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CORRIDORS OF INFLUENCE: THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EURASIAN ORDER

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Abstract: This article examines how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reshaped Eurasian international order between 2013 and 2025. Combining International Relations and International Political Economy, it applies a qualitative case-study design to China's engagement with Central Asia, BRI–EAEU coordination, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the China–Central Asia mechanism, and trans-Eurasian transport corridors. International order is assessed across three dimensions: power, institutional rules, and political norms. The findings show that the BRI strengthened China's geo-economic centrality through trade, development finance, and infrastructure, while producing institutional layering rather than replacing Russian-led or multilateral arrangements. Normative convergence around sovereignty, non-interference, development, and multipolarity remained selective and was shaped by Central Asian governments' interests. The article argues that the emerging configuration is a hybrid Eurasian order: increasingly China-centred economically, institutionally plural, and strategically contested. It demonstrates that order can evolve incrementally through state-directed capital and connectivity without hegemonic war or wholesale replacement of existing institutions.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; Eurasian order; China; Central Asia; geo-economics; institutional layering; regionalism; International Political Economy.

Introduction.

Since its launch in Kazakhstan in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has developed from a connectivity programme into a major instrument of Chinese economic statecraft. Its importance extends beyond the construction of railways, highways, pipelines, and logistics centres. The initiative connects state-directed finance, outward investment, industrial policy, and diplomatic coordination within a framework that enables Beijing to influence the economic and institutional environment of participating states (Che, 2019, pp. 172–186; Ho, 2021, pp. 119–138). In Eurasia, where infrastructure gaps coexist with overlapping Russian, Chinese, European, and local interests, the BRI has therefore become part of a broader contest over the organisation of regional political and economic relations.

The central analytical problem is whether these developments constitute a transformation of international order. International order should not be equated automatically with either American primacy or the liberal international order. At its most basic level, order denotes relatively stable and predictable patterns of interaction, although such patterns may be organised through different configurations of power, rules, institutions, and legitimising principles (Lascurettes & Poznansky, 2021, pp. 2–5). This distinction challenges the binary portrayal of China as either a status quo power socialised into existing institutions or a revisionist power seeking their wholesale replacement. The BRI may preserve some elements of the existing order while modifying others.

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Eurasia provides a particularly revealing setting in which to investigate this process. Central Asian states occupy a strategic position between Chinese markets, Russian-led institutions, European transport networks, and routes extending toward the Middle East. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) provides a formal regulatory framework led by Russia, while the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the China–Central Asia mechanism facilitate security and political coordination. Rather than simply displacing these structures, the BRI intersects with them through institutional layering, selective coordination, and negotiated accommodation (Kaczmarski, 2017b; Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020). Meanwhile, regional governments retain agency by diversifying partnerships, renegotiating projects, and using competing connectivity initiatives to pursue national development priorities.

This article asks: **How did the BRI reshape Eurasian international order between 2013 and 2025 at the levels of power, institutional rules, and political norms?** Drawing on International Relations and International Political Economy, it applies a theory-guided qualitative analysis to four empirical areas: BRI engagement in Central Asia, BRI–EAEU coordination, the evolving role of the SCO, and trans-Eurasian transport corridors. Order transformation is identified through sustained changes in economic influence, institutionalised interaction, and regional acceptance of new practices rather than through infrastructure construction alone.

The article argues that the BRI is producing an uneven and selective transformation. It has strengthened China's geo-economic position and introduced new mechanisms of economic coordination without establishing an exclusive Chinese regional hierarchy. Its effects are strongest in the economic and institutional dimensions, while normative and security transformation remains limited. The emerging outcome is consequently a hybrid Eurasian order: increasingly centred on Chinese connectivity and finance, but constrained by Russian interests, existing international institutions, and the strategic agency of Central Asian states.

Literature review.

