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THE CHINA-KYRGYZSTAN-UZBEKISTAN RAILWAY INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECT: GEO-ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE AND CONSTRUCTION PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This article analyzes the economic, geopolitical, and engineering dimensions of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway project, a development of strategic importance for the Central Asian region. It examines the project's historical formation, financing structure, route characteristics, and the practical results achieved by 2026. The study concludes with an assessment of the project's anticipated impact on Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and the broader Eurasian transport system.

Keywords: China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, Belt and Road Initiative, transport corridor, Central Asian integration, transcontinental transit, infrastructure investment.

1. Introduction

The lack of direct sea access and the limited capacity of existing transport corridors remain among the most serious obstacles to regional economic development for the countries of Central Asia. One of the largest projects aimed at addressing this challenge is a new railway line connecting the territories of China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Although the project's concept was first discussed in the late 1990s, it entered its practical implementation phase only in the mid-2020s.

The project's relevance stems from several factors. First, geopolitical instability surrounding existing Eurasian transport routes - particularly those passing through Russian territory - has prompted a search for alternative pathways. Second, this route represents the shortest path from China's western regions (the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) to markets in Central Asia and beyond. Third, the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have designated the expansion of transport-transit capacity as a priority in their national development strategies.

2. Historical Development of the Project

The idea of a China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway was first raised in the late 1990s, but the project received insufficient attention at the time. After China launched its global Belt and Road Initiative in the early 2000s, the project acquired new geo-economic significance. In 2020, border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic further heightened the urgency of diversifying transit routes for reasons of food and trade security.

Following negotiations at the level of national leaders in February 2022, the project moved into its practical phase. A joint project office to coordinate construction opened in Bishkek on 18 January 2023, and in May 2023 a Chinese design and research institute completed the project's feasibility study.

The project's most significant milestone occurred in Beijing on 6 June 2024, when the governments of the three countries signed a formal agreement on jointly advancing the railway's construction. At the signing ceremony, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that the railway's construction reflects a strategic decision made by the three governments to promote regional connectivity, prosperity, and stability, while Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov noted that the project would strengthen Kyrgyzstan's status as a transport hub and create substantial employment. In September 2024, the trilateral joint venture - the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway Company LLC - was established in Bishkek.

On 27 December 2024, an official groundbreaking ceremony was held in the village of Tash-Kumyr in Kyrgyzstan's Jalal-Abad region, marking the symbolic start of construction. On 29 April

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2025, a separate ceremony marked the start of main construction works on the project's most complex elements - bridges and tunnels.

3. Route and Engineering Characteristics

After prolonged discussion, a 'northern' route through Kyrgyz territory was selected: Kashgar (the terminus of China's railway network in southern Xinjiang) - the Torugart border crossing - the Arpa Valley - Kosh-Debe - Makmal - the city of Jalal-Abad (Kyrgyzstan) - Andijan (Uzbekistan).

The project's total length has been reported variously between 454 and 532.53 kilometers across different stages; according to the most recent official figures, the Chinese section (Kashgar–Torugart) measures 158.04 km, while the Kyrgyz section measures 304.94–311.76 km. Uzbekistan is responsible for modernizing the existing rail network on its own territory, while China is building its own section; financing, construction, and subsequent operation of the Kyrgyz section fall to the trilateral joint project company.

The engineering complexity of the route deserves particular attention: the mountainous terrain requires the construction of dozens of tunnels and bridges. Depending on the estimate, the Kyrgyz section is planned to include 1820 stations, 42-81 bridges, and 25-41 tunnels (totaling roughly 120 km), accounting for approximately 40-47 percent of the route. Another significant technical challenge is the difference in track gauge standards: from the Chinese border to Makmal station (165.5 km), the Chinese standard gauge of 1,435 mm is used, while from Makmal to Jalal-Abad (146.2 km), the 1,520 mm gauge common across the former Soviet space is retained.

4. Financing Structure

Cost estimates for the project have shifted over time: in 2024, total costs were announced at approximately US$8 billion, while the financing agreement signed in December 2025 set the project's value at US$4.7 billion.

On 16 December 2025, a credit agreement was signed in Bishkek between the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway Company LLC and a syndicate of Chinese banks (the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China). Under the agreement's terms, half of the financing - approximately US$2.3 billion — is provided by China as a 35-year loan to the joint project company, while the remaining US$2.3 billion is contributed by the three states as equity capital in the following proportions: China - 51 percent, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan - 24.5 percent each.

This financing structure serves to distribute the project's commercial and political risks among the three states while reinforcing China's role as the lead investor.

