



XINJIANG A GATEWAY TO CHINA BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

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Abstract

The importance of Xinjiang in the region as a strategic connectivity hub and its implications for economic, infrastructural, and geopolitical dynamics are examined thoroughly in this paper. It is strategically located between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East; thus, it plays an important role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as being a key point for trade and infrastructure projects. This research examines Xinjiang's strategic advantages, transformative infrastructure development influence on trade and connectivity as well as substantial trade flows that are made possible by improved networks within the area. Similarly, it outlines the security challenges connected with merging countries together by explaining why regional integration should be approached delicately so that terrorism, separatism, or even geopolitical rivalries can be dealt with accordingly. By examining these factors in detail, this paper is expected to shed light on the possibilities of inclusive sustainable regional development and integration in Xinjiang to policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders.

Keywords: Xinjiang, Regional Connectivity, Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, Trade flows, Economic Cooperation.

Introduction:

Xinjiang is a strategically located region of northwestern China and has become an important player in terms of regional connectivity (Horn & Østergaard, 2023). The situation within the geographical precincts serves as an entrance to a lot of economic, infrastructure, and geopolitical interactions. This article examines the various aspects that inform Xinjiang's

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role as a regional hub while exploring strategic advantages for Xinjiang, infrastructure development influence on trade and connectivity effects, trade flow dynamics, and security threats and geopolitical challenges associated with regional connectivity.

Xinjiang maintains a strategic position at the nexus of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, making it a fundamental transit for exchange, electricity and infrastructure tasks (Horn& Østergaard, 2023). The complex is ideally suited to China's formidable Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to restore historic transit corridors and boost economic connectivity in the region. In addition to its geographical area, Xinjiang represents an ethnic diversity, and historic cultural connections with nearby regions. These factors also enhance its potential as a bridge designed for economic integration and cultural exchange (Buzanchi 2022).

The speedy infrastructure improvement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has enhanced the networks between Xinjiang and neighboring areas significantly (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Investments in transportation infrastructure, energy pipelines and digital infrastructure have not only strengthened the ease of doing business but also strengthened social and economic integration across borders. This burgeoning infrastructure situation represents Xinjiang's transformative potential in terms of regional development and reshapes geopolitical dynamics.

Empirical research suggests that increased infrastructural developments in Xinjiang have resulted in more trade to the destinations. The results show that this area acts as an important transit point in the BRI thereby facilitating important trade between China and Central Asian countries as well as Middle Eastern countries. Support for infrastructure includes a variety of trade activities, ranging from raw materials to technological products that reinforce Xinjiang's position as an important point on international trade routes (Ilyas & Bao, 2020). ; Luo & Wei , 2022).

Consequently, sustainable development and cooperation are seriously hampered by security and geopolitical challenges despite regional integration initiatives that have the potential to transform the situation. For this reason, Xinjiang needs to address concerns about terrorism, discrimination, and geopolitical competition, due to its location, which is notably close to areas of ongoing violence and ethnic conflict there is (Akbar & Iqbal, 2023). These challenges, can only be addressed through concerted efforts in strengthening border security

through concerted efforts in promoting regional cohesion and sustainable socio-economic development and they can be dealt with.

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the role of Xinjiang as a platform for regional connectivity. Such research demonstrates the methodological value of the impact of infrastructure on productivity and competitiveness, business model mapping and transparent response a are provided for both security challenges and geographic considerations. Highlighting these important issues, this study highlights the importance of Xinjiang using its potential to promote inclusive and sustainable regional integration.

1.1 Significance and Scope of the Study:

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of Xinjiang as a regional connectivity hub and its implications for economic, infrastructure, and geopolitical development. It adds to existing literature by analyzing specific factors that make Xinjiang a focal point for promoting economic cooperation and integration. The paper examines the strategic location of Xinjiang in regional connectivity, and explores how infrastructure development affects trade and economic activities throughout the region.

The study delve into the dynamics of trade flows through Xinjiang, highlighting the region's strategic importance in facilitating trade between China and various Central Asian, South Asian, and Middle Eastern countries. This analysis underscores the importance of Xinjiang's enhanced infrastructure, such as transportation networks, energy pipelines, and digital infrastructure, in supporting diverse trade activities and fostering economic integration.

