia and China – also attempting to balance their geopolitical and strategic interest on the country – as well as developing a new regional foreign policy based on the improvement of relations and cooperation with other Central Asian republics (Indeo 2017). Mirziyoyev has remained committed to the Uzbekistan’s foreign policy doctrine, which is based on four pillars: non-intervention in the internal matters of foreign countries; non-alignment with any military organizations, including non-deployment of foreign military bases on the territory of Uzbekistan; non-membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU); and the fourth recent pillar, the improvement of relations with Uzbekistan’s immediate neighbours, which has become the main priority of the Uzbekistan’s foreign policy (Weitz 2018, 9-12).

This Uzbek’s approach to forge improved regional political and economic cooperation is contributing to draw up a new scenario, within which Central Asian republics are engaged to overcome years of suspicion, mistrust, rivalries and antagonism developing mutually beneficial ties.

In strategic terms, the improvement of bilateral political relations with the other Central Asian countries, the agreements to demarcate

borders and to solve transboundary problems with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the political will to solve water disputes are aimed to promote and increase regional interconnectivity, paving the way for the realization of cross-border trade corridors which will help Uzbekistan to overcome its double-landlocked position, reaching lucrative markets in the EU, Turkey and along the Indian Ocean. In this new landscape, Uzbekistan will be able to promote its geopolitical role in the region, promoting initiatives to support this new framework of cooperation in the political, economic and security field.

The improvement of bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan clearly represents a necessary precondition in order to complete the railway connection between these countries, which will be a key component of the China-backed trans-regional railway project included in the Belt and Road Initiative (Eurasianet 2018). In September 2017 Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement to demarcate the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, which will downgrade the instability threats linked to the disputes on the shared border. Concerning the construction of hydro power projects in Kyrgyzstan (as Kambarata hydropower station) which were formerly opposed by Tashkent, now Uzbekistan is ready to cooperate and to be involved in a project which could have regional repercussions, also downgrading another source of tension and mistrust (Hashimova 2017).

Furthermore, in March 2017 Uzbekistan signed a strategic partnership with Turkmenistan which will produce significant geopolitical benefits, connecting Uzbekistan with the North-South railway from China through Turkmenistan which will enable Tashkent to open trade corridors with Caspian and Persian Gulf region. After the visit of the Uzbek President in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan agreed to allow the transit of Turkmen electricity exports to Tajikistan giving a significant contribution to the enhancement of the regional energy security, also considering that Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are engaged to supply Afghanistan with electricity exports (Putz 2017).

The visit of the Uzbek President in Tajikistan in April 2018 was the last pawn of the Tashkent's strategy to promote a regional cooperation based on mutual trust: Uzbekistan has restored profitable bilateral relations with Tajikistan, eliminating temporary visa which represented a big hindrance to the transboundary relations and mainly softened its position on the Roghun hydro-power plant project after decades of fierce opposition against a project which could deprive the country of the regular water flow necessary to cultivate cotton (Tolipov 2018).

In Uzbekistan's regional policy, Afghanistan plays a strategic key role as transit country for trade corridors and as economic partner. Tashkent has adopted a new approach towards Afghanistan, expressed by Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov in his official visit to Afghanistan in January 2017: according to Uzbek authorities, relations with Afghanistan should be based not exclusive-

ly on the prism of security threats, which was the predominant approach over the last 25 years, but reshaping relations in order to promote cross-border trade, humanitarian and cultural cooperation, as well as more active participation in implementing various mutually beneficial regional energy, infrastructure and transport projects (Weitz 2018, 18-19).

Uzbekistan is Afghanistan's only neighbour with which it has a railway connection (Termez-Hairaton-Mazar I Sharif) and at present Uzbekistan exports electricity, petroleum products, materials, agricultural machinery, medicines and medical equipment which support Kabul's attempts to consolidate state-building process. Uzbek and Afghan authorities have planned to implement the Trans Afghan railway project, realizing a new connection between Mazar I Sharif and Herat to facilitate bilateral trade cooperation and to find new alternative export routes, exploiting the possibility to deliver Uzbek goods to Europe through the Lapis Lazuli trade corridor, a massive infrastructure project involving roads, railways, and maritime routes crossing Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey (Mashrab 2018).

