

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

Vol. 7 | No. 4 | Summer 2024

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ISSN Print: 2709-1848
ISSN Online: 2709-1856

Central Asia's Order-Making Mechanisms

Nargiz Azizova

"Of course, we [Central Asian states] all have two big partners and neighbors: Russia and China. We will always work together with them. All of our agreements remain in force, despite the fact that some of our countries are EUEC [Eurasian Economic Community] members, some Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO] members, and some not, but that's not what matters. However, we should resolve our own issues without involving third parties."

*– Nursultan Nazarbayev,
March 2018*

Most UN General Assembly resolutions are forgettable exercises in symbolism. Even political insiders could be forgiven for passing over without comment the text of resolution A/76/299 that declared Central Asia a “zone of peace, trust, and cooperation” and expressed the view of UN member states that they stood “encouraged by the efforts of the Central Asian States to strengthen and expand cooperation with the countries of the region in the fields of regional security, good-neighbourly, and friendly relations.”

And yet, this resolution should not simply be lumped together with most of the other ones that have been approved by what one of its former Presidents called the world’s “Grand Parliament of sovereign equal States.” There really is something to the language found in this resolution, and readers could do worse than to keep this text in mind as they try to understand that part of the Silk Road region as it understands itself and consider the strides that Central Asian leaders are taking to better the geopolitical and geoeconomic circumstances of their respective states. A similar

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utility could be ascribed to the words that make up this essay’s epigraph. Or to the language of the 2010 OSCE Astana Declaration that popularized the concept of “Eurasian security.”

In this essay, therefore, I will explore how the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) of the core Silk Road region are attempting to cope with global turbulence and power shifts in world politics, particularly Russia-West polarization, by developing multi-level alliances.

I will do this by discussing two major dynamics in the foreign policy of Central Asian states. I argue, firstly, that external influence and global geopolitical dynamics are pushing the Central Asian states towards strengthening regionalism and multilateralism through the establishment of informal and semi-formal formats of cooperation, which has led to a greater emphasis on shared regional.

Secondly, I will argue that “multi-vectoralism” and “regionalism” in the foreign policies of the Central Asian states have been strengthened in the past several years and provide examples of emerging region-to-region links between the Central Asian states

and several major power centers (i.e., China, the United States, the GCC, and the EU).

I will then conclude by examining the rapprochement between Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries and the evolution of the C5+AZ multi-platform “minilateral” format of core Silk Road region cooperation and how this plays into the two dynamics noted above.

What Else but Multi-Vectoralism?

Against the backdrop of rapidly-evolving international dynamics—particularly the war between Russia and Ukraine that restarted in earnest in February 2022—the five Central Asian states have chosen to further reconsider and further diversify their foreign policies. Bellicose assertions by minor Russian politicians and popular television commentators alike have stoked perturbations and even concern that their region “could be next.” It makes little difference that no genuine Russian decisionmaker has joined in such frenzied speech, or that bilateral visits at various levels, including at the very top, have been both amicable and mutually-beneficial. The “proximity

of aggression,” as some Western observers of the Silk Road region might say, has not felt this real in some Central Asian circles for quite a long time.

While Central Asian leaders have not (at least not overtly) conducted themselves in ways that could indicate they have fallen under the spell of the doomsayers, they do seem to have taken prudent foreign policy precautions to lessen the likelihood that their respective countries “could be next.”

They have, for instance, tried to ensure—to the extent possible—that their respective bilateral relations with Russia are devoid of outstanding issues. They have also, most notably, strengthened regional cooperation and further emphasized common identity-building projects. The leaders of the five Central Asian states have also continued to diversify existing political, economic, and security associations and relationships. This is, broadly speaking, what is meant by the

terms “regionalism” and “multi-vectoralism.”

In this transformative period of international relations characterized by heightened global instability and polarization, the Central Asian states are trying to avoid finding themselves in the middle of great power discord as major global players, namely Russia, China, the European Union, and the United States all seek to unduly influence the foreign policy orientation of the five countries at issue.