5. Current State of Construction (2026)

According to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Transport and Communications, by the end of 2025 the project had moved into the full-scale construction phase across the entire route. Temporary construction infrastructure has been established along the route, including 11 main construction camps that are now fully operational, along with temporary access roads and power transmission lines. The project's most critical milestone - the start of underground excavation work - has begun in all 29 tunnels.

In March 2026, Kyrgyz government officials held a working meeting with representatives of the construction company, reporting that design materials had been prepared, more than 5,000 workers were engaged on site, and tunneling and earthworks were continuing.

In early June 2026, a follow-up working meeting in the Jalal-Abad region addressed compensation and land-rights issues for local residents whose homes lie along the construction route, and officials visited the Jalal-Abad tunnel construction site. According to the Kyrgyz government's plans, 15 percent of the project's infrastructure is expected to be completed by the end of 2026, a target set under the country's National Development Program through 2030.

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On the Uzbek side, parallel work is underway to modernize the national rail network. At a meeting with Uzbekistan's President in November 2025, a goal was set to at least double passenger and freight volumes between 2026 and 2030, including the construction of 151 km of new railway lines, electrification of 182 km of existing lines, modernization of 27 stations, and renewal of 1,000 km of railway infrastructure. The President also issued specific instructions on ensuring construction quality for the practical work on the CKU railway.

Table 1. Key project parameters: initial plans versus current status as of 2026

Indicator	**Initial plan (2023-2024)**	**Current status (as of mid-2026)**
Total length	=454 km	532.53 km (Chinese section - 158.04 km, Kyrgyz section - 304.94 km)
Project cost	=US$8 billion	=US$4.7 billion (financing agreement, December 2025)
Ownership shares	Under discussion	China - 51%, Kyrgyzstan - 24.5%, Uzbekistan - 24.5%
Infrastructure facilities	18 stations, 81 bridges, 41 tunnels (preliminary estimates)	Kyrgyz section designed with 29 tunnels (=120 km total) and 50 bridges
Construction phase	Feasibility study and design documentation in progress	Full-scale construction: excavation underway in all tunnels; temporary infrastructure operational

6. Geo-Economic and Strategic Significance

The CKU railway is expected to shorten the distance compared with existing Eurasian transport corridors by more than 900 kilometers, significantly reducing both the time and cost of shipping freight from China through Central Asia and onward via Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey to European markets. The line's annual freight capacity has been estimated at various stages at 12–15 million tons, with passenger volume estimated at approximately 300,000 people per year.

For Kyrgyzstan, the project could fundamentally transform the country's position as a transit-transport hub: preliminary calculations suggest the country could earn approximately US$200 million annually in transit revenue, while thousands of new jobs are expected to be created during construction.

For Uzbekistan, the project's significance manifests in two directions. First, with a direct rail link to China, the country gains the ability to reach European and Middle Eastern markets within a shorter timeframe. Second, the project is being implemented in coordination with Uzbekistan's national program for modernizing its overall railway network, which also serves to improve domestic logistics efficiency.

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At the regional level, the project deepens economic integration among the Central Asian states and may become an important segment of the so-called Middle Corridor - an alternative Eurasian transit route that bypasses Russian territory.

7. Challenges and Expert Assessments

Despite its positive outlook, the project is not without critical commentary and risk. Some experts have expressed doubts about the project's economic efficiency and return on investment - noting in particular that the route crosses eight national borders, requires two changes of wheel bogies (at the China-Kyrgyzstan border and the Turkmenistan-Iran border), and involves a ferry crossing of Lake Van in Turkey, all of which could complicate the freight transport process.

- Financial burden: financing the project partly through debt creates long-term debt obligations for Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

- Engineering complexity: the mountainous terrain, long tunnels (some exceeding 12 km), and the need to reconcile differing track-gauge standards may affect construction timelines and costs.

• Social and legal issues: resettlement of residents along the construction route and compensation for land rights require careful coordination at the local level.

• Geopolitical factors: the project's long-term stability depends on political relations among the three states and the overall security situation in the region.

At the same time, official representatives have described the project as a model cooperation initiative under the Belt and Road framework, emphasizing high quality standards and strict environmental requirements.

8. Conclusion

The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway project, after more than two decades of discussion, successfully transitioned to the practical construction phase between 2024 and 2026. The financing structure has been finalized, the route has been determined, and major engineering work — particularly tunnel excavation — has begun across all sections. As of June 2026, the project is progressing according to its planned schedule, although full completion will require several more years of construction.

This infrastructure project represents one of the most significant steps toward integrating the Central Asian region into the global transport system. For Uzbekistan in particular, the project's successful implementation forms an integral part of a broader strategy to expand transit capacity, increase export opportunities, and modernize the national railway infrastructure. Future research should focus on the project's practical economic outcomes, including actual freight and passenger flow figures and its impact on regional trade dynamics.

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