

Out from the Shadows: Central Asia's Emerging Role on the Global Stage

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From a vital trade corridor for China on the Silk Road to farmland for the Soviet Union, Central Asia has traditionally been viewed as defined by the great powers that surround it. Even after gaining their independence following the fall of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan remained largely under Russia's sphere of influence: their economies, foreign policies, and, especially, security strategies remained closely integrated with Russia's largely by default.

However, Russia's once-undisputed power has begun to face challenges from a rising China, which has moved into Central Asia as a technology provider, infrastructure investor, trade partner, and security guarantor. China's Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) first emerged as a regional security organization in 2001, challenging the regional dominance of the similar Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The original Collective Security Treaty, signed in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, created a formal military alliance between Russia, Armenia, and the CARs, akin to NATO. The CSTO focuses on peacekeeping operations and responding to traditional military threats.¹ Meanwhile, the SCO is not a military alliance like the CSTO. Instead, it focuses on combating irregular security threats such as terrorism and extremism and regularly hosts joint military exercises typically focused on countering these types of threats.² Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members of both

¹ "History of the Collective Security Treaty Organization," Collective Security Treaty Organization, Accessed March 9, 2025, <https://en.odkb-csto.org/25years/#:-:text=History%20of%20creation%2C%20of%20fundamentals%20of,the%20possibility%20of%20further%20extension>.

² "A Quick Guide to SCO and Its Military Cooperation," China's State Council Information Office, June 5, 2018, http://english.scio.gov.cn/infographics/2018-06/05/content_51673238.htm.

organizations, while Uzbekistan became a member of the SCO after leaving the CSTO in 2012.³

China's goal of incorporating Central Asia into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the 2010s began a new period of conflicting Chinese and Russian power in the region. The BRI became a blanket term for both traditional infrastructure projects, such as railroads and pipelines, and more non-traditional programs, such as the Digital Silk Road and Health Silk Road. The Digital Silk Road project aimed to export digital and internet infrastructure to Central Asia, while the Health Silk Road project aimed to export Chinese COVID vaccines.⁴ Through projects such as these, over the course of the 2010s, China slowly asserted itself as the leading power in many developing sectors, such as technology and sustainability, in Central Asia. However, BRI projects, notably early railway and pipeline projects, failed to provide promised jobs and economic inflow to Central Asians, garnering anti-Chinese criticism from both the public and Central Asian governments.⁵ China's intense loan repayment timeline also loaded smaller states like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan with massive debts as they struggled to keep up with the payments.⁶ To many Central Asians and outside observers, it appeared clear that the Chinese-led projects of the 2010s, while lucrative for China, were not providing the boosts to development the CARs had hoped.

Now, after the CARs have been subjected to a decade of power competition between Russia and China, Russia's war in Ukraine has precipitated a shift in Central Asian states toward a more multi-vectoral foreign policy, with the goal of cooperating with a diverse range of countries outside of Russia. I argue that this phenomenon is best illustrated in Afghanistan, where we can see a clear decline in Russian- and Chinese-led initiatives and an increase in self-guided, multi-vectoral Central Asian leadership.

Effects of the Russia-Ukraine War

Russia's war in Ukraine has shifted Central Asian foreign policy away from Moscow. Historically, Central Asian states have avoided choosing sides in

³ Zheng Xianghong, "Uzbekistan and the CSTO: A Tumultuous Ride," *Chinese Social Sciences Net*, January 27, 2013,

http://euroasia.cssn.cn/xsyj/xsyj_englt/201601/t20160127_2847363.shtml.

⁴ Hong Yu, "Is the Belt and Road Initiative 2.0 in the Making? The Case of Central Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 53, no. 3 (2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2022.2122858>.

⁵ Hong, "Belt and Road 2.0," 8–9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

the conflict, oftentimes as a tactful way of rejecting Russian expansionism.⁷ The boldest countries, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, openly refute Russia's territorial claims in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and support Ukrainian sovereignty.⁸ Kazakhstan, in particular, has reason to be wary of Russian expansionism. In 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that "Kazakhs never had any statehood, [Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev] has created it"—a statement eerily similar to Putin's rationale for Russian "reclamation" of Ukraine.⁹ Such comments were echoed in 2020, when Vyacheslav Nikonov, head of the Russian State Duma Committee on Education and Science, claimed that Kazakhstan "simply didn't exist," and its present-day land is "a great gift from Russia and the Soviet Union."¹⁰ After witnessing similar reasoning used to justify the invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan and its neighbors understandably have taken the threat of Russian expansionism much more seriously.

