

# «The Belt And Road Initiative» Trajectories Of Engagement And Cooperation For Central Asia And The Gulf States

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**Abstract:** The article is devoted to a comprehensive analysis of the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative put forward by China and its impact on modern Eurasian development. Particular attention is paid to Central Asia, which is considered as a key transit hub connecting Asian and European markets and forming a new contour of global economic interconnectivity. The study emphasises that the region has a unique geostrategic value, where the interests of not only China and Russia, but also the Gulf monarchies, seeking to build into the project through investment, energy and infrastructure partnerships, intersect. The role of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is analysed as a complement to overland routes: it is their financial resources, innovative potential and experience in developing transport and logistics hubs that allow China to expand sea and land corridors. The BRI's historical continuity with the Great Silk Road, which in the past facilitated trade, cultural exchange and the spread of knowledge between civilisations, is underlined. The modern initiative is an instrument for the formation of a new co-operation architecture based on the principles of peace and co-operation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit. Thus, the study reveals that the pairing of Central Asia and the GCC countries within the BRI opens up prospects not only for diversifying transport routes and investment flows, but also for strengthening political and diplomatic dialogue, which makes this project an important element of the global multipolar system.

**Keywords:** Great Silk Road, BRI (The Belt and Road Initiative), China, Central Asia, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Kuwait, Mubarak Al-Kabeer Port.

**Introduction:** China's The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) evokes historical memories of the Great Silk Road. As we know, there have been many trade routes throughout history, but only a few have left a positive mark on peoples' memories. The Great Silk Road promoted communication, trade and exchange between civilisations, people of different cultural traditions exchanged not only goods, ways of life. The Chinese learnt to grow new types of fruit and vegetables, although China grew many local fruits including peaches, plums, apricots and persimmons, it also carefully cultivated new crops brought from the Silk Road such as figs, dates, cherries, melons, pomegranates, grapes, almonds, pistachios, walnuts, cumin, coriander and sugar cane. Many economically important fruit crops also grew in the lowland forests of eastern Central Asia. For example, modern cultivated

apples (as well as wild apples) originated in the Tien Shan Mountains in what is now southeastern Kazakhstan, and pistachios in southern Central Asia.

Spiritual and cultural interaction was no less important. It was through Central Asia that Buddhism penetrated into China. Caravan routes passing through the oases of the Tarim basin (Kucha, Hotani, Turfan) became the main arteries for the spread of Buddhist teachings. Central Asian monks and translators, among whom Dhamaraka (c. 233-311) and Kumarajiva (344-413) occupy a special place, made a great contribution to the adaptation of Buddhist texts into the Chinese language.

The Chinese 'four great inventions' - the compass, gunpowder, paper and printing - spread to Western Asia and Europe through trade and cultural contacts along the Silk Road, having a tremendous impact on the development of science, technology and civilisation as

a whole.

In the modern era, the «The Belt and Road Initiative» (BRI) initiative has become China's tool to revitalise the spirit of the Silk Road based on the principles of 'peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, mutual benefit and results that benefit all'.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one of the most ambitious international economic cooperation and development projects aimed at forging new links between Asia, Europe and Africa through infrastructure modernisation, deepening trade ties and institutional convergence. The initiative is a natural extension of China's previous domestic and foreign economic strategies. Infrastructure development has been a key factor in China's economic success. Supported by public investment, it has helped revitalise the economy, especially during periods of export decline. It has also made it easier and cheaper to transport goods and move people. Thus, China believes that its experience can be shared through the Belt and Road as part of its foreign economic relations. Infrastructure connectivity will not only promote economic growth in regions along the Belt and Road, but also strengthen China's economic ties with these regions. In September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative during a visit to Kazakhstan. A month later, speaking in Indonesia, he presented the concept of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Together, these two projects were called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It was previously known as One Belt One Road (OBOR), but this term was gradually phased out because it was perceived as too hegemonic.

The initiative involves more than 70 countries, which account for about 63% of the world's population and a significant portion of the planet's natural resources. The potential cumulative economic impact of implementing the GPE is estimated at US\$21 trillion, which is generating enormous interest among the ruling and business communities as well as in the academic community.

### **GCC**

The main land transport corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative pass through Central Asia, Russia and the South Caucasus, bypassing the territory of the GCC states. Nevertheless, the Gulf monarchies play a strategic role in the development of the initiatives: their involvement is mainly through the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, but also through investment projects, energy co-operation and the creation of industrial zones. Thus, although there is no direct corridor running through the region, the GCC is creating the conditions for BRI node and donor connections.

