



Trans-Regional Integration and Connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China and European Union

Original Paper

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Abstract

Trans-regional integration and connectivity has been considered mostly in the sense of cross border transport and logistics corridors for regional and inter-regional trade in the context of this particular research work. Central Asia, after the breakup of former Soviet Union, reappeared in the ebb and flow of international exchanges as the global and regional powers are intensely engaged in developing regional and trans-regional transport corridors across the region.

Russia, China and European Union (EU) have developed and operating their own plans of integration and connectivity. Russia's approaches to trans-regional integration in Eurasia's heartland demonstrate the characteristics of both 'open regionalism' under Greater Eurasian Partnership and 'close regionalism' under the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) framework. China's plans of regional and trans-regional integration in Eurasia's heartland under the BRI are based on the concept of open regionalism despite having geographical contiguity. EU's approach towards regional and trans-regional integration in Central Asia is also based on the principles of open regionalism where Middle Corridor has become a necessity. Multilateralism under the regional organizations is also at work for enhanced cross border hard and soft connectivity. Hence a number of trans-continental Eurasian trade and transport corridors across Central Asia are being developed giving impetus to regional cooperation in Central Asia. The paper attempts to answer three main questions; how regionalism and trans-regional integration has been evolving in Central Asian context? How Russia, China and European Union (EU) have been developing their plans of trans-regional connectivity in altered regional configuration?, and how the trans-regional connectivity plans impacting Central Asia as a region? The approach in this study is explanatory and exploratory and methodology adopted is qualitative in nature mainly descriptive and analytical.

Keywords

Central Asia • Trans-Regional Integration • Russia • China • European Union

1 Introduction

Regional and trans-regional integration through developed cross border connectivity infrastructure has been the driving force behind the transformational changes in Central Asia. Transformation is meant as fundamental changes in the regional geo-economic landscape. The two components of connectivity, hard (highways, railways, pipelines etc.) and soft (coordination, harmonization of cross border legal regimes) are equally important for smooth regional and trans-regional movement of goods, services, labor and capital. According to the Asian Development Bank Institution cross-border infrastructure has an immense impact on competitiveness of economies by reducing the economic distance from external markets, building economies of scale due to wider markets, increasing FDI inflows, and expanding trade and economic activity in general.¹

Every kind of connectivity (hard and soft) in any sphere of human life generates economic activity. Therefore, connectivity has been termed as the arms race of twenty first century.² Trans-regional integration and connectivity has been considered mostly in the sense of cross border transport and logistics corridors for inter-continental trade in the context of this particular research work. In order to understand regional and trans-regional connectivity processes in Central Asia, it is critical to examine the roles of the two giant neighbors of the region, Russia and China and the role of European Union (EU) as an important economic

¹ Brooks, D. H., "Regional Cooperation, Infrastructure, and Trade Costs in Asia", *ADB Working Paper 123*. (Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute, 2008). Available at: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/155978/adb-wp123.pdf> and <http://www.adbi.org/workingpaper/2008/12/04/2762.regional.cooperation.infrastructure.trade.costs/>

² Parag Khanna, "Connectography: Mapping Future of Global Civilization", (Random House, 2016), <https://catalog.washoecountylibrary.us/GroupedWork/6c9e54c0-9e24-8662-a722-21b8cac1ea00/Home>

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partner and as a huge market with high purchasing power. This article examines macro dynamics of regionalism (close and open regionalism) in Central Asia and Russia's, China's and European Union's (EU's) strategies of regional and trans-regional integration and connectivity in the region. The work attempts to answer three main questions; how regionalism and trans-regional integration has been evolving in Central Asian context? How Russia, China and European Union (EU) have been developing their plans of trans-regional integration and connectivity in altered regional configuration?, and how the trans-regional connectivity plans impacting Central Asia as a region? The work also touches the issue of linking east-west trans-continental trade corridors with trans-oceanic corridors via Afghanistan and Pakistan in north-south direction. The approach in this study is explanatory and exploratory. Methodology adopted is qualitative in nature mainly descriptive and analytical, employing the methods of hermeneutics and double hermeneutics by interpreting and re-interpreting the phenomenon of trans-regional integration in an altered Central Asian context by utilizing the published material in the form of books, journals, news and reports.

Central Asia, after the breakup of former Soviet Union, reappeared in the ebb and flow of international exchanges. Historically Central Asian region had served as a crossroads, linking Asian, European and West Asian civilizations and as a conduit for economic exchanges. Geography and resource base of Central Asia are generating global and regional powers' interests in developing regional and trans-regional connectivity. Geography remains a significant factor in shaping economic, political and strategic plans of major and middle powers in global and regional contexts. Central Asia as the heartland of Eurasian space links Asian, African and European continents for transcontinental trade and logistic corridors. Secondly, Central Asia possesses huge exportable surpluses of hydrocarbons, precious minerals and metals and much wanted agrarian products like cotton and grain. Technological developments in contemporary era are an added dimension to the importance of transcontinental trade corridors in Central Asian context. In addition, Central Asia as a region is growing consumer market of more than 80 million populations. In the so called 'Asian Century', Central Asia has gained added significance for the West and East to have mutually beneficial trans-continental access via the region. The global and regional powers have adopted cooperative and competitive approaches to give an orientation to the region in their desired direction in terms of connectivity. Multilateralism under the regional organizations including Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) initiative of Asian Development Bank, Eastern Partnership's plans, Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor (TITR) Conference for Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) the Northern, Central and Southern Eurasian Corridors under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is also at work for enhanced cross border hard and soft connectivity. These initiatives have given new impetus to regional cooperation in Central Asia. Regional integration helps countries to overcome costly divisions and impediments such as geographical, infrastructural and inefficient policies to enhance cross border flow of goods, services, capital, people and ideas.³ The Eurasia's heartland is increasingly connecting due to the trade and logistic corridors being developed under the ongoing plans of Eurasian powers mainly China, Russia, European countries and regional organizations.

