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Chinese Projects in Central Asia

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Abstract. *This article examines Chinese investment and infrastructure projects in Central Asia, with particular attention to their implications for labour relations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It asks how investment opportunities interact with national institutions, employment practices, and worker representation. The study uses qualitative document analysis and comparative case analysis of scholarly literature, institutional reports, and publicly available project information. The labour-related evidence is primarily historical secondary material, including a 2021 desk study, rather than a new survey of conditions in 2025. The country cases show that Chinese investment supports energy, transport, mining, and industrial cooperation, while reported labour outcomes differ by country, sector, and enterprise. The reviewed sources describe both functioning collective agreements and challenges concerning wage differences, access to information, working time, and union coverage. These observations do not establish uniform practices across Chinese-invested enterprises or a causal effect of investment on labour rights. The article concludes that infrastructure and commercial assessments should be complemented by attention to transparency, social dialogue, and compliance with national labour standards.*

Keywords: *Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese investment, Central Asia, infrastructure, labour relations, trade unions, regional connectivity*

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Mərkəzi Asiyada Çin layihələri

Kamran Şirinzadə

Xülasə. *Bu məqalədə Mərkəzi Asiyada Çin investisiya və infrastruktur layihələri araşdırılır və onların Qazaxıstan, Qırğızıstan, Tacikistan və Özbəkistandakı əmək münasibətlərinə təsirlərinə xüsusi diqqət yetirilir. İnvestisiya imkanlarının milli qurumlar, məşğulluq təcrübələri və işçilərin təmsilçiliyi ilə necə qarşılıqlı əlaqədə olduğu soruşulur. Tədqiqatda keyfiyyətli sənəd təhlili və elmi ədəbiyyatın, institusional hesabatların və ictimaiyyətə açıq layihə məlumatlarının müqayisəli təhlili istifadə olunur. Əməklə bağlı dəlillər əsasən 2025-ci ildəki vəziyyətin yeni bir araşdırması əvəzinə, 2021-ci il masaüstü tədqiqatı da daxil olmaqla tarixi ikinci dərəcəli materialdır. Ölkə nümunələri göstərir ki, Çin investisiyaları enerji, nəqliyyat, mədənçilik və sənaye əməkdaşlığını dəstəkləyir, bildirilən əmək nəticələri isə ölkə, sektor və müəssisə üzrə fərqlənir. Baxılan mənbələr həm fəaliyyətdə olan kollektiv müqavilələri, həm də əmək haqqı fərqləri, məlumata çıxış, iş vaxtı və həmkarlar ittifaqının əhatə dairəsi ilə bağlı çətinlikləri təsvir*

edir. Bu müşahidələr Çin investisiyalı müəssisələr arasında vahid təcrübələr və ya investisiyanın əmək hüquqlarına səbəbli təsirini müəyyən etmir. Məqalədə infrastruktur və kommersiya qiymətləndirmələrinin şəffaflığa, sosial dialoqa və milli əmək standartlarına uyğunluğa diqqət yetirilməsi ilə tamamlanmalı olduğu qənaətinə gəlinir.

Açar sözlər: *Bir Kəmər, Bir Yol Təşəbbüsü, Çin investisiyası, Mərkəzi Asiya, infrastruktur, əmək münasibətləri, həmkarlar ittifaqları, regional əlaqə*

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1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is driven by several interconnected economic, geopolitical and strategic factors. In the context of Central Asia, two major considerations are particularly important. First, Central Asian countries are strategically significant for China because of their abundant natural resources, particularly oil and gas. China, as one of the world's largest energy consumers, seeks stable and uninterrupted access to these resources. Their geographical proximity further increases their importance: three of the countries considered in this study share borders with China. Second, China seeks to expand its external markets and relocate part of its industrial capacity abroad. This is particularly relevant to labour-intensive, low-value-added and environmentally burdensome industries that face increasingly limited opportunities for further expansion within China. Chinese enterprises, especially those operating in traditional industries, therefore have growing incentives to enter foreign markets (Pantucci & Lain, 2017).

The reviewed literature suggests that the BRI should also be viewed as a response to China's domestic economic challenges, particularly the need to gradually move from a low-cost manufacturing model toward higher-value-added production. At the same time, China's external economic activity is not limited to traditional energy and industrial projects. Chinese enterprises export expertise and technologies in hydropower and renewable energy and seek to strengthen their position in Central Asian energy markets.

