

Underpinning China's Approach in Institutionalizing Interdependence and Regional Order in Central Asia

Fatima Rasheed Ahmad, Bilal Bin Liaqat, Ghulam Mustafa

Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan

Under the administration of XI Jinping, China has significantly reshaped its extended patterns of interaction in Central Asia across security, institutional governance and development. This increased engagement has already observed in existing scholarly literature under economic perspective, whereas shaping regional order through institutional mechanism remains rather unresearched. By using the lens of complex interdependence theory, the study examines Beijing's approach towards the Central Asia, particularly, focusing on how issue linkage, policy coordination and institutional interaction influence governance mechanism and outcomes in the region. It further analyzes how Chinese engagement intersects with governance outcomes related to stability, peace and strong institution in relations to the targets of SDG-16. This research utilizes qualitative document analysis and process tracing of official policy papers and secondary literature, dealing Central Asia as a regional case with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and institutions under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as embedded units of analysis. The results show that Chinese institutional mechanism supports patterns of asymmetric interdependence which is contributory to an evolving regional order in the region pigeonholed by institution-based governance, cooperation and infrastructural development or connectivity. An extensive debate is provided under this research on institutional mechanism and governance, regional order and Chinese foreign course of action by emphasizing on the role of institution in linking development and security .

Keywords: China, Central Asia, Regional order, SDGs, BRI

China's rise significantly transforming the Eurasian geopolitical framework through the expansion of multilateral Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the institutionalized structure of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing aims to enhance regional cooperation, promote economic interdependence and enhance technological partnerships through these institutional channels; these developments collectively intend to reshape power structure in the Central Asian region. This region is the prime focus of the study as all the Central Asian republics enjoy strategic partnership with China. Within the passage of time, Chinese engagement in the region has evolved from bilateral ties to multifaceted institutionalized one, including infrastructure connectivity, security cooperation, investments and regional governance. Beijing's regional role was predominantly framed under realist perspective by early scholarly analysis emphasizing energy security and great power competition. These approaches only partially explain its growing regional influence. However, this study primarily adopts complex interdependence theory to address this gap, to capture Chinese multidimensional institutional regional approach and to establish how institutional structures themselves act or serve as a tool of order-building. Since China has institutionalized economic cooperation within BRI and security cooperation through SCO, embedding Central Asian republics within a long-term institutional structure.

Realists assume that interstate relations are the standard means of communication. Trans-governmental interaction emerges when realist assume that states behave coherently as units is relaxed,

whereas, the realist view that states are the sole units challenged by transnational relations (Keohane & Nye, 2012). According to the neorealist perspective, the growing Chinese economic and institutional presence in the region can be understood as a strategy to protect its strategic interests and enhance its position in the regional balance of power (Waltz, 1979). However, this perspective puts greater emphasis on power maximization and competition rather than cooperative institutional mechanisms, examining the China and Central Asian engagements. Power Transition Theory argues that potential contention arises when emerging power dissatisfied with the prevailing order led by a status quo power and it seeks to reshape that order according to its own interests (Organski & Kugler, 1980).

Instead of military power or coercion to shape regional dynamics China give precedence to institutional engagement, which needs theoretical reassessment of how power function and regional order evolve. For that the concept of complex interdependence theory is highly applicable to comprehend Beijing's presence in the region, where counterterrorism, economic growth and regime stability are interconnected and the hierarchy of issues is overlapping and increasingly blurred. BRI-related mechanisms have outlined a pattern of asymmetric interdependence in which states are interlinked and connected while preserving their sovereignty. This interdependence facilitates the emergence of a regional order that is neither truly multipolar nor overtly hegemonic, but instead it is structured over rule-based and soft hierarchical governance.

Yunling identifies that Central Asia is contributing in advancing the Silk Road Economic Belt, a foundational pillar of Chinese BRI since it was introduced in 2013 by the President Xi Jinping (Yunling, 2017). Chinese increased engagement towards this region has been received by the political elites for the opportunities it generates for sustainable development with varying degree of open-mindedness or uncertainty among civil societies. To understand the conception of Sustainable development, the World Commission on Environment and Development describe it as a progress that meets the necessities or requirements of the present-day without compromising the competence of upcoming generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). Most of the states see China as reliable and non-aggressive regional power and a constructive partner (Shambaugh, 2005). Moreover, China has established regional mechanisms that provide fertile ground for dialogue and facilitate regional engagement according to its own standards and norms. Regional identity-building is a fundamental stage in the formation of region and regionalism; however, regionalism can only be achieved when nation-states share common interests and mutual trust guided by a leading state that plays a central role in facilitating and advancing regional integration process (Veicy, 2023).

