

“Belt and Road” : China and Kazakhstan Join Hands to Forge a New Chapter of Prosperity

LIU Tingting

(Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty 050040, Kazakhstan)

Abstract: This paper examines the development of China–Kazakhstan cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, with a focus on the achievements made in infrastructure connectivity, energy and resource development, industrial-chain collaboration, the digital economy, livelihood improvement, and cultural and people-to-people exchanges. It points out that although Kazakhstan is rich in energy and mineral resources, its development has long been constrained by its landlocked geographical position, limited transport channels, and a resource-dependent economic structure. The alignment between the Belt and Road Initiative and Kazakhstan’s Nurly Zhol New Economic Policy has provided an important opportunity for the country to overcome geographical constraints, improve its transport network, promote industrial upgrading, and expand its access to international markets. Through concrete cooperation projects such as the Horgos Port, China–Europe freight trains, road and railway construction, new energy projects, digital payment systems, e-commerce platforms, and educational and cultural exchanges, China–Kazakhstan cooperation has not only strengthened regional connectivity and optimized economic structures, but also deepened mutual understanding and friendship between the two peoples. The paper argues that China–Kazakhstan cooperation represents a typical example of mutual benefit and common development under the Belt and Road framework, and is of practical significance for promoting Eurasian regional cooperation, enhancing people-to-people connectivity, and building a new model of international cooperation.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; China–Kazakhstan cooperation; Kazakhstan; connectivity; industrial cooperation; digital economy; cultural and people-to-people exchanges

In the grand panorama of global cooperation, the Belt and Road Initiative is like a brilliant golden ribbon, closely connecting numerous countries, among which the partnership between Kazakhstan and China stands out particularly. Since the Belt and Road Initiative was first proposed in Kazakhstan in 2013, the two countries have embarked on a fruitful journey of cooperation.

Kazakhstan, located in the heart of the Eurasian continent, is endowed with world-class energy treasures: proven oil reserves of nearly 4.4 billion tons, natural gas reserves of about 3.8 trillion cubic meters, uranium production accounting for 43% of the global total, and copper reserves reaching 20 million tons. However, as the largest landlocked country, its development has long been constrained: lacking access to the sea, over-reliance on Russian trade routes and markets for energy and trade, a single economic structure, trapped in the "resource trap," direct economic impacts from fluctuations in

Author: LIU Ting ting, DBA doctoral candidate, Farabi International Business School, National University of Kazakhstan.

international commodity prices, and lagging technology and manufacturing. In this predicament, the arrival of China has ignited new hope for Kazakhstan.

The Belt and Road Initiative and the Bright Road Plan have been precisely aligned, ushering in a new era of infrastructure development. Transportation isolation was once the biggest constraint on Kazakhstan's development: in the past, energy exports relied on the Caspian oil pipeline crossing Russia, and cargo transportation depended on Russian-style broad-gauge railways. This single external channel made it difficult for Kazakhstan to maneuver in international competition. The Horgos Port, a landmark project of China-Kazakhstan cooperation, has transformed from an ordinary town into a national hub. Here, the largest railway transshipment yard in Asia has been built. With the help of electronic data management and rapid customs clearance, the transit time for imported goods has been reduced from 2-3 days to within 16 hours, with an average of 2 hours required to complete the transshipment of one China-Europe freight train. As of the first half of this year, a total of 48,000 trains have passed through the Horgos railway port, reaching 46 cities in 18 countries, helping Kazakhstan transform from a "landlocked country" to a "land and bridge country." The Lianyungang-Horgos Expressway, constructed by China, runs directly from Lianyungang to Horgos, spanning 4,395 kilometers across China, becoming a major transportation artery between China and Kazakhstan. In recent years, China has built over 2,000 kilometers of expressways and various road systems in Kazakhstan, significantly improving the local transportation network. The construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway further enhances the Central Asian transportation system, solidifies Kazakhstan's position as a regional hub, and provides crucial support for the smooth operation of the "Middle Corridor," making it a promising new trade artery between Asia and Europe.

In the field of industrial cooperation, Kazakhstan has long relied on energy exports, while its manufacturing and emerging industries have weak foundations. China's industrial advantages precisely address these shortcomings. Cooperation has evolved from initial commodity exports to deep integration across the entire industrial chain. Chinese automobiles have achieved a stunning comeback in the Kazakh market: a market once monopolized by European, American, and Japanese brands, where Chinese brands' share surged from 3.4% in 2021 to 39% in 2024, with six of the top ten best-selling brands coming from China. Brands like Chery and JAC have seen continuous sales growth, and the car assembly plant scheduled for production in 2025 is expected to produce 90,000 units annually, with 60% exported to CIS countries. New energy vehicles, with their environmental and energy-saving advantages, align with Kazakhstan's energy transition needs and have become a new market favorite. Energy cooperation has expanded from traditional oil and gas to green new energy: China's "Big Three" oil companies have established a presence in Kazakhstan, participating in oil and gas exploration, development, and refinery expansion, with a total investment exceeding \$30 billion. Meanwhile, projects invested and built by Chinese companies, such as the Zhanatas wind farm and the Turkestan photovoltaic project, are helping Kazakhstan achieve its goal of "50% renewable energy generation by 2050." Both sides also plan to jointly explore uranium deposits in the Ili Basin and deepen nuclear energy cooperation, achieving a full-chain upgrade from resource extraction to technological

