

IRSTI 06.52.41

<https://doi.org/10.26577/JOS.2021.v98.i3.07>**A.M. Muratbekova\*** , **A.K. Ordabayev** , **G.R. Rakhymzhan** 

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## KAZAKHSTAN'S CONNECTIVITY PARADIGMS WITH CHINA AND INDIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The world is undergoing irreversible structural changes in global geopolitical space. The dynamic development of Asian countries has brought significant changes to the geopolitical and geoeconomic structure of the world. The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions more than ever demonstrated the role of rising Asian states not only in providing manufacturing facilities but also in maintaining the global supply chain and logistics. The role of China in this process is significant. India also working on enhancing its connectivity channels, whilst the post-COVID global supply chain reality provides new opportunities for India's aspirations. For Kazakhstan, which integrated with China's Belt and Road Initiative, and working to connect to India's alternative Chabahar port, the role of connectivity is critical. Given the geographic location that bridges Europe with Asia and provides alternative roads bypassing Russia, Kazakhstan's transit potential is immense.

Against this backdrop, the paper reveals Kazakhstan's state-of-the-art in transport sector in regard to China and India. First, we analyse the theoretical framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Then, we explore China's engagement with Kazakhstan, especially during the COVID-19 hindrances. We further provide India's alternative connectivity visions from a comparative perspective. We conclude with the assessment of the current partnerships and opportunities to expand connectivity with Kazakhstan.

The major argument of discussion is that although Kazakhstan has been widely integrating into China's BRI, it still has successfully diversified its connectivity networks in line with its multivector policy.

**Key words:** China, India, Kazakhstan, connectivity, Belt and Road Initiative.

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### Қазақстанның Қытаймен және Үндістанмен байланысының парадигмалары: салыстырмалы талдау

Әлемде жаһандық геосаяси кеңістіктегі қайтымсыз құрылымдық өзгерістер болып жатыр. Азия елдерінің қарқынды дамуы әлемнің геосаяси және геэкономикалық құрылымына айтарлықтай өзгерістер әкелді. COVID-19 пандемиясының шектеулері дамушы Азия мемлекеттерінің тек өндірістік қуаттылықты қамтамасыз етуде ғана емес, сонымен қатар әлемдік жабдықтау тізбегі мен логистиканы сақтаудағы рөлін бұрынғыдан да көп көрсетті. Бұл үдерісте Қытайдың рөлі зор. Үндістан сонымен қатар байланыс арналарын кеңейту үшін жұмыс істейді, ал COVID-тен кейінгі әлемдік жеткізілім тізбегі Үндістанның ұмтылысы үшін жаңа жолдар ашады. Қытайдың «Белдеу және жол» бастамасымен интеграцияланған және Үндістанның альтернативті Чабатар портына қосылу үшін жұмыс істеп жатқан Қазақстан үшін көліктің рөлі өте маңызды. Еуропаны Азиямен байланыстыратын және Ресейді айналып өтетін балама жолдар ұсынатын географиялық орналасуын ескере отырып, Қазақстанның транзиттік әлеуеті өте зор.

Осыған орай, мақала Қазақстанның Қытай мен Үндістанға қатысты көлік саласындағы әлеуетін ашады. Біріншіден, біз «Қытай белдеуі және жол» бастамасының теориялық негіздерін талдаймыз. Содан кейін біз Қытайдың Қазақстанмен қарым-қатынасын, әсіресе COVID-19 кедергілері кезінде тексереміз. Әрі қарай, біз Үндістанның салыстырмалы тұрғысынан байланысының альтернативті көріністерін ұсынамыз. Қорытындылай келе, қазіргі серіктестіктер және Қазақстанмен байланысты кеңейту мүмкіндіктерін бағалаймыз.

Мақаланың негізгі мақсаты – Қазақстан Қытайдың белдеуі мен жол бастамасымен кең интеграцияланғанымен, өзінің көпвекторлы саясатына сәйкес байланыс арналарын сәтті әртараптандыруы.