As the Russia-Ukraine War consumes Russia's security forces and Western sanctions expose the fragility of the country's economy, Central Asian states' reliance on Russia is becoming a greater liability.¹¹ In Central Asia, the conflict has caused the price of agricultural and energy products to skyrocket, putting an enormous financial strain on consumers.¹² Many Russian-led projects have also been cancelled, causing significant job losses for Central Asians.¹³ This economic fallout is affecting public sentiment:

⁷ "The Security Situation in Central Asia under the Context of Major Power Competition: Current State and Prospects," *International Cooperation Center*, July 10, 2025, https://en.icc.org.cn/thinktank_theories/intl_observation/399.html.

⁸ Vusala Abbasova, "President Tokayev Says Kazakhstan Will Not Recognize Donetsk, Lugansk as Independent States," *Caspian News*, July 20, 2022, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/president-tokayev-says-kazakhstan-will-not-recognize-donetsk-lugansk-as-independent-states-2022-6-20-0/>.

⁹ Anna Dolgov, "Kazakhs Worried after Putin Questions History of Country's Independence," *The Moscow Times*, September 1, 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/01/kazakhs-worried-after-putin-questions-history-of-countrys-independence-a38907>.

¹⁰ Asylkhan Mamashuly, "A Big Gift.' Russian MPs' Statements About Kazakhstan's Territory Spark Outrage," *Radio Azattyq*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.azattyqasia.org/a/kazakhstanis-reaction-to-the-statements-of-russian-deputies-about-the-kazakh-territory/31002411.html>.

¹¹ Trisporah Fried, "A New Great Game Emerges as Central Asia Drifts Away from Moscow," *Hudson Institute*, November 21, 2025, <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/new-great-game-emerges-central-asia-drifts-away-moscow-tsiporah-fried>.

¹² Nurbolat Nyshanbayev et al., "Central Asia in a Changing World: Understanding the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 45, no. 4 (2024): 5-6, <https://doi.org/10.34044/j.kjss.2024.45.4.30>.

¹³ Nyshanbayev et al., "Changing World," 5-6.

according to surveys, Central Asians increasingly blame their current financial struggles on Russia's invasion.¹⁴

These vulnerabilities of overreliance on Russia have prompted a period of serious "reevaluation" and "recalculation" in each Central Asian country's foreign policy.¹⁵ The dominant themes of these revised policies are diversification and balancing.¹⁶ Diversification entails expanding the number of countries from which the region receives economic benefits, while balancing ensures they prevent a single country from gaining too much power in the region. Central Asian states have begun by seeking economic and security support from other sources. To avoid the ramifications of sanctions, Central Asian trade with Russia has trended downward, while trade with other countries, notably China, has increased rapidly.¹⁷ Similarly, following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War, Russian arms imports to Central Asia dramatically decreased by 23% from 2021 to 2023, a clear signal that Central Asian states are distancing themselves from Russia.¹⁸

China is beginning to fill this growing gap. Currently, China dominates as a key economic partner in Central Asia and challenges Russia's formal role in the security landscape through organizations such as the SCO. China and other countries, such as Türkiye, are also potential replacements for Russia in the arms technology sphere as the states seek more modern high-tech equipment, such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), and fear compromised Russian manufacturing capabilities.¹⁹ Western countries, like France and Italy, are also becoming impactful arms contributors, further supporting a diversification away from Russian arms.²⁰

Working with Global Powers

Beyond foreign policy diversification, another growing trend for the Central Asian Republics is greater internal cooperation and alignment in engagement with external powers. The states have held united dialogues with

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sardor Allayar, "Shifting Dynamics in Central Asia: The Security Landscape amid the Ukraine Conflict," *Central Asian Bureau for Analytic Reporting*, March 5, 2025, <https://cabar.asia/en/shifting-dynamics-in-central-asia-the-security-landscape-amid-the-ukraine-conflict>.

¹⁶ Allayar, "Shifting Dynamics."

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Joshua Bernard-Pearl, "New Security Trends in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Sales of Russian Arms Decline," *Caspian Policy Center*, August 27, 2024, https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/ckeditor_media/2024/08/27/security-trends-in-central-asia-and-south-caucasus_CxopCxu.pdf.

¹⁹ Bernard-Pearl, "New Security Trends."