Russia has enjoyed an established position and built up a solid level of soft power influence in Central Asia. The Central Asian economies are all strongly dependent on trade with Russia and two (or three) are linked institutionally to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members, Uzbekistan is an observer that has reportedly been taking concrete steps to harmonize its legal and regulatory framework with EAEU standards in anticipation of membership

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in a few years). Investment projects and capital flows have also significantly involved Russia.

Some of this began to change after February 2022, although one would be hard-pressed to argue that until that year Russia had truly maintained a hegemonic posture towards Central Asia akin to the one maintained by the Soviet Union over the Warsaw Pact countries, including in the period when the Brezhnev Doctrine was in force. Perhaps the example of Yugoslavia’s relationship with the USSR during some periods of the Cold War or the way certain Latin American states have dealt with the consequences of America’s self-proclaimed Monroe Doctrine—including Washington’s shifting interpretations of its meaning—could be more instructive.

Thus, for instance, on the official level, none of the Central Asian states have supported Russian actions in the Ukraine war. Instead, their governments have publicly stated their continued recognition of the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine in its 1991 borders. While none have formally joined in the Western-led sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia, each Central Asian state has stated that it will not allow its territory to

be used for the transit of sanctioned goods. This has not always worked in practice, with Kyrgyzstan being the most glaring example.

At the same time, public opinion surveys conducted in the Central Asian states since February 2022 suggest that Russian soft power is waning in the region—particularly among the younger generation. On the other hand, none of the Central Asian states have chosen to make use of this increasingly negative attitude toward Russia to attempt a wholesale shift in foreign policy orientation, as has, for instance, Armenia. Still, it is clear that the change in perception is real and that this has influenced if not the everyday conduct of foreign policy, then at least the longer-term strategic planners.

China has seized the opportunity that was, if not brought about by the war, then certainly accelerated by it. And yet, China does not seem to want to completely fill a power vacuum, as its chief Western competitor might have sought to do in the unipolar era. Rather, Beijing seeks to entrench stability in Central Asia, and to ensure the five states do not conduct themselves in ways that are contrary to Chinese interests. Thus, Chinese President Xi Jinping has spoken of “brotherhood relations” and championed a

“harmonious Central Asia” against threats like terrorism and color revolutions. At the same time, Beijing has chosen to walk through the door opened as a consequence of the Russian decision to go to war in Ukraine.

Beijing has now thus positioned itself as a leading political, economic, and security partner to the Central Asian states. Even prior to February 2022, Beijing had prioritized strengthening its cooperation with western neighborhood in strategic areas such as regional security, domestic stability, trade and technology transfers, infrastructure investment, political cooperation, cultural exchanges, and loan guarantees. China continues to work on deepening its soft power appeal in the region, too. It also strengthened its institutional engagement through the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—all Central Asian states, save for Turkmenistan, are fully-fledged members.

In a development few outside the region noticed, in March 2024 China and the five Central Asian states formally launched the Secretariat of the China-Central Asian Cooperation Mechanism. This development comes on the heels of strategic levels of growth in trade volumes between China

and the region. In 2023, China’s trade with the Central Asian states reached \$89.4 billion, up 27 percent from 2022. In 2024, the number continued to grow. In the first four months of this year, China’s trade with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan all registered double-digit growth rates in dollar terms. Another example is the surge in railway cargo volumes between China and Kazakhstan, which in 2023 grew by 22 percent year-on-year to 28 million tons.

Although Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been the most responsive Central Asian security partners for China, Kazakhstan is the cradle of the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was famously launched during Xi’s September 2013 visit to Astana. Kazakhstan continues to play a critical connectivity role in the Chinese conception of its commercial outreach to the entirety of the Eurasian supercontinent (as Mackinder would say), particularly in the all-important transport and logistics domains.

Bilateral strategic cooperation agreements, cooperation through BRI infrastructure projects, and increased trade turnaround all strengthen Beijing’s position in the region. Another indication of Beijing’s influence projection into

Central Asia is that, unlike Russia, China is viewed as a pragmatically economic, with no political and territorial claims over Central Asia. No one in Central Asia seems to think that China threatens the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of any of the Central Asian states.

