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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ROLE OF UZBEKISTAN IN THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: A STRATEGIC NEXUS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

Uzbekistan occupies a distinctive position in Central Asia. It borders all four other Central Asian countries and Afghanistan, yet it is doubly landlocked and remains dependent on cross-border transit to reach international maritime markets. This combination of centrality and constraint makes Uzbekistan a particularly useful case for examining whether the Belt and Road Initiative can transform geographical position into regional economic influence. This article examines Uzbekistan's BRI participation from a regional rather than a bilateral perspective. It asks how BRI-related connectivity interacts with Uzbekistan's domestic economic reforms and its renewed engagement with neighboring Central Asian countries, and under what conditions infrastructure connectivity can contribute to regional integration. The study combines regional integration theory, connectivity theory, and new economic geography and uses qualitative content analysis of academic literature, official policy documents, and reports from international organizations. The analysis finds that Uzbekistan is moving from a landlocked transit country toward a strategic regional nexus, but that this transformation is conditional. Transport corridors, logistics infrastructure, digital systems, energy cooperation, and tourism networks can reduce transaction costs and enlarge market access; however, the gains depend on customs coordination, regulatory interoperability, private-sector competitiveness, institutional reform, and corridor diversification.

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Introduction:-

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become one of the most consequential connectivity initiatives in contemporary Eurasia. While much of the early literature interpreted the BRI through China's foreign economic strategy, infrastructure investment, or bilateral relations, its regional consequences increasingly require a broader analytical perspective. Central Asia is an especially important setting because the region combines strategic location with weak intra-regional connectivity, fragmented transport systems, and high trade costs.

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In this environment, the question is not simply whether the BRI brings infrastructure to individual countries, but whether infrastructure can alter the regional geography of production, trade, and political cooperation. Uzbekistan occupies an exceptional position in this regional geography. It borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan and has one of the largest populations and domestic markets in Central Asia. Yet Uzbekistan is doubly landlocked: reaching a seaport requires transit through at least two other countries. The Asian Development Bank describes this combination as a structural constraint on trade and emphasizes the importance of improving Uzbekistan's surface transport links with neighboring seaports through regional corridors (ADB, 2025a). The World Bank likewise identifies high trade costs, infrastructure gaps, and border procedures as central constraints on Uzbekistan's external integration (World Bank, 2024).

The paradox is therefore clear. Uzbekistan is geographically central but commercially constrained. The BRI provides an opportunity to reduce this contradiction by supporting rail, road, logistics, digital, and energy connectivity. Yet connectivity itself does not guarantee integration. Infrastructure can reduce travel time and transaction costs, but the distribution of gains depends on customs procedures, regulatory harmonization, domestic market institutions, private-sector competitiveness, and the political willingness of neighboring countries to cooperate. This article argues that Uzbekistan should increasingly be conceptualized as a potential strategic regional nexus rather than simply a recipient of BRI projects or a transit country. A strategic nexus is understood here as a country that does more than provide physical passage: it connects multiple corridors, generates economic activity, facilitates institutional coordination, and links different regional markets.

This approach places Uzbekistan at the intersection of three processes: the construction of physical and digital connectivity, domestic economic transformation, and the gradual thickening of intra-Central Asian regional cooperation. The study addresses three questions. First, how has connectivity altered the strategic significance of Uzbekistan's geographical position? Second, under what conditions can BRI-related connectivity support intra-Central Asian regional integration? Third, what domestic and institutional conditions are required for Uzbekistan to move from geographical centrality toward functional regional centrality? The article contributes to the literature by bringing these questions together in a single analytical framework and by emphasizing Uzbekistan's agency in shaping the regional geography of connectivity.

