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Synergy between China's Belt and Road Initiative and United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in Central Asia

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Abstract

China's increased engagement in Central Asia through its grand Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) establishes that economic cooperation, regional connectivity and infrastructural development can serve as a significant accelerator for realizing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study examines how Chinese President Xi Jinping has advanced its grand initiative as a development-oriented framework that complements the strategic priorities of Central Asian republics while facilitating to achieve the 2030 Agenda. It further delves into the growing synergy among UN SDGs and the Chinese BRI by focusing on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The study uses theoretical lens of Complex Interdependence which highlights or even stresses on economic interdependence, multidimensional collaboration and multiple channels of interaction in transnational relations. Using qualitative techniques, the research analyzes official policy documents, state development approaches, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and secondary scholarly literature to assess the alignment between Central Asian strategic priorities and BRI that enhances the realization of the UN SDGs. The findings suggest that China's connectivity projects and investments are meticulously contributory directly and indirectly to several SDGs by focusing on infrastructure, economic expansion, consolidation of regional cooperation and the enhancement of development prospects around the region. The study signifies BRI more than a connectivity initiative; it functions as a platform of a multidimensional development that supports regional interdependence with expanded opportunities for Central Asian nations to accelerate the progress toward the UN SDGs.

Key Words: Belt and Road Initiative, Complex Interdependence, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, China, Central Asia

Introduction

In this era of 21st century, sustainable development has turn out to be a fundamental pillar of global governance. The UN agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development offers a global framework to deal with the interrelated societal, economic, and environmental challenges. Its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established 169 targets extending from the eradication of Poverty, achieving human rights of all and inclusive economic development to environmental sustainability and from strengthening of institutions to providing a shared proposal for global collaboration (United Nations, 2015). However, the success of these goals heavily depends on multi-stakeholder collaboration as the commitment of individual states alone is insufficient, investment mechanisms, and cross-border ventures that can translate the SDGs in practical, measurable ways.

BRI a Chinese development strategy previously labelled as the One Belt One Road (OBOR) aimed at the Eurasian economic integration and the development of its Western Provinces mainly through the transportation and infrastructural projects. In 2013, to resuscitate ancient land-trade routes has been OBOR's core idea, as proposed by Xi Jinping firstly in Kazakhstan with regard to the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and later in Indonesia with regard to the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) (Chaisse & Górski, 2018). By designing Xinjiang as a gateway of the Belt and Fujian as the strategic hub of the Road, BRI established six major economic corridors that connect regions accounting nearly two-thirds of the global population (Zhao, 2020).

Literature Review

Lewis et. al, tries to draw an in-depth comparative study of Chinese grand initiative BRI and UN agenda 2030 to identify the potential of each initiative for the realization of sustainable growth. The authors draw synergy between SDGs and the BRI in many dimensions where they say that integrating BRI within the UN development agenda will offer a platform to mobilize and integrate resources that in need to implement SDGs around the world. Similarly for China it will help to curtail the negative fallouts of geopolitical hostilities towards BRI and may ensure China as responsible investor (Lewis, Yang, & Roddy, 2021). Another study was done by Prof. Lorenzo examines the ostensible synergy between UN agenda 2030 and the Chinese B&R initiative by assessing the legal and regulatory framework. Adopting the lens of international law and sustainable development the identify several structural and normative problematic features that may deter the wider developmental objectives (Lorenzo, 2021). Jin (2018) offers a detailed analysis by examining the relationship between the BRI and the UN development agenda to identify the potentials of these two frameworks for global economic and societal development. By aligning BRI and SDGs the writer emphasis on their contribution towards the sustainable progress instead of undermining it, as the BRI investment follow societal and environmental standards to dodge negative outwardness (Jin, 2018; Imtiaz, et al., 2023). Gue et. al, draw a thorough analysis of the governmental actions or administrative policies regarding global development. Furthermore, this article addresses those challenges as well which are consider as the daunting hurdles for the realization of SDG through Chinese grand strategy BRI, where the writers argue that international collaboration and rational policies are vital to ensure its support for the efforts of sustainable development (Gu, Corbett, & Leach, 2019). Professor Lei and Ying argue that dovetailing Chinese Initiative with the UN agenda 2030 is to indorse BRI within the framework of agenda 2030 making it an imperative platform for realizing UN SDGs. In this manner, by combining Chinese initiative with the world's demand will indicate that the relationship between both is like of between goals and actions and between current and future. This alignment will build shared discourse structure to cultivate key objectives for win-win cooperation by advancing the process of sustainable development and by encouraging and facilitating B&R countries to implement UN SDGs. Authors further argues that soft route and hard route can be used to achieve the dovetail of Chinese proposal and globally recognized agenda 2030, former route refers to ideological level where policy coordination will be focused and later one refers to action level including field and mechanism dovetail (Rahim, et al., 2018;Lei & Ying, 2019).

