

## EXPLORE THE IMPACT OF CHINA'S "BELT AND ROAD" INITIATIVE ON UZBEKISTAN'S INTERESTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is transforming Uzbekistan through substantial Chinese-financed infrastructure and trade, but implications for sustainable development remain contested. This review synthesizes literature on BRI's emerging political, economic, social and environmental impacts in Uzbekistan. While BRI brings major infrastructure investment, critics argue it may primarily benefit China and create debt burdens, imbalance and environmental harm. Studies find increased China-Uzbekistan cooperation and trade under BRI, improved regional connectivity, and Chinese renewable energy financing. However, risks around transparency, debt levels, resource extraction, and uneven gains persist. Social and ecological sustainability impacts are understudied. Qualitative analysis dominates, with minimal empirical evidence. Key knowledge gaps include local community perspectives, project sustainability assessments, and impact monitoring. Realizing BRI's promise requires strategic cooperation to ensure projects align with Uzbekistan's development priorities and safeguard equity and ecology. Uzbekistan must leverage its position to shape BRI engagement towards sustainable ends. More empirical research grounded in data is critically needed to substantiate claims, evaluate progress, elucidate long-term impacts, and uncover policy levers. This review highlights complex BRI tradeoffs and uncertainties. While accelerated development is desired, unbalanced reliance on external financing and commodity exports may compromise sovereignty, institutions and sustainability. Strategic collaboration and continuous impact monitoring are vital to maximize BRI's upside and mitigate risks. Evidence-based policy adjustments can help steer BRI's vast investments towards Uzbekistan's vision for equitable and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Belt And Road, BRI Uzbekistan, China Sustainable Development, China-Uzbek BRI.

### I. INTRODUCTION

China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, aims to strengthen China's connectivity and economic integration with nations across Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East through substantial infrastructure development and investment (Kamel, 2018). As a key country along the ancient Silk Road, Uzbekistan has become a major partner in BRI, with China financing and constructing railways, roads, power plants and other projects. While BRI offers opportunities, its implications for sustainable development in Uzbekistan remain contested (Serikkaliyeva et al., 2019). This review synthesizes current scholarly knowledge on the emerging impacts of BRI on Uzbekistan's interests and progress towards environmental, economic and social sustainability. BRI, also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR), involves over \$1 trillion in Chinese-funded infrastructure projects including ports, railways, bridges, airports and energy facilities across disparate regions (Sheng, 2020). The "Belt" represents overland routes through Central Asia to Europe, while the "Road" refers to maritime trade routes. BRI aims to strengthen China's economic and political influence through hard infrastructure and soft power diplomacy. Developing countries are major partners, with China offering financing for megaprojects aligned with its strategic interests.

Uzbekistan joined BRI in 2016, signing over \$20 billion in investment deals with China (Kholishkhon and JianPing, 2020). This represents a key milestone, as Uzbekistan was initially cautious about BRI under former authoritarian President Karimov. His successor Mirziyoyev has enthusiastically embraced Chinese investment, seeing BRI as an engine for economic modernization (KELKİTLİ, 2022). Major BRI projects in Uzbekistan include the Kamchik Pass railway tunnel and electrified rail lines linking Tashkent with neighboring countries. China is also Uzbekistan's top trading partner and source of foreign investment. Proponents argue BRI can accelerate Uzbekistan's development by improving transport connectivity, energy infrastructure and cross-border trade (Xuanli Liao, 2021). However, critics contend BRI may primarily benefit China while creating

unsustainable debt burdens, economic dependence and environmental degradation. As research on BRI in Central Asia is still emerging, its impacts remain contested and unclear.

This review will synthesize current studies on BRI's economic, political, social and environmental implications for Uzbekistan. It will incorporate empirical data, policy analyses and expert perspectives from academia, governments, NGOs and investigative journalists. The scope will include both cooperative opportunities and risks/challenges related to BRI, assessing impacts on sustainable development. Geographic coverage centers on Uzbekistan but will also consider regional dynamics in Central Asia.

Key questions explored including to what extent does BRI support Uzbekistan's economic modernization and social development goals? How are China-Uzbekistan economic linkages reshaping trade patterns, markets and labor? What are risks related to debt sustainability, resource extraction and corruption? How might relations with Russia evolve given perceived geopolitical competition with China in Central Asia? Does BRI foster environmental and social safeguards or exacerbate harms? Answering such questions can clarify how well aligned BRI is with Uzbekistan's development needs and sustainability priorities.