In recent years, the Western bloc, namely the European Union and the United States, have also shown interest in this region. And yet, for all their talk, they simply cannot compete with the scale of Chinese investment and assistance. Even the EU’s vaunted Global Gateway initiative is a decade too late and tens of billions of euros too small. And the lessons that Central Asian leaders (and their Chinese counterparts) drew from America’s disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan will not soon be forgotten.

Still, Western influence should not be dismissed. Brzezinski’s grand designs (published at the height of the unipolar era) on that part of the world—his advocacy for “benign American hegemony” playing the role of “Eurasia’s arbiter” in the area “stretching between the western and eastern extremities [of Eurasia] is a sparsely populated and currently politically fluid and organizationally fragmented vast middle

space”—continues to animate the thinking of too many policymakers in Washington and Brussels.

Against this backdrop, the Central Asian states find themselves having to deal with the push and pull of the major powers. All five resist—prudently—the entreaties to enter into exclusive relationships with any of them. They hesitate even to gravitate towards any of them. At the same time, the Central Asian states seem to realize the urgent necessity to coordinate and cooperate amongst themselves, so as to be able to preserve stability in the region by championing the emergence of a new, home-grown regional order predicated on a shared effort to diversify their respective and collective external relations with all the major powers.

Regionalism Without Regional Institutions

Since the Central Asian states established their independence due to the implosion of the Soviet Union, they have faced a plethora of security issues. These include intra-regional tensions over borders (Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan) and natural resources (Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan and Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan). All have had to deal with domestic

ethnic-based tensions and even clashes as well as security concerns (extremism and terrorism threats, whether homegrown or emanating from Afghanistan, or, for that matter, further afield). There have been disruptive domestic political disagreements and geopolitical competition across the wider region (e.g., Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership initiative, first proposed in 2016), and there have also been infrastructural shortcomings. All these have, at one time or another, set back regionalization efforts. A historical example is the agreement on the establishment of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) involving Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in 1998. Seven years later, it was dissolved or merged into the Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC), a predecessor of the EAEU.

Years of division and isolationism fed with a strong emphasis on national sovereignty and the construction of national identities undermined the development of a coherent regional identity. Truly regional institutions and dialogue formats either did not exist or remained weak. Intra-regional dialogue mostly took place within wider region organizations, such as the SCO, where four out of five Central Asian states are members;

the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan participating as member states and Turkmenistan as an observer; and the EAEU with two Central Asian participating countries (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

At the same time, there exist successful examples of regional cooperation efforts. Understanding that a reliable water supply is important to fostering political stability as well as social and economic development in Central Asia (because of its uneven distribution throughout the region), in April 2009 the leaders of the five Central Asian states met in Almaty for a special summit in which they expressed their readiness and intention to carry out joint programs to optimize cross water management with aim of improving the region's socio-economic, environmental, and security situation within the framework of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS).

This body has been subsequently used to manage transboundary water flows in Central Asia more generally. The uniqueness of this organization is that it was established by the five Central Asian heads of state without external involvement.

The turning point in regional politics in terms of strengthened intra-regional dialogue and cooperation followed Shavkat Mirziyoyev becoming President of Uzbekistan (his predecessor, who died in office in September 2016, had a notorious rivalry with his Kazakh counterpart, which made it difficult for regional cooperation to deepen).

Mirziyoyev helped to lead the way in launching what has become an annual "Consultative Meeting" of Central Asian heads of state. Typically, leaders discuss security, economic, trade, territorial, and political issues. The Consultative Meeting format, which is relatively informal, has become a pivotal regional event that has come to represent a turning point in regional affairs. Held annually since 2018 (save for the COVID-19 year of 2020) in a different Central Asian country, they are accompanied by parallel or side events in the fields of economics, industry, education, transport, gender, science and culture, youth, and sports.