1.2 Objectives:

- i. To analyze Xinjiang's strategic advantages as a regional connectivity hub.
- ii. To evaluate the Influence of Infrastructure Development on Trade and Connectivity.
- iii. To examine trade flow through Xinjiang.
- iv. To explore security and geopolitical challenges associated with regional connectivity and propose solutions.

2. Literature Review:

Many studies looked at Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and how it connects regions. They focused on Xinjiang's important location at the meeting point of Central Asia, South

Asia, and the Middle East. Nirmal and Aydin's research in 2022 showed that Xinjiang's place allows it to reach big markets and trade paths, making it a possible economic center. In 2021, Clarke emphasized the need to handle ethnic relations in Xinjiang well for long-term stability and to unlock its economic chances.

2.1. Xinjiang's Strategic Advantages

Xinjiang's strategic location at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East positions it as a critical player in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other regional connectivity endeavors (Horn & Østergaard, 2023). This advantageous geography grants Xinjiang access to major markets and trade routes, solidifying its role as a vital economic bridge (Nirmal & Aydin, 2022).

Beyond its geographical prominence, scholars' like Buzanchi (2022) highlight Xinjiang's growing importance as a soft power hub. Its diverse ethnic composition and historical cultural ties with neighboring regions can foster economic cooperation and cultural exchange, further solidifying Xinjiang's position as regional connector (Buzanchi, 2022). However, some argue that this very diversity presents challenges and effective management of inter-ethnic relations is crucial for long-term stability (Clarke, 2021).

2.2. Impact of Infrastructure Development on Trade and Connectivity

The impact of infrastructure development on trade and connectivity in Xinjiang has been extensively studied. Research by Jiang et al. (2023) shows that large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), have had transformative effects on trade facilitation and economic integration. Investments in transportation networks, energy pipelines, and digital infrastructure have not only increased trade volumes but also improved cross-border connectivity. This significantly increased economic growth of the area (Jiang et al., 2023). Also, Luo and Wei (2022), highlighted how building things in the ground was really important in making some places different, mostly rural areas.

2.3. Trade flows through Xinjiang:

Many studies were done to understand how trade happens in Xinjiang. This is important to know how the area's economy connects with others. Ilyas and Bao's study in 2020 looked at how much is traded between Xinjiang and nearby countries. They checked what is imported and exported and the balance of trade to find key factors, partners, and patterns in Xinjiang's trade. Apart from trades with single countries, experts also look at bigger regional trade patterns. By looking at trade data over time, they can see how things

like trade deals or building projects impact Xinjiang's economy(Li et al., 2023).Additionally it is also important to consider the environmental implications of the increased trade activity (Napalm, 2019)

2.4. Security and Geopolitical Challenges Associated with Regional Connectivity:

Issues related to security and geopolitical challenges that are associated with regional connectivity in Xinjiang are a critical area of studies. A study by Akbar and Iqbal (2023) have identified various security threats, including terrorism, separatism, and geopolitical rivalries, which pose significant impediments to sustainable development and cooperation (Akbar & Iqbal, 2023). Some of the studies emphasize the importance of addressing security and geopolitical challenges, through combined efforts, particularly through China-Pakistan cooperation, in areas such as counter-terrorism, border security, and regional stability (Wang & Khan, 2019). Additionally researchers like Xing and Zhao (2022) highlighted the need for comprehensive strategies that integrate economic development with security considerations to foster inclusive and sustainable regional integration (Xing & Zhao, 2022).

3. Methodology:

To critically examine the role of Xinjiang as a regional connectivity hub, this paper used a multifaceted approach. It brings together a systematic literature review with data analysis to accomplish the objectives.

- i. **Data Collection:** A comprehensive literature searches was conducted on academic database, and government/international organization websites using appropriate keywords.
- ii. **Data Analysis:** Collected data and literature was analyzed critically to explore strategic advantages of Xinjiang as connectivity hub, the influence of infrastructure development, the trade flows, and security challenges.
- iii. **Literature Review Approach:** A comprehensive review strategy, involving keyword searches, citation chaining, and reference list consultation, ensures inclusivity of recent and relevant publications.
- iv. **Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria:** Inclusion criteria prioritize relevance to research objectives and credibility of the source. Only high-quality, directly relevant sources are included in the analysis.
- v. **Quality Assessment:** The quality of included literature is assessed based on author expertise, research methodology rigor, and relevance to research objectives.

- vi. **Ethical Factors:** Strict adherence to correct citation procedures, avoidance of plagiarism, and compliance with copyright laws are maintained throughout the research process.
- vii. **Constraints:** Dependence on secondary data sources may result in biases or constraints. Moreover, the analysis may be affected by source selection and interpretation.