²⁰ Ibid.

various countries, including the U.S., China, Japan, and Germany, under a C5+1 initiative, where the five Central Asian countries are aggregated as the “C5” and the “+1” refers to the external country they meet with.²¹

A key emerging partnership is with Türkiye, primarily through the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The OTS is an intergovernmental organization of Turkic-speaking states aimed at fostering cooperation within the Turkic world.²² Early suggestions and efforts to form a Turkic council were led by Kazakhstan in 2006, before forming the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States in 2009, which would later officially become the OTS in 2021.²³ Tajikistan is the only CAR that is not a member of the OTS, as Tajiks are not a Turkic ethnic group. However, importantly, this has not excluded it from Turkish-Central Asian cooperation in the realms of arms procurement and transportation connectivity.²⁴

In the past, the regional grouping of the five states was typically fabricated by external powers such as the West or Russia.²⁵ This artificial attribution of unity overlooked the decades of border and ethnic conflicts that divided the region. Because of these tensions, the Central Asian countries often did not see themselves as a single entity, unlike external powers, which did. However, in recent years, almost all significant border disputes originating from Soviet territory delineation have been resolved, thereby also easing the tensions that kept the CARs divided.²⁶ This marks a promising step toward self-driven regional unity, as the states are choosing to act together of their own will. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan has emphasized that the Central Asian states should unify to “resist external forces that seek to pit the states of the region against each other and divide them.”²⁷ Divisions between Central Asian states remain, but initiatives such as C5+1 display a newfound dedication to collaboration, allowing them to increase their power as a rapidly emerging regional bloc.

Such cooperation, combined with Central Asia’s enduring dependence on Russia, gives the CARs a unique ability to pursue relationships with

²¹ “Central Asia’s ‘C5’ Security Bloc Can Become a Reality,” *The Times Of Central Asia*, May 20, 2024, <https://timesca.com/central-asias-c5-security-bloc-can-become-a-reality/>.

²² “Organization of Turkic States,” Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turk-konseyi-en.en.mfa>.

²³ Daria Isachenko, “Turkey’s Turns to Central Asia,” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, comment no. 49 (2025): 5-6, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2025c49>.

²⁴ Isachenko, “Turkey’s Turns,” 5-6.

²⁵ Uuriintuya Batsaikhan and Marek Dabrowski, “Central Asia — Twenty-five Years After the Breakup of the USSR,” *Russian Journal of Economics*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ruje.2017.09.005>.

²⁶ Marcin Popławski, “Central Asia: A Region without Border Disputes?,” *Centre for Eastern Studies*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-01-17/central-asia-a-region-without-border-disputes>.

²⁷ “‘C5’ Security Bloc.”

Russia's opponents without separating themselves from Russia. External powers know that the Central Asian states can not fully separate themselves from Russia because of the inherent security vulnerabilities caused by their long border with Russia. Therefore, they afford Central Asia more flexibility and collaborate with the CARs without requiring significant concessions or guarantees of reducing relations with Russia. Central Asia thus wields the unique ability to play both sides, further strengthening its ability to pursue a successful multi-vectoral foreign policy.

Central Asia's Approach to Afghanistan

A new paradigm of regionally-driven cooperation and diversification away from Russia is exemplified by Central Asia's recent rapprochement with Afghanistan. Separation from Russia requires Central Asian states to seek alternative trade routes to replace the traditional Northern Corridor route, which passes through Russia into Europe. One of the popular alternatives, particularly for Uzbekistan, is a trans-Afghan corridor, which restores connectivity with South Asian ports.²⁸ In pursuing this transit corridor, the Central Asian Republics have approached Afghanistan in a new, self-driven fashion, signaling a readiness to act as their own regional administrator. Moreover, these efforts are part of a larger Central Asian strategy to cautiously reintegrate Afghanistan into the region in an attempt to promote and maintain stability. This coordinated strategy remains in its early stages; however, it reflects the development of a shared goal among the Central Asian states.

This desire for Afghanistan's reintegration is rooted in the fear that an economically unstable and isolated Afghanistan will cause broader instability and extremism to spill over into the rest of Central Asia, destabilizing the entire region.²⁹ Central Asian governments worry that instability would spark an influx of Afghan refugees, which would increase the risk of militant extremists entering their borders and lending strength to extremist religious movements in their own countries.³⁰ However, officials in Central Asia are optimistic that pragmatic engagement can ensure security in the region and reassert Central Asian autonomy. Therefore, the states are

²⁸ Paul Bartlett and Joanna Lillis, "Central Asia: Bringing Afghanistan in from the Cold," *Eurasianet*, July 7, 2025, <https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-bringing-afghanistan-in-from-the-cold>.