Theoretical and Methodological Foundation:-

Regional integration and regionness:-

Regional integration is not limited to the creation of supranational institutions. Balassa's classic framework treats integration as a process in which countries progressively reduce barriers to exchange, while later regionalism scholarship stresses functional cooperation, interdependence, and the construction of regional institutions (Balassa, 1961; Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). In Central Asia, integration has remained uneven, but transport, energy, water, tourism, and trade cooperation can generate practical forms of regionness even without a highly institutionalized common market. From this perspective, Uzbekistan matters because regional integration in Central Asia increasingly requires a country capable of connecting otherwise fragmented national systems. Uzbekistan can potentially perform this function because its borders, population, transport geography, and economic scale place it within almost every major regional direction. The relevant issue is therefore not whether Uzbekistan is geographically central, but whether that centrality can be institutionalized through cross-border cooperation.

Connectivity as a multidimensional concept:-

Connectivity should be treated as a system rather than as physical infrastructure alone. Physical connectivity includes railways, roads, ports, logistics centers, pipelines, and power networks. Institutional connectivity includes customs procedures, border management, standards, transport regulations, and trade agreements. Digital connectivity increasingly includes electronic customs, cargo tracking, digital payments, and interoperable information systems. Social connectivity includes tourism, education, and professional mobility. The distinction is important because a new railway may remain underutilized if border procedures are slow, freight services are fragmented, or regulations differ across jurisdictions. Conversely, institutional reforms can generate gains even before major infrastructure projects are completed. Connectivity is therefore most effective when physical and institutional improvements reinforce each other.

New economic geography and the strategic nexus proposition:-

New economic geography emphasizes the relationship among transportation costs, market size, agglomeration, and the location of economic activity (Krugman, 1991; Fujita, Krugman, & Venables, 1999). Lower transport costs can enlarge market access and attract investment, but they can also concentrate activity in already-advantaged urban

centers. For Uzbekistan, connectivity can therefore support diversification only if improved corridors are linked to productive capacity, secondary cities, and border regions. Combining these approaches, the article defines a strategic regional nexus as a country whose location, infrastructure, economic scale, institutional capacity, and external relations enable it to connect multiple regional markets and influence the direction of economic flows. The analytical sequence proposed here is: connectivity reduces trade and transaction costs; lower costs expand market access; expanded access stimulates trade and investment; investment supports industrial and service development; and deeper economic interaction creates incentives for institutional cooperation. The process is conditional rather than automatic.

Research Method:-

The study employs a qualitative case-study methodology with a regional analytical scope. Uzbekistan is selected because it combines exceptional geographic centrality with unusually high structural trade costs and a visible shift toward regional engagement. The evidence base consists of academic literature, government statements and policy documents, and reports from the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund, supplemented by analysis of major connectivity projects. The period of analysis focuses on 2013–2025, with particular attention to the post-2016 period, when Uzbekistan's domestic reforms and regional diplomacy changed significantly. The objective is explanatory rather than econometric. The article does not attempt to estimate the causal impact of a single BRI project. Instead, it examines the mechanisms through which multiple forms of connectivity can interact with institutional reform and regional cooperation.

Uzbekistan's Geographical Centrality and Connectivity Constraint:-

Uzbekistan's geography produces a strategic paradox. It is located at the center of the Central Asian transport system, yet it lacks direct access to the sea and must cross at least two sovereign territories to reach a seaport. Its potential regional role is strengthened by the fact that all other Central Asian countries can be reached directly from its territory. In practical terms, this makes Uzbekistan both a destination market and a possible transit platform.

The country's transport geography can be understood through four broad directions. The northern axis links Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan and onward to Russia and the wider Eurasian transport system. The eastern axis links Uzbekistan through Kyrgyzstan toward China. The western axis connects Uzbekistan through Turkmenistan toward the Caspian Sea and potentially the South Caucasus and Europe. The southern axis points toward Afghanistan and the markets of South Asia and the Middle East. Each direction offers diversification, but each also depends on different infrastructure and institutional conditions.

