

The C5+1 Upgrade

Heightened Importance of the Silk Road Region for American Foreign Policy?

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Today's geopolitical world is full of images, symbolisms, and displays of effecting power. One meeting, with coffee, on the sidelines of the most recent General Debate of the UN General Assembly adumbrates what could be seen as auguring a new era—not only for the Silk Road region but for the world, with very important adaptations to come.

A Historical Meeting

In what was the first-ever heads of state summit between the U.S. and Central Asia's five states, on 19 September 2023, U.S. President Joe Biden hosted a meeting with the presidents of Kazakhstan (Kassym-Jomart Tokayev), Kyrgyzstan (Sadyr Zhaparov), Tajikistan (Emomali Rahmon), Turkmenistan (Serdar Berdymukhamedov), and Uzbekistan (Shavkat Mirziyoyev) in New York. The meeting followed last year's one on the same occasion, which had been hosted by U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken. The 2023 meeting was the first involving all six presidents, which is why it was heralded as an upgrade to the C5+1 format.

All C5+1 consultations—from the format's establishment in 2015 until September 2023—had taken place at or below the ministerial level, including working groups touching upon economy, energy, environment, and security issues. Hence, holding the meeting with all its Heads of State, even if on the sidelines of a multilateral event, is—in and of itself—an important milestone in the history of interaction between the parties.

The upgraded C5+1 meeting may seem merely symbolic with no immediate substantive or concrete results. Certainly, the readouts were largely boilerplate. According to the White House, the six presidents share a vision for sustained cooperation to address

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the region's complex challenges and emerging threats, enhancing security, improving economic resilience, supporting sustainable development, combating climate change, and promoting peace. Yet, there was no clear manifestation that the U.S. would work in tandem with the EU on energy and connectivity issues, even though the EU has held 18 ministerial meetings with Central Asian counterparts.

There is much to the assessment by Kamran Bokhari, writing for George Friedman's Geopolitical Futures, that "there are early signs that the United States is adopting a more strategic approach to the countries of Central Asia, nearly 32 years after the former Soviet republics gained independence. Two key factors are driving this shift: the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the intensifying U.S.-China competition." Still, the meeting in New York would seem to not herald *per se* a new age in the region or the opening of a New Great Game, in a region overshadowed by Russia and China. Just as Azerbaijan has implemented a balanced foreign policy vis-à-vis its neighbors, Central Asian leaders have also sought balance in their neighborhood. They have distanced themselves from Russia's assault on Ukraine in various statements and votes in the UN General Assembly—although, by abstaining, they have not rejected it entirely, either. Perhaps it is safest to say, as my colleague Damjan Krnjević Mišković has put it, that their respective foreign policies can be characterized as seeking "equilibrium but not necessarily equidistance."

More Than America First?

Dealing with direct U.S. interests, Biden beckoned the C5 to intensify cooperation with his country in the extractive sector. Although less so than Russian and Chinese firms, U.S. businesses are currently present in Central Asian countries' mining, oil, and gas sectors. Biden proposed a C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue to harness the region's abundant mineral resources and promote the security of critical mineral supply chains, which imply by necessity a guaranteed, safe, non-politicized, and free-of-sanctions transport route.

Thus, Biden reaffirmed the U.S. intention (but not more than that) to increase spending on expanding the Middle Corridor as part of its Global Infrastructure and Investment Partnership initiative. This involves looking into fresh and cutting-edge funding options at the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to encourage investments focused on addressing major global issues like climate change. In this respect, we must stress that the network of oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea to Türkiye and Europe were the first clear evidence of the Silk Road region's growing importance, as it ended Russia's monopoly on the transport of the region's hydrocarbons. The Middle Corridor looms on.

The discussion to improve the economic climate for trade and private sector investment in Central Asia is important because of the difference between conceiving

of the Middle Corridor as a *transport* corridor versus as an *economic* corridor. To that end, the Samantha Power-led U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has been tasked with organizing a C5+1 Connectivity Ministerial meeting in October 2023 to discuss concrete actions for the C5+1 countries. It is supposed to focus on strategies for equitable and sustainable economic development. To some, this was the meeting's greatest tangible outcome. Another way of putting this is that the New York meeting had little effect on short-term tangible outcomes.

This is particularly the case given the fact that \$90 million has been invested into border security in Central Asia, and, since September 2022's C5+1 meeting, \$66 million with the initiation of the Economic Resilience Initiative for Central Asia (ERICEN)—a package that started with \$25 million to broaden regional trade networks, create export opportunities, boost private sector investment, and provide people with practical skills for the modern job market but was then boosted in February 2023 in Astana with an additional \$25 million pledge.