Scholarship on international order provides the conceptual starting point for analysing the BRI as more than an infrastructure programme. Lascurettes and Poznansky (2021, pp. 2–5) define international order at its minimum as stable and predictable patterns of interaction. They distinguish between thin and thick, position-centred and rule-centred, regional and global, and issue-specific and multi-issue orders. This approach is useful because it does not assume that every international order must be liberal, global, or created by a single hegemonic power. He and Feng (2020, pp. 18–22) offer a more detailed framework by separating order into power-, rule-, and norm-based levels across economic, political, and security domains. Consequently, a redistribution of economic influence does not necessarily constitute a complete transformation of international order. Order change may occur unevenly: institutions can be modified while established security arrangements or constitutive norms remain intact.

This distinction is particularly important in the debate over China's international role. One strand of scholarship portrays China as a beneficiary of the existing order whose participation in institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization encourages gradual socialisation. A competing position interprets China's growing material capabilities and dissatisfaction with Western dominance as evidence of revisionist intentions. Both approaches tend to treat support for or opposition to international order as a binary choice. Role-theoretical research offers a more differentiated interpretation. Harnisch et al. (2016) demonstrate that China performs multiple

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international roles shaped by domestic expectations, historical identity, and interactions with foreign actors. China may therefore support established arrangements in one policy domain while attempting to modify them in another. Similarly, Chan et al. (2021, pp. 114–115) conceptualise contemporary revisionism as a spectrum that includes non-military strategies of institutional reform. Their analysis suggests that China is better understood as a selective revisionist than as a state seeking the immediate destruction of the existing order.

The literature on the BRI translates this theoretical debate into the language of International Political Economy. Che (2019, pp. 29–37) conceptualises the Chinese state simultaneously as planner, market participant, and regulator. This configuration allows formally commercial actors, including state-owned enterprises and policy banks, to advance broader national objectives. Her analysis of outward investment further demonstrates how administrative guidance, public finance, and corporate activity interact in China's international economic policy (Che, 2019, pp. 172–186). Ho (2021, pp. 119–138) accordingly interprets the BRI as economic statecraft through which material resources are connected to political influence and narratives of Chinese leadership. Callahan (2016, pp. 1–4) advances a stronger argument, presenting the BRI as an attempt to reconstruct Eurasian order around Chinese connectivity, governance concepts, and normative preferences. However, this interpretation relies heavily on official and semi-official discourse. It risks treating Beijing's strategic ambition as equivalent to an achieved regional outcome. Financial resources and infrastructure ownership may produce leverage, but they do not automatically create legitimate authority or accepted regional rules.

Research on Eurasian regionalism further complicates China-centred interpretations. Kaczmarski (2017a) demonstrates that the BRI and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union employ contrasting models of influence. The EAEU prioritises formal membership, regulatory harmonisation, and a geographically bounded sphere, whereas the BRI relies on flexible participation, bilateral agreements, and transregional economic networks. His comparative study of non-Western regionalism argues that Russia generally approaches regional organisation as protection from external pressures, while China uses regional connectivity to deepen engagement with globalisation. These differences reduce the likelihood of a direct institutional confrontation but also prevent the two projects from merging into a coherent Eurasian system.

Studies incorporating regional perspectives show that outcomes are negotiated rather than imposed by China or Russia. Shakhanova and Garlick (2020) find that formal BRI–EAEU coordination coexists with divergent Russian and Kazakh interpretations of the "Greater Eurasian Partnership." While Kazakh elites often emphasise the practical value of Chinese connectivity, Russian elites remain concerned about the erosion of Moscow's normative influence. Vakulchuk and Overland (2019) similarly show that Central Asian perceptions of China are rooted in bilateral relationships established before the BRI. The initiative increased public discussion of China but did not produce a uniform regional shift in attitudes. Morris (2024) consequently rejects a simplified "new Great Game" framework. His locally grounded analysis shows that BRI projects can diversify connectivity and reduce dependence on Russia while simultaneously generating political, financial, and implementation risks.

