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FROM THE MIDDLE OUT AND BOTTOM UP:

## THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AT 10 AND CORRIDOR CONNECTIVITY



FROM THE MIDDLE OUT AND BOTTOM UP:

# THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AT 10 AND CORRIDOR CONNECTIVITY

by Xiangming Chen

**T**he year 2023 marks the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a transcontinental connectivity project launched by China in 2013 to foster infrastructure development and trade growth, plus other activities for promoting international cooperation, such as cultural exchange. However, Western media coverage generally portrays the BRI as a Chinese-government-led strategy to project geopolitical influence, even with the intention of gaining advantage in developing infrastructure projects via so-called “debt-trap” diplomacy. As this narrative hangs on very sketchy evidence, academic research on the BRI as a geopolitical campaign overlooks

the extensive geo-economic structure of connectivity shaped by the BRI's first decade.

In a simplistic view, the BRI's geo-economic connectivity appears linear and long via the extent and reach of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the twenty-first-century Maritime Silk Road. The real and realised mix of new connections, however, has been wider and more dispersed. These connections have taken form as part of the BRI's six main economic corridors and a score of sub-corridors emerging near or extending from the six main corridors (see numbers 1-6 vs 7-10 in table 1). They have unfolded a new era of corridor-centric global geo-economic connectivity via

webs of transport and other infrastructural pathways between and among pairs of, or multiple, cities and their surrounding regions. The China-Laos Railway (CLR), anchored at each end to the cities of Kunming, capital of China's Yunnan province, and Vientiane, capital of Laos, strings together around 20 cities and major towns across southwestern China and central Laos.

The BRI (sub-)corridors vary considerably in length. While the CLR stretches around 1,000 km, the longest China-Europe freight train route between the Chinese city of Shenzhen and the German city of Duisburg is over 13,000 km. While these train-enabled transport corridors

**Table 1: The BRI-enabled economic and logistics (sub-)corridors across Eurasia**

	I. BRI Corridors and Subcorridors	II. Countries and No of Borders Crossed in ( )	III. Key Cities Anchoring and Along the Corridors	IV. Freight Train Routes and Multi-modal Transportation
1	The New Eurasian Land Bridge Corridor	China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Germany, Netherlands (7), and other European countries	Xian, Lanzhou, Urumqi, Horgos, Alashankou, Almaty, Kazan, Moscow, Minsk, Warsaw, Duisburg, Rotterdam (13)	Rail route on land between China and Europe and maritime transit within Europe and involving East Asia
2	The China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor	China, Mongolia, Russia (2)	Shenyang, Harbin, Manzhouli, Heihe, Chita, Novosibirsk, Ulaanbaatar (7)	Overland rail connects to the Siberian Railway
3	The China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor	China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey (9)	Xi'an, Urumqi, Kashgar, Kara-Suu, Aktau, Andijan, Tashkent, Samarkand, Osh, Ashgabat, Baku, Tbilisi, Kars, Istanbul (14)	Overland rail to and across the Caspian and Black Seas to and from West Asia, the Caucasus and Europe via intermodal shipping
4	The China-Indochina Peninsular Corridor	China, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand (6)	Kunming, Beihai, Chongqing, Boten, Vientiane, Hanoi, Mandalay, Bangkok (8)	Overland rail to ports for shipping to maritime Southeast Asia
5	The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor	Bangladesh, China, (India), Myanmar (4)	Dakar, Kunming, Chengdu, (Kolkata), Chittagong, Ruili, Mandalay, Kyaukpyu (8)	Limited and difficult road transport connections
6	The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor	China-Pakistan potentially extends to Afghanistan (1 or 2)	Kashgar, Gilgit, Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Gwadar, (Kabul) (7)	Overland road connection with potential rail-sca intermodal shipping
7	China-Laos Corridor (No. 4)	China and Laos (1)	Kunming, Mohan, Boten, Luang Prabang, Vientiane (6)	The China-Laos Railway with transit connections
8	China-Myanmar Corridor (No. 4)	China and Myanmar (1)	Kunming, Ruili, Mandalay, Yangon, Kyankpu (5)	Road transport with a planned rail line
9	Western China Land-Sea Corridor (Nos. 1, 3, 4, and 7)	China, Europe, Central Asia, Southeast Asia (4) with extensions to South Asia and Africa	Chongqing, Chengdu, Xian, Beihai, Horgos, Alashankou, Vientiane, Bangkok, HCMC, Singapore (10)	Land-sea (rail-ocean) intermodal transport linking Central and Southeast Asia via Western China
10	Northern China-Russian Far East Corridor (No. 2)	China and Russia (1) with potential East Asian connections	Harbin, Heihe, Blagoveshchensk, Vladivostok (4)	Rail-road routes with a potential for sea shipping

