



Available Online at EScience Press

Journal of South Asian Studies

ISSN: 2307-4000 (Online), 2308-7846 (Print)

<https://esciencepress.net/journals/JSAS>

Dynamics of Regional Integration in Central Asia: A Case Study of Belt and Road Initiative

Najam Us Saqib,* Manzoor Ahmad Naazer*Department of Politics & International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.***Corresponding Author Email ID: write2najamussaqib@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

In today's globalized world, it has become a necessary norm to be part of a regional integration process for neighbouring countries in any region of the world. Central Asia is a good example to understand with its rich past and unexplored perspective. This phenomenon can be better understood by examining the quest of Central Asian republics (CARs) for regional integration and the role of BRI in this process. For that, this paper explores the historical dynamics and drivers of regional integration in Central Asia with a special focus on the role of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which aims to improve regional infrastructure, commerce, and investment, has the potential to redefine the direction of regional integration in Central Asia in the face of shifting global power dynamics. Furthermore, Liberal Intergovernmental theory helps explain the Central Asian Republics' core actions and the impact of their domestic policies providing a details view of what drives regional integration in Central Asia. The study explores the historical dynamics and drivers of regional integration in Central Asia, focusing on the role of the BRI in reshaping these dynamics at domestic and external levels, using qualitative and thematic analysis of secondary sources.

Keywords: Central Asia, Central Asian Republics, BRI, Regional Integration, Liberal Intergovernmentalism Theory, States, China, Russia.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, regional economic integration is at the forefront of geopolitics. It's all about how neighboring nations in a particular geographic area connect through various means like trade, transportation, communication, money flow, and people moving around. On the one hand, regional integration can bring prosperity and political stability, but on the other, it raises questions about power, sovereignty, and what it means to be a region. Central Asia, a region as complex as its history, provides a unique case study to understand the forces that drive or hinder regional integration (Cooley, 2012). It's home to around 80 million people and is rich in untapped resources and human potential (World Bank, 2022). But Central Asia's path to unity has been tangled in history. It was born as an administrative region of Tsarist Russia, and the Soviet era solidified its economic ties through a web of production hubs that spanned national borders, all artificially orchestrated

from Moscow. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, marked a turning point for Central Asia. The region's formerly connected economic systems were now viewed through the lens of cultural diversity and geopolitical interests, rather than as a single unit. Central Asian countries continuously yearned to find new economic partners beyond Russia, leading to divergent interests and challenges, like border disputes and disagreements over resource management.

This research article aims to explore the historical dynamics of regional integration, and the driving factors shaping regional integration in Central Asia. It will also delve into the role of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), introduced in 2013. The BRI is a comprehensive plan to boost the region's connectivity infrastructure, trade, and investment. In a world where global powers compete; the BRI could potentially reshape the path of regional integration in Central Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Central Asia's regional integration is shaped by a combination of internal and external factors. Internally, the countries strive for economic cooperation and growth via sharing infrastructure and commerce (Khan, 2021). Externally, China's BRI project has played a critical role in linking the region and encouraging integration by funding infrastructure development projects (Gezgin, 2020). First, it has sponsored and constructed critical transportation and energy infrastructure such as oil and gas pipelines and trains that connect the countries (Gezgin, 2020). Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has fostered a collective framework that emphasizes regional integration among participating nations (Khan, 2021). Finally, the BRI has linked Central Asia to larger Asian markets, which would posture new business prospects and encourage regional collaboration (Fumagalli, 2016). Although the BRI has a significant role in the region the integration of this region has also been affected by other factors such as Russian influence, South Asian linkages, and international institutions (Contessi, 2016; Högselius, 2021; Mamyrova, 2020; Siraj & Sartaj, 2019). Disparities in development, political tensions, and the risk of excessive dependence on China represent a few of the obstacles that nations encounter in fully harnessing the advantages of integration. (Yerimpasheva *et al.*, 2022; Linn & Pidufala, 2008).