### **3 The Belt and Road Initiative: Promoting Interconnectivity in Central Asia**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a global geopolitical strategy backed by China in order to increase interconnectivity through the realization of economic and trade corridors crossing Eurasia to link China with Europe, Middle East and South Asia.

BRI has become the centrepiece of Xi's foreign policy. This ambitious initiative is composed by a land corridor - the Silk Road Economic Belt, which runs via Central Asia, Iran, Turkey and Eastern Europe - and a maritime network, the Maritime Silk Road, which runs through Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean. On the Chinese perspective, the BRI geopolitical projects aims to achieve two strategic goals:

- the implementation of an alternative continental route for trade and energy imports reducing the dependence on maritime routes crossing Malacca and South China Sea;
- the enhancement of a security buffer zone between Xinjiang western province and Central Asia, preserving Chinese western provinces from instability threats linked to Islamist terrorism (International Crisis Group 2017, 4-5).

China's trade toward EU is mainly based on maritime routes, so the development of land-corridors crossing Russia and Central Asia have become a significant tool for Beijing in order to diversify export routes, reducing the reliance on maritime corridors. Railway corri-

dors crossing Central Asia appear a profitable option because goods can be delivered faster to the markets – 16 days of travel from China to Europe – compared to the sea transport (35 days), even if the transport of a container by rail is more expensive (7,000 US\$) than the sea transport (more than 2,000 US\$) (Duarte 2018, 13).

In the Belt and Road Initiative, Central Asia plays a relevant role because it is the key to achieve the above-mentioned BRI's strategic goals: this region is crossed by two of the six main BRI corridor projects – the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor and the Eurasian land bridge – and three of the five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) share a border with Xinjiang, while the two remaining (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) share a border – together with Tajikistan – with the unstable Afghanistan.

Since 2013 – when Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the former Silk Road Economic Belt project during a speech at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan – China has invested billions of dollars to build new transport infrastructures (highways, railways, dry ports, pipelines) in Central Asia, or to upgrade existent ones, to create the basis in order to undertake this strategy aimed to increase trade, cooperation and investments (CADGAT 2019; Yiping 2016, 21). Moreover, Chinese President pointed out that “to forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand space for development in the Eurasian region, we should take an innovative approach and join hands in building an ‘economic belt along the Silk Road’. We may start with work in individual areas and link them up over time to cover the whole region” (Yiwei 2015, 93).

The involvement of Central Asian countries in the Belt and Road Initiative is evidently profitable and lucrative, ensuring them economic and political benefits: for instance, in geopolitical terms, Chinese growing presence in the region allows Central Asian countries to undertake a multi vector strategy in foreign policy, containing traditional Russian influence and balancing Moscow's pressures to join or to further develop the integration project in the economic field, namely the Eurasian Economic Union. The Chinese initiative is based on an inclusive dimension: all five Central Asian republics are involved in the BRI mainly because the support to this project does not include a rigid membership to a potential supranational organization like the adhesion to the Eurasian Economic Union (Bugajski; Assenova 2016). The convergence of massive investments to develop and upgrade national infrastructures is highly profitable for Central Asian countries, promoting interconnectivity and improving regional trade cooperation through the creation of trans-regional network of transport, also opening new markets for these economic-landlocked countries: furthermore, this modernization of the transport infrastructures allows Central Asian states to set aside the networks of pipelines, roads, and railways inherited by the Soviet era, which were

designed to serve the needs of the Russian hub of the Soviet economy (Indeo 2018, 135-8).

