

Rebuilding Eurasian Interconnectivity: China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor

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Abstract

This chapter explains developments in the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. The first section introduces the direction of the China-Central Asia-Iran-Arabian Peninsula (or Turkey), which utilises the transportation infrastructure of the Chinese, Central Asian, Iranian, and Arabic states. The first subsection examines the potential of the main transportation routes and infrastructure between China and Central Asia. The second subsection focuses on Iranian, and the third on the Arabic state's infrastructure. These sections arise and answer the following question: Why China, Iran, Central Asian, and Arabic states are interested in developing the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor? This research argues that China maintains and securitises its connections with the participating states through this corridor. Central Asia stands as a crucial crossroad for rebuilding Eurasian interconnectivity, and China plays the core role in these processes. Central Asian states get access to maritime routes and the Chinese and West Asian markets. In turn, Iran and Arabic states bolster their economic and security connection with China. Nevertheless, tensions between Iran and the West can bring challenges, making this route problematic. The second section introduces the China-Central Asia-South Caucasus-Turkey-Europe direction, focusing primarily on the Turkish, Azerbaijani, and Georgian roles in the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. It argues that this direction can stand crucial for Eurasian interconnectivity as interests of great, middle, and small Eurasian powers coincide. Moreover, peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the opening of borders between Armenia and Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan can create additional direction towards Europe within the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor.

The main argument of this chapter is that the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor can stand as the key mainland link between China and Europe if China and regional states modernise and reconnect transportation infrastructure and solve regional security issues. It can also stand as an energy supply conduit for China to import its energy sources from West Asia if there are any conflicts with the West in the South China Sea, which can interrupt supply chains through 21 Century Maritime Silk Road.

Introduction

What is CCAWAEC, and why is China interested in building this economic corridor? It is a multimodal economic corridor comprising railways, highways, and dry and seaports, which aims to rebuild Eurasian interconnectivity. Constructing and utilising the CCAWAEC, Beijing aims to grow transportation and trade between China, Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe. Therefore, the main idea is to make it a superconnector between Eurasian regions. Following President Xi Jinping's announcement in Kazakhstan in 2013 about building BRI's SREB, China, along with its financial organisations and business companies, actively invest in developing the necessary infrastructure, making the CCAWAEC the essential mainland bridge connecting these Eurasian regions. As Calder mentioned:

"This logistical revolution is provoking a rapid proliferation of transcontinental supply chains with China at their core" (Calder, 2019, p.15).

Therefore, by developing CCAWAEC China is rebuilding Eurasian interconnections.

The following question arises: what is wrong with Eurasian interconnectivity?

It appeared that after the Cold War there were no more dividing ideological and physical barriers which could interrupt the Eurasian mainland's interconnectivity. However, the indirect war between Russia and NATO for Ukraine, which started on February 24, 2022, announced the entrance of the Multipolar World Order 2.0 stage with heavy competition for spheres of influence and fragmentation of interconnectivity (Sahakyan, 2023). It created a wall of mistrust between the EU and Russia and problems for mainland interconnection between Europe and China through the SREB's NEALBEC. This is due to the reliance on the Russian Trans-Siberian Railway, which loses its appeal as EU members impose sanctions on Russia and seek alternative transportation infrastructure. As a result, East-West trade through NEALBEC shrank by more than 40%. Moreover, the Russia-NATO confrontation threatens to grow into the Third World War, even with the usage of nuclear tactical weapons. This will threaten Eurasian security and disrupt supply chains across Russia, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe for an extended period.

Therefore, the CCAWAEC stands in an alternative direction with its comparatively modernised infrastructure. There are two operational routes in CCAWAEC and one prospective route. The first section of this chapter introduces the direction of the China-Central Asia-Iran-Arabian Peninsula (or Turkey), which utilises the transportation infrastructure of the Chinese, Central Asian, Iranian, and Arabic states. The first subsection analyses the potential and perspectives of the main transportation routes and infrastructure between China and Central Asia. The second subsection focuses on Iranian, and the third on the infrastructures of the Arabic states, which are used for the operational needs of CCAWAEC. These sections arise and answer the following question: Why China, Iran, Central Asian, and Arabic states are interested in developing CCAWAEC? It argues that through this economic corridor, China maintains and securitises its connections with these states. Central Asian region stands as a crucial crossroad for securing and rebuilding East-West interconnectivity. China plays a core role in this process. Landlocked Central Asian states get access to maritime routes and the Chinese and West Asian markets. In turn, Iran and Arabic states located in West Asia strengthen their economic and security connection with China. It is worth mentioning that China is the first trade partner for most of these states. Nevertheless, tensions between Iran and the West over the Palestinian crisis, sanctions on Iran, and the Iranian nuclear issue make this route problematic.

The second section introduces the second operational route, which traverses from China utilising the transportation infrastructure of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. This direction has the potential to stand as one of the essential mainland routes linking Asia with Europe. It explains Turkey's and South Caucasus's states' roles in CCAWAEC. It argues that this direction can stand crucial for Eurasian interconnectivity as interests of great, middle, and small Eurasian powers are coincide. Moreover, peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan and opening

borders between Armenia and Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan can create a new direction towards Europe within the CCAWAEC.

The main argument of this chapter is that CCAWAEC has the potential to stand as the key mainland link between China and Europe if China and regional states can build, modernise, reconnect transportation infrastructure, and solve regional security issues. It can stand as an energy supply conduit for China to import its energy sources from West Asia if there are any conflicts with the West in the South China Sea, which can interrupt supply chains through MSR.