This systematic review will identify critical knowledge gaps and future research priorities. Findings aim to inform policy debates on maximizing BRI's benefits while mitigating risks. By offering a balanced, evidence-based perspective, this review seeks to elucidate China's emerging infrastructure empire and its consequences for Uzbekistan's sustainable development pathway.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

BRI's impacts in Uzbekistan is still emerging, with limited empirical research published to date. Early discourse focused heavily on geopolitical dynamics, viewing BRI through the lens of great power competition between China and Russia in Central Asia (Kong, 2023). Recent studies have begun assessing economic and infrastructure effects, though primarily using qualitative policy analysis rather than data-driven methods. Some experts cite risks of debt dependence and lack of transparency, while others see benefits for regional development. Social and environmental sustainability remain largely overlooked. Kholikhon and JianPing (2020) explored opportunities for bilateral cooperation between China and Uzbekistan through the lens of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI aims to achieve globalization through infrastructural investments in nearly 70 countries. The authors noted China's growing economic influence, especially in Central Asia and Uzbekistan, since BRI's 2013 launch. Their research mapped existing political, financial, economic and cultural interactions between China and Uzbekistan according to the five key aspects of policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, free trade, financial integration and people-to-people ties outlined under BRI (Saeed et al., 2023). By reviewing peer-reviewed articles, books, reports and databases, they documented valuable data on cooperative agreements between the countries. Based on their findings, the researchers evaluated each agreement and determined potential mutual interests and prospects for enhanced cooperation going forward.

Specifically, they recommended that further investigations of China's political and economic interactions in Uzbekistan were warranted in the near future to build on progress made so far under BRI and maximize benefits for both participating nations (Semenova, 2019). Toshpulatov (2022) examines the influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Uzbekistan's international trade. Since its inception in 2013, BRI has received support from over 100 participating countries and organizations aiming to improve connectivity. As a central hub in Central Asia, Uzbekistan was among the earliest supporters of BRI. The author's research found that Uzbekistan's involvement in BRI has notably promoted the growth of its foreign trade. Located along major BRI corridors, Uzbekistan is well positioned to capitalize on expanded trade networks. The study's findings carry useful implications for how Uzbekistan can better address challenges in international trade while continuing active involvement with BRI. The conclusions provide valuable insight for leveraging Uzbekistan's strategic location and optimizing its trade and economic cooperation with China and other partners engaged with this wide-ranging infrastructure and development initiative. The paper suggests BRI participation has significantly benefited Uzbekistan's foreign commerce and presents opportunities to overcome trade barriers through strengthened regional connectivity. Tanaka (2022) examines efforts to promote environmental sustainability within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the lens of the country's lending and investment in Uzbekistan's renewable energy sector. The paper outlines China's 'Green and Sustainable Silk Road' agenda to

align BRI projects with UN Sustainable Development Goals. It then provides an overview of Uzbekistan's transition to clean energy, focusing on regulatory frameworks and strategies. Tanaka (2022) analyzes Chinese involvement in Uzbekistan's hydro, solar, and wind power projects in detail. The conclusion serves two purposes: 1) to assess China's lending and investment practices in Uzbekistan's renewable sector, and 2) to elucidate the host country's role in shaping the 'greening' of BRI.



**Figure 1:** BRI routes. The Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road

Source Toshpulatov (2022)

The case study explores progress and challenges and how synergies between China's emerging 'green finance' priorities within BRI and Uzbekistan's renewable goals can be strengthened - offering insight into sustainable development cooperation along the Silk Road Economic Belt. Toktogulova and Zhuang (2020) conducted a critical analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative's economic impact in Central Asia. The paper assessed trade and investment between China and participating Central Asian countries following BRI's 2013 launch. An extensive literature review and data from BRI-relevant research and institutions were analyzed. The authors observed China-Central Asia trade turnover annually declined 2013-2016 before gradually increasing since. Projects in each Central Asian country were summarized under industry categories including roads/railways, energy, minerals, petroleum extraction, finance/IT, agriculture and training. China has heavily invested in Central Asian mineral and petroleum extraction projects. A key challenge identified is local sentiments that China benefits more from BRI than participating Central Asian nations. The paper provided a comprehensive empirical evaluation of BRI's first years in Central Asia, highlighting sectoral investments and trade trends to gauge economic ramifications while also acknowledging perceived political-economic asymmetries remain a hurdle to maximizing mutual opportunities within the initiative's framework. Sabitov (2022) analyzes China's monumental "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative from Uzbekistan's perspective. As global trade between Europe and Asia accelerated at the turn of the century, new logistical infrastructure was needed for cheaper, faster goods delivery across continents. OBOR aims to promote this vision of China's via strategic economic and foreign policy priorities. The routes of OBOR's "Silk Road Economic Belt" pass through Central Asia, Russia, Europe and the Middle East, with ports connecting China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Europe. The article considers OBOR's rationale, routes, drawbacks and modern transport significance. It evaluates how mutually beneficial OBOR participation is for other states. The results describe China's mechanisms for implementing OBOR and assess the project's overall viability.