In this context, Russia, China and European Union (EU) have also developed and operating their own plans of integration which are briefly discussed in this particular research work. Russia's approaches to regional and trans-regional integration in Eurasia's heartland demonstrate the characteristics of both 'open regionalism' and 'close regionalism' simultaneously. Russia's bilateral and multi-lateral collaborative efforts with China, EU, Central Asian Republics (CARs) and other countries for developing trans-regional connectivity in Central Asian context fall under the category of open regionalism while Russia's approach towards Central Asia for regional integration under the framework of Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is based on the concept of close regionalism. EU can be termed as the best example of close regionalism as a custom union, common market and an economic union however EU's approach towards regional and trans-regional integration in Central Asia is based on the principles of open regionalism. China's plans towards regional and trans-regional integration in Eurasia's heartland are also based on the concept of open regionalism (project, sector, activity specific) despite having geographical contiguity. Trans-regional integration plans based on the principles of open regionalism such as EU's Eastern Partnership, Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership and China's BRI offer flexible and convenient formats to meet the requirements and needs of all players involved; major and small.⁴

2 Conceptualizing Regionalism, Close and Open Regionalism and Trans-Regional Integration in Central Asia

Regionalism can be defined as organized all-encompassing institutional cooperation amongst countries of a particular region. The process of regional cooperation can be termed as regionalization which develops through regional integration. Regionalism may be defined as coordination and harmonization of political and economic policies by countries of a particular region to enhance regional trade and economic cooperation through seem less border crossings. Traditionally regionalism evolved in the

³ "Regional Integration", (The World Bank, n.d.), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/overview> accessed on 03/05/2024

⁴ Rosa Turarbekova, ed., "The Eurasian Network of Regional Initiatives and Organizations: Elements of Interconnectedness", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Policy Paper, October 2020, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/17136.pdf>

form of trade and economic cooperation amongst countries of a particular region adopting protectionist measures against non-member or non-regional states in the form of free market, custom union, common market and ultimately economic union with common currency.⁵ This type of regionalism is known as tight or close regionalism. Thus close regionalism, 'inward looking', imposes restrictions on non-member states as a custom union, common market and as economic union where supra-national institutions are also developed.⁶ Professor John Crawford of Australia coined the term open regionalism in 1980 to address the shortcomings of close regionalism by adopting 'outward oriented' regional integration arrangements.⁷ Lolette Kritzing –van Niekrek also stated that the concept of open regionalism derived from the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) model which offers outward oriented, open model of integration for advancing regional trade and economic cooperation while the region remains opened for trade and economic relations with the rest of the world.⁸ The concept of open regionalism is broader than a regional trade or economic block and encompasses security and political dimensions along with harmonization of trade and economic policies.⁹ Regional integration arrangements under open regionalism are mostly project/sector specific where different kind of projects requires different kind of multi-country cooperation.¹⁰ There can be bilateral, tri-lateral or multilateral project and sector specific regional integration arrangements, having no restrictions on non-regional states to join a particular regional integration arrangement or access to markets of regional states. Similarly, there are no supra-national institutions involved under the concept of open regionalism to surrender state sovereignty in some areas.

Trans-regional integration has been defined as a multi-dimensional states led process leading to coordinated, harmonized and converging efforts through improved cross border connectivity; hard and soft, integrating multiple adjacent regions.¹¹ The states through cooperative agreements facilitate cross border flows for public and private sectors. Whereas connectivity is regarded as the level of effective and efficient networks (inter and intra-regionally) to facilitate flows of goods, services, capital, people and knowledge. Both the components of connectivity hard (highways, railways, pipelines etc.) and soft (coordination and harmonization of cross border legal regimes) are equally important for smooth regional and trans-regional movement of goods, services, labor and capital.¹² Regional and inter-regional integration is thus the harmonization and coordination of political, legal and economic policies through developed cross border connectivity infrastructure. The system of east-west and north-south trans-continental trade and logistic corridors is being developed across Central Asia linking Asia, Europe and Africa. These trade and logistic corridors are economic arteries which develop integration, trade, communication, and cooperation.

Initially Central Asian Republics (CARs) remained inclined towards close regionalism however the efforts proved unsuccessful. Regionalism within Central Asia proved to be a challenging task since 1991 due to steep economic decline related to socio-political and economic transitions and due to the focus on nation and state building by CARs during the immediate post-Soviet period. The CARs were 'inward looking' reflected in their policies of economic self-sufficiencies, consolidating control on resources within national borders, import substitution industrialization and thus resisting regional cooperation and integration.¹³ The former president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev presented the idea of making a Central Asian Economic Union and suggested to have a common market, having common currency amongst the CARs in his book 'Kazakhstan v Patok-e Istoree'.¹⁴ A treaty was signed between Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan for creating single economic space in 1994 named as Central Asian Economic Union which Tajikistan also joined in 1998.¹⁵ Turkmenistan following policy of positive neutrality did not join. There were even plans of developing 'supra-national institutions' such the Council of Prime Ministers and Central Asian

5 Shabir Ahmad Khan and Zahid Ali Khan, "Regional Integration in Central and South Asia: Open Regionalism", *Central Asia*, No. 80 (Area Study Centre, University of Peshawar, 2017), 1-14

6 Chung-in Moon, "Economic Regionalism", Encyclopedia Britannica, retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/topic/economic-regionalism#ref751099> accessed on 31, October, 2024

7 Sutton Michael, "Open Regionalism and the Asia Pacific: Implications for the Rise of an East Asian Economic Community," *International Affairs*, no. 5 (Tokyo: Institute of International Relations and Area Studies, Ritsumeikan University, 2007) as quoted by Shabir Ahmad Khan and Zahid Ali Khan, "Regional Integration in Central and South Asia: Open Regionalism", *Central Asia*, No. 80 (Area Study Centre, University of Peshawar, 2017), p: 5

8 Lolette Kritzing –van Niekrek, *Regional Integration: Concepts, Advantages, Disadvantages and Lessons of Experience*, (Mozambique: Southern Africa Regional Poverty Network, 2005), accessed September 17, 2024 http://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0001249/P1416-RI-concepts_May2005.pdf

9 Shabir Ahmad Khan and Zahid Ali Khan, "Regional Integration in Central and South Asia: Open Regionalism", op. cited

10 Chung-in Moon, "Economic Regionalism", Encyclopedia Britannica, op. cited.

11 Isabelli Ramdoo, "Developing Value Chains: What Role for Regional Integration", (Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2014), <http://ecdpm.org/great-insights/extractive-sector-african-perspectives/extractive-sector-regional-integration-regional-value-chains/>

12 Haruhiko Kuroda Masahiro Kawai and Rita Nangia, "Infrastructure and Regional Cooperation", *Asian Development Bank Institute: ADB Institute Discussion Paper No. 76*, (Asian Development Bank: September 2007), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/156715/adbi-dp76.pdf>

13 Alberto Turkstra, "Central Asia in the Age of Connectivity", *Europe Now*, (Council for European Studies) <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/06/04/central-asia-in-the-age-of-connectivity/>

14 Noor Sultan Nazarbayev, *Kazakhstan V Patok-e Istorie*, Almaati 1999, tr. Shabir Ahmad Khan, "Kazakhstan Tareekh k Ayenai Main", (Islamabad: LokVirsa, 2002)

15 Niyozbadal Mirzoev, "Economic Integration in the Central Asia: State and Prospects", *Taiwan International Studies Quarterly*, 2, no. 2, (Summer 2006): 43-61, <https://www.tisanet.org/quarterly/2-2-3.pdf> accessed 13 April, 2024

Parliament as per the scheme for regional integration in Central Asia discussed by the President of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in December 1995.¹⁶ This would have been a case of tight or close regionalism in Central Asia, however did not materialize. The Central Asian Economic Union was renamed as Central Asian Cooperation Organization in 2001. This body seized to exist in 2005 by merging into wider Eurasian integration structure i.e. Eurasian Economic Community¹⁷ and Central Asian Leaders would not meet, sit together and discuss Central Asian issues without presence of external powers for the next thirteen years. However, there is a growing trend of intra-regional cooperation in Central Asia after consolidating their nation and statehood. The CARs are more capable of influencing the major powers strategies to adjust these plans to regional perspective on the principles of open regionalism.

