



“Belt and Road” and the Role of Third Parties: A Geopolitical Analysis of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway

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Abstract. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway reveals the general rule of intrinsic logic for geopolitical strategic games within the Eurasian space during its construction, which serves as an adept project node under the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia. The paper develops a 3D interactive analysis framework of the “core actors-third-party role-outcome delivery” based on close interactions among China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, while studying the functional modes and influence mechanisms of third-party actors, including Russia, the US, and Europe. The research argues that under the “strategic corridor construction + export of capacity advantages” mode driven, China advances project implementation by flexible financing, full-life-cycle technical support and policy strategies adapting to resistance; Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are stuck in a dual dilemma of “development demands or risk concerns”, both prioritizing national sovereignty in face of big-power competition; Russia shifts from “strategic obstruction” early to maintain its leadership in operation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to more “tactical adjustments” after restructuring resources following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which indicates a balance between geopolitical interests and practical constraints; other third-party forces constitute a multi-faceted role system involving dynamics such as “intervention, cooperation and wait-and-see”, impactee together on project process. The involvement of third-party forces has facilitated the transformation process of the geopolitical pattern of Central Asia. To some extent, it gained practical experience for the high-quality development of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords: Belt and Road, China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway, Third-party Role, Geopolitical Contestation.

1 Introduction

Interconnectivity across the Eurasian continent has always been a central issue in shaping its regional geopolitical economic landscape. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway is deeply entwined with the evolving geopolitical dynamics of Eurasia, serving as an essential practice to advance the latter. In as much as it was a strategic project associated with connecting the China-Central Asia-West Asia transport corridor, its

over-twenty-year advancement has become a significant window reflecting great-power strategic interaction and multiple interest coordination.

The geopolitical importance of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway comes from its unique geographical position, but its dual value as a repository of abundant energy resources and an international strategic corridor. For China, this railway is a key node in building an open pattern of "coordinated development of land and maritime areas, both internally and externally, with mutual benefits between east and west." Its completion will effectively reduce dependence on Russian transit transportation through traditional Eurasian logistics corridors. To Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the two Central Asian countries, it represents a hope to solve inland trade bottlenecks, spur employment along the route, improve livelihoods, and further integrate both countries into the regional economic cycle. However, constructing this railway is not easy. Russia, with deep influence in Central Asia, has always kept a watchful eye on how the project could shake its traditional regional position, while external powers like the US and Europe have been intervening and seeking to check it. Although these actors are not direct participants in the project, they continue influencing the project's decision-making environment and pace of progress.

While previous research has viewed the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project from various angles, such as its anticipated economic benefits, potential geopolitical importance, and challenges to progress, key gaps remain in terms of theoretical integration, systematic analysis of third-party roles, and response to contemporary geopolitical issues. Accordingly, this paper aims to investigate the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway by proposing a three-dimensional interactive analytical framework of "core actors-third-party roles-outcome outputs". The paper draws on the railway project's three stages of evolution and proposes a mixed-method research design to systematically examine core actors' strategic interests, behaviors, and interactions. The study aims to answer the following core questions: How are the strategic motives and interaction logic of China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, as core participants, formed? Through what mechanisms do third-party actors such as Russia influence the project's progress? How does third-party intervention reshape the Central Asian geopolitical landscape and provide practical insights for deepening the Belt and Road Initiative?

By probing these questions in depth, this paper seeks to reconstruct the complete logical chain of the strategic game surrounding the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, and aims to offer theoretical reference for understanding the mechanisms by which transnational infrastructure projects advance in complex geopolitical environments, and to provide scholarly support and practical guidance for risk management and pathway optimization of cross-border cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Research on the Belt and Road Initiative and Infrastructure Cooperation with Central Asia

Since the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative, research on the Belt and Road Initiative and infrastructure cooperation with Central Asia has become a hot topic in academia. Scholarly work has formed a relatively systematic discourse. Mainstream academic viewpoints mainly revolve around two paradigms: the “win-win” theory and the “development-driven” theory, with research focusing on two empirical dimensions: “project economic benefits” and “policy coordination mechanisms”.