Literature Review

Professor Lukin in his study titled "Mackinder Revisited: Will China Establish Eurasian Empire 3.0?" links Chinese attempt to construct Eurasian empire with the two historical attempts, first was made by Mongol conquests as they build largest land empire in history; the same attempt was made by another Russian Tsars which was only partly successful (Lukin, 2015). But the distinction in technique is clear where the former ones use military force and coercion to do so as the China is trying to install economic power to build its own version. Another argument was made by Xuetong, while dealing with the question of diplomatic priorities either to the relationship with the US, the existing power, or to the peripheral diplomacy. If observed historically, every global power arose as regional power before becoming a global power (Xuetong, 2015).

An expert on Chinese studies while deciphering Beijing's vision for the region argues that Beijing is using ostensibly innocuous terms, for instance, the "Community of shared destiny" to form regional order through its grand geopolitical approach BRI (Rolland N., 2017). Solingen and Malnight define regional order as the combination of regionalization and regionalism within a particular region. Regionalization is described as a process of socio-political, economic and cultural exchange while regionalism refers to state-driven institutional projects encompassing both formal and informal arrangements (Solinigen & Malnight, 2016). So, regional orders are shaped through the interplay of domestic, regional and global forces.

While talking about the importance of regional order for the world order in "Think globally, act regionally" Thomas Wright argues that many analysts conceptualize the international system through a top-down prism, where global concerns dominate regional priorities. However, the truth is quite the opposite. It is resilient and healthy regional orders in strategically vital areas that form the foundations for the world order,

not global institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the United Nations (UN). If these regional orders collapse, it will trigger a chain reaction that will destabilize the entire world order (Wright, 2015). That is why the actions of Beijing and Moscow in their respective neighborhoods are more indicative of their strategic outlook than their explicit policies on global concerns. It is conventional that both states are more focused regionally and prioritize their immediate geopolitical setting, as historically great powers tended to secure influence close to home instead of chasing abstract ideas of global governance. The reviewed scholarly literature presents diverse perspectives on Beijing’s growing role in Central Asian region. To synthesize these perspectives more systematically, the given table categorizes the existing scholarship into four analytical dimensions.

Categorization of Existing Literature

Category	Key argument and relevance
Facts: (Lukin, 2015); (Xuetong, 2015)	China’s rise shifted from military influence to economic and institutional engagement, as consolidating regional power before becoming a global power which demonstrates strategic rationale behind Beijing’s institutional approach.
Events and Current Issues: (Solingen & Malnight, 2016); (Rolland, 2017)	BRI and the ‘Community of shared future’ expanded the bilateral engagement to institutional cooperation and provided conceptual basis for examining Beijing’s institutionalized interdependence in Central Asia.
Concerns: (Wright, 2015); (Lukin, 2015); (Rolland, 2017); (Solingen & Malnight, 2016); (Xuetong, 2015)	Existing studies focus primarily on geopolitical competition or China’s grand strategy, raising concerns related to the institutional dimensions of Beijing’s regional approach which is addressed in the current study.

Source: Compiled by the Author

This table demonstrates that the existing literature remains largely focused on geopolitical competition and strategic intentions, while the institutional processes through which China constructs regional interdependence that accelerates the realization of UN SDGs remain comparatively underexplored. This gap provides the analytical foundation for the present study.

Method

To examine the Beijing’s institutional engagement in Central Asia this study adopts qualitative research design. Instead of evaluating the entire United Nations’ 2030 Agenda, the analysis focuses on how Chinese regional approach in Centra Asia influences governance mechanism and outcomes linked with peace, stability and institution resilience aligned with the targets of SDG-16. Regarding Central Asia as a regional case, institutional mechanisms particularly the SCO and BRI related governance structures serve as an embedded analytical unit. The study was relied on document analysis and process tracing, as this approach enables to analyze how institutional relations and policy synchronization link development and security to shape regional governance mechanism and outcomes. Data collected through both primary and secondary sources, where official policy documents, white papers and speeches by Chinese and Central Asian leadership as well as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports and think tank publications were included.