The financial foundation of the BRI is substantial. According to PwC estimates cited in the literature, the initiative could mobilize up to US$1 trillion in Chinese outbound state financing over a ten-year period, primarily through preferential loans and, to a lesser extent, equity investment. Important institutional mechanisms include the Silk Road Fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China's foreign-exchange reserves and major state-owned banks (Taliga, 2021). China's dominant financial position in Central Asia also contributes to the leading role of Chinese enterprises in BRI projects. A significant proportion of Chinese financing remains within the Chinese economic system: loans provided to Central Asian governments may ultimately be used to contract Chinese companies, which frequently supply the equipment, technology and labour required for project implementation. Taliga (2021), referring to a cross-regional study by Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI), reports that more than 60% of China-financed BRI projects were awarded to Chinese companies.

China's regional strategy has generally been characterized by three principles: limited interference in the domestic affairs of partner countries, an emphasis on economic cooperation, and efforts to strengthen China's international reputation (Pantucci & Lain, 2017). This approach has contributed to China's emergence as an important and relatively convenient economic partner in Central Asia. In addition to loans and direct investment, China has provided substantial grants for infrastructure and social projects. Kyrgyzstan received more than US$300 million for road construction and drinking-water infrastructure, while Tajikistan received approximately US$230 million for road rehabilitation.

The BRI is conceived as a long-term initiative, with its implementation potentially extending over several decades. The year 2049 is frequently identified as an important milestone because it coincides with the centenary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Consequently, the initiative extends well beyond the simple restoration of historical trade routes. Its contemporary scope encompasses broader economic connectivity and infrastructure development linking China with Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe and other regions (Shirinzade, 2026).

The BRI can therefore be interpreted as an important component of China's long-term economic and foreign-policy strategy and, potentially, as an instrument for restructuring its domestic economic model (Clarke, 2014). Declining export growth, slower domestic and global economic expansion, and the need to shift from investment- and export-led growth toward greater domestic consumption have contributed to its development. China's prolonged emphasis on heavy industry has also generated significant industrial overcapacity.

The BRI provides an external mechanism for absorbing part of this excess capacity through the internationalization of Chinese engineering, construction, equipment, materials and technologies. By expanding transport and economic connectivity across Asia, Europe and Africa, China also expects to stimulate demand for its goods and services and generate longer-term economic growth. The initiative is particularly relevant to less-developed inland Chinese provinces, where improved international connectivity may support economic development and reduce regional disparities.

Domestic stability is another consideration. Improved connectivity with the interior regions, particularly Xinjiang, is intended to strengthen economic integration and regional stability. At the international level, the BRI simultaneously serves China's ambition to increase its economic and geopolitical influence, strengthen relations with neighboring states and expand the international role of Chinese finance and currency.

The geographical and economic scale of the initiative is considerable. Earlier source literature describes approximately 65 countries as being connected to the BRI, representing more than half of the world's population, around 30% of global economic activity and infrastructure investment requirements estimated at approximately US$5 trillion.

The BRI has sometimes been compared with the Marshall Plan because both involve large-scale international infrastructure and economic development initiatives. However, the comparison has important limitations. China presents the BRI as an inclusive and mutually beneficial framework in which participating countries are encouraged to cooperate without the political conditions traditionally associated with external assistance. China also emphasizes that the BRI is not a formal alliance and does not impose political obligations.

Nevertheless, the economic relationship may involve implicit or project-specific conditions, including the use of Chinese labour, equipment and technology, financial obligations and long-term access to

natural resources. At the same time, China's own financial resources are insufficient to meet the entire investment requirement of the BRI. Consequently, cooperation with foreign governments, corporations, investment funds and public-private partnerships (PPPs) is essential for implementing large-scale projects.

