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Theoretical Perspectives for the Study of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia: Issues and Trends

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23359696>**Sourav biswas****Abstract:**

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), has significantly transformed the geopolitical and economic significance of Central Asia. This study examines the regional implications of the BRI through a multi-theoretical framework integrating Realism, Liberalism, the English School, and Social Constructivism. Central Asia's strategic location, energy resources, and potential as a corridor connecting China with Russia, the Caspian region, West Asia, and Europe have attracted sustained engagement from China, Russia, India, the United States, the European Union, Turkey, Iran, and other actors. The study argues that no single theoretical perspective is sufficient to explain the complex interaction between China's expanding regional presence and the responses of other powers and Central Asian states. Realism explains competition over power, security, energy resources, strategic infrastructure, and regional influence, while Liberalism highlights economic interdependence, institutional cooperation, connectivity, and the possibility of mutual gains. The English School provides an analytical perspective on how competition and cooperation coexist within an international society through diplomacy, sovereignty, shared rules, and regional institutions. Social Constructivism further demonstrates how identities, historical relationships, norms, perceptions, and political narratives shape the interests and interactions of regional actors. By integrating these perspectives, the study conceptualizes the BRI as simultaneously a material, economic, strategic, institutional, and ideational phenomenon. It therefore examines Central Asia as a multi-layered regional order in which geopolitical competition, economic cooperation, institutional interaction, and socially constructed relationships operate concurrently. This theoretical framework provides a comprehensive basis for analysing the evolving distribution of power, connectivity, and regional order associated with China's BRI in contemporary Central Asia.

Keywords: *International Anarchy, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)*

Introduction

Central Asia occupies a distinctive position in contemporary international politics because of its geographical location, energy resources, transportation potential, and proximity to several major centres of power. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan constitute a strategically significant region connecting China and East Asia with Russia, the Caspian region, West Asia, and Europe. The region's oil, natural gas, uranium, and other mineral resources, together with its potential as a transit space for road, rail, pipeline, and commercial corridors, have attracted sustained engagement from China, Russia, India, the United States, the European Union, Turkey, Iran, Japan, and other actors. Within this broader geopolitical environment, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly its land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), has significantly increased the importance of Central Asia in China's external economic and strategic relations. The SREB was announced by President Xi Jinping in Astana in September 2013 and subsequently became an important component of the wider BRI framework. Scholarship on the SREB has emphasized both its developmental and

connectivity dimensions and its wider implications for economic and security relations in Central Asia.

The increasing Chinese presence, however, cannot be adequately understood through a single theoretical perspective. The development of infrastructure, energy networks, trade corridors, investment relationships, and diplomatic partnerships involves material capabilities, national interests, institutional cooperation, historically constructed identities, and competing interpretations of regional order. Accordingly, this study employs a multi-theoretical framework combining Realism, Liberalism, the English School, and Social Constructivism. These perspectives are not treated as interchangeable or as mutually exclusive explanations. Rather, each illuminates a different dimension of China's BRI and the resulting patterns of interaction in Central Asia. Realism directs attention towards power, national interest, security, strategic competition, and the distribution of capabilities. Liberalism highlights economic interdependence, institutional cooperation, mutual gains, and the possibility that infrastructure and connectivity can generate shared benefits. The English School examines how states can construct international society and maintain order despite the absence of a central authority. Constructivism shifts attention towards identities, ideas, norms, perceptions, legitimacy, and the social construction of interests. Taken together, these perspectives provide a broader analytical framework for examining how China's expanding regional presence interacts with Russia's established position and with the strategies of other regional and extra-regional powers.

Realist Perspective

The realist perspective provides a foundational explanation for the strategic importance of Central Asia because it emphasizes the relationship between power, national interest, security, and competition. Classical realism, particularly associated with Hans J. Morgenthau, views international politics as a struggle in which states pursue national interests defined in terms of power. Morgenthau places particular emphasis on political power and the role of statesmen in interpreting and pursuing national interests. (Morgenthau, 1948) Neorealism, most prominently associated with Kenneth Waltz, shifts the analytical emphasis from human nature towards the structure of the international system. Because the international system lacks a central governing authority, states operate under conditions of anarchy and must take responsibility for their own security. (Waltz, 1979)

Central Asia is particularly relevant to this perspective because material capabilities and strategic geography overlap. The region's energy resources and its position between China, Russia, the Caspian region, West Asia, and Europe make it strategically significant beyond the borders of the five Central Asian states. China, Russia, India, the United States, the European Union, Turkey, Iran, and Japan have therefore developed varying forms of economic, diplomatic, security, and connectivity engagement.

