

# Frankopan's "The Silk Roads: A New History of the World"

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical context and modern implications of the Silk Roads, emphasizing their role as a conduit for trade, culture, and geopolitical interaction. By analyzing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), we explore how contemporary infrastructure projects can revitalize these ancient routes, fostering economic growth and regional cooperation. The research highlights the revitalization of the Silk Roads through the BRI, illustrating its impact on global trade and cultural exchange. Key infrastructure developments aimed at enhancing intercontinental connectivity are analyzed, alongside the interplay between the BRI and the European Union's Global Gateway initiative. This paper aims to evaluate the opportunities and challenges presented by such initiatives in promoting sustainable development and economic diversification. Additionally, the study assesses the implications for economic growth and regional stability, providing a comprehensive overview of the strategic landscape shaped by these initiatives.

**Keywords:** Silk Roads, Belt and Road Initiative, trade, geopolitics, infrastructure, economic growth, regional cooperation, Global Gateway, sustainable development, cultural exchange.

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## Introduction

The Silk Road, as a concept and corridor, has evolved through multiple interpretative lenses—from imperial cartography to cultural renaissance to geopolitical grand strategy. First coined by the German geographer **Ferdinand von Richthofen** in the 1870s as *Seidenstraße*, the term originally referred to the ancient trade routes that spanned **from Xi'an to the Mediterranean**, enabling the exchange of **silk, jade, paper, and spices** alongside **technologies, religions, and diplomatic missions**. Richthofen's approach was grounded in physical geography and economic history, emphasizing the **land-based arteries of trade** that connected Han China with the Roman Empire through a Eurasian overland matrix.

**Sven Hedin**, the Swedish explorer of Central Asia, followed in Richthofen's intellectual footsteps, bringing a more **romanticized and archaeological lens** to the Silk Road. Venturing through the **Taklamakan Desert, Lop Nur, and Kashgar**, he uncovered ruins of Buddhist temples, lost cities, and dried-out riverbeds that suggested

a long-lost civilizational richness once flowing along these arteries. For Hedin, the Silk Road was not just a trade route but a **cultural frontier**, bearing traces of Indian, Persian, Chinese, and Turkic civilizations layered in the sands.

In contrast, **Peter Frankopan's** 21st-century reinterpretation (*The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*) pivots the narrative from Western Europe to the **heart of Eurasia**. Rather than viewing the Silk Road as a peripheral curiosity, Frankopan recenters **Persia, Central Asia, and the Levant** as the crucibles of global exchange. His Silk Road is not a singular path but a **fluid network of circulation**—of gold, knowledge, empires, pandemics, and religious movements—binding together the **Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and Chinese worlds**. Frankopan's account revives the ancient Silk Road as a **multipolar system**, challenging Eurocentric historical templates and echoing the connective spirit of our globalized age.

The **Chinese state**, in turn, has not merely inherited this legacy but has **strategically repurposed it**. The **Belt and**

**Road Initiative (BRI)**, launched in 2013, invokes the romantic symbolism of the Silk Road while projecting **21st-century infrastructure, digital, and energy corridors** across Eurasia, Africa, and beyond. Historically, the Chinese Silk Road was state-supported from the Han Dynasty (Zhang Qian's diplomatic missions in the 2nd century BCE) through the Tang and Yuan periods, when China exported **paper, porcelain, and gunpowder** and absorbed **Islamic astronomy, Buddhism, and Persian art**. The modern Chinese approach mirrors this history in its ambition to **restore China's centrality** in global trade, albeit through **rail links, port leases, fiber-optic cables, and development finance**.

So, *Silk Roads* is an apposite title. There has not been in history one Silk Road. The Chinese term for the **Silk Road** is:

丝绸之路 (*sī chóu zhī lù*)

- 丝绸 (*sī chóu*) = silk
- 之 (*zhī*) = a classical possessive particle, like "of"
- 路 (*lù*) = road or route

So, 丝绸之路 literally means **"the road of silk."**

This term can refer to both the ancient overland trade routes and the maritime routes, sometimes specified as 海上丝绸之路 *hǎi shàng sī chóu zhī lù*, meaning "Maritime Silk Road, a term indicative of a desire for possession and to be part of the known world to Chinese merchants.

The phrase **"roads of silk"** refers to the ancient trade routes known as the Silk Road, highlighting silk as the most important and valuable commodity traded along them. This genitive construction indicates that the routes were defined by the movement and exchange of silk, which was highly prized in places like Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Originating during the Han Dynasty around 130 BCE, these roads connected China to the West through both overland and maritime paths. Silk symbolized luxury and was often used as currency, making it central to the identity of the trade network. The phrase emphasizes not only the economic value of silk but also the cultural exchange it facilitated. Alongside silk, other goods like tea, porcelain, spices, and silver were traded. The term "roads of silk" captures the essence of international trade and cultural interaction in the pre-modern world.

In history, the Silk Road was a vast trade network connecting China with Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, active from around 130 BCE to the 1600s. It began during the Han Dynasty, when silk, jade, and lacquerware were exported in exchange for horses and glassware. Trade flourished in the Tang Dynasty, with exports like tea, paper, and porcelain, and imports including spices

and precious metals. The Yuan Dynasty saw a golden age of Silk Road trade under the Mongol Empire, which ensured safety and efficiency across Eurasia. During this time, goods like gunpowder and printing techniques were exchanged alongside luxury items. In the Ming Dynasty, overland trade declined, but the Maritime Silk Road grew, with Zheng He's voyages reaching as far as Africa. China exported silk, ceramics, and tea while importing silver, gems, and tropical goods. Though exact trade volumes are unknown, silk alone was so valuable it was once used as currency.

Peter Frankopan is a British historian and professor at the University of Oxford, specializing in Byzantine history and the Middle East. In *The Silk Roads*, Frankopan aims to shift the traditional Eurocentric perspective of world history by highlighting the centrality of Central Asia and the Middle East in shaping global events, comparable to the historically correct understanding of its uses. He posits that the region stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the Himalayas has been the true heart of global history, influencing the rise and fall of empires, the spread of religions, and the flow of goods and ideas.

Frankopan argues that the traditional narrative of world history, which centers on Europe and the West, overlooks the significant role played by the East. He contends that the Silk Roads—ancient trade routes connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa—have been the arteries of global exchange, facilitating not only the movement of goods but also ideas, religions, and cultures. By focusing on this region, Frankopan seeks to provide a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of world history.

*The Silk Roads* is divided into several sections, each exploring different periods and themes:

- **Ancient Foundations:** The book begins with the early civilizations of Mesopotamia and Persia, examining how trade routes facilitated the exchange of goods and ideas.
- **The Rise of Empires:** Frankopan delves into the expansion of empires such as the Persian, Byzantine, and Mongol empires, highlighting their control over the Silk Roads and the resulting cultural and economic exchanges.
- **Religious and Cultural Exchange:** The spread of religions like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam along the Silk Roads is explored, illustrating how these faiths influenced diverse cultures.
- **Medieval Prosperity and Decline:** The book discusses the flourishing of cities like Baghdad and Samarkand, and the eventual decline due to invasions and the rise of maritime trade routes.

- **Modern Implications:** Frankopan concludes by examining the resurgence of the East in contemporary global politics, particularly through initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Frankopan employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from history, economics, and political science. He utilizes a wide range of sources, including historical texts, archaeological findings, and contemporary analyses, to support his arguments. The book is well-researched and provides extensive footnotes and references, demonstrating a thorough engagement with existing scholarship.