The initiative also creates opportunities for non-Chinese companies, particularly in infrastructure-related sectors. Foreign suppliers of technology, equipment, components and raw materials may cooperate with Chinese construction companies in overseas markets. Engineering, procurement and construction firms can similarly establish partnerships with Chinese enterprises and use BRI projects to enter new markets. The Siemens–SEPCOIII cooperation, including a US$1 billion order for a power plant in Saudi Arabia, illustrates the potential for such international partnerships. Such cooperation may also provide foreign firms with access to broader Chinese business networks. Successful cooperation with major Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) can strengthen foreign companies' reputations and facilitate subsequent participation in Chinese and international projects. The Siemens–SEPCOIII case demonstrates how successful overseas cooperation can generate recommendations and additional business opportunities within the Chinese market.

Finally, the BRI may create investment opportunities for private-equity firms and institutional investors. Chinese public financing, guarantees and state support can improve the risk-return profile of infrastructure projects in emerging markets, while state-owned enterprises may benefit from substantial government backing. China's state-owned policy insurance mechanisms may additionally provide protection against certain political and social risks associated with overseas projects.

This article examines how Chinese projects combine infrastructure and economic objectives with country-specific labour relations. It compares the four country cases and considers the limits of drawing general conclusions from historical secondary evidence.

The literature approaches these questions from complementary perspectives. Shambaugh (2013) examines China’s global role, while Laruelle (2015) analyses the US use of the Silk Road concept, providing a comparative policy context rather than direct evidence for Chinese financing. Regional studies examine investment opportunities, institutional constraints, and differing local perceptions (Aminjonov et al., 2019; Hoh, 2019; Jochec & Jenish Kyzy, 2018; Manish & Behera, 2024; Owen, 2020; Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019; Wolters, 2018). World Bank (2019, 2020) reports provide transport and country-level economic context. Azerbaijan-focused work is used only for the wider connectivity discussion (Shirinzade, 2023, 2026).

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine the role, objectives, and implications of Chinese projects in Central Asia. The research focuses on China's economic, infrastructural, energy, transportation, and connectivity projects in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, with Turkmenistan considered only as part of the regional transit context. Particular attention is given to projects associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while also considering Chinese investments and bilateral cooperation that operate outside the formal BRI framework.

The study adopts a qualitative case-study design combined with comparative analysis. A case-study approach is appropriate because Chinese engagement in Central Asia involves diverse projects with different economic, political, geographic, and strategic characteristics. The comparative dimension

allows the research to identify similarities and differences in China's engagement across the four country cases.

The analysis examines Chinese projects through four principal dimensions: economic, infrastructural, political-diplomatic, and strategic-security. The economic dimension considers trade, foreign direct investment, financing, employment, industrial cooperation, and access to natural resources. The infrastructural dimension focuses on transport corridors, railways, roads, energy infrastructure, pipelines, logistics facilities, and telecommunications. The political-diplomatic dimension examines bilateral relations, intergovernmental agreements, diplomatic initiatives, and institutional cooperation. The strategic-security dimension considers connectivity, regional stability, border security, energy security, and China's broader interests in Central Eurasia.

The research is based primarily on secondary data obtained from academic literature, official government documents, international organizations, research institutes, and reputable policy publications. Primary documentary sources include statements and policy documents published by the Chinese government, the governments of Central Asian states, and relevant Chinese and regional institutions.

Academic sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, edited volumes, and scholarly studies addressing Chinese foreign policy, the BRI, Central Asian geopolitics, infrastructure development, geoeconomics, and China–Central Asia relations. Reports from international organizations and research institutions are used to obtain information concerning investment, trade, infrastructure development, energy cooperation, and regional connectivity. Where available, project-level information is examined in order to identify the project's location, sector, financing structure, participating institutions, implementation period, and intended economic or strategic objectives. The study also considers publicly available statistical data concerning trade, investment, infrastructure, and energy cooperation.

The study uses thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns in China's Central Asian projects. Documents and scholarly literature are examined according to several analytical categories: project objectives, sector, financing mechanisms, participating actors, expected benefits, implementation challenges, and broader implications. The research also applies a geoeconomic perspective to examine how economic instruments and infrastructure projects can contribute to broader foreign-policy objectives. This approach does not assume that all Chinese projects are primarily geopolitical. Instead, it investigates the interaction between economic interests, connectivity objectives, diplomatic relations, and strategic considerations.