Material and Methods

The principal objective of this research was to examine the engagement of China in Central Asia in relation to realizing UN 2030 agenda for Sustainable Developmental. Qualitative research methodology was employed to understand the perspective of partying states which was considered the most appropriate approach to answer the research questions. For data collection secondary resources were drawn from a wide range of secondary sources including books, policy documents, journal articles, databases and reports to determine the historical and contemporary dimensions of Chinese engagement in the region and to analyze the synergy between Beijing's BRI and UN SDGs.

Theoretical framework

The relevance of Keohane and Nye's Complex Interdependence to this research work lies in its three core assumptions such as multiple channels of interaction, the absence of a clear or consistent hierarchy among issues, and no use of military force in shaping international relations (Nye & Keohane, 2004). These core assumptions meticulously correspond to the China's engagement in Central Asia through its grand BRI. In this context, interactions are not confined to state-to-state dealings only but also encompass private enterprises, financial institutions and multilateral development actors, reflecting or signifying the presence of multiple channels of engagement. There are many interrelated challenges in world politics and no single issue particularly military security constantly dominates, resulting in multifaceted patterns of relations. Therefore, the complex interdependence offers a suitable analytical lens to comprehend how such multi-dimensional interactions enable collaboration and contribute to extensive development objectives as well as the advancement or the realization of the SDGs in Central Asia.

Results and Discussions

Evolution of BRI from a Strategic Initiative to Global Development Platform

BRI evolved beyond a connectivity and infrastructure focused initiative into a broader framework of development cooperation between 2016 and 2019, as the first (2017) and second (2019) Belt and Road Forums further institutionalized the initiative by expanded its policy discourse to emphasize inclusive growth and sustainable development (Belt and Road Portal, 2019). A comparative reading of these Joint Communiqués reveals a discernible normative change or shift: where the first document primarily emphasizes connectivity, infrastructure and trade facilitation, the second incorporates expanded language highlighting high-quality, open, inclusive, green, clean and sustainable development (Belt and Road Portal, 2019). This shift in discourse suggests a progressive institutional repositioning of BRI from an infrastructure connectivity initiative to a more holistic development-oriented framework.

Aminjonov and Kholmatov noted that the idea of the initiative is built on the thoughts of Confucian schoolings, if distant people do not recognize you, attract them through education and the fruits of effective governance (Aminjonov & Kholmatov, 2022; Shah, 2020)). Professor Mitrovic argues that the BRI should not be decoded geographically, it functions as a strategic blueprint for China's integration into the global economy and brace its multilateral influence in the regions along the Belt and Road corridors (Mitrovic, 2018). Central Asia constitutes one of the earliest and most significant regions for BRI implementation, where states such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have hosted most important transport, logistics and energy projects under the framework of SREB.