Source: Compiled by the author

span international boundaries to reach a cross-regional scale, a large number of corridors have formed at the local level and short length via Chinese-built bridges, expressways and light rail lines that create and facilitate connectivity across and within cities and their neighbouring territories. Examples include the Pupin Bridge across the Danube in Belgrade, the expressway around Nairobi and the Orange subway line in Lahore. Although these run for only a varied number of few kilometres, they function as critical commuting or transport corridors to foster new and more efficient local-regional flows of people and goods for improving livelihood.



**Urban and economic corridors have been around a long time. The BRI-induced regional economic corridors, however, exhibit new features relative to such recent disruptive dynamics as fragmenting economic activities, vulnerable supply chains, great-power competition, and the war in Ukraine, with its resultant economic sanctions against Russia.**

In the age of digital global connectivity, these material corridors appear conventional. At a time of growing economic fragmentation and a potential for supply-chain decoupling due to intense nationalism and great-power rivalry, the BRI-induced corridors, regardless of their length, provide a new round of physical connectivity to strengthen trade and other exchanges across a large number of places across regional boundaries. These corridors collectively add up to a wave of regionalising forces and local developments from “the middle and below” vs the distributed power of the global economy and national polity. They produce new horizontal opportunities for trade and economic growth originating and spilling over from inside China to its neighbouring regions and farther beyond.

Against the prevailing narrative of the BRI as a top-down strategy to spread China’s geopolitical influence, I see the BRI’s impact through its first decade as emanating “from the middle out and bottom up” via transport-enabled corridors traversing a large number of regions within and across national territories. In this essay marking the BRI’s tenth anniversary, I explore the features of the BRI-centric connectivity with a look at the early consequences of a new China-anchored land-sea corridor across three linked cross-border regional contexts.

## **TOWARD CORRIDOR-CENTRIC CONNECTIVITY**

Urban and economic corridors have been around a long time. The BRI-induced regional economic corridors, however, exhibit new features relative to such recent disruptive dynamics as fragmenting economic activities, vulnerable supply chains, great-power competition, and the war in Ukraine, with its resultant economic sanctions against Russia.

The early scholarship on corridors focused on urban-regional corridors in the 1960s. It



identified linearity and transport infrastructure as two defining features of urban corridors, which were tied to the dual axes of (sub)urbanisation and economic development linking two or more cities and the territorial spaces between them. Besides their linear structure, urban corridors take on such network-like attributes as poles at both ends and secondary nodal points between the two poles, with any branches and points as spin-off lines and lower-level places, respectively. The “BosWash” (Boston-Washington DC) corridor along the eastern seaboard of the United States qualified as a prototype for the pioneering study by geographer Jean Gottmann in the early 1960s.

Fast-forwarding to the early 2010s, a broad comparative study identified 67 urban corridors around the world. Around 95 per cent of those began and ended within national territories like the BosWash corridor. Approximately 60 per cent of the 67 urban corridors were anchored to and pass through two or more major national and international centres and their relatively well-integrated immediate hinterlands in advanced economies. They were typically between 400 km and 1,200 km long and 70 to 200 km wide. Almost all of these corridors were shaped largely by market-based forces of urban, economic, and transport growth, with limited national and subnational planning and inter-city coordination.