A comparative analysis is subsequently used to determine whether China's engagement demonstrates common patterns across Central Asia or whether project objectives and outcomes vary according to individual country conditions. The collected material is analyzed through qualitative interpretation and cross-case comparison. First, relevant Chinese projects are categorized according to sector and country. Second, their stated objectives and implementation mechanisms are examined. Third, the economic and political implications of these projects are compared across the four country cases.

The study distinguishes between officially stated objectives and interpretations offered by academic and policy literature. This distinction is important because Chinese government documents generally emphasize principles such as mutual benefit, connectivity, development, and cooperation, whereas some external analyses interpret particular projects in terms of China's geopolitical, economic, or strategic interests. Presenting these perspectives separately helps avoid treating contested interpretations as established facts.

The labour-related country accounts rely substantially on Taliga (2021), which reports research conducted in 2020. Interviews and statements attributed to union officials in that report are treated here as secondary evidence; no original interviews, fieldwork, or new employee survey are claimed. Historical project, workforce, and policy figures retain their source-period meaning and are not presented as a verified inventory of conditions in late 2025.

3 Results

3.1 Chinese investment in Kazakhstan

In the historical account reviewed by Taliga (2021), the Kazakh government had reported, since 2015, more than 50 Chinese investment projects, including joint ventures in mining, chemicals, and petrochemicals. For several years, authorities declined to release a full project list despite requests from policy specialists and environmental organisations, referring to commercial confidentiality. In September 2019, Kazakhstan Invest JSC—established in 2017 as the successor to the national investment and export agency KAZNEX INVEST—published an overview of 55 joint Kazakh–Chinese projects with a combined value of US$27.6 billion. According to that review, 15 projects had been completed, 11 were under implementation, and 29 remained under consideration.

Oil and gas constitute a major area of cooperation, with numerous joint ventures involving Chinese shareholders. A key participant is China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), a large state-owned energy company with operations and interests in more than 30 countries. CNPC acquired a stake in Aktobe Munay Gas in 1997 and holds 85.42% of its shares. In Kazakhstan, the company has participated in oil-field development and in the construction of oil and gas pipelines, including the Kazakhstan–China oil pipeline and the Kazakhstan–China gas pipeline. Aktobe Munay Gas operates in northern Kazakhstan and employs approximately 6,300 permanent workers. The source material reports that 88 employees were Chinese, compared with 124 before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The company's trade union is described as maintaining a constructive relationship with management and having concluded eight collective agreements since 2000. Taliga (2021) identifies the collective agreement applicable to the reporting period as covering 2017–2020.

Another major CNPC-related enterprise in Kazakhstan is PetroKazakhstan, whose ownership is divided between CNPC (67%) and the national company KazMunayGas (33%). Its activities include acquiring, exploring, developing, and producing oil and gas fields—particularly the Kumkol field in the Kyzylorda region—as well as selling oil and refined petroleum products.

Interview accounts reproduced by Taliga (2021) suggest that investment retention, commercial objectives, and worker representation can create differing institutional priorities. The authorities appear keen to retain CNPC as a major investor. However, the extent to which state agencies monitor foreign-owned companies is difficult to establish, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when labour inspections concerning employment, environmental, and other matters were suspended.

3.2 Chinese projects and labour relations in Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyzstan case reviewed by Taliga (2021) covers Chinese participation in energy infrastructure, oil refining, and mining. In 2019, Sino-Pipeline International Company began construction of the Kyrgyz section of Line D of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline. Chinese companies also built two refineries in the north of the country: Kara-Balta, with an approximate annual capacity of 800,000 tonnes, and Tokmok, with a capacity of 450,000 tonnes. Both facilities reportedly operated below capacity because

of limited crude-oil supplies. The Kara-Balta refinery suspended operations following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the shutdown, it employed approximately 775 people, including around 500 local workers, with the remainder coming from China.

Chinese investors are also active in mining and quarrying. According to the reported figures, Kyrgyzstan had 11 companies operating mines and quarries that each employed at least 500 people; four were owned by Chinese investors. Zijin Mining Group, a major Chinese mining company, holds a 60% stake in Altynken LLC, which operates the Taldybulak Levoberezhny gold deposit, described in the source as Kyrgyzstan's third-largest gold mine. Commercial production began in July 2015, and output reached 133,335 ounces of gold in 2019. In June 2019, Kyrgyzstan's Investment Support and Protection Agency signed a framework agreement with Daren Group, Lingbao Gold Group, and Full Gold Mining to develop a new gold-recovery facility.

