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# Silk Stretched: Are we overestimating Chinese cultural influence in Uzbekistan in the era of the Belt and Road?

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## **Silk Stretched: Are we overestimating Chinese cultural influence in Uzbekistan in the era of the Belt and Road?**

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*Pantucci, Raffaello. "Why Xi Jinping Chose Central Asia for His First Post-COVID-19 Trip".  
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Uzbekistan borders the world through the maintenance of strong global trade relationships. It was not long ago that Uzbekistan's place on the globe was a soviet subdivision; a strong ground of Russian influence and intention. Culminating in the 2016 Election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, seismic strategic changes since their declaration of independence in 1990 fuelled the national movement of an increasingly globalized country. Tucked in close range of Russia, China, and India, Uzbekistan stakes its claim directly in the balance of the three. The neighbouring Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan each have varying levels of willingness to cooperate internationally, and have chosen their allies with great caution. In protest of Russian historical association and aggression concerning the Uzbek region, dominant Western and Sinocentric objectives have converged to support the fostering of an east-west trade corridor to exchange the boundless natural resources that laid the bedrock for the pivotal Silk Road.



Since Soviet dissolution, the Uzbek government has become open to cooperating with the Western world. Central Asia proved an important bed of cooperators for those with interests in the Middle East towards the turn of the century. The war in Iraq strengthened tensions with the West, as Uzbekistan strayed from Russian grasp. American military bases stationed themselves in southern provinces during the war in Afghanistan. Fractures occurred that led to tension between Uzbekistan and the Western world, further propelled by Russia, but since then, Uzbekistan has maintained a positive trade relationship with the United States.

During the same time period, Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road megaproject to spread Chinese Economic Prosperity and Soft power throughout the Eurasian region. Referred to colloquially as the BRI, it has grown from a project of physical infrastructure aimed at bridging economic gaps connecting Asia and Europe, into a force reshaping global power dynamics.

The Belt and Road initiative began in 2013, and has become an extension of the 'Chinese Dream', meant to challenge American hegemonic power - building a foundation of Chinese soft power strong enough to make opposing powers envious. The Chinese government's method to connect was rooted in the physical and metaphorical revitalization of the Silk Road, as well as the creation of a maritime trade operation. The organization and impact of the Belt and Road have changed significantly since its creation. Once centred around widespread megaprojects within the physical borders of the Silk Road that involved heavy financing for lower-income countries, the initiative now also focuses on more specific projects in sectors tailored to individual countries' needs, making a larger impact with smaller footprints. While countries like Italy and Germany have since pulled their participation from the physical web of ports, the BRI's influence pathways transcend borders that divide participants and non-members through the control and proxy ownership of a multitude of the globe's most important ports spanning from France, Germany, Italy, the United States and Canada. Almost \$30 billion has been loaned by China to East African countries to facilitate and finance projects building railways in Kenya and Ethiopia, aiming to connect major cities, creating new trade routes. The Belt and Road continues to expand into Europe slowly, and even countries like Hungary have seen over 60 percent of their foreign direct investment comprising Chinese ventures connected to the BRI. It's clear that the Belt and Road initiative has already made a strong global imprint, inching China along to the eventual fulfillment of the Chinese dream.

It's also no surprise that the former home of the Silk Road, Uzbekistan, is a crucial partner in its revival. Mirziyoyev's government, upon its election, created a plan coined the "Development Strategy for 2017-2021" that's grand strategy consisted of leveraging geopolitical locale to "extract concessions from neighbourhood states" while leveraging its independent cooperation with Russia and China. China positioned itself to take swift advantage of Western failings in the Central Asian region. In the 2000s, Central Asian countries were forced to rethink the strength of their American "ally". Through the cooperation of Russia and China, the United States was forced to close their base military base, K2, located in Uzbekistan, that served as support for the American effort in



Afghanistan. Not long afterward, it was China's union with Uzbekistan that protected Southern Kyrgyzstan from worries of invasion. The Chinese partnership was pivotal once again as Uzbekistan contacted China to oppose the opening of a Russian military base in the Kyrgyz section of the Fergana Valley region. The introduction of the BRI only strengthened the bond between Uzbekistan and China.