The CARs are closely linked and connected by common language, culture, religion, economic structure and history which necessitate regional cooperation for stability and economic development. The Consultative Forum amongst the Central Asian Leaders has been revived to discuss ways and means of resolving regional issues of security and economic under-development. In June, 2018 all five CARs adopted a resolution on regional cooperation in the UN General Assembly.¹⁸ Uzbekistan and Tajikistan signed the 'Alliance Treaty' in April 2024 to strengthen bilateral strategic ties and cooperation on regional issues.¹⁹ The CARs are looking beyond their borders 'outward oriented' for access to regional and global markets in altered regional geo-political and geo-economic configuration on the basis of open regionalism. The US/NATO withdrawal from the region, Western sanctions on Russia in the wake of Russia-Ukraine war, China's economic rise, end of war in Afghanistan and consolidated nation and statehood of CARs are the main hallmarks of altered regional geo-political and geo-economic configuration. There is a realization in Central Asia in the face of ongoing trans-regional integration processes of major powers and regional organizations that the Central Asian region can maximally benefit from these integration plans only through regional cooperation and smooth border crossings.²⁰ The increase in intra-regional trade is a sign of growing regional cooperation in Central Asia. Intra-regional trade has increased by 73% during 2018 to 2022 from \$5.8 b to \$10 b as the Astana Times reported.²¹

Production and trade multiplies through the expansion of transport connectivity. Regional cooperation is a necessity for the development of transcontinental trade corridors due to the nature of transcontinental trade passing through various borders of multiple jurisdictions that require different infrastructure, policy and governance in contrast to trans-oceanic trade.²² The involvement of major powers for developing trans-regional connectivity in Eurasia's heartland has thus created expanded opportunities for cooperation amongst CARs. A country has to be efficiently connected regionally first if it has to be efficiently connected globally. This is very much relevant in the case of Central Asia. Open regionalism is the best successful model for regional and trans-regional integration in Central Asia that does not restrict any institution or extra-regional state from participation in a specific project or sector of regional and inter-regional connectivity. Developing multiple and multi-dimensional trade, energy and logistic corridors lies at the heart of CARs' connectivity plans. CARs are, therefore engaged with major powers and organizations because of a positive image of material progress as developing cross border connectivity needs capital and technology. There is also a realization in CARs to play active positive roles in ensuring sustainable peace in Afghanistan as the ultimate stakeholders in the peace of Afghanistan which provides the shortest outlet to the region in southern direction. CARs, in the altered regional geo-economic circumstances, are more interested in engaging Afghanistan in regional economic and connectivity processes to develop trans-Afghan transport corridors.²³ Particularly Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have adopted a regional economic approach for trade and transit with South Asia via Afghanistan.²⁴ The revived 'outward oriented' regionalism in Central Asia based on openness thus bode well for the implementation and operation of trans-regional integration and connectivity plans. It is through regional and trans-regional integration and connectivity that the natural wealth

16 Ulugbek Azizov, "Regional integration in Central Asia: From knowing-that to knowing-how", *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8,(2017): 123–135 https://www.academia.edu/100082133/Regional_integration_in_Central_Asia_From_knowing_that_to_knowing_how, accessed on April 25, 2024

17 NartsissShukuralieva and JildizNicharapova, "Integration Processes in Central Asia", in JildizNicharapova and Sebastien Peyrouse(Eds.),*Integration Processes and State Interests in Eurasia*, (2019):145-156.<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337469541>, accessed on April 25, 2024

18 "General Assembly Adopts Resolution on Strengthening Cooperation in Central Asia", (New York UN HQ, June 25, 2018), <https://unrcca.unmissions.org/general-assembly-adopts-resolution-strengthening-cooperation-central-asia>, accessed on April 26, 2024

19 NavbahorImamova, "No longer a US priority, is Afghanistan a Central Asia problem now?", VOA, April 24, 2024,<https://www.voanews.com/a/no-longer-a-us-priority-is-afghanistan-a-central-asia-problem-now-/7583597.html> accessed on May 14, 2024

20 Shabir Ahmad Khan, "Trans-Regional Connectivity in Eurasia's Heartland and the Role of Uzbekistan", *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*,16, no.4, (Winter 2022): 133-142. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.51709/19951272/Winter2022/10>

21 NurlanKulbatyrov, Aida Haidar, "Five Trade Trends in Central Asian Connectivity", *The Astana Times*, June 2023,<https://astanatimes.com/2023/06/five-trade-trends-in-central-asian-connectivity/#:~:text=Intra%2Dregional%20trade%20increased%20by,roughly%20%245%20billion%20in%202022>

22 Evgeny Vinokurov and Alexander Libman, "Eurasia and Eurasian Integration: Beyond the Post-Soviet Borders", in *The Economics of the Post-Soviet and Eurasian Integration*, Eurasian Development Bank (EDB). *Eurasian Integration year Book* (2012), https://eabr.org/upload/iblock/865/a_n5_2012_10.pdf, accessed on 16 April, 2024

23 S. Fredrick Starr, *Rethinking Greater Central Asia: New American and Western Approaches to Continental Trade and Afghanistan*, (Central Asia Caucasasia Institute, June, 2022), <https://www.isdp.eu/content/uploads/2022/06/2206-Starr-Final.pdf>, accessed on 04 March, 2024

24 Rajab Taieb, Maryam Jami, Alamuddin Rizwan, "A change in policy or inevitability? Afghanistan and Central Asia's relationship after NATO's withdrawal", (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, n.d.)<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kabul/18636.pdf> accessed on 07/05/2024

of Central Asia i.e., geographical location and resource base, translates into inclusive economic growth and development. CARs are able to recalibrate the Eurasian integration process in its 'heartland' in the altered regional circumstances. Central Asian region will benefit from access to regional and global markets as well as from the potential transit trade which will develop across the region linking Eurasian space from East to West and from North to South.