Progress is visible in strengthening policy coordination

between China and a number of countries in the Middle East, where Beijing has consistently sought to develop its relations. Joint efforts have developed dialogue and communication mechanisms such as the China-Arab Cooperation Forum and the China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Strategic Dialogue.

China's first Arab Political Programme, published in 2016, states that joint efforts with Arab countries will aim to advance the initiative based on the principles of 'broad consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. The document also states that China and Arab countries will adopt a '1+2+3' cooperation model, where '1' refers to energy cooperation as a key element of infrastructure; '2' covers construction and trade and investment facilitation; and '3' emphasises innovative technologies in nuclear power, satellite technology and renewable energy.

This emphasis can be linked to the Belt and Road Initiative. Since its launch, high-level visits between Chinese and Middle Eastern leaders have become more frequent. China has signed strategic partnership agreements with eight Arab countries and construction agreements under the Belt and Road Initiative with six Arab states. In addition, seven Arab countries, including Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE from the GCC bloc, are founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). These measures have enhanced the understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative among countries in the Middle East and improved policy coordination.

Progress is also evident in the development of infrastructure connectivity. Under the initiative, Chinese companies have participated in the construction of several ports in the Middle East, including Ain Sokhna Port in Egypt and the new Hamad Port in Qatar. The establishment of these ports will increase capacity and transport connectivity, thereby reducing transport costs. China has also established a logistics base in Djibouti designed to enhance its maritime security capabilities under the UN mandate.

On land, in January 2016, the first goods train between China and Iran, passing through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, completed its journey in just two weeks, 30 days faster than before.

Located at the strategic intersection of two major routes, Saudi Arabia plays a key role in regional development. For example, the opening of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) branch in Riyadh in 2015 may have helped attract foreign investment in the Kingdom's megaprojects.

DP World, one of Emirates' leading marine and inland terminal management companies, is already actively involved in the initiative's projects. In April 2017, the

first direct goods train from the UK to Yiwu (East China) departed from DP World's terminal at London Gateway Port. Also, the Belt and Road initiative will strengthen the UAE's position as an economic hub. Existing infrastructure such as Jebel Ali Port already plays a key role in international trade between several continents. As the initiative develops, its importance will only increase.

Since late 2016, China has invested billions of dollars to transform Duqm, a small fishing village 550 kilometres south of Muscat, into an industrial hub. This project is part of Oman's economic diversification strategy, but also represents an important element of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

As reported by Reuters, Kuwait is set to sign a contract worth approximately USD 4 billion with China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) to complete the first phase of the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Port project on Bubiyan Island. The project is described as a strategic infrastructure initiative aimed at establishing a secure regional transport corridor and a commercial hub, which China seeks to integrate into the Belt and Road Initiative. According to the source, Kuwait views the port as a key instrument for economic diversification, GDP growth, and the restoration of its regional commercial and financial role, while the project also forms part of a broader portfolio of Kuwait–China cooperation within the BRI framework.

### Central Asia

Infrastructure development by China and the GCC under the Belt and Road Initiative has become an important tool for deepening trade ties. China proposes the so-called '1+2+3' model, where '1' refers to energy as the basis for cooperation, "2" includes infrastructure and trade and investment interaction, and '3' involves joint work in innovative sectors such as nuclear power, space and renewable energy. In this logic, Central Asia is seen as a natural transit hub for overland flows between China and the Gulf States.

However, the realisation of transport corridors faces limitations. Turkmenistan maintains a cautious stance, limiting its participation in infrastructure projects. An exception was the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway, which opened in 2016 and allowed to repeatedly reduce the time of cargo delivery between Shanghai and the port of Bandar Abbas.

Financial and investment co-operation remains an important dimension. Gulf capital is beginning to penetrate Central Asia through targeted projects: Kuwait's Arab Economic Development Fund financed road works in Tajikistan, and Emirati companies show interest in Caspian ports.

Consequently, the interactions between Central Asia and the GCC focus on four main areas: energy, infrastructure, financial partnerships, and political and diplomatic dialogue. Despite existing barriers, Uzbekistan has the potential to attract Gulf investments in the near future. The overland routes of Central Asia and the Gulf sea lanes provide a foundation for a more sustainable model of cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative framework.

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