Theoretical Framework

Institutionalized structure refers to the interconnected network of economic, security and governance institutions through which Beijing embeds regional countries into long-term patterns of complex interdependence, establishing an order without military force or formal hegemony. Complex Interdependence Theory developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye serves as a primary theoretical lens to analyze Chinese institutionalized interdependence in Central Asia. The theory is mainly applicable as it offers a useful alternative to traditional realist approaches by putting emphasis on multiple channels of interaction, multiple issues with the absence of a clear hierarchy, and the irrelevance of threat and use of military force in foreign relations (Nye & Keohane, 2004).

In this context, interactions are not confined to state-to-state dealings only but also encompass private enterprises, financial institutions and multilateral development actors, reflecting or signifying the presence of

multiple channels of engagement. The realist belief that states are unitary entities is challenged by this multidimensional structure which emphasizing on the increased intricacy of international engagement. These various channels are readily apparent in the framework of China-Central Asian engagement under the BRI, as collaboration between ministries, infrastructure agencies, development banks and private businesses goes beyond formal diplomatic agreements. Such interactions improve regional connectivity and make it easier to carry out massive development projects. Therefore, the complex interdependence offers a suitable analytical lens to comprehend how such multi-dimensional institutional interactions enable collaboration and contribute to extensive development objectives as well as the advancement or the realization of the UN SDGs in Central Asia.

China's Institutionalized Mechanism for Order-Building in Central Asia

China's economic rise has become one of the most significant developments of the 21st century, prompting policy and scholarly debates regarding the implications of its increasing capabilities. Currently, being one of the most important players in Central Asia, China is expanding its influence through trade, diplomacy and infrastructure progressively building what the Pantucci and Petersen, term an 'inadvertent empire', an order designed through the consolidation of power rather than an absolute conquest (Pantucci & Petersen, 2012). Dr. Jessica Neafie from Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan stated that BRI infrastructure has improved Central Asia's connectivity, especially through roads, railways, logistics hubs, energy pipelines and border infrastructure. Its contribution is not simply 'growth' in a narrow GDP sense, but the reduction of isolation for landlocked states, as better corridors can lower transport times and expand access to markets (Neafie, 2026). As the General Liu Yazhou of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) put it, Central Asia is "the thickest piece of cake given to the modern Chinese by the heavens" (Hung & Herman, 2013).

Foreign policy of China under administration of Xi Jinping has become more visible, unlike previous governments, it has taken more dynamic and self-confident diplomatic initiative. Christoffersen highlights that Xi Jinping redefined the order of diplomatic priorities at the 2013 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) work forum, making peripheral diplomacy the top strategic priority reversing Deng's major power orientation (Christoffersen, 2024). An ancient concept revived to manage the potential problems with neighboring states, so, the quest for a coherent approach towards bordering relations turned out to be a critical part of the BRI. At home when China's National People's Congress adopted its 13th Five-Year Plan in 2016, 17 SDGs organically incorporated into its medium and long-term strategies and plans (Li, Chen, & Jiang, 2025). This ensures that the investment and projects under BRI are framed around sustainability and inclusivity which will create a network of common dependence. Sheng says that China being a member states of UN attaches great importance to SDGs by embedding them into its state development policy where the coordination mechanism is established for handy interaction with the UN branches. Moreover, China is regularly participating in High-level Political Forums and issuing progress reports on SDGs (Sheng, 2023).

Community of common destiny and community of a shared future for humanity are the articulated ideas of the Xi's administration to frame Chinese peripheral engagement emphasizing peace, cooperation and justice as guiding principles which are shared values of humanity (Singh, 2022). Beijing seeks to transform neighborly relations beyond confrontational politics to extensive global partnership, with its above stated global visions projecting a positive image and reflecting its desire to peacefully transform and even change regional or global order. Keith, noted that President Xi Jinping stated, during a conference in 2014 that Asian Problems must be solved by Asian countries, and China will do more for the protection or security of Asian and seek substitute to American Strategic Pivot (Keith, 2017).