collaboration. Digital economy cooperation has yielded fruitful results: Kazakhstan has implemented the "Digital Kazakhstan" plan, with China's mature payment industry providing solid support. China UnionPay has issued over 4 million bank cards in Kazakhstan, achieving full coverage. Huawei, Alibaba and other enterprises have participated in local 5G construction, e-commerce training and logistics upgrading, promoting the rapid development of Kazakhstan's digital industry. From 2018 to 2022, the "Digital Kazakhstan" plan has created more than 300,000 jobs.

People's livelihood cooperation allows citizens of both countries to truly share the dividends. The Horgos International Border Cooperation Center implements a visa-free policy, enabling Chinese and Kazakh citizens to freely enter and exit for shopping and transactions: Chinese tourists enjoy a daily tax-free quota of 8,000 yuan, while Kazakh tourists enjoy a quota of 1,500 euros. Among the 3,500 merchants in the center, China's products are highly popular among Kazakh citizens. The rapid customs clearance channel for agricultural products allows Chinese fruits and vegetables to reach Almaty within 6 hours. From January to July this year, over 300,000 tons of fruits and vegetables have been exported to Kazakhstan, enriching local dining tables. The development of e-commerce and logistics has brought the two countries closer: Kazakhstan's e-commerce market is growing rapidly, and it is expected that by 2025, e-commerce transactions will account for 15% of the total retail sales of consumer goods. Chinese enterprises have helped Kazakhstan improve the fund custody and return/exchange mechanisms of e-commerce platforms, assisted in building logistics networks, and introduced technologies such as smart warehousing and drone delivery. On the Alibaba platform, 200 Kazakh enterprises have obtained the "Gold Supplier" qualification, with total sales reaching 167.7 million US dollars, helping local specialty products sell well in China's 1.4 billion-person market. Payment convenience has enhanced the effectiveness of people's livelihood cooperation: the proportion of non-cash transactions in Kazakhstan rose from 67.4% in 2020 to 90% in 2024, with 80% of daily transactions completed through online banking. In major cities like Almaty, people can easily use China's mobile payment apps for daily consumption, and this integration of lifestyles has brought the people of both countries closer together.

In terms of cultural exchanges, the ancient Silk Road once composed a harmonious symphony of friendship through its commercial and travel activities, while today's trade along the Silk Road Economic Belt has further strengthened the bonds between the hearts of the Chinese and Kazakh people. China and Kazakhstan have implemented visa-free travel, established 26 pairs of friendly provinces and cities, and witnessed frequent exchanges between their peoples, with the millennium-old friendship remaining ever fresh. In Almaty, Xian Xinghai Street and the lotus-shaped Xian Xinghai Monument bear witness to the enduring bonds forged during wartime. The Sino-Kazakh co-produced film "The Musician" brought this touching story to the silver screen, celebrating the deep friendship between the two nations. At the China-Kazakhstan Traditional Medicine Center in Astana, the "compassionate heart" of traditional Chinese medicine warms local patients through meticulous treatment: since its inauguration in December 2022, the center has received nearly 8,000 patients and conducted over 200 international remote consultations, becoming a "warm" force that strengthens emotional ties. Cultural exchanges take diverse forms: at the Almaty Musical Instrument Museum, Central Asian dombra,

Western European guitars, Chinese erhu, and South Asian harps are displayed together, narrating the fusion of civilizations. Astana TV broadcasts translated Chinese dramas, Kazakh production crews shoot in China's Hengdian, and China introduces Kazakh song and dance performances. At the "Shangsi Bookstore" in Almaty, over a thousand Chinese political, historical, and cultural books attract numerous readers. The Northwest Polytechnical University branch has settled at Ali Farabi National University, the Luban Workshop is rooted at East Kazakhstan Technical University, five Confucius Institutes operate smoothly, and the Sino-Kazakh joint archaeological team has established a multi-dimensional framework for mutual learning of civilizations.

Looking ahead, as cooperation in green energy, digital economy and other fields continues to deepen, China-Kazakhstan relations will surely usher in broader horizons. Against the backdrop of reshaping the global order, the successful practices of China-Kazakhstan cooperation provide a vivid model for mutual benefit and win-win outcomes between nations. This "Eastward Path" not only transforms Kazakhstan's resource advantages into development momentum but also allows the people of both countries to share the fruits, becoming a brilliant landscape of the new era Silk Road. China and Kazakhstan will continue to move forward shoulder to shoulder, writing a new chapter of lasting friendship, and jointly steering toward a prosperous future under the guidance of the Belt and Road Initiative.