E. Tadjibaev, identified in Taliga (2021) as chairman of the Trade Union of Miners and Metallurgists of Kyrgyzstan, reported that trade unions were present in three of the four Chinese-owned companies and represented approximately 90% of their employees. Unionisation was more difficult in subcontracting firms, which often operated for only six to twelve months. Chinese investors reportedly preferred to use subcontractors from China where possible. Establishing a union in a Chinese-invested company was not generally described as impossible: although employers did not actively support unionisation, they did not necessarily obstruct it. A significant proportion of locally recruited employees were skilled workers familiar with trade unions, although the requirement to pay union dues discouraged some from joining.

Despite the legal authority of a trade union to operate once established, Chinese-owned companies were reportedly reluctant to recognise unions before their formal registration. Several years earlier, protests had taken place at the Chinese-operated Orlovka gold mine after the company allegedly failed to comply with a government requirement that at least 90% of its workforce be local. Workers also demanded equal pay and employment contracts consistent with Kyrgyz labour legislation for both local and foreign employees.

One explanation offered by the company for differences in wages was that Chinese workers lived far from their homes and families and therefore faced circumstances that were not directly comparable with those of local employees. Trade unions raised concerns with local authorities, the Labour Inspectorate, and the Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Migration. According to the source, Chinese employers were reluctant to provide wage supplements for night work, hazardous conditions, high-altitude employment, or rotational work involving travel to camps, despite such payments being required under the Labour Code. Employers also argued that local workers' wages were already above the national average. Trade union representatives maintained that legally required allowances should be paid in all cases, even if this affected the basic wage structure.

Taliga (2021) reports that some investors referred to differences between home-country practices and host-country labour requirements when explaining their employment arrangements. Employers also pointed to Chinese workers' willingness to accept company-established schedules and conditions. Disagreements reportedly concerned 12-hour shifts in place of the standard eight-hour day and lunch breaks limited to 15 minutes. These accounts indicate potential tensions between company practices, workers' expectations, and the requirements of national labour law.

3.3 Chinese investment in Tajikistan

In the Chinese–Tajik joint ventures described by Taliga (2021), the Chinese partner commonly provides most of the capital, while the Tajik side facilitates land allocation, permits, and regulatory approvals. The government has also offered tax concessions or land at no cost in some cases. Private investment projects require state approval, and the Tajik authorities have presented Chinese companies as attractive partners in the mining sector because of the anticipated benefits they bring.

Nevertheless, observers have raised concerns about the consistency with which investment legislation is applied. In October 2019, reports described tax exemptions granted by the Tajik parliament to Chinese companies investing in the country. TBEA, a company active in power generation and renewable-energy construction, received tax concessions on imported equipment and technology for the development of the Upper Kumarg deposit in Sughd Region and the East Duoba deposit in Ayni District. The concessions were reportedly linked to the period required for the company to recover its US$331 million investment in a 400-megawatt power plant in Dushanbe, financed through a preferential loan from China Eximbank.

These examples illustrate the close relationship between investment attraction, state facilitation, and negotiated financial incentives. They also raise questions about transparency, the distribution of benefits, and the degree to which public authorities consistently apply domestic rules to foreign-invested projects.

3.4 Chinese investment and infrastructure in Uzbekistan

According to China Investment Monitor figures reproduced in Taliga (2021), Chinese investments and contracts in Uzbekistan between 2013 and 2020 totalled US$2.24 billion. The reported breakdown included US$720 million in real estate, US$560 million in transport, US$440 million in chemicals, and US$340 million in energy. Other Uzbek sources estimated Chinese foreign direct investment at US$3.9 billion over the preceding three years, while the government set a target of increasing annual Chinese investment to US$5 billion by 2025. These figures come from different reporting bases and should therefore not be treated as directly interchangeable.