First, the “mutual benefit and win-win” theory emphasizes the high complementarity between China and Central Asia in resource endowments and development needs. Through channels such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund, China has provided the Central Asian region with much-needed infrastructure financing and construction capacity, helping the region overcome the long-standing “infrastructure bottleneck” that constrained its economic development, while Central Asian countries, with their abundant oil and gas resources, have become an important strategic conduit for China to diversify its energy supply and safeguard national energy security—especially through the Central Asia-China natural gas pipeline projects, which have established a land-based energy artery for “west-to-east gas transmission” [1]. Infrastructure improvements have significantly reduced inland trade costs for Central Asian countries, achieving a “positive-sum game”.

Secondly, the “development-driven theory” emphasizes, from a macro-regional development perspective, the multidimensional spillover effects of Belt and Road infrastructure cooperation. Its research thread focuses on two core axes: “project economic benefit assessment” and “deconstruction of policy coordination mechanisms”. On the one hand, a large number of empirical studies assess a project’s “economic benefits” through quantitative models, commonly using indicators such as bilateral trade flows, regional GDP growth rates, and the direct and indirect contributions to job creation. Lin Beizhan studied the economic impact of the China-Kazakhstan Lianyungang logistics cooperation base by analyzing the port cargo throughput of China-Kazakhstan Lianyungang and the frequency of China-Europe freight trains, and confirmed that the base has become Kazakhstan’s key outlet to connect with the Belt and Road and has significantly enhanced its transit trade capacity, directly promoting the deep coupling of the “Road of Brightness” strategy and China’s westward opening strategy [2,3]. Dong Wanlu, through policy simulation research, found that after the railway is completed, it can increase the annual GDP growth rates of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and create a large number of jobs [4]. At the level of “policy coordination mechanisms”, scholars focus on the synergistic effects of “building legal frameworks” and “coordinating multilateral platforms”, revealing the institutional guarantee pathways that take infrastructure cooperation from “intent” to “implementation”. Yang Zewei reviews the legal frameworks, such as 17 bilateral investment protection agreements and 9 double taxation avoidance agreements, signed between China and Central Asian countries [5]. These legal documents, by clarifying investment dispute resolution mechanisms and

reducing tariff barriers, have avoided about 40% of policy risk for projects like the China-Kazakhstan crude oil pipeline and the Central Asia-China natural gas pipeline. On this basis, Song Guoyou systematically evaluated the potential and priority areas for cooperation by comparing the infrastructure development plans of Central Asian countries (such as Kazakhstan's "The Bright Road" and Uzbekistan's "2030 Development Strategy") with China's competitive capacities in high-speed rail, construction machinery, and the like, and pointed out the key role of multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in promoting project implementation [6].

Overall, the existing literature has systematically elaborated "the Belt and Road Initiative" and the theoretical paradigms and empirical findings of infrastructure cooperation with Central Asia, providing a solid foundation for understanding the basic logic and outcomes of the cooperation. However, the research largely focuses on positive bilateral narratives and has not given sufficient attention to multilateral geopolitical factors, particularly the complex impacts of third-party actors on specific projects.

2.2 The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway from the Perspective of Geopolitics and Great Power Competition

The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, as a strategic hub project of the "Belt and Road" initiative in Central Asia, and its promotion process can be regarded as a "microcosm" of great-power competition in the region, profoundly reflecting the dynamic adjustment of the Eurasian geostructure of power. Existing research revolves around the two dimensions of "interactive players in the game" and "competition over core areas", systematically revealing the geopolitical logic behind the project, among which the "tripartite interaction framework" is the mainstream analytical perspective for interpreting the pattern of competition.

In defining the actors in the game, China, Russia, and third parties, represented by the US and Europe, are generally regarded by academia as key actors, and each actor's role, positioning, and strategic motives differ. Zhang Huaqing and Li Qi point out that China regards the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway as a composite strategic motive to break the Eurasian continental logistics bottleneck, deepen economic integration with Central Asia, and optimize energy import routes [7]. Dong Wanlu provides policy simulation research that supports its economic rationality. Russia is viewed as a key balancer and adjuster [8]. Zhao Chunhui further adds that Russia is concerned the project will undermine its leading role in the Eurasian Economic Union and therefore has employed various means to counterbalance it [9-10]. Their study also corroborates Russia's deep-seated concern about its influence being diluted. The United States, as an external variable, its "New Silk Road Initiative" has seen its influence wane, but scholars believe that its diplomatic and security cooperation objectively constitutes an indirect check on China and Russia [11].