It is noteworthy to remember that EU leaders have also indicated reinforced attention to the region through various schemes like the Global Gateway, although the EU did not actually pledge new money but only the movement of cash around from other programs and initiatives. Still, this is better than nothing.

American Strategic Messaging

Yet, in addition to funding, the summit's political and economic messaging was patently strong. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has considerably increased the geopolitical significance of the Middle Corridor and the United States seems to have grasped this. Many states and businesses are attempting to avoid Russian goods or even simply traversing the country, with Russia's own trade relocating to new markets.

As a result, the Middle Corridor has experienced a marked growth in East-West commerce between China, on the one hand, and Türkiye, the Western Balkans, and the EU, on the other. It has also provided an intersecting route for increased North-South trade, reducing bottlenecks not only between Russia and China but also between Russia and Iran—the latter of which is receiving heightened interest in Washington. As a result, the major geopolitical powers surrounding the region have recently increased the amount and frequency of their cooperation arrangements with Central Asia, particularly when in the context of the region's abundant mineral and other resources.

The quest for routes to reach markets has been evident for some time in the core of the Silk Road region, which is entirely landlocked aside from Georgia. Several conversations to foster closeness have taken place throughout the years. "Consultative Meetings of

the Heads of State of Central Asia” have been held in Astana (March 2018), Tashkent (November 2019), Turkmenbashi (August 2021), Cholpon-Ata (July 2022), and Dushanbe (September 2023), which suggests that economic integration has gained a new impetus—not only in the context of Central Asia but also looking to the western shore of the Caspian and beyond, accompanied with new high-level trilateral meetings and summits taking place, such as Azerbaijan and Türkiye with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

Additionally, during the last year, intra-Silk Road region economic integration and cooperation has been sharply strengthened. For instance, all Central Asian presidents have recently hosted their Azerbaijani colleague (Kyrgyzstan, October 2022; Turkmenistan, March 2023; Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, April 2023; and Uzbekistan, August 2023). Conversations dealt with several issues, including trade corridors, connectivity, and security. Uzbekistan proposed creating a Free Trade Zone in Central Asia, reflecting Central Asia’s increasing gaze towards Azerbaijan as a transport hub to the Black Sea, Mediterranean, and European continent. Thus, the C5+1 upgraded meeting should not be isolated from the 14 September 2023 Dushanbe summit that President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan attended as an “honored guest,” During which he referenced ongoing improvements to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Baku Trade Port to further increase capacity by millions of tons. If products are to reach world markets from Central Asia—free of politicization issues and sanctions— they will either go East mainly through China or West through the Caspian Sea and, by necessity, Azerbaijan as the only country on the latter’s western coast. This explains why the Middle Corridor has been the subject of extensive discussion in regional bilateral conversations, all coalescing in Dushanbe in order to promote strong bonds between the core states of the Silk Road region and outside stakeholders.

The New York C5+1 summit also falls within this regional context. Between 1991 and 9/11, the U.S. concentrated on assisting the C5 to strengthen their respective sovereignties, following the advice of retired former senior officials like Zbigniew Brzezinski; post-9/11, the focus shifted primarily to security relations, as the region became an important supply route for U.S. troops in Afghanistan—for which Azerbaijan became a noted participant as well, including transport and the provision of military personnel. In 2015, not only was the C5+1 diplomatic platform established, but USAID launched its 2015-2019 Strategy for Central Asia. Only in 2019 did the U.S. adopt a Strategy for Central Asia, with the intent of supporting regional connectivity and the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of each of the C5 states.

Connectivity and Sovereignty

Connectivity and economic integration in the region have also been of growing interest for the world. Earlier this year, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Kazakhstan (28 February) and Uzbekistan (1 March), becoming the first member of

Biden's cabinet to visit the region. On 19 May 2023, President Xi Jinping of China inaugurated a new biennial China-Central Asia heads of state summit, which may be seen as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. On 14 October 2022, Russia, which has several formats within which it can meet with Central Asian leaders, launched a new annual heads of state summit that President Vladimir Putin attended (the inaugural session took place in Astana), purporting to reflect Russia's historical and strategic interests in the region, during which he sought to consolidate the Kremlin's influence. The first meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia and the President of the European Council took place on 27 October 2022 in Astana. India also held the first India-Central Asia (virtual) summit on 27 January 2022, shortly after the third India-Central Asia Dialogue at the foreign ministers' level in December 2021, which has since expanded to other ministries—a reflection of India's deepening engagement, seemingly driven by economic and strategic considerations, particularly in areas like energy, trade, and connectivity. These happenings likely triggered the United States to upgrade the C5+1 to a presidential-level format—a sign that it was playing catch up.