China established multilateral financing institution called Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016 as part of BRI to institutionalize development finance embedding Asian developing states especially Central Asian (Zreik, 2022). Tanaka argues that in an international financial architecture, AIIB has advanced into a significant player by 2023, as it has become the largest multilateral development bank after the World Bank (WB) including largest European economies such as Britain, Germany, Italy and France as its founding members (Tanaka, 2024). The most assertive strategies of Chinese foreign policy are AIIB, BRI and New Development Bank (NDB), as Wang argues that these evolving global strategies based on Beijing's economic power aims to increase its influence at the regional and international levels (WANG, 2017). These

newly established Chinese led financial institutions are expanding their influence as an alternative to western-backed monetary institutions such as IMF and WB in terms of financing and investment. Dr. Jassica Neafie stated that the institutional architecture is layered that includes bilateral agreements, strategic and security partnerships, BRI, SCO, China-Central Asia mechanism, development finance, Confucius Institutes, media cooperation and UN-linked discourse. She said that it has normalized China as a long-term regional actor, not just an investor or trade partner and reinforced norms of sovereignty, non-interference, stability and government-to-government cooperation (Neafie, 2026).

Cooley and Nexon identify that many scholars believe that the NDB was created as an alternate to Western dominated Bretton Woods institutions which reflects PRC's long-term strategy to establish analogous institutions and norms that might dilute or weaken the influence of US-led liberal global order (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). New Zealand and Australia became its founding participant in an open defiance of the American request not to join the bank, so, the subsequent divergence between the US and its partners constitute a major diplomatic success for Beijing (Tanaka, 2024). Cai states, that some analysts put AIIB and BRI as critical components of Beijing's grand strategy which aims to promote its influence in the Eurasian region and beyond (Cai, 2020). The governance framework of AIIB emphasizes transparency, anti-corruption, accountability and multilateral decision-making, thereby aligning with the SDG-16 targets 16.6 and 16.7, which promotes effective, accountable and transparent institutions and inclusive decision-making respectively.

Zimmerman argues that the developing countries' unhappiness with the under-representation in Bretton Woods institutions not only spurred the creation of AIIB but also contributed to the establishment of NDB at Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) summit in 2014, officially launched in 2015 (Zimmerman, 2015). It has been reported through BRICS Post that the first investment by the NDB will be issued in Yuan (Chinese renminbi) not in dollars (BRICS Post, 2015). According to Harsana, the China Development Bank (CDB) and the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) signed a landmark BRICS Yuan loan agreement worth 2.1 billion Yuan (around \$290 million) (Harsana, 2025). Dominated completely in yuan is a significant shift in evolving global finance architecture marking a historic breakthrough in both international de-dollarization trend and BRICS economic integration. With collective governance and equal contribution of capital among BRICS members, the NDB mirrors principles coherent with SDG-16 by encouraging more inclusive and archetypical global financial institution.

The China-Central Asia summit of 2023 serves as key evidence of China's expanding influence, resulting in new investment of 3.7 billion dollar in Central Asia, bringing the total to over 63 billion dollars (Ozat, 2023). Ozat further argues that this significant influx of capital has reinforced regional development and cemented China's position as a leading trading partner in the region. While talking about the advancement of new regionalism, Fawcett called rising powers as core states that act as leaders in promoting strategies, ideas and other incentive to process the collaboration and integration. Examples include the United States in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), China in SCO, France and Germany in European Union (EU) and Saudi Arabia in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), all are serving as the drivers in their respective regional projects (Fawcett, 2015). Khan and Sultana argue that SCO was establish after the productive partnership between Beijing and Moscow from boundary formation to protect economic and strategic interest in Central Asian region. As both considered the presence of NATO in their backyard not only a threat to their security but to the development of Eurasian Silk Road as well (Khan & Sultana, 2019). Below an analysis is given to examine the Xi's approach towards Central Asia through SCO and BRI, which have emerged as a key driver in shaping a regional order grounded in Chinese norms while also contributing to realize UN SDGs in the region.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Since the 1990s, Central Asian states repeatedly pledged regional cooperation but most initiatives remained on paper, the creation of SCO emerges as one of the most important attempts. Its history goes back to mid of 2000s, when China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan came together to create the Shanghai Five, and soon after the addition of Uzbekistan it became SCO and today its geographic reach extended towards South Asia, Eastern Europe and Middle East (Yuan, 2022). Dadabaev points out, the SCO was mainly focused on security and territorial issues, such as border demarcation and coordination in the fight against the three social evils; terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Dadabaev, 2013). With the initial success,

the member states were in favor to broaden the scope of this cooperation in economic sphere and the development of shared infrastructure like pipeline routes and transportation corridors. Today this regional integration platform characterizes as one of the central means to synchronize multidimensional cooperation in Central Asia. Najwa argues that the SCO, as an enabler, have significantly strengthened China's role as a regional leader in Central Asia, where it challenges western dominance by fostering regional stability, building new narratives and creating new avenues to reshape the global order (Najwa, 2025).

