A New Eurasian Railway Axis: China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan Moves from Plans to Actual Construction – Alona Lebedieva

KYIV, UKRAINE, September 8, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- For decades, the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway was more of a diplomatic topic than a construction project. The route, track gauge, financing and balance of interests were repeatedly discussed. Now, a different indicator has emerged: the first metres of tunnel have been excavated.



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On the Kyrgyz section, the project company and Xinhua reported the completion of excavation works at the 209.6-metre-long Kosh Dobo North No. 2 tunnel. It is a short single-track tunnel with a maximum overburden depth of about 41 metres. These metres alone will not change the transport map. What they do confirm is something else: one of Central Asia's most delayed infrastructure projects has moved from presentations to the construction site.

According to official data as of early September 2026, work on the Kyrgyz section is already under way at 27 tunnels, 43 bridges and 88 sections of railway subgrade, while infrastructure for 20 stations is being prepared in parallel. The full project scope is larger: publicly available estimates refer to around 29 tunnels and 50 bridges, a substantial share of the route running through mountainous terrain, and several tunnels more than 5 kilometres long, with the longest exceeding 12 kilometres. The first completed tunnel is only the beginning of the most technically challenging section.

More Than 500 Kilometres and a Break of Gauge

The total length of the railway will exceed 500 kilometres, of which 304.84 km will run through Kyrgyzstan. The route is expected to connect Kashgar in Xinjiang with Andijan in Uzbekistan via

Torugart, Makmal and Jalal-Abad.

The line is designed as a single-track railway, initially using diesel traction, with a design speed of 120 km/h and the possibility of electrification at a later stage. A critical issue for freight owners is the change in track gauge: the Chinese standard of 1,435 mm will be used as far as Makmal, while the 1,520 mm gauge will continue from there towards Uzbekistan. Without efficient transshipment in Makmal, the advantage gained from a shorter route could easily be lost due to border procedures and bogie changes.

For Central Asia, this means direct rail access to the Chinese network. For Uzbekistan, it is an opportunity to strengthen its role in freight flows between China, the region and markets further west and south. The Uzbek side has cited a design capacity of up to 15 million tonnes per year. More conservative feasibility-study estimates put initial volumes closer to 5–8 million tonnes, with 13–15 million tonnes considered a longer-term target. Travel time to European and Middle Eastern markets is expected to be reduced by approximately 7–10 days, depending on which existing route is used for comparison.

Not Just a Railway, but the Economy Around It

The railway is expected to be accompanied by terminals, warehouses and supporting logistics infrastructure. This is where the line between being merely a transit territory and becoming a logistics hub is drawn.

Freight owners do not buy geography. They buy transit time, capacity, predictable tariffs and minimal delays. What is needed is not only tunnels, but also modern border crossings, wagons, locomotives, transparent tariffs and fast customs clearance. A single weak element can undermine billions of dollars invested in the infrastructure itself.

The Kyrgyz section is estimated to cost approximately $4.7 billion. China holds a 51% stake in the joint project company, while Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan each hold 24.5%; a significant share of the financing is expected to come from a long-term Chinese loan. If rolling stock, components and maintenance services remain imported, much of the economic impact will leave the region. If part of this demand can be localized, the railway could also support industrial policy.

Andijan Does Not Necessarily Have to Be the Final Destination

Tashkent is already placing the route within the broader framework of the Trans-Afghan Corridor. During the launch of construction, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev referred specifically to this strategic horizon: China – Central Asia – Afghanistan – South Asia.

This is a political extension of the project rather than a continuation of infrastructure that has already been built. The Afghan section is a separate and considerably more risky project. On the map, Uzbekistan would become a hub rather than a terminal point under such a scenario. For

freight owners, however, a hub will emerge only if the route is competitive in terms of price, transit time and reliability. The timelines for the CKU railway itself also still differ: Uzbek statements have pointed to around 2028, while engineering estimates suggest a date closer to 2031.

The Impact Begins Before the First Train

According to the project company, more than 2,000 local workers have already been employed on the Kyrgyz section, while another 1,800 have undergone training in civil construction, machinery operation and metal structures. More than 60% of key construction materials, including cement, are being sourced in Kyrgyzstan.

These figures should be viewed as an official snapshot of the construction process rather than proof of a fully developed industrial policy. Nevertheless, projects of this scale leave behind more than railway tracks: contractors gain experience in complex works, workers acquire new skills, and local manufacturers receive orders. For Uzbekistan, the question is the same: what share of future contracts for equipment, maintenance and servicing will domestic companies be able to secure?

The completion of the first short, 209.6-metre tunnel matters not because of its length. It confirms that the region’s map is changing on the construction site, not only in official communiqués. The next indicators will be more demanding: how much freight will actually use the new route, how much time will be lost at the border and during transshipment, and what share of servicing will remain within the region.

The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway is already moving from concept to infrastructure. Its economic outcome will be determined not by the number of kilometres of track laid, but by how much added value remains along them.

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