
China - Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan railway set to enhance regional connectivity

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The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, scheduled to begin construction this year, will create a new shortcut between China and Europe, while elevating Central Asia's status in the global supply chain, executives and experts said.

With a designed speed of 120 kilometers per hour, the railway is a key connectivity project between China and Central Asia and is expected to become a new demonstration project for cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.

The route will begin in Kashgar, in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, and pass through the mountainous terrain of Kyrgyzstan to reach Uzbekistan.

Jiang Zhidong, chairman of the Kashgar-based Xinjiang Jiujiuxi International Trade Co Ltd, looks forward to the railway's operation, which he said will reduce freight transport times between China and Europe by about a week.

"Our coal imports from Kyrgyzstan will see a significant surge in quantity, while transport costs will be cut by a third," Jiang said, adding that products made from the imported coal, including activated carbon, can then take this route to reach European markets in shorter timeframes.

Currently, land transport between China and the two Central Asian nations relies on road-rail routes or must detour through Kazakhstan. Once operational, the railway will not only cut transport times, but also exempt goods from multiple reloading tasks, thus making it easier and cheaper to transport perishable goods such as farm produce.

Moreover, the railway is expected to offer landlocked Central Asian nations access to the sea by connecting to the sprawling railway network in China that extends to Pacific Ocean ports.

“The railway allows local resources and products to enter the global market rapidly. This will make Central Asia more important in the global supply chain,” said Ravshan Nazarov, a senior researcher at the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, highlighting the railway’s benefits to the region’s logistics, mining, energy and agriculture sectors.

In 2023, trade between China and the five Central Asian countries rose 27 percent year-on-year to \$89.4 billion.

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan experts have also highlighted the railway’s catalyst effect for regional development and its benefits for local livelihoods.

Sergei Ponomarev, president of the Association of Markets of Kyrgyzstan, said Kyrgyzstan will see a large increase in the transport of goods with the help of the railway.

The expert said the project presents an interesting opportunity to not only create jobs and boost infrastructure development, but also improve economic conditions. “In general, the main goal of the project is to improve the lives of citizens of Kyrgyzstan, China and Uzbekistan,” Ponomarev said.

Mederbek Shermetaliev, director of the Kabar News Agency of Kyrgyzstan, said apart from strengthening Kyrgyzstan’s transit potential, the railway will also make the country more attractive to investors.

“Opening a factory will become more economical in Kyrgyzstan, which boasts abundant human resources and skilled labor,” said Shermetaliev.

Zhong Feiteng, a researcher at the National Institute of International Strategy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said the railway highlights the vitality of the BRI and will play a crucial role in enhancing regional connectivity between Europe and Asia.

“The construction of the railway demonstrates China’s commitment to aligning its development with the interests of other countries to foster a win-win situation through greater openness,” Zhong said.

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