3 Russia's Plans of Integration

Russia could not pay attention to Central Asia during the immediate post-Soviet period mainly due to her own multiple-transitions' related issues. Russia also never expected that the West would be physically engaged in the region. Central Asian Republics were also diversifying their foreign trade and economic links during the same period and the region no more remained a Russian inclusive zone. Russia is engaged with CARs bilaterally as well as under the multilateral formats including regional organization. There have been fundamental changes in Russia's approach to the region in terms of economic integration in post 9/11 period and post Russia-Ukraine war period. The post 9/11 period is marked by Russia's efforts towards the region on the principles of close regionalism earmarked by constituting Eurasian Economic Community which later transformed into Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). In the post Ukraine war period and Western sanctions; Russia's approach is earmarked by open regionalism replacing Greater European Project by Greater Eurasian Partnership where Central Asian region assumes added significance. One can observe that Russia's pivot to east for Eurasian integration is irreversible which necessitates long term engagement with Central Asia, China and other Asian countries on the basis of open regionalism.

Eurasian Economic Union as a Custom Union, including Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as full members while Uzbekistan and Tajikistan with observer status, is one of Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership tools to integrate Central Asian region. A custom union was introduced in 2010, common market for goods, services, capital and labor became operational in 2021 the former launching of EEU held the field on January 01, 2015.²⁵ This institution has achieved some tangible results in Russia's integration approach to the region of Central Asia.²⁶ Russia incentivizes its Central Asian partners under the EEU project through integration discounts, migrant workers' movement, stabilization grants and loans.²⁷ It is obvious that in post Ukraine war, Russia's position has been diluted to use EEU for political gains on the expense of Central Asian or other member states. An instance was the rejection by Kazakhstan and Belarus to join Moscow's retaliatory sanctions on the import from EU in August 2014.²⁸ Russia's narrative under efficient global connect theme has been that EEU will increase collective bargaining power for member states while for non-members it will improve access to a single market with common tariff and custom control regulations. Thus, for China it will also serve as a single transit system towards Europe. Russia and China have also agreed to align EEU and BRI for efficient Eurasian integration process.

Russia's close cooperation with China on trans-regional integration in Eurasia's heartland is a unique phenomenon of twenty first century. The global and regional circumstances in Eurasia's heartland compel Russia to cooperate and to converge efforts with an economically powerful China for enhanced trans-regional connectivity. The Shanghai Five Forum which transformed into Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 proved to be decisive in creating long-term understanding and cooperation between Russia, China and CARs. SCO has achieved tangible success in security cooperation however much work is needed to institutionalize trade and economic cooperation within the organization. Russia's priority has been security while China's priority has been economic cooperation within the SCO. The idea of SCO Development Bank presented in 2010 still remains unfulfilled. Russia has been impeding the establishment of SCO Development Bank and desire's China to join Eurasian Development Bank instead.²⁹ The creation of the SCO Development Bank can not only respond to the consequences of the international financial crisis, but also optimize the SCO's financial resources, strengthen the SCO's internal financial cooperation, and reinforce development activities including cross border infrastructure.³⁰ Kazakhstan has prioritized transport connectivity along with trade development, digitalization, smart agriculture, innovation and high tech for its SCO's Chairmanship.³¹

In Russia's pivot to Asia/East, China is the natural option. Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership announced in 2016 has been re-enforced and vitalized by Russia-Ukraine war in effect reorienting Russia's foreign policy focus from Greater Europe to Greater

25 Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, "Eurasian integration: elite perspectives before and after the Ukraine crisis", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32, no.6, (2016).<https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1118200>, accessed On April 17, 2024

26 Julian Cooper, "The Development of Eurasian Economic Integration", in *Eurasian Economic Integration; Law, Policy, and Politics*, edited by RilkaDragneva and KatarynaWolczuk, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013): 15-33

27 Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, "Eurasian integration", 2016

28 Ibid.

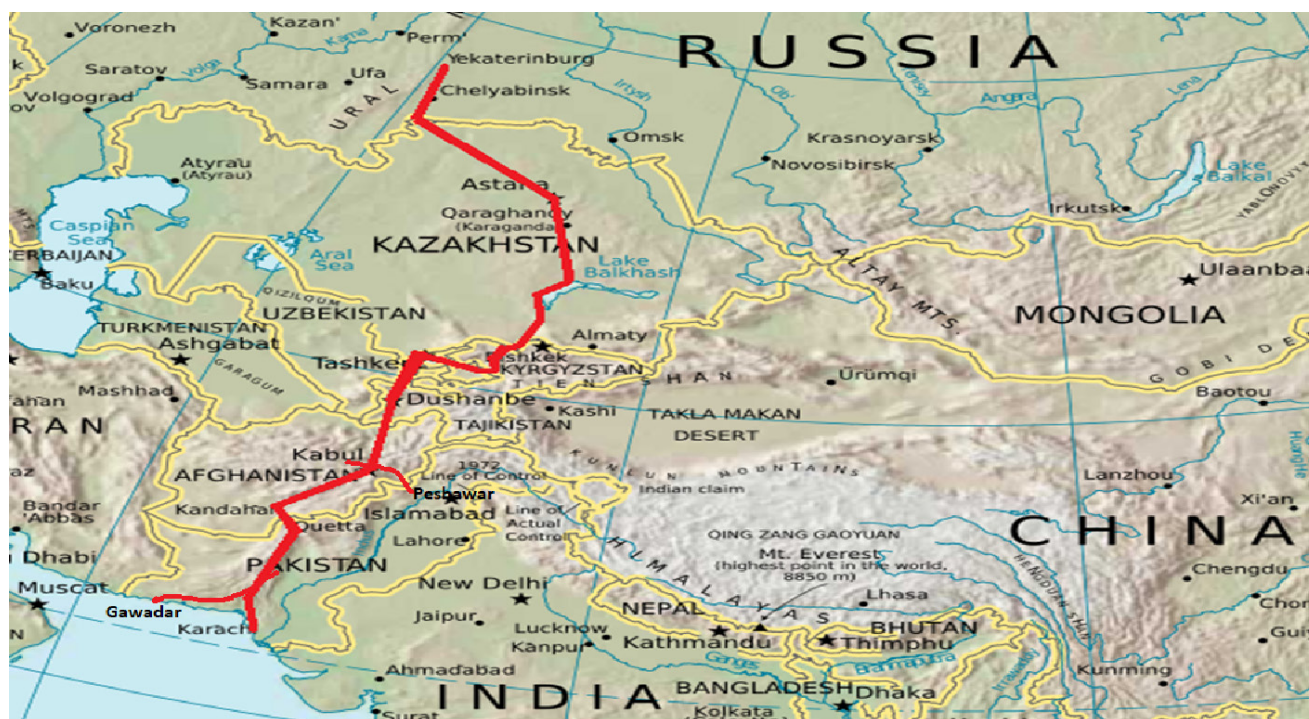
29 Yana L. Gobareva, Olga Y. Gorodetskaya, Alexander V. Medvedev, "*The SCO Banks: Goals and Prospects of Development in the Digital Space*" (Atlantis Press, 2019),<https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/icefb-19/125925177>

