

Manuscript No.:IJAR-59106

Title: “The Role of Uzbekistan in the Belt and Road Initiative: A Strategic Nexus in Central Asia,”

Recommendation:

Accept as it is

Accept after minor revision.....

Accept after major revision

Do not accept (*Reasons below*)

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality		✓		
Techn. Quality			✓	
Clarity			✓	
Significance		✓		

Reviewer's Name: Dr Feroze Ahmad Mir

Reviewer's Comment

The manuscript addresses a timely and important topic concerning Uzbekistan's evolving role in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its implications for regional connectivity and integration in Central Asia. The paper's central argument that Uzbekistan's geographical centrality can be transformed into strategic regional significance through connectivity, institutional coordination, domestic economic reform, and regional cooperation is clearly articulated.

A major strength of the manuscript is its attempt to move beyond a narrow China–Uzbekistan bilateral perspective and examine the BRI through the wider regional geography of Central Asia. The authors appropriately emphasize that physical infrastructure alone cannot guarantee regional integration and that customs coordination, regulatory interoperability, private-sector competitiveness, and institutional reform are necessary complements to infrastructure development.

The theoretical framework combining **regional integration theory, connectivity theory, and new economic geography** is appropriate for the subject. The concept of the “strategic regional nexus” is particularly useful as an organizing analytical concept, and the proposed sequence from connectivity to market access, investment, productive development, and institutional cooperation provides a coherent conceptual structure.

The methodology is also explicitly identified as a qualitative case-study approach using academic literature, government documents, international-organization reports, and major connectivity projects, with particular attention to developments after 2016. This gives the manuscript a reasonable methodological foundation.

The paper provides useful discussion of the four major connectivity directions—north, east, west, and south—and explains how Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, China, South Asia, and the Caspian region fit into Uzbekistan's broader connectivity strategy. The sections on border governance and corridor diversification are particularly relevant because they demonstrate that the effectiveness of connectivity depends on institutional interoperability as much as physical infrastructure.

The manuscript would nevertheless benefit from some revisions before publication. First, the concept of a “strategic regional nexus” should be distinguished more explicitly from related concepts such as a logistics hub, transit state, regional gateway, or connectivity corridor. The paper provides a definition, but additional conceptual differentiation would strengthen its theoretical contribution.

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Second, some sections are predominantly descriptive. The manuscript would be stronger if the evidence were used more systematically to demonstrate the proposed causal mechanisms. For example, the relationship between infrastructure development, reduced transaction costs, increased trade, investment, and regional integration could be demonstrated through selected empirical indicators or documented cases.

Third, the paper should more clearly distinguish **BRI-specific projects from broader Uzbek connectivity initiatives**. This is important because not every infrastructure or reform development discussed in the manuscript necessarily originates from the BRI. The authors themselves appropriately argue that the BRI should be understood as one component of a broader regional transformation.

Fourth, the manuscript could provide more quantitative or comparative evidence to support its central claims. Even within a qualitative study, data on trade flows, border-crossing times, logistics costs, foreign investment, transit volumes, or intra-Central Asian trade would help demonstrate whether Uzbekistan is actually progressing toward the proposed nexus function.

Finally, the manuscript requires careful language and editorial proofreading. There are some formatting inconsistencies, lengthy sentences, minor grammatical issues, and inconsistencies in citation/reference presentation. These are generally editorial rather than fundamental problems.

Strengths

1. **Highly relevant research topic:** The paper addresses the growing importance of Central Asian connectivity and Uzbekistan's position within the BRI.
2. **Clear research questions:** The study explicitly asks how connectivity changes Uzbekistan's strategic significance and under what conditions BRI-related connectivity can contribute to regional integration.
3. **Strong conceptual framework:** The integration of regional integration theory, connectivity theory, and new economic geography provides a useful multidisciplinary foundation.
4. **Original conceptual contribution:** The idea of transforming Uzbekistan from a "transit country" into a "strategic regional nexus" provides a potentially valuable conceptual contribution.
5. **Regional rather than bilateral perspective:** The paper appropriately considers Uzbekistan's relations with all neighboring Central Asian states and multiple external connectivity directions.
6. **Attention to institutional factors:** The manuscript correctly emphasizes that infrastructure must be accompanied by customs modernization, regulatory interoperability, domestic reforms, and private-sector development.
7. **Comprehensive treatment of connectivity:** The paper considers transport, energy, digital systems, tourism, education, human capital, and regional value chains rather than limiting connectivity to roads and railways.
8. **Balanced discussion of challenges:** The manuscript acknowledges financing risks, institutional fragmentation, geopolitical uncertainty, uneven development, and the possibility of infrastructure-led overoptimism.

Weaknesses

1. **Limited empirical measurement:** The central "strategic nexus" proposition would be stronger with more concrete indicators of trade, investment, logistics performance, transit utilization, and regional integration.

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2. **Conceptual differentiation needs strengthening:** The distinction between “strategic regional nexus,” “transit country,” “logistics hub,” and “regional gateway” should be developed more explicitly.
3. **BRI attribution requires greater precision:** The manuscript should clearly identify which projects are BRI-related and which represent Uzbekistan's independent national or multilateral connectivity policies.
4. **Some analysis remains descriptive:** Several country-by-country and corridor discussions could be strengthened by explicitly connecting empirical evidence to the theoretical framework.
5. **Limited comparative perspective:** A brief comparison with another Central Asian state could help demonstrate what makes Uzbekistan's proposed nexus role distinctive.
6. **Causal claims need additional support:** The proposed sequence from connectivity to integration is theoretically convincing, but additional evidence is needed to demonstrate that these mechanisms are occurring in practice.
7. **References require editorial standardization:** The reference section contains variations in formatting and some entries that should be checked for completeness and consistency.
8. **Language editing is recommended:** Minor grammatical, punctuation, spacing, and stylistic issues should be corrected before publication.

Significance of the Study

The manuscript is significant because it provides a regional interpretation of Uzbekistan's participation in the BRI and links infrastructure connectivity with broader processes of economic transformation and Central Asian regional integration. Rather than measuring BRI participation simply by the number or financial value of infrastructure projects, the study proposes evaluating whether those projects generate wider network effects across the region.

The paper also makes an important analytical point that connectivity is not an outcome in itself but a mechanism whose developmental consequences depend on institutions, market structures, domestic reforms, and regional cooperation. This perspective can be useful for future research on the BRI and regional integration in landlocked and doubly landlocked economies.

Recommendation for Publication

Recommendation: Accept for publication subject to minor revisions.

The manuscript has a clear research focus, a relevant theoretical framework, an appropriate qualitative methodology, and a potentially useful conceptual contribution through the idea of Uzbekistan as a **strategic regional nexus**. Its discussion of transport corridors, border governance, economic reform, digital connectivity, energy cooperation, and intra-Central Asian integration makes the study relevant to researchers of international relations, Central Asian politics, regional integration, geoeconomics, and the Belt and Road Initiative.

Before publication, I recommend that the authors strengthen the empirical evidence, clarify the distinction between BRI projects and broader Uzbek connectivity initiatives, sharpen the conceptual definition of the strategic regional nexus, improve the theoretical-to-empirical linkage, standardize references, and undertake thorough language editing.

Subject to these revisions, the manuscript is recommended for publication.

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