Despite a partial temporal overlap, the BRI-enabled regional corridors since 2013 differ from the existent urban corridors in several respects. First and most

obviously, the BRI corridors have been initiated or driven by China. While geographically fuzzy, the BRI corridors range widely in overall length and degree of linearity, with the China-Europe freight train route between Shenzhen and Duisburg topping 13,000 km, while the China-Laos Economic Corridor defined by the CLR runs for 1,000 km between Kunming and Vientiane. The BRI corridors cover a large mix of developing countries and their cities with their diverse regional hinterlands, and thus contain less spatial coherence than older urban corridors in developed countries. The BRI corridors also encompass a larger number of smaller and marginal places featuring greater uneven geographical development.

In addition, the BRI corridors cross a good number of international borders, which act as generic geographical barriers for the transport of traded goods. On the other hand, the BRI corridors span land and sea boundaries and thus allow landlocked countries and cities to access maritime trade, as exemplified by the CLR, which helps reduce the friction of the barrier effect of borders. Finally, some BRI corridors are “docked” into one another and form distinctive segments of longer corridors, such as the China-Central Asia freight train routes and the Western China Land-Sea Corridor anchored to and channelled by the megacity of Chongqing.

Given the BRI’s recency, it is a little early to take a full inventory of all corridors and sub-corridors that can be directly or indirectly attributed the BRI, although their numbers may approximate 30. It is, however, quite clear that the BRI has directly shaped six main economic

corridors extending from different points or parts inside China out into its neighbouring Asian territories to reach Europe and the Middle East (table 1).

Table 1 also lists four sub-corridors (numbers 7-10) that have spun off the six main corridors. These sub-corridors span and cross multiple countries (II). They are also anchored to key cities or nodal hubs and linked by other cities along the generally linear geographies covered (III). Finally, these corridors are distinguished by their key freight train route and its links to other modes of transport as the scope and strength of their logistical connectivity (IV).

While these BRI-enabled corridors and sub-corridors are young and still taking shape, their key geographical and compositional features provide solid grounding for their formation and development, as well as their growing impact as they expand. More importantly, in looking back at these corridors, I see them as critical to understanding the essence of the BRI and its cumulative impact over the past decade.

## THE WESTERN CHINA LAND-SEA CORRIDOR AS IMPACTFUL NEW CONNECTIVITY

I chose Corridor No. 9 to examine for two important reasons. First, the Western China Land-Sea Corridor (NLSC) bridges three of the BRI main corridors (Nos. 1, 3 and 4) to allow a separate but joint look at how these corridors have become connected into a new and longer corridor channelling greater trade flows. In other words, the corridor is both “sub” and “super”, in that it connects

three existing corridors for a combined analysis. Second, the NLSC is anchored to and channelled by Chongqing, which occupies a nodal position beyond any pair of typical two termini between any single corridor and their roles in land-sea intermodal shipping.

### The steady China-Europe freight train

The BRI’s first decade is temporally almost coterminous with the China-Europe Freight Train (CEFT), which made its maiden journey from Chongqing to Duisburg in 2011. If that inaugural run portended trade and logistical connectivity embodied by the BRI, the CEFT has exceeded its little-recognised potential for becoming a transcontinental transport network spanning Eurasia. From one single route to a handful of routes and about 80 trains, with only one train from Europe back to China by 2013, the CEFT grew rapidly over the ensuing decade. The number of CEFTs reached 16,000 in 2022, with a cumulative number of 73,000 trains since 2011. These trains run on 82 routes between over 100 Chinese cities and 216 cities across 25 European countries and a number of Central, East, West and Southeast Asian countries bordering or near China. They carried 6.9 million containers with cargo worth over \$400 billion and covering more than 50,000 types of goods by July 2023. During the first half of 2023, 2,754, 1,563, and 4,324 freight trains ran through the CEFT’s Eastern, Central, and Western corridors, respectively, along the China-Kazakhstan, China-Mongolia, and China-Russia borders. This total of 8,641 trains carrying 936,000 containers was up 16 per cent and 30 per cent over the same period of 2022 and anticipates the total number of trains and containers to surpass last year’s figures by the end of 2023.