Rakhimov (2010) explores the internal and external dynamics of regional cooperation in Central Asia, highlighting the involvement of many players and the challenges they face.

Pomfret (2020) explores the relationship between regionalism and multilateralism in Central Asian trade policy, delving into the motivations for adopting regional treaties without implementing preferred trading arrangements. The transition from the closely connected former Soviet economy to disintegration in the 1990s, followed by increased collaboration and integration post-2006, highlights a dynamic evolution in the economic landscape. (Pomfret, 2020). Additionally, Indeo (2019) assesses how Chinese BRI and Uzbekistan's active regional strategy contribute to regional interconnection. Capannelli & Tan (2012) draw attention to the various mechanisms that support Asian economic regionalism, such as regional initiatives like ASEAN+3, bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements, and international talks conducted by the World Trade Organization (WTO). Serikkaliyeva (2019) examines the key drivers and

explores what China finds interesting in the CARs.

According to Siraj & Saqib (2019), Chinese direct investments have increased in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe such as Hungary due to the BRI. This trend is badly affecting the EU and causing serious implications.

Qoraboyev and Moldashev (2018) stress the necessity of a comprehensive conceptual agenda on the BRI's dynamics and underscore how crucial political independence, regional security, and economic opportunity are to the initiative's success.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Liberal Intergovernmentalism (LI) provides a theoretical framework to analyze the dynamics of regional integration in Central Asia. The theory assumes that both individuals and nations have specific objectives, weighing the costs and benefits of pursuing them. State actions in international politics are influenced by foreign policy objectives determined domestically based on national priorities and preferences. Responses to domestic pressures from social and political groups may vary. The government monitors these domestic issues and how they impact policy decisions (Ahmad, 2013; Muhammad, 2015).

LI theory revolves around the role of states as central actors in decision-making processes and negotiations within the context of regional integration. LI incorporates liberal principles and emphasizes the influence of domestic preferences and the distribution of power among states in shaping regional integration processes. It assumes that national preferences are formed in response to pressures from domestic groups and that these preferences are aggregated through political institutions (Smeets & Zaun, 2020).

The application of LI to the study of regional integration in Central Asia can shed light on the following aspects: LI posits that national governments are key actors in regional integration, driven by their pursuit of national interests (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2018). LI emphasizes the role of intergovernmental bargaining and negotiations in shaping regional cooperation (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2018). The varying degrees of cooperation and conflict resolution among member states reflect the intergovernmental bargaining process (Libman & Obydenkova, 2021). LI highlights the influence of domestic political factors on a state's approach to regional integration (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig,

2018). The domestic political dynamics of member states have affected the region's ability to achieve deeper integration (Kukeyeva *et al.*, 2016).

LI acknowledges the role of power differentials among member states in influencing the regional integration process (Kleine & Pollack, 2018). It suggests that cooperation in specific policy sectors can lead to greater regional integration (Kleine & Pollack, 2018). LI theory underscores the agency of states and the influence of domestic politics on international agreements, thereby offering a nuanced perspective on the mechanisms driving regional integration. This approach provides valuable insights into the complexities of intergovernmental negotiations and the intricate interplay between domestic interests and international cooperation, thereby enriching our understanding of the processes underpinning regional integration efforts.

DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION

Political and Cultural Dynamics

The political dynamics of regional integration in Central Asia are influenced by a complex interplay of factors such as economic interdependence, security, and geopolitical relationships. Central Asia's stability and security have an impact on the region's patterns of cooperation, institutional development, and integration trajectory (Rakhimov, 2010). In the past three decades, the concept of a regional cooperation and integration framework for Central Asia has shown to be feasible, even in the face of the lack of institutions specifically dedicated to the region (Mamyrova, 2020). While low levels of regional economic interdependence have hindered the promotion of regional cooperation in Central Asia (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019), the US's key strategic interests, including its political, economic, and security policies, have demonstrated the region's geopolitical significance. These interests can only be guaranteed in a free and stable Central Asia (Gul *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the dynamics of relationships among Central Asia, Russia, China, and other SCO member states in economic and energy cooperation have been analyzed, indicating the influence of economic and energy cooperation on regional integration. In addition, Russia is attempting to reclaim its former glory while rising China expands its economic and political influence, intensifying the conflict for control of Central Asia (Mirza & Ayub, 2022).

