



## Central Asia-West Asia-South Asia Connectivity Building an Upgraded Version of the CPEC

Chen Ruihua<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Director, Research Center of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Kashi University

<sup>2</sup>School of Economics, Nankai University

Correspondence: [chenruihua@nankai.edu.cn](mailto:chenruihua@nankai.edu.cn)

**Abstract:** The world is undergoing profound changes unprecedented in a century, jointly building the Belt and Road is an important guarantee for maintaining global stability and development in response to profound changes, and building a new development pattern with the domestic cycle as the main body and the domestic and international dual cycles promoting each other is a strategic choice to respond to the changes in the complex situations. With the in-depth advancement of the BRI, Xinjiang has actively served and integrated into the new development pattern, becoming a hub node to build a domestic and international dual cycle facing Eurasia. As the flagship project of the BRI and the landmark project of the rise of land power in the post-global era, the CPEC is of great strategic significance in responding to profound changes and building a new development pattern. With the stability of Central Asia, West Asia, and South Asia, we have taken the initiative to accelerate regional connectivity and it is both necessary and feasible to build an upgraded version of the CPEC.

**Keywords:** new development pattern; Central Asia-West Asia-South Asia connectivity; the upgraded version of CPEC

In July 2022, President Xi Jinping pointed out that Xinjiang is no longer a remote area, but a core area and a hub area with the in-depth advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) when he inspected Xinjiang.<sup>[1]</sup> As the heart of Asia and the hinterland of Eurasia, the economic and strategic value of Xinjiang-Central Asia-Eastern Europe is particularly important, and scholars such as Halford J. Mackinder and Karl Haushofer have elaborated on it<sup>[2]</sup>. Today's world has entered an era of equal emphasis on sea power and land power, and the concept of global economic and strategic security has been reshaped. Xi Jinping's assertion is largely a response to this change. Since ancient times, China's development and prosperity have been closely related to the westward strategy and Xinjiang has always been the focus, despite there have many disputes over the coastal defense and frontier defense. As the intersection of the world's four major civilizations, three major language families, and three major religions, Xinjiang is an important window for China's opening up to the outside world, and it is also a witness to China's prosperity and strength. At present, global geo-strategic and political wrestling has put tremendous pressure on Xinjiang's high-quality development, and has also brought unprecedented opportunities for the rise of emerging markets in Eurasia with the Pamirs Plateau as the "heart of the land". In the future, China is necessary urgently to use the great achievements of Xinjiang's high-quality development to drive the rise of emerging markets in Eurasia. To this end, the discussion on the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Central Asia-West Asia-South Asia Connectivity under the new development pattern is particularly important.

### I. The Basic Background of the Central Asia-West Asia-South Asia Connectivity

At present, under the influence of the boycott of western forces and geopolitical instability, the high-quality development of the Belt and Road with the construction of six corridors, six roads, multiple countries, and multiple ports as the carrier has encountered challenges. After seven years of construction, the CPEC has become the flagship project of the BRI and the landmark project of the rise of land power in Eurasia in the post-globalization era, and China-Pakistan relations have also become a model for building a community with a shared future for mankind.

In recent years, Xinjiang, which is committed to the construction of the core area of the Silk Road Economic Belt, has deeply implemented the spirit of the important instructions of Xi Jinping's important speech on jointly building the "Belt and Road" and Xinjiang's work under the new development pattern of "double circulation", completely and accurately implemented the party's strategy for governing Xinjiang in the new era, adhered to social stability and long-term peace and stability as the overall goal of Xinjiang's work, gave full play to its location advantages, resource advantages, industrial advantages, and cultural advantages, and focused on one port, two regions, five centers and port economic belt. The main line of work, deeply integrated into the Belt and Road construction and the overall layout of



China's opening up to the west, continue to expand the opening up to the outside world, promote the construction of the core area of the Silk Road Economic Belt to achieve new results, and provide Xinjiang practice for the joint construction of the Belt and Road<sup>[3]</sup>.