**Түйін сөздер:** Қытай, Үндістан, Қазақстан, байланыс, «Белдеу және жол» бастамасы.

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### **Парадигмы связности Казахстана с Китаем и Индией: сравнительный анализ**

В мире происходят необратимые структурные изменения в глобальном геополитическом пространстве. Динамичное развитие азиатских стран внесло существенные изменения в геополитическую и геоэкономическую структуру мира. Ограничения пандемии COVID-19 более чем когда-либо продемонстрировали роль растущих азиатских государств не только в предоставлении производственных мощностей, но и в поддержании глобальной цепочки поставок и логистики. Роль Китая в этом процессе значительна. Индия также работает над расширением своих каналов связности, в то время как реальность глобальной цепочки поставок после COVID открывает новые возможности для устремлений Индии. Для Казахстана, который интегрировался с китайской инициативой Пояса и Пути и работает над присоединением к альтернативному индийскому порту Чабхар, роль транспорта имеет критическое значение. Учитывая географическое положение, которое соединяет Европу с Азией и предоставляет альтернативные дороги в обход России, транзитный потенциал Казахстана огромен.

На этом фоне статья раскрывает потенциал Казахстана в транспортном секторе по отношению к Китаю и Индии. Сначала проводится анализ теоретические основы китайской инициативы Пояса и Пути. Затем исследуется взаимодействие Китая с Казахстаном, особенно во время ограничений, связанных с COVID-19. Далее предоставляются альтернативные взгляды связности Индии в сравнительной перспективе. В заключении оцениваются текущие партнерские отношения и возможности расширения связности с Казахстаном.

Главный аргумент статьи заключается в том, что, хотя Казахстан широко интегрируется с инициативой Пояса и Пути Китая, он все же успешно диверсифицирует свои каналы связности в соответствии со своей многовекторной политикой.

**Ключевые слова:** Китай, Индия, Казахстан, связность, инициатива Пояса и Пути.

## **Introduction**

This research has been funded by the Science Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Grant AP08957343).

The world is undergoing irreversible structural changes in global geopolitical space. The dynamic development of Asian countries has brought significant changes to the geopolitical and geoeconomic structure of the world. The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions more than ever demonstrated the role of rising Asian states not only in providing manufacturing facilities but also in maintaining the global supply chain and logistics. The role of China in this process is significant. In virtue of the overdependence on China's products and services that was vividly demonstrated during the total lockdown of China in winter 2020, global and regional actors once again started to reconsider China's role in the distribution of manufacturing and its supply chain value. India in this regard is the most suitable alternative. Although the majority of global manufacturing companies operate in China, India still could provide an alternative platform for transporting goods and services via its land and ocean routes. Given that India has long been working on enhancing its connectivity channels, the post-

COVID global supply chain reality provides new opportunities for India's aspirations.

For Kazakhstan, which integrated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and working to connect to India's alternative Chabahar port, the role of transportation is critical. Given the geographical location that bridges Europe with Asia and grants alternative roads to Russia, Kazakhstan's transit potential is immense. Hence, geographical proximity, along with the geopolitical ambitions of both China and India encourages studying China and India's connectivity ambitions in Kazakhstan from a comparative perspective, especially taking into account their primordial contradictions. Situating in the heart of Eurasia, it is also an opportunity to connect to the global sea routes and other alternative connectivity networks.

Against this backdrop, the paper reveals Kazakhstan's state-of-the-art in transport sector in regard to China and India. First, we analyse the theoretical framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Then, we explore China's engagement with Kazakhstan, especially during the COVID-19 hindrances. We further provide India's alternative connectivity visions from a comparative perspective. We conclude with the assessment of the current partnership opportunities of Kazakhstan.

## Relevance

Due to geopolitical ambitions and the economic capacities of both China and India, their relations play a special role in contemporary international affairs. For Kazakhstan, a direct neighbour to China and an extended neighbour to India, along with being a strategic partner of both countries, it is essential to formulate an analytical understanding of the processes occurring between the two regional powers.

The relevance of exploring aspirations of China and India, also in connection to their competing nature in the field of road infrastructure is also essential for Kazakhstan. As seen from the case in the energy sector, bilateral contradictions need to be considered while engaging in business with China and India (Muratbekova, 2018). Hence, the study scrutinizes the connectivity paradigms of China and India through Kazakhstan's prism.