The Case of CCAWAEC’s China-Central Asia-Iran-Arabian Peninsula (or Turkey) direction

China's businesses have access to Central and West Asian markets through Kazakhstani, Uzbekistani, Turkmenistani, Iranian, and Turkish transportation infrastructure. These markets comprise mainly a young and rising population of more than 302 million people in West Asia and more than 79 million in Central Asia, where Chinese businesses sell their products, from computers and semiconductors to cars, washing machines and clothes. As Chinese scholar Wang Jinbo (2022, p.226) mentioned:

"The infrastructure connectivity, under the framework of the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor, provides new opportunities for China, Central Asia, and West Asia to jointly improve infrastructure and facilitation and achieve a ‘seamless link’ in the supply chain.”

According to China's State Council Information Office (2023), transport infrastructure projects under the CCAWAEC would reduce trade costs by 10%, and trade growth would range between 2.8% and 9.7% for economies located in this corridor.

The CCAWAEC's first direction currently connects railway links between the Chinese Yiwu trading city and the Persian Gulf. It passes through China's Xi'an and Urumchi cities, the Khorgos dry port, the largest city in Kazakhstan, Almaty, the capital Tashkent and the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan's Türkmenabat and Mary cities, and reaches Bandar Abbas port through Iranian railways. Or from Iran, it goes towards Turkey with the help of a connection between Iranian and Turkish Railways, reaching out to Turkish transportation infrastructure (see Figure 2.1). In 2020, the transportation of goods between Iran and Turkey totalled 564,000 tons (Girgin, 2021).



Figure 2.1 CCAWAEC's First Direction.

Source: Based on United Nations map, complied by author

The other direction of this route utilizes Chinese and Kazakhstani railways until the Aktau port and then goes to the Turkmen capital, Ashgabat (see Figure 2.2). After that, it connects Turkmen railways with Iranian railways in Incheh Borun, continuing towards the Persian Gulf (Sahakyan, 2020; Horák, 2022, pp. 177-78).



Figure 2.2 CCAWAEC's Second Direction.

Source: Based on United Nations map, complied by author

These routes are all operational. Regional states, on their own or with the help of Chinese investments in the framework of the BRI, develop and modernize transportation infrastructure.

Central Asia

Central Asian transportation infrastructure plays a crucial role in connecting China with West Asia and opens the way towards European markets. Beijing started to develop its transportation connection with Central Asia well before the announcement of the SREB. The first step was establishing a railway link from Urumqi to Kazakhstan's Aqtoghay in 1990 (Garver, 2006, p.2). Considering Xinjiang's geographical location, Beijing makes it SREB's one of the main transportation hubs in China's march towards Eurasia's westward. In China-Central Asia interconnectivity, the primary connectors are the Chinese and Kazakhstani railways, which pass through Xinjiang's Alashankou to Kazakhstan's Dostyk and from Xinjiang's Khorgos to Kazakhstan's Khorgos dry port (Sahakyan, 2022a). They serve as transit hubs for more than 90% of trade between China and Europe

(Railway Supply, 2022). Kazakhstan's Khorgos plays a central role in CCAWAEC to boost Eurasian trade and transportation. It has become the biggest dry port in the world (Khalid, 2021, p.473). Kazakhstan spent US\$239 million on building and connecting it with Kazakh and Chinese railways. The Chinese company, Lianyungang Port Holding Group Co. Ltd., bought 49% of Khorgos's shares (Aminjonov et al., 2019). On the other side of the border, Xinjiang's Khorgos dry port is a major transit hub for 80 China-Europe freight train routes, connecting 45 cities across 18 countries (CGTN, 2024). Further, in 2022, Kazakhstan put into action 1435 mm gauge railway tracks in Khorgos to harmonise them with Chinese railway gauges (Railway Supply, *op. cit.*). However, as Kazakhstani and other post-Soviet Eurasian states' railway gauges are 1520 mm gauge, further the exchange of trains is happening for continuing its way through Kazakh railways to other states.

In 2024, Astana started to build a third railway link with China. It will start from Kazakhstan's Abay region's Ayagoz city and run to Bakhty. After that, the railway will be connected to Chinese railways and reach Chuguchak, the administrative seat of Tacheng Prefecture in Xinjiang. The main goal is to increase freight capacity by about 48 million tonnes annually by 2027 (International Railway Journal, 2024). Kazakhstan also plans the Shalkar–Beineu railway, which aims to establish the “continuation of the shortest rail route from central Kazakhstan to the Persian Gulf countries” (Aminjonov et al., *op. cit.*).

Kazakhstan modernized its Aktau and Kuryk ports in the Caspian Sea and, through Kazakh and Chinese railways, connected them with the terminal in the Chinese Lianyungang seaport (*ibid.*), which created an additional important multimodal direction in the framework of BRI. During its ten years of existence, the China-Kazakhstan Logistics Cooperation Base in Lianyungang handled over 6,000 China-Europe freight trains by May 2024 (CGTN, 2024).

The Export-Import Bank of China actively participates in the financing of infrastructure construction in Kazakhstan in the framework of the BRI. For instance, it provided a US\$727 million loan for the reconstruction of the Centre-South corridor of the Astana-Karaganda-Balkhash-Kurty-Kapshagai-Almaty (Karaganda-Burybaytal) road, US\$796 million in the rebuilding of the Taldykorgan-Kalbatau-Ust-Kamenogorsk highway section, and US\$253 million for the reconstruction of the Merke-Burybaytal road section (Aminjonov et al., *op. cit.*). In turn, the AIIB, which was initiated by China to fuel BRI, provided a US\$1.111 billion public loan for constructing Centre–West Road (*ibid.*). In 2019, Kazakhstan approved a US\$46.7 million loan to construct Zhanatas' 100 MW wind power plant (AIIB, 2019). Further, in 2023, AIIB signed an agreement for a US\$36 million loan for the 100 MW Shokpar Project in South Kazakhstan (AIIB, 2023a).