The challenge is that the existence of multiple corridors does not automatically create a functioning network. Trade routes become strategically valuable when they are reliable, commercially competitive, and interoperable. A corridor that crosses several borders can lose its cost advantage when customs clearance, transshipment, technical standards, or road and rail regulations are poorly coordinated. Uzbekistan's centrality must therefore be transformed from a cartographic fact into a functional economic advantage.

The BRI and Uzbekistan's Emerging Regional Connectivity:-

From bilateral infrastructure to regional networks:-

The BRI has contributed to the evolution of Uzbekistan's connectivity landscape by supporting transport and economic infrastructure. An important lesson, however, is that the strategic value of a project should be assessed by its network effects rather than by its bilateral character. The Angren–Pop railway and Kamchik Tunnel, for example, reduced an internal geographical barrier by linking the Fergana Valley more effectively with the rest of Uzbekistan. The significance of such infrastructure extends beyond the project itself because domestic connectivity is a precondition for participation in transnational corridors. Recent research similarly emphasizes that Uzbekistan's BRI participation has strengthened transport connectivity and economic integration, while also highlighting the country's potential to function as a logistics hub (Tekir, 2026; Simpson, 2024). The analytical step taken in this article is to connect this corridor function to intra-Central Asian integration rather than viewing it only as a China-linked infrastructure story.

The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan direction:-

The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway is particularly significant because it can reinforce the eastern connectivity axis and connect Uzbekistan more directly to wider Eurasian networks. Its regional importance lies less in replacing other routes than in adding another option to Uzbekistan's corridor portfolio. Corridor diversification can reduce dependence on any single transit route and improve resilience against geopolitical or logistical disruptions. At the same time, the benefits of the railway will depend on border coordination, freight demand, tariff

structures, and connections to domestic logistics and industrial centers. A railway corridor should therefore be understood as a regional system requiring interoperable institutions on both sides of the border.

The Caspian and westward direction:-

The Caspian direction has gained importance as Central Asian states seek diversified access to European and global markets. Uzbekistan's links through Turkmenistan toward the Caspian complement northern and eastern corridors and reduce the strategic risk associated with excessive dependence on a single external system. The development of the Trans-Caspian transport environment further increases the relevance of Uzbekistan's westward orientation.

The Asian Development Bank's work on CAREC Corridor 2 illustrates the practical dimension of this strategy. In 2025, the ADB approved a USD 233.1 million loan to modernize approximately 87 kilometers of the Guzar–Bukhara–Nukus–Beyneu (A380) highway in Karakalpakstan, explicitly linking the project to regional trade and improved access to neighboring seaports (ADB, 2025a; ADB, 2025b). The project demonstrates that regional connectivity is also an issue of road quality, climate resilience, traffic management, and logistics efficiency rather than only of headline infrastructure construction.

The South Asian direction:-

The southern corridor offers Uzbekistan a long-term option for reaching Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and the Indian Ocean. Its strategic value is partly contingent because security, infrastructure quality, and political developments in Afghanistan remain uncertain. Nevertheless, maintaining a southern connectivity option strengthens Uzbekistan's diversification strategy and can give the country greater flexibility in choosing external markets and transit partners.

Corridor governance and the economics of borders:-

The economic performance of a transport corridor is shaped at least as much by border governance as by the road or railway itself. For Uzbekistan, this issue is particularly important because almost every external route requires the crossing of multiple borders. A delay at one checkpoint can offset time savings created elsewhere in the network. Consequently, the regional nexus concept places border governance at the center of connectivity analysis.

Border modernization involves more than additional customs facilities. It includes risk-based inspection, coordinated operating hours, advance electronic documentation, interoperable information systems, and mutual recognition of selected standards. Such measures reduce uncertainty for logistics firms and allow them to plan routes around predictable clearance times. In this sense, institutional connectivity can create an economic effect similar to physical infrastructure because both reduce the effective cost of distance. Uzbekistan's strategic opportunity is to connect domestic customs modernization with regional agreements. Improvements on the Uzbek side create stronger returns when neighboring countries implement compatible systems. The implication is that regional connectivity should be treated as a co-produced public good. No single country can maximize the value of a corridor through unilateral investment alone.