Moreover, there has been discussion regarding how the Ukrainian War has affected South Korea's diplomacy in

Central Asia, with a focus on the necessity of releasing current diplomatic strategies and policies of economic cooperation toward Central Asia from the inclination to see these nations solely as Russia's sphere of influence (Ho, 2022). The role of the SCO in expelling the USA's deliberate attendance from Central Asia has been highlighted, indicating the geopolitical shifts in the region (Atif *et al.*, 2022).

The dynamics of regional integration are significantly influenced by the cultural and comparable political systems of the Central Asian republics. Five culturally and ethnically diverse nations that separated from the Soviet Union and followed separate routes to political and economic change make up Central Asia (Batsaikhan & Dąbrowski, 2017). Migrations, assimilation processes, and cultural exchanges between various tribes shaped the cultural diversity and historical legacies of Central Asia during its prehistoric past (Abdullaev *et al.*, 2021). The region's cultural relationship with China during the Bronze Age is of great interest to scholars, highlighting the historical ties and cultural interactions between Central Asia and China (Mei, 2003). The political culture and civil society in Russia and the new states of Eurasia have also influenced the political dynamics in Central Asia, as the region shares historical and political ties with Russia and other post-Soviet states (Dawisha & Parrott, 1997).

The presence of both Central Asian and South Asian states as members of the SCO complements each other, indicating the interconnectedness of political and security dynamics between Central Asia and South Asia (Siraj & Sartaj, 2019). Moreover, the foreign policy and international economic links of post-Soviet Central Asia have been affected by the influence of the region's internal dynamics on its exterior contacts (Yazdani, 2020). The cultural and linguistic ties between Central Asian republics and Turkey have been viewed as important future economic partnerships, reflecting the potential for cultural and economic cooperation between the regions (Jong-Hwan & Kim, 2014). Additionally, the role of the Central Asian region in China's BRI development has triggered a change in the current international political environment, highlighting the region's significance in global geopolitics and economic connectivity (Serikkaliyeva, 2020). The attempts to construct a regional security system based on military cooperation among Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan demonstrate how the five Central Asian

nations have used their shared cultural and historical background as a foundation for regional integration. (Somzhurek *et al.*, 2018). The lack of a regional organization in Central Asia despite the cultural, economic, and political similarities between the countries has been noted as surprising, indicating the complexities and challenges of regional integration in the region (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019).

Socio-Economic Dynamics

The socio-economic dynamics of regional integration in Central Asia are influenced by various factors such as economic growth, trade agreements, water management, and geopolitical relationships. Regional integration has been found to have a significant effect on economic growth in Southeast Asia, indicating the potential positive impact of integration on the socio-economic development of the region (Bong & Premaratne, 2018). On the other hand, challenges such as climate change and international water conflict in Central Asia pose significant threats to the socio-economic stability of the region, particularly in terms of the allocation of water resources and management (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012). The increasing political tensions and worsening ecological and socioeconomic conditions in Kazakhstan have been identified as key reasons affecting water management in Central Asia (Zhupankhan *et al.*, 2018). The evolving landscape of regional trade agreements, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, has implications for the socio-economic dynamics of Central Asia. The exclusion of the United States from certain trade blocs may impact the region's economic relationships and trade patterns (Petri *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, the interactive influence of economic growth and trade liberalization has been identified as a driving force for regional economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region (Chen, 2020).