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The CEFT has not been all smooth. The hurdles include the pandemic-induced supply chain disruptions, occasional traffic congestion at a small number of crucial border crossings like Małaszewicze, Poland, and lagging logistical infrastructure at a few hubs along some routes to support efficient train crossings. The most disruptive challenge emerged when the war in Ukraine broke out. The West-imposed sanctions on Russia, including the Russian railways, raised risks that led some China-based European and US manufacturers to suspend shipping by the CEFT. The German carmaker Audi, which has extensive supply chains to China, stopped using the Trans-Siberian Railway linking the Eastern and Central routes to the Western route to enter East-Central and Western Europe.

Yet this downturn did not last long. July and August of 2022 saw new records of 1,517 and 1,601 trains, respectively, the latter of which was up 21 per cent in year-over-year growth. The city of Duisburg, leading all European cities, began to process a comparable number of trains from China in June 2023. This recovery has benefited from more freight trains switching to land-sea intermodal shipping by crossing the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey into Europe, which is known as the CEFT's Southern Corridor, or the Middle Corridor more broadly.

Given its geographical coverage, the CEFT has basically formed the arteries of the BRI's main Corridors 1 and 3 (table 1), more the former than the latter. Moreover, the CEFT's steady run, with its resilience through the Ukrainian crisis, has solidified the spatial foundation and form of Corridors 1 and 3. As the CEFT has steadied its operation, it has dealt with such financial and logistical challenges as sanction-induced risk of account settlement by introducing the RMB as



Khabarovsk, far East, Russia.

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an alternative currency to the US dollar. Some companies have set up overseas warehouses at or near main hubs to spread risks and plan better for processing future cargoes.

In a recent improvement starting on 1 July 2023, the Chinese city of Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province and the highest-ranked city in sending and receiving CEFTs, regularised two scheduled services to Duisburg on Wednesday and Saturday each week, up from once a week. This regularised schedule has removed the unpredictability of stopping at the two border crossings between China and Kazakhstan and Belarus and Europe in order to switch from standard to wider gauges and then back to reach any European or Chinese destination. This shortens the time of travel along the entire route to 11.5 days, from 14-16 days. The return train also started on a new and similarly harmonised schedule, leaving Duisburg for Xi'an on 27 June 2023 and arriving on 9 July. These improvements further refine and strengthen the China-European freight train corridor, a timely accomplishment for the BRI's tenth anniversary.

### The accelerating China-Central Asia freight train

For much of the past decade, the CEFT has been key to sustaining Corridor No. 1, which technically links the Chinese eastern port city of Lianyungang and Rotterdam across the full length of Eurasia. Yet the CEFT contains the China-Central Asia freight train as a partial but integral set of routes with their termini and connected cities. This has not only helped consolidate the shipping and trade orientations and functions of Corridor No. 1 but also accentuates the China-Central/West Asia segment of Corridor 3 (table 1). The China-Central Asia freight train has differentiated itself from the CEFT as a shorter and more focused shipping network recently, with more freight trains arriving in and departing from Central Asia, in the wake of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in Samarkand in September 2022, and especially since the first China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an in May 2023.

Earlier on, during the past decade, the China-Central Asia freight train mostly ran from China to Europe and back through Kazakhstan, with a relatively small number of trains terminating in Kazakhstan's commercial centre and former capital of Almaty, located 350 km from the China-Kazakhstan border. The benefit resulting to Kazakhstan from strong freight train links with China was largely confined to border-crossing fees and the limited logistical growth of its small border cities like Altynkol, facing Horgos and Dostyk opposite Alashankou. More recently, the China-Central Asia freight train has broadened across Central Asia in two ways. First, it has expanded rail

connections beyond Kazakhstan to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. With its feasibility study being completed in May 2023, the planned China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway linking Kashgar and Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, through Jalalabad, Kyrgyzstan is moving faster toward construction, with a targeted completion in 2026 (see map 1). This new railway will shorten freight train shipping from China to Europe and West Asia/Middle East by 900 km, creating the shortest rail route between China and Europe.