At the beginning of 2020, Uzbekistan hosted 1,652 enterprises with Chinese investment, representing 16% of all enterprises with foreign participation. Of these, 531 had been established in 2019, and more than 120 were wholly Chinese-owned. According to the Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan (FTUU), only 15 Chinese-invested enterprises had trade unions. In an effort to attract foreign direct investment, Uzbekistan established an agency dedicated to attracting foreign investors and introduced tax exemptions for residents of free economic zones. Under the reported scheme, investments above US$10 million qualified for a ten-year exemption; investments between US$5 million and US$10 million for seven years; those between US$3 million and US$5 million for five years; and investments between US$0.3 million and US$3 million for three years. In December 2019, the government also decided to open a representative office of the Ministry of Investment and Foreign Trade in China to facilitate engagement with prospective investors.

Uzbekistan’s economic relationship with China initially centred on the export of strategic raw materials, including natural gas, copper, cotton fibre, and mineral fertilisers. Gas transportation has also been important. Although Uzbekistan’s own hydrocarbon reserves are described as relatively limited, the country has a significant transit role in transporting Turkmen gas to China. In addition to the existing pipeline through Kazakhstan, plans were reported for a 210-kilometre section of the D-line connecting Turkmenistan with China.

Over time, cooperation has broadened to include transport connectivity and energy infrastructure. The China Railway Tunnel Construction Group upgraded the Andijan–Pap–Angren–Tashkent railway section, one of the routes associated with the Silk Road Economic Belt. The work included construction of the 19-kilometre Kamchik Tunnel and railway electrification between 2013 and 2016. In October 2020, regular rail freight services were launched between Hebei Province, near Beijing, and Tashkent, with reports indicating at least 12 departures per week from Hebei.

Chinese investment has also extended into industry, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and water management. For Uzbekistan, this diversification forms part of a broader ambition to move away from an economic model centred on raw-material exports and towards the production and export of goods with greater added value. Chinese firms have participated in the development of joint high-technology industrial parks. In late August 2019, the two governments signed an agreement to establish a joint investment fund with authorised capital of US$1 billion, intended to support high-technology projects in the chemical and petrochemical industries and production facilities in the oil and gas sector.

Other proposed Uzbek–Chinese projects have included power plants and wind turbines in Navoi, Samarkand, and Bukhara, reportedly valued at US$720 million; hydrocarbon production projects valued at US$600 million; further development of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan–China transport corridor; railway construction; logistics centres along the Andijan–Osh–Irkeshtam–Kashgar route; and the construction of the Kamchik highway tunnel. As Owen (2020, p. 266) notes in the source cited, Uzbekistan's objective is not simply to function as a transit territory for Chinese manufactured goods. It also seeks to become an industrial and transport hub serving other Central Asian countries and Afghanistan.

Public attitudes towards Chinese investment in Uzbekistan have reportedly been more favourable than in neighbouring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. One possible explanation is that Uzbekistan's closer economic engagement with China developed more recently, following the launch of economic reforms under the country's new leadership in September 2016. Central Asia Barometer survey results cited by Taliga (2021) indicated that in 2019, 65% of respondents in Uzbekistan strongly supported Chinese investment in national energy and infrastructure, compared with 7% in Kazakhstan and 9% in Kyrgyzstan. In 2020, the share of strong supporters in Uzbekistan declined to 48%. At the same time, the proportion of Uzbek respondents who were very concerned that Chinese development projects could increase external debt rose from 7% to 25%.

3.5 Trade unions and labour conditions in Uzbekistan

The situation of social partnership in Chinese-invested enterprises in Uzbekistan appears mixed. Despite the large number of such companies, only around 1% reportedly had a trade union, even though a new Trade Union Law that took effect in March 2020 simplified the registration of primary trade union organisations. Where unions had been established, Chinese employers were not generally reported to oppose them and were willing to sign collective agreements.

According to the historical account in Taliga (2021), the FTUU reported that, over the three years preceding that report, it had received no information from member organisations about labour conflicts or individual employment disputes in Chinese companies. Chinese investors were said to comply with Uzbek labour legislation. Although wage differences between foreign and local workers existed, union representatives did not identify them as a major problem requiring separate intervention. Issues concerning Chinese investors were generally handled directly between workplace-level unions and employers rather than being raised by the federation as a broader policy concern. This position is

discussed in the secondary source in connection with the government's emphasis on attracting foreign direct investment, creating jobs, and accelerating economic growth (Taliga, 2021).