In focused studies of the strategic game, scholars mainly focus on competition in three core areas. First is the direct contest over geopolitical influence. This is concentrated in Russia's high vigilance against the erosion of its "traditional sphere of influence", with the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway striking precisely at this "red line" [12]. Second is the competition for dominance over energy and logistics corridors,

the core dispute being the railway's technical standards, particularly the gauge issue, which is seen as an institutional struggle to dominate future Eurasian logistics networks [13]. Third are considerations of security risk management, with non-traditional security threats in Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan's domestic political fragility being regarded as important variables affecting project advancement [14].

2.3 Third-party Roles and Research Gaps

In studies of large transnational infrastructure projects, “third parties” as a key variable, their role positioning and mechanisms of influence have increasingly become focal topics in academia; scholars have already established a comprehensive systematic framework for defining and classifying third parties. “Third parties” are explicitly defined as “actors who are not direct contracting parties or builders of the project but can exert substantive influence on the project process through political, economic, or normative means”, their scope can include regional great powers, international organizations, and large multinational corporations. Based on differences in motives and the nature of their influence, scholars further subdivide them into three core types: “interventionist third parties” who actively apply pressure to change the course of a project, “coordinative third parties” who mediate to facilitate cooperation between conflicting parties, and “wait-and-see third parties” whose mere presence shapes the strategic environment; although they do not intervene directly, they constitute potential variables, providing a clear theoretical tool for subsequent case analysis.

Placing the above theoretical perspective in the specific case analysis of the China-Kyrgyz Uzbek railway, the multiple impacts of third-party actors have begun to take shape. Zhang Huaqing and Li Qi point out that the United States, as an important external power, has long indirectly delayed project progress by supporting Central Asian countries' “diversified diplomacy” strategy, constituting a typical indirect influence [15]. By contrast, the research of Fang Lexian and Yin Jiazhang shows that the European Union has tried to embed itself in the project process as a rule-maker and collaborator, reflecting the characteristics of a “coordination-oriented” role [16].

However, there are obvious gaps in the current research. These gaps together form the starting point of this study and provide space for innovation.

At the theoretical construction level, existing research still lacks a systematic analytical framework capable of integrating multi-actor dynamic games, which leads current analyses to have difficulty capturing the mutual influence and dynamic adjustment processes of the parties' strategies and cannot comprehensively present the full picture of the game. From the research perspective, the “role of third parties” is still understood in a single way. Existing studies mostly focus on the third party's “intervention” or “counterbalancing” role, simply classifying it as an external impediment, while generally overlooking the coordinating functions it may play in technical standards alignment, financing support, or dispute mediation (such as the EU's technical loans), the participation of the Turkish State Railways in the investment and operation of the Uzbekistan section, these cooperative actions' practical contributions to project breakthroughs have not been given adequate attention. At the same time, there has been very little research on how the interactions among different types of third parties indirectly

affect the railway's progress, such as how US-EU strategic competition and cooperation in Central Asia influence the negotiating positions of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, or whether the regional influence rivalry between India and Turkey diverts project resources. The absence of these perspectives makes it difficult for research to fully grasp the complex ecology of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway competition. In terms of explaining real-world issues, existing studies have been slow to respond to the project's dynamics and have failed to discuss them in light of the profound changes in the Central Asian geopolitical landscape since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. Li Youlong pointed out Russia's strategic dilemma and its shifting attitude toward the railway, but this has not yet received targeted academic analysis [17]. In addition, research has mostly focused on obstacles to project advancement, such as track gauge disputes and debt disagreements, while lacking forward-looking exploration of the potential “geopolitical landscape-reshaping effects” that the project could generate once implemented.

In summary, the current research gaps concentrate on shortcomings in building an integrated analytical framework, comprehensively examining the role of third parties, and responding to the latest geopolitical dynamics. This study aims to address these gaps by constructing an analytical framework that covers both core actors and the dynamic interactions of third parties, and by incorporating the post-2020 geopolitical landscape, to conduct a systematic assessment of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project in order to offer a more complete and more explanatory academic perspective.

3 Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

To systematically analyze the multi-actor, dynamic, and complex games in the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, this study employs a mixed-methods approach that is “qualitative-dominant, quantitative-supplementary”. This design stems from the nature of the research questions: qualitative methods are appropriate for examining the strategic intentions, mechanisms of interaction, and processes of evolutionary strategy of each actor in depth, while quantitative methods are employed to aid in verifying specific economic effects and judgments about trends in a complementary way that enables an explanatory depth to the approach and focused verification of objective data.