Spanning Asia, Africa, and Europe, six economic corridors shape the backbone of the BRI. Within a decade BRI corridors have advanced constructively in both execution and participation, policy coordination and receptiveness to governance challenges. Renegotiation and restructuring of projects have increased transparency, institutional competence and sustainability, while several corridors have accomplished concrete advancement and others are advancing continuously. This adaptive trajectory underlines the development of BRI into a framework based on partnership that strengthens inclusive institutions and shared development bring into line closely with the aims of SDG 16 and 17 (Ain, et al., 2024).

Overview of UN Agenda 2030 as a Universal Development Framework

The 2030 Agenda for development was unanimously approved by all UN members back in 2015, through General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1, under the title of Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, representing the world's most comprehensive development framework. This universal policy agenda includes a framework of 17 SDGs, supported by169 targets and 244 indicators that are integrated and indivisible, the world leader has never pledged such a common action before (United Nations, 2015). It offers a shared global vision for achieving peace and prosperity, environmental sustainability and social well-being by the year 2030. The 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs set out a high level of motivation not only to finish the unfinished business of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but also to follow a comprehensive, cohesive approach to meet the intertwined and intricate challenges of the twenty-first century within the timeline of 15-year. Overall, the SDGs offers a much more holistic vision and cohesive approach of sustainable progress than the MDGs, highlighting the interconnectedness of the 5 Ps of People, Planet, Peace, Partnership and prosperity (United Nations, 2015).

Figure 1: 5Ps of SGs Source: (Pollack, n.d.)

Core Principles of Agenda 2030

The 2030 Agenda embodies five core principles, first, universality as it applies to all countries. Second, leaving no one behind is central and transformative promise which entails all people irrespective of location and status. Third principle is Interconnectedness and indivisibility denoting that it needs to be implemented as a whole. Fourth, inclusiveness signifies that every contribution is valid and the last one is multistakeholder partnerships which is crucial to mobilize resources, collective actions and to support effective implementation (Shullah & Filho, 2023). The 2030 Agenda is universal in scope, having been unanimously adopted by all 193 member states of UN committing to pursue its goals regardless of their economic and development status thereby contributing towards sustainable development (L'Agenda 2030 en France, 2023).

Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs)

A core conceptual novelty of the 2030 agenda is its commitment to integration. The SDGs were deliberately designed to move beyond sectoral approaches, admitting that economic progress, human well-being and ecological sustainability are interdependent (Yamada, 2017). All goals have specific targets that offer a clear and measurable framework for accomplishing the desired results, and its own indicators to track growth or progress. These goals are;

Figure 2: 17 Global Goals to Transform the World Source: https://sdgs.un.org/goals

Rationale for Exploring SDG-BRI Synergy

In April 2019, while speaking at the Forum of Belt & Road for International coordination the UN Secretary General António Guterres praised the inextricable connection of the BRI with the development Agenda 2030, noting that the planned investments of BRI bid an expressive prospect which is contributory for the more just and prosperous world for all and to reverse the environmental crisis. The world will benefit from the BRI that fast-tracks efforts to comprehend the SDGs as they are linked with the above-mentioned foundational pillars of BRI (United Nations, 2019).

The UN Agenda encompasses an extensive and people-centered universal goals for sustainable development and the cooperation through BRI, pursues all-embracing economic, social and environmental sustainability goals. In other words, both share similar goals and objectives. Ambassador Jieyi Liu, argues, the important means to implement the agenda 2030 is the financing for development and for that the BRI is a significant initiative to support the implementation of the agenda 2030. As he further put that the China is ready to willingly continue to work with the international community to implement completely the agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (Jieyi, 2017).

Prof. Hong noted that many targets under the designed goals of the 2030 agenda are meticulously related to the above-mentioned BRI areas. To exemplify, SDG 7 focuses on renewable energy transitions, SDG 9 stresses infrastructure development, SDGs 8 and 10 deals with trade and economic factors, SDG 14 highlights the protection of ocean and marine ecology and SDG 17 encourage partnerships to drive progress across all SDGs (Hong, 2016). This advocates that realizing the BRI agenda holds great promise to serve as a vehicle that would lead to rewarding at least part of the UN Agenda 2030 across the Asian and African region.