Three limitations therefore remain in the literature. First, studies frequently infer order transformation from the scale of Chinese projects without demonstrating changes in sustained regional practices. Second, great-power-centred analyses understate the agency of Central Asian governments. Third, material and normative effects are often examined separately. This article addresses these limitations by combining IR theories of order with IPE analysis of state-directed finance,

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infrastructure, and institutional bargaining. Rather than asking whether China has created a wholly new Eurasian order, it identifies which power relations, rules, and norms have changed, through what mechanisms, and under what constraints.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theory-guided case-study design to examine how the Belt and Road Initiative influenced Eurasian international order between September 2013 and December 2025; sources published through June 2026 are used only to report final-year outcomes. A case-study approach is appropriate because the relationship between Chinese economic engagement and regional order cannot be isolated from its institutional, political, and geographical context (Yin, 2018, pp. 15–18). The principal unit of analysis is not an individual infrastructure project but a sustained pattern of interstate interaction created or modified through the BRI. The study therefore distinguishes between the construction of physical infrastructure and the formation of an international order characterised by regularity, institutionalisation, and predictable political behaviour.

Eurasia is treated as a single regional case containing four embedded areas of analysis: China's economic engagement with Central Asia; coordination between the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union; the development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the China–Central Asia mechanism; and trans-Eurasian transport corridors. Central Asia constitutes the empirical core because it connects China with Russia, Europe, the Caspian region, and the Middle East. Examining multiple embedded areas permits a structured comparison of whether China's influence produces similar outcomes across economic, political, and security domains (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 67–72).

The evidence is drawn from three categories of documents. The first comprises primary sources: Chinese BRI and China–Central Asia documents, SCO declarations, EEC agreements and communiqués, a Russian–Chinese joint statement, and an official Uzbek account of regional priorities. The second includes project, trade, investment, and transport data from the World Bank, the Eurasian Economic Commission, the OSCE Academy's regional project database, and official Chinese reporting. The third consists of peer-reviewed articles, academic books, and research reports. Documents were selected for direct relevance, identifiable institutional authorship, methodological transparency, and traceability. Unverifiable investment estimates and media claims without an identifiable primary basis were excluded. This design balances official sources with independent scholarship while acknowledging that comparable project-level financing data remain limited.

The analytical framework adapts He and Feng's (2020, pp. 18–22) distinction between power-, rule-, and norm-based dimensions of international order. Power transformation refers to durable changes in economic dependence, access to finance, control over strategic infrastructure, and agenda-setting capacity. Rule transformation concerns the creation of repeated consultation mechanisms, formal agreements, coordination procedures, or practices that modify how regional decisions are made. Normative transformation is identified through the acceptance or contestation of principles promoted in BRI diplomacy, including sovereignty, non-interference, development-centred cooperation, and multipolarity. These indicators are summarised in Table 1.

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Table 1

Operationalisation of Eurasian Order Transformation

Dimension	Principal mechanism	Empirical indicators	Main empirical areas
Power	Geo-economic leverage	Trade dependence, investment, finance, strategic infrastructure, and agenda-setting	Central Asia and transport corridors
Rules	Institutional layering	Agreements, summits, coordination procedures, and organisational overlap	BRI–EAEU, SCO, and China–Central Asia
Norms	Political legitimation	Acceptance or contestation of sovereignty, non-interference, development-first cooperation, and multipolarity	Official documents and regional responses

Note. Author's operationalisation based on He and Feng (2020) and Lascurettes and Poznansky (2021).