4. **Xinjiang: A Pivotal Hub for Regional Connectivity in the 21st Century**

As the world changes because of globalization, how places are connected to each other becomes very important for making more money, sharing culture, and keeping people safe and happy. Xinjiang is in a very good place in China, right up in the northwest, and it can be a very important part of the way the world is connected. It's like it's at the center of a big circle that includes Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, so it can reach a lot of people and trade paths that have been used for a long time. This makes Xinjiang very important for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other projects to connect different places (Horn & Østergaard, 2023).

Xinjiang's geographical advantage is complemented by its rich ethnic diversity and historical connections with neighboring regions. These attributes make Xinjiang a potential "soft power" hub, capable of driving economic cooperation and cultural exchange, as suggested by Buzanchi (2022). Xinjiang could become a trade nexus, with routes spreading out from it to enable the free movement of goods, services, and ideas across borders.

However, this promising approach is not without challenges. It is important to manage ethnic relations in Xinjiang to keep them stable in the long run (Clarke, 2021). There are also security threats such as terrorism and separatism that can stop sustainable development and teamwork (Akbar & Iqbal, 2023). Addressing these multifaceted challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach that combines coordinated security measures with strategies that harmonize economic advancement with security imperatives (Xing & Zhao, 2022).

- **Geopolitical Positioning:** Xinjiang is centrally situated at the Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, and enjoys privileged access to expansive markets and established trade corridors. This strategic location solidifies its indispensable role in regional and global connectivity endeavors like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), (Horn & Østergaard, 2023).

- **Historical Legacy:** Throughout the history, Xinjiang has been a vibrant cultural junction, fostering a rich ethnic diversity. This historical significance has facilitated economic cooperation with neighboring regions for centuries (Liu & Liu, 2020). This historical legacy made Xinjiang as a potential hub for “soft power”, cultivating future collaborations and cultural exchange (Buzanchi, 2022).
- **Culturally Rich Neighboring Ties:** Xinjiang's population composition, encompassing diverse ethnic groups like Uighurs, Kazakhs, and Han Chinese, creates a microcosm of multiculturalism (Zhao & Ahmed, 2018). These cultural connections can act as bridges, facilitating social cohesion and collaborative efforts towards shared economic and developmental goals (Han & Li, 2019).

Collectively, Xinjiang's geographical location, historical significance, and cultural ties make it a unique key player in fostering regional connectivity. Its strategic location at the center of key trading routes facilitates the smooth transfer of goods and services, while its historical role as a cultural hub stimulates economic partnership and social bonds with neighboring regions. These advantages enhanced Xinjiang’s economic prosperity and also contribute to the regional connectivity.

5. Influence of Infrastructure Development on Trade and Connectivity in Xinjiang:

Development of infrastructure played an important role in fostering regional connectivity by facilitating trade flows and improving transportation efficiency.

5.1. Evaluating Impacts on Trade and Connectivity:

Trade Volume Analysis: Through analyze of data on trade volume before and after major infrastructural projects like high-speed rail and highways, it is possible to estimate how infrastructural development has effected trade activity within Xinjiang. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, study recently conducted by Li et al. (2023) provides a solid basis for understanding the relevance of infrastructural development in sharpening regional trade patterns. Their study finds a strong positive relationship between infrastructural development and trade volume. These variables are found to be associated with an increase of 2.3% in trade activity and 3.8% in trade volume. Such data provide a solid basis for estimating potential effects of infrastructural development on trade volume in Xinjiang, a key region in the BRI network.

Transportation Efficiency Analysis: Analysis of transport efficiency data shows a pronounced correlation between the deployment of infrastructure and positive outcomes. The

research conducted by Jiang et al. (2023) shows that it is capable of substantially reducing journey costs by 12% and journey time by 20%. Applying such findings to the development of infrastructure within Xinjiang suggests a promising future for the role of the region as a central Asian trading hub with improved productivity and increased competitiveness.