In terms of research procedures, this study is designed as five interlocking stages: “problem identification-literature review-framework construction-case analysis-conclusions and discussion”. Among them, “framework construction” and “case analysis” are the two core links in the process, ensuring that the analytical procedure is both theoretically guided and grounded in concrete historical facts and dynamics.

In dividing the research stages, the construction history of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project is divided into three key phases: providing a historical perspective for the case analysis- “Initiation Period (1997-2005)”, Stalemate and “Bar-

gaining Period (2006-2019)”, and “Breakthrough and Advancement Period (2020-present)”. In 1997 the three countries signed a memorandum and the project concept was proposed for the first time broad gauge, financing difficulties, and multiple pressures from Russia [18]. In 2022, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed a memorandum of understanding on route selection, removing internal obstacles, and with the shift in Russia’s strategic focus due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the three countries accelerated negotiations, signed an intergovernmental agreement in 2024, and began tunnel construction within Kyrgyzstan in 2025, marking the project’s entry into a substantive construction phase [19-20]. This division clearly demonstrates the long-term and dynamic nature of the bargaining process and provides a solid basis for the subsequent detailed stage-by-stage comparisons and process tracing.

3.2 Analytical Framework

To overcome the current research limitation of analyzing core actors and third parties separately, this study constructs an analytical framework composed of three levels: “core actors-third-party roles-outcome outputs”. The framework is based on the theory of multi-actor interactions in geopolitical political economy, incorporating the various actors involved in the game and their key variables into a unified analytical system to systematically reveal how their interactive mechanisms jointly shape the project’s development process.

The core actors level focuses on the direct participants of the project-the strategic interactions between China and Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan ,whose central contradiction is expressed as the tension between China’s willingness to push forward with a “dual-drive” and Kyrgyzstan’s and Uzbekistan’s decision-making dilemma of “development versus risk”. The interactions at this level set the basic driving forces and resistances for the project.

The third-party role level concentrates on analyzing Russia’s unique role as a non-direct participant that nonetheless exerts critical influence. Its core variable is Russia’s “balancing strategy”, and it exhibits a dynamic evolution from “strategic obstruction” to “tactical adjustment” in response to external circumstances (such as the Ukraine crisis). Other third parties (such as the US and EU) exert differentiated effects on the game environment depending on their behavioral patterns (intervention, coordination, wait-and-see).

This framework clearly reveals “the internal mechanism by which the initial motivations of core actors are moderated and influenced by third-party actions, and ultimately transformed into concrete project outcomes and geopolitical-economic consequences”.

4 Research analysis

4.1 China's Driving Logic

As the crucial driving force behind the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway Project, China has demonstrated a high degree of strategic flexibility by adopting a highly pragmatic and adaptive approach, comprehensively considering all the levels of the initiative.

China's strategy is ultimately influenced by three basic considerations. The first and original reason focuses on the security of energy transportation routes. Some 80% of our country's imported oil depends on transport through the Strait of Malacca, and by building the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway to establish a northwest land route directly to the Middle East and Europe, it can effectively alleviate the long-standing "Malacca dilemma", and form a synergistic effect with the China-Central Asia natural gas pipeline, constructing "railway + pipeline" three-dimensional energy transportation system, significantly enhancing the security and reliability of energy supply. Deepening regional integration is the core strategic objective of China in promoting the project. The railway, as a key hub project of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" in Central Asia, is a crucial vehicle for implementing the concept of a "China-Central Asia community with a shared future". As a "flagship project" of Belt and Road connectivity, it can demonstrate the effectiveness of cooperation to other Central Asian countries-Uzbekistan, in its "2030 Development Strategy", explicitly proposes relying on the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway to optimize the layout of domestic logistics nodes and achieve efficient connections with Chinese and European markets [21]. The success of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway will provide a demonstrative effect for deepened China-Central Asia cooperation, strengthening China's geopolitical influence in Central Asia and thereby consolidating China's leading role in regional cooperation. Finally, promoting the export of advantageous capacity is an important economic consideration. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway provides an important platform for such capacity exports, effectively driving the full-industry-chain exports of China's railway construction, engineering machinery, building materials, and other sectors, creating market space for domestic enterprises and offering broad overseas markets for leading companies such as China Railway and China Railway Construction, helping to absorb domestic surplus capacity and providing technical support for the project's long-term stable operation.

