

From China to Afghanistan: A New Milestone for Belt and Road Progress

by Hussein Askary

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Sept. 24—The first rail shipment, consisting of two freight containers, arrived from China to the border town of Hairatan in Afghanistan's northern Balkh province Sept. 23, marking a milestone in breaking the isolation of that land-locked country, which is currently suffering a massive humanitarian crisis. The two containers, part of a larger consignment, are part of many shipments planned for a three-month testing period for the China-Afghanistan Corridor.

The initial shipment traveled along the first stage—around 500 kilometers from the city of Kashgar in Xinjiang to Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan—by road, since there is no rail link, although one is planned eventually.

At Osh, the containers were loaded onto trains to link up with Uzbekistan's rail network across the border in Andijan. They then crossed eastern Uzbekistan and headed south into Afghanistan, as part of a 12-container train, to arrive at Hairatan, which links with the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif along an Uzbek-built railway line. The first containers, carrying mostly vehicle parts, left Kashgar Sept. 13, taking only 10 days to reach Afghanistan. This compares to one to three months for the current route used to send cargo from China to Afghanistan through Pakistan via the seaport of Karachi and overland. China has also used an air bridge, flying humanitarian aid to Kabul in recent months.



The first shipment of Chinese commercial freight containers arrives from Nantong, China by rail at the border town of Hairatan in Afghanistan's northern Balkh province.

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China's *Global Times* cited Governor Qudratullah Abu Hamza of Balkh province as saying that, "It is a milestone and a positive step towards boosting trade and economic relations between Afghanistan and the neighboring countries." The opening of the new China-Afghanistan Corridor contributes to regional development, and Afghanistan is determined to pursue economic relations with all nations in the region.

Before attending the Sept. 15-16 Summit of the leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Samarkand, China's President Xi Jinping sent a letter, published in Uzbek media, underlining the importance of Uzbek-China relations and the transport corridor from China to Central Asia. Xi underlined the important developments that had occurred for the Uzbek economy since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative. He wrote:

We are good partners pursuing common development. China is the biggest trading partner and a major investor for Uzbekistan. Two-way trade exceeded US\$8 billion in 2021, approached US\$5 billion in the first half of this year, and is on course to reach the US\$10 billion goal set for 2022. Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative has been fruitful, and major projects are making steady progress.

Regarding the infrastructure projects connecting China to Central Asia and Afghanistan, Xi wrote:

All four lines of the China-Central Asia natural gas pipeline run through Uzbekistan. The [Kamchiq] tunnel on the Angren-Pap railway line, the longest tunnel in Central Asia, has been successfully completed. More transport potential is being unleashed from the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan highway and the China-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan railway. And preparations for the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project are well under way. Uzbekistan is thus trans-

forming from a land-locked to a land-linked country.

The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan route is the one which is most important for Afghanistan. In his speech at the SCO Summit President Xi emphasized:

We should ensure that the SCO-Afghanistan contact group and the mechanism of coordination and cooperation among Afghanistan's neighbors continue to play their roles; and we should encourage Afghan authorities to establish a broadly-based and inclusive political structure and remove the ground that breeds terrorism.

As [explained](#) in a thorough study by the Belt and Road Institute in Sweden (BRIX) last year, Afghanistan's economic and security woes can only be remedied through a massive economic development process implying full integration into the Belt and Road corridors and its natural geographical neighborhood under the umbrella of the SCO.

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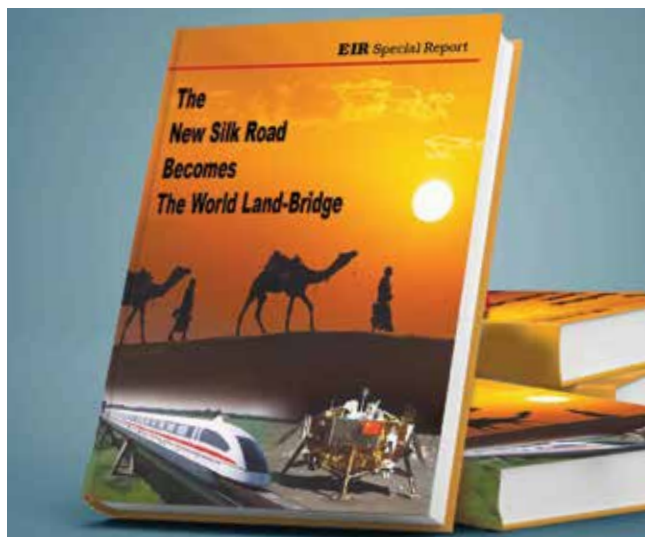
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