Uzbekistan also actively uses Kazakhstan's Khorgos dry port for its trade and interconnection with China. Tashkent has established logistic corridors to reach out to Chinese suppliers and markets. One is Guangzhou–Khorgos–Tashkent, which connects Uzbekistan and China's Greater Bay Area businesses on the seaside of the South China Sea. The second is Hebei Gaoi–Khorgos–Tashkent, which connects Uzbekistan with Chinese northern industrial centres. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are trying to settle on an alternative multimodal route that will not utilise Kazakhstan's transportation infrastructure. Chinese trains transport goods to Kashgar in Xinjiang, and after goods are being transported via the Kashgar–Irkeshtam–Osh–Andijan highway using automobile trucks to reach their final destinations (Sahakyan, *op. cit.*, p.94). The Export-Import Bank of China provided finances to Kyrgyzstan for the construction of its section on this highway (Belt and Road Portal, 2023). In October 2023, China's State Council Information Office (2023) introduced the operationality of the Kashgar–Irkeshtam–Osh–Andijan highway as one of the main deliverables of the CCAWAEC in its document, *The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future*. This means that Beijing acknowledges the importance of this route.

For a considerable period, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China have been in discussions about establishing a railway between the three states. During the SCO meeting in 2022, the parties announced an understanding to build this railway and set up a Joint Coordination Office in Bishkek (Izimov, 2024, p.94). On June 6, 2024, in Beijing, China, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan signed a trilateral intergovernmental agreement to build the railway. As President Xi mentioned, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is “a strategic project of connectivity between China and Central Asia and a landmark project of Belt and Road cooperation among the three countries”. According to Kyrgyzstan’s president, Sadyr Zhaparov, this railway is “a flagship project of Belt and Road cooperation among the three countries. Once completed; it will become a new transport route linking Asia to Europe and the Persian Gulf countries”. In turn, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasised that “The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway will become the shortest land route connecting China and Central Asian countries and open up the big markets in South Asian and Middle East countries” (Embassy of China in the UK, 2024). As it is obvious from the speeches of three presidents, this railway will have regional and continental importance and stand as one of the main transportation infrastructures in the framework of the CCAWAEC.

The following question arises: Why does China need another railway with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan if it has a railway with Kazakhstan that connects it with the railways of other Central Asian states? As Muratalieva (2024, p.107) explained:

"The construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway will provide China with alternative trade routes and decrease its reliance on Russian and Kazakh routes. Political unrest in Kazakhstan in January of 2022 showed shortcomings of logistical routes that connect China and the countries of Central Asia, which are overly dependent on Kazakhstan".

Export-Import Bank of China and AIIB actively work in Uzbekistan. For instance, in the framework of the BRI, the Export-Import Bank of China provided US\$350 million to Uzbekistan for the building of the electrified Angren–Pap railroad with the electrification of the Pap–Kokand–Andijan section (Aminjonov et al., *op. cit.*). In 2020, The AIIB approved a loan of US\$165.5 million to Uzbekistan to improve the main cross-border roads in the Bukhara region, which play an important role in Central Asian interconnectivity (AIIB, 2020). In 2023, Uzbekistan and AIIB signed a US\$108 million loan for the electrification of 465 km of the Bukhara-Miskin-Urgench-Khiva railway line (AIIB, 2023b). Therefore, by developing its transportation infrastructure, Uzbekistan is trying to strengthen its role in CCAWAEC. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway will bring competition in this direction, and Kazakhstan will try to keep its superior role as a railway hub between Central Asia and China. From this competition, Eurasian transportation companies will benefit.

Turkmenistan, a significant player in connecting Central Asia with West Asia, contributes to this regional connectivity through its links to Iranian, Kazakh, and Uzbek railways. It is noteworthy that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ashgabat took significant steps in expanding its national railway system. It constructed a 1719 km railway, expanding its national railway system to 3839 km (Horák, 2022, p.172). On 2 May 2018, Turkmenistan opened Turkmenbashi International Sea Port. It covers 152 hectares and can handle 17 vessels, 300,000 passengers, and 75,000 lorries per year. The new port's throughput capacity is 17 million tonnes, excluding oil products (“Türkmendeşizderýaýollary” Agency). In the framework of the CCAWAEC, Beijing, Astana, Ashgabat, and Tehran negotiate to develop the existing Transnational railway China–Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran to increase the traffic of goods between China, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf

states through Iran (Aminjonov et al., *op. cit.*; Assaniyaz, 2023). Unlike other regional states, Turkmenistan is the only country in Central Asia that is not a member of AIIB and the SCO.

As Rashid Alimov, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan and former Secretary-General of the SCO, mentioned, the establishment of transportation interconnectivity with China has given Tajikistan the opportunity to "emerge from a century-long transport deadlock" (Alimov, 2023, p.158). Among notable infrastructure projects implemented by China in Tajikistan in the framework of CCAWAEC are the Tajik Vakhdat-Yavan railway, which started operating on August 24, 2016, with a US\$72 million investment (Semenova, 2022, p.56), Dushanbe-Uzbekistan Border Road Improvement Project with US\$27.5 million financing from AIIB, which aims to connect Tajikistan's transportation infrastructure with the Asian Highway Network and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridor (AIIB, 2016a), the completion of the Dushanbe-Chanak Highway, Dushanbe No.2 thermal power plant, the South-North power transmission line, and Zeravshan Gold Company (Xu, Su, & Chen, 2024). After the announcement of the SREB's launch in 2013, Tajikistan attracted approximately US\$2.6 billion in Chinese investments by 2023 (Alimov, *op. cit.*, p.161).