In the Belt and Road Initiative, Central Asia holds a strategic relevance because of its geographic centrality which is necessary for the success of the Chinese projects. As I mentioned above, Central Asia is crossed by two of the six main BRI corridor projects: the New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor is the older and involves Russia, linking China with Europe via Kazakhstan and Russia. This Northern route currently is the main artery of transport from China to the EU markets: it is composed by the three trans-Siberian corridors (all of which converge in the Urals, near Yekaterinburg, and from there the goods are transported to the EU). Among them, the corridor that runs through Kazakhstan - which starts on the Chinese-Kazakh border crossing of Alashankou/Dostyk - is the most important route, delivering the biggest number of containers: in 2016, it accounted for 68% of the entire volume of China-EU-China transit via Russia (Jakóbowski; Popławski; Kaczmarek 2018, 39-40). Between 2017 and 2018, the number of trains through this route rise by 73%, which means more than 6000 trains per year: over 2% of goods traded between EU and China are now transported by rail, up four times since 2007 (Russell 2019, 2-3).

The China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor is aimed to connect China-Kazakhstan railway to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran. We can observe that this corridor is strategically relevant in geopolitical terms, in order to downplay Moscow's influence in Central Asia mainly because it is conceived to bypass Russian territory (Cooley 2016, 6). For China this represents a strategic card to play, in order to diversify the export routes avoiding to depend on a single corridor (especially if this depends on Russian control, so balancing the relations with Russia as well as fostering a more deepen cooperation with Moscow to achieve common interests), developing an alternative route which crosses Central Asia.

The China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor also envisages additional and alternative branches, which could be also combined: the Trans-Caspian land and sea corridors running through the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus and the Black Sea and the train route through Turkey, which can use or the Trans Caspian route and then the recent Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway or and the overland route connecting Central Asia to Iran (Mercator Institute for China Studies 2018). The Trans-Caspian route - which will deliver at least 60 Mt of goods annually - is characterized by an intermodal architecture of transport, combining railway and ferries: the strong cooperation between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan (and potentially Turkmenistan) will be necessary to develop and link together the Caspian Sea ports of Aktau and Kuryk (Kazakhstan), and Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) with the Baku-Alyat new international port in Azerbaijan (Jakóbowski; Popławski; Kaczmarek 2018, 50).

The realization of other infrastructural projects in the space between China-Central Asia and the EU are helping the interconnectivity's target of the BRI. Among them, the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway in 2017 has allowed China and Central Asian exporters to benefit of a new export route to reach EU markets. The BTK route aims to be integral to China's Belt and Road initiative, implementing the Trans Caspian route as a corridor bypassing Russia: BTK's current capacity is 6.5 million tons of cargo but it will be able to transport up to 17 million tons of cargo by 2023 (Shahbazov 2017b). The rail connection between Khorgos, on Kazakhstan's border with China, and the Caspian Sea port of Aktau - one of the branch of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor - is the infrastructural link connecting with the BTK. In addition to China, also Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have openly expressed interest to use this railroad. Kazakhstan together with Azerbaijan and Georgia, established the International Trans-Caspian Transport Consortium and the International Trans-Caspian Transport Association, designed to ship goods from the Khorgos dryport on the Sino-Kazakh via the Caspian Sea (through the Kazakh ports of Aktau and Kuryk in the Caspian Sea) to Turkey and Europe (Uatkhanov 2017). Kazakhstan has already started to deliver cargo train carrying containers of wheat along the BTK, exploiting a new profitable route of trade export (Azernews 2018).

The renovated Turkmenbashi Sea Port will play the role of logistical hub, according to the Turkmen authorities, following the \$1.5 billion works which have tripled Turkmenistan's cargo-handling capacity to 25-26 million tons a year (State News Agency of Turkmenistan 2018; Pannier 2018): the only logistical problem is that the Khorgos-Aktau railway corridor is already opened and on stream, while Turkmenbashi port is not connected yet with railway links from China.

Uzbekistan is also interested in joining the BTK and becoming an important link within the China-Europe overland corridor network (Trend Az News Agency 2018; Shahbazov 2017a). However, Uzbekistan's participation in the BTK project strongly depends on the completion of a railroad connecting the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) with Navoi (Uzbekistan).