²⁹ Sebghatullah Safari, "Understanding the Afghan Taliban's Deepening Links with Central Asia," *UOL Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research*, September 29, 2025, <https://csspr.uol.edu.pk/atcars/>.

³⁰ Kate Mallinson, "Afghanistan Creates Tricky New Reality for Central Asia," *Chatham House*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/08/afghanistan-creates-tricky-new-reality-central-asia>.

leading their own efforts to re-engage and stabilize Afghanistan primarily through cooperation in critical infrastructure, such as energy projects and trade corridors.³¹ The three most significant infrastructure projects set to move into physical implementation in the near future are the Trans-Afghan railway, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (TAPI), and the Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA 1000).³²

The Trans-Afghan railway aims to connect South Asia to the Middle Corridor, which crosses the Caucasus and Turkey into Europe, to the Northern Corridor through Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and potentially to the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway line.³³ Many existing railways in Central Asia were developed, rehabilitated, or improved by the Soviet Union or as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. These new lines in Afghanistan, however, would be a significant step forward for Central Asia, as the states themselves take initiative over their own rail network development to directly benefit their own economies. Additionally, new routes and markets in South Asia will decrease dependency on Russia for economic connectivity.

Turkmenistan has traditionally been the most reclusive of Central Asian governments, often referred to as the "North Korea" of Central Asia because of its tendency toward isolationism. Turkmenistan is often the odd one out in terms of Central Asian collective action. For example, it is not a member of the SCO or the CTSO. However, Turkmenistan is now joining the other CARs in efforts to integrate Afghanistan by leading the charge in energy projects and energy diplomacy efforts. One such project is Turkmenistan's TAPI gas pipeline, which aims to supply Turkmen gas to Pakistan and India through Afghanistan.³⁴ In September of 2024, Turkmen and Taliban officials met to officially resume progress on the project after it had been halted since its inception in the 1990s due to conflict and instability in Afghanistan.³⁵ The revival of the project suggests that Turkmenistan considers the Taliban government stable enough to justify investing in a major infrastructure project. Turkmenistan has also boasted that the project will serve a

³¹ Aidar Borangazyev, "Afghanistan and Central Asia: Pragmatism instead of Illusions," *The Times Of Central Asia*, April 16, 2025, <https://timesca.com/afghanistan-and-central-asia-pragmatism-instead-of-illusions/>.

³² Borangazyev, "Afghanistan and Central Asia."

³³ Daria Zielińska, "Pragmatism Beyond Divides: Central Asia's Engagement with Afghanistan," *Centre for Eastern Studies*, November 7, 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-11-07/pragmatism-beyond-divides-central-asias-engagement-afghanistan>.

³⁴ Zielińska, "Pragmatism Beyond Divides."

³⁵ Farangis Najibullah and Khursand Khurramov, "Central Asia's High-Stakes Gamble with the Taliban," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, September 22, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-kazakhstan-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-tajikistan-turkmenistan/33126717.html>.

humanitarian purpose in Afghanistan by creating 12,000 new jobs and contributing to greater economic prosperity.³⁶ As of 2026, ten kilometers of pipeline have already been built in Afghanistan.³⁷ Significantly, the TAPI project is entirely Turkmen-led, suggesting that Turkmenistan, like its neighbors, is taking a leading role in developing regional infrastructure and markets.

The CASA 1000 project, led primarily by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, is a high-voltage transmission line designed to transport surplus electricity generated in the summer to Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁸ This project represents a significant effort toward collaboration by Tajikistan, which had been the most hesitant of the Central Asian republics to work with the Taliban government.³⁹ While none of the Central Asian governments have formally recognized the Taliban government, Tajikistan has gone a step further and explicitly labeled the Taliban a threat.⁴⁰ Statements made at the 2024 CSTO Parliamentary Assembly by Tajik officials calling Afghanistan a “breeding ground of terrorism” reflect Tajikistan’s heightened fears of terrorist activity crossing over from Afghanistan.⁴¹ However, the CASA 1000 project suggests that Tajikistan may be following the other Central Asian states’ leads, striving to foster a stronger relationship with the Taliban in an effort to improve economic and security cooperation.