Furthermore, the BRI has led to a significant increase in China's export potential to Central Asian countries, particularly in capital-intensive industries, indicating the potential for enhanced economic cooperation and development in the region (Meredov & Ma, 2023). The impact of transboundary water and energy problems on socio-economic development and stability in Central Asia has been highlighted, emphasizing the interconnected nature of resource management and regional stability (Guo *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, the role of the SCO countries in ensuring China's energy security has been discussed, indicating the transformative impact of China's economic

growth on the global economic landscape (Mamakhatov & Mallah, 2021). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been identified as a model for regional economic dependency and its implications for peace and stability in Central and South Asia (Rasool & Ahmad, 2021). On the other hand, challenges to regional integration in Central Asia have also been noted. Low levels of regional economic interdependence have hindered the promotion of regional cooperation in the region, indicating the need for greater economic integration to drive socio-economic development (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019). The impact of the Ukrainian War on South Korea's diplomacy in Central Asia has raised concerns about the potential weakening of regional economic unions and the centripetal force of existing economic initiatives (Ho, 2022).

ROLE OF REGIONAL AND EXTRA-REGIONAL ACTORS

Foreign powers like Russia and China have complicated Central Asia's regional dynamics. While Central Asian countries participate in regional organizations, Russia and China often prioritize bilateral relations, choosing to resolve disputes directly rather than through regional bodies. This approach hinders the development of a cohesive regional strategy (Olędzki, 2021). Russia has implemented a "divide and conquer" strategy to maintain its regional dominance, preventing the formation of strong regional connections among Central Asian nations. In contrast, Europe and the United States have limited interests in the region, primarily focusing on Afghanistan's energy security and stability. Their influence has not been enough to drive regional cooperation in Central Asia (Ziegler, 2014).

Central Asia is navigating a complex landscape where regional and extra-regional powers play influential roles in regional integration. China established the SCO for integration and cooperation, while Russia created the EAEC to assert its dominance. On the other hand, the U.S. introduced the Greater Central Asia structure, encompassing Central Asia, Afghanistan, and broader macro-regional initiatives. These models, each driven by distinct geopolitical goals, pull the region in different directions (Tolipov, 2010). In 2011, Hillary Clinton launched the New Silk Road Strategy (NSRS), aiming to promote regional integration and cooperation in Central Asia and Afghanistan amid increasing globalization (Rafique & Humayun, 2011). The project underscores the importance of regional connectivity, energy, and

economic growth. Simultaneously, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Kazakhstan, a global effort focused on enhancing infrastructure and connectivity across Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. It involves numerous countries, particularly in Central Asia, to boost trade, investment, and economic cooperation (Pradhan, 2017).

Amidst these developments, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) came into being in January 2015, initiated by Russia, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Belarus. The primary aim of the EEU was to deepen economic integration among its member states, creating a unified market for goods, services, and capital. This union sought to take advantage of the geopolitical closeness of the Central Asian republics and enhance cooperation in areas such as trade, investment, and the movement of labour (Umbach & Raszewski, 2016). These initiatives highlight the importance of regional integration in Central Asia, driven by the geographical proximity of these nations and the desire to tap into international support in an era of globalization. Projects like the New Silk Road, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and EEU all share a common goal of improving connectivity, fostering economic growth, and addressing shared challenges faced by the Central Asian republics. These efforts underscore the region's recognition of the need to work together and collaborate to seize the opportunities presented by the changing global landscape.

REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Numerous factors drive regional integration in Central Asia, influencing cooperation and collaboration among the region's countries. These drivers include Historical Legacy, Economic and Political Integration, Security Concerns, Potential for Contention within Regional Organizations, and Geopolitical and International Support, particularly in the era of globalization. Regional institutions such as the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (CACO) and its predecessors have struggled to establish payment systems, harmonize rules, and develop dispute-resolution mechanisms (Wu, 2018).