Currently, the annual Consultative Meeting format is the major platform for regional cooperation, initiated and run exclusively by Central Asian countries, without the presence, initiation, or support of any outside power (e.g., China,

the EU, India, Iran, Russia, the U.S.). This indicates a commitment by the Central Asian leaders to strengthening the region's self-sufficiency. With the evolving focus on amplifying regional integration, the Consultative Meetings serves to solidify integrative movements in Central Asia and illustrates the growing atmosphere of good neighborliness and mutual trust. Thus, the paramount significance of the Consultative Meeting format is the fact that it exists: its vitality is evidence of a political commitment to regional projects. As Mirziyoyev put it during his address to the UN General Assembly on 19 September 2023, the "Central Asian region has no choice but to expand regional cooperation."

Another example of a successful regional integration project that breaks the narrative that it is difficult to kickstart region-wide initiatives in Central Asia is the Central Asian Gateway, a single online trade information platform that acts as a hub to provide users easy access to information on cross-border trade formalities in the region.

The introduction of this platform marks significant progress in enhancing trade cooperation, harmonization, and alignment of regional standards and policymaking

among the five Central Asian states. At the same time, it positions the region as the single and stronger international trade player, additionally enabling intra-regional trade to go faster and smoother. The growth of mutual trade and investments is one of the key factors of the now-enhanced cooperation reality. It is gratifying that the figures in both of those directions indicate consistent growth.

All told, regionalization dynamics have improved markedly and have been taken to a higher stage in the latest years. Yes, border disputes, even clashes, still flare up occasionally. Those involving Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 2021 and 2002 are a case in point. And yet, Bishkek and Dushanbe are working together on a final settlement of the conflict in what Tajikistan's president called an "atmosphere of friendship and mutual understanding." This may sound like a boilerplate statement, but given this history of recriminations and accusations, it most certainly should not be dismissed as such.

Interestingly, all this activity and all these events at the heads of state level have not resulted in enthusiasm for either their institutionalized formalization or the establishment of a regional block of

some sort. This is even more surprising given that a large number of region-wide initiatives are taking place at lower levels and now even include non-state actors like think-tanks and universities. Central Asia is experiencing a surge in the development of regional shared identity-building. Taking place in political, academic, and popular settings (including the mainstream media), this rhetoric is based on and supported by a narrative of common geography, linguistic roots, history, culture, and religion. The Central Asian Media Forum, which took place in December 2022, is an example of regional identity-formation through the establishment of a common media space. The urgent need to form a regional identity was one of the Forum's main messages, where the need to "feel not only part of your country, but also the common region of Central Asia" was concurrently stated by representatives of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

The foregoing narrative and accompanying examples, which (to remind) are taking place against the backdrop of increasing great power competition, represent a concerted set of attempts to strengthen the role of the Central Asian states as "regional order providers" established and nurtured by and for those states themselves.

This development is present even through regional multilateralism in Central Asia has not been established in the "Western" understanding of regionalism (i.e. taking EU integration as the benchmark). But Central Asia has very little to do with the West: the Central Asian way is not the Western way, whether understood in its North American or European variants. Rather, the notion of "order" in the Central Asian context needs to be understood "a relatively stable and predictable set of relations between social actors that makes it possible for the basic goals of a given social context to be achieved by implementing rules and institutions that enable and protect common interests"—to quote from a June 2021 article in *Central Asian Affairs* written by Filippo Costa Buranelli.

C5 and Multi-Vectoralism

Alongside aiming at boosting cooperation efforts, inter-regional dialogue, and strictly respecting sovereignty in internal affairs, rising regionalism in Central Asia has a role to play in positioning it as a stable partner for interaction with the rest of the world. Cooperation and coordination in addressing foreign affairs issues and common challenges have become possible as Central Asian foreign

ministers have been meeting regularly since 2018.

Thanks to their deepening intra-regional cooperation, Central Asian states are becoming increasingly unified in addressing foreign affairs challenges and increasingly coordinated within multilateral platforms and their interactions with other (outside) players. They have been stepping into their relations with outsiders in a concerted regional voice since 2022. This is called the C5 format.