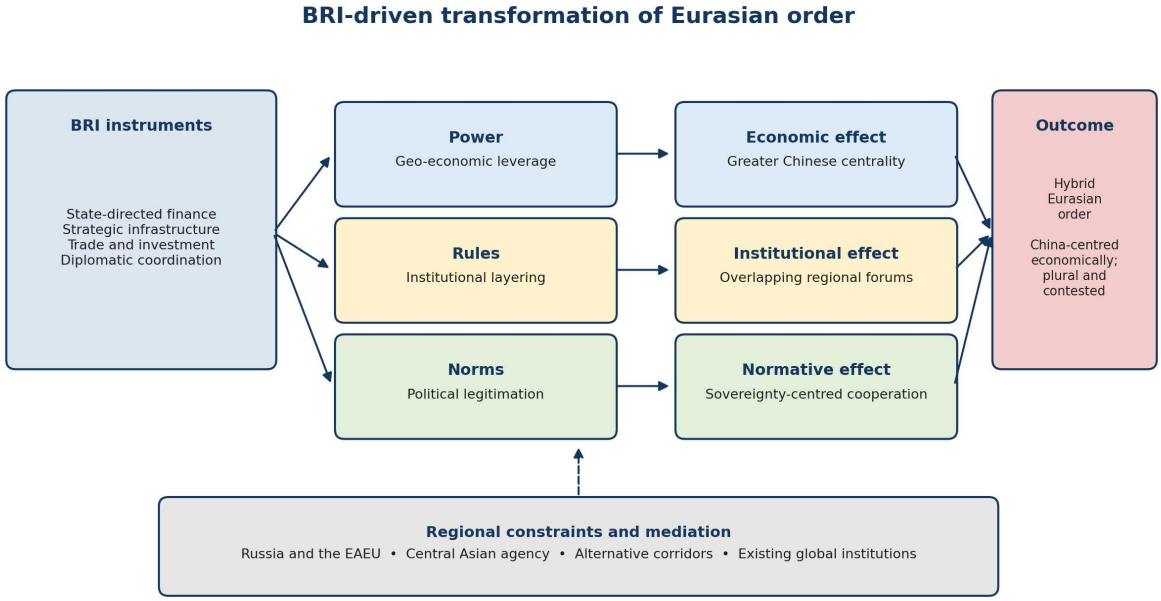
Document analysis proceeds in three stages. First, a chronological map traces major developments from the BRI's launch in 2013 to the end of 2025. Second, documents are coded according to the power, rules, and norms categories through qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Third, the four embedded areas are compared to identify whether Chinese resources generated institutionalised practices and whether regional actors accepted, modified, or resisted those practices. An isolated railway, loan, or declaration is not treated as evidence of order transformation unless it contributes to a durable and repeated pattern of interaction.

The analysis also considers alternative explanations, including pre-existing infrastructure demand, Russia's changing regional position after 2022, and the multi-vector strategies of Central Asian governments. Triangulation across Chinese, Russian, EEC, SCO, Uzbek, and international sources reduces dependence on a single official narrative (Bowen, 2009). Nevertheless, limited financing transparency and the absence of original interviews restrict causal claims. The findings therefore identify plausible mechanisms and durable patterns rather than asserting that the BRI alone caused every observed change. Figure 1 summarises this analytical logic.

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Figure 1

From BRI Instruments to a Hybrid Eurasian Order



Note. Author's illustration.

Findings

The evidence produces five findings. The BRI strengthened China's geo-economic position in Central Asia; China and Russia accommodated one another through limited BRI–EAEU coordination; the SCO and China–Central Asia mechanism increased institutional density; transport corridors multiplied rather than forming a single China-controlled network; and Central Asian governments retained meaningful bargaining agency. Together, these outcomes indicate order transformation without institutional replacement.

Geo-economic Redistribution in Central Asia

China's economic centrality increased substantially during the study period. Its trade with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan reached $94.8 billion in 2024 and $106.3 billion in 2025, an annual increase of approximately 12 per cent (Xinhua, 2026). Chinese official sources also reported cumulative investment exceeding $30 billion across the five states by 2025 (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2025). Because official investment statistics may combine equity, lending, and construction contracts, the precise stock should be treated cautiously. The directional change is nevertheless clear: China became a principal source of trade, capital, and infrastructure provision.