Historical Legacies

The historical legacy of Central Asia, particularly its ties to the Silk Road, has played a crucial role in driving regional integration efforts among the CARs. The Silk Road, which historically connected China, the Middle East, and Europe through the Central Asian steppes,

facilitated extensive cultural, commercial, and even religious interactions among civilizations. This shared historical backdrop has forged a sense of regional identity among the CARs, fostering a deep understanding of their common history and cultural connections. This shared heritage serves as a driving force, motivating regional governments to collaborate in pursuit of greater integration. Consequently, joint initiatives have been undertaken to promote cultural exchange, preserve historical monuments, and emphasize the historical significance of the region (Winter, 2016). Scholars have long been interested in the potential for regional cooperation and integration among the five Central Asian countries. These nations share historical, linguistic, religious, and geopolitical affinities.

Sunni Islam is the dominant religion in the region, and their political structures bear resemblances to those of the former Soviet Union. They share a common socio-political history as former members of the Soviet Union, where the Russian language served as the lingua franca (Saqib, 2012). Moreover, their national languages, primarily Turkic, are mutually intelligible. As landlocked countries, they are surrounded by more populous and influential neighbours, such as China, Russia, and Pakistan, leading to their frequent oversight and surveillance in the region (Saqib, 2012).

Political and Security Dynamics

The CARs have a historical legacy of centralized, often corrupt regimes. However, a closer examination reveals significant differences in their political systems. Kazakhstan adopts a softer authoritarian approach, relying on material incentives and implementing relatively liberal economic policies. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan is semi-democratic and the most diverse among the five CARs. Tajikistan has shifted towards a more autocratic system due to a lack of institutional capacity (Stronski & Ng, 2018). Meanwhile, Turkmenistan and, to some extent, Uzbekistan, have pursued isolationist international policies while maintaining highly repressive governments domestically. These differences in governance impact their behavior on the international and regional stages (Zogg, 2019).

Despite challenges, regional integration plays a crucial role in achieving effective governance, especially in addressing security challenges like extremism, drug trafficking, and regional instability. Effective governance is essential to tackle these issues.

Central Asian countries often resort to coercive measures to combat extremism, which can lead to unintended consequences. Corruption within law enforcement agencies contributes to drug trafficking, and poor governance exacerbates instability. Therefore, promoting regional integration becomes a vital driving force for improving governance and addressing these security challenges (Kimmage, 2008).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often face suspicion or hostility in the region. Turkmenistan has very few NGOs, while Kyrgyzstan boasts an active NGO presence. Uzbekistan subjects NGOs to strict oversight and restrictions. Recognizing the significant role national governments play in combating extremism, drug trafficking, and instability highlights the need to address governance issues hindering the implementation of such measures in Central Asia. The aspiration for regional cooperation to address political and security issues and seek peaceful resolutions stands out as a primary motivation (Kimmage, 2008).

Central Asia's regional integration faces several challenges despite the economic potential within the region. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan boast significant oil and gas reserves, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan rely on remittances from migrant workers, primarily from Russia. These remittances play a crucial role in their economies. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan control a substantial portion of the region's water supply, essential for neighboring countries' agriculture. Kazakhstan, as the largest contributor to the region's GDP, attracts both investment and labour migration. While energy trade and labour migration are significant, the region faces challenges in diversifying its industries due to a limited production base and dependence on commodities (Zogg, 2019).

Central Asia's regional institutional challenge necessitates the establishment of new institutions to achieve genuine integration. Drawing parallels with the European experience in institutional integration can offer insights. Despite differences in culture, religion, history, and geography, Central Asia is working to enhance regional cooperation and integration in a changing multipolar world. While challenges, suspicion, and pessimism persist, the region is striving for improvement (Tolipov, May 2017).

Differences in identities, values, and economic and political models have hindered political and economic cooperation in Central Asia. Established integration

platforms and regional organizations have shown questionable effectiveness. Strong institutions and active public engagement are essential for achieving sustainable integration and addressing challenges in Central Asia (Tolipov, May 2017).