Another issue on the regional agenda is territorial integrity, particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the 15 September 2022 meeting with Xi in Samarkand—it took place a day prior to the 16 September 2022 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where Xi also met four Central Asian presidents, as well as leaders from India and Pakistan—Putin stated that there might be international concerns about his country's invasion of Ukraine (presumably, an allusion to China's concerns). This was seen as a response to the 14 September 2022 Xi declarations during the China-Kazakhstan presidential meeting in which he told Tokayev that however the international situation changes, China would “resolutely support Kazakhstan in the defense of its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.” Xi's visit to Kazakhstan is of further interest, as it was his first trip outside China since January 2020, and may have been a form of admonishment to the Kremlin, especially after Xi declared a “no limits” partnership with Russia when he met Putin in Beijing shortly before Russia invaded China. Xi's statement suggests that China is determined to assert that in Central Asia, Beijing has interests that are at least as important as those of Moscow. It is useful to note, in this context, that China has a large economic imprint in Central Asia: it is the largest trading partner of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan; the second-largest of Kazakhstan (the EU is first); and the third-largest of Tajikistan (behind Russia and Kazakhstan). Russia has a similar trade position for all countries in the Silk Road region—5 percent of its overall global trade is with the C5. Although American companies play leading roles in energy projects in Kazakhstan, U.S. trade with the region is generally quite far behind China, Russia, Türkiye, and the EU.

The overall point here can perhaps best be summarized with reference to a traditional Turkish proverb: “*nerede hareket, orada bereket*”—where there is activity, there is abundance.

Moving in the Right Direction

While the C5+1 meeting in New York seemingly did not presage a significant deepening of U.S. engagement with the region, it will give regional leaders additional leverage in their quest to avoid overreliance on Russia and China. It is notable that Biden described the upgraded C5+1 format as “a historic moment, building on years of close cooperation,” adding that the “shared commitment to sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity” would remain the cornerstone of his country’s cooperation of the C5. Biden also indicated the possibility that the upgrade was not a one-off: “I look forward to seeing you soon, possibly in one of your countries.” If this were to be achieved, it would constitute a historical first since no U.S. president has ever visited a Central Asian country. We can expect that economic and security issues will further increase in importance during such a hypothetical visit, as the U.S. would strive to display its willingness to provide economic inducements in exchange for the C5 observing the U.S.-led sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia, rather than just the secondary ones. Perhaps it is here useful to underline that the White House’s readout of the meeting quoted Biden as saying that “our countries must cooperate to have resilient, secure supply chains that can support the future energy landscape.”

With its upgrade C5+1 meeting, Washington appeared to want to demonstrate to the C5 leaders that high-level relations with the U.S. can indeed develop, thus allowing them to garner more negotiating power with countries like China and Russia. In the eyes of the United States, it seems that the upgraded C5+1 both contains China and fences in Russia. And other countries are contending to exert their presence.

The cumulation of events noted above confirms the rapid rise in importance of the Silk Road region for all the relevant major outside powers, with a view to fostering and benefiting from greater economic integration, connectivity, and respect for the territorial integrity of all UN member states, including the C5. All this activity was well-observed in Baku. The question whether abundance will follow remains, for the moment, open and unanswered. Useful is that there is no indication that Biden made any illusory values-based statements—a signal that, at least when it comes to that part of the Silk Road region, the United States conducts its foreign policy in as Realpolitik a manner as its domestic politics can bear. A strategic, interest-based, and even somewhat transactionalist approach may indeed be on the horizon.

Note of Caution

By way of conclusion, one could do worse than compare the above with the following: less than a week after the C5+1 New York meeting, Biden hosted on 25 September 2023 the U.S.-Pacific Islands Forum Summit—and he did so at the White House itself— with various other events taking place in Baltimore and Washington over the course of two full days, including a formal U.S. State Department dinner hosted by Blinken. This

was the second time such a high-level annual meeting was held—the first took place on 28-29 September 2022, when the U.S. unveiled its first-ever Pacific Strategy Partnership touching upon climate change, economic recovery and maritime security—seemingly as a response to China’s increased presence in the Pacific theater.

With its approach to the Pacific and Central Asia, Washington is highlighting security and territorial integrity. With a veritable commitment to the region, one can only expect a second upgraded C5+1 meeting in 2024 and an accompanying presidential visit to the Silk Road region.