As the governance of the Afghan Interim Government becomes increasingly stable, Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction and integration into the BRI are on the agenda. On March 31, 2022, the third meeting of foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighboring countries was held in China, attended by the foreign ministers or senior representatives of China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The meeting stressed that a peaceful, stable, prosperous Afghanistan is in the common interests of Afghanistan and the countries of the region, and the countries of the region should work together to play a constructive role to this end; Support Afghanistan's efforts to develop independently, and pledge to support Afghanistan's economic reconstruction at the bilateral and multilateral levels, increase the opening of ports, strengthen exchanges and cooperation with Afghanistan in the fields of economy and trade, energy, agriculture, finance, connectivity, infrastructure, and other fields, and help Afghanistan improve its capacity for independent development; Reaffirm its commitment to deepen cooperation under the BRI and the Framework of regional cooperation organizations, integrate Afghanistan into regional connectivity, energy and transportation networks, and economic and trade systems, and help Afghanistan realize its geopolitical advantages and economic development potential<sup>[4]</sup>.

In the future, accelerating the construction of the core area of the CPEC and the Silk Road Economic Belt, enriching the carriers of opening up to the outside world, upgrading the level of opening up, innovating an open economic system, accelerating the construction of a modern industrial system with Xinjiang characteristics, benefiting people's livelihood and supporting high-quality development, building a new pattern of all-round, multi-level and wide-ranging opening up, and promoting the economic and social development of Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia, is an important task for China's Xinjiang to interconnect with neighboring countries, especially Pakistan and Afghanistan.

## **II. The CPEC, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Corridor and the Wakhan Corridor.**

The Central Asia-West Asia-South Asia connectivity is a systematic project that must be based on the corresponding physical geographical conditions and historical and humanistic cognition. The China-Afghanistan-Pakistan connectivity will be the top priority. The CPEC, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Corridor, and the Wakhan Corridor are important carriers of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Connectivity.

The CPEC is an economic corridor of mutual benefit, sharing, and win-win results, a humanistic corridor with close people and similar hearts, and a strategic corridor that is interdependent and close to each other. The first phase of the CPEC focuses on Pakistan's energy and transportation infrastructure construction, driving the development of a fragment of economically backward areas, making it enter the fast lane of rapid economic development, bringing 25.4 billion US dollars of investment to Pakistan, 46 projects have been completed or under construction, helping to add 5,200 MW of electricity, 886 km of national trunk transmission lines, 1,800 kilometers of highways, and bilateral trade between China and Pakistan has jumped from US\$17 billion in 2014 to US\$27.8 billion in 2021<sup>[5]</sup>. The construction of the CPEC fully revitalizes the inherent needs of the economic and social integration and development of the two countries, comprehensively docks and optimizes the economic cooperation between the two countries, and forms a "1+4" cooperation layout focusing on Gwadar Port, energy, infrastructure construction, and industrial cooperation, bringing tangible benefits to the two peoples and laying a solid foundation for Pakistan's economic and social development. More importantly, the radiation effect of the CPEC region has gradually emerged, and more and more countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan, have expressed their desire to join the construction of the CPEC and invest heavily in projects such as petroleum refining and infrastructure in Gwadar Port, which has played a positive role in promoting regional economic integration and integrated and coordinated development.

The planned China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Corridor is an important part of the New Eurasian Land Bridge, which is planned to connect Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan with two railways from Kashi in Xinjiang, China, via the Ilkistan Port and the Turgat Port respectively. Once completed, the corridor will connect China's Xinjiang to Tehran, Iran, and then through Istanbul to the Balkan Peninsula, Central Europe, and Western Europe, will improve the status of the New Eurasian Land Bridge in international transportation, and provide new impetus for the economic and social development of Central Asia and West Asia. More importantly, the smooth passage of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Corridor will provide more perfect transportation conditions for China's Xinjiang to open up to the west; It provides new choices for the transformation of Xinjiang's advantageous resources and the development of an export-oriented economy. It is gratifying that in June 2022, Kyrgyzstan President Sadyr Japarov announced that the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway will start in 2023. However, geopolitics, international public opinion, Russian attitudes, the financial and technical standards are still important variables affecting the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway.