Since the war between Russia and Ukraine restarted in earnest in February 2022, Central Asia has enjoyed increase of international attention, as changing geopolitical dynamics have not only reshaped greater Eurasia's political landscape, but these have also paved way for an increase of Central Asia's importance in the eyes of outsiders. Central Asia is now seen by all relevant players as a crucial transport hub and "transport bridge" that connects China and Europe.

The region has also come to serve as a reliable source of information and even an intermediary with Afghanistan since the Taliban came back to power in the wake of the U.S.-led withdrawal, given the ongoing dialogue between all but one

of the Central Asian states and the new regime in Kabul.

Moreover, the Central Asian states has been actively increasing their interaction with influential global actors within the C5 format, including the United States, China, the European Union, the GCC, and so on. The C5+ format has become one of the major mechanisms for the Central Asian states to interact with the rest of the world. C5+ has also come to be seen as a tool of implementation of their shared multi-vectoral foreign policy, which can in this context be understood as one that “invites everyone to the region and so hedges against the ambitions of each of them.” The Central Asian states may be said to conduct their multi-vectoral foreign policy informed by the spirit of a famous line from Federalist 51: “ambition must be made to counteract ambition.”

On 18-19 May 2023, the first China and Central Asia Summit (C+C5) took place. This Summit carries historical significance as it not only highlighted the pride of place of Central

Asia in Chinese foreign policy also has indicated expansion of Chinese engagement in the region from economic cooperation only to positioning itself as a security provider as part of its new Global Security Initiative. “China is ready to help Central Asian countries improve their law enforcement, security, and defense capability construction,” said Xi in his speech.

The Summit also represents the moment at which Beijing established itself as an independent player in interacting with the Central Asian five — whereas before such interactions occurred mostly within the framework of the SCO. Moreover, the Summit formalized China’s C+C5 relationship through the establishment of a Permanent Secretariat in China for coordination of efforts which was officially launched on 30 March 2024, in Xi’an. The Secretariat’s primary responsibilities are to promote the implementation of the consensus and outcomes reached by the heads of state of the six countries, prepare for

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the China-Central Asia Summit, and serve the foreign ministers’ meeting and the cooperation mechanism in key areas. On the pragmatic angle, the Summit saw the signing of a number of multilateral and bilateral documents and the reaching of agreement on various cooperation initiatives. These included the establishment of a China-Central Asia energy development partnership (e.g., the construction of a solar power plant in Kyrgyzstan), investment in connectivity and trade (e.g. the establishment of new customs checkpoints, the construction of roads), support for the development of a trans-Caspian international transport corridor, enhanced humanitarian and cultural cooperation (e.g., the establishment of Chinese universities in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan).

The sum of bilateral investment, trade deals, and grant agreements between China and the Central Asian states came out to nearly \$4 billion. This clearly demonstrates the practical commitment and economic power of China, particularly in comparison with other regional and global players. The C+C5 Summit format demonstrates that China recognizes and supports the processes of strengthening intra-regional cooperation in Central Asia.

In July 2023, the first GCC-Central Asia Summit was held (in Jeddah). Through the Arab states of the Persian Gulf are new players in the region, the GCC+C5 format presents an unprecedented opportunity for both regions to reinforce their existing cooperation mechanisms. GCC-Central Asia cooperation prioritizes economic integration, joint development projects, and tourism. GCC member states began heightening their economic activity in Central Asia in 2022, with Saudi Arabia making investments in Kazakhstan and signing contracts worth \$14 billion with Uzbekistan. The UAE made infrastructure investments in Kazakhstan, invested in the energy sector in Turkmenistan, and signed agreements with Uzbekistan worth \$10 billion on power generation and distribution. All in that pivotal year of 2022.

But before the July 2023 summit, relations took on a mostly bilateral character (for example, Mirziyoyev visited Saudi Arabia in August 2022). A groundbreaking GCC and Central Asia Investment Forum took place on 29 May 2024 and represents a concerted intent to engage in joint action to strengthen investment and economic relations between the GCC states and those of Central Asia. This forum comes on the heels of

the GCC-Central Asian Summit held in Jeddah in July 2023. The next one is scheduled to take place in Samarkand in 2025, and should mark a pivotal moment in solidifying the partnership.