SDG adoption and progress in each Central Asian Country

The adoption and implementation of SDG in Central Asia can be observed through strong formal commitment to the agenda 2030, as the commitment reflects its integration into the state development strategies, the monitoring frameworks and participation in reporting to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. In Kazakhstan, on November 22, 2021, a new Knowledge-sharing platform on SDG was launched by the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for all the Central Asian states (UNDP, 2021).

Kazakhstan

According to the first Voluntary National Review of Kazakhstan, the 2030 Agenda coincides with the national priorities in many respects as identified in the Strategy Kazakhstan-2050, the Strategic Development Plan of 2025, 100 Concrete Steps a national plan to implement institutional reforms, the Five Social Initiatives (a comprehensive set of social, economic and infrastructure projects) and the Ruhani Jangyru program (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019). As the review shows these program and initiatives are aimed at designing a sustainable economy, building up human capital and advancing the quality of life of all. So, these priorities correspond or link directly with agenda 2030, predominantly SDG 1, 3, 4, 8 and 13. Till now Kazakhstan has presented its three VNR at the UN high-level political forum on sustainable development, which not only reasserted its obligation to pursue the SDG pattern for progress but also permitted leaders to pin down important areas for advancement or improvement.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan has systematically integrated UN SDGs into its national policy framework for development, primarily through National Development Strategy for 2018–2040 adopted by Presidential Decree (Tretyakova, 2025). Kyrgyzstan has made substantial progress in several areas since the adoption of UN agenda. The focus of Government on poverty and inequality reduction, educational reforms and the promotion of green economy, aligning closely with ‘leaving no one behind’ principle (United Nations Kyrgyz Republic, 2023). Kyrgyzstan has prepared two VNR in 2020 and 2025, where an important constructive aspect of the reporting process was the structured engagement and inclusive

participation of civil society stakeholders (Tretyakova, 2025). Such alignment denotes a people-centered approach to development, embedding UN agenda 2030 within long-term state planning.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan-2030 strategy which is an ambitious development initiative including 100 targets across five priority areas are mostly aligned with the UN SDGs, Sattarove wrote, that these priority areas are; creation of modern education and social protection system, sustainable economic growth to join the upper-middle income states, a just and modern state that serve the community, favorable ecological condition and ensured sovereignty and security (Sattarov, 2026). These priorities show high degree of convergence with the SDGs, predominantly in relation to SDG 8, 10, 13 and 16.

Uzbekistan presented two VNRs, where it is noted under the VNR for 2020, that the reform trajectory in Uzbek republic is directed by the principle of "Human Interests Are Above All" which is precisely resonant with the "Leaving No-one Behind" a foundational principle for agenda 2030. Ever since Uzbekistan has adopted the SDGs, it has achieved a notable progress in promoting the law enforcement and safeguarding the human rights indicating significant developments in SDG 16 (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2020). These reforms reflect an inclusive transformation of governance structures meant to improve state accountability, civilian engagement and institutional efficiency.

Tajikistan

Like other Central Asian republics, Tajikistan is committed as well to integrate 2030 agenda into its national development priorities, primarily through the National Development Strategy 2030 (NDS-2030) to realize the goals domestically. Tajikistan presented two VNRs on the implementation of the agenda 2030. National consultations on SDGs agenda publicized the key priorities of the state growth after 2015 and economic ideology, key principles and a set of procedures stated in NDS-2030 are envisioned to implement these priorities. According to the NDS-2030 these priorities are: social welfare, inequality, education, health care, employment, combating corruption, food security and nutrition, social welfare, energy security, environmental protection and managing demographic processes (Republic of Tajikistan, 2016). These priorities make evident a wide and multidimensional alignment with the framework of agenda 2030, particularly in relation to SDG 1, 2, 7, 8, 13, and 16. The diagram given below demonstrates how Tajikistan aligns its state development programs with the SDGs or defined global goals through both long-term and medium-term planning mechanisms.