At present, the Wakhan Corridor is only a geographical concept, located between the southern end of the Pamirs Plateau and the northern and eastern section of the Hindu Kush Mountains, where China and Afghanistan are adjacent to each other in the narrow Wakhan Corridor, which is part of the ancient Silk Road and an important channel for exchanges between Chinese civilization and Indian civilization. Affected by the situation in Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor is still undeveloped. But the strategic and economic value of the Wakhan Corridor is self-evident. How to

effectively develop and utilize the Wakhan Corridor depends on the strategic considerations and arrangements of China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, especially the direction of China's relations with peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

### **III. The Infrastructure Construction Options for the Central Asia-West Asia-South Asia Connectivity**

In the discussion on the Central Asia-West Asia-South Asia connectivity, especially the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan connectivity, we must recognize two realities: a stable Afghanistan is an important cornerstone of the BRI. Affected by its domestic situation, Afghanistan has not been included in the Belt and Road plan. However, the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan connectivity can be compared with the CPEC model, or an upgraded version of the CPEC can be built.

The CPEC is connected to the Silk Road Economic Belt in the north and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in the south is a key hub through the North-South Silk Road and is an economic corridor including road, railway, oil and gas, and optical cable channels, which is divided into three lines: east, central and western, and is also an important part of the Belt and Road. Connecting the CPEC is the best choice for the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan connectivity. At present, the construction of the CPEC has entered a stage of high-quality development in the fields of agriculture, industry, water resources, and education, accelerating the transmission of corridor dividends to the grassroots and non-governmental organizations, and building the corridor into a landmark project that benefits the two countries and Central Asia, West Asia and South Asia.

The docking of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan connectivity with the construction of the CPEC is an inevitable choice. At present, the Afghan transport network system has begun to take shape, and the domestic ring road connects Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, Herat, Jalalabad, Zaranj, and other major cities, and is connected to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Pakistan. Among them, the Kabul-Jalalabad highway on the eastern route extends to Islamabad, Pakistan via the Khyber Pass, the Kabul-Zaranji highway in the south extends to the Persian Gulf through Zahedan, Iran, and connects to Gwadar Port in Pakistan, and the Kabul-Kunduz highway in the north connects Dushanbe via the Alay Valley and the Irkeshtan port in China's Xinjiang from Guzarahwaja. Therefore, Afghanistan is connected to the CPEC through the eastern route and southern route and is connected to Kashi in Xinjiang through the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Corridor. Of course, if the conditions are met, it is also feasible to connect the Karakoram Highway from Kabul via the Wakhan Corridor in Tashkurgan County, Xinjiang, China. In addition, the opening of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan air route is also worth exploring.

These connectivity routes highlight the importance of Afghanistan and the CPEC. The east, south, north, Wakhan Corridor and Air Corridor of China-Arab-Pakistan Connectivity are all connected to the important city nodes of the CPEC from Kashi, Xinjiang, China to Gwadar Port, and Pakistan and Iran have corresponding planning requirements, and it is imperative to build an upgraded version of the CPEC. Focusing on infrastructure construction, the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan connectivity should draw lessons from the first phase of the construction of the CPEC, effectively connect with the high-quality development stage of the CPEC, and make overall plans for the post-war reconstruction of Afghanistan and the coordinated development of China-Arab-Pakistan in the fields of transportation, energy, industry and people's livelihood.

The completion of the upgraded version of the CPEC will enable China to reach the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea region through Afghanistan, which will not only complement and improve the CPEC but also run through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran in southern Central Asia, forming a trade corridor including transportation, energy, and economic nodes and a large market covering 200 million people.

### **IV. Xinjiang's role in the Central Asia-West Asia-South Asia Connectivity**

During the "14th Five-Year Plan" period, China proposed to build a new development pattern with the domestic cycle as the main body and the domestic and international dual cycles promoting each other, and Xinjiang became the hub node for China to build a domestic and international double cycle facing Eurasia. With the deepening of China's opening up to the outside world, the large-scale development of the western region, and the joint construction of the Belt and Road, Xinjiang has become the forefront of opening up to the outside world, further opening up the strategic space of the core area of the Silk Road Economic Belt, and creating more adequate conditions for Xinjiang to rely on the Silk Road Economic Belt to deepen international production capacity cooperation, build a mutually beneficial and win-win industrial chain supply chain cooperation system, and build a free, fair and shared cooperation mechanism.