This shift did not amount to a direct exchange of infrastructure for political control. Aminjonov et al. (2019) catalogued 51 China-associated road and railway projects in Central Asia with reported funding of approximately $23.5 billion. Most were located within national territories rather than constituting an integrated regional network, and several predated the BRI before being incorporated into its policy framework. Chinese finance therefore expanded governments' development options and

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connected bilateral projects to a wider Eurasian narrative, but dependence varied. Kazakhstan's larger economy and access to Russian, Caspian, and European routes afforded greater bargaining capacity than that of Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan.

The distribution of gains also depended on project function and domestic capacity. Transit infrastructure could strengthen national bargaining power when it connected several markets, whereas a single bilateral asset could increase dependence on one financier, contractor, or export destination. This distinction helps explain why project scale alone is an inadequate indicator of order transformation. What mattered was whether infrastructure altered a government's alternatives, created repeated coordination with Chinese institutions, or shifted control over strategic nodes. In Central Asia, the evidence was mixed: Chinese capital increased the range of projects that governments could pursue, but implementation remained embedded in national regulation, local bargaining, and pre-existing transport systems. The BRI consequently changed the regional opportunity structure more consistently than it changed formal political authority.

China–Russia Accommodation and BRI–EAEU Coordination

China and Russia managed overlapping regional ambitions through selective accommodation. Their institutional preferences remained different: the EAEU relied on formal membership, territorial scope, and regulatory harmonisation, whereas the BRI operated through flexible bilateral agreements and transregional networks (Kaczmarski, 2017a, 2017b). Rather than resolving this divergence, Moscow and Beijing politically endorsed coordination. Their 2022 joint statement reaffirmed efforts to connect EAEU development plans with the BRI (President of Russia, 2022). This commitment reduced the risk of open institutional rivalry while leaving authority divided.

The resulting legal arrangements demonstrate the limits of coordination. The Agreement on Economic and Trade Cooperation between China, the EAEU, and its member states was signed on 17 May 2018 and entered into force on 25 October 2019. It was not a free-trade agreement and did not reduce customs tariffs. Instead, it created consultation procedures in customs cooperation, technical regulation, competition, government procurement, electronic commerce, and trade facilitation. In February 2023, the joint commission adopted a roadmap covering transport-corridor digitalisation, trade-policy dialogue, and joint research (Eurasian Economic Commission [EEC], n.d.). China–EAEU trade reached approximately $280 billion in 2024, more than twice its 2019 level (EEC, 2025). This expansion also reflected Russia's post-2022 economic reorientation; it cannot be attributed to the agreement or the BRI alone.

The outcome was institutional layering. Russia retained influence through the EAEU's customs and regulatory competences and its security role, while China supplied markets, finance, and connectivity. Beijing accepted the EAEU as an interlocutor but continued to negotiate most projects bilaterally. Moscow accommodated China's economic presence while promoting the Greater Eurasian Partnership. Cooperation therefore managed asymmetry without producing a unified Sino-Russian condominium or transferring regional authority to Beijing (Shakhanova & Garlick, 2020).

Russian accommodation should not be interpreted as acceptance of Chinese hierarchy. The EAEU agreement preserved collective regulatory procedures, and the SCO continued to give Moscow a seat in decisions involving China and Central Asia. At the same time, China's larger economic resources created a growing functional asymmetry: Beijing increasingly shaped the finance and connectivity agenda, while Russia retained greater influence in security relationships and inherited institutional networks. The two powers therefore divided functions without formally agreeing on

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exclusive spheres. This arrangement was resilient because it allowed both governments to present cooperation as multipolarity, yet it remained potentially contested whenever Chinese bilateral initiatives bypassed EAEU procedures or created forums—such as China–Central Asia—in which Russia was absent.

The SCO and the China–Central Asia Mechanism

The SCO provided an established sovereignty-centred forum for China, Russia, and Central Asian governments. Its flexible design enabled consultation on security, transport, energy, and development, but weak supranational authority constrained implementation (Maduz, 2018). The 2024 Astana Declaration described Central Asia as the organisation's core, endorsed cooperation in trade, finance, investment, transport, energy, and digitalisation, and reaffirmed sovereign equality, territorial integrity, non-interference, and national control of information space. Proposals for an SCO development bank and funds nevertheless remained non-operational (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation [SCO], 2024). The SCO institutionalised consultation more effectively than economic integration.

