

## BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: EMERGING NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY THREATS TO CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

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### **Abstract :**

*The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China is projected as an economic integration of the world and bringing the Central Asian countries together to develop along with them by investing in large infrastructural projects such as roads, railways, sea-ports, airports and telecommunications. By examining the China's BRI this article argues that BRI is not about of economic inclusion, development and win-win relations with Central Asian states but it is also regarding security implications especially Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats to Central Asian States in the form of migration, water issues, threats from Lop-Nor, separatism and terrorism, drug trafficking and environmental issues from China. These problems can bring threat to Central Asian States sovereignty in future.*

**Keywords:** Silk Road, Non-Traditional Security Threats, Separatism, Sovereignty

### **Introduction :**

The roots of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be seen in the term "Silk Road" which was coined by a German geographer Ferdinand Von Richthofen in the year 1877 (Mark. J. Joshua, 2014). It is believed that General Zhang Qian is credited for finding Silk Road when he was sent by Han dynasty Emperor Wudi on a diplomatic mission from China to West in second century BC. During the Han dynasty the Silk Road helped in establishing trade links with Western world and other regions which eventually facilitated in trade of goods and commodities especially in silk, paper, gun powder, spices and gemstones etc. Later on when silk became the most demanding commodity to be transported from China to Western world as far as Roman Empire the trade route came to be known as "Silk Road" (Blah Montgomery, 2018).

For centuries China is connected through Silk Road with different parts of the world across mountains, seas and deserts. In this process of developing relations with the world especially with the Central Asian States it mainly focused on strengthening its economy, improving its military capacity and ensuring its presence in the region. The BRI is not different to this centuries old strategy because China has clearly giving a signal through this initiative that it requires more business, good cooperation and connection with its allies and others to promote its economic development and ensuring their presence in every part of the world.



This article is an attempt to present the big picture that Belt and Road Initiative is not about economic inclusion, development and win-win relations with Central Asian States but it is also regarding security implications especially Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats to Central Asian States in the form of migration, water issues, threats from Lop-Nor, separatism and terrorism, drug trafficking and environmental issues from China. These problems can bring threat to Central Asian States sovereignty in future.

### **Xi Jinping's: Roadmap to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) :**

The concept of Belt and Road Initiative for the first time was introduced by President, Xi Jinping in September 2013 in Kazakhstan when he outlined China's ambitious plans of "Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) that will connect China to Europe via Central Asia. A month later, during his trip to Indonesia Xi Jinping proposed a similar project named as "Maritime Silk Road" (MSR) linking China's eastern ports to Europe via South East Asia (Murphy David, 2016). These two major initiatives later on combined into one mega project known as Belt Road Initiative (BRI) with China being as its hub. In May 2015, specific policies pertaining to One Belt and One Road was revealed and decided that international economic corridors will be created with an estimated amount of US \$890 billion - China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC); the New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB); the China-Central and West Asia Economic Corridor (CWAEC); the China-Indo-China Peninsula Economic Corridor (CIPEC); the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC) (Erik Kjeld Brodsgaard and Koen Rutten, 2017). Hence, Xi Jinping is determined to reshape the world order by integrating all the participant economies of BRI rather than be shaped by the changing world order (Aoyoma Rumi, 2016).

### **Central Asian States Perspective: BRI and Emerging Non-Traditional Security Threats**

In recent years, Central Asian states has risen from a marginal position to one of the top priorities in China's foreign policy especially after Xi Jinping coming into power and paying an eight-day visit to four Central Asian states-Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. During this trip Xi Jinping signed important energy deals and promised to bring billions of dollars for investment in the region (Xichao Yu, 2014), Thus, all the Central Asian states are in need of huge investment and BRI is determined to do that. They have welcomed the BRI and sought to align with their own development agendas and political objectives with it. The common and main reasons of Central Asian states for accepting BRI is the prospects of transport connectivity, great opportunities of trade, earning transit fees and export their natural resources at attractive prices to China and other regions (Dave Bhavna and Yuka Kobayashi, 2018).

All is well, with Central Asian states perception of China and BRI for offering plethora of opportunities to their smaller financial systems. Nevertheless, these states have to take into consideration that with vast openings, there are also many prospective security threats especially Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats emanating from China's BRI. These Non-Traditional Security threats can be seen in the form of:



### **Migration :**

Adiljan Umarov and Dmitiry Pashkun (2006) view that with the rise of China main danger to Central Asian states is “Yellow Peril” that is uncontrolled penetration of Chinese population into Central Asian states. These people are unwilling to go back to China and prefer to settle in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. They enter into Central Asian states either on tourist visas or on 30 day work invitations and after their completion of due date they extend their stays for 90 days with the help of competent authorities. After that some choose to stay on and work illegally while others leave to Russia but, majority return and go back to China so that they can once again start administrative procedures and come back to Central Asian states (Laruelle Marlene and Sabestein Peyrouse, 2009). These illegal migrants majorly work in cement and brick industries or in small business. This has led to Sinophobia in Central Asian states and a perception has developed among the Central Asian populace that sooner or later much more numerable Chinese will overrun the Central Asian states (Hashimova Umida, 2018).

### **Water Issues :**

With executing BRI significant economic development is possible in the Central Asian states but to sustain this development for long run water is dire essential. The rivers Irtysh and Ili rise in China and flow into Central Asia. It is believed that as the Central Asian states share these rivers with China there is a possible ground for conflict between them because demand for water from all sectors of society in Central Asia is increasing with the expansion of population and economic development.