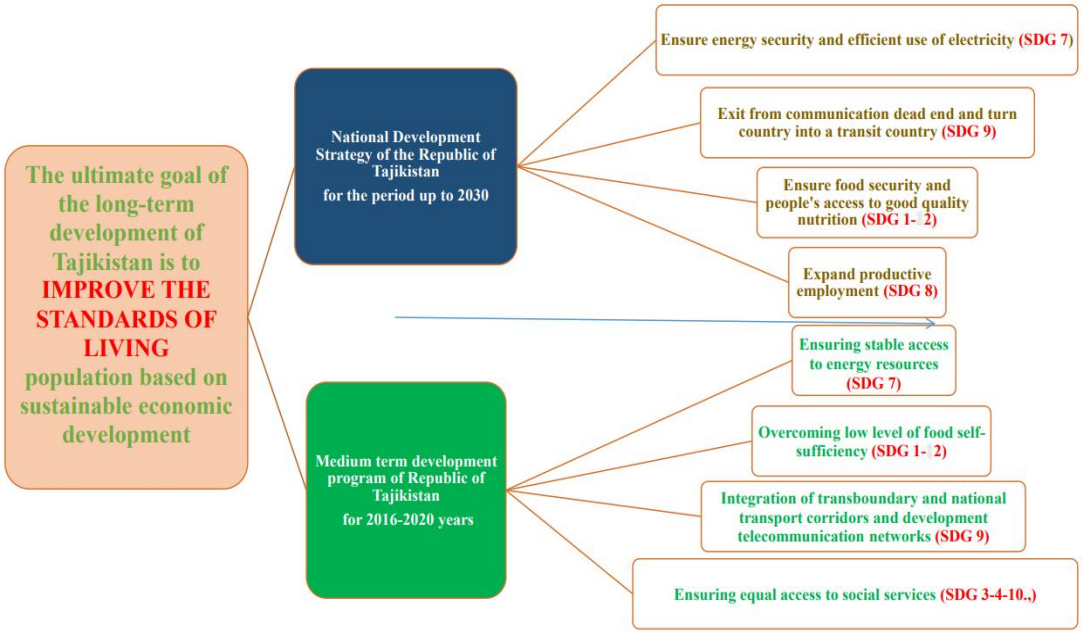

Figure 3: Alignment of Tajikistan's State Development Programs with SDGs, Source**:** (Faridun, n.d)

Turkmenistan

In central Asia, Turkmenistan was the first country to nationalize the agenda 2030, a result of a global effort to address existing challenges. In 2017, this course of action was institutionalized through the Presidential decree, as national architecture for SDGs monitoring was established including the National SDG working group (United Nations Turkmenistan, 2022). This framework reflects an attempt to embed SDGs within the state governance structures, aligning meticulously with SDG 16 through the monitoring mechanisms and increased coordination. The integration of SDGs into national priorities further reflected through key strategic documents such as, the National Program for Social and Economic Development of Turkmenistan until 2030 and the Turkmen Presidential program for Social and Economic Development for the period of 2019 to 2025 (Republic of Turkmenistan, 2019). The President's book titled "Turkmenistan is on the way to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals", was a great contribution during the preparation of the country's first VNR as it underlines the steps taken by the state government to achieve UN SDGs and its targets (Republic of Turkmenistan, 2019). Whereas, the second VNR's emphasis on economic modernization closely aligns with the key priorities of BRI. According to the VNR of 2019, diagram given below shows the implementation of SDG in Turkmenistan.