### Strengths

- **Innovative Perspective:** Frankopan's focus on the East offers a refreshing and necessary counterpoint to traditional Western-centric histories.
- **Engaging Writing Style:** The book is accessible to a general audience while maintaining scholarly rigor, making complex historical events understandable.
- **Richly Detailed:** Frankopan provides a wealth of information, drawing connections between diverse cultures and historical periods.

### Weaknesses

- **Overemphasis on Central Asia:** Some critics argue that the book places too much focus on Central Asia, potentially neglecting other regions' contributions to world history.
- **Limited Analysis of Contemporary Issues:** While the book touches on modern developments, it could benefit from a deeper analysis of current geopolitical dynamics.

*The Silk Roads* challenges the traditional historiographical framework that centers on Western Europe. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of civilizations across Eurasia, Frankopan aligns with theories of world-systems and global history that advocate for a more inclusive and interconnected understanding of the past.

Frankopan's work significantly contributes to the field of world history by providing a comprehensive narrative that repositions the East at the center of global historical developments. The book encourages scholars and readers to reconsider the importance of regions traditionally viewed as peripheral and to appreciate the complex interconnections that have shaped the modern world.

*The Silk Roads* is suitable for a wide audience, including students, scholars, and general readers interested in history, politics, and global studies. The writing is clear and engaging, with minimal jargon, making it accessible to readers without specialized knowledge.

Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads* offers a compelling and thought-provoking reexamination of world history. By shifting the focus to the East, Frankopan provides valuable insights into the interconnectedness of civilizations and the importance of regions often overlooked in traditional narratives. While the book has some limitations, its strengths make it a significant contribution to the field and a worthwhile read for anyone interested in understanding the broader forces that have shaped our world.

**Historical Perspective:** Frankopan's work emphasizes how the original Silk Roads connected East and West, facilitating economic, cultural, and political exchange. He suggests that the modern BRI is a re-establishment of these historical trade routes, which could have positive effects on global trade.

**Impacts on Trade:** Frankopan emphasizes the "Bridge" role of the Silk Roads in linking Europe with Asia. Countries along these routes stand to gain from enhanced trade, investment, and cultural exchange, especially in regions like Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe.

### Other studies on the Silk Road of a More Contemporary Nature Encompass

The World Bank Report on BRI (2020):

**Infrastructure and Trade Impact:** A World Bank study noted that the BRI could increase global trade by up to 6.2% by 2040. This translates into a \$1.7 trillion increase in global GDP, with notable gains for Central and Eastern Europe.

**Regional Gains:** The report highlights that the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Baltic regions would benefit from improved access to global markets, particularly in manufacturing and energy.

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Report (2018):

**Economic Growth:** This report concluded that BRI infrastructure projects could increase trade between China and Europe by up to 20-30%, particularly through improved rail and maritime connections. This will reduce transportation costs, thus driving down prices for consumers and increasing the overall volume of trade.

**Job Creation and Investment:** The study found that BRI-related projects are projected to create hundreds of thousands of jobs in Europe, especially in construction, transportation, and logistics sectors. Increased foreign direct investment (FDI) is also expected, particularly in ports, roads, and railways.

European Commission (2020) – "The Role of Transport in BRI":

**Connectivity and Economic Growth:** The European



Commission report on the BRI focuses on the potential of improved transport corridors in Eastern and Southern Europe. It states that the successful integration of BRI-related infrastructure projects in the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions could increase regional GDP by as much as 1.2% annually by improving access to both Asian and European markets.

**Logistics Sector Expansion:** European ports, particularly in the Mediterranean (e.g., Piraeus, Venice), are seeing increased investment from Chinese firms. This could lead to an increase in the region's share of global maritime trade.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Study (2019):

**Impact on Central and Eastern Europe:** The EBRD found that the BRI's transportation and infrastructure projects could bring up to a 5-10% increase in trade and GDP growth to countries in the Black Sea region, particularly through enhanced access to markets in China and Central Asia.

European Economic Area Study (2018):

**Maritime Silk Road Growth:** The study projected that by 2040, the BRI could increase the volume of cargo passing through European Mediterranean ports by 25-30%, largely driven by China's trade expansion to Europe. This would reduce costs for importers and exporters in Southern Europe, making Mediterranean ports more competitive in global trade.

## Bridge Effects on Growth and Exchange

The "bridge effect" refers to the way countries positioned between major economic areas (such as Europe and Asia) can act as critical transit hubs, facilitating economic exchange and benefiting from increased trade flows.

**Trade Volume Growth:** The reestablishment of the Silk Road routes will significantly reduce trade costs. For example, rail shipments from China to Europe could decrease by 30-40% in cost compared to sea routes, providing a competitive advantage to countries on these land routes, like those in Eastern and Central Europe, including the Baltic and Black Sea regions.

**Economic Growth:** The bridge effect will stimulate job creation, infrastructure development, and FDI inflows. Studies show that GDP growth could range from 2% to 5% in the affected regions by 2030, particularly as trade volumes and infrastructure investments increase.

**Cultural and Technological Exchange:** The Silk Road also encourages the exchange of ideas, technologies, and innovations. This could have a significant effect on the

growth of technology sectors in countries along the route, including those in the Mediterranean and Baltic regions.

Turkey's role in the Middle Corridor, its relations with China in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Iran's potential positioning in global trade and globalization are all intertwined in significant ways. Let's break this down into key components.

## Turkey and the Middle Corridor

According to Frankopan, historically Turkey managed to block the inroads Chinese merchants of the Silk Road into the Mediterranean hurting prospects for trade and growth in the Mediterranean. The lessons learned is that Turkey's role perception as a bridge between the Eu and Caucasus and the Middle East could also be amenable to greater integration between the Eastern and Western end of Eurasia.

The Middle Corridor refers to a trade and transport route that connects China and Europe through Central Asia, passing through key countries such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. It's often seen as an alternative to the longer, more congested sea routes and potentially as a route bypassing geopolitical tensions in the Middle East.

**Strategic Importance:** Turkey is a central player in the Middle Corridor due to its geographic location, acting as a bridge between Europe and Asia. The country plays a pivotal role in facilitating the movement of goods between the East and West, particularly through the

Trans-Caspian International Transport Route.

**Infrastructure Development:** Turkey has been investing heavily in its transportation infrastructure, such as expanding its railway systems (the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway) and modernizing its ports (e.g., Istanbul's new mega port). These projects aim to enhance connectivity and promote smoother trade flows between Asia and Europe, contributing to Turkey's ambition of becoming a regional transit hub.

**Political and Economic Leverage:** Through the Middle Corridor, Turkey is positioning itself as a critical node in the global trade network, thus increasing its political and economic leverage in Eurasian and global affairs.

Turkey sits at the strategic crossroads of Europe and Asia, bordered by the Black, Aegean, and Mediterranean seas and neighboring key regions such as the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Balkans. This unique location gives Turkey enormous geopolitical leverage as a natural bridge for trade across Eurasia. To enhance its role as a conduit for trade between Europe and East Asia, Turkey can take several integrated steps.

First, Turkey should prioritize upgrading and expanding its transport infrastructure. Projects like the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway are crucial in connecting Central Asia to Europe through Turkey, and expanding these networks will make Turkey more central to transcontinental logistics. In tandem, the development of multimodal logistics hubs, particularly in Istanbul, Mersin, and Izmir, would facilitate more efficient freight movement. By investing in the Middle Corridor—an overland route that avoids both Russia and maritime chokepoints—Turkey can position itself as a strategic alternative in a world of increasingly fragile global supply chains.