The second expansion has involved intermodal shipping from more Chinese cities along additional routes and border crossings. In July 2023, the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou launched the intermodal "China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan" service from the Great Bay Area to Tashkent via Kyrgyzstan (see photo 1). The train switched to trucking at the border crossing of Irkeshtam in the Kashgar

region and then reverted to train at Osh, Kyrgyzstan, before reaching the destination of Tashkent. A logistics company based in Xinjiang planned to organise 25 freight trains from the Great Bay Area along the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan route by the end of 2023. Also in July 2023, an identical train service was launched by the industrial city of Langfang in Hebei province and reached Tashkent after 6,000 km and 12 days. It marked a new shipping route between the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei mega-region and key Central Asian cities.

These two new routes represent a growing number of China-Central Asian intermodal freight connections between such cities as Shanghai, Zhengzhou (Henan province), Xi'an, and a number of smaller cities across China and Almaty, Bishkek (capital of Kyrgyzstan), and Tashkent in Central Asia. The world's only major double-landlocked country, Uzbekistan has benefited



Source: The Economist, 6 September 2022



**Photo 1:** The Great Bay Area's inaugural intermodal freight train for the "China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan" route departed Guangzhou on 4 July 2023



considerably from these new freight routes leading to maritime shipping via eastern China. These new transport links have further elevated the importance of Central Asia in both Corridors 1 and 3 (table 1).

### The dynamic China-Laos railway

As the China-Central Asia freight train broadens China's logistical connections to the west, another new freight (and passenger) railway line along the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (No. 4 in table 1) has created rapidly growing shipping ties between China and Laos, and Southeast Asia more broadly. Launched into operation on 3 December 2021, the CLR has, over just 18 months, become the transport backbone of the China-Laos Economic Corridor, a sub-corridor (No. 7, table 1). In other words, the CLR has played a key role in creating and shaping a dynamic sub-corridor between China and Laos from the BRI's No. 4 main corridor.

By 2 January 2022, one month into its operation, the CLR ran 50 freight trains in both directions,

carrying nearly 50,000 tons of cargo, some of which crossed the border after clearing rigid customs and sanitary control procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the period 1 January-13 April 2023, the number of CLR freight trains reached 1,130, averaging 11 trains a day, up 122 per cent over the same period of 2022. The freight carried amounted to 1.18 million tons. The number of shipped goods rose from less than 100 to over 2,000. By 18 April 2023, the cumulative amount of shipped cargo on the CLR reached 18.8 million tons, which comprised 14.6 million tons within China, 4.2 million within and beyond Laos, and over four million of both segments across the China-Laos border. By 3 June 2023, 18 months

after the CLR went into operation, its shipped cargo surpassed 12 million tons, while its cumulative number of passengers topped 16.4 million, which accelerated after the international passenger through-train service began on 13 April 2023 with easy and fast visa clearing across 12 lanes at the border crossing.

## **In July 2023, the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou launched the intermodal “China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan” service from the Great Bay Area to Tashkent via Kyrgyzstan.**

**Photo 2:** The president of Laos, Thongloun Sisoulith

Through channelling economic and human movements along the China-Laos Economic Corridor, the CLR has transformed the Laotian economy and society. The CLR has greatly facilitated not only China-Laos bilateral trade based on their comparative advantages but also larger and broader flows of traded goods between China and ASEAN, especially since the fortuitous timing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which became effective on 1 January 2022. The CLR has sent more machinery, household electronics, and fresh flowers (mostly from Yunnan province) to Laos and beyond, while Laos has exported more metal ore and minerals, cassava, tropical fruits, and other agricultural goods to China. The CLR's cold-chain freight cars allow reliable shipping of such time-sensitive goods as fresh flowers and fruit. It has cut the cost of shipping between Kunming and Vientiane by 40-50 per cent.

