



The Cambridge Security Initiative

NEW FREIGHT LINK BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND CHINA CONNECTING CENTRAL ASIA

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A new 'multimodal' containerised freight service commenced operation between China and Uzbekistan in early June, another strand in China's global transportation network. Freight will be transported along this new route by rail and road from Lanzhou in northwest China to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, via Osh in Kyrgyzstan. The route is seen as an important component of the broad Eurasian corridor, part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Vehicles have been shifting cargo along this road since late 2017, but the rail link saves about five days, making the total journey time 7-10 days. This is one of the project's principal benefits. Prior to June, rail freight from China heading west had to cross Kazakhstan, a far longer route. The Kyrgyz-Uzbek route reduces the journey from China to southeast Europe by up to 900km. This route also has the advantage of potentially offering access, via Turkmenistan, to markets in Iran, Turkey and southeast Europe. China is keen to gain access to new markets, whilst simultaneously boosting the economic development of regions such as Xinjiang, objectives that this new rail link could help to achieve.

Ultimately, it is hoped that the entire route will consist of a single rail link. The route has been on the table for years, first mooted by China in the early 1990s, but has been entangled in political and economic issues. Kyrgyzstan, the middle country in the link, has stalled on construction of the railway across its territory, amidst disagreements over [the route](#) and gauge of the line. The mountainous terrain in southern Kyrgyzstan is a complicating factor, necessitating the construction of numerous tunnels, which increases the price of any proposed route across it. The lack of a clear cost for constructing the rail link across Kyrgyzstan continues to hamper progress, with China and Uzbekistan unwilling to finance an unnecessarily long and/or expensive route designed to meet domestic Kyrgyz requirements.

Despite being longer, the existing Central Eurasian Corridor through Kazakhstan still has the advantage of a minimal number of border crossings on the journey from China to European markets: there are only two, China-Kazakhstan and Russia/Belarus-the EU. This route carries the most container traffic, with freight [doubling](#) since 2016. Until agreement can be reached on the construction of the rail link across Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan will remain a key transit route for goods being shipped from China to European markets.

OUTLOOK

This project will boost the capacity of container transport along the East-West corridor, capitalising on the vast Eurasian landmass. The development of cross-border infrastructure and inter-regional connectivity is key to future economic growth in Central Asia. These projects will connect remote areas of the landlocked region of Central Eurasia, integrating them into the global economy and giving them access to international markets, a move that is vital for their continued development. China is playing a leading role in this development, as the largest trading partner of a number of Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan. While there are significant opportunities as Central Asian states seek foreign partners willing to invest, the U.S. is likely to remain on the back foot in the region, left behind by massive Chinese investment and engagement.