From a realist perspective, China's BRI can be interpreted partly as an effort to strengthen its economic and strategic position by expanding connectivity across Eurasia. Energy security is an important component of this interpretation. Central Asian energy resources provide China with additional sources of supply and enable the development of overland infrastructure that diversifies China's connectivity with Eurasia. The SREB therefore has significance beyond commercial exchange: transportation networks, pipelines, logistics facilities, and border infrastructure can also generate strategic advantages by increasing China's economic presence and connectivity with neighbouring regions. (Orazgaliyev, 2019)

The realist interpretation is strengthened by the existence of competing regional initiatives. Russia has sought to maintain and institutionalize its economic and security role through organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while India has promoted alternative connectivity mechanisms such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The EAEU officially functions as a regional economic integration organization involving Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, with provisions concerning the movement of goods, services, capital, and labour. India's contemporary engagement with Central Asia similarly emphasizes connectivity through the INSTC. Robert Gilpin's work on international political economy is particularly useful for extending realist analysis beyond military capabilities. In contemporary international politics, economic strength, technological capabilities, infrastructure, access to markets, and control over strategic resources can contribute to national power. Consequently, competition over energy corridors and transportation infrastructure can be understood as a form of geoeconomic competition. States may pursue strategic influence not only through military alliances or territorial control but also through investment, trade, energy networks, financial relationships, and infrastructure. (Mohammad Farhadi, 2025)

This dimension distinguishes the Central Asian geopolitical environment from forms of strategic competition that are predominantly maritime and military. China's maritime interests in the Indo-Pacific involve important naval and strategic considerations, whereas the SREB creates a continental network involving railways, roads, pipelines, logistics, energy infrastructure, and trade routes. The two dimensions are connected within China's broader foreign-economic strategy, but they should not be analytically conflated. Neorealism further explains why the presence of multiple major powers generates competitive behaviour even when individual states may prefer cooperation. The absence of a central authority creates uncertainty, while differences in capabilities generate concerns about relative power. China's expanding economic presence consequently has implications for Russia's established regional position, while Russian institutional initiatives may be interpreted by other actors

in relation to China's growing influence. The resulting regional environment can therefore be understood as a continuing process of balancing, accommodation, and competition. (Gajardo, 2026)

At the same time, realism should not be reduced to the proposition that every infrastructure project is an instrument of domination. The same infrastructure can have commercial, developmental, political, and strategic functions simultaneously. The realist contribution is to draw attention to how such material relationships affect the distribution of capabilities and the strategic options available to states. (Esteban, 2018)

Liberal Perspective

Where realism emphasizes competition, liberalism provides an alternative analytical perspective by emphasizing cooperation, interdependence, institutions, and the possibility of mutual gains. Liberal approaches are diverse and include liberal internationalism, idealism, pluralism, and neoliberal institutionalism. (Mohammad Farhadi, 2025) Their common analytical concern is that international politics cannot be adequately understood solely through interstate conflict. The liberal tradition associated with Immanuel Kant emphasizes the possibility of peaceful relations among states, while liberal institutionalism focuses more specifically on how institutions can facilitate cooperation under conditions of anarchy. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye are particularly important in demonstrating that international relations involve multiple forms of interaction and that interdependence can influence state behaviour. Their concept of complex interdependence challenges an exclusively state-centric interpretation of international politics by drawing attention to economic, institutional, and transnational relationships. (Esteban, 2018)

From this perspective, China's BRI can be interpreted not only as an instrument for expanding Chinese influence but also as a framework for increasing economic connectivity. The Central Asian republics require investment, infrastructure, transportation access, technology, energy development, and connections to international markets. China, meanwhile, has an interest in stable trade routes, energy access, expanding markets, and secure connections with Eurasia. Such overlapping interests create possibilities for cooperation even when power asymmetries remain substantial. The liberal interpretation therefore directs attention towards the **absolute gains** that states may obtain from cooperation. A railway, pipeline, highway, energy project, or logistics corridor may simultaneously serve Chinese commercial interests and contribute to the economic development and connectivity of a Central Asian state. This does not eliminate concerns regarding dependency, unequal bargaining power, or strategic influence, but it demonstrates why states may participate in cooperative arrangements despite broader geopolitical competition. (Orazgaliyev, 2019)