By examining OBOR through Uzbekistan's lens, Sabitov offers Central Asian insights into strengths and limitations of this ambitious multi-national development initiative with wide-reaching implications for Eurasian trade and connectivity. Qoraboyev (2018) evaluates how China-Uzbekistan bilateral relations can

transform into synergy needed for BRI success. The text has three parts. First, it briefly outlines overlaps between Uzbekistan's New Development Strategy and China's BRI initiative. Second, it highlights positive dynamics in the China-Uzbekistan relationship and features of BRI providing a solid basis for Uzbekistan's successful participation. Finally, it proposes discussing caveats to address, strengthening Uzbekistan's involvement. The paper argues ambiguity around BRI's ultimate aims and form constitute both challenges and opportunities to further involve countries like Uzbekistan in implementation. Ambiguity allows local ownership to develop - seen as necessary for realizing Belt and Road projects.

Emerging local ownership from ambiguity could generate positive dynamics for meaningful cooperation given relevance of BRI to Uzbekistan's development path. Qoraboyev presents a balanced perspective on leveraging the relationship's potential through addressing uncertainties in BRI's long-term vision and implementation approaches. Shao (2023) researches ways to construct a regional economic cooperation mechanism between China and Uzbekistan under China's Belt and Road Initiative. The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to contract global supply chains long-term, increasing the importance of international and regional cooperation. Under BRI, China and Uzbekistan have conducive conditions but also face challenges like differing economic systems and Uzbekistan's development strategies and infrastructure needs. Problems constructing their cooperation mechanism could be solved within BRI's multilateral framework. Their trade cooperation mechanism could be strengthened by increasing Chinese imports, improving trade structures and docking with the Eurasian Economic Union. This case study provides insights on strengthening international mechanisms under BRI by addressing issues like system inconsistencies, development priorities and connectivity deficits. The author argues a cooperative approach respecting each other's conditions within BRI's framework could maximize mutual benefits through an institutionalized regional platform supporting post-pandemic economic recovery and integration.