We can observe that a convergence of interests between China and Central Asia is pushing ahead the improvement of a regional cooperation within the BRI framework, in order to achieve common goals on foreign policy and to increase a profitable interconnectivity which will open new market outlets for Central Asian republics. According to the Central Asia perspective, the implementation of transport corridors must be necessarily based on a condition of regional stability and security, also requiring the establishment of good relations among Central Asian neighbouring countries to develop transnational railway corridors which involve them.



Central Asian republics have attracted massive investments from China and from multilateral financial institutions to realize these infrastructural and transport projects under the BRI umbrella such as new railways, highways, and the necessary connections and links among them. According to the Central Asia Data-Gathering and Analysis Team (2019, 3), China has financed 51 rail and road connectivity projects in Central Asia (some of them labelled as BRI projects, others as bilateral projects), investing nearly \$23.5 billion: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - which share a border with China - are the main recipient of these infrastructural investments (more than \$20 billion) to increase regional interconnectivity (3). Given its position Kazakhstan is playing the role of Central Asian pivot within the BRI project, as strategic transit country crossed by the Eurasian Land Bridge corridor, by the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor as well as is the fully involved in the Khorgos-Aktau railway corridor. Astana government has already received \$14.5 billion of China's Belt investment to realize these transport infrastructures and to develop some transport hubs along the Sino-Kazakh border: among them Khorgos - opened in 2015 - is the most relevant "land bridge" which currently represents the main commercial and logistical hub in Eurasia under the BRI label (Ghiasy; Zhou 2017, 20). In December 2015, Presidents Xi and Nazarbayev announced plans to link the Belt and Road Initiative together with Kazakhstan's *Nurly Zhol* (Bright Road) economic policy, highlighting the strategic complementarity between these initiatives, which aim to create new transport infrastructures and their integration with the big international railway and roads in order to consolidate the role of Kazakhstan as political and economic bridge between east and west (Kassenova 2017, 111-12; Indeo 2018, 143-4). In order to realize this ambitious plan, Kazakhstan has plans to invest \$8.4 billion by 2020 through *Nurly Zhol* program to modernize and to build railways and highways (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the United Kingdom 2019).

The support of Central Asia to the Belt and Road Initiative is helping them to diversify their export routes and their economies, overcoming their landlocked condition and also benefiting of transit fees. Moreover, a border management policy based on reciprocal trust could facilitate the realization of these corridors. Undoubtedly, a big impulse to a wider cooperation in Central Asia has derived from the proactive foreign policy inaugurated by the Uzbek President Mirziyoyev which aims to improve relations and cooperation among Central Asian republics, putting aside previous mistrust and interstate rivalries which have hindered the realization of projects of common interests (Weitz 2018, 31-42). Uzbek Presidents paid two official visits in Turkmenistan and the strengthening of good neighbourhood and fraternal relations between these countries could accelerate the realization of the Navoi-Turkmenbashi railway link (Uzbekistan National News Agency 2017).

This Mirziyoyev's approach to promote a profitable regional cooperation has produced positive results to realize the planned China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan railroad transportation corridor, which will be extended to Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey. China hopes that this corridor will be active by 2020. As a matter of fact, the recent improvement of relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan - after the tensions of the Karimov'era - has given a strong impulse to implement this project, with the joint commitment to finally realize the missing railway connection between these two countries: this corridor will connect China's western city of Kashgar to Osh (in the Kyrgyz sector of the Ferghana Valley), via the the Torugart Pass and from there it will run through Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan's eastern town of Pap, in Uzbekistan's section of the Ferghana Valley (Goble 2019). Furthermore, since February 2018 these countries are already connected through an highway from Kashgar (Chinese Xinjiang region) to the Chinese-Kyrgyz border (Irkeshtam) and then to Osh and Andijan before to reach Tashkent (KABAR 2019). In 2015 Uzbekistan inaugurated the Angren-Pap railway - an infrastructure which benefited from Chinese investments - which holds a strategic relevance for Uzbekistan connecting the whole national railway system, and also for China because the Angren-Pap is a key segment of the BRI railway project to Afghanistan.