The CCAWAEC is also crucial for China, as Beijing, through strengthening its interconnectivity with Central Asian states, fortifies its energy security. From this region, it gets oil, coal, and uranium; through the Central Asia-China Natural Gas Pipeline, it gets gas from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (Dudlak, 2024, p.63). China imports oil from North Kazakhstan using the China-Europe Railway Express (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2023). Thanks to CCAWAEC's supply chains, trade between China and Central Asia grows yearly. When comparing the 2021, 2022, and 2023 results, only Turkmenistan traded US\$600 million less with China in 2023 compared to 2022. However, when we compare the results from 2021 and 2023, the trade was US\$3.2 billion more in 2023.

Table 2.1 China's Trade with Central Asian States (US\$ billion). (GAC, China, 2021, *op. cit.*, *op. cit.*).

States	2021	2022	2023
Kazakhstan	25.2	31.1	41
Kyrgyzstan	7.5	15.5	19.8
Tajikistan	1.8	2.6	3.9
Turkmenistan	7.3	11.1	10.5
Uzbekistan	8	9.7	14

Table 2.2 Regional Members of the AIIB from Central Asia (AIIB, 2020a).

Members	Total Subscriptions		Voting Power	
	Amount (million US\$)	% of Total	Number of Votes	% of Total
Kazakhstan	729.3	0.7516%	9,305	0.8239%
Uzbekistan	219.8	0.2265%	4210	0.3728%
Tajikistan	30.9	0.0318%	2,290	0.2028%

Kyrgyzstan	26.8	0.0276%	2,280	0.2019%
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Iran

China's Comprehensive Strategic partner, Iran, and its rail network, highways and ports are crucial for CCAWAEC's operationality. Iran signed the MoU, joined the BRI and signed the Iran-China 25-year Comprehensive Cooperation Plan, standing as one of China's leading economic, political, and military partners in West Asia. Tehran implements the *Look to the East* policy, which aims to strengthen its strategic partnership with China (Gharayagh-Zandi, 2024, pp.141-142). It is also a member of China's lead SCO, which is providing its platform for developing its relations with China and Central Asian states at a multilateral level. Iran is also a member of AIIB. The connection of Iranian with Turkmenistani and Turkish railways allows Tehran to play a role in connecting Eurasia's East and West, North and the South.

Iran's railway system, with its 13954 km, provides an opportunity to transport of 50 million tons of goods annually (Li & Lei, p.244). China is interested in the modernization of Iranian railways for using them in the framework of the CCAWAEC. Chinese side already provided a US\$1.6 billion loan for the electrification of the Tehran-Mashhad high-speed train. In 2015, China Railway Group Limited signed an agreement with the Iranian side for 14.49 billion yuan to build a high-speed railway connecting Tehran, Qom, and Esfahan (Lim, 2021, p.35). In 2018, China Civil Engineering Construction Corp signed an agreement with Iran's Construction & Development of Transportation Infrastructures Company to construct a 263 km railroad connecting Kermanshah city with the Khosravi village on the border of Iraq for 3.53 billion yuan (Financial Tribune, 2018). In the same year, China National Machinery Industry Corp signed a contract for 5.35 billion yuan to build a 410 km railway between Hamedan and Sanandaj (Reuters, 2018) for connecting Iranian Kurdistan with Tehran, which has a railway connection with Hamedan. In November 2023, the 151 km Hamedan-Sanandaj railway was inaugurated by the late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (President of Iran, 2023). China Machinery Industry Construction Group signed a contract for 5 billion yuan to build a 400 km railway between Shiraz City and Bushehr Port located in the Persian Gulf (Bursa & Bazar Foundation, 2018). Chinese companies are involved in the modernization of Iranian transportation infrastructure. This means that China is providing loans to Iran to develop its capabilities within the framework of the CCAWAEC and China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; meanwhile, it is also recouping its funds for its products or services, generating various profits. This is demonstrated through several means:

1. China is extending loans to Iran in its currency, the yuan.
2. Chinese construction companies and professionals are obtaining work and payment in Iran.
3. China is selling its railway industry products to Iran.

As a result, the China-Iran partnership is becoming more robust, especially within the context of the SREB's CCAWAEC. Several railway links have been established and are operational between China and Iran through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. For instance, in 2016, the first cargo train from China's Yiwu City, travelling 10,399 km, arrived in Iran's capital Tehran (China Daily, 2016). One year later, in 2017, a block train service was established between Changsha City in Hunan Province and Tehran (People's Daily Online, 2018). In 2018, the first freight train from Bayannur City, located in China's Inner Mongolia province, moved towards Iran, passing 8,352 km (Xinhua, 2018). There is also a railway connection between China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and Tehran, which was operational in 2017 (Xinhua, 2017). This route was utilising Kazakhstan's and Turkmenistan's