30 Gobareva, "The SCO Banks: Goals", (2019)<https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/icefb-19/125925177>

31 "Astana Times", <https://astanatimes.com/2023/09/expert-discusses-kazakhstans-priorities-as-sco-chair/>

Eurasia and ultimately towards 'Great Ocean'.³² Russia's collaboration with China, Central Asia, Iran, India and Pakistan to develop Eurasian transport corridors seems the main focus of Greater Eurasian Partnership. Asian Highway 7 starts from Yekaterinburg in Central Russia and reaches to Gwadar and Karachi Ports in Pakistan via Astana, Tashkent, Kabul and Kandahar. The Northern, Middle and Southern corridors plus the New Eurasian Land Bridge from China to Europe and West Asia via Central Asia are also interconnected by Asian Highway 7 within Central Asia and at Yekaterinburg in Russia. This will result in a North-South corridor for Russia via Central Asia to South Asia, Indian Ocean and beyond. Kazakhstan has also invested substantially in the expansion and up gradation of north-south cross-border rail routes from Russia to Iran and through Uzbekistan to Afghanistan.³³ The Russian and Central Asian hydrocarbons can reach Indian market via Afghanistan and Pakistan efficiently. Russia has plans to access South Asia and Indian Ocean and to sign Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between EEU and India.³⁴ This will also enhance Pakistan's significance as any kind of efficient overland connectivity from Russia via Central Asia to South Asia has to pass through Pakistan. It will also lead to the linking of trans-continental Eurasian trade corridors with the trans-oceanic corridors via Asian Highway 7 as shown below.

Fig. 1. Asian Highway 7: North-South Overland Connectivity



Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AH7>

Russia-Ukraine war has thus necessitated and expedited Russia's pivot and stride to Asia. Russia's old plans of access to 'Great Ocean' and South Asia via Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan can be materialized in the altered regional geo-political and geo-economic context on the principles of open regionalism. However it seems that Russia's plans of regional integration in the framework of EEU based on the principles of close regionalism may become less attractive to regional countries as it imposes restrictions on important economic partners of the region. It is also not clear yet that how Russia and China will align EEU and BRI in Central Asia though Sino-Russia condominium continues in post-US Central Asia.

32 Yury V. Kulintsev, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the Structure of Greater Eurasia Partnership," *The of Review of International Affairs* LXXI, no. 1180, (Central and Eastern European Online Library, Oct.-Dec. 2020), <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1053940>, accessed on 20 August 2023

33 "South Caucasus and Central Asia: The Belt and Road Initiative Kazakhstan Country Case Study", (The World Bank, June 2020), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/471731593499938164/pdf/South-Caucasus-and-Central-Asia-The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-Kazakhstan-Country-Case-Study.pdf>, accessed April 202024

34 Rezaul H. Laskar, "India, Russia begin talks on Eurasian Free Trade Deal", *Hindustan Times*, (April 18, 2023), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-and-russia-discuss-fta-inving-eurasian-economic-union-to-address-trade-imbalance-created-by-45bn-two-way-trade-101681757779557.html>, accessed on 20 August 2023

4 China's Strategies for Regional and Trans-Regional Connectivity

China is engaged in the region through bilateral as well as multilateral mechanisms to enhance regional and trans-regional connectivity across Central Asia. China's economic rise coincided with the independence of energy rich Central Asia in the neighborhood. While Western companies hurriedly jumped into the energy market of Central Asia for example Chevron and others in 1992-93, China was engaged in making ground for the long-term engagement with the region under the platform of Shanghai Five. China's 'Go West' policy aimed to address the economic disparity in Xinjiang for stability and smooth energy imports from Central Asia and enhanced trade and economic relations. Thus, the stability in Xinjiang province bordering three CARs, energy security with diversification of energy sources, trade and economic relations and access to West Asian and European markets via Central Asia are the main features of China's strategy towards Central Asia. China, for more than a decade, has been the World's largest energy consumer and bulk of its energy is imported from the Middle East via the vulnerable Sea Lanes of Communication. Access to Central Asian hydrocarbons available at the door step therefore remained at the core of China's policy towards the region. China entered into an agreement with Kazakhstan in 1997 to construct an oil pipeline and the 2228 km long Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline became operational in 2006.³⁵ Yet another oil pipeline from Kazakhstan became operational soon after that. Similarly, China constructed Central Asia-China gas pipeline system from Turkmenistan via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Three gas pipelines have been developed under the system and all the three countries feed gas for export to China. During the first ten months of 2023, Turkmenistan remained the top natural gas supplier to China via this pipeline system, exporting a total of \$8.1 b worth gas, Kazakhstan earned \$1.1 b while Uzbekistan's gas exports to China via this pipeline amounted to \$454 million.³⁶ Construction of Line D is also proposed from Turkmenistan via Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to China. China has also invested hugely in the connectivity infrastructure of CARs while has already replaced Russia as the major trading partner of the region. China Central Asia total trade reached to \$89.4 billion in 2023.³⁷ According to Aliya Tshkay, China is firmly binding Central Asia to itself while hinders alternative cooperation through 'binding' and 'wedging' policy in the region.³⁸

China announced its world-famous connectivity project the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Kazakhstan in October 2013.³⁹ Belt is overland connectivity from China via Central Asia to West Asia and Europe while Road is the maritime connectivity from China to global markets. This is also known as the New Silk Road. The Project takes care of 21st century needs by inter-linking trans-continental trade corridors with oceanic trade corridors through various regions. China's President Xi Jinping also suggested to Putin to dock BRI and EEU to avoid any competitive struggle and to ensure smooth trans-regional connectivity.⁴⁰ BRI is purely based on the principles of open regionalism and appealing narratives of shared growth, common prosperity and shared destiny. According to a World Bank report, Kazakhstan stands the most benefiting country from the Belt as five routes of the two main corridors under the Initiative from China to Europe via Central Asia, Caucasasia and West Asia pass through Kazakhstan. The first corridor uses two rail routes, one through Kazakhstan and Russia and the other through Kazakhstan, the Caucasus and Turkey. The second uses three routes, one through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, another one through Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and the third through Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Afghanistan.⁴¹ China's BRI has made Kazakhstan an infrastructure hub for Eurasia, connecting China to Europe. Like other CARs, Kazakhstan is also aligning its national development strategy under the "Nurly Zhol" (bright path) program with the BRI.⁴² These corridors bring equal benefits to China and CARs and therefore they will continue to improve efficiency of these corridors in terms of operation. High speed railway operationalized in 2014, from China reaches to Iran via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in just 14 days time as compare to 45 days from Shanghai port via South China Sea, Malacca Strait and Indian Ocean to Iran.⁴³

35 Shabir Ahmad Khan and Nadeem Akhtar, "China's Policy Towards Central Asia since 1991: An Overview", *Central Asia* No. 69, (Winter 2011)