## Theoretical-methodological basis

The paper discusses connectivity through conventional theories of IR as realism and liberalism, and the major arguments are relying on the critical approach. We believe that while critically analysing the potential of bilateral cooperation, states could build pragmatic and constructive cooperation, connecting based on social values and in virtue of globalization calls.

## Discussion of theoretical underpinnings of China's connectivity

Connectivity is considered an integral part of the process of globalisation. The role of connectivity was especially highlighted with the launch of China's grand initiative. India believes that connectivity undermines country's growth, employment, and prosperity (Swaraj, 2016). Other Asian giants as South Korea, Japan also revised the value of connectivity, especially in regard to geopolitical games with China.

China's grand Belt and Road initiative realists see it as a geopolitical and geoeconomic construct that boost China's power over others. Realism provides tools for analysing China's actions in terms of the concepts of "strength", "power" and "competition". Hence, BRI is characterized as the global expansion of China, which has a set of qualities of a "strong" state, such as population, economy, technology, cultural influence, and military power (Alastair, 2017). It is estimated that the initiative through the PRC's ability not only

to contain the influence of the United States but to reduce the influence of various regional players, change global governance and transform the existing international system (Shaun et. al., 2019). Strategically, it should raise the country's status to a superpower, allowing the creation of its own rules and its own agenda in order to become a decisive factor in ensuring the country's security. Therefore, the initiative causes concern among global and regional actors in international relations (Geeraerts, 2018).

Chinese authorities are using neo-mercantilism in the economy and the state directly uses its resources to promote national companies abroad. China conceptualizing a policy of "entering" foreign markets to address the problem of domestic overcapacity (Bhattacharya, 2018). These efforts of Beijing have been developed and shaped into the Belt and Road Initiative. Thus, more than 80% of projects within the framework of BRI are carried out by state-owned Chinese companies. The PRC controls most of the financing of these projects through the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, its own Silk Road Fund and the Export-Import Bank of China. China's strategy challenges the rules of the world economic order based on the centrality of multilateral cooperation, respect for the rule of law and transparency (Degterev, 2021). Through the initiative, China is trying to change the Asian regional order, which should transform to make China a "great power" (Mingjiang, 2020).

At the same time, while investing in developing countries and politically unstable regions, the PRC does not forget about the need to protect its investments. To protect the infrastructure construction in Pakistan, China has established a security management mechanism in conjunction with the Pakistani government (Rossijskaja Gazeta, 2016). In Africa, the PRC is actively involved in the problems of South Sudan by sending a battalion of its peacekeepers. In Djibouti, the only Chinese overseas military base has been opened so far. There is a large stratum of experts considering that the BRI is primarily aimed at countering the influence of the United States, through control over the oil trade route between the Persian Gulf and East Asia (Chatzky, McBride, 2020). China is implementing projects along the coast of South Asia, which in the future have the potential to become Chinese naval bases aimed at countering regional Indo-Pacific domination (Mingjiang, 2020). Experts are concerned that China will seek to change the current rules of the game to achieve the status of a world hegemon. Thus, the proponents of realism characterize the BRI as an instrument of the international policy of the Chinese

state as an opportunity for China to strengthen its economic and political power.

India's position in relation to China's BRI also lays under the realist approach, complaining about assertive diplomacy, ignoring India's territorial claims in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, along with China's debt-trap policy chaining neighbouring South Asian countries.

In turn, the theory of liberalism in international relations is less structured, so it is difficult to outline a framework, which gives an assessment of the cooperation between the two countries. However, a wide range of instruments of this theory allows a broad assessment. One of the main theses is that global peace can be achieved because states act not only as incentives for power (Meiser, 2021). Because the state is not the only subject of international relations, there are actors as citizens or companies, as well as beliefs, social structures and commercial interests that determine the behaviour of the state (Haggard, 2015).

An important component of the theory is "commercial liberalism" (Keohane, 2002). It focuses on the economic benefits of international trade, and the benefits of it stimulate government action towards other countries. The theory recognizes that international trade increases well-being, although not necessarily to the same extent for everyone, therefore supporting international trade cooperation is of paramount importance (Zharkov, 2015). It leads to interdependence and makes the costs of conflict incomparably high.