A defining characteristic of recent Central Asian endeavors in Afghanistan is a strict apolitical focus on developmental projects and economic interaction. Many of the Central Asian governments have refrained from making political statements in their dealings, and so far, none have officially recognized the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan.⁴² In the European Union-Central Asia summit held in Afghanistan in 2025, EU and Central Asian leaders jointly committed to helping “Afghanistan develop into a secure, stable and prosperous State with inclusive government and governance systems that respect the human rights and fundamental

³⁶ Borangaziyev, “Afghanistan and Central Asia.”

³⁷ Fidel Rahmati, “10 km of TAPI Gas Pipeline Completed in Afghanistan,” *Khaama Press*, March 16, 2025, <https://www.khaama.com/10-km-of-tapi-gas-pipeline-completed-in-afghanistan/>.

³⁸ Fabio Indeo, “CASA-1000 Energy Project Revival: Involving Afghanistan in the Regional Cooperation,” *NATO Defense College Foundation*, August 27, 2025, <https://www.natofoundation.org/central-asia/casa-1000-energy-project-revival-involving-afghanistan-in-the-regional-cooperation/>.

³⁹ Najibullah and Khurramov, “High-Stakes Gamble.”

⁴⁰ Aleksandar Ivanović, “The CIS Summit and Central Asia’s Afghan Challenge,” *American Foreign Policy Council*, November 14, 2025, <https://www.afpc.org/publications/articles/the-cis-summit-and-central-asias-afghan-challenge>.

⁴¹ Ivanović, “CIS Summit.”

⁴² Zielińska, “Pragmatism Beyond Divides.”

freedoms of all its citizens, including women, girls.”⁴³ However, it is worth questioning if the CARs truly aim to support the EU’s aspirations for the region or if they are simply ensuring EU support for economic development in the future. The CARs have continued economic investment and cooperation with the Taliban without actually demanding such political changes, suggesting that their real priority is not to jeopardize their growing relationship with the Taliban. Because the Central Asian states experience less pressure to adhere to Western liberal standards than Western countries, they are able to engage with the Taliban without pressure to complicate their relationship with political demands. This gives the Central Asian states an advantage when forging new relationships with the Taliban that can help grow their power as a regional authority.

Afghanistan represents a new theater where the CARs are demonstrating their ability to take control over their own regional affairs. The CAR-led projects in Afghanistan echo the early infrastructure projects of China’s BRI. However, instead of being dictated by an outside power, the CARs are leading these projects themselves and creating markets for their own benefit and under their own control.

Combating Terrorism

The greatest area of multilateral cooperation among the CARs has been in the security sector, specifically through combating terrorism across Central Asia. This is a change to the traditional dynamic. Russia and China have traditionally used Central Asia as a buffer against terrorism spreading from the Middle East. For example, China created the SCO primarily to combat the “three evils” of terrorism, extremism, and separatism that it feared would spread through Central Asia into China.⁴⁴ As Turkic Muslim groups, the Uyghur and East Turkestan movements in Xinjiang were perceived to be linked to the Central Asian states, further exacerbating China’s need for a regional partner in counterterrorism. As a result, China established the SCO to gain the CARs’ support for counterterrorism efforts. Furthermore, the SCO acts as a tool for China to bring Central Asia into its sphere of influence, carving a foothold in a region traditionally dominated only by Russia. Joint counterterrorism military exercises with the SCO predate the BRI and other economic and development-focused Chinese initiatives in

⁴³ European Council, “Joint Declaration Following the First European Union-Central Asia Summit,” press release, April 4, 2025, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7745-2025-REV-1/en/pdf>.

⁴⁴ Stephen Aris, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: ‘Tackling the Three Evils.’ A Regional Response to Non-Traditional Security Challenges or an Anti-Western Bloc?” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61 (2009): 457–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130902753309>.

Central Asia, making them some of the earliest attempts to generate influence in the region. Now, however, the CARs' approach to counterterrorism is changing.