According to Huntington, the defeat of Soviet Union in the hands of Afghan Islamic Mujahidin resulted in the emergence of trans-Islamic links in Central Asia (Huntington, 1996). Terrorist and violent extremist activities are seriously posing challenges to peace and exacerbating the separatist conflict in the region where to control this menace multilateral efforts are required. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) serves under SCO being organization's main coordination center to conduct joint training and military exercises, exchange data and develop strategies to combat terrorist and extremist groups. Moreover, Norov argues that RATS actively collaborates with many international organizations such as the United Nations and International Criminal Police Organization, the CSTO, the International Drug Control Agency and the Center for Internet Security, to address transnational threats (Norov, 2024). China's engagement in Central Asia demonstrates several considerable linkages with SDG-16. These mechanisms contribute particularly to SDG-16.1 by supporting efforts to reduce violence, and SDG-16. A by strengthening relevant national and regional institutions.

However, the effectiveness of SCO remains constrained by several structural limitations. The decentralized and consensus-based institutional structure restricts its implementation capability and constrains the extent to which shared decisions are translated into binding action (Bailes, Dunay, Guang, & Troitskiy, 2007). Furthermore, to enforce collective security commitments, it lacks a permanent military force although joint military drills are conducted regularly. Relationship between Russia and China inevitably heading towards competition particularly over regional influence and agenda-setting within the Eurasian space (Gabuev, 2016). After the accession of India and Pakistan in SCO, the stalemate between them not often delayed cooperation for counterterrorism but also weakened the consistency of responses to security (Jamal, 2025). Despite these challenges, the organization sustains regularized coordination, security dialogue, and confidence-building, conducive to institutionalized interdependence in Central Asia.

Over the past two decades, SCO is greatly contributing in counterterrorism efforts and successfully preserving peace and security in the Central Asian region. As its member states recognize that the above mentioned three social evils are constituting a danger to international peace and security and undermining the fundamental social rights and freedom. So, they are engaged in many counterterrorism exercises or joint military drills reflecting SCO's collective commitment to deal with this menace. China is particularly playing a prominent role in conducting such operations known as 'Peace Missions' with Central Asian and other member states for sustainable peace and security in the region (Jin & Dehang, 2019). This SCO counterterrorism cooperation directly supports SDG 16.1 and 16. A, which are reducing violence and strengthening security institutions respectively. Peace Missions accomplished through joint military exercises were conducted biennially; this security based collaborative efforts are successful especially in the realm of combating terrorism, serving the most significant purpose of SCO which is common security (Pradt, 2020).

Kazi & Nabi say that at all levels, different approaches were adopted under the SCO-RATS framework to counterterrorism. In this regard, the SCO conducted 'Interaction-Antiterror-2024' in Xinjiang, strengthening coordination, experience-sharing, and mechanisms for joint responses to terrorism. Bilaterally, the 'Hand-in-Hand 2018' counterterrorism drills between China and India involving 130 soldiers from each side is a comprehensive exercise to enhance mutual trust (Kazi & Nabi, 2025). Domestically, all member states have adopted a mechanism to combat terrorism accordingly, for example, Beijing is pursuing counterterrorism through its campaign against the 'three evils'.