It is essential to note the direction of liberal theory – globalization, which is defined as the interdependence between groups of interest (Alekseeva, 2019), yet there are theorists who distinguish globalization as a separate theory (Nikifarov, 2015). But the paper considers globalization as part of liberal theory and is seen as a process of forming common values, for example, economic development, under the influence of powerful integration processes in various fields of social development (Drobot, 2015).

BRI, in general, does not contradict the principles of the development of the world economy and politics within the framework of this approach. The initiative can become a platform "for harmonious coexistence and solidarity development of various countries" (Amrebaev, 2019), which will be economically interdependent while remaining independent from each other. The leadership of the Chinese Communist Party publicly declares that the initiative is focused on market relations and is consistent with basic principles that do not represent the creation of an alternative model of economic liber-

alism (Embassy of China in Uzbekistan, 2015). The Belt and Road offer common standards, measurements, certifications, as well as lowering non-tariff barriers and increasing the openness of the service industry. All of this is directly consistent with globalization.

Obviously, BRI creates conditions for protecting and deepening trade and investment relations, expanding opportunities for cooperation with multilateral organizations, and proposes new institutional forms. It is also important to note that Chinese leadership proposed this initiative because of the accumulated significant economic and political resources in the existing global economic model. China has taken full advantage of the current global economy and experienced unprecedented economic growth (Harrison, Palumbo, 2019). China's continued growth depends on the continuation of the existing order that allows trade and investment. China has a large economy, which benefits even more from the absence of trade barriers. BRI should effectively create new trade chains, open market access, and support global trade.

The ideas of the initiative such as openness, joint development and mutually beneficial cooperation should support world trade, increase interdependence, and increase the costs of open conflicts (RIA Novosti, 2019). Thus, it can be said that the BRI is a strategy for China's international cooperation. Moreover, it is aimed at strengthening economic cooperation and does not provide for institutional changes in the participating countries.

To achieve these goals, China uses opportunities that exist through open relationships. But the main instrument of the BRI is participation in those regions where the USA, EU and financial institutions are present in a limited format – South and Central Asia, countries of Africa south to Sahara, the deficit of financing for the construction of infrastructure facilities here is about \$800 billion (InfraONE, 2017). Kazakhstan in this sense is an example of such limitedness. The United States and the EU have invested significant amounts in the country, but their presence in the economy is limited with resource fields, and the PRC offers financial instruments for the development of other industries. At the same time, China actively uses international institutions to promote its initiative or creates new ones, for example, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Matt, 2017).

### **Kazakhstan's recent developments with China**

Relations between Kazakhstan and China in the last decade have been influenced by the Chinese

Belt and Road Initiative. This multi-billion-dollar project was resented in Kazakhstan in 2013. Important components of the initiative are its flexibility, adaptability, and lack of a delineated framework. This multi-billion-dollar project has already had an economic and strategic impact on all participating regions and countries. Kazakhstan is adapting its foreign and economic policies in such a way as to open access to world trade at the strategic level and to receive significant investments in the development of its transport infrastructure at the tactical level. However, the initiative has several benefits and risks. BRI is well received by a number of developing countries, which believe that financing for trade-related infrastructure will contribute to economic growth (Sultanov, 2019). On the other hand, the BRI is becoming an instrument for strengthening China's position in the region. The key argument is that investments create conditions for a debt trap, and investments themselves are poorly developed, as a result, projects do not support economic development, and the infrastructure is not used (The Economist, 2018).

Regarding the most recent developments of bilateral arrangements on BRI, it could be mentioned the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, which was held on September 12-13, 2020 (Bajzakova, 2020). The official visit took place at the height of the pandemic, which demonstrates the increased interest of China in Kazakhstan, and in general in the region of Central Asia. To some extent, the visit marks a restart of the Chinese-Kazakh "offline diplomacy" since Wang Yi held meetings with the first President N.A. Nazarbayev, the President K.K. Tokayev, and with the Minister of Foreign Affairs M.B. Tleuberdi (Kabar.kg, 2020). Kazakhstan and China reaffirmed that the pandemic should not affect trust between two countries and that the sustainable development of relations will continue. President Tokayev in his turn noted that independently how the international situation changes, Kazakhstan's friendly policy towards China will not change that also means a commitment to enhancing China-Kazakhstan relations in the post-pandemic period (Akorda, 2020).

