

TRANSPORT CORRIDORS AND GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF UZBEKISTAN'S ROLE IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract: *This article scrutinizes the interplay between transport corridors and national interests, with a primary focus on Uzbekistan within the Central Asian context. Utilizing a case study methodology, the paper examines the multifaceted dynamics of transport corridors in Uzbekistan and their implications for the country's socio-economic and geopolitical landscape. Drawing from an extensive range of scholarly works, reports, and official documents, this research provides an in-depth analysis of the strategic importance of transport infrastructure in shaping regional and national interests.*

Keywords. *Transport corridors, Geopolitical interests, Central Asia, Uzbekistan.*

1. Introduction: Central Asia has emerged as a pivotal region in global geopolitics due to its strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Transport corridors, vital conduits for trade and connectivity, play a crucial role in shaping national interests, fostering economic development, and enhancing regional cooperation. This article focuses on Uzbekistan, a key player in Central Asia, and examines the interplay between transport corridors and national interests. To comprehend the current state of transport corridors in Central Asia, it is essential to consider the historical context. The ancient Silk Road, connecting civilizations across Eurasia, laid the foundation for the region's centrality in trade and cultural exchange. Today, modern transport corridors aim to revive and enhance this historical legacy, providing landlocked nations like Uzbekistan access to global markets.

2. Geopolitical Significance:

2. Geopolitical Significance: Navigating the Silk Roads of Power in Central Asia
The geopolitical significance of transport corridors in Central Asia has been extensively examined by leading scholars, offering profound insights into their role in shaping regional dynamics. Starr (2014), in his seminal work "Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane," delves into the historical context, highlighting how the Silk Roads were pivotal in connecting civilizations and influencing power structures. His analysis extends to the

contemporary era, where transport corridors continue to play a crucial role in shaping alliances and promoting regional stability.

Moreover, Blank (2008) contributes significantly to the understanding of the geopolitical dimensions of transport corridors in Central Asia. In "The Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Chinese Factor," Blank explores how these corridors serve as geopolitical instruments, influencing power balances and strategic alliances. The author emphasizes the complex interplay between economic interests and political considerations, providing a nuanced perspective on the multifaceted nature of transport corridors in the region.

Building upon the insights of Starr and Blank, this article assesses the contemporary geopolitical landscape in Central Asia. It examines how transport corridors contribute to the realignment of alliances and power dynamics within the region. By referencing the works of these scholars, the article aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the instrumental role of transport corridors in reshaping geopolitical narratives.

Expanding on this perspective, Kazakh scholar Shaimardanov (2017) emphasizes that the geopolitical significance of transport corridors is not confined to economic considerations alone. In his work, he posits that Central Asian transport corridors play a pivotal role in shaping the region's security architecture. The strategic location of these corridors enables Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, to enhance their geopolitical standing by becoming key players in global supply chains and transit routes.

Moreover, the research of Schoeberlein-Engel (2006) provides historical context, asserting that the importance of Central Asia's geopolitical position has deep roots in the historical Silk Road. The revival of these corridors, according to Schoeberlein-Engel, signifies not only economic ambitions but also a reclamation of historical agency, positioning Central Asian states as key actors in shaping the geopolitics of the region.

Comparatively, Starr (2014) delves into the contemporary geopolitical landscape, emphasizing the strategic positioning of Central Asia in the context of great power rivalries. He suggests that the region's transport corridors are arenas where global powers vie for influence, and Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, strategically align themselves to safeguard their national interests amidst these geopolitical dynamics.

The dynamics of regional stability are a focal point in the research, drawing on the contributions of De Haas (2012) and Laruelle (2016). De Haas, in "Migration and Development: A Theoretical Perspective," provides a framework for understanding how connectivity through transport corridors can foster stability by addressing

economic disparities and enhancing cooperation. Laruelle, in "Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship," sheds light on the geopolitical implications of regional stability, emphasizing the role of Central Asia in broader Eurasian dynamics.

In Uzbekistan's pursuit of national interests, geopolitical considerations play a pivotal role. The research incorporates the perspectives of Mirzayev (2018) in "Uzbekistan in the Geopolitics of Central Asia: Cooperation and Competition Dynamics." Mirzayev's analysis offers a nuanced understanding of how Uzbekistan strategically positions itself within the regional geopolitical landscape and utilizes transport corridors as instruments to achieve its national interests.

Furthermore, the nuanced perspective offered by Mohapatra (2021) provides a comprehensive understanding of the intricate geopolitical landscape surrounding Central Asian transport corridors. Mohapatra delves into the multifaceted relationships between Central Asian states and external actors, particularly major powers like Russia, China, and the United States. His analysis underscores the idea that the geopolitical significance of Central Asian transport corridors extends beyond the regional sphere, becoming a focal point for global strategic maneuvering.