In addition to infrastructure, deeper integration with regional trade blocs is essential. Turkey can strengthen ties with Central Asian republics and South Caucasus countries through trade agreements and shared infrastructure projects. Its engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative can be deepened in a balanced and strategic way, ensuring long-term benefits without overdependence. Simultaneously, improved relations with the EU, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Gulf states will allow Turkey to act as a bridge between multiple economic systems.

Modernizing digital infrastructure and customs processes will further boost Turkey's appeal as a trade corridor. By streamlining border logistics and adopting harmonized trade regulations, Turkey can reduce friction for goods moving between continents and become known as a fast, reliable, and business-friendly transit country.

Turkey's energy role is also critical. As a natural corridor for oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian and Middle East to Europe, Turkey already plays an important part in regional energy dynamics. Expanding this role to include renewable energy transmission and improved grid connectivity would not only strengthen its energy relevance but also complement its broader trade ambitions.

Diplomatic balance and regional stability are equally vital. Turkey must maintain cooperative, neutral relations with global powers including China, Russia, the EU, the U.S., and Iran. Its ability to mediate or defuse regional conflicts—particularly in the South Caucasus and the Middle East—will enhance its reputation as a stable, dependable link in global trade networks.

Positioning Istanbul as a financial and commercial hub for Eurasian investment would also pay dividends. Turkey can develop free trade zones and logistics-centered industrial clusters to attract foreign investment, becoming not just a route for goods but a site for high-value production and innovation.

Finally, Turkey has an opportunity to capitalize on global supply chain shifts. As companies seek to diversify

manufacturing and reduce reliance on distant East Asian suppliers, Turkey can present itself as a nearshoring alternative—particularly attractive to European and Middle Eastern markets. Expanding industrial capacity in sectors like automotive, electronics, and textiles would turn Turkey into a central node not just in trade, but in production as well.

While geography provides the foundation for this potential, realizing it requires deliberate strategy. Through smart infrastructure investment, regulatory modernization, balanced diplomacy, and industrial innovation, Turkey can move from being a geographic bridge to becoming an indispensable economic corridor—one that links the opposite ends of Eurasia in a 21st-century Silk Road.

### Turkey-China Relations and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

China's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**—a modern echo of the ancient Silk Road—winds its way through the heart of Eurasia, and Turkey stands as a **vital crossroads** on this sprawling map of ambition. More than just a bridge between East and West, Turkey is becoming a **keystone in the arch of global connectivity**, where trade routes converge, cultures intersect, and strategic interests collide.

At the heart of this dynamic lies the evolving relationship between **Ankara and Beijing**. **Bilateral ties are growing, deepening, expanding**—fueled by a mutual recognition of economic potential and geopolitical relevance. China, now one of Turkey's largest trading partners, views Turkey not merely as a transit point, but as a **strategic gateway** to European markets through the Middle Corridor. This overland route, bypassing maritime chokepoints and volatile regions, offers Beijing a faster, more secure passage to the West—and Turkey, in turn, gains leverage, investment, and influence.

The impact is twofold. **China secures access; Turkey gains stature. China exports infrastructure; Turkey imports opportunity.** From high-speed railways to energy corridors, Chinese investments are reshaping Turkey's physical and economic landscape. Ports are deepened, rails extended, and highways broadened—not only in concrete and steel but also in promise and possibility.

Yet this relationship is more than economics—it is a **strategic dance**. Turkey must balance its embrace of Chinese capital with its commitments to the West, its NATO obligations, and its complex regional alliances. To fully benefit from the BRI, Turkey must not merely **host the road**—it must **own its place on it**, defining its terms, protecting its interests, and leveraging its geography into long-term advantage.

In the grand theater of 21st-century geopolitics, the BRI is

not just a plan—it is a performance. And Turkey, situated at the very center of the stage, must decide whether it will be a **silent corridor** or a **sovereign actor**—a place that goods pass through, or a power that shapes what passes through it.

### **Economic Impact of BRI**

**Infrastructure Investments:** China has invested heavily in Turkish infrastructure, including the development of transport networks like railways and ports, helping Turkey enhance its position as a key transit point.

**Trade and Connectivity:** The BRI strengthens trade between China and Turkey, with Turkey acting as a logistics hub between Europe and Asia. Increased connectivity under the BRI boosts Turkish exports, especially in areas like textiles, machinery, and automotive products.

**Financial Investments:** China's financial assistance and loans for infrastructure projects enable Turkey to improve its domestic infrastructure, though it also creates concerns about the long-term debt burden.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

**Competition and Geopolitical Tensions:** There is potential competition with other regional powers like Russia and the European Union. Additionally, political concerns, especially regarding Turkey's NATO membership and its relations with the U.S., can create complexities in deepening ties with China.

**Future Economic Potential:** As China's global influence continues to grow, Turkey's participation in BRI could help it further integrate into global trade networks, expanding its economic base through increased exports, trade diversification, and investment in critical sectors like energy and technology.

## **The Impact of Successful Completion of BRI**

Let's explore how these European subregions could benefit and look at some studies and numbers related to the reintegration of the Silk Road, particularly focusing on the effects of infrastructure improvements on economic growth and exchange.

### **Impact on Europe's Subregions:**

#### ***Baltic Sea Region***

The Baltic Sea region is already an important hub for trade between Europe and Russia, and also a gateway for goods moving to and from Northern Europe. The Silk Road could boost this region by:

**Enhanced Connectivity:** With better rail and road connections from China through Russia and into the Baltic,

goods could flow more easily between the two regions, reducing transportation costs and times.

**Trade Growth:** Improved links with China would likely increase exports of goods such as machinery, electronics, and automobiles from Baltic states to China. Conversely, China could use the Baltic as a transit route for its goods entering European markets.

**Port Development:** Ports in the Baltic (e.g., in Gdansk, Klaipeda, and Tallinn) could benefit from improved logistics and shipping infrastructure, making them more competitive for global trade.

**Energy Security and Cooperation:** With infrastructure development and economic ties deepening, Baltic states might also benefit from energy projects such as pipelines and energy distribution networks that align with Silk Road projects.

#### ***Black Sea Region***

The Black Sea region, home to countries like Turkey, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria, will likely see significant positive effects from the BRI, especially through enhanced maritime and land connections:

**Maritime Trade:** The Black Sea offers access to key maritime routes linking Europe with Asia, and its ports (e.g., Constanța, Odessa, Istanbul, and Varna\*\*) could benefit from increased trade traffic.

**Increased Investment:** Countries in this region could see more Chinese investment in infrastructure, particularly in ports, logistics networks, and energy infrastructure.

**Land Routes:** The overland route linking Central Asia and Europe passes through the Caucasus and Turkey, further boosting Turkey's role as a critical node in connecting the Black Sea with the broader European market.

**Tourism and Economic Diversification:** Improved connectivity and stability from Silk Road reintegration could lead to a more diversified economy, where countries in the region can build on industries like tourism, agriculture, and light manufacturing.

#### ***Mediterranean Region***

The Mediterranean is at the crossroads of trade between Europe, Asia, and Africa. With its key ports and geographic location, the region stands to benefit substantially:

**Port Expansion and Infrastructure Development:** Major Mediterranean ports (e.g., Piraeus in Greece, Genoa in Italy, Valencia in Spain) would see significant upgrades, improving their capacity to handle increased trade volumes.

**Investment Flows:** China's growing investment in Mediterranean countries, particularly through infrastructure



development, would enhance the region's competitiveness and strategic importance.