The parties also paid attention to President Xi Jinping's proposal to promote an emerging 'double circulation' growth model with an emphasis on domestic production and consumption (Kapital.kz, 2021). China's proposal in fact is an attempt to reduce criticism of the BRI on the creation of debt obligations from the participating countries. As part of the 'double circulation' vision, it would be increased the procurement of materials for the construction of transport infrastructure from local producers (Kabar.

kg, 2020). Sides also highlighted the importance of regular train connections between China and Europe during a pandemic. An important part of the visit was a discussion of further measures to combine the BRI and Nurly Zhol program. The parties will continue to look for ways to expand links between road and rail transport, restore and increase the carrying capacity of border passes. Countries discussed the Digital Silk Road, which should help strengthen cooperation in the digital economy (Akorda, 2020). During the negotiations, parties agreed to normalize prevention and control at the border. As a result of the negotiations, it was announced the start of a specialist exchange program.

The results of the negotiations can be observed by assessing the further development of events. So, according to the results of the first quarter of 2021, the volume of transit container traffic from China to Europe and vice versa increased by 2.2 times, and by 2030 the volume of container transit traffic may triple, while 88% of transit passes through the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Gusachenko, 2021). Also, Kazakhstan provides transit of goods to the states of Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran. The container market has been growing for six years almost 13 times. Last year, despite the pandemic, the volume of containerized cargo transportation in the China-Europe route in transit through Kazakhstan amounted to 517.5 thousand TEU, which is 65% more than in 2019 (Trend.az, 2021). Transit through Kazakhstan has a number of advantages. Among them is a significantly shorter transit time for delivery of products from the manufacturer to a consumer from Asian countries to European countries as compared to sea routes. At present, the country's task is to maintain and expand the share of transit routes through service, creating strategic alliances with Russian, Chinese, and European partners.

Apart from that, in early 2021, a new freight rail route was launched between China and Kazakhstan, connecting the administrative centre of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southern China and Kazakhstan. On this train, Route I can get to Kazakhstan in about 13 days. The 5031 km route will become part of the China – Europe cargo traffic (Kazakhstan temir zholy, 2021).

However, despite the high-level agreements, there are still difficulties with the crossing of border points. In November 2020, due to the introduction of strict epidemiological control measures by the PRC at the Dostyk-Alashankou and Altynkol-Khorgos border crossings, there was significant congestion of transport at some point on the border there were about 16,000 loaded wagons on the Kazakh side and up to 6,000 on the Chinese side (Kursiv, 2021). In

addition, about 16 thousand cars with grain, non-ferrous metals, fertilizers, and other goods from Kazakhstan could not get into China. The reason for the refusal was the strengthening of quarantine rules. Moreover, some of these wagons never crossed the border and in April 2021 exporters received their wagons back, incurring significant losses, and the quality of goods, which had been stored in covered wagons for five months, was also damaged. For example, according to the estimates of the Grain Union, only grain exporters could suffer a loss of about \$23 million (Inbusiness.kz, 2021). According to the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs "Atameken", approximately about 700 million tenge was lost due to the refusal to import Kazakh products in Chinese borders. In order to resolve the problems that have arisen, in February 2021, two railway companies with the participation of state bodies have activated. As a result of negotiations, the Chinese side agreed to accept 2,200 wagons.

This is not the first case with a problem of border crossings. In the summer of 2020, there were congestions and failures at the border between Kazakhstan and China (Sputnik.kz, 2021). The situation was resolved before Wang Yi's visit to Kazakhstan. New problems for exporters in November 2020 are possibly related to the fact that Kazakhstan at the end of October granted refugee status to Chinese Kazakhs, who reported that they fled due to pressure from the authorities in Xinjiang (Zakon.kz, 2021). Obviously, the pandemic gave China leverage in the region, using the fight against proliferation as an excuse to restrict exports to its country.