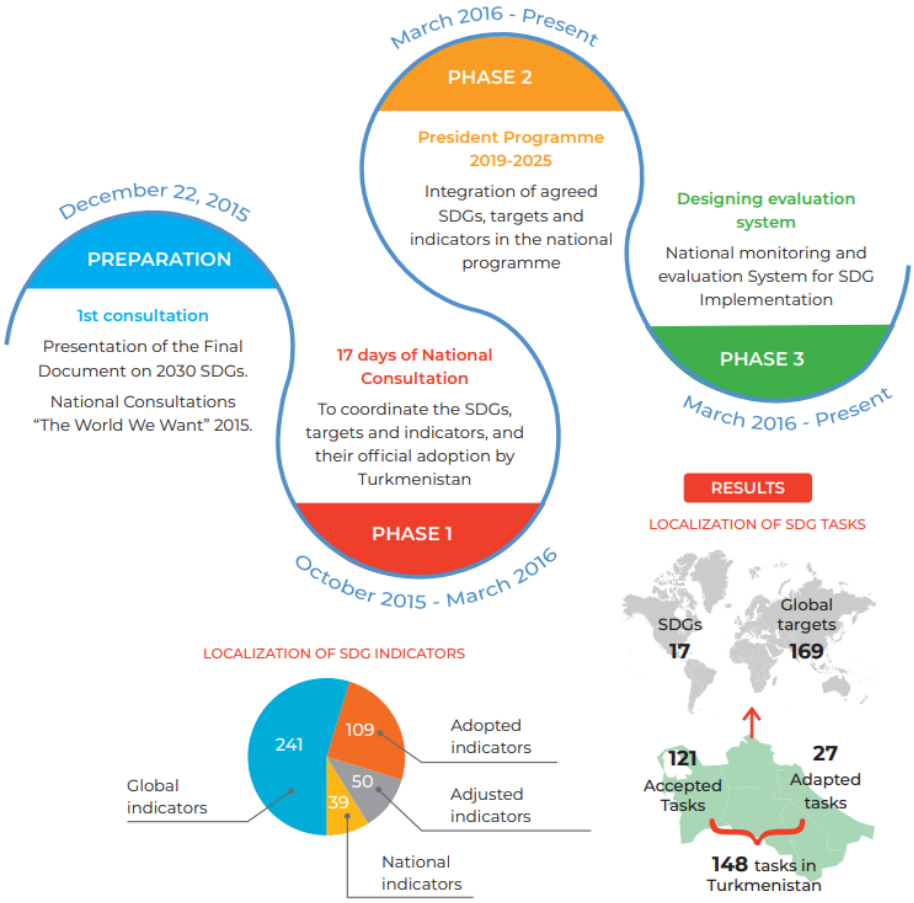

Figure 4: SDGs Implementation Mechanism in Turkmenistan Source: (Republic of Turkmenistan, 2019)

Comparative Assessment of BRI as an Accelerator of SDG Implementation in Central Asia

A comparative analysis of all the Central Asian republics makes evident the formal integration of the agenda 2030 into their national development frameworks, yet the scope and effectiveness of this alignment vary considerably across the region. These variances are shaped by governance structures, institutional competence and approaches to global cooperation. Consequently, the ability of the BRI to advance the realization or the implementation of the SDGs is context-dependent and uneven.

According to the Jash et. al, since the launch of BRI, Chinese administration has backed approximately 112 projects in Central Asia predominantly intended to boost connectivity and transportation (Jash, Gokireddy, & S, 2024). To link their development programs (Kazakhstan's Nurly Zhol and Taza Koom in Kyrgyzstan) to the SREB initiative, Kazakhstan took lead to act on by aligning its state-led Nurly Zhol strategy which is an economic stimulus package of 9 billion US dollars for the period of 2015 to 2019 with the Chinese vision in 2014 (Lain, 2018). Its objectives exhibit significant convergence to SDG 9,7,4 and 8 while also corresponding with the BRI core priorities such as the advancement of transport, energy, logistics, industry, infrastructure, education and strengthening small and medium-sized enterprises.