4. Discussion

4.1 Geopolitical context and the role of external actors

Central Asia's strategic environment is shaped by the involvement of multiple external powers. In addition to China, the principal actors include Russia, the United States, the European Union, India, Japan, South Korea, and Türkiye. T. Umarov of the Carnegie Moscow Center, as cited in Taliga (2021), has highlighted the complexity of this environment and the importance of regional states' efforts to preserve balanced relations with external partners. In this context, some Central Asian governments regard Russia as a potential counterweight to China's growing economic presence.

Russia remains one of China's principal geopolitical counterparts in Central Asia because of its substantial political, security, and economic influence. The reviewed literature presents Moscow as an important actor in the regional security sphere. Nevertheless, Russia is not an equivalent economic competitor to China in the region. The structure of the Russian economy limits its capacity to become a major market for Central Asian raw materials, while China's demand for energy and other resources gives it a distinct economic position.

Consequently, the relationship between China and Russia in Central Asia is not necessarily characterised by direct competition across every policy area. A practical division of roles has often been observed: Russia retains considerable influence over regional security, while China places greater emphasis on trade, investment, and economic development. The United States has also been an important external actor, although the reviewed accounts describe variation in the scope and timing of its regional engagement.

The European Union remains an important investor in Central Asia, but China's economic role has continued to expand. On 17 June 2019, the EU adopted its strategy, *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*, which prioritises resilience, prosperity, and regional cooperation. In December 2020, the EU Special Representative for Central Asia convened the online forum *EU–Central Asia Dialogue on Partnership for Prosperity*. The event brought together senior representatives of the European Commission, deputy prime ministers and trade and economy ministers from Central Asian states, as well as nearly 200 public- and private-sector participants from the EU and the region. Despite these diplomatic and economic initiatives, the United States and EU member states face constraints in matching China's role in regional trade and investment. Their capacity to offer an alternative security presence is also limited. Regional governments have approached NATO's military presence cautiously, while expanded Western military involvement could affect the security interests of Moscow and Beijing.

4.2 The Belt and Road Initiative as a strategic framework

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) should be understood not only as a programme for international infrastructure development but also as a central component of China's domestic and foreign-policy strategy. It supports Beijing's longer-term ambitions and forms part of the country's broader "going global" approach. The action plan developed by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), and the Ministry of Commerce articulated the initiative's general direction. In its initial form, however, the plan was closer to a strategic vision than to

a detailed implementation blueprint; its broad scope left considerable flexibility in how individual projects could be designed and carried out.

China established a dedicated coordinating office under the NDRC to oversee BRI-related implementation. The initiative was also supported by a substantial financing framework. An estimate by PwC suggested that BRI could mobilise as much as US$1 trillion in Chinese state-backed overseas financing over a ten-year period. Such support was expected to take the form primarily of concessional lending, supplemented by equity investment. The financing architecture included the Silk Road Fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), foreign-exchange resources, and major Chinese state-owned banks.

The initiative was conceived as a long-term undertaking, potentially extending over three or four decades. The year 2049 is frequently cited as a significant milestone because it marks the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Although BRI is often presented as an effort to revive historical trade routes, its objectives extend well beyond the restoration of former links between China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. It combines transport connectivity with wider economic, industrial, and geopolitical ambitions. In this sense, BRI is closely linked to China's long-term development strategy and international engagement. It has been presented as a means of shaping domestic economic development while expanding China's role abroad; some analysts have also interpreted it as a potential instrument for restructuring aspects of the Chinese economy.

4.3 Economic motivations behind the BRI

Several domestic and international economic pressures help explain the launch and expansion of BRI. These include weaker export performance, subdued economic growth in China and globally, and the need to move towards a more consumption-oriented growth model rather than relying predominantly on government investment and exports. China's development model, combined with sustained support for heavy industry, contributed to excess production capacity in a number of sectors. Government intervention has been a significant feature of this process, and Chinese authorities identified multiple industries in which measures were required to curb further overproduction.

Against this background, overseas infrastructure and industrial projects can create outlets for Chinese capital, technology, equipment, and construction capacity. They can also strengthen access to energy and other raw materials and deepen China's economic links with neighbouring states. These objectives do not necessarily explain every project individually, but they provide a useful framework for examining the expansion of Chinese investment across Central Asia.