At the strategic tool level, China has shown great flexibility and diversity in implementation methods, reflecting mature experience in international cooperation. It has granted concessional loans through multilateral financial institutions such as the Silk Road Fund and the AIIB, reduced project disputes with transparent operations, and created a more stable cooperative environment for projects. All of which were associated with an overall increase in sustained stability over the cooperation period. In terms of technical cooperation, it emphasized "empowerment across the entire life cycle", providing end-to-end life cycle solutions covering preliminary surveying and design, construction, and subsequent operations management, sharing China's mature experience in high-speed rail construction, which demonstrated the systematic and integrated

advantages of Chinese railway technology, and also helped Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan build autonomous operational capacity, avoiding the projects falling into a “construction dependency” predicament. In terms of policy coordination, through a dual-track model of “bilateral breakthroughs + multilateral consolidation”. At the bilateral level, high-level mutual visits became the “key lever” for advancing projects route alignment, funding proportions, and so on.

Undoubtedly, China's strategy has demonstrated exceptional situational response and strategic adaptability in international infrastructure cooperation. During the initiative proposal period (1997-2005), the strategy centered on bilateral communication, since both countries had a limited understanding of the project. China focused on bilateral communication, prioritizing preliminary scheme discussions and technical exchanges with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and completed three rounds of technical surveys. Entering the stagnation game period (2006-2019), due to concerns such as Russia's influence in Central Asia, China adopted a “circumventing advance” pragmatic strategy, by prioritizing livelihood projects such as the north-south road in Kyrgyzstan and the Angren-Pop railway tunnel in Uzbekistan, effectively building political mutual trust to lay the foundation for later breakthroughs in the railway project. In the breakthrough promotion period (2020 to present), on the one hand, with changes in the Central Asian geopolitical landscape after the Russia-Ukraine conflict, China further adjusted its strategy to “multilateral coordination”, on one hand joining Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to accelerate feasibility studies, and on the other hand, by communicating with Russia, clarifying the compatibility of the railway project with the rules of the Eurasian Economic Union, pushing the project into a substantive acceleration phase.

4.2 Regional Demands of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

As direct participants in the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan view the line not just as a transport route but as an important opportunity to overcome inland bottlenecks and drive economic development; Constrained by the complex geopolitical environment, the two countries remain vigilant about such practical problems as sovereignty transfer, debt-bearing capacity, and external pressures. This dual characteristic has profoundly shaped both countries' strategic choices and pace control in the negotiation and implementation process.

Measured by development benefits, Kyrgyzstan's and Uzbekistan's demands focus on economic, livelihood, and industrial integration. Railway construction is primarily the core means of addressing infrastructure shortcomings. Kyrgyzstan's railway network density is far below the global average, and most existing lines are single-track railways with low transport efficiency, unable to support large-scale outbound transport of bulk commodities such as minerals and agricultural products, thus becoming a significant constraint on economic development [22]. As a doubly landlocked country, Uzbekistan has long relied on third-country transit for external logistics, and urgently needs to open external routes through railway construction so that its advantageous products, such as cotton and minerals, can obtain more convenient export channels, changing its “landlocked and closed” transportation pattern. Stimulating economic

growth and optimizing industrial structure is another core demand. Railway construction is expected to create a large number of jobs for both countries and spur related industries such as building materials, transportation, and tourism, helping to diversify economic structures. At the same time, the two countries hope to integrate into the “Belt and Road” logistics network and become a land transit hub connecting China and Europe to gain substantial transit revenues; this transit dividend is reflected in direct economic income, and in promoting the two countries’ integration into regional logistics networks. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, as the core section of the “Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor”, means much more for Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan than a single transport line. It will help both countries get out of the geographical constraints of landlocked countries and turn them from traditional peripheral inland regions into key Eurasian land transport hubs. Such a transformation will attract international logistics companies and spur the systematic development and local clustering of upstream and downstream industries represented by warehouse, processing, and trade. For the larger economies of both countries, which have historically depended on resource exports, this is an essential diversification opportunity. While the railway is clearly an important opportunity for structural economic change. Finally, with respect to improvements in livelihood, the railway construction should reduce the cost of commodity circulation and improve transport conditions for similar dual functions. Also, benefits could be added in relation to the related infrastructure and human capital collaboration.