Building upon Mohapatra's insights, Kazakh scholar Tokmadi (2019) contributes to the discourse by highlighting the role of Russia as a historical and contemporary player in shaping the geopolitics of Central Asia. In his work, Tokmadi argues that Russian interests in Central Asian transport corridors are deeply rooted in historical ties and contemporary geopolitical imperatives. Russia's strategic investments in transportation infrastructure projects, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) initiatives, reflect its efforts to maintain influence and secure economic advantages in the region.

Moreover, Uzbek academic Khakimov (2018) provides a localized perspective on the impact of external actors on Central Asian transport corridors, emphasizing the role of China. According to Khakimov, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significantly altered the geopolitical dynamics of the region. China's economic influence through investments in transport infrastructure projects not only enhances regional connectivity but also introduces complexities in Central Asian states' efforts to balance economic benefits with concerns about potential overreliance on a single external actor.

Additionally, Tajik scholar Sharipov (2020) contributes to the discussion by examining the implications of U.S. interests in the region. Sharipov argues that the United States, although physically distant, plays a crucial role in shaping the geopolitical chessboard in Central Asia. The U.S. interest in secure and open transport corridors aligns with its broader geopolitical strategies, impacting the decision-making

processes of Central Asian states and influencing their pursuit of national interests in the realm of transport infrastructure.

In summary, Mohapatra's analysis serves as a springboard to consider the perspectives of regional scholars such as Tokmadi, Khakimov, and Sharipov. Together, their works highlight the complex interplay between Central Asian states and external actors, shedding light on how major powers' strategic interests in the region are intricately woven into the geopolitics of Central Asian transport corridors. This multifaceted dynamic underscores the challenges faced by Central Asian states as they navigate the geopolitical chessboard to safeguard their sovereignty while capitalizing on the economic opportunities presented by these vital corridors.

3. Economic Impacts: Delving deeper into the economic impacts of transport corridors on Uzbekistan, local scholars provide valuable insights that complement the perspectives of international studies. In addition to the World Bank and Akramov & Khamidov, Uzbek economist Dilshod Rahimov's work, "Uzbekistan's Connectivity Initiatives: Economic Implications and Opportunities" (2021), offers a nuanced analysis of the economic implications of enhanced transport infrastructure.

Rahimov's research delves into the specific economic development outcomes resulting from connectivity initiatives, shedding light on how improved transport corridors contribute to Uzbekistan's economic diversification and growth. By examining the intricate linkages between transport infrastructure, trade, and economic development, Rahimov's work provides a localized understanding of the transformative effects of corridors on Uzbekistan's economy.

Furthermore, Uzbek scholar Feruza Tashpulatova's work, "Regional Economic Cooperation and Uzbekistan: Opportunities and Challenges" (2018), explores the broader regional context of economic cooperation and its implications for Uzbekistan. Tashpulatova's analysis encompasses the economic impacts of transport corridors on regional trade dynamics, emphasizing how Uzbekistan's participation in connectivity initiatives aligns with its national interests in fostering economic collaboration with neighboring countries.

4. Uzbekistan's Strategic Transport Corridors:

Examining specific transport corridors that align with Uzbekistan's national interests, two notable examples stand out: the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman corridor and the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India corridor.

Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman Corridor, a vital component of the Lapis Lazuli Route, connects Uzbekistan to the Persian Gulf via Turkmenistan and Iran. Scholarly works such as Rakhimov (2016) and Rahimov (2021) emphasize the strategic importance of this corridor for Uzbekistan's economic diversification. It provides an alternative route for Uzbekistan's exports, reducing dependence on

traditional pathways and opening avenues for increased trade with countries in the Middle East.

Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Corridor corridor, exemplified by the "Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar Railway," extends Uzbekistan's reach to South Asia. Rahimov (2021) and Tashpulatova (2018) shed light on the economic implications of this corridor, emphasizing its potential to stimulate regional economic integration. By providing Uzbekistan access to the Arabian Sea, this corridor enhances economic collaboration not only with Afghanistan and Pakistan but also with the broader South Asian market.

Comparing these corridors, it becomes apparent that each serves distinct economic and strategic purposes for Uzbekistan. The Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman corridor provides a direct link to the energy-rich Persian Gulf, enhancing Uzbekistan's energy security and diversifying its trade routes. On the other hand, the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India corridor positions Uzbekistan as a key player in the regional economic landscape, fostering collaboration with South Asian nations.

In conclusion, local scholars like Rahimov and Tashpulatova enrich our understanding of the economic impacts of transport corridors on Uzbekistan. The examples of the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman and Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India corridors illustrate how Uzbekistan strategically navigates connectivity initiatives to achieve economic development, showcasing a nuanced and context-specific approach to regional integration.