Uzbekistan first latched onto the Belt and Road initiative in 2013, three years before the new Mirziyoyev government was elected, hoping to benefit from the Chinese move towards globalization. In the now twelve years of partnership, the connection and interdependence between the two countries have only grown stronger. One of the initiative's first successes was a railway connecting the two Uzbek cities of Angren and Pop. Although the two cities are quite small, the strategic significance of the railroad is much greater: aside from creating a strong bond between Xi Jinping and Islam Karimov, the railway saved traders, merchants and citizens from entering Tajikistan in order to traverse the region between the capital city of Tashkent and the populous Ferghana region. By 2016, the railway line and its arduous tunnel lines were completed, designating Uzbekistan as a key ally moving forward. By 2022, the Belt and Road had initiated a major shift in the outlook of their foreign policy. Uzbekistan's "Development Strategy for 2022-2026" was not only heavily reliant on Chinese cooperation but it was presented within Beijing, with little mention of Russian cooperation and interdependence. In 2024, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan reached an agreement to collaborate on the sizable China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project that aimed to connect the significant cities of Kashgar Prefecture, Andijan, and Jalal-Abad. The project comes 11 years after Uzbekistan first agreed to collaborate on Belt and Road infrastructure, and this delay comes at the hands of the region's two major powers' dissuasion. Although the Belt and Road initiative was initially announced on Kazakh ground, Kazakhstan positioned itself against the railway with their major economic, and to a limited degree, ideological ally, Russia. Some attribute the increased willingness of cooperation between China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan to the newly elected governments of each central asian country, and their retroactive response to the Russo-Ukraine war that opened up the possibility for greater Asian capitalization upon the European market that was once dominated by Russia. Since the introduction of the tri-national railway, the Chinese province of Xinjiang, home to Kashgar Prefecture, has seen a 64.7% growth in total foreign trade values, with 67.4% of that value derived from Central Asia. Trade between China and Central Asian nations now exceeds \$90 billion. The creation of the east-west bridge, designed by China, pours significant foreign direct investment into the Uzbek economy, as it acts as a facilitator of the physical bridge infrastructure. Slowly, Central Asia has become the literal center of east-west trade.

The specific effects on the Uzbek economy are vast. Between 2022 and 2023, the amount of foreign direct investment (FDI) doubled to a figure of \$7.2 billion. Uzbek FDI accounted for approximately 23% of the total investment consumption in the country. Chinese FDI accounted for almost double the amount of Russia's, signifying a further Sinocentric shift. Uzbek GNI, accounting for income earned by purely Uzbek firms and households, grew by 10.8% between 2022 and 2023, and the Uzbek GDP has grown by a rate of over 6 percent consistently between 2023 and 2024. In terms of Uzbek-Chinese trade volume, Chinese exports like cars, machinery, and broadcasting equipment grew by





44.9% between 2022-2023. Uzbek exports to China continue to develop and grow, with the majority of trade volume moving east, consisting of gas, copper, and cotton. Unemployment in Uzbekistan has continued to decrease, hitting a low of 4.53% in 2023. Not accounted for in these measures are the tri-national railway and billions of dollars of collaborations agreed upon between Tashkent and China's CSCEC. Increasing foreign direct investment through the creation of Chinese infrastructure projects has made positive impacts on local incomes and crucial Uzbek natural resource markets.

Although Vladimir Putin's public comments have praised China's Belt and Road initiative for its venture to create a more "equal" world order, and for its benign will to seek cooperation, it is clear that China's political and economic influence has matched Russian influence even within the confines of former Soviet territory. From cement factories in Samarkand to railroads that connect the continent, allyship between Uzbekistan and China has been strengthened and secured. While Russia seeks to expand its influence in rebuke of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization through force, China has found a different strategic medium.

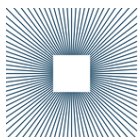
However strategic the Belt and Road program is, its influence in Uzbekistan has been limited to a purely economic partnership. Even as more students opt for opportunities abroad in America, Canada and Britain and decrease their participation in the Russian language, Russian cultural influence and widespread language use is still almost as common as the Uzbek language itself. Russia may be losing parts of its political influence in favour of China in Uzbekistan, but it is certainly not losing its cultural influence to the same pair of hands.

As of 2025, Uzbekistan's economic partnerships are more accurately defined by its cooperation with China and America. Uzbek-Russian relations have entered a new chapter of strongly decreased emphasis surrounding economic collaboration, with existing ties nonetheless, that seem to stem more out of a place of strategic and geographic necessity than opportunity. Uzbekistan's cultural market is headlined by the growing dominant influence of America on top of its Russian roots, with little enthusiasm for Chinese influence, that isn't in the form of infrastructure.



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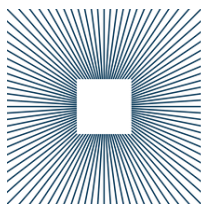
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