railways to reach Iran. In 2022, a new direction was established, due to which trains are coming to the Caspian Sea through Kazakhstan's railway and being shipped by sea to Iranian Anzali port. As *Global Times* (2022) informed, it "saves 6,000 yuan (\$897) per container compared with the former international freight railway line from Yinchuan to Tehran, Iran". In 2018, China and Iran also established a train between Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province and Tehran (IRNA, 2018). In sum, the China-Central Asia-Iran transportation route provides an opportunity to strengthen trade and interconnectivity between China and West Asia. Iran, with its railways, highways, and ports in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, such as Bandar Abbas, Bandar Imam Khomeini, Bushehr, Chabahar, Anzali, and Nowshahr, plays a vital role in Eurasian interconnectivity, as China's producers send their goods not only to Iran but through its territory to regional states. It is important to note that all trains connected to Tehran originate from various provinces in China. This will help develop local production sectors in Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Hunan, Zhejiang, and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Along with Xinjiang, these provinces will play an essential role in the interconnectivity between China and West Asia. It seems that Beijing also considered the unique role of religious similarities (Islam) in some of these areas, which could strengthen connections with West Asian states. An opportunity exists to increase the transportation of goods between China and Europe through Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey by increasing the utilisation of the railway connection between these two states. This railway, which runs from the Iranian city of Sufian to Van City in Turkey, is operational but is an old and slow single-track railway built in the last century. It needs to be modernised and enlarged. It is worth mentioning that this railway was mainly financed and built by the UK to link London with West Asia, but now all roads lead to Beijing.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that there are problems in this direction. For a long time, Iran has been under Western heavy sanctions, which brings problems in investing and implementing businesses in this country. For this reason, year by year, Sino-Iranian trade has gone down. Before the US withdrawal from JCPOA and reimposition of sanctions in 2018, in 2017, Sino-Iranian trade was US\$37.1 billion. In 2022, it went down to US\$15.7 billion; in 2023, bilateral trade dropped US\$14.6 (GAC, China, 2017; *op. cit.*; *op. cit.*). The Iranian nuclear issue still remains unresolved because of the disagreements mainly between the US and Iran. The sudden death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, and other high-level officials in a helicopter crash on May 19, 2024, raise questions which can impact the internal and external security of Iran and CCAWAEC's supply chains, which passes through Iran. Therefore, the situation in CCAWAEC's route through Iran is complicated because of geopolitical tensions with the US and the sanctions on Iran. It can stand more problematic if Iranian opposition and external foes try to destabilise the political situation in Iran, utilising political instability because of the president's death, discontent because of the heavy socioeconomic situation and unemployment in the country. Any revolution backed by the US can bring to power a Western-oriented government, which will down the level of the Comprehensive strategic partnership between Iran and China, creating problems for implementing the CCAWAEC as well. Therefore, China supports Iran's Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, in reproducing the continuation of Raisi's foreign policy. Further escalation of tensions between Iran and Israel can bring war, with a nuclear threat, as Israel imposes nuclear weapons, and Iran is not far from obtaining them. Both sides have developed drones and missile systems. It means that each side can target the other's strategic infrastructure by bombing railways, highways, and ports, which would disrupt transportation in CCAWAEC. Moreover, it will endanger the Persian Gulf's energy resource supply chains. Therefore, China, West Asian, Central Asian, and European states must prevent large-scale war between Iran and Israel and play an active role in regulations of the Palestinian issue to keep the interconnection between Eurasian regions alive. As China has good

relations with Iran and Israel, it can play the role of mediator for finding ways for diplomatic solutions, as it did for Iran-Saudi Arabia relations. These kind of initiatives will bring stability to CCAWAEC and Chinese investments in this direction.

Arabic States

In *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of China, with State Council authorisation in 2015, it is stated that CCAWAEC aims to connect China with the Persian Gulf (BRF, 2017). It is worth mentioning that, while taking into consideration sanctions on Iran, Arabic states and China mostly use MSR for trade and transportation. However, the CCAWAEC grows its capability to link the Arabian Peninsula's states with Iran, Central Asia, and China through its multimodal transportation infrastructure. The following question arises: Why are Arabic states important for China and BRI?

China's reason for being interested in the Arabic states in West Asia is that they are located in a vital crossroads, connecting states located in the basins of the Mediterranean, Red, and Arabian seas, the Persian, Oman, and Aden Gulfs. The locations of the Arabic states make them essential for implementing China's BRI, which aims to create safe routes not only from East to West but also from South to South and open new horizons for Chinese investments and products.

As Ebrahim Hashem (2021, p.175), in the example of the GCC states, explains:

"They believe that the Arabian Peninsula's strategic geographic location, connecting three continents, Asia, Africa, and Europe, and its vast natural resources will play a vital role in making the BRI a success".

The role of energy sources remains crucial in China-Arab World relations. The world's second-biggest economy, China, needs to import energy resources. Arabic states hold 43%-46% of the world's oil resources and need to sell them to continue developing their economies. Therefore, both sides are interested in continuing cooperation. Beijing imports 41% to 45% of its crude oil from the Arab World, where Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman, Kuwait, and the UAE are among the leaders in exporting to China (Sahakyan, 2022b, p.107; Lo, 2024, p.438). For instance, only in 2023 China imported 265 million tonnes of crude oil from Arab countries (Xueyin, 2024). The CCAWAEC can stand an alternative way for China to import its energy sources from the Arabic States and Iran if there are any conflicts with Quad and AUKUS in the South China Sea, which can disrupt supply chains through MSR. For this reason, China invests in West Asian Arabic states. For instance, "between 2005 and 2021, China invested more than US\$43 billion in Saudi Arabia, US\$36 billion in the UAE" (Szalai, 2024, p.155). Most of these investments are directed at the modernisation of transportation infrastructure, such as Abu Dhabi's Khalifa port, where China invested more than US\$600 million (Calder, *op. cit.*, p. 112; Sahakyan *op. cit.*, p.111), New Hamad Port of Qatar, Oman's Duqm port (Janardhan, 2020, p.2-3). China Railway Construction Corporation built a 450 km Mecca-Medina high-speed railway in Saudi Arabia, which has a maximum speed of 360 km (CGTN, 2023). Chinese companies are involved in the construction Jizan City for Primary and Downstream Industries, a power plant in Jeddah, Yanbu oil refinery, Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park, etc. (Fulton, 2020 p.6-10).

China's high technologies are popular in Arabic states. In the framework of the DSR, Chinese companies participate in the construction of Saudi Arabia's Neom smart city; Huawei is actively working on establishing 5G networks, among others. I tried to find out which factor makes China's Digital Silk Road high technologies attractive to them, asking Dr Narayannapa Janardhan (2024), Research Director of UAE's Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, about it. He explained this by

mentioning that, for instance, UAE and Saudi Arabia are choosing in a practical way according to the quality, price, and modernity of high-tech products without putting forward ideological moments and contradictions when choosing business partners.