Corridor diversification as geoeconomic resilience:-

Diversification has both an economic and a geoeconomic dimension. For a landlocked country, dependence on a narrow set of transit routes creates vulnerability to changes in tariffs, political relations, sanctions, border closures, and infrastructure disruptions. Uzbekistan's strategy of developing northern, eastern, western, and southern directions can therefore be interpreted as a form of geoeconomic resilience. The objective is not to maximize the number of corridors at any cost. Multiple routes are valuable when they provide commercially credible alternatives. This requires comparing transit time, reliability, tariffs, border procedures, capacity, security, and access to major markets. In such a framework, connectivity diversification becomes a portfolio strategy: the country seeks several viable channels rather than one supposedly optimal route. This approach is consistent with the changing regional environment. Central Asian economies increasingly seek balanced relations with multiple external partners while strengthening intra-regional ties. Uzbekistan's connectivity strategy therefore fits within a wider pattern of strategic diversification in which infrastructure is used to enlarge policy autonomy and reduce excessive dependence on any single external actor.

Uzbekistan–Kazakhstan: a northern regional axis:-

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan together represent the most important potential economic axis in Central Asia. Their geographical complementarity is significant: Kazakhstan provides extensive territory, access to the Caspian and northern Eurasian routes, while Uzbekistan provides a large consumer market and direct links to the other Central Asian countries and Afghanistan. Stronger connectivity between the two economies can therefore generate network effects extending beyond bilateral trade. A functional northern axis would support the movement of agricultural products, manufactured goods, energy, and services. It could also strengthen logistics cooperation around border

regions and create incentives for standardized customs and transport procedures. The value of this relationship is thus regional: an efficient Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan connection can serve as a backbone for links between northern and southern parts of Central Asia.

Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan: the eastern interface:-

The Uzbek–Kyrgyz relationship is central to the eastern side of the regional nexus because the Fergana Valley contains densely interconnected populations and economic activities divided by country borders. Improved border relations and transport links can reduce the friction generated by these administrative boundaries. The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway would add a transnational dimension by linking the two Central Asian economies to a major external market. The strategic issue is again interoperability. The railway’s regional effect will depend on whether customs, freight handling, tariffs, and domestic feeder networks are coordinated. If these systems are integrated, the corridor can strengthen not only China–Uzbekistan trade but also intra-Central Asian trade by making the eastern side of the region more accessible.

Uzbekistan–Tajikistan: normalization as connectivity capital:-

The Uzbek–Tajik relationship demonstrates that political normalization itself can function as connectivity capital. When border crossings become more predictable and transportation links are restored, businesses can recover trading relationships that had previously been constrained. This suggests that regional connectivity is partly political: diplomatic trust lowers the perceived risk of cross-border investment and enables infrastructure to operate more effectively. For the strategic nexus concept, the key point is that Uzbekistan does not need to control neighboring routes in order to benefit from them. It needs stable relations that allow networks to pass through and connect different markets. Regional influence therefore emerges through coordination and interdependence rather than territorial control.

Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan: the Caspian gateway:-

Turkmenistan offers Uzbekistan a strategically important westward direction. Access through Turkmenistan can connect Uzbek producers to the Caspian Sea and, through multimodal routes, to the South Caucasus and European markets. The route is also relevant to energy cooperation, particularly as regional electricity and renewable-energy systems develop. The significance of the Turkmen route is therefore not limited to one trade corridor. It contributes to Uzbekistan’s broader strategy of maintaining multiple external options and illustrates why the strategic nexus must be evaluated as a network of complementary directions.