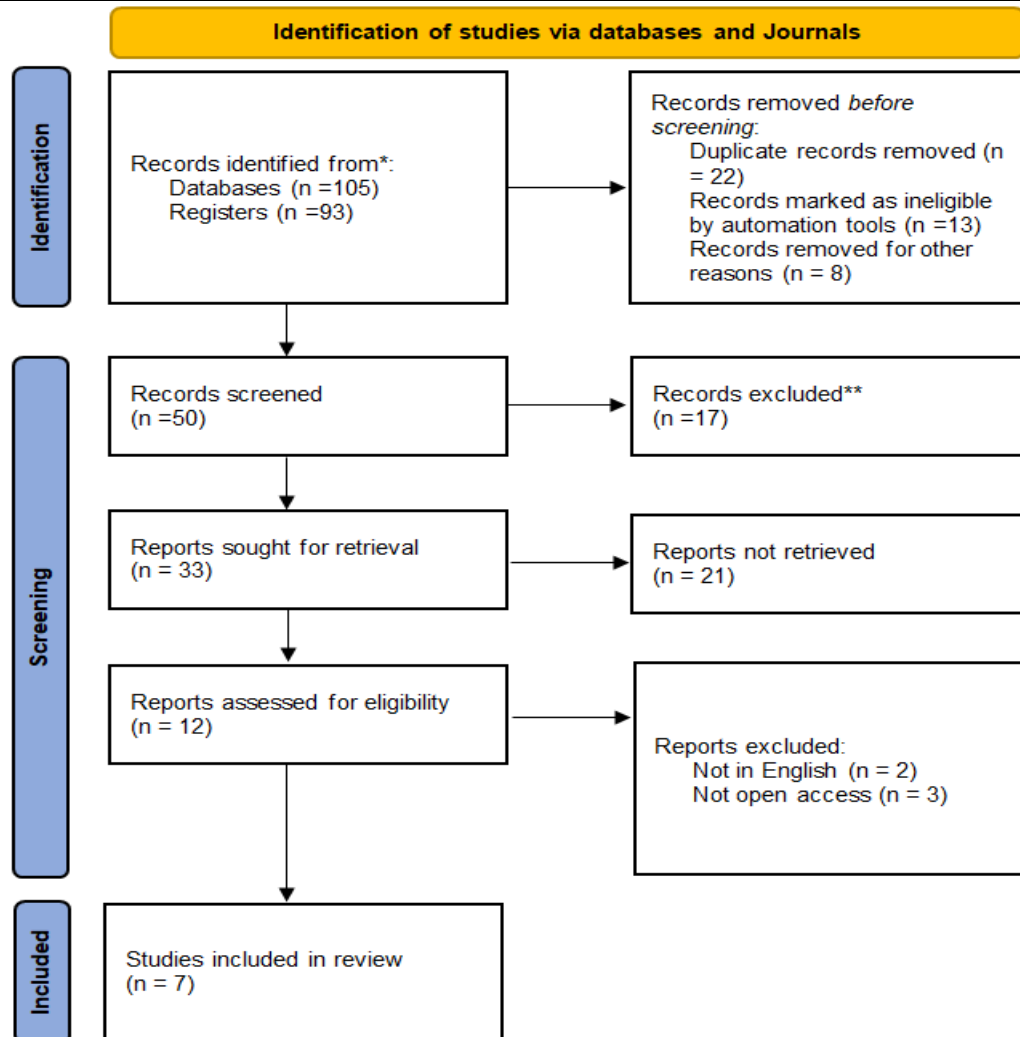
### **III. METHODOLOGY**

A systematic search strategy was utilized to identify relevant literature on the impacts of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Uzbekistan. The following databases were searched: Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Political Science Complete, Emerging Markets Information Service, and China Academic Journals. Search terms included "Belt and Road Initiative", "BRI", "One Belt One Road", combined with "Uzbekistan." Additional geographical search terms for Central Asia were also used. Sources were limited to English language publications from 2013-2023, since BRI was announced in 2013.

Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed scholarly articles, books/book chapters, policy reports, and working papers focused on political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental impacts of BRI projects in Uzbekistan. After removing duplicates, sources were screened based on relevance to the research questions. Exclusion criteria removed sources focused only on BRI globally without mention of Uzbekistan, along with opinion pieces or commentary without empirical analysis and older than five years i.e older than 2018.

The search and screening process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram below:

Key data extracted included author(s), year, methodology, geographical scope, findings on economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental impacts, and limitations identified. A narrative synthesis approach was utilized to analyze findings, identify themes, compare conclusions, and discern research gaps. Assessments of study quality and risk of bias were also performed.



**Figure 2:** PRISMA flow diagram showing number of records identified, screened, eligible, and included, with reasons for exclusion at each stage.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The studies encompass a range of objectives examining political, economic, environmental, and social dimensions of BRI in Uzbekistan. Both opportunities and risks/challenges are considered. Most studies utilize qualitative analysis of existing data, documents, agreements, and expert perspectives to evaluate dynamics. Only Toshpulatov involves quantitative empirical analysis, assessing trade statistics to measure BRI's influence. Gaps remain in terms of robust impact evaluations grounded in quantitative data. All studies concur that Uzbekistan's participation in BRI holds substantial promise to advance development goals, particularly through improved infrastructure and connectivity. However, concerns exist around debt burdens, lack of transparency, and environmental/social safeguards.

Findings suggest that while BRI offers vast financing, its implications depend heavily on localized implementation and host country priorities. Maximizing mutual benefits requires addressing ambiguities in BRI's vision, ensuring cooperation respects Uzbekistan's needs, and monitoring for imbalances. Ultimately, the literature highlights mostly positive but tentative and conditional judgments of BRI's influence. Further empirical research is needed to substantiate claims, monitor sustainability issues, and elucidate long-term impacts. Most studies call for strengthened cooperation and engagement between China and Uzbekistan within BRI to overcome challenges. This underscores the importance of continued dialogue and collaborative governance in steering BRI along a sustainable development path in Uzbekistan.