The Central Asian states, under their new C5 bloc mentality, are making their own security strategy regarding Afghanistan. In 2025, Central Asian governments held the first Special Representatives' Meeting in Tashkent, where a major topic was developing a coordinated strategy for combating terrorist activity from Afghanistan.⁴⁵ The meeting also established a new 'Contact Group,' which will serve as a "regional platform for regular consultations, coordination, and dialogue" for matters on Afghanistan, further emphasizing greater institutionalization of Central Asian cooperation.⁴⁶

A major focus for counterterrorism efforts moving forward will be the ISIS-Khorasan group based in northern Afghanistan. ISIS-K is responsible for numerous cross-border attacks and for recruiting fighters from the Central Asian Republics.⁴⁷ ISIS-K is a threat to the Taliban and has ambitions of destabilizing governments in Central Asia, making eliminating the group a shared ambition of the CARs and Afghanistan.⁴⁸ Although there are few actual plans to combat terrorist threats in the region, the mutual threat of ISIS-K, combined with the emerging strategic cooperation of the Special Representatives' Meeting, points to a future of regional counterterrorism efforts with reduced external involvement.

Conclusion

Central Asia's cautious and pragmatic invitation for Afghanistan to reintegrate into the international community is a telling sign of the desire to navigate its foreign policy on its own terms. While the region remains dependent on external powers such as Russia and China for larger security guarantees, its ambitions to address the "irregular" security threat posed by terrorism in Afghanistan independently indicate that Central Asia is becoming a regional decision-maker. Additionally, the Central Asian states are now dictating and designing their own railway projects in Afghanistan, rather than taking direction from Beijing with the BRI, which further highlights their new agency. The growing institutionalization of Central Asian

⁴⁵ Sadokat Jalolova, "Central Asian Countries Launch New Contact Group on Afghanistan," *The Times of Central Asia*, August 29, 2025, <https://timesca.com/central-asian-countries-launch-new-contact-group-on-afghanistan/>.

⁴⁶ Jalolova, "New Contact Group."

⁴⁷ "C5' Security Bloc."

⁴⁸ Clayton Sharb and Danika Newlee, "Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Last modified November 9, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/programs/former-programs/warfare-irregular-threats-and-terrorism-program-archives/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic>.

cooperation—evident in the beginnings of a formal regional C5 bloc—also points to greater regional unity aimed at reducing the ability for external powers to exploit divisions between the states.

Central Asia is seizing the opportunity to transform the region from a passive battleground dominated by external powers into an active network of highly connected countries. It is hard to deny the growing economic opportunity and strategic power of the region. In 2025, the combined economy of Central Asia grew 6% while the U.S. and Eurozone only saw growth of 1.1% and 1.6%.⁴⁹

Central Asia has ultimately created a multi-vectoral foreign policy that attracts benefits from the most powerful opposing powers in the modern world with minimal concessions. The future of Central Asian collaboration is reflected in many of Uzbek President Mirziyoyev's speeches. Since 2018, the CARs have held annual Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, which President Mirziyoyev recently described in his address to the UN General Assembly as "an effective mechanism for deepening regional integration."⁵⁰ In this same address, President Mirziyoyev affirmed that Central Asia is "steadily securing a stronger position in the system of international relations as an independent actor."⁵¹ In the seventh Consultative Meeting, President Mirziyoyev furthered this optimistic vision of present and future Central Asia. He proudly recounted the region's achievements in integrating into the global economy and expanding its markets and praised the success of the C5+1 format in allowing the region to take "a unified position at high-profile international forums."⁵² One of the most significant and promising takeaways from this speech, however, was Mirziyoyev's proposition to "transform [their] meetings from a consultative format of regional dialogue into a strategic format: 'The Community of Central Asia.'"⁵³

This optimism is not purely hopeful rhetoric from Central Asian heads of state. Rather, it is founded on the tangible economic and development gains over the past few years, possible only through increased collaboration.

⁴⁹ Teymur Atayev, "New Railway Corridor to Link Central Asia with Arabian Sea Ports by 2027," *The Caspian Post*, July 15, 2025, <https://caspianpost.com/opinion/new-railway-corridor-to-link-central-asia-with-arabian-sea-ports-by-2027>.

⁵⁰ Shavkat Mirziyoyev, "Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly" (speech, United Nations General Assembly, New York, NY, September 23, 2025), *President of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8525>.

⁵¹ Mirziyoyev, "Address at the United Nations."

⁵² Shavkat Mirziyoyev, "Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the Seventh Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia" (speech, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, November 16, 2025), *President of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8674>.

⁵³ Mirziyoyev, "Address at the Seventh Consultative Meeting."

After a long period of consistently being written off as an open space for great powers to compete in, Central Asia is finally coming into its own as a unified bloc, ready to assert itself on the global stage.

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