The separate China–Central Asia mechanism increased institutional density after 2023. At the inaugural Xi'an Summit, China and the five Central Asian states adopted a declaration, established biennial summits, and agreed to create a permanent secretariat (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [MFAPRC], 2023). The second summit in Astana in June 2025 produced a treaty on permanent good-neighbourliness, friendship, and cooperation, twelve sectoral documents, and specialised centres for poverty reduction, education, desertification control, and trade facilitation (MFAPRC, 2025). Uzbekistan used the forum to propose a regional development fund, industrial-standardisation centre, and common transport planning (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). This evidence shows that agenda-setting was negotiated, not simply imposed by Beijing.

Unlike the SCO, the six-state mechanism excludes Russia, India, Pakistan, and Iran and gives Beijing a focused platform for regional diplomacy. Yet the 2025 documents did not establish an alliance, supranational authority, or binding economic union. They combined support for the BRI and multipolarity with commitments to national sovereignty, the United Nations system, and nationally chosen development paths. The mechanism therefore supplemented the SCO and existing bilateral relations rather than replacing them.

Transport Corridors and the Reorganisation of Economic Space

Transport infrastructure produced the most visible spatial effects. Kazakhstan's crossings at Dostyk and Khorgos connected Chinese railways with northern routes through Russia and Belarus. The Middle Corridor offered an alternative through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. Its development involved regional governments and international financial institutions, not China alone. The World Bank (2023) found that traffic rose in 2022 but subsequently exposed border delays, repeated transshipment, fragmented tariffs, and weak coordination. With coordinated reform and investment, Caspian traffic could reach 11 million tonnes by 2030; even then, less than 40 per cent would be intercontinental and the corridor would carry approximately 1 per cent of EU–China trade. Its principal value is therefore regional diversification rather than replacement of maritime or northern routes.

The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway expanded long-term route options. After decades of negotiation, the governments signed an intergovernmental agreement in June 2024 and held a commencement ceremony in December. The planned route connects Kashgar with the Torugart Pass,

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Jalal-Abad, and Andijan, while a trilateral joint venture is responsible for the Kyrgyz section (Xinhua, 2024). The line was not operational by the end of 2025 and cannot yet demonstrate completed order transformation. Meanwhile, China–Europe Railway Express services made 20,022 journeys in 2025, many using Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus (Xinhua, 2026). Eurasian connectivity consequently evolved through route multiplication: alternative corridors expanded, but Russia-linked routes remained commercially significant.

Regional Agency and the Limits of Chinese Influence

Central Asian governments used Chinese resources to pursue national diversification strategies. Kazakhstan simultaneously participated in the EAEU, supported the BRI, and developed the Middle Corridor. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan promoted the trilateral railway to reduce dependence on routes through Kazakhstan and Russia. Uzbekistan's 2025 proposals for common standards, a development fund, and coordinated corridor planning further demonstrate that regional states sought to shape the institutional content of cooperation (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025).

Acceptance also remained conditional. Vakulchuk and Overland (2019) found that BRI engagement did not erase perceptions of China formed before 2013. Morris (2024) similarly identifies economic opportunities alongside financial, environmental, political, and implementation risks. By 2025, China had become indispensable to Eurasian political economy, but economic centrality did not automatically generate hegemony. The strongest transformation occurred in economic capabilities and connectivity; rule change was incremental; and normative convergence remained negotiated by Russia, Central Asian states, and existing institutions.

Discussion

The findings answer the research question by showing a selective and evolutionary transformation of Eurasian order rather than a systemic transition. Change was strongest in economic power, moderate in institutional rules, and limited in political norms and security. China did not displace Russia from regional security affairs or replace the EAEU, SCO, World Bank, and established commercial regimes. Instead, the BRI altered the relative weight of actors and the mechanisms through which regional bargaining occurs. This uneven pattern supports the view that international order can change across particular issue areas without simultaneous replacement of its entire power structure or normative foundation (Lascurettes & Poznansky, 2021).