After gaining regional consensus related to these issues, PRC prioritizes a concrete security cooperation over transnational crimes such as drug trafficking, law enforcement, police assistance and training

personnels to create a stable and peaceful environment for collaboration (UNODC, 2025). Yau argues that beyond drills, PRC has conducted various joint patrols with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and extensive anti-drug operations over the years, highlighting practical collaboration on security grounds (Yau, 2022). Moreover, in addition to its engagement through SCO, China now organizes its alternative security initiatives in Central Asia excluding Russia, such as C5+China, Global Security Initiative (GSI) and other bilateral or multiparty initiatives (Hosaka & Hanso, 2025). China advances a state-led yet market-oriented model of development within the framework of SCO that many Central Asian states see as a decolonizing alternate to both models of Russian dependency and Western liberal democracy. PRC's global development visions mentioned above are ideas that mirror its desire to transform peacefully the regional as well as global order to its advantage as part of its peripheral diplomacy. Drawing on the work of (Dian & Silvia, 2025), Azmat Ullah and Sultana argues that under Xi Jinping, Chinese grand strategy based on ideologically driven initiatives of global security, development and civilization are to secure its position as a global leader by challenging the prevailing Western-led liberal international order (Ullah & Sultana, 2025).

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed to join hands developing a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) with modern or innovative cooperation mode in his first speech under the title 'Promote people-to-people relationship and make a better future' at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2013). Quintáns argues that President Xi Jinping called for an 'economic belt along the Silk Road' connecting PRC with Central Asian Republics (CARs) through trade and economic development (Quintáns, 2024). Furthermore, Penghong argues that the other part of OBOR was the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), a product of maritime partnership between China and other Southeast Asian nations that was presented after a month in his second speech at Indonesian Parliament, aiming to advance maritime partnership in cooperation with ASEAN (Penghong, 2015).

Mazuelos argues that China under Xi Jinping seeks to shape a Community with a common future with Chinese characteristics and a New Model of transnational relations built on fairness, equally beneficial for collaboration and morality (Mazuelos, 2022). This approach is understood as involving effort to reform global order, institutions and norms and to nurture networks of economic interdependence through the BRI. After the success story of more than a decade, this initiative has grown broader than its original design as Quintáns argues, it integrates more continents including Europe, Africa and America, new geographic ranges such as the Arctic, and new realms such as cyberspace (Quintáns, 2024). It envisages the creation of a extensive transnational network of energy pipelines, infrastructure programmes, power plants, railways, ports and highways which are often interpreted as contributing to build China-influenced regional order and reflecting its historic positioning in global connectivity (Akdağ, 2024). PRC leaders at various levels have promoted the diplomacy of 'dui jie' (link) highlighting the role of BRI in building regional networks and addressing skepticism. As Wang explains that duijie means aligning BRI with the other states' development initiatives with the broader aim of reviving the ancient Silk Road (Wang, 2016). This approach is framed in terms of shared responsibility as Beijing emphasizes intergovernmental collaboration and co-finances through institutes such as AIIB and Silk Road Fund (SRF) rather than unilateral decision-making.

China was viewed as 'norm shaker' under Mao Zedong due to its challenge to the Western rules and regulations but it was shifted in post-Mao era, as Lanteigne notes, towards a 'norm taker' position through participation in international institutions. In 21st century under Xi Jinping, China is increasingly described seeking to 'shape norms' and influence global governance through new institutions and policies (Lanteigne, 2020). While talking about BRI and its new ideas to global governance, Yafei argues that changes in global order are associated with prodigious development, structural adjustment because the overall power of developing economies including China has augmented, thereby altering the power pattern of the world. He argues, in 2017 IMF identifies that the share of GDP to the global total by Western developed states in purchasing power parity (PPP) fell from 64% in 1980 to 42% (Yafei, 2017). He further argues that Global governance is increasingly described as moving away from purely Western-centric model towards a more diversified structure involving both Eastern and Western powers.

Several monetary institutions have been established for infrastructural projects. Smith, argues that China International Commercial Court (CICC) was established to address the disputes related to the BRI. Furthermore, two branches under CICC were launched by the Supreme People's Court (SPC) one in Xi'an to deal with overland belt disputes and other one in Shenzhen to deal with disputes in relations to the Maritime road (Smith, 2018). This mechanism (CICC) can be linked to SDG-16.6 and 16. A, in terms of enhancing institutional transparency and dispute resolution mechanism through its transparency in proceedings that may contribute to reducing the likelihood of inter-state disputes and violence, respectively. This material (AIIB) and legal (CICC) infrastructures are designed to support BRI projects through principles of Justice and transparency which may contribute to conditions associated with peace and stability for sustainable development. Institutions such as the AIIB, the SRF, and China's policy banks provide financing, technical expertise and project oversight that may enhance the operational capacity of host states, supporting their ability to manage complex infrastructure, trade and energy networks. These institutional expansions can be further studied in data-driven perspective through governance outcomes in beneficiary republics, particularly in relation to political stability, rule of law, and control of corruption. Selected Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) for Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan are presented below, between 2013 to 2024; these indicators present an overview of governance trends in political stability, rule of law and control of corruption.