On the passenger side, the CLR has stimulated greater tourism and other purposes of cross-border travel. While passenger trains within China average about 42 per day, due to its larger population and higher demand and income levels, the increased interest in travel on the Laotian side, including Thailand, has raised the average number of trains from one to six and as many as 10 each day.

By the conventional evidence on flows, the CLR has transformed landlocked Laos to a newly land-linked country capable of funnelling greater trade between China and Southeast Asia. Moreover, the CLR has created over 110,000 jobs in commerce, logistics, and tourism along the route, and hired over 3,500 employees just for the railway. Encouraged by the CLR, the Boten Special Economic Zone on the Laotian side of the border crossing has drawn 768 resident firms with cumulative registered capital of \$1.6 billion. Laos's very first rail system, the CLR has recently earned the laudatory comment of Laotian President Thongloun Sisoulith that this new railway is his country's pride (see photo 2).

**Starting out as a joint venture between Chongqing and Guangxi province, the NLSC has expanded to include six more provinces with eight equity ownerships that involve seven regional stockholding companies and one overseas company in Laos.**

Chongqing in and through southwestern China (see map 2).

#### THE FUTURE OF ASIA 2023

### High-speed rail to China a 'source of pride': Laos president

South-east Asian nation's foreign debt is 'manageable,' Thongloun says



Source: *Nikkei Asia* photo, reprinted in the source in Note 12

## CONNECTING MULTIPLE CORRIDORS

As more freight trains run between China and Europe, Central Asia, and Laos with extensions to Southeast Asia, the economic and logistics corridors and sub-corridors linking them have become connected into a new land-sea corridor (NLSC) through Western China (No. 9 in table 1) that ties cargo flows across multiple domestic and international boundaries. Led by China and in operation since 2017, the NLSC is the most integrative of all

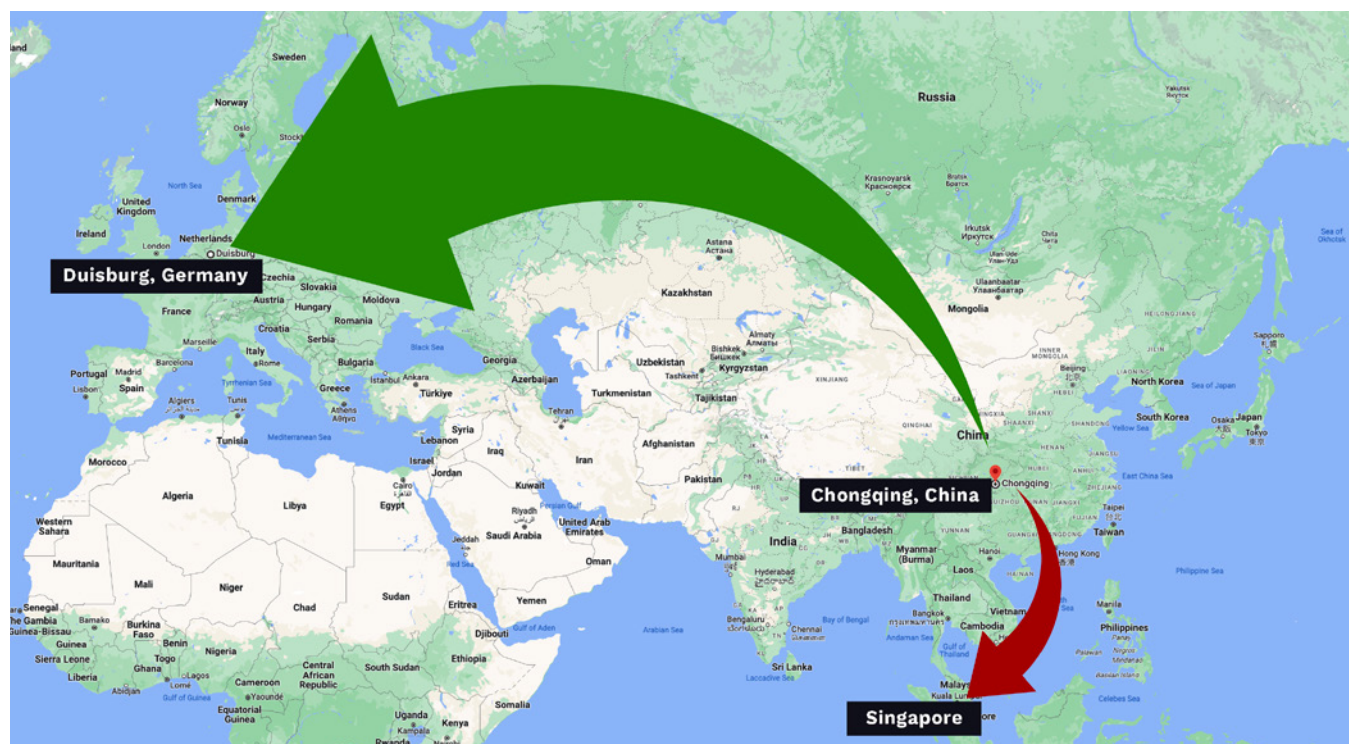
BRI-enabled corridors in that it ties three distinctive freight systems across Eurasia – Europe, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia – into a longer and more extended multi-modal shipping route featuring the central nodal, connective, and consolidating roles of