**Greater Trade Flows:** Mediterranean countries could expect to benefit from improved access to the markets of Central Asia, the Middle East, and China, boosting exports in sectors like agriculture, textiles, and manufacturing.

**Economic Diversification:** Countries in Southern Europe and North Africa (particularly Mediterranean basin countries) could diversify their economies, relying less on traditional industries like tourism and agriculture.

## Iran's Positioning in Globalization

Iran's situation is more complicated due to its geopolitical challenges, particularly its strained relations with Western powers. However, its strategic location and resources offer significant potential if managed well in the context of global trade.

### Geopolitical Strategy

Iran sits at a crossroads between Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. It has access to both continental and maritime trade routes, especially through its ports in the Persian Gulf (e.g., Bandar Abbas).

The Silk Road revamp through China's BRI could offer Iran new opportunities, particularly in connecting with Central Asia and Europe via the Iranian land route, which could become a key part of the Middle Corridor.

### Continental and Maritime Advantages

**Maritime:** Iran's proximity to key shipping lanes, especially in the Strait of Hormuz (which handles a significant portion of the world's oil shipments), gives it considerable leverage in maritime trade. Iran could capitalize on this by developing port facilities and enhancing its maritime logistics capabilities, allowing it to play a central role in regional and global trade.

**Continental:** Overland trade routes through Iran could serve as a key alternative for countries looking to avoid sea routes. As the Middle Corridor becomes more important, Iran's rail and road networks could facilitate more trade between China, Europe, and the Middle East. In this sense, Iran's strategic land connections offer it a way to engage with both BRI and European markets.

### Economic Development through Globalization

**Diversification of Trade:** By improving its trade relations with neighboring countries and leveraging the BRI, Iran could diversify its economic base, moving beyond oil exports into more manufacturing and technological sectors.

**Leveraging Sanctions:** Despite the sanctions, Iran can

look to non-Western countries, such as China and Russia, for investment and trade partnerships. If the geopolitical environment stabilizes, Iran could emerge as a critical node in both continental and maritime trade routes.

**Regional Cooperation:** Iran could also enhance regional cooperation through trade agreements with Central Asian countries, Turkey, and the Arab world, using its location to integrate itself into a broader network of trade partnerships.

### Recommendations for Iran

**Strengthening Infrastructure:** Iran should invest heavily in modernizing its infrastructure, particularly in transportation (rail, roads, ports) to facilitate trade along both continental and maritime routes.

**Regional Diplomacy:** Iran should prioritize strengthening relations with countries in the region, particularly through regional trade agreements like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Caspian Sea littoral states, and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), to maximize its geopolitical and economic position.

**Diversifying Trade Partners:** By continuing to foster strong relations with China, Russia, and emerging markets in Central Asia, Iran could gradually mitigate the negative effects of Western sanctions and improve its economic resilience.

**Exploit Maritime Leverage:** Given its control over critical maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, Iran can position itself as a central maritime trading hub, potentially cooperating with BRI-related projects to enhance its shipping and port infrastructure.

Iran sits at a **geographical and strategic fulcrum**—a land bridge linking the energy-rich Middle East, the vast markets of Europe, and the rapidly expanding economies of Asia. For a reforming Iran eager to reengage with the global economy, this location offers an extraordinary opportunity to transform itself into a pivotal **transit hub** and economic powerhouse along the Belt and Road Initiative.

By embracing comprehensive reforms—political liberalization, economic modernization, and regional diplomacy—Iran could break free from decades of international isolation and sanctions. Such reforms would signal to global investors and governments that Iran is ready to serve as a **stable and reliable conduit** for trade and energy flow. This repositioning is crucial because, despite its geography, Iran's transit potential remains underutilized due to geopolitical uncertainties.

Within the BRI framework, Iran's vast landmass could serve as a **crucial overland corridor** connecting China's western provinces to the European Union.

The northern routes through Central Asia and Russia face their own geopolitical challenges, while maritime routes are vulnerable to disruptions and piracy. Iran's infrastructure—roads, railways, and ports—if upgraded and integrated efficiently, could offer an alternative, faster, and secure route. For instance, linking Iran's Persian Gulf ports with its northern borders and onward to Turkey and Europe could create a seamless transport chain, making Iran indispensable to Eurasian trade networks.

Iran's **energy reserves** add another layer of strategic value. It is a major supplier of oil and gas, and as global demand evolves, it could leverage energy exports as part of broader trade and infrastructure partnerships under BRI. Coupling energy transit with goods transit would position Iran as a **dual-purpose corridor**, essential both for commodities and manufactured goods.

However, to capitalize fully, Iran would need to pursue sustained regional cooperation, particularly with neighbors like Turkey, Iraq, and Central Asian states, harmonizing customs regimes and investing in joint infrastructure projects. Diplomatically, a reforming Iran should seek to ease tensions with the West and Gulf neighbors, fostering a more predictable and peaceful regional environment conducive to trade.

Finally, Iran's youthful population and growing tech-savvy workforce could transform transit hubs into centers of innovation, logistics services, and manufacturing, moving beyond a simple passageway to become a vibrant economic hub in its own right.

In sum, a reforming Iran, by marrying its **strategic geography with political and economic reforms**, can evolve from a sidelined player into a cornerstone of the 21st-century Silk Road—a bridge not just for goods and energy, but for cooperation, development, and regional integration between Europe and China under the ambitious vision of the Belt and Road Initiative.

## Structural Improvements to BRI

To improve the structure of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and better align it with both EU and Central Asian interests—while enabling shared global leadership in globalization—China should evolve the BRI into a co-led, rules-based, transparent, and multilateral initiative. This could involve:

1. **Multilateral Governance Council:** Include EU, Central Asia, and other stakeholders in a transparent steering group.
2. **Green Investment Standards:** Adopt EU-compliant environmental and sustainability criteria.
3. **Decentralized Hubs:** Create regional decision-making

hubs in Europe and Central Asia.

4. **Joint Funding Mechanisms:** EU-China co-financing of major projects with oversight from development banks.
5. **Digital BRI 2.0:** Standardize data, cybersecurity, and infrastructure for inclusive digital trade.
6. **Academic and Civil Society Forums:** Institutionalize civil society engagement and think tank collaborations.
7. **Labor Mobility Pacts:** Promote legal and safe labor mobility between China, Central Asia, and Europe.
- Dispute Resolution System:** Create a neutral, multilateral arbitration mechanism.
8. **Interoperability and Standardization:** Harmonize technical standards between EU and BRI infrastructure.
9. **BRI Blue Corridors:** Joint maritime trade zones with transparent customs and environmental policies.

## Global Gateway and Belt and Road

The European Union's **Global Gateway** initiative, launched in December 2021, represents a strategic response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). With a projected investment of €300 billion from 2021 to 2027, the Global Gateway aims to enhance global infrastructure connectivity through sustainable and transparent projects (Wikipedia)

The Global Gateway emerged as a reaction to China's expanding influence via the BRI, which has significantly shaped infrastructure development in the Global South. The EU recognized the need to assert its presence in global infrastructure financing, emphasizing values such as sustainability, transparency, and adherence to high environmental and social standards.

The Global Gateway has mobilized substantial investments, focusing on areas like digital connectivity, green energy, and sustainable transportation. By promoting projects that adhere to stringent governance standards, the initiative aims to offer an alternative to the BRI's approach, which has faced criticism for lack of transparency and potential debt traps.