Governance Trends in Central Asia Based on Selected WGI Indicators (2013–2024)

Indicator	Economy	Year	Governance Score
Political Stability	Kazakhstan	2013	58.18
		2024	61.06
	Kyrgyz Republic	2013	51.95
		2024	57.28
	Tajikistan	2013	47.89
		2024	61.19
Rule of Law	Kazakhstan	2013	45.26
		2024	50.40
	Kyrgyz Republic	2013	40.67
		2024	40.85
	Tajikistan	2013	35.22
		2024	36.59
Control of Corruption	Kazakhstan	2013	29.06
		2024	46.50
	Kyrgyz Republic	2013	24.08
		2024	24.85
	Tajikistan	2013	20.89
		2024	23.21

Source: Compiled from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators/interactive-data-access>

The table presents varying governance indicators from 2013 to 2024 in Central Asian republics. Improvements in control of corruption, political stability and rule of law are generally gradual and uneven across the region. Kazakhstan shows relatively sustained improvement while marginal changes were recorded in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, demonstrating the largest gain in political stability, whereas progress remain modest in rule of law and control of corruption. In this context, the BRI should be understood as an evolving and long-term developmental process, whose infrastructural and institutional effects are shaped by domestic, regional and global factors that unfold gradually.

BRI has been widely interpreted as a catalyst for connectivity and infrastructure development. However, some important criticism has been raised by the existing literature that requires careful consideration. A prominent criticisms and the most debated issue is debt-trap diplomacy which links Chinese lending to debt stress in recipient states. Nevertheless, some empirical studies such as Jones and Hameiri, indicates that debt distress is typically an outcome of multiple internal (misconduct of local elite) and external (Western-dominated economic markets) weaknesses rather than a singular Chinese creditor strategy (Jones & Hameiri, 2020). Hurley et al., (2018) argues that concerns highlight that increased debt challenges will establish a negative and unfavorable degree of dependency on China especially, where its dealings with debt related problem has already aggravated bilateral and internal stresses in some BRI states (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018). Furthermore, they argues that project related investments are sometimes announced

publically by Chinese commercial banks as there is no consistency in it and to disclose loan information is highly uncommon in debtor states. So, it highlights the questions of transparency that weakens accountability mechanism.

Competing Mechanism for Order-Building in Central Asia

Russian Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China's SCO and BRI related institutional mechanisms function in a competitive relationship, where they are cooperating for trade and connectivity and competing for regional order. Lynch noted that near abroad has been a priority of Moscow's foreign policy which is intertwined with the policy of regionalism, as Russia seeks to limit Chinese and western influence in its near abroad (Lynch, 2000). Rozman noted that one Chinese expert wrote that both China and Russia have different positions on economic globalization, where the former one shows positive attitude through its high degree engagement while the Russia views it negatively and critically. It is Russian choice and way out to break the current world order as China prefers gradualism and enhancement to make it more impartial and just (Rozman, 2025).

Christoffersen argues that Russian President Putin considers EAEU as a means to prevent growing Chinese sphere of influence in Central Asia, although it is a fact that EAEU is not as dynamic as BRI that is what shifted the balance of power in the lap of China due to its extensive hydrocarbon and infrastructural investment in the region (Christoffersen, 2023). While dealing with the theme of opposing the BRI, Shakhanova and Garlick says that according to officials the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) should be regarded as an answer to the prevailing regionalization developments predominantly regional trade initiatives by America and the Chinese BRI (Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020). Whereas, Russia's full-scale incursion of Ukraine has unswervingly affected its interests and influence in the region, destroying severely its status and self-proclaimed role as the only security manager for the region.