36 "Central Asia: Is the China-Kyrgyz-Uzbek railway project encountering a red signal?", *Eurasianet*, (December 01, 2023), <https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-is-the-china-kyrgyz-uzbek-railway-project-encountering-a-red-signal> accessed April 20, 2024

37 "China reports robust trade growth with Central Asian states", *China-Central Asia Monitor Eurasianet*, (Feb 2, 2024), <https://eurasianet.org/china-reports-robust-trade-growth-with-central-asian-states>, accessed on April 23, 2024

38 Aliya Tshkay, "China and Geo-economic Dynamics in Central Asia: Balancing Global Strategies, Local Interests and Multiple Partners", (Finnish Institute of International Affairs FIIA, October 2021), https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/wp126_china-and-geo-economic-dynamics-in-central-asia_aliyatskhay-1.pdf accessed 02/05/2024

39 Gaye toward Central Asia, 2013-2024", (The ASAN FORUM, February 28, 2024), <https://theasanforum.org/chinas-strategic-thinking-toward-central-asia-2013-2024/>, accessed on April 22, 2024

40 Christoffersen, "China's Strategic Thinking", 2024

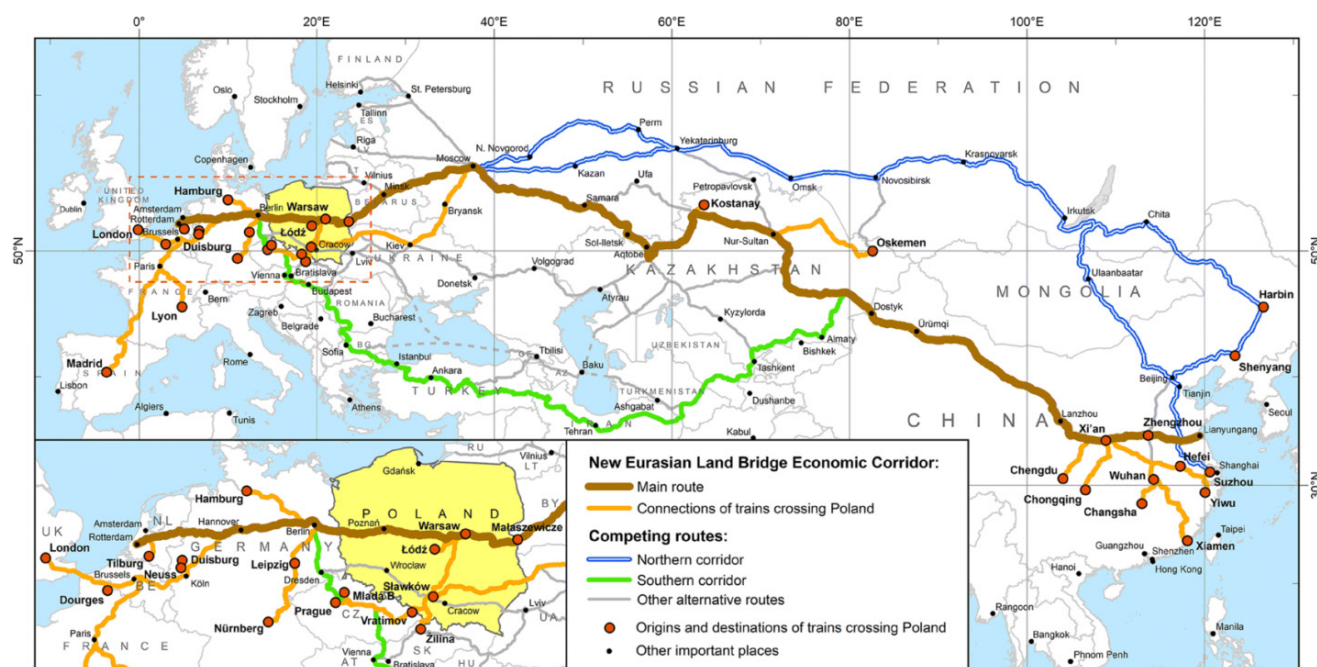
41 "South Caucasus and Central Asia: The Belt and Road Initiative Kazakhstan Country Case Study", (The World Bank, June 2020), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/471731593499938164/pdf/South-Caucasus-and-Central-Asia-The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-Kazakhstan-Country-Case-Study.pdf>, accessed April 202024

42 Alberto Turkstra, "Central Asia in the Age of Connectivity", *EuropeNow*, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/06/04/central-asia-in-the-age-of-connectivity/>, accessed on April 24, 2024

43 Shabir Ahmad Khan, "Sino-Russian Convergence on Eurasian Integration: Understanding the Long-term Engagement", *South Asian Studies Journal*, 36, no.1, (January-June, 2021).

New Eurasia Land Bridge Corridor consists mainly of railways and connects China to Europe via Kazakhstan and Russia as shown in figure 1. Prior to the Russia-Ukraine war, the frequency of freight rail service from Chongqing (China) to Duisburg (Germany) had increased from three times a week in 2013 to daily in 2018.⁴⁴ The China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor links China to West Asia and Europe via Central Asia (figure 1). The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project makes portion of this corridor via Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey to Europe and is part of China's broader regional strategy, including BRI, to enhance regional and trans-regional connectivity.⁴⁵ China on June 06, 2024 finally signed the deal to materialize the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway line project.⁴⁶ This railway line can be connected to the proposed Trans-Afghan railway line from Termiz (Uzbekistan) via Afghanistan to Pakistan. CAREC Program having CAREC Institute based in Urumqi, Xinjiang is also supported by China for developing cross border connectivity infrastructure in Central Asia. CAREC transport corridors from 1 to 6 (details available on carecprogram.org) also interconnect these Eurasian corridors in Central Asia in all directions.