5. Regional Cooperation and Threats to Regional Stability:

Examining regional cooperation within the context of transport corridors, various intergovernmental organizations and regional studies contribute valuable perspectives. In addition to Eurasianet (2022), the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, as highlighted by Akramov & Khamidov (2020), is instrumental in fostering collaboration. CAREC's endeavors focus on enhancing connectivity and promoting economic development through comprehensive transport infrastructure initiatives.

Expanding on regional cooperation, Uzbekistan's commitment to fostering collaborative efforts is evident in its participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO, as analyzed by Cheng (2019), plays a significant role in shaping regional security and economic policies. Uzbekistan's engagement in the SCO aligns with its strategic interests in promoting stability and economic development within the region.

Despite the potential benefits of regional cooperation, threats to stability and collaboration persist, particularly from major powers such as Russia and China. The influence of Russia in the region, explored by Blank (2008), introduces challenges to

independent decision-making by Central Asian states. Russia's historical ties and economic influence pose potential hurdles to the autonomy of regional initiatives, including transport corridors.

Similarly, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as discussed by Khakimov (2018), brings both opportunities and challenges to the region. While the BRI provides significant investments in infrastructure, it also raises concerns about potential debt dependencies and the strategic interests of external actors.

The security situation in Afghanistan, as highlighted by International Crisis Group (ICG, 2018), poses another layer of complexity to regional cooperation. The evolving geopolitical landscape and security challenges may impact the effectiveness of transport corridors, requiring careful consideration and strategic planning to ensure their success.

Uzbekistan, recognizing the importance of regional collaboration, has undertaken initiatives to ensure the success of transport corridors. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's regional diplomacy efforts, as analyzed by Uzbek political analyst Tursunov (2021), reflect a commitment to fostering stability and cooperation. Uzbekistan's active involvement in regional forums and its diplomatic initiatives emphasize the nation's dedication to creating an environment conducive to successful transport corridors.

Additionally, Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan, exemplified by the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan-Pakistan-India corridor, underscores its efforts to contribute to regional stability. This corridor, as highlighted by Hussain (2021), facilitates economic integration and connectivity, showcasing Uzbekistan's commitment to regional collaboration.

In conclusion, regional cooperation in transport corridors is a multifaceted endeavor that involves navigating geopolitical challenges. Uzbekistan's proactive engagement in intergovernmental organizations, diplomatic initiatives, and cross-border projects demonstrates its commitment to mitigating threats and fostering an environment conducive to the success of regional transport corridors.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations:

In conclusion, the intricate tapestry of Central Asia's historical legacy, particularly its pivotal role in the Silk Road, lays the foundation for contemporary discussions on transport corridors. Drawing upon the works of scholars such as Hulsewé, Christian, Rakhimov, and Rahimov, this research sheds light on Uzbekistan's historical agency and its present-day pursuit of national interests through strategic participation in regional transport corridors.

However, as the region seeks to harness the potential benefits of these corridors, it is essential to address the multifaceted challenges and threats posed by external influences, especially from major powers like Russia and China. The potential risks to

regional autonomy, economic dependencies, and security concerns require careful consideration and strategic planning to safeguard the interests of Central Asian nations.

In the face of these challenges, Uzbekistan, under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has demonstrated proactive diplomacy and a commitment to fostering regional cooperation. To strengthen the success of transport corridors and enhance regional stability, several recommendations can be considered:

1. Encourage the strengthening of regional institutions like CAREC and the SCO to serve as platforms for dialogue, coordination, and conflict resolution. These institutions can play a crucial role in mitigating external pressures and fostering collaborative efforts.

2. Uzbekistan should continue diversifying its economic partnerships beyond major powers, ensuring a balanced approach that minimizes dependency risks. Engaging with a diverse set of nations will contribute to a more resilient and inclusive regional economic ecosystem.

3. Given the complexities of the security situation, enhancing cooperation among Central Asian nations, particularly with Afghanistan, is paramount. Collaborative efforts to address common security challenges will contribute to the overall success and sustainability of transport corridors.

4. Investing in sustainable development initiatives, as recommended by the World Bank and local scholars like Tashpulatova, can further contribute to the economic vibrancy of the region. Infrastructure projects should prioritize environmental sustainability and social inclusivity.

5. Continue diplomatic initiatives to foster regional stability and cooperation. Uzbekistan's diplomatic endeavors, as analyzed by Tursunov, showcase the potential for dialogue and collaboration as tools for resolving regional challenges.

As Central Asia navigates the complexities of regional cooperation through transport corridors, adopting a holistic approach that integrates historical awareness, academic insights, and practical solutions will be instrumental in shaping a resilient and prosperous future for the region.

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