The 2022 Russia-Ukrainian War has weakened and reshaped Russian influence in Central Asia, accelerating multi-vector foreign strategy, thereby increasing engagement with China and the European Union. Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests a decline in public support for Moscow across the region. Following public opinion, several Central Asian governments such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan canceled performances by Russian artists in support of the war in Ukraine, indicating growing societal sensitivity toward the actions of Russia in Ukraine and ultimately damaging its soft power influence in the region (Primiano & O'Neill, 2025). In this evolving perspective, The Global gateway, a flagship initiative of European Union which was launched in 2021, has increasingly positioned itself as an economic actor in the region, emphasizing sustainable infrastructure development and connectivity partnership. It also boosts EU's interests while strengthening development in partner states (Bilal, 2025). The geopolitical repercussions of the war between Russia and Ukraine have created opportunities for the EU to increase its role in the region like China, however, Tonchev argues that despite its growing engagement, EU will remain as an economic and development partner in the region as it cannot be a security broker or guarantor (Tonchev, 2023). Paralyzing the Northern corridor, Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought a new perspective for the Middle Corridor or Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, as an alternative to diversify trade routes and promote economic resilience. Middle corridor connects China to Europe through Central Asia, Caspian Sea, Caucasus and Türkiye bypassing Russia (World Bank, 2023). This deepens the structural rivalry between China and Russia, as the former supports diversified connectivity while the latter seeks to maintain long-established transit dominance.

The decisive goal of powers like Russia and China is to reshape their respective regional orders, where Professor Wright argues that if it goes unnoticed or unchallenged (by the west), the world will see a return to multipolar system of sphere of influence (a less liberal and democratic). Thus, future orders will be shaped by the geopolitical shifts in East Asia and Eastern Europe (Wright, 2015). Patnaik argues that certain developments are underscoring the weakening of United States' influence in the region as he says that the US-led frameworks such as C5+1 (a diplomatic medium) and the New Silk Road (NSR) strategy cannot serve as a substitute for the real security and economic demands of Central Asia or to be compatible with China in the region. Compared to Chinese infrastructure-heavy initiative, the US economic engagements require both scale

and permanency (Patnaik, 2025). Whereas, Dr. Jildiz Nicharapova stated that China is treating all the Central Asian countries equally, not dominating like Russia (Nicharapova, 2026).

Rolland agreed that BRI is as much geopolitical strategy as it is economic to form a Sino-centric regional order using ostensibly innocuous terms, for instance, the “community of common destiny (Rolland N. , 2017). Malashenko argues that China has become successful in containing post-Soviet gang-style corruption, hitherto, another example of the China’s miracle (Malashenko, 2013). Thus, through the analysis of official and unofficial sources, the article has traced the linkage between the visions, institutions and conduct in Xi Jinping’s engagement in Central Asia. As Callahan claims that Beijing is merging new ideas like Asia Dream and China Dream to build what Xi Jinping calls ‘community of shared destiny’ and to weave peripheral states into Sino-centric network of relationship (Callahan, 2016).

Conclusion

China has embedded Central Asian republics under the complex network of asymmetrical but stable interdependence primarily through the multilateral SCO and the institutional architecture of BRI that establishes foundation for regional order. In this sense, a significant transition has observed in Chinese foreign approach from dominance-driven regional structure to a 21st century model of regional governance. China’s journey from the ancient Silk Road to the advanced Belt and Road is more than economic and geopolitical engagement as it represents human narrative of coexistence, cooperation and shared destiny. By aligning BRI with the UN SDGs, Beijing presents its investments as contributions to global development efforts, while simultaneously influencing the structure of regional governance in Central Asia. Chinese scholars emphasize on development, connectivity and mutual benefit whereas, Central Asian scholars generally acknowledge the economic opportunities, infrastructural development and connectivity breaking isolation through diversified ties while highlighting asymmetrical dependence and sovereignty. A more critical assessment was provided by western scholars, focusing on strategic competition, institutional effectiveness and governance concerns.

The triangulated evidence demonstrates that the institutional engagement of China has transformed bilateral ties progressively into institutionalized regional interdependence. Security cooperation through the multilateral SCO, connectivity and interdependence through the grand BRI and financial support via AIIB collectively supports emerging regional order and global development efforts. In contrast, Russian approach in the region is to preserve post-soviet hierarchical model of integration which may have implications for the autonomy of regional states. Washington’s regional engagement remains modest and often perceived as comparatively inadequate economic commitments and periodic diplomatic initiative. These insights are particularly relevant for the policymakers and scholars seeking to comprehend the evolving regional dynamics. Future scholarly studies can further delve into how Central Asian republics respond to such evolving dimension of order and whether alternate institutional arrangements emerge to maintain balance or complement growing influence of China.

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