The expanding economic engagement of China in Kazakhstan through the BRI has created extensive opportunities for advancing sustainable development. In 2023, the 5.2% of total Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is received by Kazakhstan, making it the largest beneficiary of in Central Asian region (Wildsmith, 2024). BRI consist on 51 mega projects in Kazakhstan with an investment of 35 billion US dollars, of this a significant portion around 3.5 billion US dollars allocated to the International Centre for Border Cooperation Khorgos and a strategic dry port located on the eastern frontier with China (Khan, 2022). In this context, BRI engagement acts out as a critical accelerator by connecting national development priorities with concrete economic opportunities, thus advancing the progress toward the agenda 2030 in Kazakhstan.

The BRI holds significant relevance to Kyrgyzstan as it complements the National Development Strategy 2040, which is the first development plan designed to expand and improve the economy (Borodyna, Calabrese, & Nadin, 2022). Schroeder argues that as of 2021, under the BRI Kyrgyzstan had 46 active projects worth of 5.4 billion US dollars including: 17 industrial development projects, 13 initiatives are associated to educational and cultural institutes, 11 projects focused on roads and rail connectivity and 5 projects are related to the energy connectivity (Schroeder, 2023). Under the BRI, it directly advancing the SDG 9 and 8 by enhance the transit competitiveness and reducing time and distance of cargo delivery.

The geographical disadvantage of Uzbekistan as a land-locked state has elevated the importance of transport connectivity as a critical component of its engagement with the BRI. Liu Yu, the executive chairman of the Uzbek Chamber of Commerce for Chinese Entrepreneurs, stated that for stronger collaboration between China and Uzbek republic the railway project connecting Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan with China would be a substantial achievement. As part of the BRI, the project is likely to improve its connectivity, while facilitating Uzbekistan's journey from a landlocked state to a more regionally connected or land-linked country (Yeping, 2024). Uzbekistan exhibits a reform-driven model, where the implementation of SDG is meticulously interconnected with extensive economic and governance reforms.

In 2023, relationship between Turkmenistan and China was elevated to an inclusive strategic partnership strongly emphasizing on energy cooperation, placing Turkmenistan within regional energy links as a key supplier (Changzhi, Chang, & Dongjie, 2024). Moreover, combining the Turkmen policy of "Revival of the Great Silk Road" under the BRI, underscores the convergence of geopolitical and economic interests between the Turkmenistan and China (Jash, Gokireddy, & S, 2024). Turkmenistan applies an integrated approach to the implementation of SDGs, as reflected in its VNRs.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Chinese growing engagement in Central Asian region under the BRI establishes a significant convergence between UN SDGs and the regional development priorities. Simultaneously, major components of their (Central Asian Republics) national development strategies are aligned with BRI-related priorities as well, particularly in logistics, transport connectivity, digitalization, industrial expansion and energy infrastructure. This alignment shows a strong and clear synergy between the UN SDGs and China's strategy for regional engagement, where BRI acts as an accelerator for the realization of SDGs in the region through investment, enhancing connectivity and improving infrastructure. Moreover, the cooperative and multidimensional nature of such interactions reinforces the ideas of Complex Interdependence, where interstate relationships are increasingly

influenced by economic interdependence, formal coordination and multiple channels of interaction rather than the use of military. So, it can be said that the interaction between the Chinese Belt and Road and the UN development agenda has shaped an inspiring framework for advancing sustainable development and regional partnership in Central Asia under the broader goals of the 2030 Agenda.

Recommendations

The results of this study suggest that the increasing convergence between the UN SDGs and Chinses BRI offers a significant opportunity for sustainable development in Central Asia. To increase the developmental potential of this synergy between the both, Central Asian republics should further bring into line their national development approaches with BRI-related projects and SDG targets. Transparent evaluation and monitoring mechanisms are needed to assess the impacts or contribution of connectivity, investment, infrastructure projects towards sustainable conclusions. An integrated approach should be employed by the Policymakers that amalgamates security cooperation, economic development and institutional consolidation to encourage sustainable growth, promote stability and long-term development in the region. By fostering greater regional integration, shared governance and economic interdependence both Central Asian republics and China can accelerate progress toward the achievement of the UN 2030 Agenda while advancing long-term sustainable development across the region.

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