Despite its ambitious goals, the Global Gateway faces several challenges:

- **Funding Scale:** The €300 billion budget, while significant, is smaller compared to China's extensive investments under the BRI.
- **Implementation Speed:** EU's decentralized decision-making and stringent regulations can lead to slower project execution compared to China's more centralized approach.
- **Transparency Concerns:** Critics argue that the Global



Gateway lacks clarity in its decision-making processes and project selection, potentially undermining its credibility

The Global Gateway and the BRI are often viewed as competing initiatives, with the EU aiming to counterbalance China's influence through its own infrastructure projects. However, this rivalry can lead to fragmented efforts and inefficiencies in global infrastructure development.

To enhance the competitiveness and effectiveness of the Global Gateway initiative, the EU Commission should consider increasing its overall funding and introducing more flexible financial mechanisms. This would enable quicker allocation and disbursement of resources to priority projects, helping to reduce bureaucratic delays that currently slow progress.

Streamlining decision-making processes and accelerating project implementation is also crucial; simplifying internal procedures and empowering a dedicated coordinating body with clear authority would ensure faster approvals and better oversight.

Strengthening strategic partnerships with key countries, international financial institutions, the private sector, and local stakeholders will help pool resources, avoid duplication, and ensure projects align with local needs and priorities, enhancing sustainability. Improving transparency around project selection, funding allocation, and progress reporting, combined with proactive communication campaigns, can build trust and clearly demonstrate how the Global Gateway offers an alternative rooted in sustainability, transparency, and good governance.

Focusing investments on high-impact sectors such as renewable energy, digital infrastructure, health systems, and climate resilience will maximize developmental benefits. Tailoring these investments to regional priorities, especially connectivity between Europe, Africa, and Asia, will further enhance their relevance and impact. Leveraging the EU's technical expertise and stringent environmental, social, and governance standards will help differentiate the Global Gateway through quality and long-term value creation, supported by technical assistance and capacity-building alongside financing.

Moreover, rather than positioning itself purely in competition with China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Gateway could explore areas for cooperation and alignment on shared objectives like sustainable infrastructure development. Joint ventures or co-financed projects could combine the EU's regulatory rigor with China's financing capacity, creating synergies and greater impact. Finally, expanding the initiative's focus on digital connectivity and green technologies—supporting

innovation hubs and renewable energy projects—will help futureproof investments and align with broader EU priorities such as the Green Deal.

By adopting these approaches, the EU Commission can sharpen the Global Gateway's competitive edge and position it as a trusted, effective, and sustainable partner in the global infrastructure landscape.

Despite their differences, the Global Gateway and the BRI can complement each other:

- **Regional Integration:** Collaborative projects can enhance connectivity between Europe, Asia, and Africa, leveraging both initiatives' strengths.
- **Shared Goals:** Both initiatives aim to improve infrastructure, albeit with different methodologies, and can align on common objectives such as sustainable development and economic growth.
- **Resource Pooling:** Joint ventures can combine EU's regulatory expertise and China's financing capabilities, leading to more efficient and impactful projects.

In conclusion, while the Global Gateway and the BRI have distinct approaches and objectives, there is potential for synergy. By focusing on complementary strengths and shared goals, both initiatives can contribute to a more interconnected and sustainable global infrastructure landscape.

## **BRI Projects (Sea + Land) the EU and Central Asia Could Lead, Outside Beijing's Vision**

While China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has set an ambitious framework for infrastructure and connectivity across Eurasia, there is significant potential for the European Union and Central Asian countries to initiate and lead their own strategic projects along both maritime and overland corridors. These projects can complement, diversify, or even serve as alternatives to Beijing's vision by emphasizing sustainability, regional ownership, and alignment with local priorities.

Examples include enhancing digital infrastructure hubs in Central Asia, developing green energy corridors linking the Caspian region to Europe, modernizing ports along the Black Sea and Mediterranean coastlines, expanding multimodal transport centers in Turkey and the Caucasus, and investing in rail networks that bypass traditional BRI routes. Projects focused on environmental protection, cross-border trade facilitation, and regional economic clusters could also stimulate deeper integration and resilience.

By spearheading these initiatives, the EU and Central Asia can assert greater agency over regional development,

promote transparency and good governance, and foster more balanced economic growth across the continent. This approach not only offers alternatives to the topdown nature of some BRI projects but also strengthens the broader Eurasian economic landscape by encouraging diversified partnerships and innovative infrastructure models.

### Land-Based Projects

1. Central Asia-EU Hydrogen Corridor Build pipelines and solar farms for green hydrogen exports from Kazakhstan to Europe via Ukraine.
2. Smart Agro-Supply Rail Hub in Uzbekistan EU-led logistics and agri-tech rail terminal connecting to EU markets.
3. Eurasia Open Data Rail Network Rail data-sharing project for real-time freight tracking (EU-standard transparency).
4. Eco-Railway Belt Through the Caspian A low-emission train route from Baku to Bucharest via the Caucasus and Black Sea.
5. Tashkent-Almaty Circular Economy Tech Park EU-funded R&D hub focused on circular economy models for Central Asia.
6. Green Border Trade Zones (Turkmenistan-Iran, Kazakhstan-Russia) Renewable-powered border customs posts with EU co-design.
7. Sustainable Silk Road Heritage Trail Tourism and cultural conservation corridor from Xi'an to Venice via Central Asia.
8. Central Asia Disaster-Resilient Infrastructure Grid Climate-proof roads, bridges, and storage in seismically active regions.
9. Renewable-Powered EV Corridor from Prague to Tashkent EU-standard charging infrastructure and mobility route.
10. Aral Sea Climate Adaptation Corridor Agroforestry, irrigation tech, and EU water governance reform for Central Asia.
14. Green Maritime Silk Corridor (Trieste to Karachi) Electrified cargo shipping routes using EU-made green fuels and logistics.
15. Arctic-Eurasian Fiber Optic Link via EU-Finland Avoids Chinese undersea cables; links Europe to Central Asia via Russia's north.
16. Baltic-Black Sea Energy Superhighway High-capacity subsea grid linking renewables from EU to Caspian neighbors.
17. EU-Turkey-Central Asia Digital Customs Ports Smart customs zones with paperless processing and AI analytics.
18. Suez-to-Central Asia Green Transit Hub Inland container transshipment center in Azerbaijan serving the Suez-Eurasia route.
19. Biosecure Eurasian Maritime Corridors Sanitation and surveillance systems in BRI maritime ports (post-COVID logistics model).
20. EU-Central Asia Maritime Education & Naval Training Academy: A civilian port training institute headquartered in Georgia or Romania.

In an evolving geopolitical environment, diversification of connectivity projects is crucial. By leading these 20 projects outside of Beijing's centralized framework, the EU and Central Asian countries demonstrate that regional actors can chart their own courses in the transcontinental infrastructurespace. This multiplicity of initiatives enhances competition, improves standards, and reduces dependency, ultimately benefiting all stakeholders. As the Silk Road's legacy is rewritten for the 21st century, collaboration rooted in shared values and regional empowerment will be essential for creating a truly interconnected, sustainable, and prosperous Eurasia.

### From First Encounters to Strategic Competition: Europe and China

The encounter between China and Europe stretches back over a millennium, reflecting cycles of curiosity, trade, cultural exchange, and strategic calculation. The earliest records date to the Tang dynasty (7th–10th centuries), when Arab and European intermediaries transmitted knowledge of China's silk, porcelain, and innovations to the Mediterranean world. By the 13th century, European explorers such as Marco Polo documented firsthand impressions of China, portraying a highly sophisticated civilization that captivated European imagination.