It is worth mentioning that not only China invests in Arabic states, but Arabic states are also investing in China in the framework of the BRI. For example, Qatar established a US\$10 billion fund and expressed its plan to invest an additional US\$15–20 billion in Chinese real estate and infrastructure (Szalai, *op. cit.*, p.159). In turn, the UAE and China have established a joint sovereign wealth fund of approximately US\$10 billion for collaborative projects (Sharma, 2019). China's biggest oil supplier from West Asia, Saudi Arabia, invested in oil refineries in Zhoushan and Liaoning, etc. (Fulton, *op. cit.*, p.4). It means that in the framework of the BRI, not only did China raise its economic presence in the Arabic states, but these states also grew their involvement in China. Szalai explained it in the example of the GCC states:

"It is true that Chinese engagement in the Gulf not only results in the political and economic influence of China in the Middle East but also leads to some influence of Gulf states over Chinese foreign policy" (Szalai, *op. cit.*, p.149).

The Arabic world in West Asia and beyond, with more than 450 million people, is an essential market for Chinese companies, where it sells products that range from simple household products to high technologies and weapons. With its 1,4 billion people, China is also a crucial market for Arabic states. In 2023, trade between China and the Arabic States totalled US\$398 billion (Xueyin, *op. cit.*).

Mutual trust and geopolitical interests play a significant role as Arabic states are interested in China's increasing influence in West Asia.

It is also worth mentioning that there are different states with different interests in the Arabic world. Some of these states have problems with each other. Actually, the fact that all Arabic states were attending the 10th Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in May 2024, and some of them were present even at the king or presidential level, means that there is mutual trust and understanding between the Chinese and Arabic sides. In this sense, Beijing plays a uniting role. This means that they want to work together and plan global governance, which can stabilise the situation in West Asia. Actually, we are having problems with multilateralism in the era of Multipolar World Order 2.0, but as we see, the China-Arab forum is a good example of multilateralism.

With Beijing's support and participation in the BRI, Arabic states get the opportunity to improve security and create a balance of power in the region, where the West, Russia, and India are also involved. For 'reality checking', I asked about this argument during the interview with Narayanappa Janardhan (*op. cit.*). As he mentioned in the example of GCC states and the involvement of the US and China, GCC states are interested in growing security collaboration with Beijing as Washington can no longer provide it alone. Therefore, in the Multipolar World Order 2.0 era, they keep collaborating with Beijing and other sides to improve regional security mechanisms and maintain a balance of power. As he explained, it was the logic of Saudi Arabia, UAE, and other Arabic states that they joined SCO as dialogue partners, as it will provide them with an opportunity to work with China, Russia, India, and in the same "political club".

Decision-makers in Beijing understand that the Persian Gulf's security is crucial because war in this region can endanger the sea route from where China gets the vast amount of its energy supplies from Arabic states. This is why, in recent years, China has tried to contribute to the region's stability. As a result, Beijing is interested in developing friendly relations with all states in West Asia at a multilateral level and, simultaneously, strengthening relations with all of them despite the various political and religious disputes at stake. It is worth mentioning that China and the Arab world have

the same vision about the solution of the Palestinian issue. They are for creating a Palestinian state, which will have East Jerusalem as its capital, and UN membership. This position unites them. Therefore, in May 2024 in Beijing, they could agree on a joint declaration for a peaceful solution to this crisis and Palestinian statehood.

In sum, China and the Arab World develop their relations by having a 1+2+3 cooperation roadmap (State Council China, 2016), where energy (oil, gas) cooperation plays a core role, infrastructure and investment development as the two wings, technologies and renewable energy cooperation as three background. In his speech at the opening ceremony of the 10th Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in May 2024, President Xi (2024) proposed "five cooperation frameworks" to strengthen relations with Arab states, with the goal of building a "China-Arab community with a shared future". The AI, research and development, and people-to-people contact will stand crucial for further developing this relationship. In this aspect, strengthening academic exchanges and creating ties between research institutes on both sides will bring results. It is worth mentioning that in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula SREB through its CCAWAEC and MSR are being connected.

The Case of CCAWAEC's China-Central Asia-South Caucasus-Turkey-Europe direction

The CCAWAEC's next route, which goes from Xinjiang through Central Asia to the Caspian Sea's Kazakh Aktau and Kuryk ports, Turkmenistan's Turkmenbashi ports, and after that to South Caucasus, Turkey and Europe, stands critical for Eurasian interconnectivity. This route utilises Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Turkish transportation infrastructure, where Baku port, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, and Marmaray undersea railway tunnel play critical roles in transporting goods towards and from Asia to Europe (see Figure 2.3).



Figure 2.3 CCAWAEC’s Third Direction.

Source: Based on United Nations map, compiled by author.

In 2015, Ankara and Beijing agreed to conjunct Turkish Middle Corridor with China's BRI. Through this step, the sides choose cooperation over competition. This means that China values Turkey's strategic location between the Asia and Europe to rebuild Eurasian interconnectivity. In turn, Turkey acknowledges that its Middle Corridor can succeed if it is harmonised with the Chinese initiative. In