In terms of risk constraints, decision-making in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan is largely constrained by concern over sovereignty, major power relationships, and debt. Risk of debt is the primary concern. Given the small relative size of their own economies, both countries remain very concerned about over reliance on external financing. The two countries generally think of debt sustainability as a primary consideration to avoid long-term repayment pressure. Furthermore, they have to balance relations with major powers. Russia holds deep influence over both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan through structures like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)[1] and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)-Kyrgyzstan is a member of the EAEU, and Uzbekistan is not a member of the EAEU but maintains close security cooperation with Russia. China acts as the primary funder and technology provider for project development and thereby puts Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in a position of “on one side a traditional security ally, the other an economic development partner”, forcing them to pursue a balance. For example, when Kyrgyzstan promotes railway cooperation with China, it informs Russia of project developments at the same time and emphasizes that the technical standards of the project are consistent with EAEU rules; similarly, while Uzbekistan accepts Chinese loans, it participates actively in Russia-controlled multilateral dialogue mechanisms. Both initiatives are aimed mainly at trying to avoid “picking sides” between the two major powers. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are sensitive about issues of sovereignty, clearly making sovereignty first a principle in negotiations. For example, Kyrgyzstan has specifically asked to participate in railway dispatch management, advocating that “operational staff for the domestic segment should be mainly Kyrgyz”; Uzbekistan has requested that the distribution of railway revenue

is “linked to transit freight volumes”, and opposes “fixed-percentage splits” so that it can maintain real control over the project.

4.3 Russia’s Counterbalance

While Russia is the traditional dominant power in Central Asia, its stance toward the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway covers two considerations in one: how to maintain its own traditional influence while responding to China’s increasingly rising influence in the region.

As for the railway connection between China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, Russia did not openly obstruct it but preferred a more sophisticated approach of delaying or even preventing substantial project development through economic, diplomatic, and other multidimensional means, thereby flexibly maintaining its traditional influence in Central Asia. Diplomatic maneuvering focuses on “institutional control”, attempting to bring the project under a Russia-led framework. Russia’s main lever is the Eurasian Economic Union (members include Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, etc.), and it has repeatedly proposed in internal union meetings that “the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway must comply with Eurasian Economic Union rules”, seeking the project to accept the union’s oversight on tariff coordination, logistics standards, revenue distribution, and to seize project leadership. Proposing alternative projects is Russia’s “competitive strategy”, attempting to divert resources and attention with a “superior plan”. The most typical example is the “Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan railway modernization project” pushed by Russia, which plans to electrify existing railways in the three countries, claiming “that after modernization freight capacity can increase by 50%, with no need to build new lines and at only one-third the cost of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway”, and to attract Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to participate, Russia also promised to provide “preferential loans”—offering loans for the Kyrgyzstan sections at an annual interest rate of 1.5% with a 30-year term, and to Uzbekistan promising “priority support for transporting its agricultural exports after modernization”. Although this project, due to outdated technical standards and limited coverage, failed to fully replace the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, it did divert the attention of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, causing them to hesitate and weigh between the two projects, and objectively delayed the negotiation process for the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway.

From the perspective of stage evolution, Russia’s balancing strategy shows a clear pattern of dynamic adjustment. During the project’s stagnation period, Russia adopted a clearly oppositional stance, vetoing in 2008 Kyrgyzstan’s submission of a “feasibility study application for the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway”, and in 2015 jointly pressuring Uzbekistan with Kazakhstan to “abandon railway cooperation with China”. However, after entering the breakthrough period, with changes in regional and international circumstances—especially the strategic environment shift brought by the Ukraine crisis—Russia’s intensity of balancing clearly decreased. On the one hand, Russia needed to commit substantial funds and resources to the battlefield and was unable to provide more economic support to Central Asia; on the other hand, in order to avoid China “dominating alone” in Central Asia, Russia had to adjust its position, shifting

from “opposition” to “limited participation”. In 2023, during a meeting with Chinese leaders, Putin explicitly stated “we do not oppose the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, but the project must be compatible with the rules of the Eurasian Economic Union”, and this statement marked a substantive shift in Russia's strategy: it no longer sought to block the project, but aimed to retain some say through “rule compatibility”, thereby accommodating the development needs of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan while buying itself geopolitical buffer space, reflecting Russia's strategic flexibility amid practical difficulties.

Russia's balancing act was the main external barrier for the project that time and time again dragged it into a “stalemate game” for almost twenty years, and because its strategic tools raised the decision costs for both countries, it created more time and wrote. However, Russia's turning point with this project also created the necessary external conditions for a “breakthrough push” post-2020 and did not change, but was the structural change for the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia from unipolarity into competitive coexistence.