At present, Kashi Airport reconstruction and expansion, Tashkurgan airport construction, Karakoram highway upgrading, G314 line Kashi section of the new road, and other transportation projects have been put into use, Urumqi-Kashi high-speed railway, Aksu-Kashi railway double line electrification transformation, China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, China-Pakistan railway, and other key projects are stepping up preparations, It has set up consolidation and transportation of China-Europe express train from Kashi to Urumqi, and strive to open freight charter routes directly to key cities in neighboring countries, and promote the development of multimodal transport such as "public railway" and "land and air". Kashi Economic Development Zone constantly improves the functions of the comprehensive bonded zone, headquarters economic zone, airport logistics zone, processing and transformation zone, and financial trade zone, accelerate the construction of "Enclave Park", promotes the cultivation and growth of characteristic industries represented by labor-intensive industries, and drives the development of ten key industries in

the region. Relying on the construction of the port economic belt, Xinjiang has also strengthened the construction of supporting facilities for the Kashi Comprehensive Bonded Zone, the Kashi Airport, and the land ports such as Hongqilap, Karasu, Irkeshtan, and Turgat, improving the functions of the China-Pakistan border trade zone, promoted the construction of the China-Pakistan Tashikurgan border economic cooperation zone. In addition, Xinjiang has also actively applied for the establishment of a China (Kashi) cross-border e-commerce comprehensive pilot zone, bordered tourism pilot zone to fully connect China and Pakistan<sup>[6]</sup>.

In the future, Xinjiang will also implement the overall deployment of the central government's opening up to the outside world, and deeply participate in the construction of the CPEC and the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan connectivity. First, it is necessary to strive for the support of the central and state organs in terms of policies, talents, and funds, and to strengthen the Carrier of Opening Up such as the Kashi Economic Development Zone and the Comprehensive Bonded Zone, and to establish the first inland frontier free trade pilot zone on this basis. The second is to learn from the experience of the eastern and central regions in the construction of the pilot free trade zone, promote the reform and innovation of the Kashi pilot free trade zone and the strategic transformation of foreign trade and economic cooperation, deepen the reform of the port customs clearance management system, and cultivate new advantages in opening up and cooperation. The third is to build a platform for industrial park cooperation, explore the construction of the China-Pakistan International Border Cooperation Center in Khunjerab Pass, establish the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Tajikistan International Economic Cooperation Zone in the Wakhan Corridor, and form an industrial park chain of the CPEC and the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan connectivity through cooperation in the construction of industrial parks. The fourth is to actively promote the preliminary work of the project of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway, China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway, China-Pakistan Oil and Gas Pipeline, China-Pakistan Power Transmission Line, relying on air and land trunk lines such as Kashi Airport, Shache Airport, Tashkurgan Airport, Urumqi-Kashi Railway and Karakoram road, strengthen the coordination of international road transport of China-Afghanistan-Pakistan and China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan, improve infrastructure and multimodal transport mechanisms, and strive to build Kashi into an important node and commercial logistics center of diversified and three-dimensional transportation network between China and neighboring countries.

## V. Conclusion

At present, the world is experiencing profound changes unprecedented in a century, the BRI is an important option to promote global stable development, and China is the most stable and powerful leading force. Giving full play to the great wisdom and strength of the Chinese nation and unswervingly promoting the high-quality development of the Belt and Road and the CPEC is a strategic arrangement to cope with the profound changes. In response to the changes in the global and Eurasian situation, consolidating China's cooperative relations with neighboring countries in Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia, accelerating the Central Asia-West Asia-South Asia connectivity, especially the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan connectivity, and building an upgraded version of the CPEC are the inevitable choices for establishing more convenient land links between China and Eurasia.

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