In this regard, Ann Mcmillan (2004) asserts that China’s plan to divert water is likely to impose negative development and security implications especially to Kazakhstan. Thus, in recent decade’s Chinese diversion of Irtysh River towards Xinjiang has increased the problems of Kazakhstan in operating hydroelectric facilities especially in electricity grids of eastern Kazakhstan and in port facilities for substantial trade between Russia and Kazakhstan. Similarly the diversion of Ili River by the Chinese government is creating major implications for Kazakhstan due to the reason that Lake Balkhash is a source of food, supplying fish, and is also a source of water for irrigation and government infrastructure, including a hydropower station, supplying the cheapest electric power in southern Kazakhstan.

Thus, there is a need to stop the trans-boundary boundary diversion of the Rivers especially Irtysh and Ili. In case, this issue is not resolved in near future it may soon lead to a prolonged tension between Central Asian states predominantly with Kazakhstan and China.

### **Threats from Lop-Nor :**

The situation in Lop Nor has created apprehensions among the Central Asian states since; this site is located in China’s western part and nearer to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Central Asian states believe that these nuclear risks or radiations may fallout in their territory and this notion came into limelight when scientist calculated that the so-called nuclear sands of radioactive dust and particles had reached many towns and villages situated

along the ancient Silk Road. Further, the vestiges of the radiation diseases are found near the border territory between China and Kazakhstan (Sudakov Dmitry, 2009).

The BRI has further raised concern among the Central Asian states for the reason that the inadequacy of customs control in the region which makes their countries potential targets for nuclear smugglers, separatists and terrorists emanating from Xinjiang.

### **Separatism and Terrorism :**

Central Asian states especially Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan bordering China are concerned of Xinjiang separatist movement. The important reason behind this is that Uighur nationalities of Xinjiang region share common history, tradition, culture, ethnic, language and religion with these Central Asian republics.

The separatist movements of Uighurs have become so stronger that it developed violent methods to achieve its goal. Thus, with the implementation of BRI, Central Asian states may be affected due to close relations between those separatist and terrorist organisations that are functioning within Xinjiang (East Turkistan Islamic Movement, East Turkistan Islamic Party, East Turkistan Liberation Organisation etc) and outside Xinjiang (The Committee of Eastern Turkistan, United National Revolutionary Front of East Turkistan, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan etc) whose bases are in Central Asian states. The increasing separatist, terrorist and extremist groups are threatening the implementation of BRI. The long highways, ports and bridges along the Belt may be the main targets of these groups (Imomnazar Imomov 2018). This would not only destabilise China but also peace and stability of Central Asian states.

### **Drug Trafficking :**

The Central Asian states especially Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan being immediate neighbours of Afghanistan are ruined due to drug proliferation (Brill Olcott Martha and Natalia Udalova, 2000). The high demand for drugs in China has created a concern to those Central Asian states that are bordering China especially Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan which has borders with Xinjiang.

The demand for high quantity of drugs in Xinjiang induces the drug traffickers to supply more since, the prices of drugs particularly heroin retail prices are 4-5 times higher in this region than in the Central Asian states. In general, the major reasons for feasible opiate trafficking across the Central Asian-Chinese borders are porous and lengthy borders, scattered populations and rapidly increasing trade and community links. Hence, any expansion of roads mainly via BRI without banning or countering drug proliferation in Central Asia from Afghanistan will only lead to criminal activity and trafficking to China (Townsend Jacob, 2006).

### **Environmental Issues :**

On Ecological considerations, Chinese companies do not have a good track record. For instance, the cement plants developed by China in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have increased pollution and can have negative effect on local people. Similarly, refineries built

and operated by Chinese companies in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have also received complaints from local residents (Pannier Bruce, 2016).

### **Conclusion :**

The future of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will be a challenge or opportunity to Central Asian States will not be easy to answer in simple terms. Though, the success of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the coming years depends upon the Central Asian States ability to upgrade essential infrastructure facilities to ensure economic gain and connectivity. It also rests on right kind of leadership qualities guarding its political, economic and security interests.

China's well-known motive behind BRI in Central Asia is energy based economic interest especially gain access to natural resources, oil and gas. Though, Central Asian states are aware of these interests of China, still they want to maintain relations and cooperate with China. The reason is that they are landlocked countries and their economies are fragile and smaller. The BRI may help the Central Asian States to develop their economies by opening their landlocked region to other countries and continents.

Though, BRI of China may provide plenty of options to Central Asian states to mitigate common problems but the real future challenges to Central Asian states from BRI includes Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats in the form of migration, water issues, threats from Lop-Nor, separatism and terrorism, drug trafficking and environmental issues. These threats are emanating from China due to the reason that the Central Asian States are immediate neighbour of China especially Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. To lessen these common problems Central Asian States need to tighten-up their borders and mature leadership should take appropriate decisions to safeguard their political, economic and security interests.

Further, Central Asian States view BRI as a game changer in the region due to the fact that large sum of money is invested in infrastructure development and projects in an effort to join them together. However, viewing China's investment policies in the participating countries of BRI namely in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mongolia, Laos, Djibouti, and Montenegro it is evident that huge investments are only creating debt trap to small and weaker countries where China persuades them to take loans in the name of infrastructure development and when they are not in a position to payback their debt, it captures their land and resources. Central Asian States mainly Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan which owe billions of dollars to China need to learn lessons from these debt trap countries that if a country or a lender gives too much loan to the borrower to the point that its financial condition is at risk then it is a serious problem since, how will the borrower will repay the loans? If this borrowing tendency goes for a long run then lender has to take control of borrower's natural resources such as oil and gas and other infrastructures as collateral to facilitate the repayment of debt. Hence, Central Asian states need to be prepared to face the challenges of Chinese debt and try to be proactive and construct a robust vision against their debts to China by engaging their relations simultaneously with Russia and U.S. to safeguard their sovereignty in future.



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