The growing engagement of Central Asian republics in supporting these projects can be explained by the necessity to overcome their landlocked geographic position benefiting of additional and promising export routes. Since independence in 1991, for post soviet countries the Iranian ports near the Strait of Hormuz (Bandar Abbas and Chabar) have represented a concrete possibility to direct their exports to the Indian Ocean and then reaching international markets. The Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat railway - which is currently under construction - and its expected continuation to the Iranian city of Khaf are other fundamental segments which will be connected to the existent Termez-Hairaton-Mazar-I-Sharif railway allowing both Uzbekistan and China to implement this corridor and to deliver their export to the Iranian ports. The strategic role of Uzbekistan in this corridors derives from the fact that it is the only country to have a railway connection with Afghanistan (Iran Daily 2018).

Moreover, also the railway connecting Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran (inaugurated in 2014) is another segment which boost the BRI and Central Asian interconnectivity and export capacities, especially because goods are delivered from China to Iran in 14 days, instead 45 by sea (Reuters 2016).

In November 2017 officials from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey signed an agreement in Ashgabat to build the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, which must has been conceived as an additional segment of this "BRI-regional railway architecture" because

it is linked to the railroad between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan (which is a section of the wider Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railway) and to the existent BTK (Kucera 2017).

In December 2018, the first cargo from Afghanistan reached Baku port through the Lapis Lazuli Route: this corridor begins at the Afghanistan's Torghundi city in Herat province, then crosses Turkmenistan and reaches Turkmenbashi International Sea Port. After crossing Caspian Sea, goods are delivered from the Baku International Sea Port through Georgia's Tbilisi city to Turkey's Ankara city with branches to Georgian Poti and Batumi, then from Ankara to Istanbul (Afghanistan Times 2018).

#### 4 Conclusions

The combination between BRI's initiatives and Uzbekistan's Central Asian policy has provided a positive impulse to enhance regional interconnectivity and to promote a broader economic and political cooperation, contributing to reshape a new geopolitical landscape in Central Asia, which will produce relevant benefits for all involved actors.

For Central Asian countries, BRI represents an attractive idea: the realization of modern infrastructures of transport which will be linked to a regional grid will boost interconnectivity also allowing landlocked Central Asia to reach international markets. As a matter of fact, in spite of their geographic condition Central Asian republics can successfully exploit their strategic centrality within the BRI project, taking advantages from Chinese investments and modern infrastructures to improve and upgrade regional connections and cooperation.

The Chinese initiative will allow Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to further maintain their multivector strategy in foreign policy. Especially Kazakhstan can really play the role of regional hub: the Khorgos-Aktau connection is the strategic key-bridge linking China and EU without crossing Russia, mainly after the realization of the BTK railway. Concerning Uzbekistan, its role of regional pivot will depend on the stabilisation process in Afghanistan, a crossroad of different railway projects, so pushing President Mirziyoyev to promote cooperation with its neighbour as a driver to build stability.

A long-term stability scenario and the real possibility for Central Asian republics to deliver their goods in these railway and highway infrastructures represent the keys to success of the interconnectivity projects in the region: at the same time, also the realization of transport links among Central Asian countries will be also productive, expanding the opportunities of cooperation as a necessary precondition to also develop a constructive political dialogue.

In spite of several progresses, the idea that this improved cooperation and enhanced interconnectivity could lead to an "endogenous"

framework of cooperation (exclusively based on the interests and orientations of Central Asian republics) appears premature and far to reach: as a matter of fact, the second consultative meeting among Central Asian presidents have been postponed, temporarily losing an important opportunity to dialogue and to interact on regional unsolved issues which still delayed a concrete cooperation.

Moreover, a realistic development of an “endogenous” regional cooperation could be achieved preserving good relations with the main regional actors (Russia and China), even because Central Asian countries are involved – albeit to a different degree – in multilateral organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Even if Russia is currently involved in BRI, Moscow is also promoting a North-South railway axis opposed to the BRI east-west route, in order to contain the geopolitical success of the Chinese initiative in Central Asia, showing the efforts to preserve its traditional influence in the region.

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