

# CHINA-KYRGYZSTAN-UZBEKISTAN RAILWAY: COULD CHINA BE AT INDIA'S BORDER?

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Only two outlets connect China's Xinjiang to South and Central Asia — one from Kashgar via the Khunjerab Pass to PoK, and the other from Kashgar via Irkashtam Pass to Kyrgyzstan. Another narrow cliff-side road runs through the Pamir Mountains into Tajikistan.

For decades, China built roads, railroads and pipelines through the steppe of Kazakhstan, but the grandest dream to enter Fergana Valley with a railway since the 1990s remained elusive due to multiple geopolitical hurdles.

But as Russia's power declines, Eurasia is turning into China's opportunity. The most recent case in point is the renewed zeal to build the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway (CKU-R) in the backdrop of the [Ukraine](#) crisis, supply chain disruptions and the demand for alternative routes to bypass Russia. China brought it back to life during the BRI's 10th anniversary summit at Xi'an in 2023. Uzbekistan ending its isolationist policy made it possible. The 454-km long CKU-R will connect Kashgar with Osh and Andijan and further link up with the European railway network through Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey.

The CKU-R will come as a huge strategic and economic boon for China. Once completed, Xinjiang, hitherto terra incognita but bordering eight countries including India, will be connected with Fergana Valley, the heart of Eurasia and the intersection of Central Asia, Trans-Caspian, South Asia, and West Asia. It will boost China's presence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, and amplify its Europe-bound freight, bypassing the longer Russian route besides transforming the region into a business hub.

Central Asia will once become "central" to East and West transit trade. The Chinese trains will arrive closer to India through the proposed Trans-Afghan Railway.

However, CKU-R confronts numerous hurdles. The Chinese are aware that Fergana is a hotbed of radical Salafi-Jihadi terror groups. Experts see the corridor as becoming a double-edged sword — crucial for Central Asian integration into global supply chains but still running the risk of becoming a conduit for smuggling illicit goods to Russia.

The region is already known for grey zone trade. Since the Ukraine crisis, parallel imports into Kyrgyzstan from Western suppliers have increased, suggesting massive smuggling to evade sanctions against Russia.

The CKU-R's delay is mainly due to Kyrgyzstan's political and financial problems. Bishkek wants the corridor but doesn't have the money (\$4.7 billion) to build its part of the route. Attracting investment is a challenging task, but raising a loan is even more difficult due to its chronic debt to China — currently \$2 billion. The fear of further sinking into the debt trap is viewed as a "threat" to the country's sovereignty.

Kyrgyzstan wants CKU-R to be a strategic project hoping other players to form a consortium to pay for its construction. The transit country shouldn't be made to pay is an argument among others. The Kyrgyz want the project but without having to pay for it.

The theory linking the project to "Chinese expansionism" runs deep. The last time the Chinese

controlled Syr and Amu Darya region was during the 7th century. The Kyrgyz fear that CKU-R will lead to an influx of Chinese migrants, intruding upon their sovereignty.

China can fund the project but Beijing intends to get in exchange Kyrgyzstan's largest iron ore and gold mining site Zhetim Too worth \$50 billion, located in Naryn at the China-Kyrgyz border. The area is also located at a big glacier water belt that China wants to divert.

Beijing can wait till the Kyrgyz are ready. President Sadyr Japarov opted to skip the 2023 BRI Forum in Beijing citing a "tight schedule" However, Premier Li Qiang immediately landed in Bishkek to discuss the CKU-R.

China is not known for writing off debt. Tajikistan had to cede 1,122 sq km of its territory to China in 2011.

While the hope is for the CKU-R construction to begin in 2024, Uzbek experts have already joined the Kyrgyz and Chinese specialists to prepare the technical reports. Sceptics feel it is nowhere close to reality.

Central Asian geopolitics can be tricky, especially if the players prematurely discount the Russian factor. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are closer to Moscow but Uzbekistan has opened up to the West and even warmed up with the Taliban regime. Tajikistan is critical of the Taliban government, but its porous border is notorious for opium trafficking,

China has changed its terms of engagement. It relies less on the consensus-based SCO grouping, and instead prefers to operate through the 5+1 format and BRI schemes. China's trade with Kazakhstan stands for \$21.7 billion exceeding Russia's \$18.9 billion. Similarly, China's trade with Uzbekistan accounts for \$12.23 billion, compared to Russia's \$8.86 billion.

Compared to the belligerent Russian stance, the Chinese diplomats operate with subtlety in sharp contrast to "wolf warrior" diplomacy elsewhere.

Chinese trains had reached Afghanistan's Hairatan city in 2022. Tashkent wants to build a 753-km long Trans-Afghan Railway (TAR) from Hairatan to Kabul and then into Pakistan via Peshawar — it looks problematic due to security concerns in Afghanistan.

Moscow's response towards CKU-R remains muted, but its position is subject to change, for it would mean replacing the Russia-oriented south-north directed connectivity by a China-led east-west network.

In the 19th century, the Russian railway in the Karakum desert underpinned the great-power rivalry involving British India. This time, CKU-R could become an instrument of Chinese expansion to skirt the Himalayan terrain and gain a foothold in Babur's land to reach the gates of India.

India's connectivity via Chabahar is not proving to be viable in many ways. A direct railroad to Central Asia is possible without compromising on India's territorial integrity so long as it learns to defend its interest in Eurasia while maneuvering regional norms in the shifting balance of power.

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