CCAWAEC's China-Central Asia-South Caucasus-Turkey-Europe direction, China participates in building and modernising Turkish transportation infrastructure. For instance, the Chinese side constructed the Ankara-Istanbul high-speed railway (Semenova, *op.cit.*, p.55) to improve the interconnectivity between Turkey's political centre and its largest city located in Europe and Asia. Turkey and China agreed to build a high-speed rail line between Edirne and Kars (Çolakoğlu, 2024, p.128). It is worth mentioning that the first city is in the European subcontinent, and the second one is in the Asian subcontinent. It means that this railway will also contribute to rebuilding interconnectivity in Eurasia, making transportation fast and competitive. The COSCO, in cooperation with China Merchants Holdings International and China Investment Corporation, paid US\$940 million to obtain 65% of Turkish Kumport located in Istanbul for operating in the Marmaray Sea (Atatüre, 2023, p.43). As Eldem (2022) mentioned, "the Marmaray tunnel in Istanbul became the first underwater railway in the world, linking Beijing and London via the Bosphorus Strait". This all means that the sides have implemented concrete steps to strengthen economic interconnectivity after announcing the conjunction of the BRI and Middle Corridor. As a result, bilateral trade and investments between Turkey and China have also grown. For instance, in 2014, a year before the decision to conjunct the BRI and Middle Corridor, bilateral trade was US\$23 billion (GAC, 2014). In 2023, it grew to US\$ 43.3 billion (GAC, *op. cit.*). As Çolakoğlu (*op. cit.*, p.129) informed: "China's FDI flow to Turkey from 2015 to 2021 is US\$6.3 billion (US\$7.3 billion in Chinese sources). Turkey's FDI flow to China from 2015 to 2021 is US\$1.8 billion (US\$1.2 in Turkish sources)".

In the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Georgia play active roles in the CCAWAEC. It was Azerbaijan's initiative to build the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. Baku was the leading investor in this project. It has also modernised its Baku port, which can currently store 15 million tons of goods (Port of Baku, a). In 2023, the Port of Baku (b) handled 7.343.000 tons of cargo, 16.3% more than the previous year. China's trade with Azerbaijan has grown year by year. For instance, in 2022, bilateral trade was US\$1.3 billion; in 2023, it totalled US\$1.7 billion (GAC, China, *op. cit.*).

In turn, Georgia established a strategic partnership with China and signed a free trade agreement; its ports in the Black Sea and its railroads and highways are essential in CCAWAEC's South Caucasian direction. The former Georgian ambassador to China, Dr. David Aptsiauri (2024), stated that these measures were instrumental in elevating Sino-Georgian economic and political cooperation to a higher level compared to China's relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia. This provided an opportunity to utilize Georgia's other capabilities beyond being just a transit country. Therefore, trade between China and Georgia is growing year by year. For instance, in 2022, it was US\$1.4 billion; in 2023, it grew to US\$2 billion (GAC, China, *op. cit.*). According to *People's Daily* (2024), until November 2023, China invested about US\$800 million, and its companies constructed more than 40 km of railways and 300 km of roads in Georgia.

Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are also members of AIIB, from which they received financing to rebuild Eurasian interconnectivity. For instance, in 2021, the AIIB approved a EUR300 million loan for the Ispartakule-Cerkezkoy Railway Project, which aims to improve interconnectivity and increase transportation capacity between Turkey and Europe (AIIB, 2021). In 2023, AIIB agreed to provide a EUR140 million loan to Fraport TAV Antalya Yatirim, Yapim ve Isletme (FTA) for the modernisation of Antalya's Airport (AIIB, 2023c). In turn, in 2016, Azerbaijan received a US\$600 million loan from AIIB to construct the TANAP for transporting natural gas from Azerbaijan into Turkey and Europe (AIIB, 2016b). Georgia received a US\$114 million loan to build a highway bypassing Batumi port city on the Black Sea coast (AIIB, 2017).

There are regular trains between Chinese, Turkish, Azerbaijani, and Georgian ports and cities, some of which continue their way towards Europe through multimodal routes. For instance, in 2018, a

freight train was launched between Kazakh-Chinese logistics terminal in the port of Lianyungang and Istanbul (Middle Corridor, 2018). In 2019, the first China Railway Express freight train went to Europe from Chinese Xi'an using Kazakh, Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Turkish railways, ports and the Marmaray subsea tunnel (Xinhua, 2019; Hürriyet Daily News, 2019). In 2020, under the framework of its Intercontinental Rail service network, Maersk launched rail service between Xi'an and port of Korfez in Izmit "for customers within the automotive and technology industrial verticals in Turkey and other segments which are in high need of fast delivery to market" (Maersk, 2020a). Xi'an is connected with Baku and Tbilisi with block train services for bringing Chinese products to Azerbaijani and Georgian markets (Middle Corridor, 2024; Maersk, 2020b). Xi'an is also connected through Kazakhstani and Azerbaijani transportation infrastructure with Georgian Poti port, from where goods are being shipped and received towards and from Europe (Xinhua, 2024).

It is worth mentioning that in rebuilding of infrastructure in this direction, the interests of China, European, regional, and other Eurasian states coincide. For this reason, not only China and regional states and their financial institutions are investing money, but also the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Asian Development Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency, European Investment Bank, and others.

Armenia is a Prospective member of AIIB not yet a Regional member. Its role is symbolic in CCAWAEC with its MOU with China on jointly building SREB, which all regional states signed, but its trade with China also continues to grow. In 2022, Sino-Armenian trade was US\$1.4 billion; in 2023, it totalled US\$1.5 billion (GAC, *op. cit.*). Speaking of the potential impact and prospects of BRI in South Caucasian states, Chinese scholar Yuntian Zheng (2024) noted:

"BRI will be constructive in integrating all sorts of resources in this region. With the combination of the Black Sea ports of Georgia, the unique cultural heritages in Armenia, the potential of jointly implementing Digital Silk Road, and the natural energy from Azerbaijan, the whole region will come into play to flourish the contemporary Silk Road".

Nevertheless, in a Multipolar World Order 2.0 era, the South Caucasus is a polarised region, where superpowers US, China, great powers Russia, the EU, and India, and middle powers like Turkey and Iran are competing. Additionally, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has not been settled yet. Ethnic cleansings in the non-recognised Nagorno Karabakh Republic brought tensions and threatened regional security (Sahakyan, 2024, p.475-476). If there is a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the sides can target each other's railways, ports, and highways.