From an International Political Economy perspective, the principal change is China's capacity to connect state-directed capital with regional infrastructure demand. Policy banks, state-owned enterprises, and government institutions operate as components of an economic system in which the state acts simultaneously as planner, regulator, and market participant (Che, 2019). This configuration increased China's trade centrality and agenda-setting capacity. Yet infrastructure created durable leverage only where partner governments lacked alternative finance or transport routes. The Middle Corridor, EAEU regulation, and continued Russian and multilateral involvement preserved bargaining alternatives for regional states.

Institutionally, the BRI generated layering rather than displacement. BRI–EAEU coordination placed Chinese connectivity beside a Russian-led regulatory framework without transferring formal authority to Beijing. The China–Central Asia mechanism added a compact diplomatic platform alongside the wider SCO. This plural architecture permits China and Russia to cooperate without resolving competing preferences over regional leadership. It also confirms Kaczmarski's (2017a)

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distinction between China's flexible network-based influence and Russia's more formal, geographically bounded regionalism. The new forums increased consultation and agenda-setting but stopped short of supranational governance.

Normative change was more qualified. Sovereignty, non-interference, development, and multipolarity correspond with Chinese foreign-policy preferences, but Central Asian governments support them because they protect domestic autonomy and limit external conditionality. These norms are therefore co-produced through an alignment of Chinese diplomacy and regional regime interests. This finding supports role-theoretical arguments that China's international position is shaped through interaction between its own expectations and those of partner states (Harnisch et al., 2016), rather than being transmitted unilaterally.

Alternative explanations limit causal claims. Central Asia's infrastructure deficit preceded 2013; Russia's rupture with Western states after 2022 accelerated trade reorientation; and regional governments actively incorporated BRI projects into national multi-vector policies. These factors do not make the BRI irrelevant. They identify the conditions under which Chinese resources gained influence and explain why outcomes varied across institutions and corridors. The argument is therefore conditional: BRI instruments were most consequential when they supplied a scarce resource, connected previously fragmented markets, and became embedded in repeated intergovernmental procedures. Where governments retained credible alternatives or institutions preserved regulatory authority, Chinese economic weight produced bargaining leverage but not political command.

The resulting configuration is best described as a hybrid Eurasian order: increasingly China-centred in trade and infrastructure, institutionally plural, normatively sovereignty-centred, and strategically contested. This interpretation is consistent with selective revisionism: China modifies particular practices and institutions without rejecting the wider international system (Chan et al., 2021). The BRI's significance lies not in a completed alternative order but in the gradual reorganisation of Eurasian connectivity, bargaining power, and regional coordination.

Conclusion.

This article examined how the BRI reshaped Eurasian international order between 2013 and 2025 through changes in power, institutional rules, and political norms. It finds that the BRI did not create an alternative to the existing order. Instead, it produced an uneven and evolutionary transformation concentrated in trade, development finance, and transport connectivity.

Three conclusions follow. First, China became an indispensable geo-economic actor in Central Asia, but economic centrality did not translate automatically into regional hegemony. Second, cooperation with the EAEU, SCO, and China–Central Asia mechanism generated institutional layering rather than the displacement of Russian-led or multilateral arrangements. Third, sovereignty, non-interference, development, and multipolarity gained prominence, although Central Asian governments accepted these principles selectively and in accordance with their interests.

The emerging arrangement is therefore best understood as a hybrid Eurasian order: increasingly China-centred economically, institutionally plural, and strategically contested. This conclusion contributes to IR by showing that order transformation can occur without hegemonic war or wholesale institutional replacement. It contributes to IPE by demonstrating how state-directed capital and infrastructure can reorganise regional bargaining relationships. Nevertheless, financing opacity and the

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absence of interviews limit the analysis. Future research should examine project-level negotiations and the long-term operation of emerging transport corridors.

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