

# China springs a BRI surprise on US

by M. K. Bhadrakumar,\* India



M. K. Bhadrakumar  
(Photo ma)

*The report of the death of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was an exaggeration, after all. Within days of the US President Joe Biden's acerbic remark during an interview last week with the "Time" magazine that the BRI has "become a nuisance*

*graveyard initiative," a trilateral intergovernmental agreement<sup>1</sup> to commence construction work on the "China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan" (CKU) railway project was signed in Beijing on Thursday.*

*Chinese President Xi Jinping offered congratulations<sup>2</sup> on the trilateral intergovernmental agreement with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and described the CKU as "a strategic project for China's connectivity with Central Asia, symbolising the three nations' collaborative efforts under the Belt and Road Initiative." Xi hailed the agreement as "a show of determination".*

The idea of such a railway project was first proposed by Uzbekistan in 1996 but it languished for over a quarter century thereafter due to the geopolitical and alliance changes in Central Asia, including reservations reportedly on the part of Moscow and Astana. China, which could unilaterally finance CKU, also lost interest and prioritised its ties with Russia and Kazakhstan.

Principally, the failure of the three countries to reach a consensus on the railway's route became a vexed issue with China and Uzbekistan favouring a southern route, which would represent the shorter transit route to Europe and West Asia, while Bishkek insisted on the northern route—a longer passage that would connect



*China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed an intergovernmental agreement to begin construction of a railway link connecting Xinjiang with Fergana Valley, Beijing, June 6, 2024. (Picture ma)*

Kyrgyzstan's northern and southern regions and boost its economy.

However, the moribund project took new life following the changing geopolitics of Central Asia, as intra-regional integration processes began gaining traction, the rethink in Moscow in favour of strengthening regional connectivity in the conditions under western sanctions, etc.

Indeed, with improved railway connectivity, it is not only the connection between China and the two Central Asian countries along the route that will be strengthened, but the interconnectivity in Central Asian region as well.

However, in a curious reversal of roles, as Central Asia turned into a turf of the great game lately between the US on one side and Russia and China on the other, Washington began taking a dim view of the prospect of such a project to connect the railway systems of China potentially to the European railway network through Turkmenistan, Iran, and Türkiye.

Suffice to say, in the past two years, with renewed interest, China began viewing the 523 km long railway line – 213 km in China, 260 km in Kyrgyzstan, and 50 km in Uzbekistan – optimistically as a shorter route from China to Europe and West Asia than the existing 900 km corridor that passes through the Trans-Siberian Railway in Russia, which lacks modern infrastructure with only a single non-electrified track that makes it incapable of transiting Chinese goods to Europe, and also mitigate the economic costs associated with Western sanctions on Russia.

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Above all, the growing geopolitical tensions over the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea have begun posing serious concern and top priority for Beijing to establish alternate land routes to the European market.

Without doubt, CKU has huge potential in geopolitical, geo-strategic and geo-economic terms. Succinctly put, it will complete the southern passage of the *New Eurasian Land Bridge*, shaping a convenient transport path from East and South-east Asia to Central and Western Asia, Northern Africa and Europe.

Specifically, apart from integrating Central Asian region with the wider transportation network, and connect it better to the global market, Beijing envisages that CKU could be further extended to other countries in future, such as Afghanistan.

In fact, speaking at the signing ceremony on Thursday alongside Xi and Kyrgyz President *Sadyr Japarov*, President of Uzbekistan *Shavkat Mirziyoyev* underscored that “This road will allow our countries to enter the wide markets of South Asia and the Middle East through the promising Trans-Afghan Corridor.”

Of course, the construction of CKU, which is expected to start later this year at a cost of \$8 billion, poses formidable challenges, being a trans-national project to be executed by a joint venture of between three countries in the BOT format. No doubt, CKU involves daunting engineering skills with its path traversing the challenging terrain of western China and Kyrgyzstan at altitudes ranging from 2,000–3,500 meters and involving the construction of more than fifty tunnels and ninety bridges through Kyrgyzstan's highest mountains.

But China has vast experience and expertise in pulling it off. Xi said the agreement signed in Beijing provided a “solid legal foundation” for the railway's construction and it transformed the project “from a vision to a reality”.

The project feasibility study is currently being updated, following the completion of field surveys by Chinese engineers in December. *Zhu Yongbiao*, a professor at the Research Centre for the Belt and Road of Lanzhou University, told “Global Times” that construction techniques and financing pose no problems.

The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson stated at the *daily press briefing*<sup>3</sup> in Beijing on Friday [7 June], “This important milestone was



achieved thanks to the tremendous efforts of different departments and experts, as well as the personal attention and support from the leaders of the three countries.”

The spokesperson flagged that CKU is “another testament to the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative and demonstrates the popularity of the vision for a community with a shared future for mankind in Central Asia.”

The CKU originates from the western Chinese hub of Kashgar to the Uzbek city of Andijan in Ferghana Valley, passing through Torugart, Makmal and Jalalabad. It connects the Soviet-era railway grid in Uzbekistan leading to Termez on the Amu Darya bordering Mazar-i-Sharif city in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan announced last month [May] that the Trans-Afghan railway project is anticipated to be completed by the end of 2027, connecting Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, “facilitating crucial trade routes and bolstering regional connectivity”. Interestingly, the *Trans-Afghan Railway project* has also figured in the Chinese-Pakistani documents in the past.

The *joint statement*<sup>4</sup> issued after Pakistani Prime Minister *Shehbaz Sharif's* visit to China last week vowed to make the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor “an exemplary project of high-quality building of Belt and Road cooperation ... (and) recognised the significance of Gwadar Port as an important node in cross-regional connectivity” while also agreeing to play a constructive role “in helping Afghanistan to achieve stable development and integrate into the international community”.

Notably, in the first official recognition of the interim Taliban government by a major nation, Xi Jinping welcomed *Asadullah Bilal Karimi*, the Taliban-appointed Afghan ambassador, in a

formal ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in January, along with envoys from Cuba, Iran, Pakistan and 38 other countries, who also presented their credentials.

It is entirely conceivable that the time has come for the realisation of the century-old dream of a Trans-Afghan railway. Qatar reportedly has shows interest in funding the project. At a *meeting in Kazan in February*<sup>5</sup> with Russian President *Vladimir Putin*, Mirziyoyev had disclosed that the Russian side had expressed interest in participating in the development of the technical justification for the project and its promotion. The Russian Deputy Prime Minister for Transport *Vitaly Savelyev* who had earlier visited Tashkent, attended the meeting in Kazan.

Certainly, the restoration of full relationship between Moscow and Kabul, which is imminent, will help speed up matters.

The CKU becomes the lodestar in a phenomenal transformation of regional connectivity in Central Asia and far-flung regions surrounding it. In the current international climate, this has profound geopolitical implications for the Russian-Chinese joint/coordinated efforts to push back the US' dual containment strategy.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/china-springs-a-bri-surprise-on-us/>, 10 June 2024

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-china-agreement-railway-project/32983143.html>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202406/07/WS666249d1a31082fc043cb558\\_1.html](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202406/07/WS666249d1a31082fc043cb558_1.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://english.news.cn/20240607/c302f95b1834440786261fed726c8bcf/c.html>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/202406/t20240609\\_11415903.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202406/t20240609_11415903.html)

<sup>5</sup> <https://tashkenttimes.uz/national/12524-mirziyoyev-putin-hold-talks-3>