Trade formed the core of early encounters. The Silk Road, both overland and maritime, facilitated exchanges of silk, tea, spices, and precious metals, while European merchants

### Sea-Based Projects

11. Caspian Renewable Maritime Trade Ports EU-backed floating solar and wind-powered ports in Turkmenbashi and Aktau.
12. Black Sea Circular Maritime Trade Loop Short-sea shipping network linking Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Turkey.
13. Mediterranean-Caspian Smart Port Alliance AI-based logistics efficiency across ports like Piraeus, Constanța, and Baku.

gradually established footholds in ports along the South China Sea by the 16th century. The Ming dynasty engaged selectively with European powers, introducing Jesuit missionaries such as Matteo Ricci, who contributed to scientific and cultural knowledge flows, though formal political or strategic ties remained limited.

The 18th and 19th centuries marked a more fraught encounter. Europe's industrial expansion and colonial ambitions clashed with China's territorial integrity, culminating in the Opium Wars and the imposition of unequal treaties. These experiences shaped mutual perceptions: Europe viewed China as a vast, complex market, while China increasingly perceived Europe as technologically advanced yet politically aggressive.

The 20th century saw intermittent engagement punctuated by ideological shifts. Republican and later Communist China navigated a world dominated by European empires and their postcolonial legacies, while European powers contended with domestic reconstruction after two world wars. Direct engagement resumed meaningfully in the 1970s following China's reform and opening under Deng Xiaoping, when trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchanges accelerated.

In the contemporary era, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents the latest phase of this long historical relationship, institutionalizing China's external projection through infrastructure, finance, and technology. Since its formal launch in 2013, the BRI has evolved into a sprawling network connecting over 150 countries (Callahan, 2016; Fallon, 2015). Chinese-financed BRI projects involve over \$1 trillion in contracted investments, with an additional \$150–200 billion in annual trade flows linked to BRI corridors. Trade along BRI routes is projected to increase further, potentially exceeding \$1.5 trillion annually by the early 2030s, driven by energy, raw materials, and manufactured goods (World Bank, 2023; China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, 2024).

Europe's Global Gateway (GG) was launched as a counterweight, yet its limitations underscore a deeper reality: the EU cannot sustain an external strategy without first consolidating internally. The effectiveness of the EU's external arm depends on its ability to strengthen eight interlinked areas of resilience, cohesion, and projection—ordered to reflect the logic of China's modernization push, from internal consolidation to external projection:

1. Internal decision-making and governance. Like China's centralized governance model, the EU's coherence underpins all other policy areas. Currently, the Union's reliance on unanimity in sensitive domains perpetuates delays and compromises, creating openings for external

actors to exploit divisions. Greater use of qualified majority voting in strategic economic areas, alongside improved intelligence-sharing and crisis coordination, would enhance the EU's agility and credibility (Bickerton, Hodson & Puetter, 2015; Fabbrini, 2019).

2. Industrial policy. Domestic industrial strength is essential for strategic autonomy and external credibility. Unlike China's state-directed investments, EU member states often compete rather than collaborate on subsidies, weakening efforts to create champions in semiconductors, batteries, hydrogen, and other strategic sectors. A genuinely European industrial strategy, with conditional support linked to research, employment, and supply-chain integration, would bolster both economic sovereignty and external influence (Zenglein & Holzmann, 2019; Aiginger & Rodrik, 2020).

3. Supply-chain security. Industrial strength depends on resilient supply chains. Europe's reliance on external providers of raw materials, rare earths, and advanced components exposes it to coercion and market shocks. Policies for diversification, stockpiling, recycling, and domestic refining would reduce vulnerability and reinforce the credibility of industrial ambitions (European Commission, 2020; Scholten & Bosman, 2022).

4. Technological governance and standard-setting. Innovation and normative influence stem from domestic capabilities. Europe has demonstrated global normative power in areas such as data protection and environmental regulation (Bradford, 2020), but its ability to lead in digital infrastructure, 5G/6G telecommunications, and dual-use technologies remains uneven. Fragmentation across member states slows collective action, allowing competitors to dominate emerging domains (Pereira & Schmitter, 2021).

5. Trade defence and investment screening. Protecting domestic gains before projecting influence is essential. Instruments such as the Foreign Subsidies Regulation and the framework for screening foreign direct investment are powerful tools, yet inconsistent enforcement diminishes their deterrent effect (Meunier, 2014; García-Herrero, 2020). Without robust application, European markets risk distortion, undermining trust in the single market itself.

6. Financing and external projection. Once internal foundations are secure, credible outward engagement becomes possible. Whereas the BRI signals Chinese commitment through rapid, visible infrastructure projects, the EU's Global Gateway remains slower and more modest in scale. Current GG investments total around €300–400 billion over the next five years, covering infrastructure, digital connectivity, and energy projects. Efficiently



channeling EU resources would strengthen the initiative's strategic weight and showcase European standards of transparency, sustainability, and local value creation (Otero-Iglesias & Molina, 2022; Siddi, 2022).

7. Infrastructure development and strategic presence. The BRI's effectiveness lies in rapid construction of transport corridors, ports, and digital networks. Europe must mirror this capacity, investing in cross-Eurasian corridors, renewable energy hubs, and digital infrastructure that enhance connectivity from Lisbon to the Caucasus. Infrastructure here is not only economic but strategic: it signals presence, strengthens partnerships, and demonstrates operational capability. At a geopolitical level, the EU can draw a parallel to China's stabilization of Xinjiang and cultivation of alliances with the Global South: just as Beijing links internal cohesion with outward influence, Europe must reinforce stability and connectivity at its eastern and southern frontiers through acceleration of its infrastructure program and the implementation of the erstwhile corridors now *Via Europea*. A first opportunity will be at a special EUCO on Enlargement.

8. External diplomacy and alliance-building. Finally, strategic partnerships amplify influence. The EU cannot counterbalance the BRI in isolation; cooperation with the United States, Japan, Canada, and regional organisations strengthens both credibility and reach. Yet the EU's ten Strategic Partnerships would be more persuasive if Europe first consolidates internally and demonstrates tangible infrastructure, industrial, and technological capacity, ensuring that outward engagement is supported by domestic strength (Tocci, 2020; Youngs, 2021).

Taken together, these eight areas illustrate why the EU is falling behind. Where the BRI fuses domestic consolidation with external projection, the EU's initiatives are weakened by fragmentation, slow implementation, and insufficient political commitment. China's model combines internal stabilisation—exemplified by Xinjiang—with outward alliances across the Global South, using infrastructure, finance, and strategic partnerships to project power at one end of Eurasia. Europe, at the opposite end, must recognize that internal resilience, industrial strength, technological coherence, and strategic diplomacy are the preconditions for projecting influence; only by consolidating these areas can the EU make its own connectivity, infrastructure, and partnerships credible. With the BRI poised to facilitate 1.5 trillion dollars in annual trade by the 2030s, and the Global Gateway operating at a fraction of that scale, the need for internal consolidation is urgent. Only by strengthening governance, industrial capacity, supply chains, technological capabilities, trade protection, financing, infrastructure, and alliances can Europe translate

its economic weight into meaningful strategic influence in a world increasingly defined by the intersection of internal strength and external reach. Without political will to organize Europe, conceptual skill to carry through and emotional commitment to unite Europe will never complete the mission handed down to us by the founding fathers of the European Union.