Also in 2023, the first-ever collective meeting of the Presidents of the five Central Asian countries and the United States took place on the margins of the UN General Assembly annual meeting on 19 September. Existing since 2015 at a working level (but so far failed to turn into an active forum), the C5+1 Diplomatic Forum was “upgraded” in February of 2023 by the attendance of U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken. His visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has been viewed as a manifestation of Washington’s changing tactic in the region after the years of disengagement due to the U.S.-led withdrawal from Afghanistan. It should be noted that Central Asians could not help but notice that heightened American interest in the region came about twice now due to external developments (9/11 and the Ukraine war).

Be that as it may, U.S. President Joe Biden called this C5+1 Central Asia-U.S. heads of state meeting a “historic moment,” since it did indeed represent the first time

an American president has met with all five of his Central Asian counterparts. He also highlighted areas of cooperation “taken to new heights,” including counterterrorism and increasing U.S. security sector funding to Central Asia; strengthening regional economic connectivity; “the potential for a new critical minerals dialogue”; and the launch of a new initiative on disability rights.

Biden’s meeting with the five Central Asian presidents took place several months after the second EU-Central Asia Summit was held on 1-2 June 2023 in Kyrgyzstan (the first Summit took place the year before in Kazakhstan). During this event, which lasted much longer than the one in New York, EU and Central Asian leaders discussed in detail the prospects of heightened regional cooperation between Central Asia and the EU as well as regional and international developments (e.g., the Ukraine war).

Currently the EU and Central Asia engage in dialogue within multiple platforms. Examples include the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum, the Civil Society Forum, the EU-Central Asia High-Level Conference on Environment and Water Resources, the EU-Central

Asia Connectivity Conference, the EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting, and the EU-Central Asia High-Level Political and Security Dialogue.

During the July 2019 launch of the EU’s new Strategy on Central Asia in Bishkek, the EU’s outgoing foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini framed the EU as “a non-geopolitical” actor in Central Asia. Still, Brussels wanted the Central Asians (and other actors) to recognize its regional ambitions and its avowed readiness to respond to great power competition in the region.

The EU’s next initiative in Central Asia was launched in 2021 under the moniker of Global Gateway. This is the EU’s connectivity strategy, with promises being made by Brussels that the EU and its member states would mobilize up to €300 billion between 2021 and 2027 in investments in quality infrastructure. These promises display both an ambition and a readiness to implement a large scope of work with the region.

Rapprochement with Azerbaijan

A quantum leap is taking place in terms of both the quantity and, more importantly, the quality of cooperation between the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan, which has gained an unprecedented level of dynamism. Representatives of the six countries (presidents, prime ministers, ministers, and so on), meeting in various formats (bilateral, trilateral, C5+AZ) are comprehensively augmenting their cooperation utilizing multiple platforms.

Only in 2022, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev conducted nine visits to the countries of Central Asia, and the heads of states of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, in turn, paid a number of visits to Baku as well. These bilateral visits have produced countless agreements.

For example, following the meeting between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan in April 2022, ten bilateral cooperation documents and agreements were signed as well as a Declaration on Strategic Partnership.

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In this essay, I will highlight the trajectory of the Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan relationship and not focus on other Azerbaijan-Central Asia bilateral ties, in part for reasons of space. A similar record of engagement and achievement can be drawn from Azerbaijan-Uzbekistan ties and, admittedly to a lesser extent, with regards to developments in bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and even Turkmenistan.

The overall point, however, is that Azerbaijan's deepening and widening engagement with the Central Asian Five as a group is also unprecedented. This in-many-ways-unique "minilateral" relationship will also be discussed below, after I survey the Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan one.