Governance Challenges and Regional Cooperation

Effective communication with Central Asian countries is essential for advancing regional integration, considering the challenges faced by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While Turkmenistan has few NGOs, Kyrgyzstan has an active presence, and Uzbekistan subjects NGOs to strict oversight. Recognizing the role of national governments in combating extremism and drug trafficking underscores the need to address governance issues hindering the implementation of measures in Central Asia. The role of national governments in regional cooperation and integration efforts becomes crucial, driven by the aspiration to address political and security issues and seek peaceful resolutions (Kimmage, 2008).

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INTEGRATION AND THE ROLE OF BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has played a pivotal role in shaping the economic, geopolitical, and infrastructural landscape of Central Asia. The initiative has been instrumental in fostering regional integration through various mechanisms, including infrastructural development, economic cooperation, and geopolitical realignments.

Kazakhstan was an early participant in China's BRI project, aligning with its national development plan, "Nurly Zhol," amid economic challenges (World Bank, 2020). The International China-Kazakhstan Bridge (ICBC) was initiated to enhance Chinese trade, investment, and transportation access. However, public-private partnerships, influenced by China, challenge domestic law (Gelvig, 2020). Public opinion in Kazakhstan varies, with some expressing strong anti-Chinese sentiments. Critics argue that China focuses primarily on infrastructure without sufficient economic benefits. Cooperation is expected in agriculture, polluting industries transfer, and energy, but security concerns limit Kazakhstan's full partnership with China. Kazakhstan provides a significant route for international transportation infrastructure including highways, Amu Darya bridges, Turkmenbashi port, airports in Ashgabat

and other Velayats, and railroads linking Turkmenistan with Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Iran (Vitalis, 2023). In 2016, a test train carrying container goods was introduced by the China-Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway line (Zasiadko, 2019). The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railroad's Atamurat-Imamnazar (Turkmenistan)-Akin (Afghanistan) section began service in November 2016. Contentious problems also included the choice of route and the construction of the Tajik-Afghanistan segment. Thanks to the port of Turkmenbashi, the landlocked countries in the region now have new opportunities to transport commodities from Central Asia via the Silk Road, attract investment, and lure tourists (Zasiadko, 2019). The multimodal logistics center here will provide Central Asia with a complex of services for the storage and combined processing of containerized Central Asian goods carried by air, road, and rail, ensuring their transshipment to and from water transit (Golden Age, 2016).

The possibility of bringing new vitality and stability to regional growth lies in the multivariate traffic flow model (Karymshakov & Sulaimanova, 2020).

China has led significant developmental initiatives in the area under the BRI, investing heavily in the energy sector, providing loan financing, and boosting bilateral commerce with neighboring nations (Khan, 2021).

BRI has been a subject of geopolitical analysis, particularly in the context of Chinese-Russian dynamics in Central Asia. The initiative has been viewed as a factor in the jostling for power between China and Russia in the region (Gabuev, 2016). The initiative's impact on the region's water resources has been a subject of growing concern, prompting discussions about the future of water management in Central Asia (Brassett *et al.*, 2022). This underscores the multifaceted nature of the BRI's impact, encompassing environmental and sustainability considerations alongside its economic and geopolitical dimensions. The initiative's focus on connectivity and cooperation has aligned with the region's aspirations for economic growth and integration (Qadri & Qureshi, 2021). By fostering trade, investment, and infrastructural development, the BRI has sought to contribute to the economic prosperity of Central Asia and enhance its regional significance. Despite, anti-China rhetoric by a few elements, the leadership of CARs is committed to supporting BRI. However, there exist variations in the CARs approach when they compete for Chinese investment and industrial collaboration

(Borisov *et al.*, 2018).