Meanwhile, it is possible that strengthening the position of the PRC became the reason for Wang Yi's visit to Kazakhstan and further to the Central Asian countries. The economy of the PRC is showing a fast pace of recovery, having increased by 18.3% in the first quarter of 2021 alone [40]. During the pandemic, China's trade with other countries also increased significantly, with a trade surplus in 2020 of \$535 billion, exports exceeding \$2.6 trillion, while imports, on the contrary, fell to \$2 trillion (TASS, 2021). At the same time, the growth in exports is directly related to the transportation of goods to Europe and by rail through Kazakhstan. Railways increased freight traffic along the Eurasian corridor by 50%, and the number of freight train runs reached about 12 thousand (Edovina, 2021). Consequently, Kazakhstan for obtaining financial benefits for transit largely depends on China, and this role has increased significantly, which gives China new opportunities in negotiations with Kazakhstan. Therefore, the overlap of borders with Kazakhstan is a clear signal to the country's leadership.

In theory, Kazakhstan could retaliate against Chinese transit. Kazakh customs could check the cargo more thoroughly or refer to blocked railroad tracks on which wagons have accumulated. However, this threatens Kazakhstan with consequences not only in relations with China but also with international partners – the EU countries. Moreover, Kazakhstan is not the only way to Europe, cargo from China can always use the transit corridor in the north of Kazakhstan. In addition, oil prices have fallen and are recovering only now, so transit income is becoming even more important.

### **India's alternative visions of connectivity with Kazakhstan**

Although India's connectivity aspiration is relatively moderate in comparison to the Chinese, it has the potential to promote itself as a counterbalance to China. It could even play a crucial role in conditions if the US-China trade wars for instance will be escalated. Projects such as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the Istanbul–Tehran–Islamabad–Delhi–Kolkata–Dhaka–Yangon (ITI–DKD–Y) Container Rail Corridor, along with Mausam project and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) all attempt to broaden and deepen India's multimodal network of ship, rail, and road route to connect India with other regions.

Among these projects, the International North-South Transport Corridor that connects India with Iran, Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Northern Europe is the best alternative to boost India's connectivity capacity with Eurasia. The INSTC that was initially signed between Russia, and Iran in 2000 was later joined by other 11 countries, including Kazakhstan. By using the road, train and ships, the aim of the project is to transit goods from India via Russia to Europe, linking the Indian Ocean with the Caspian Sea. In particular, to link Jawaharlal Nehru and Kandla ports in India with Iran's Bandar Abbas port and Chabahar once completed, and from there to connect by road and rail through Baku to Moscow and St. Petersburg and further to Northern Europe. It is expected that the new connection will reduce time and costs for transportation from India to Central Asia, Russia, and Northern Europe. However, there are some sceptical thoughts considering the financial viability of the projects and customs clearance challenges that could happen when moving through Iran and Russia (Purushothaman, Unnikrishnan, 2019).

Chabahar port that is located in southeastern Iran, on the Gulf of Oman is strategically important

to connect with Kazakhstan. Chabahar is gaining momentum as a gateway to the ocean for the landlocked countries of Eurasia that will link India with Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries. Due to the overflowing capacity of Bandar Abbas – the largest Iranian port within the INSTC, Chabahar plans to be a strategic alternative (The Economic Times, 2021).

Kazakhstan joined the Ashgabat Agreement in 2015 that is synchronized with the INSTC, whilst the agreement came into force in 2016. According to the agreement, Kazakhstan along with other partner countries envisages developing multimodal connectivity via provided INSTC. Kazakhstan is also interested in connecting to Chabahar port. Although the pandemic corrected plans for the implementation of the project, Kazakhstan anticipated the launch of Chabahar, which was planned for June 2021, whilst negotiations began in 2015. Kazakhstan also proposed to create a consortium for the use of the port, which in 2017 led to a joint meeting between Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, India, and Kazakhstan to discuss perspectives for using the Chabahar port. Also, there is a working group with India, Uzbekistan and Iran that is focused on the issues related to the use of Chabahar port (Sibal, 2021).