Fig. 2. New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor



Source: Asia Europe Journal, available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341372254/figure/fig2/AS:960359498264601@1605978955234/Course-of-the-New-Eurasian-Land-Bridge-Economic-Corridor-overlaid-on-Eurasia-and.png> accessed on 19 April, 2024

Similarly, the ECO Road Routes interlink CARs with the sea ports of Pakistan and Iran. ECO Road Route 3 starts from Azerbaijan's border with Russian Federation via Baku reaches Tehran up to Bandar Abbas. Its branches also go to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Likewise, the ECO Network Road Routes 4, 5, 6 and 7, according to ECO Road Network Development plan document, connect all CARs from Kazakhstan linking all other Central Asian Republics up to Karachi and Gwadar ports of Pakistan.⁴⁷ China also works on developing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which can be supplemented by Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia corridor through the development of trans-Afghan transportation network comprising of highways, railways, electricity lines and energy pipelines. The World Bank sponsored Khyber Pass Economic Corridor linking Peshawar (Pakistan) via Torkham to

44 Azhgaliyeva and Yelena Kalyuzhnova, ed., "Unlocking Transport Connectivity in the Trans-Caspian Corridor", (Asian Development Bank Institute, 2021), <https://elearning.carecinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/unlocking-transport-connectivity-092921-web.pdf#page=139>, accessed on May 20, 2024

45 Genevieve Donnellon-May, Full steam ahead for the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway? *The Daily Interpreter*, (Lowy Institute, June 01, 2023), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/full-steam-ahead-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway> accessed on 20 April, 2024

46 Liu Zhen, "China reaches deal on Central Asian railway project linking it with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan," *South China Morning Post*, 6 Jun 2024. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3265685/china-reaches-deal-central-asian-railway-project-linking-it-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan>, accessed on June 8, 2024

47 "ECO Road Network Development Plan", (ECO Secretariat, Dec. 2012), retrieved from http://www.eco.int/parameters/eco/modules/cdk/upload/content/general_content/3512/1500291306332k6uqkccfcocgv3qpqr8b2rjem6.pdf, accessed 29/08/2019

Jalalabad (Afghanistan) can serve as an important component connecting Eurasian corridors with South Asia, Indian Ocean and beyond.

China also supports the Middle Corridor (Figure 2); trans-Caspian connectivity via Central Asia and Caucasia to Europe (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route) to link it and countries of the two regions with European markets through various routes. As a result of Chinese investment in trans-regional corridors across Central Asia, the direct freight trains now link China to 12 European countries, importantly bringing down the journey times to less than two weeks.⁴⁸ China has successfully integrated Central Asian region, particularly energy sector, to its huge economy yielding mutual benefits. China's BRI based on the principles of open regionalism and backed by financial resources is most successful and decisive in developing trans-regional integration and connectivity. China and Russia have the leverages of geographical contiguity and historical links in Central Asia in comparison to EU. However CARS seem more interested in diversifying their economic and trade partners as well as in diversifying their trader routes. In this context the economically developed EU is considered as important trade and economic partner.

Fig. 3. The Middle Corridor



Source: <https://qafsam.org/en/2023/05/09/strategic-importance-of-the-middle-corridor/>

5 European Union's Plans of Connectivity

European Union (EU) is an important economic player in Central Asia particularly in Kazakhstan in terms of its trade and investment initiatives. EU has hugely invested in Central Asia as its direct investment reached to Euro (€)62 billion (\$64.48 b) in 2021.⁴⁹ Development aid has made EU an important economic player in the region along with Russia and China. EU development aid supports investment, competitiveness and trade in Central Asia through consultancy, training, regional meetings and sharing best practices targeting small businesses and rural development.⁵⁰ As early as 1993, the EU revived the idea of Silk

48 Martin Russell, "The EU's new Central Asia strategy", (European Parliamentary Research Service, January, 2019), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS_BRI_2019.633162_EN.pdf accessed on April 23, 2024

49 Aliya Tshkay, "China and Geo-economic Dynamics in Central Asia: Balancing Global Strategies, Local Interests and Multiple Partners", (Finnish Institute of International Affairs FIIA, October 2021), https://www.fii.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/wp126_china-and-geo-economic-dynamics-in-central-asia_aliyatskhay-1.pdf accessed 02/05/2024

50 Martin Russell, "The EU's New Central Asia Strategy", op.cited

Road through its Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasia-Asia (TRACECA).⁵¹ The TRACECA transport corridor has taken the form of Middle Corridor (Figure 2) also known as Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR). EU tried to diversify its energy sources and route away from Russia and seemed more interested in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Initially EU along with USA made efforts to develop energy and trade transportation from Central Asia to Europe bypassing Russia in order to provide energy independence to Europe.⁵² In this regard the development of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline was a major success. Similarly Trans-Caspian-gas and oil pipelines were planned where Kazakhstan has to play important role by developing Trans-Caspian oil pipeline from the port of Aktau via barge to the BTC pipeline.⁵³ Kazakhstan shipped 190000 barrels per day in 2006 from its Aktau port across Caspian to Baku for onward delivery by rail to Black Sea port.⁵⁴ Similarly Turkmenistan has to provide gas via undersea pipeline to Sangachal terminal on the eastern coast of Azerbaijan linking with South Caucasus gas pipeline.⁵⁵ It is opined that Trans-Caspian pipelines can resolve energy crises of Europe in the wake of Russia's suspended supply.⁵⁶ These pipelines are components of the multi modal Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian Corridor) which has gained added significance for EU in the post Russia-Ukraine war period.

EU formally defined its strategy towards Central Asia in the year 2007. In 2019, EU adopted a New Central Asia Strategy in the wake of China's and Russia's connectivity and integration plans for the region.⁵⁷ An important development regarding the Middle Corridor has been the completion of Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line in 2017 linking the Caspian port to Turkish rail network.⁵⁸ The multi modal Middle Corridor has become much important for EU particularly in the aftermath of sanctioned Russia and Iran. Currently it links China to Europe via Caspian littoral Kazakhstan, across Caspian, Caucasus and Turkey. However, routes through other CARs and Caspian littoral Turkmenistan can also be developed as branches of the Middle Corridor. Three new Caspian ports in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan became operational simultaneously in second half of 2018. The Middle Corridor links CARs to Europe efficiently and also offers Chinese exports greater access to European markets in terms of reduced time and cost bypassing sanctioned Russia in post Ukraine war period.⁵⁹ EU has allocated €10 b (\$107 b) to develop related infrastructure under its Global Gateway initiative and considers involvement of Middle Corridor in the initiative.⁶⁰ In January 2024, the EU and CARs agreed to expedite the development of Trans-Caspian Corridor and the EU will provide finances of €10 billion through the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.⁶¹ In fact EU can also contribute to greater connectivity under its border management program for Central Asia (BOMCA) by building up soft infrastructure in the region, supporting technical modernization of border installations and training customs personnel as a building block to smooth and efficient cross-border trade.⁶² EU plans to integrate CARs regionally and enhance regional and trans-regional trade through this initiative.

Alberto Rizzi argues that the development of Middle Corridor outweighs the risks of benefiting Russia and China largely due to its potential to deepen European connectivity with Central Asia and stated that "Europeans can rest assured that if they do not throw their weight behind the project, someone else will".⁶³ The Middle Corridor also reduces Central Asia's sole dependence on Russia and China and therefore CARs welcome the development of this corridor to diversify their connectivity options. The container transit via Middle Corridor has grown by 33% during the year 2022 as China routed much of its EU bound export traffic

51 Alberto Turkstra, "Central Asia in the Age of Connectivity", *Europe Now*, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/06/04/central-asia-in-the-age-of-connectivity/>, accessed on April 24, 2024

52 Shabir Ahmad Khan and Saima Ashraf Kayani, "Pipeline Politics in Central Asia: Paradox of Competitive/Cooperative Relations between the United States, Russia and China", *Central Asia Journal* No. 73, (Winter 2013)

53 Leonard L. Coburn, "Central Asia: Pipelines are the New Silk Road", (International association For Energy Economics, 2010): 19, accessed on 01/05/2024.