The contrast in trade dynamics further underscores these strategic asymmetries. In 2024, China's total foreign trade reached approximately 6.16 trillion US dollars, with exports accounting for 3.58 trillion and imports totaling 2.59 trillion, resulting in a trade surplus of roughly 992 billion dollars. Its top ten trading partners included the United States, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Germany, India, Malaysia, the Netherlands, and Brazil, together representing a substantial share of total trade and reflecting broad diversification. In comparison, the European Union's total foreign trade is estimated at around 3.96 trillion dollars, combining goods and services, with a modest trade surplus of approximately 42 billion dollars. The EU's trade is concentrated among a few major partners, with the United States, China, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland representing the majority of external trade. China's substantially larger trade volume and surplus, together with its diversified partner network, underscore its capacity to project influence globally. By contrast, the EU's smaller, more concentrated trade highlights the importance of internal cohesion and strategic partnerships in amplifying its external reach.

Europe's historical genius in science, industry, and governance has long illuminated the world stage, crafting institutions, ideas, and technologies that have shaped global norms and advanced the common good. This inheritance confers upon the Union a profound potential to exercise influence not through coercion but through the magnetism of example—through the power of reasoned policy, innovation, and principled engagement. Yet this potential is neither automatic nor inexhaustible. Its realization depends on the Union and its member states consolidating their strengths, bridging internal divides, and channeling their collective ingenuity with deliberate foresight. In the absence of such cohesion, the mantle of leadership may drift to other ascending powers, not through conquest, but through the quiet attrition of opportunity. Europe's enduring relevance, therefore, rests not on the assertion of superiority, but on the disciplined and virtuous application of its historical capacities, on a self-conscious cultivation of excellence that inspires cooperation, sets standards, and leaves a legacy of constructive influence. Europe shall rise to shape the world once more, its genius in science, governance, and industry illuminating the paths of progress. Yet this brilliance is neither eternal nor guaranteed; should

the European nation-states falter, squander their creativity, or succumb to internal fragmentation, the mantle of leadership will inevitably pass to other rising powers, reminding the world that the cycles of history are relentless and that influence must always be earned and renewed

In other words, just as China binds internal stability with external reach, Europe must mirror that dynamic in its own context at the opposite end of Eurasia, ensuring that strengthening domestic capacity is inseparable from strategic engagement abroad. Europe shall rule the world once more until the European nation-state and the local elites collapses and the Asians take over.

### **The China-Russia Partnership, Eurasian Geopolitics, and Implications for the EU, Central Asia, and India**

The relationship between China and Russia represents one of the most consequential axes in contemporary global geopolitics, characterized by a complex and evolving balance of power. Economically, China's rapid growth, technological advancement, and deep integration into global value chains provide it with significant leverage over Russia, whose economy remains smaller, resource-dependent, and increasingly constrained by Western sanctions. This economic asymmetry positions China as the dominant partner, despite Russia's enduring military capabilities and nuclear arsenal. While Russia continues to exert influence through its conventional and strategic military assets, China's expanding military modernization—particularly in missile technology, naval power, and cyber capabilities—suggests a gradual narrowing of the traditional Russian advantage.

Energy and natural resources have historically underpinned Sino-Russian cooperation. Russia's hydrocarbon exports to China complement the latter's financing, technological support, and market access. However, this energy dependence has also shifted strategic leverage toward China, given Russia's growing reliance on Chinese markets in the context of international sanctions. Diplomatic alignment, rooted in shared opposition to US hegemony and advocacy of a multipolar world, reinforces the partnership, although underlying mistrust persists regarding issues such as border security, influence in Central Asia, and long-term strategic objectives. Both regimes emphasize sovereignty, non-interference, and multipolarity, yet China's relative rise increasingly frames it as the preeminent actor within this ostensibly "shared" Eurasian vision.

While the relationship has traditionally centered on energy, trade, and arms transfers, recent trends suggest a cautious movement beyond these domains. Chinese investment in Russian digital infrastructure, fintech, and high-tech industries indicates an emerging strategic dimension

beyond mere resource exchange. Joint projects in railways, ports, and connectivity further illustrate attempts to deepen economic integration. Militarily, high-level exercises, joint naval patrols, and nascent cooperation in cybersecurity and space reflect an evolving security partnership. Nevertheless, the relationship remains asymmetrical: Russia provides natural resources and military legitimacy, whereas China offers technology, capital, and global reach. This asymmetry constrains the partnership's long-term depth, as Russia seeks to avoid over-dependence, and China maintains a careful balance between influence and overt domination.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Eurasian Geopolitics**

The evolving Sino-Russian axis can be better understood through contemporary theoretical frameworks. Mankoff emphasizes Russia's historical imperial logic, highlighting how military, political, and economic instruments serve to maintain strategic depth and regional authority. MacFarlane shifts attention toward Eurasia as an emergent geopolitical space, defined by infrastructure, trade networks, and multipolar competition, where economic and institutional integration shape influence alongside military capacity. Kaplan's reinterpretation of the World Island builds upon Mackinder's Heartland Theory, asserting the enduring strategic significance of Central Eurasia, where geography constrains state behavior and grants disproportionate power to those able to control transit routes, resources, and strategic corridors. Frankopan's Silk Roads thesis complements these perspectives by historicizing the centrality of Eurasian trade networks, emphasizing how commercial and cultural connectivity has historically structured power and influence across the continent. Together, these frameworks suggest that Eurasian power projection is simultaneously structured by imperial legacy, geographic determinism, and networked economic integration.

From this combined theoretical perspective, Central Asia emerges as a pivotal arena. Russia seeks to maintain its influence through traditional military and political mechanisms, while China leverages infrastructure, trade, and connectivity to embed the region within broader Eurasian economic networks. Kaplan and Frankopan underscore the strategic importance of these territories for global power projection, while MacFarlane highlights the potential for Central Asia to serve as a hub for multipolar economic integration. The convergence of these factors illustrates why the region remains contested, not only between China and Russia, but also in the broader strategic calculations of external actors such as the European Union and India.

### **Implications for the European Union**

The EU's engagement with Central Asia has been historically characterized by development aid, trade, and governance promotion, but recent geopolitical shifts demand a recalibration of this approach. Strategic diversification has become a priority, particularly to reduce dependency on Russian energy supplies. Projects such as the Middle Corridor, connecting Central Asia to Europe via the Caspian Sea, have emerged as critical alternatives for transporting energy and critical raw materials, supported by significant EU investments. Central Asia's abundant critical minerals, including lithium and uranium, are central to the EU's green transition and technological competitiveness. Additionally, the EU emphasizes regional stability and connectivity, investing in infrastructure and digital networks to foster trade and counterbalance the influence of other powers. While economic and strategic concerns dominate, human rights and governance remain a core part of the EU's agenda, reflecting a dual approach to influence and values promotion.

### Implications for Central Asia

Central Asian countries find themselves navigating a complex geopolitical environment. Economic engagement with both China and the EU offers development opportunities, technological access, and integration into global markets. Simultaneously, these nations must

manage geopolitical pressures, balancing Russian historical influence with China's economic and infrastructural expansion. Infrastructure projects associated with the Middle Corridor and digital connectivity not only stimulate economic growth but also integrate Central Asia into broader Eurasian networks. Environmental and social considerations are critical, as large-scale projects require sustainable approaches to ensure long-term benefits and stability.

### Implications for India

India's strategic interests in Central Asia encompass energy security, trade, connectivity, and geopolitical influence. Central Asia provides alternative energy sources, reducing India's reliance on traditional suppliers. Connectivity initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) enhance trade efficiency and integrate India into Eurasian economic networks. Geopolitically, India's engagement counters China's growing influence, while cultural and historical linkages offer soft power advantages to strengthen diplomatic ties. Participation in multilateral frameworks, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS+, allows India to assert influence and enhance its strategic presence in Eurasia.