Connectivity Development Assessment: A survey of connectivity development in Xinjiang reflects the expansion in transport infrastructure and improvement in regional connectivity. The positive contribution of the infrastructure development to regional networks can be seen in a recent work by Luo and Wei (2022). Their study of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) shows the potential of highway, railway, and other fiber optic network constructions to be regionally transformative. In the case of the CPEC project, a model was made for a multi-modal transport corridor with smooth communication and trade facilitation all over the region. Moreover, in a study on the Belt and Road Initiative by Liu et al(2021), it was found that trade volumes have significantly increased with reduced alternatives. Their study evidences that there is a 15-20% increase in trade between participating nations, showing economic advantages of improved connectivity.

5.2 Case Studies Illustrating the Connectivity:

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): There is no doubt that this mega-project within Xinjiang acts as a significant transit point, provided a strong reason to evaluate it. Research by Ilyas & Bao (2020) demonstrated a significant increase in trade volume between China and Pakistan since CPEC's inception. Their findings suggested a 25% growth in bilateral trade, highlighting the project's role in facilitating trade flows (Ilyas & Bao, 2020).

Khorgos Land Port: This was the case after the development of this land port in Xinjiang since it dealt with trade with Central Asian countries. Studies by Xing & Zhao (2022) documented a substantial rise in trade volume since its establishment. Their research suggested a 40% increase in trade between China and Central Asia, attributing it in part to the improved efficiency facilitated by the Khorgos Land Port (Xing & Zhao, 2022).

6. Analyzing Trade Flows through Xinjiang:

Understanding the trade dynamics of Xinjiang is very helpful to gain insight into regional economic interactions. For a comprehensive understanding of its economic importance in facilitating cross-border commerce and regional integration, focus can be laid on trade flows within Xinjiang.

6.1 Understanding the Outcomes of Trade Flow Analysis:

Over all the analysis of the import and export ratio in Xinjiang provides a clear perspective of the trade relations at the regional level. Of course, so much more than what has been previously discussed can be said about its role in advancing the economic interests of the area and contributing to cross-border operations as well as regional connectivity; nevertheless, if the necessity for focus on trade flow within Xinjiang is to be emphasized, then it would be necessary to look more deeply in following respects.

6.1 Understanding the Outcomes of Trade Flow Analysis:

Analyzing the trade statistics give an insight into the overall trade and trends of Xinjiang. Ilyas and Bao (2020) has researching on some aspects of the trade flows, between Xinjiang and its nearby countries. As with import export data and trade balances researcher discover specifics about significant traded commodities, partners and conduits prevailing in Xinjiang that shapes the trading condition.

6.2 Building Trade Relations to Strengthen Regional Connectivity:

Xinjiang is strategically situated to help to improve connectivity. Bordering East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe, Xinjiang's strategic position makes it a crucial province in the context of trade and connectivity projects including the Belt and Road Initiative. In the research conducted by Li et al (2019) emphasis is laid on the need to study and understand economic potentials of Xinjiang as a hub for trade within the framework of the region.

7. Security and Geopolitical Challenges in Xinjiang's Regional Connectivity:

Security and geopolitical challenges have long hindered the process of regional connectivity in Xinjiang. China is reluctant to open unsecured trade routes that could lead to the mass infiltration of terrorists or extremists into countries upholding relations with Beijing. The evaluation of security and geopolitical situation in Xinjiang leads to the conclusion that a multilevel, multifaceted spectrum of factors determines the influences on regional connectivity. All these different perspective of knowledge are integrated in the paper that on one side recognizes how destabilizing is for the region to be challenged by terrorism, separatism, and geopolitical rivalries. Further, terrorism and extremism incidents in Xinjiang are also heavy barriers to regional connectivity endeavors.

Trade routes and infrastructural projects are destroyed through violence and unrest, perpetrated mainly by separatist forces striving for the independence or at least autonomy of

the Uyghur. It is understood that radicalism cannot be fought at its roots without paying much attention to the fact that being socially included is a part of the solution to this complex problem.

Geopolitical Rivalries: The geopolitics of Xinjiang places it in the neighborhood of Central Asia as well as South Asia which responsible lead to geopolitics confrontation among some of the most significant powers globally. Competition with countries like USA and Russia, as well as ongoing conflicts in other parts of the world, makes instability in the region worse and security cooperation significantly more challenging.