Therefore, China and Europe must play an active role in this issue. As China has a good reputation in Armenia and Azerbaijan, it can initiate a trilateral platform to play a constructive role in a peaceful solution to the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute, as it did for Iran and Saudi Arabia. This step will provide an opportunity to open borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan and reconnect Azerbaijani-Armenian and Turkish railways and highways. This direction will create another link within CCAWAEC, making it more sustainable and safer. Transportation between Europe and China will stand fast compared with other directions (Iran, Georgia) of the CCAWAEC. Therefore, the recommendation is that China works with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and the EU to make this project feasible. However, there is a need to invest in South Caucasian peace development, railways, and highways. In this process, China can involve the AIIB and invite Armenia to stand as a regional member.

In this stage of Multipolar World Order 2.0 stage, Russia is losing its influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia because of the Russo-Ukrainian war and failed peacekeeping operation in Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, China gets an opportunity to strengthen its relations with South Caucasian and Central Asian states to upgrade its role in this strategically important direction for Eurasian

interconnectivity. It is also worth mentioning that the CCAWAEC can stand as an essential and safe alternative for China to import its energy sources from West Asia without using maritime routes, where Quad and AUKUS can bring problems if there is a conflict between China and the US.

Table 2.3 Regional Members of the AIIB from West Asia (AIIB, 2020).

Members	Total Subscriptions		Voting Power	
	Amount (million US\$)	% of Total	Number of Votes	% of Total
Turkey	2,609.9	2.6977%	28,350	2.5133%
Saudi Arabia	2,544.6	2.6302%	27,697	2.4554%
Iran	1,580.8	1.6340%	11,736	1.0404%
United Arab Emirates	1,185.7	1.2256%	14,108	1.2507%
Israel	749.9	0.7751%	9,750	0.8643%
Qatar	604.4	0.6247%	8,295	0.7354%
Oman	259.2	0.2679%	4,843	0.4293%
Azerbaijan	254.1	0.2619%	4,553	0.4032%
Jordan	119.2	0.1232%	3,443	0.3052%
Bahrain	103.6	0.1071%	2,687	0.2382%
Georgia	53.9	0.0555%	2,551	0.2259%
Iraq	25.0	0.0258%	1,662	0.1472%

Conclusion

In the Multipolar World Order 2.0 era, when Eurasia stands polarised, it is becoming hard to maintain cooperation and coordination between Eurasian states, which have different national interests and responsibilities towards their allies. In this stage, states mostly prioritise their security and political interests over economic interests.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that SREB's CCAWAEC unites states from different regions to rebuild the Eurasian interconnectivity. Analysing through the Realism theory introduced by Wohlforth (2010, p.123-133), China tries to use Groupism to create common interests and cohesion among CCAWAEC participating states. However, the CCAWAEC is not an institution or union where China can enforce order according to the Realism's power-centrism, even if it plays a central role with the help of investments and infrastructure building. The CCAWAEC is being developed within Anarchy, where no centralised government exists. As no central power can impose peace, it brings security issues and conflicts that can cause problems for the Eurasian interconnectivity through CCAWAEC. Relations within CCAWAEC are being regulated with the help of MoUs on jointly building BRI between China and CCAWAEC states, the conjunction of national strategies of regional states with China's BRI, multilateral and bilateral agreements, etc. Egoism plays a constructive role, because all states located in CCAWAEC's regions are interested in rebuilding Eurasian interconnectivity through CCAWAEC. As they are getting an opportunity to modernise their transportation infrastructure, link their economies with China and other Eurasian states, grow trade and get investments for developing economies. Moreover, they strengthen their security by creating interconnectivity with neighbouring and continental states.

It is worth mentioning, that the CCAWAEC is creating interdependence, rather than only one-way dependence, as not only China is using the transportation infrastructure of the CCAWAEC for accessing Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe, but countries located in these areas are also modernising their infrastructure by the help of Chinese investments and sell their products through SREB and MSR. Moreover, involving China in their regions, CCAWAEC participating states try to implement a balance of power. In sum, rebuilding and modernising infrastructure in CCAWAEC, China, and regional states strengthen Eurasian interconnectivity and security. It is worth mentioning that the EU is also interested in the development of CCAWAEC, as "in 2023, China was the third largest partner for EU exports of goods (8.8 %) and the largest partner for EU imports of goods (20.5 %)" (European Commission, 2024). Nevertheless, as statistics show, because of geopolitical tensions as well as problems with NEALBEC's supply chains, trade between the EU and China decreased. If it was US\$847.3 billion in 2022, it dropped to US\$782.9 billion in 2023 (GAC, China, 2022; 2023). The CCAWAEC allows the EU and China to trade and build mainland interconnectivity without Russia, which coincides with the EU's interest in bypassing Russian territory. Therefore, even if the indirect war between Russia and NATO for Ukraine is causing problems for China-Europe transportation and there is a threat that the Quad and AUKUS can block the Malacca strait, the CCAWAEC can stand as a solution for an extended period. In sum, time is working for CCAWAEC to stand as the main connector between Eurasian regions.

To securitize its supply chains and investments in CCAWAEC, it appears that China is trying to make SCO the main platform for problem solving in Central and West Asia. For this reason, getting China's support during 2023-2024, Iran joined as a Member; Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrein, Qatar, and Kuwait obtained Dialogue Partner status bringing more involvement from West Asia, taking into consideration Turkey's, Armenia's and Azerbaijan's Dialogue partner status, which they had well before. This move can be explained also that China is disturbed because of Turkish growing influence in CCAWAEC states after the defeat of Armenia in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, and activation of the work of Organization of Turkic States, and Middle Corridor. Involving Iran, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, China tries to diversify SCO and create a balance of powers for not letting Turkey to get decisive role in CCAWAEC and SCO utilizing its national, cultural, and religious connections with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.

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