Uzbekistan and Intra-Central Asian Regional Integration:-

The most important implication of Uzbekistan’s connectivity strategy may not be access to distant markets but the strengthening of trade and transport within Central Asia itself. For much of the post-Soviet period, regional borders disrupted economic links that had previously operated within an integrated Soviet space. Differences in customs practice, border regimes, transport rules, and political relations contributed to high transaction costs. The regional environment has changed since 2016. Uzbekistan has adopted a more active regional diplomatic posture, improved relations with neighboring states, and increasingly treated Central Asia as a priority area. This does not create an integrated regional market by itself, but it reduces political barriers to practical cooperation. Regionalism can advance through functional projects before it reaches more ambitious institutional forms.

Uzbekistan’s relationships with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan therefore have to be considered as components of a single connectivity strategy. Kazakhstan provides a northern complement through its larger territory, Caspian access, and connections to Russia and Europe. Kyrgyzstan is crucial to the eastern corridor toward China. Tajikistan is important for eastern and southern regional linkages and for the normalization of cross-border economic relations. Turkmenistan provides a westward and southwestern route toward the Caspian and Iran. This geography makes Uzbekistan potentially central to an emerging regional network. Yet a hub function requires institutional interoperability. Customs documents, border procedures, vehicle regulations, railway systems, digital platforms, and logistics standards must work across borders. Regional integration therefore depends on the gradual reduction of institutional friction, not only on the construction of physical links.

Infrastructure, Trade and Economic Transformation:-

Infrastructure can influence development through a chain of mechanisms. Better roads and railways reduce transport time; lower logistics costs enlarge market access; larger markets increase the incentive to invest; investment can support industrial clustering; and productive clustering can stimulate employment, exports, and diversification. This logic is consistent with new economic geography, but the Uzbek case also demonstrates why complementary

institutions matter. The same infrastructure can produce different results depending on the domestic economy. If firms face barriers to entry, weak competition, limited access to finance, or dominant state-owned enterprises, improved connectivity may increase imports without generating a proportional expansion of domestic productive capacity. Connectivity can then deepen external dependence rather than diversification.

Uzbekistan's ongoing economic reforms are therefore a central part of the connectivity story. The IMF reported in 2025 that Uzbekistan had made substantial progress toward a market-oriented economy, but also emphasized the need to reduce the state's footprint, accelerate privatization, strengthen competition, complete trade and price liberalization, and improve governance (IMF, 2025a; IMF, 2025b). These reforms directly affect the capacity of Uzbek firms to use improved transport and market access. The relationship can therefore be expressed as external connectivity plus domestic reform equals productive integration. In other words, transport infrastructure becomes economically transformative only when domestic institutions allow firms and households to exploit the opportunities created by connectivity. This is one of the key conditions under which Uzbekistan can move from a transit function toward a regional production and logistics function.

Logistics performance and corridor utilization:-

A corridor's economic value depends on utilization rather than physical capacity alone. If freight volumes remain low, fixed infrastructure costs can be high relative to economic returns. For Uzbekistan, this means that corridor development should be linked to export promotion, logistics services, industrial parks, customs modernization, and the emergence of competitive freight operators. The strategic objective is to increase the number of economic activities that use the corridor, not merely the number of trucks or trains that pass through it. This perspective also changes how regional projects should be evaluated. A highway modernization project should be assessed not only by reduced travel time but by whether it improves reliability, lowers vehicle operating costs, expands the effective market for local firms, and strengthens links with neighboring economies. The A380 modernization supported by the ADB illustrates this wider logic because the project combines road rehabilitation with climate resilience, intelligent transport systems, and weigh-in-motion technologies (ADB, 2025a; ADB, 2025b).

Trade diversification and productive capacity:-

Trade diversification is another test of whether connectivity generates structural transformation. Greater connectivity can expand imports of machinery, intermediate goods, and consumer products, but its long-term development effect is stronger when it also supports domestic exports. Uzbekistan therefore needs to connect transport policy with industrial policy, export finance, standards development, and firm-level competitiveness.