4.4 Cross country patterns and labour representation

Across Central Asia, governments have introduced measures to attract additional foreign direct investment, while the extent of their dependence on Chinese capital varies. In some circumstances, this dependence has been characterised as investment pursued under constrained alternatives. Publicly available information about Chinese investment remains limited both at the macroeconomic level and at the level of individual companies (World Bank, 2019). Obtaining details about a particular project often requires a formal request to the relevant authorities, which determine what information can be disclosed and how much detail can be provided. At the enterprise level, trade unions may have little access to performance data because companies classify it as confidential.

Foreign-owned businesses may also apply management practices familiar from their home markets. Where trade unions and workers have limited bargaining power, investors may have an incentive to meet only the minimum requirements of local labour legislation. The source material suggests that managers of Chinese enterprises can be reluctant to engage in social dialogue, particularly at newly established workplaces. However, these observations should not be generalised to every company or country: labour relations differ according to the national legal framework, sector, company, and strength of local institutions.

Employment quotas for local workers have gradually been introduced in Central Asian countries, with reported requirements generally ranging from 70% to 90%, depending on the country and industry. Compliance is not always assured (Taliga, 2021). Wage disparities between Chinese and locally recruited workers have been justified in different ways. Employers may argue that Chinese employees are separated from their families or that local workers already earn more than the official minimum wage. Such explanations can complicate collective bargaining when unions lack access to reliable data on pay structures and employment conditions.

The bargaining position of trade unions is weakened by several interrelated factors. Wages and tariff rates may be determined unilaterally by employers rather than negotiated collectively. Unions may not receive the information needed to develop evidence-based wage demands, while differences in pay policies among subsidiaries of the same investor can make comparisons difficult. Collective agreements may simply reproduce legal requirements for bonuses and additional compensation—such as payments for overtime and night work—without establishing benefits beyond the statutory minimum. In these circumstances, unions may focus on securing non-monetary benefits and preventing workplace disputes rather than achieving substantial improvements in remuneration.

Trade unions' limited engagement with the wider economic and political implications of Chinese investment may reflect their immediate institutional priorities. Their day-to-day work is generally concentrated on working conditions, compliance with labour law, collective bargaining, and workplace issues. Their engagement may also be shaped by national policies that prioritise the attraction of foreign investment (Taliga, 2021).

4.5 Limitations

The study is a qualitative synthesis of selected secondary material and does not provide a representative sample of Chinese-invested enterprises or workers. Much of the project and labour evidence concerns 2019–2020 and cannot establish current conditions. The original sources use different definitions of investment, contracts, project completion, and enterprise participation, so their totals are not directly comparable. Reported interviews and survey results have not been independently replicated. Turkmenistan is discussed in relation to regional transit but is not a separate country case. Source selection dates, a complete documentary corpus, and an independent coding procedure are not available in the supplied material. These limits restrict causal inference and generalisation.

5. Conclusion

Chinese investment in Central Asia is shaped by a combination of economic, geopolitical, and strategic considerations. The BRI provides a broad framework for expanding transport connectivity, securing access to natural resources, supporting overseas commercial activity, and strengthening China's regional influence. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have each pursued cooperation with

Chinese companies, but the scale, sectoral distribution, and institutional conditions of that cooperation differ.

The country cases indicate that investment can support infrastructure development, energy production, mining, transport links, and industrial diversification. At the same time, questions remain concerning transparency, public oversight, the consistent application of national legislation, and the distribution of benefits. Labour relations are similarly varied. Some Chinese-invested enterprises have functioning trade unions and collective agreements, whereas in others union coverage is limited or workers face difficulties related to wage disparities, employment contracts, overtime, and additional compensation.

The evidence presented does not establish that all Chinese investment in the region is economically unsustainable or that labour practices are uniform across Chinese-owned enterprises. Rather, it points to the importance of evaluating projects through multiple criteria, including commercial performance, access to resources, employment creation, security and political cooperation, transparency, and compliance with labour standards. The reviewed synthesis suggests that China may assess the value of its regional investments according to objectives that extend beyond immediate economic returns, including access to natural resources, employment, military and security advantages, and political cooperation. Future assessments should therefore combine economic analysis with country-specific examination of governance, environmental oversight, and the effectiveness of labour institutions.

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