For Kazakhstan, expanding bilateral trade relations thanks to new direct connections is significant for deepening bilateral ties. Considering the market size of India and trade potential, reducing the distance of transportation thanks to new routes, definitely will ameliorate bilateral economic cooperation. Kazakhstan already provided its portion of the Beineu-Etrek-Gyzylgaya-Gorgan (Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran) railway route under the INSTC (Kuanyshev, 2014).

As for bilateral trade cooperation, Kazakhstan remains a major trading partner of India in Central Asia. Despite the pandemic, over the 9 months of 2020, Kazakhstan traded with India for over \$2.2 billion (Sibal, 2020). In comparison, in 2019, bilateral trade amounted to \$ 1.9 billion that is 55.8% higher than in 2018 (\$ 1.2 billion). Kazakhstan's export to India in 2019 increased by 65% for over \$ 1.6 billion, whilst imports from India increased to 20.1% to \$ 291.6 million (24.kz, 2020). 80% of Kazakhstan's export consist of petroleum oils and minerals, and India import its medical products, tea, telephone sets, and other electronic devices. (Sarsenbayev, 2019). Meanwhile, at present, over 560 entities with Indian capital have been operating in Kazakhstan, with around 200 of them registered in the past several years.

In terms of institutional developments, Kazakh-Indian joint working group on trade and economic

cooperation was met in September 2020, where counterparts discussed options of enhancing the export potential of Kazakhstan. Besides, during the meeting, Kazakhstan proposed to initiate a joint study on the development of the Central Asian transport and transit economic corridor “North-South”, which links South Asia (Afghanistan, India) with the regions of Central Asia and Europe, the Urals, Siberia and the Far East (24.kz, 2020).

India could become a balancing actor in terms of regional cooperation, whilst for the Republic of Korea and Japan, Kazakhstan could be a bridge to bypass Chinese territory for its Northern land routes (UNECE, 2019). However, due to the spread of COVID-19 especially in India, bilateral cooperation between Kazakhstan and India were largely affected, halting the exchange of products, people, and services. The measures taken by both sides, as well as aspirations for further cooperation, including the transport sector, gives hopes that India will strengthen its positions in Kazakhstan and in the Central Asian region. Countries have been moving towards enhancement, while the post-pandemic world emphasized the role of connectivity and diversification for sustainable development.

## Conclusion

The analysis carried out in this work demonstrates the complexity of assessing China's actions, which can be traced in the public field and in concrete measures and actions. It can be said with a certain degree of confidence that the Belt and Road Initiative in its values and orientation, using the example of relations with Kazakhstan, fits into the theoretical framework of the liberal school. India also has its liberalist aspirations that similarly fit into the liberalist paradigms. We can trace the joint development of transit infrastructure, public statements to support trade liberalization. Within the framework of joint work, Kazakhstan is trying to harmonize its strategic programs with China, while highlighting its strategic partnership with India.

On the other hand, Kazakhstan is actively looking for an opportunity to diversify transit routes, which will help to ensure a stable, fast, and reliable transport route through the country. Despite the pandemic, Kazakhstan began construction in the Hungarian city of Feneshtitka of the East-West Gate (EWG) intermodal combined railway terminal with an expected capacity of 1 million TEU per year (Eurasia Rail Alliance Index, 2021). The new terminal will become an alternative to the Brest (Belarus) – Malashevich (Poland) crossing, where there is now an acute infrastructural constraint for the pro-

spective growth of trans-Eurasian transit (Eurasia Rail Alliance Index, 2021). In addition, the political situation in the Republic of Belarus negatively affects the transit of goods, for example, a ban on the transit of goods to Germany through the territory of Belarus damages the entire China-Europe-China route (Interfax, 2021).

EWG is building at the junction of wide and narrow tracks, with the introduction of new wheelset change formats, which provides a new opportunity to speed up the transition. According to Yerlan

Dikhanbaev, a representative of Kazakhstani company, the connection of terminals at Dostyk station on the Kazakh-Chinese border and in Feneshlitka on the Hungarian-Ukrainian border will diversify the risks of transit of goods. The operation of the terminals is planned to begin as early as 2022 (EuroTransit, 2021).

In general, further analysis of the dynamics of development of the transport sector should allow extrapolating theoretical conclusions on Kazakhstan's connectivity approaches.

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