A regional nexus should ideally function in both directions: it should move goods across borders and help local firms enter regional value chains. This requires reliable customs procedures, quality standards, access to trade information, and financial services that enable small and medium-sized enterprises to participate. Without these complementary measures, large infrastructure projects may produce transit rents without creating broad-based productive upgrading.

Emerging Dimensions of the Regional Nexus:-**Energy and green connectivity:-**

Regional integration increasingly extends beyond transport. Central Asia contains substantial complementarities in energy resources, electricity generation, seasonal demand, and renewable potential. Regional energy trade can improve resilience and lower the costs of balancing supply and demand. The World Bank has emphasized that deeper cooperation in water and energy could generate major economic benefits for the region (World Bank, 2023). For Uzbekistan, energy cooperation also intersects with domestic reform. Tariff reform, renewable-energy investment, grid modernization, and greater commercial orientation can make the energy system more compatible with regional markets. In this sense, green connectivity is not a separate policy field but part of the wider transformation of the regional economic system.

Digital connectivity:-

Digital infrastructure adds a new layer to Uzbekistan's strategic position. Electronic customs, cargo tracking, digital payments, e-commerce, and interoperable data systems can reduce transaction costs even when physical distance remains unchanged. For a doubly landlocked economy, digital connectivity is particularly valuable because it can compress administrative distance and improve the predictability of cross-border trade. This also changes the meaning of regional integration. The future regional nexus is unlikely to be defined only by railways and highways. It will increasingly include data flows, digital logistics, and integrated information systems. The Digital Silk Road literature is therefore relevant to Uzbekistan's broader connectivity strategy, although digitalization should be

evaluated through regulatory interoperability and economic use rather than infrastructure deployment alone (Tekir, 2026).

Tourism, education and human connectivity:-

Regional integration also has a social dimension. Uzbekistan's historical cities, including Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, provide a base for cross-border tourism networks. Tourism corridors can increase mobility, create small-business opportunities, and strengthen societal interaction among neighboring populations. Education and professional exchange similarly help create the human capital required for logistics, trade, digital services, and regional institutions. The original Uzbek participation in Silk Road cooperation already linked infrastructure with tourism, cultural exchange, and education. The analytical significance today is that these activities can reinforce the social foundations of regional integration rather than functioning only as symbolic diplomacy.

Regional value chains and the role of small and medium enterprises:-

A key indicator of successful integration is whether connectivity allows firms to participate in regional value chains. Central Asian trade is often constrained not only by distance but by the limited scale and internationalization of domestic firms. Improved corridors can matter most when they allow smaller producers to source inputs, reach customers, and participate in subcontracting relationships across borders. For Uzbekistan, this creates an opportunity to link infrastructure policy with industrial parks, export support, standards institutions, and entrepreneurship programs. The objective should be to create a dense economic ecosystem around corridors rather than a thin stream of transit traffic. Local suppliers, warehouses, freight forwarders, financial firms, and digital service providers can all increase the value captured domestically from connectivity.

Human capital and institutional capacity:-

A strategic regional nexus requires specialized skills. Logistics management, customs administration, trade law, data analysis, foreign-language competence, engineering, and digital security become increasingly important as cross-border networks expand. Investment in human capital can therefore be understood as infrastructure for integration in a broader sense. Universities and vocational institutions can contribute by aligning curricula with logistics, transport engineering, digital trade, and regional business needs. Professional exchanges among Central Asian institutions can also create networks of trust that lower the transaction costs of government and business cooperation. This social infrastructure is less visible than a railway but can be equally important for sustaining regional integration.

Digital trade and administrative distance:-

The concept of administrative distance is particularly useful for Uzbekistan. Physical distance cannot be eliminated, but the time and uncertainty associated with paperwork can be reduced substantially. Electronic single windows, digital certificates, interoperable customs declarations, and real-time cargo tracking can shorten this administrative distance. The result is a new form of connectivity in which data moves faster than physical goods. For a doubly landlocked state, this can improve predictability and reduce the hidden costs of trade. Digital connectivity should therefore be incorporated into regional corridor planning from the beginning rather than added after physical infrastructure has been completed.