Impact on Regional Cooperation: Security issues made people scared that militancy and weapons might spread over the borders and it also messes things up for working together in the area - security dangers in Xinjiang make more distrust happen. This blocks things like regional connectivity projects which could've helped the economy and development. Effective regional collaboration in combating terrorism is important to address the threats posed by such extremist groups operating across borders.

iv. Addressing the Challenges

The following are some of the key strategies needed in addressing challenges linked with regional connectivity in Xinjiang, given ethnic tension and security issues:

a. **Discussion and Inclusion:**

The most important way in which these problems can be approached is through open communication with the inclusion of these ethnic groups in Xinjiang. From the point emphasized by Akbar & Iqbal (2023), and Roberts (2020), another important factor for dealing with these underlying issues of ethnic tension and stability is promotion of inclusion and social cohesion in Xinjiang. This can be done in various ways:

- **Intercultural Programs:** Encouraging initiatives that promote understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures can contribute to enhancing social cohesion.
- **Support for Civil Society:** Empowering civil society organizations that bridge ethnic divides and advocate for social inclusivity is crucial.
- **Inclusive Policy-making:** Ensuring equitable representation of all ethnic groups in decision-making processes through inclusive policies is vital for long-term stability.

b. **Enhanced Regional Security Cooperation:**

Considering the common ground of security threats between Xinjiang and its neighboring areas, there is a great call for enhanced regional security cooperation. According to the International Crisis Group in 2019 and Ritter in 2021, this can be achieved in several ways:

- **Enhanced Sharing of Intelligence:** More effective mechanisms for sharing information among regional security agencies will help identify and address the threats potentially caused by terrorism and separatism.
- **Joint Counter-terrorism Operations:** Strengthening cooperation between law enforcement agencies can enhance regional security efforts.
- **Addressing the Root Causes of Extremism:** Implementing socio-economic development initiatives that offer equal opportunities for all ethnic groups can help prevent radicalization.

c. Transparency and Adherence to International Norms:

Upholding transparency and adherence to international norms and diplomatic engagement, as proposed by Clarke (2021) and Ritter (2021), are crucial for mitigating concerns and building trust among stakeholders in the region. This can be achieved through various means:

- **Improved transparency:** More awareness on policies harboured and policies implemented in Xinjiang and affairs concerning security issues and ethnic groups to prevent mistrust.
- **Maintain human rights norms:** Commitment to the standards of conduct ranked by the international society in the field of human rights could reduce international concern over human-rights violations in the region.
- **Open and constructive dialogue:** Thus, limit on access to information may contribute to trusting relations with other countries, as well as non-closure of misinterpretations.

Conclusion:

A glimpse into the trade currents shows that Xinjiang plays a vital part in bettering regional connectivity. As the front entrance for business between East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe Xinjiang ensures that products, services, and concepts flow evenly. By doing so, this linkage gives not solely thrust to financial development but also an exchange of cultures and cooperation and however harnessing fully the business webs of

Xinjiang necessitates a thorough grasp of the dynamics, goods flows, and trading patterns of the marketplace.

The pledge of regional connectivity aside, Xinjiang faces main challenges. This inquiry centered on Xinjiang's role in this extensive regional connectivity grid across Central Asia South Asia, and further. It inspected the strategic advantages of the area, gauged the impact of infrastructure expansion, investigated trade currents and explored security and geopolitical obstacles. The analysis gleaned useful lessons from the opportunities, as well as the intricacies, met with the positioning of Xinjiang as a regional connectivity center.

As a very important economic integration and cultural exchange center, the geographical location of Xinjiang is located at the intersection of major trade channels. Along with the cultural richness, in history it could have been this one of a common variable which helped to spark economic collaborations and interpersonal interactions. At the same time, the large scale infrastructure initiatives under Belt and Road Initiative, China Pakistan Economic Corridor have not only increased trade volume, improved transport efficiency but also created opportunities for inclusive development. But these benefits can only be fully realized, through effectively addressing the inter-ethnic relationship and long standing security threats. Xinjiang has the potential to not only transform its own destiny but also shape the broader contours of regional integration and prosperity for generations to come.

Geopolitical challenges to security, such as issues in terrorism, separatism, and geopolitical rivalries, have a tendency to remain. To address such challenges, a complex approach is required, in which dialogue, inclusivity, and cooperation on regional security remain a leading priority. Xinjiang's future will be deterministic; however, the province sees the changes taking place now in the world and its role in regional connectivity. The strategic advantage of this province will provide significant benefits for the development of the region. Still, it requires unwavering commitment of the Chinese government and collective efforts to realize this prosperity while taking into account concerns and needs of all stakeholders in the region. This makes Xinjiang a critical point, potentially reshaping not only its own future but that of regional connectivity and prosperity in general over generations.

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