Starting out as a joint venture between Chongqing and Guangxi province, the NLSC has expanded to include six more provinces with eight equity ownerships that involve seven regional stockholding companies and one overseas company in Laos. Now covering 12 western provinces, the NLSC network reaches 116 shipping stations across 60 cities in 18 provinces. Its shipping network radiates out to 393 ports in 119 countries and regions. In 2017, the NLSC processed 178 rail-sea intermodal freight trains from Europe and Central Asia to maritime Southeast Asia, especially Singapore, via the ports of Guangxi province. The number of trains soared to 8,820 in 2022, a 50-fold increase, and also included trains carrying containers from Southeast Asia by sea to Europe, Central Asia, and beyond that also involves trucking. This rapid growth also contains more trains and trucks shipping goods from more Chinese cities in both directions. In the first half of 2023, the NLSC carried 424,000 containers, 10.5 per cent more than the first six months of 2022.

On 5 July 2023, the Gansu provincial subsidiary of the NLSC sent a train from the capital city of Lanzhou to the city of Kashgar, from where the cargo was switched to trucks that exited China at the border crossing of Irkeshtam and reached the city of Osh, Kyrgyzstan. There, the cargo was reloaded on to a freight train to reach Mazar-i-Sharif

in northern Afghanistan as the destination. This inaugural run marked the beginning of the “China-Afghanistan Express”, an extension from the “China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan” intermodal route, which will be a more direct and effective shipping link when the planned China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway is completed (see map 1). On 13 July 2023, the NCLS and the city of Kashgar formalised an agreement to strengthen cooperation on channelling more intermodal, rail-road services between Western China and Central Asia in order to deepen their trade and logistical relations.

On 7 July 2023, a freight train left the megacity of Chengdu, near Chongqing, for Budapest, Hungary. It carried car parts and components from Thailand that had departed on 1 July and arrived in Chengdu via the CLR, before the rail journey to Budapest, where the freight train arrived on 17 July 2023. This trip of 17 days from Thailand to Hungary saved nearly 20 days and 20 per cent of the cost relative to the road-rail and road-sea routes of the past. This route represents the combined use of the CLR’s “Lancang-Mekong Express” and the “Chengdu-Europe Express” freight services. It now runs three days a week on a regular schedule covering the journey between Vientiane at one end and a number of European cities in as few as 15 days at the opposite end



MAP 2: The Western China New Land-Sea Corridor (NLSC)

of Eurasia. On 15 July 2023, the NCLS and the ASEAN Federation of Forwarders Association (AFFA) of the International Federation of Freight Forwarders Associations (FIATA) signed a MOU to strengthen cross-Eurasian logistics through resource- and information-sharing, with the primary goal of enhancing China-ASEAN regional economic integration.