54 Julian Lee and Yelena Kalyuzhnova, "Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor Infrastructure: Oil and Gas Pipelines", in Dina Azhgaliyeva and Yelena Kalyuzhnova, ed., *Unlocking Transport Connectivity in the Trans-Caspian Corridor*, (Asian Development Bank Institute, 2021), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/743006/adbi-unlocking-transport-connectivity-092921-web.pdf> accessed on May 27, 2024

55 "Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline", nd, https://www.gem.wiki/Trans-Caspian_Gas_Pipeline accessed on 01/05/2024

56 Luke Coffey, "A trans-Caspian gas pipeline could solve Europe's energy crises", *Arab news*, January 11, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2101491>

57 Raj Kumar Sharm, "Great Game vs Small Game: Europe, India and Japan in Central Asia", in Kahif Hassan Khan and Anja Mihr, ed., *Europe-Central Asia Relations New Connectivity Frameworks*, (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature, 2023)

58 Yelena Kalyuzhnova and Richard Pomfret, "Trade Corridors in the Caspian Region: Present and Future", Dina Azhgaliyeva and Yelena Kalyuzhnova, ed., *Unlocking Transport Connectivity in the Trans-Caspian Corridor*, (Asian Development Bank Institute, 2021), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/743006/adbi-unlocking-transport-connectivity-092921-web.pdf> accessed on May 27, 2024

59 Genevieve Donnellon-May, "Beijing's interest in the Middle Corridor", *The Daily Interpreter*, (Lowy Institute, October 26, 2023), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/beijing-s-interest-middle-corridor>, accessed on April 22, 2024

60 Alberto Rizzi, "Risk and reward: Why the EU should develop the Middle Corridor trade route", (European Council on Foreign Relations, April 11, 2024), <https://ecfr.eu/article/risk-and-reward-why-the-eu-should-develop-the-middle-corridor-trade-route/>, accessed on April 24, 2024

61 "Global Gateway: EU and Central Asian countries agree on building blocks to develop the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor", (European Commission, January 30, 2024), https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/global-gateway-eu-and-central-asian-countries-agree-building-blocks-develop-trans-caspian-transport-2024-01-30_en, accessed on May 05, 2024

62 Alberto Turkstra, op. cited

63 Alberto Rizzi, op. cited

away from the Northern route via Russia.⁶⁴ The World Bank report says that policies and investment in the Middle Corridor may triple the freight volumes and halve the travel time by 2030.⁶⁵ The corridor has also played important role in enhancing trade between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Kazakhstan. It is obvious that the development of the Middle Corridor makes core of EU's connectivity strategy toward Central Asia in the post Russia-Ukraine war and consequent European sanctions on Russia. Therefore EU has become more interested in further developing the Middle Corridor linking the energy rich regions of Caucasia and Central Asia along with China. The trans-Caspian pipelines will make essential part of the multi modal Middle Corridor which can be instrumental in resolving Europe's energy crises created by Russia-Ukraine war.

6 Conclusion

Trans-regional connectivity plans of Russia, China and European Union are transforming the topological configuration of logistic and supply chain in Central Asia. Central Asia's land locked nature is being transformed into a land linked one in a fundamentally altered Central Asia's geo-economic landscape. In this century of Eurasian integration, the 'heartland' i.e., Central Asia has been under the world focus for developing trans-continental trade corridors. Developing multiple and multi-dimensional trade, energy and logistic corridors lies at the heart of CARs' connectivity plans. Regionalism has been revived in Central Asia to maximally benefit from the connectivity and integration processes undertaken by global and regional powers. It is through regional and trans-regional integration and connectivity that the natural wealth of Central Asia i.e., geographical location and resource base, translates into inclusive economic growth and development. CARs are able to recalibrate the Eurasian integration process in its 'heartland' in the altered regional circumstances. Central Asian region will benefit from access to regional and global markets as well as from the potential transit trade which will develop across the region linking Eurasian space from East to West and from North to South. It is important to coordinate and align regional and trans-regional connectivity plans undertaken by countries and regional organizations for smooth cost-effective connectivity.

Russia, China and EU have adopted bilateralism and multilateralism to engage CARs and shape trans-regional integration in their own desired direction. Russia-Ukraine war has necessitated and expedited Russia's pivot and stride to Asia. Russia's old plans of access to 'Great Ocean' and South Asia via Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan can be materialized in the altered regional geo-political and geo-economic context on the principles of open regionalism. Russia's plans of regional integration in the framework of EEU based on the principles of close regionalism may become less attractive to regional countries as it imposes restrictions on important economic partners of the region. Russia may therefore review its plans of regional integration in Central Asia under the EEU framework in the altered regional circumstances. Russia's focus has been on developing Greater Eurasian Partnership, however one can conclude that Greater Eurasian Partnership can be developed only on the basis of open regionalism.

China has successfully integrated Central Asian region, particularly energy sector, to its huge economy yielding mutual benefits. China's BRI based on the principles of open regionalism and backed by financial resources is most successful and decisive in developing trans-regional integration and connectivity. China has been developing connectivity infrastructure through bilateral, trilateral and multilateral mechanisms with CARs and with other partners on the basis of open regionalism. EU is considered as an important trade and economic partner by CARs. Northern Eurasian corridor via Russia to Europe has become least attractive for EU. EU has focused on further developing the Middle Corridor linking the energy rich regions of Caucasia and Central Asia along with China. EU itself developed on the principles of close regionalism however it has been developing the Middle Corridor and other connectivity infrastructure on the basis of open regionalism through bilateral, tri-lateral and multilateral project specific cooperation. The trans-Caspian pipelines will make essential part of the multi modal Middle Corridor which can be instrumental in resolving Europe's energy crises created by Russia-Ukraine war.

Opening up of Central Asia in the southern direction via trans-Afghan-Pakistan corridor will give new impetus to the Eurasian corridors by efficiently connecting east-west trans-continental trade corridors with the trans-oceanic corridors in a north-south direction. CARs' thirst and urge for trade and transit with South Asia and beyond provides context for cooperation with Afghanistan. This link between the trans-continental corridors and trans-oceanic corridors is in the interest of CARs and of all powers engaged in the region leading to a win win situation.

64 "Greater consensus on improving the Middle Corridor", (International Institute of Strategic Studies, December 2023), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2023/greater-consensus-on-improving-the-middle-corridor/>, accessed on April 24, 2024

65 "Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030", (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023), <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/40626>, accessed on April 24, 2024

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