Aliyev has conducted four visits to Kazakhstan in the last two years; in the same time period, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev visited Azerbaijan three times. These visits demonstrate the strategic and allied nature of the bilateral relationship, which was officially confirmed by the signing of the Declaration on Strengthening Strategic Relations and Deepening Allied Cooperation between the two countries in August 2022.

Back in 2022, Tokayev had evaluated his first official visit to Azerbaijan as head of state as a "breakthrough for the partnership between Baku and Astana," and since then, the bilateral relationship has been strategically broadened and deepened. A total of 134 documents, including a comprehensive program aimed at developing cooperation until 2026, are serving this dynamic cooperation.

One result was the holding of the first-ever joint naval tactical exercise in Baku in October 2023, with the participation of warships and military personnel of both countries. Another is the project to install a fiber-optic cable line along the bottom of the Caspian Sea to enhance internet connectivity between Europe and Asia. A third is expanded cooperation in the energy sector, with plans to lay an electric cable along the bottom of the Caspian that will enable Kazakhstan to export electricity to Europe via Azerbaijan, coupled with a preliminary agreement between SOCAR and KazMunaiGas to increase the volume of Kazakh oil transported through Azerbaijan's pipeline infrastructure.

It is hardly irrelevant to underscore the genuinely warm interpersonal relations between the two heads of state. The example

of Aliyev driving Tokayev from Baku to Fizuli (a city in liberated Karabakh) is illustrative.

Mirziyoyev characterized Aliyev's participation as a guest of honor at the Fifth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia held in Dushanbe on 14 September 2023 as "evidence of the deep historical relations and the current high level of cooperation." The significance of this event cannot be overestimated. Not only did it inaugurate a new format of minilateral cooperation (C5+AZ), but it also has the potential to grow into larger format of South Caucasus-Central Asia cooperation, bringing closer to each other all the core states of the Silk Road region, naturally separated by the Caspian Sea.

The first Central Asia-U.S. C5+1 presidential summit took place in New York on the margins of the UN General Assembly annual meeting just a few days later. I noted this in an earlier section. Aliyev was not present, as is well-known. And yet, there have been credible (although never officially confirmed) reports that this very thing had been proposed to the White House several times by the presidential administrations of both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. If accurate, this missed strategic opportunity for

the United States to take the lead amongst the world's major powers in recognizing the increasingly tight interlinkages between Central Asia and Azerbaijan could be said to be quite unfortunate (to speak euphemistically).

International platforms have also been actively utilized by the sides involving external partners and friends including Türkiye, Georgia, Hungary, and the GCC. "Azerbaijan and the countries of Central Asia are bound by centuries-long historical and cultural ties. Azerbaijan and Central Asia represent a single historical, cultural, and geopolitical space, with increasing strategic significance." So said Aliyev during his welcome speech at the first Summit of Heads of States of Members of the United Nations Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) Summit held in Baku on 24 November 2023. The attendance of the prime ministers of Georgia and Hungary, as well as the GCC Secretary-General, as guests of honor, indicates the readiness of all six C5+AZ presidents to involve and engage in pragmatic and economically beneficial cooperation with "middle powers" from the world.

Another piece of evidence of the veracity of this assessment is the

fact that Aliyev for the second time participated in the SCO Summit in July 2024. Yet another is the fact that he has been invited to participate in the 2025 Central Asia-GCC Summit.

The Turkic Dimension

The final piece of the regional puzzle is the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), perhaps the Silk Road region's most emblematic regional (let the term be understood here in a broader sense) platform, notwithstanding the obvious limits of such a statement (e.g., as an organization based on ethnic identification, it is highly unlikely that three core Silk Road region states—Armenia, Georgia, and Tajikistan—will ever join it). Its member states are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan—with Hungary, Northern Cyprus, Turkmenistan, and the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) as observers. Still, unlike virtually all other regional cooperation (or minilateral) formats where at least a majority of the members belong to the Silk Road region, this is the only one that is structured institutionally in more or less the usual way.

Its members all seem to share at least two basic precepts

(“brotherhood” and “optimism”) with regards to the OTS. I will use two lengthy quotes by Aliyev to put these forward because I know of no better summary statements or writings that brings all this out succinctly.