Central Asian states' multi-vector foreign policies are particularly relevant to this interpretation. Since independence, the Central Asian republics have sought to

maintain relationships with multiple external actors rather than relying exclusively on one major power. Engagement with China therefore exists alongside relations with Russia, the European Union, the United States, Turkey, Iran, India, Japan, and other partners. The institutional environment further supports a liberal interpretation. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) provides a multilateral framework through which China, Russia, the Central Asian states, and other members interact. India and Pakistan became full SCO members in 2017, demonstrating that the organization developed beyond its original membership configuration. The SCO has also developed mechanisms for political and diplomatic interaction concerning regional security and other areas of cooperation. India's connectivity strategy provides another example of overlapping rather than mutually exclusive economic initiatives. India's official policy emphasizes the INSTC and connectivity through Iran as mechanisms for improving access to Central Asia and Eurasia. India's decision not to participate in the BRI has been explicitly linked by New Delhi to concerns regarding sovereignty and territorial integrity in relation to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Thus, competition and cooperation can exist simultaneously within the same regional environment.

The liberal perspective also requires conceptual precision concerning the BRI. The SREB should not be classified as a non-state actor. It is better understood as a state-led international connectivity framework involving governments, financial institutions, state-owned and private enterprises, international organizations, and other economic actors. (Indeo, 2017) This distinction is important because liberal pluralism emphasizes the interaction of states with non-state actors without requiring the BRI itself to be treated as a non-state entity. The EAEU and BRI also should not be presented simply as mutually exclusive projects. The relationship between Russia's Eurasian integration project and China's Silk Road initiative has involved both potential competition and efforts at coordination. Scholarly research has identified tensions associated with differences in Russian and Chinese power and interests while also examining attempts to connect the two projects. (Indeo, China and Russia: Cooperation or Rivalry along the Belt and Road Initiative?, 2020)

English School Perspective

The English School provides a bridge between realist concerns with power and liberal concerns with cooperation by examining the possibility of international society under conditions of anarchy. Martin Wight and Hedley Bull are central figures in this tradition. Hedley Bull's concept of international society is particularly relevant to Central Asia because it explains how sovereign states can recognize common interests and develop rules and institutions even without a central world government. (Dunne, 2013)

The English School distinguishes between an international system, in which states interact sufficiently to influence one another, and an international society, in which states

additionally recognize common rules, interests, and institutions. Bull's understanding of institutions refers not simply to formal organizations but also to established practices through which states pursue common objectives. This distinction provides a useful interpretation of China–Russia relations in Central Asia. China and Russia possess different interests and have potential areas of competition. Russia has longstanding historical, political, cultural, economic, and security connections with Central Asia, while China's influence has expanded substantially through trade, infrastructure, investment, energy cooperation, and the BRI. (Odgaard, 2017)

Yet competition has not prevented institutionalized cooperation. The SCO provides a particularly important arena in which China, Russia, and the Central Asian states interact. Rather than eliminating competition, such institutions provide mechanisms for managing it. The English School therefore helps explain why China and Russia can simultaneously compete for influence and cooperate in maintaining regional stability. The concept of great-power management is also relevant. Major powers possess disproportionate capabilities and consequently exercise significant influence over regional order. In Central Asia, China's economic capabilities and Russia's historical and security connections create an environment in which their policies have consequences beyond bilateral relations. Their interaction therefore contributes to the broader regional order. The English School also draws attention to diplomacy, sovereignty, international law, and balance-of-power practices. Central Asian states seek to preserve their sovereignty and strategic autonomy while engaging multiple external powers. China and Russia, meanwhile, operate within overlapping institutional environments. The coexistence of the SCO, EAEU, CSTO, CIS, BRI, and INSTC illustrates that regional order is not necessarily produced by one institution alone.

The English School therefore permits the Central Asian environment to be understood as neither purely competitive nor purely cooperative. Power disparities remain important, but states also develop rules, institutions, diplomatic practices, and shared expectations that constrain the manner in which competition is expressed. The relationship between China and Russia is consequently better conceptualized as an evolving combination of competition, accommodation, coordination, and institutionalized interaction. (Odgaard, 2017)

Social Constructivist Perspective

Social Constructivism provides a further analytical dimension by examining how identities, perceptions, norms, ideas, and interaction shape international politics. Constructivism became increasingly influential in International Relations during the late 1980s and 1990s. Nicholas Onuf played an important role in developing the approach, while Alexander Wendt, Martha Finnemore, Peter Katzenstein, John Ruggie, Ted Hopf, and Michael Barnett made important contributions to constructivist scholarship. Constructivism challenges the assumption that national interests are entirely fixed before interaction

occurs. Instead, identities and interests are shaped through social processes. Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* develops this argument by treating the international system as a social construction and emphasizing the importance of whether states perceive one another as enemies, rivals, or friends. (Fierke, 2013)