### Conclusions

### Comparative Theoretical Framework

Theorist	Core Assumptions	Conception of Power & Security	Implications for Central Asia	Implications for China	Implications for India	Implications for EU
<b>Mankoff</b>	Russia's imperial legacy and historical strategic depth shape contemporary behavior. Security is about maintaining spheres of influence and buffer zones.	Military and political dominance are central. Economic tools serve to support strategic objectives.	Central Asia is a key buffer zone; Russia maintains military, political, and economic leverage.	Views China as both partner and competitor; cautious coordination to avoid losing strategic depth.	India is peripheral but can collaborate with Russia on defense and energy.	EU must account for Russia's strategic leverage; limited influence unless aligned with local powers.
<b>MacFarlane</b>	Eurasia as an emergent multipolar space; economic integration and infrastructure networks are central.	Power is exercised through trade, connectivity, and institutional integration; security is tied to economic influence.	Central Asia can become a hub of multipolar economic and infrastructural integration.	Uses Belt and Road Initiative to embed influence economically and institutionally.	Opportunity to integrate via trade corridors and multilateral frameworks; soft balancing against China.	EU engagement via trade, infrastructure, and digital connectivity; opportunity for diversified partnerships.
<b>Kaplan (World Island)</b>	Geography constrains state behavior; Central Eurasia ("Heartland") is key to global power projection.	Strategic control of geography, transit routes, and resources underpins security.	Control over Central Asia grants disproportionate influence; key for transit, resources, and strategic depth.	Strengthening presence in Eurasia critical for regional/global projection.	Peripheral actor; leverages geographic corridors for connectivity and influence.	EU must navigate Eurasian geography to maintain energy security and strategic access.



Theorist	Core Assumptions	Conception of Power & Security	Implications for Central Asia	Implications for China	Implications for India	Implications for EU
Frankopan (Silk Roads)	Historical trade networks shape political, economic, and cultural power across Eurasia.	Connectivity and networked exchange—commercial, cultural, and diplomatic—are forms of influence and soft power.	Central Asia is the historical and contemporary nexus of trade, culture, and strategic corridors.	Expands influence through economic and cultural connectivity; Belt and Road as modern Silk Road.	Can leverage historical ties to strengthen trade, culture, and diplomatic influence.	Supports engagement through trade and investment; opportunity to participate in historical and modern Eurasian networks.

In conclusion, Turkey's active involvement in the Middle Corridor and its strategic role within China's Belt and Road Initiative present significant opportunities for regional integration and economic growth. As a critical gateway linking Asia and Europe, Turkey stands to benefit from expanding trade flows and infrastructure development, deepening its economic ties with China and neighboring regions. Similarly, Iran, despite geopolitical challenges, possesses substantial potential to leverage its strategic location bridging continental and maritime trade routes. Should Iran continue investing in infrastructure, strengthen regional cooperation, and carefully navigate its relations with global powers, it could harness the benefits of globalization to substantially improve its economic standing in the coming decades.

The reconstruction of the Silk Road—both land and maritime—under the Belt and Road Initiative promises transformative effects on Europe's Baltic, Black Sea, and Mediterranean subregions. Enhanced infrastructure connectivity, streamlined trade routes, and increased foreign investment are poised to spur economic growth, create jobs, and foster international exchange. Empirical studies underline significant gains in trade volumes, GDP growth, and economic integration, which will elevate these subregions as pivotal hubs in the global economy.

However, this growth potential is nuanced by the competition among Europe's diverse core areas. The Baltic, Black Sea, and Mediterranean subregions each possess unique strengths and challenges, and the race for investment and development could risk unbalanced growth. To realize a more harmonious and united Europe, strategic coordination is needed to ensure that infrastructural improvements and economic opportunities are equitably distributed. This balance would not only support cohesion within the European Union but also amplify Europe's collective bargaining power in the evolving global economic landscape. The relationship between Europe's Global Gateway initiative and China's Belt and Road Initiative is emblematic of the broader dynamics between the EU and China in globalization. While there is an

element of competition—each aiming to shape global infrastructure and connectivity on its own terms—there is also considerable scope for complementarity. By aligning shared interests in sustainable development, transparent governance, and economic modernization, the EU and China can leverage their respective strengths to foster a more interconnected and resilient global economy.

Today, the European Union, Turkey, Iran, and China converge across Eurasia through overlapping economic, energy, and transport interests, particularly in infrastructure and connectivity. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seeks to enhance east-west trade through land and maritime corridors, many of which pass through Iran and Turkey en route to Europe. Meanwhile, the EU's Global Gateway aims to offer a democratic, transparent alternative to the BRI, prioritizing sustainability and local ownership. Turkey plays a pivotal role as a geopolitical and logistical bridge between Asia and Europe, while Iran offers a critical land route alternative via the International North-South Transport Corridor. This convergence requires balancing strategic competition and cooperation by fostering interoperability, ensuring infrastructure projects serve local needs, and avoiding debt traps. Rather than opposing the BRI outright, the Global Gateway can complement it by promoting open standards, resilient supply chains, and regional development in shared corridors. A balanced approach respects the agency of countries like Turkey and Iran while reflecting the broader goal of stability, trade integration, and multipolar connectivity at both ends of Eurasia.

In summary, at the western end of Eurasia, **the contemporary Silk Roads are associated with the EU's Global Gateway strategy, efforts to ensure sustainable, transparent infrastructure, and a rules-based alternative to China's influence.** At the eastern end, **they are driven by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which focuses on expanding trade corridors, energy routes, and infrastructure networks to strengthen China's economic ties across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.**

In the former case, the context is the political and economic unification of Europe, a historical first and a challenge without precedent undertaken in a spirit of militant skepticism and doubt, in the latter China is emerging from the rubbles of history with self-confidence and as a fully modernized polity with a competent and effective state apparatus. If the CAI between China and the EU can be clinched involving amongst others better revenue sharing and protection of rights of the often turbulent Turkic peoples in Xinjiang— a center of minorities in Kashgai backrolled by the central Asians in return for an Eu-funded Center of regional integration in Samarkand and stronger people-to-people exchanges between Central Asia and Europe – much would have been done to provide the conditions to engage in a constructive dialogue on how to better stitch together the opposite ends of Eurasia into one trading area. After all, win-win scenarios is not a *deus ex machina* but a technique to think outside the box in order to create strategic leaps, an exercise that involves strategies and the meeting of minds on infrastructure projects and mutual economic growth in order to deliver the stability and development both Europe and Asia craves.

Who can say no to a real Pho ?

Ultimately, the interplay between regional integration within Europe, the ambitions of the Belt and Road, and the EU's strategic responses like the Global Gateway will shape the future of globalization. Success will depend on fostering balanced growth across Europe's subregions, embracing cooperative engagement with China, and navigating the complexities of geopolitical competition with pragmatic, forward-looking policies. Through this, Europe can solidify its role as a united, influential actor in a rapidly changing global order.

The China-Russia partnership reflects a complex asymmetry that is expanding beyond traditional trade, energy, and arms domains into technology, infrastructure, and political coordination. Interpreted through the frameworks of Mankoff, MacFarlane, Kaplan, and Frankopan, this axis highlights the enduring significance of imperial logic, geographic centrality, and Eurasian connectivity in shaping global power structures. The implications for the EU, Central Asia, and India underscore the necessity of multidimensional strategies that balance military, economic, and diplomatic tools in a multipolar and increasingly interconnected Eurasian order. Strategic partnerships, infrastructure development, and diversified economic engagement emerge as essential instruments for managing the evolving geopolitical landscape.

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