The NLSC's anchor and central hub, Chongqing, has benefited the most from a wider and more efficient set of direct or through shipping routes, featuring more integrated rail-rail, rail-sea, and rail-road links. Chongqing recently sent a freight train loaded with local industrial parts to Kunming, from where a CLR freight train carries the cargo to the town of Padang Besar in northern Malaysia bordering southern Thailand via the metre-gauge track from Vientiane to Bangkok. The trip took only 13 days, cutting the time required by the traditional land-sea or river-sea shipping along the Yangtze River by 40 per cent. This rail corridor has created a new logistics opportunity for Chongqing's local companies to export more to overseas markets, avoiding the unpredictable problem of Yangtze's uneven water levels during either its dry or flooding season via traditional river-sea shipping to and from an eastern seaport to Southeast Asia.

## THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF CORRIDORISATION

As the BRI has created a global buzz about building more infrastructure in the global South and China's capacity of delivering it at scale and speed, the BRI-enabled economic and logistics


corridors and sub-corridors stand out as its most geographically distinctive and impactful feat. By connecting over 200 cities across Eurasia and beyond that otherwise would not be linked in this manner, this corridorisation has unleashed large trade and cargo flows among more parties and places, diverting some from the slower, albeit lower-cost, maritime shipping routes. The BRI corridors have reshaped urban-regional positions and relations across Eurasia by adding logistical functions to small and previously marginal cities like Horgos and Alashankou on the China-Kazakhstan border and Boten on the China-Laos border. Furthermore, the BRI-induced corridorisation has carved a set of shipping pathways for trade flows through multiple crossings along China's domestic/international divide. This produces multifaceted economic spillovers from "the middle out and bottom up" that spreads some development benefits to cities and regions neighbouring and farther beyond China.

While more shipping connections among more places are generally desirable, corridor-centric connectivity can have a double-edged effect. As they link more localities in a linear fashion, corridors call for growing usage, greater integration, and effective governance. If demand for more shipping along these corridors does not materialise, it may lead to some wasteful



infrastructure investment and development and stimulate cut-throat competition on shipping prices among more rival logistics corridors. As more subnational governments and private businesses enter more corridors as players or participants, how would they cooperate with one another to facilitate more efficient processing of freight trains and trucks through more border crossings and reduce inter-local differences that may not be easily resolved by bilateral or multilateral national agreements?

While the NLSC has done quite well in facilitating connected cargo flow around Europe, Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia, it needs to be better in fostering even faster and smoother coordination of customs clearance, standard compatibility, and other governance matters. The NLSC's new five-year plan for 2023-27 aims to address these challenges more purposefully and strategically.

As the BRI marks its first decade of existence, it has brought a score of economic and logistics corridors into existence that will continue to serve their purpose of moving more traded goods across Eurasia and beyond. But this is not enough. As partially documented earlier, these BRI corridors carry broader implications that include stimulating more urbanisation and industrialisation along the railway and intermodal routes, creating potential economic agglomeration and fostering greater regional integration. At a time of partial global economic fragmentation and even decoupling, the BRI regional corridors form a timely countering force with and through their wider and stronger logistical connectivities for greater cross-border trade flows. 

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Xiangming Chen** served as the founding Dean and Director of the Center for Urban and Global Studies at Trinity College in Connecticut from 2007 to 2019. He is currently Director of the Urban Studies Program and Paul E. Raether Distinguished Professor of Global Urban Studies and Sociology at Trinity College, a Guest Professor at Fudan University, Shanghai, a Visiting Professor at Duke Kunshan University, China, and an Associate Fellow at the Center for Advanced Security, Strategic and Integration Studies (CASSIS) at the University of Bonn, Germany. He has published extensively on urbanisation and globalisation with a focus on China and Asia, and conducted policy research for the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, UNCTAD, and OECD.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Jean Gottmann, *The Megalopolis: The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States*. The MIT Press, 1964.
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