Green corridors and climate resilience:-

Climate change is increasingly relevant to Central Asian connectivity because extreme heat, water stress, and changing weather patterns can affect roads, railways, agriculture, and energy systems. The ADB's A380 modernization project illustrates the growing emphasis on climate-resilient transport infrastructure, including drainage, pavement design, and intelligent transport systems (ADB, 2025a). Green connectivity can therefore reduce both environmental and operational risks. For Uzbekistan, a regional nexus strategy that integrates renewable energy, efficient logistics, and climate-resilient infrastructure may produce more durable benefits than a strategy focused solely on increasing transport volumes.

Challenges and Structural Limitations:-**Infrastructure-led overoptimism:-**

The first challenge is the assumption that infrastructure automatically creates development. Transport projects can remain underused when freight demand is weak, services are fragmented, or border procedures remain inefficient. Uzbekistan's strategy should therefore evaluate corridors through actual trade and logistics performance rather than construction volume alone.

Financing and fiscal sustainability:-

Large connectivity projects require long-term financing and careful risk management. International experience shows that commercially weak infrastructure can become a fiscal burden. Uzbekistan therefore needs transparent project appraisal, realistic demand forecasts, diversified financing, and greater participation by private investors. External capital should complement rather than substitute for domestic productive capacity.

Institutional fragmentation:-

Central Asia contains overlapping regional frameworks, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, CAREC, the Eurasian Economic Union, and multiple bilateral and trilateral mechanisms. These institutions can be complementary, but they can also create regulatory fragmentation. Uzbekistan's regional value will rise when it can facilitate interoperability across frameworks rather than deepen institutional competition.

Security and geopolitical uncertainty:-

Southern connectivity remains exposed to Afghanistan-related security risks, while broader Eurasian transport routes are affected by geopolitical tensions and sanctions. Corridor diversification is therefore not simply an economic objective; it is also a resilience strategy. Uzbekistan benefits from having multiple transport directions, but each direction carries different political and security risks.

Uneven development and agglomeration:-

Connectivity may strengthen already dominant urban centers while leaving peripheral areas behind. The benefits of improved corridors will be more inclusive if border regions, secondary cities, and local firms are connected to logistics networks, industrial zones, skills programs, and digital services. This requires regional policy at the domestic level, not only interstate diplomacy.

Continuing domestic reform:-

The IMF's 2026 assessment continues to identify state-owned enterprise restructuring, privatization, market competition, governance, and private-sector dynamism as central reform priorities (IMF, 2026). These issues matter for the BRI because external connectivity can generate broad welfare gains only when domestic institutions permit resources to move efficiently toward productive uses.

Measuring the nexus: indicators for future research:-

The strategic nexus proposition also creates a basis for future empirical measurement. Uzbekistan's regional centrality could be evaluated through a combination of indicators: border-crossing time, logistics costs, number and diversity of international corridors, transit reliability, intra-Central Asian trade intensity, foreign direct investment in tradable sectors, participation of domestic firms in regional value chains, and interoperability of digital customs systems. Such indicators would allow future research to distinguish between infrastructure visibility and actual integration. A country could possess extensive infrastructure without becoming a regional nexus if trade remains concentrated, domestic firms are weak, or border systems remain fragmented. Conversely, moderate infrastructure improvements can have substantial effects when combined with strong institutions and growing regional demand.