This approach is particularly useful for Central Asia because the relationships among China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics have strong historical and identity dimensions. Russia's regional influence cannot be understood exclusively in terms of military capabilities or economic resources. Soviet history, Russian-language connections, institutional legacies, and perceptions of Eurasian identity contribute to the continuing meaning of Russia's regional role. Similarly, China's engagement with Central Asia involves more than infrastructure investment. The BRI provides a narrative of connectivity and Eurasian economic integration through which China presents itself as a major participant in regional development. Central Asian governments interpret this engagement through their own national identities and foreign-policy priorities. Thus, China's influence is not simply imposed upon the region; it is also mediated through interaction with Central Asian governments and societies. (Gajardo, 2026)

Constructivism is particularly valuable for explaining why identical material circumstances may produce different political relationships. Geographical proximity, for example, can generate security competition in one relationship while facilitating economic cooperation in another. Political meaning emerges through historical interaction, perceptions, and expectations. (Wendt, 1992)

Wendt's Cultures of Anarchy

Wendt's three cultures of anarchy—**Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian**—provide a useful conceptual framework for examining these differences. In a Hobbesian culture, states perceive one another as enemies and the possibility of violent conflict is central to their interaction. In a Lockean culture, states regard one another as rivals but recognize each other's sovereignty and right to exist. In a Kantian culture, states increasingly regard one another as friends and develop expectations of peaceful dispute settlement and mutual assistance. Wendt explicitly develops these three cultures as different forms of social structure within anarchy. The Central Asian environment contains elements that can be examined through these different categories. Strategic competition over energy, infrastructure, and influence may contain Lockean characteristics when states compete without necessarily treating one another as existential enemies. Institutional cooperation within the SCO and other organizations can simultaneously generate expectations of dialogue and peaceful management of disputes. (Robert Jackson, 2013)

The China–Russia relationship illustrates this complexity. The two states have different strategic interests and are not free from competition. However, their interaction is also characterized by institutionalized dialogue and cooperation. Scholarly analysis of the relationship between the EAEU and China's Silk Road initiatives has identified both

tensions arising from power asymmetries and efforts to establish forms of coordination. This combination cannot be adequately explained through an exclusively conflict-oriented understanding of anarchy. Constructivism therefore shifts the question from whether anarchy exists to what kind of social relationship states construct within anarchy. (Wendt, 1992)

Identity, Legitimacy, and the BRI

Constructivism also provides a framework for analysing legitimacy. States seek not only material capabilities but also recognition of the legitimacy of their policies and international identities. China's presentation of the BRI in terms of connectivity, development, infrastructure, and economic cooperation forms part of the normative dimension of its external policy. The importance of such narratives does not mean that material interests disappear; rather, material projects acquire political meaning through the narratives and identities attached to them.

Xinjiang is particularly relevant to this dimension because of its geographical relationship with China's Central Asian connectivity. China's western border region is central to overland connections between China and Central Asia. China's policies in Xinjiang have generated extensive international criticism, including allegations concerning serious human-rights violations, while the Chinese government has presented its policies through narratives involving security, stability, development, and counterterrorism. A constructivist analysis should not resolve this contested debate by adopting either narrative as an uncontested fact. Instead, it examines how competing claims concerning identity, legitimacy, security, and human rights influence international perceptions and diplomatic relationships. (Bitabarova, 2018) The Central Asian states' responses are likewise shaped by their own identities and interests. Their participation in Chinese-led connectivity projects does not necessarily indicate complete acceptance of China's political narratives. Rather, their governments can selectively engage Chinese economic opportunities while maintaining relations with Russia, Western states, Turkey, Iran, India, and other actors. Constructivism thus helps explain the agency of smaller states within a regional environment characterized by substantial power asymmetries. (Gajardo, 2026)

Institutions, Interaction, and the Construction of Regional Order

The interaction of the BRI with the SCO, EAEU, CSTO, INSTC, and other initiatives demonstrates how regional order is continuously constructed. These arrangements are not merely expressions of pre-existing interests; repeated interaction can also modify perceptions and create new expectations. The SCO is particularly significant in this respect. India's accession as a full member in 2017 expanded the organization's membership and added another major actor to an institutional setting already involving China, Russia, and Central Asian states. India's participation does not erase Sino-Indian strategic disagreements, but it demonstrates that states can

participate in common institutions while maintaining substantial bilateral differences.