**Table 1:** Summary of the research studies included in the review

| Author                         | Title   | Objectives  | Findings/Results   | Recommendation/Future Work   |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Kholiskhon and JianPing (2020) | Exploring opportunities for bilateral cooperation between China and Uzbekistan through the lens of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) | Explored opportunities for bilateral cooperation between China and Uzbekistan through BRI by mapping existing interactions and reviewing agreements | Documented valuable data on cooperative agreements between China and Uzbekistan according to the key aspects outlined under BRI    | Recommended further investigations of China's political and economic interactions in Uzbekistan to build on progress made under BRI and maximize benefits for both nations                       |
| Toshpulatov (2022)             | The influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Uzbekistan's international trade   | Examined the influence of BRI on Uzbekistan's international trade   | Found Uzbekistan's involvement in BRI has notably promoted the growth of its foreign trade through expanded trade networks         | Provided implications for how Uzbekistan can address challenges in international trade while continuing active involvement with BRI  |
| Tanaka (2022)                  | Promoting environmental sustainability within China's Belt and Road Initiative through renewable energy cooperation with Uzbekistan       | Examined efforts to promote environmental sustainability within BRI through China's lending and investment in Uzbekistan's renewable energy sector  | Analyzed Chinese involvement in Uzbekistan's hydro, solar, and wind power projects and assessed progress, challenges and synergies | Assessed China's lending practices in Uzbekistan's renewable sector and how synergies between China's 'green finance' priorities within BRI and Uzbekistan's renewable goals can be strengthened |
| Toktogulova and Zhuang (2020)  | A critical analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative's economic impact in Central Asia   | Assessed trade and investment between China and participating Central Asian countries following BRI's 2013 launch                                   | Observed China-Central Asia trade trends and summarized BRI projects in each Central Asian country by industry                     | Identified challenges including local sentiments that China benefits more than participating nations and need to maximize mutual opportunities within BRI  |
| Sabitov (2022)                 | China's Belt and Road Initiative  | Analyzed China's OBOR initiative  | Considered OBOR's rationale, routes,   | Assessed China's mechanisms for implementing OBOR and  |

| Author           | Title   | Objectives  | Findings/Results  | Recommendation/Future Work  |
|------------------|---|---|---|---|
|                  | from Uzbekistan's perspective   | from Uzbekistan's perspective   | drawbacks and modern transport significance and how participation benefits other states   | the project's overall viability from Central Asia insights  |
| Qoraboyev (2018) | How can China-Uzbekistan bilateral relations transform into synergy needed for BRI success?   | Evaluated how China-Uzbekistan bilateral relations can transform into synergy needed for BRI success          | Outlined overlaps between countries' development strategies and highlighted positive dynamics providing a basis for cooperation | Proposed discussing caveats to strengthen Uzbekistan's involvement and allow local ownership to develop meaningful cooperation                              |
| Shao (2023)      | Constructing a regional economic cooperation mechanism between China and Uzbekistan under BRI | Researched ways to construct a regional economic cooperation mechanism between China and Uzbekistan under BRI | Analyzed issues like differing economic systems and development priorities that need to be addressed                            | Argued a cooperative approach respecting each country's conditions within BRI could maximize mutual benefits through an institutionalized regional platform |

**Economic Development**

BRI is transforming Uzbekistan’s economic landscape through increased trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), and infrastructure connectivity with China. Studies found Uzbekistan’s trade and FDI from China expanded notably since joining BRI (Toshpulatov 2022; Toktogulova & Zhuang 2020). Major Chinese investments in transport links, including electrified railways and tunnel construction, are improving Uzbekistan’s role as a regional transit hub (Kholiskhon & Jianping 2020). However, concerns persist around imbalanced trade, debt sustainability, and over-reliance on commodities trade.

**Social Development**

Research on BRI’s social impacts in Uzbekistan is limited. Some cultural exchange and educational cooperation agreements have been signed, aligning with BRI’s “people-to-people” pillar (Kholiskhon & Jianping 2020). But studies have not empirically assessed resulting changes to education, public health, or cultural integration. This represents a significant knowledge gap concerning BRI’s human and social capital effects. Early analysis highlights the need to balance economic priorities with safeguarding people’s well-being under BRI.

**Environmental Sustainability**

China has financed some renewable energy investments in Uzbekistan under its “green BRI” framework, including hydropower and solar facilities (Tanaka 2022). However, a lack of binding environmental standards persists, and research finds localized safeguards inadequate thus far (Tanaka 2022). Extractive industries dominate investments, raising ecological concerns. Scholars urge more attention to sustainability in BRI project selection, design and monitoring. Stronger green finance policies and Uzbek oversight would help ensure BRI infrastructure adheres to ecological principles.