The construction of critical infrastructure such as pipelines, railways, and ports, has not only promoted economic development but also enhanced connectivity and cooperation among the countries in the region Gezgin (2020). This infrastructural connectivity has been instrumental in integrating Central Asian economies and promoting regional trade and investment, thereby contributing to the process of regional integration. Moreover, the BRI has been a subject of geopolitical analysis, particularly in the context of Chinese-Russian dynamics in Central Asia. The initiative has been viewed as a factor in the strategic realignments and power dynamics in the region, influencing the geopolitical landscape and shaping the relationships between China, Russia, and Central Asian countries (Kerr, 2010). The initiative's influence on global trade hubs and the import of intermediate goods has raised discussions about the potential effects on trade relations and economic dynamics in the region (Mora *et al.*, 2020).

By fostering trade, investment, and infrastructural development, the initiative has sought to contribute to the economic prosperity of Central Asia and enhance its regional significance (Khin *et al.*, 2019). This economic dimension of the BRI's impact underscores its role in shaping the economic landscape of the region and promoting economic integration. The BRI's impact on Central Asia has also been analysed in the context of regional organizations and initiatives. The initiative has been seen as potentially synergizing with local connectivity initiatives and encouraging the integration of regional economic communities (Albana & Fiori, 2021). This highlights the BRI's potential to complement and align with existing regional frameworks, further contributing to the process of regional integration in Central Asia.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN RESPECT OF BRI

BRI has made a big difference in bringing Central Asian countries closer together. It's helped build roads, bridges, and energy projects, mostly led by China. They've put a lot of money into the energy sector and boosted trade with countries in the region. This has the potential to make it easier for these countries to work together and do more business. But there are some things to consider. While the BRI is opening up opportunities, it also brings challenges. How these

projects get implemented could affect how well these countries integrate and work together in the future. It isn't without its challenges. One big issue is the involvement of countries like China and Russia. Their presence in the region can create power struggles and make things more complicated, which might slow down how well these countries come together (Gezgin, 2020). There's also a historical side to consider. Past attempts at regional cooperation in Central Asia haven't always worked out. These old issues might make it harder for the BRI projects and regional integration efforts to succeed this time around (Rosset & Svarin, 2014). On top of that, there are security concerns. Things like extremism based on religion and influence from outside the region could make it tough for the BRI projects to happen smoothly and might get in the way of countries working together more closely (Kukeyeva *et al.*, 2016).

BRI brings some good opportunities for Central Asia. It could mean better roads and railways, which would help countries connect and trade more easily. Plus, it has the potential to boost the region's economy by attracting investments and encouraging trade among the participating countries (Shi *et al.*, 2019). Another positive side is how it encourages countries in Central Asia to team up on shared projects. This could create more cooperation among them and help with development (Khan, 2021). On a more cultural side, the BRI might also help strengthen ties between these countries, bringing their cultures and languages closer together (Siraj & Sartaj, 2019; Gezgin, 2020).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the regional integration process in Central Asia is influenced by historical legacy, economic and political integration, security concerns, and geopolitical support. However, the region faces challenges in diversifying industries due to limited production bases and dependence on commodities. Liberal Intergovernmentalism offers valuable perspectives on how Central Asian states' preferences, power dynamics, and external actors such as China impact their involvement in the BRI and the development of regional economic cooperation within the region. Understanding the geopolitical and economic ramifications is necessary when studying regional integration in Central Asia within the framework of the BRI. The LI theory emphasizes how national governments, internal politics, power asymmetry, and policy sector collaboration all

play a part in determining the nature of regional integration. To achieve genuine integration, strong institutions and active public engagement are needed. Political dynamics are deeply influenced by economic interdependence, security concerns, and geopolitical relationships, impacting cooperation patterns and integration paths. Socio-economic aspects, including growth, trade, and water management, heavily influence integration. The New Silk Road Strategy (NSRS) and Chinese BRI have significantly impacted Central Asia's economic, geopolitical, and infrastructural landscape, facilitating international transportation infrastructure, attracting investment and tourists, and boosting bilateral commerce. However, challenges such as power struggles, historical issues, and security concerns must be addressed to effectively integrate Central Asia.

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