From Transit Country to Strategic Regional Nexus:-

The evidence supports a conceptual shift from treating Uzbekistan as a transit country to viewing it as a potential strategic regional nexus. A transit country primarily provides passage. A nexus, by contrast, combines passage with production, consumption, coordination, and institutional influence. Uzbekistan's evolution can be understood in four stages. The first is geographical centrality: the country is physically located at the center of the Central Asian system. The second is infrastructure centrality: roads, railways, energy networks, and digital systems connect it to surrounding states. The third is economic centrality: lower trade costs increase investment, market access, and industrial opportunities. The fourth is institutional centrality: Uzbekistan becomes a platform through which regional standards, logistics, and economic networks are coordinated. The fourth stage is the most demanding. It requires trust among neighboring states, predictable regulation, efficient border administration, and continued domestic reforms. It also requires Uzbekistan to act not only as a beneficiary of regional connectivity but as an organizer of regional cooperation. In this sense, agency becomes more important than geography alone. This interpretation also changes the way the BRI should be understood in Central Asia. Rather than treating the BRI as an external structure imposed upon passive regional states, the BRI can be viewed as one component of a broader regional transformation in which Central Asian governments pursue their own connectivity priorities. Uzbekistan is especially important because its national strategy overlaps with almost every major regional corridor.

Conclusion:-

Uzbekistan's role in the Belt and Road Initiative is best understood through the regional geography of Central Asia rather than through a narrowly bilateral lens. The country combines exceptional geographical centrality with one of the strongest structural connectivity constraints in Eurasia: it is doubly landlocked and remains dependent on multiple cross-border systems to reach maritime markets. This paradox creates both vulnerability and strategic opportunity. The article has argued that the BRI can contribute to Uzbekistan's transformation from a constrained inland economy into a more connected regional platform, but only when physical infrastructure is combined with institutional coordination and domestic reform. Transport corridors reduce distance; customs reform reduces administrative friction; market reforms increase firms' capacity to use new access; and regional diplomacy creates the political conditions for cross-border networks. The most important conclusion is therefore that Uzbekistan's strategic significance should not be measured by the number or financial value of BRI projects located within its borders. The more meaningful indicator is whether Uzbekistan can convert those projects into network effects across Central Asia. This requires corridor diversification, intra-regional trade facilitation, digital interoperability, energy cooperation, and a competitive domestic private sector.

The Uzbek case provides a broader lesson for the study of the BRI. Connectivity is not an outcome in itself; it is a mechanism whose developmental effects depend on institutions, market structures, and regional cooperation. In Central Asia, the future of the BRI will increasingly depend on whether infrastructure is embedded within locally owned strategies of regional integration. Uzbekistan is well positioned to become one of the region's principal organizing nodes, but the transition from geographic centrality to strategic regional centrality remains conditional on sustained reform and cooperation. In this sense, Uzbekistan's emerging role can be summarized as a progression from geography to connectivity, from connectivity to integration, and from integration to regional agency. That progression is the basis on which Uzbekistan may become not simply a route across Central Asia, but a strategic nexus within it.

Key findings:-

- Uzbekistan's strategic importance derives from the interaction of geographic centrality, economic scale, multiple transport directions, and renewed regional diplomacy rather than from geography alone.
- BRI-related infrastructure can reduce transport and transaction costs, but its developmental effect is conditional on customs efficiency, regulatory interoperability, and the ability of domestic firms to use external market access.
- The strongest regional effect of Uzbekistan's connectivity strategy may be the strengthening of intra-Central Asian integration, not simply access to Chinese or European markets.
- Corridor diversification toward Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan/China, the Caspian region, and South Asia increases resilience and reduces dependence on any single transit system.
- Domestic market reforms are a necessary complement to connectivity. Reducing the state footprint, strengthening competition, and expanding private-sector capacity are essential for converting infrastructure into productive diversification.
- The emerging strategic nexus is multidimensional: transport, digital systems, energy, logistics, tourism, and human capital increasingly operate as interconnected components of regional integration.
- Uzbekistan's transition from transit country to strategic regional nexus remains conditional on sustained institutional reform, regional cooperation, and effective management of financing, security, and uneven-development risks.

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