The first quote, which is taken from Aliyev's 14 February 2024 Inaugural Address, speaks to the “brotherhood” precept:

We have no other family. Our family is the Turkic world. If anyone thinks that we should look for a family elsewhere, I can say that we are not welcome anywhere else, and they are not even concealing this anymore.

The second, which he exclaimed at the Global Media Forum in Shusha on 20 July 2024, speaks to the “optimism” precept:

Our geography is huge, natural resources, delivery routes, our growing influence. [...] [A]ll these factors clearly show the potential of our Organization, and by strengthening the unity, we should turn the Organization of Turkic States into a worldwide power center. Today, there are numerous international organizations: some are in crisis, some are in decline, whereas the Organization of Turkic States is on the rise. This ascent should be comfortable and will be achieved with joint efforts.

Whether Turkic world leaders under the auspices of the OTS or

bilaterally or anything in between (regular trilateral meetings at various levels, many involving Türkiye, are a favorite format), they gather with these (and perhaps others) in mind.

An informal OTS Summit took place in Shusha on 6 July 2024 and further demonstrated the unity of purpose described above. The heads of state adopted and signed several important documents, including the Karabakh Declaration, which offers a comprehensive and (surprisingly for this type of document) pretty concrete vision for the future of the OTS region (it more or less corresponds to the Silk Road region).

Passages address the importance of optimizing and digitalizing transport and transit procedures; advancing digital government (e-Government) infrastructures; harmonizing e-signature/digital signature mechanisms for electronic document sharing; fostering common cybersecurity protection measures against cyber-incidents and cyber-attacks; and building Artificial Intelligence

(AI) policies, guidelines, and partnerships.

But the OTS is not a regional panacea. It will not subsume or incorporate or force out all other platforms and modalities of cooperation. Consider, in this context, that just a few weeks after the Shusha OTS summit, the first-ever military exercise (“Birlestik-2024”) involving the operational and tactical

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command and staff of the militaries of Azerbaijan and four Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) took place in Kazakhstan—and they took place

without the participation or involvement of any external powers (they also did not involve Türkiye, although Turkish troops have participated in various military exercises with Azerbaijan and several Central Asian states).

This development in regional cooperation is significant because it indicates an expansion into the security dimension, which will further both strengthen and deepen trust between the participants. The conduct of this military exercises against the backdrop of the Silk

Road region's increased geopolitical and geoeconomic importance, provides the strategic context of this development.

The big picture takeaway here is that C5+AZ can be considered a “paradigm shift” for the geopolitical balance of the Silk Road region. This political concert of countries that shares a common history, ethnicity and language, cultural ties, and so on, is driven forward not only by the “brotherhood” precept, but also by the “optimism” one. And this, in turn, suggests that both pragmatism and shared strategic interests predominate.

First, they hold in common a strategic foreign policy outlook, as manifested by their concerted pursuit of regionalism and multi-vectoralism against the backdrop of heightened great power rivalry across the Silk Road region.

Second, this rapprochement is obviously pushed forward by common strategic economic interests and intercontinental logistical projects. In today's complex geopolitical conditions, Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states are perfectly located at the intersection of international flagship connectivity projects, including

the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or TCIT), the Belt and Road Initiative, the International North-South Transport Corridor, and the European program for the development of organization and conduct of communications. C5+AZ are, together, seizing an excellent opportunity to capitalize on international interest in developing and investing in alternatives to existing Western-dominated maritime routes and the Russia-dominated Northern Corridor trade route. All the major external players seem to understand the strategic advantages of driving connectivity through TCIT.

The strategic focus on TCIT, in particular, which has gained tremendous significance since February 2022, has had as an unintended consequence the acceleration of cooperation between all the three countries located on the route (Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan-Türkiye) but also beyond, more broadly, within the Silk Road region (including Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan). After all, the title of the high-level economic forum that was held during the SPECA summit in November 2023 in Baku was titled, “Transforming the SPECA Region Into a Global Communication Hub.” ^{BD}



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