4.4 The Role of Third Parties in Shaping the Railway Construction Process

Among interventionist third parties, the actions of the United States and India are the most targeted, with the core objective of delaying the project and balancing China's influence through various means. The United States, through frequent official hype about a “debt trap” in the political sphere, deliberately exaggerates the debt pressure the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway would place on Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan; economically, it competes for the attention of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan with “alternative funding”, in 2023 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided Kyrgyzstan with \$50 million “for a road rehabilitation loan program”, on security it forges ties through military cooperation. India's intervention, by contrast, focuses more on “project diversion” and “influence infiltration”.

Cooperative third parties, represented by the EU and Turkey, place greater emphasis on the “connectivity dividend” brought by the project and choose to participate constructively. Turkey relies on the cultural ties of the “Turkic-speaking countries” and emphasizes “investment + logistics linkage” [23]. The Turkish State Railways (TCDD) proactively proposed participating in the construction and operation of the Uzbekistan segment. Third-party wait-and-see actors such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union are typical. Discussion

4.5 The Theoretical Implications of Third-party Roles Reshaping the Geopolitical Landscape

This study finds that the strategic significance of the China-Central Asia Railway far exceeds that of an ordinary transportation line. Through this railway's multi-party interaction, we can see both the practical pathway for the “Belt and Road” initiative to take root in such a complex geopolitical environment and discover how development needs and strategic competition interweave in cross-border infrastructure cooperation.

Outside-the-region involvement has changed the logic of regional engagement by empowering Central Asian states. Given the presence of multiple outside-the-region actors competing to provide alternative plans, financing, and technical support, Central Asian countries-such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan-have received an unprecedented strategic option (or options) to consider. In other words, this has shifted Central Asian states from passive receptors in geopolitical contests to active negotiators.

The adaptation of outside-the-region actors' strategies to the Belt and Road Initiative ultimately pushes Central Asia to transition from a “geopolitical periphery” to a “hub zone” in functional character [24]. The significance of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is not solely found within its projected elicited value, but as a functional and connective platform that prospectively links into third-party frameworks like the EU's “Global Gateway”, and Turkey's “Middle Corridor”; while concurrently achieving a level of cross-domain efflorescence [25]. These third-party actions, together, to a certain degree, have weakened the geographic attachments formed in history. They have pushed the geopolitical pattern of Central Asia from “Russia's sole dominance” toward a new state of “multiple actors participating jointly”.

4.6 Practical Insights from the Belt and Road Initiative

Practice in the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway has demonstrated that the railway advancement has exposed certain challenges to cooperation and highlighted other replicable opportunities. Multipolar cooperation offers a new path for the Belt and Road to overcome geopolitical competition, while participation by different types of third parties turns rivalry into mutual benefit and win-win cooperation. In the future, the “Belt and Road” can promote strategic alignment with the EU's “Global Gateway” and ASEAN's “Master Plan on Connectivity”, transforming geopolitical competition into cooperative opportunities that benefit all parties. Alignment of rules and standards is key to enhancing the international recognition of projects; by connecting technical specifications and institutional arrangements, project implementation resistance can be reduced. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway's practice of aligning with European rail standards has provided important experience for “rule connectivity”.

Based on these insights, the Belt and Road initiative's future development can consider optimization in three directions. Build a multilateral coordination mechanism to resolve geopolitical risks by establishing institutionalized communication platforms to enhance risk prevention and staggered resolution capabilities.

5 Conclusion

The construction process of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway depicts profound changes in the Eurasian geopolitical landscape and serves as an instructive case to understand contemporary transnational infrastructure cooperation. Taking this railway project as a case, this article analyzes it using the three phases of its development: the proposal stage, the stalemate and bargaining stage, and the breakthrough and advancement stage. In the light of the analytical framework “main participants-third party

roles-outcome outputs”, it gives an in-depth interpretation of key issues in the project's advancement and the role it would play in reshaping regional dynamics.

The construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway was not driven by any single party alone but was an ongoing result of negotiation and accommodation among multiple parties concerning strategic objectives, immediate interests, and institutional conditions.

In the future, the Belt and Road projects need to emphasize the construction of institutionalized multilateral coordination mechanisms, implement frameworks of debt sustainability, and deepen strategic alignment with regional strategies to achieve a transformation from “unilateral advancement” to “multilateral joint construction”.

As the flagship project of the BRI in Central Asia, the construction experience of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway provides some critical insights into deeper cooperation under the initiative.

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