Similarly, the existence of Russian and Chinese regional initiatives does not automatically imply mutually exclusive blocs. The EAEU is an established regional economic integration organization, while the BRI provides a broader connectivity framework. Their interaction can therefore be understood as a process through which states negotiate the boundaries and compatibility of different regional projects. The same principle applies to India's connectivity initiatives. India's contemporary engagement with Central Asia places emphasis on the INSTC, and India and Central Asian states have continued to discuss strengthening connectivity through that corridor. The coexistence of BRI, EAEU, and INSTC therefore creates an institutional environment in which Central Asian states possess multiple external connectivity options. (Lu Na-Xi, 2019)

Integrating the Four Perspectives

The analytical value of combining these theoretical perspectives lies in their ability to explain different dimensions of the same regional phenomenon. **Realism** explains why China, Russia, India, the United States, the European Union, and other actors attach strategic importance to Central Asia. It highlights power disparities, national interests, security concerns, energy resources, and competition over strategic infrastructure. **Liberalism** explains why competition does not prevent extensive economic and institutional cooperation. It draws attention to interdependence, infrastructure development, trade, investment, institutions, and the possibility of absolute gains. The BRI and INSTC can consequently be examined as competing but also potentially complementary connectivity frameworks. **The English School** explains how competition and cooperation can coexist within an anarchic international system. It focuses on international society, shared rules, diplomacy, sovereignty, institutions, and the management of relations among major powers. **Constructivism** explains how identities, perceptions, norms, historical relationships, and narratives shape the meaning of power and interests. It therefore provides an analytical explanation for why China's relationship with Central Asia differs from its relationship with some other neighbouring regions and why Russia's historical regional role remains politically significant even as China's economic presence expands.

These approaches also illuminate different dimensions of the China–Russia relationship. A realist analysis emphasizes competition over influence and capabilities; a liberal analysis highlights economic interdependence and institutional cooperation; the English School emphasizes regional order and great-power management; and constructivism examines the identities and perceptions through which China and Russia interpret one another's regional roles.

The same multi-theoretical approach can be applied to the Central Asian states themselves. Realism draws attention to their efforts to preserve security and autonomy; liberalism highlights their search for investment, markets,

infrastructure, and economic development; the English School emphasizes their participation in regional institutions; and constructivism examines how national identities, historical experiences, and perceptions of external powers influence their foreign policies. Their multi-vector strategies can therefore be understood as more than simple balancing behaviour: they also represent attempts to construct relationships that preserve autonomy within a complex regional environment. This integrated framework is particularly appropriate for studying the BRI because the initiative simultaneously possesses material, institutional, strategic, economic, and ideational dimensions. Railways, pipelines, roads, ports, energy investments, and trade networks constitute its material dimension. Diplomatic agreements and organizations provide institutional mechanisms. Economic connectivity generates interdependence. Strategic infrastructure affects the distribution of capabilities. Finally, narratives of connectivity, development, cooperation, and Eurasian integration contribute to the ideational construction of China's role.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework developed in this study demonstrates that China's BRI in Central Asia cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical paradigm. The region represents a complex intersection of material power competition, economic interdependence, institutional cooperation, historical relationships, and socially constructed identities. Realism provides an explanation of why the strategic geography and energy resources of Central Asia generate competition among major and extra-regional powers. Liberalism demonstrates why these same conditions can generate cooperation through trade, infrastructure, investment, and institutional interdependence. The English School explains how states can preserve and negotiate regional order despite the absence of a central authority, while Constructivism demonstrates how identities, perceptions, norms, and interaction shape the meaning of power and national interests. The combined framework consequently treats China's BRI neither exclusively as an instrument of geopolitical expansion nor simply as an economic development initiative. Its regional significance emerges from the interaction between material capabilities and the political, institutional, and social environment in which those capabilities are deployed. The SREB simultaneously changes patterns of connectivity, creates economic relationships, affects strategic calculations, interacts with Russian and Indian initiatives, and contributes to the evolving understanding of China's role in Eurasia. Likewise, the responses of Russia, India, the Central Asian republics, the European Union, the United States, Turkey, Iran, and other actors cannot be reduced to a single logic of either balancing or cooperation. The resulting analytical picture is therefore one of a multi-layered regional order in which competition and cooperation operate simultaneously. China's expanding presence alters the distribution

of economic and strategic capabilities; Russia's historical and institutional relationships continue to shape regional politics; India and other external powers develop alternative connectivity and engagement strategies; and the Central Asian states seek to preserve room for manoeuvre through diversified external relationships. The interaction of these processes provides the basis for examining the BRI not as an isolated Chinese initiative but as part of the wider transformation of power, institutions, connectivity, and international order in contemporary Central Asia.

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