### **Governance and Institutions**

BRI's institutional implications remain understudied, though observers note deals often lack transparency and economic governance reforms sometimes stall after agreements are signed (Toktogulova & Zhuang 2020). Anti-corruption measures are needed, along with local input and monitoring to avoid BRI becoming an elite-driven endeavor. Research overall stresses that BRI's success hinges on good governance and institutions that ensure accountability, sustainability and broad-based development.

### **Geopolitical Dynamics with Russia**

Experts recognize BRI has geopolitical as well as economic motivations, sparking debate on great power dynamics. Some contend BRI threatens Russia's influence in Central Asia (Laruelle 2018). But literature focusing specifically on Uzbekistan suggests continued strong Russia-Uzbekistan relations, with cooperation seen as feasible if BRI aligns with the country's vision (Qoraboyev 2018). Managing great power interests is recognized as crucial for optimizing BRI regionally. Further analysis is required concerning potential geostrategic impacts on Uzbekistan

## **V. DISCUSSION**

This review synthesized seven recent studies assessing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its emerging impacts in Uzbekistan. Despite limitations in the body of literature, key findings point to a nuanced picture of both opportunities and risks. BRI offers substantial financing for Uzbekistan's infrastructure and connectivity goals, holding promise to accelerate modernization ambitions. However, concerns exist around debt burdens, lack of transparency, uneven benefits, and inadequate environmental and social safeguards. Maximizing the upside while mitigating the downside of BRI engagement remains a complex challenge requiring strategic cooperation between China and Uzbekistan.

Several studies highlight deepened economic ties between China and Uzbekistan under BRI, with increased trade and investment flows, particularly in transport, energy, and minerals (Toshpulatov 2022; Toktogulova & Zhuang 2020). This suggests BRI is catalyzing development by expanding Uzbekistan's trade networks and financing infrastructure critical for regional connectivity. However, an over reliance on commodities trade and perceived asymmetry in benefits remain risks requiring ongoing monitoring and renegotiation. Findings indicate BRI has accelerated Uzbekistan's development progress but careful management is essential to ensure this continues on a sustainable path.

### **Implications for Sustainable Development Goals**

For Uzbekistan to achieve its sustainable development vision, BRI must strengthen – not undermine – environmental protection, social equity, and good governance. Yet current research provides insufficient evidence on BRI's impacts across key SDG dimensions. Early analysis raises concerns about lack of transparency, weak safeguards, and reliance on extractive projects (Tanaka 2022; Toktogulova & Zhuang 2020). This underscores the need for more proactive sustainability policies and impact monitoring mechanisms within BRI processes. Uzbekistan must leverage its position to shape BRI engagement toward SDG-aligned ends, particularly on climate action, environmental stewardship, poverty reduction and participatory decision-making.

### **Research Gaps and Future Needs**

This review revealed substantial gaps in data-driven research on BRI's localized impacts in Uzbekistan. Most published analyses rely on qualitative assessments rather than empirical evidence. More rigorous mixed-methods studies are needed to substantiate claims about economic, social and environmental effects. Key research priorities include:

- Local community perceptions and experiences with BRI projects
- Case studies tracking project outcomes and sustainability over time
- Analysis of debt sustainability impacts across public and external finance
- Environmental impact assessments and monitoring of key megaprojects
- Evaluation of completed projects' impacts on poverty, jobs and living standards
- Surveys, interviews and focus groups capturing a diversity of citizen perspectives
- Collaboration with Uzbek researchers and civil society organizations



Filling such research gaps can enrich understanding of how BRI is reshaping development trajectories in Uzbekistan. It can also uncover leverage points for civil society and policymakers to maximize opportunities and mitigate risks. Monitoring sustainability issues must be an urgent priority as more BRI projects are rolled out. Ultimately BRI's success depends on alignment with Uzbekistan's priorities and ensuring local communities benefit equitably while safeguarding their environment. Ongoing research engagement is essential to guide this vital megaproject in a sustainable direction.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This review synthesized current knowledge on China's BRI in Uzbekistan, elucidating a complex picture of tradeoffs. Substantial opportunities exist alongside equally substantial risks across economic, environmental and social domains. While BRI financing offers prospects to accelerate Uzbekistan's development, it may also exacerbate systemic issues around debt dependence, weak governance, and external economic reliance. Much remains unknown about on-the-ground impacts within local communities. Realizing BRI's full promise requires strategic cooperation and oversight to ensure sustainability is strengthened rather than undermined by this new Silk Road. Impact monitoring and collaborative course correction can help steer BRI toward Uzbekistan's vision for balanced, equitable and sustainable development.

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