

U.S. Cooperation with Central Asian Countries within the C5+1 Initiative: Trends and Prospects

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ABSTRACT. *The article examines the United States' engagement with Central Asian countries through the C5+1 initiative, highlighting its evolution, challenges, and strategic implications. Central Asia's significant geostrategic position and history have made it a focal point for global powers. The C5+1 initiative, encompassing the U.S. and five Central Asian nations, represents a strategic realignment of U.S. policies in the region post-9/11. This initiative aims to balance the dominant Russian influence and China's growing economic power. The article explores how the C5+1 initiative has established foundational frameworks for cooperation, addressing a range of issues from economic development to security concerns. The analysis underscores the initiative's role in shaping U.S. foreign policy towards Central Asia, considering regional dynamics and international relations.*

KEYWORDS: *C5+1 Initiative, Central Asia, U.S. Foreign Policy, Geostrategic Position, International Relations.*

INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical milieu of Central Asia, a region characterized by its rich history, cultural diversity, and significant geostrategic position, has invariably attracted the attention of global powers. The inception of the C5+1 initiative, which includes the United States and the five Central Asian nations – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – marked a transformative phase in the diplomatic and strategic engagements of the U.S. within this pivotal Asian sub-region. This diplomatic platform, established in 2015, serves as a testament to the U.S. commitment to fostering multifaceted relations with the Central Asian republics, advancing collective interests that span security, economic development, environmental protection, and the promotion of regional cooperation (U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity, 2023).

The relevance of Central Asia to U.S. foreign policy has been consistently underscored by the region's potential as a corridor for trade and energy resources, its proximity to global hotspots, and the opportunity it presents for the U.S. to promote stability and counterbalance other regional influences. The United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 articulates a vision that seeks to reinforce sovereignty, economic prosperity, and resilience among these nations, thus aligning American foreign policy interests with



the security and development needs of Central Asian partners (U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity, 2023).

This article intends to delve into the dynamics of the U.S.-Central Asia cooperation under the C5+1 initiative, tracing the trends that have emerged from this collaboration and assessing the prospects of this regional forum. It will explore the underpinnings of U.S. involvement in the area, analyze the breadth and depth of the C5+1 engagements, and contemplate the evolving nature of this partnership against the backdrop of the larger geopolitical shifts and regional challenges.

In doing so, the article will employ a diverse array of sources, including policy documents, academic analyses, and empirical data, to ensure a robust and comprehensive examination of the subject. The analysis will be informed by strategic documents such as the U.S. Strategy for Central Asia, scholarly contributions that provide a broader understanding of regional geopolitics, and evaluations of the C5+1's achievements and setbacks from research conducted by think tanks and institutions dedicated to Central Asian studies.

Through this exploration, the article aims to provide clarity on the C5+1 initiative's role in shaping U.S. policy in Central Asia, elucidate the trends that define the current U.S.-Central Asia relations, and offer insights into the potential trajectory of this cooperation in the face of 21st-century geopolitical realities.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Central Asia, often referred to as the “heartland” in the classical geopolitical theory by Mackinder, has been a focal point of international maneuvering and power struggles historically known as the Great Game. This term, coined in the 19th century, originally described the strategic rivalry and conflict between the British Empire and the Tsarist Russian Empire for supremacy in Central Asia (Hopkirk, 2006). The region's significance was primarily attributed to its location as a crossroads between Europe and Asia, its wealth of natural resources, and its potential as a buffer zone against hostile forces. The Great Game never truly dissipated but evolved, manifesting in the 20th century as a complex contest for influence, with the U.S. becoming increasingly involved following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Central Asian republics emerged as strategic chess pieces in a post-Cold War era marked by U.S. efforts to establish a presence in what was once a Soviet-dominated territory. The U.S. strategy was initially driven by three primary interests: securing energy resources, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and combating terrorism, particularly post-9/11 when Central Asia became a strategic rear base for operations in Afghanistan (Olkott, 2005).

The C5+1 initiative is a contemporary embodiment of the U.S.' shifting policy focus towards multilateralism in Central Asia. Throughout the 2000s, the U.S. engagement with Central Asian states was predominantly bilateral and security-focused, leveraging

the region's support for the War on Terror. However, this approach often sidelined broader regional issues and development goals. Recognizing the limitations of this strategy and the need for a more comprehensive approach, the U.S. began to pivot towards fostering sustainable development, regional security, and economic integration among the Central Asian states as a collective.

This initiative, officially launched in 2015, represents a nuanced shift from the prior U.S. policy stances, seeking to create a platform for dialogue and cooperation on issues ranging from economic connectivity to environmental management and security. This multilateral framework was also indicative of the U.S. recognition of the growing influence of other powers, notably China with its Belt and Road Initiative, and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union. Hence, the C5+1 was envisioned as a means to reassert U.S. presence and partnership in Central Asia, balancing the influence of these great powers while also accommodating the autonomy and regional cooperation aspirations of the Central Asian countries (Pomfret, 2019).

The historical context of U.S. cooperation with Central Asia reflects a trajectory shaped by the region's enduring geostrategic significance. From the Great Game's legacy to contemporary great power competition, Central Asia has consistently been a stage for strategic presence and contestation. The evolution from a security-focused bilateral approach to a more multilateral and development-oriented framework under the C5+1 indicates a critical reassessment of U.S. policy towards Central Asia.

Critically, the C5+1 framework's establishment can be seen as a strategic response not only to the historical patterns of power dynamics in Central Asia but also to the global shift towards multilateral engagement. It represents a recognition of the interconnected nature of modern geopolitical challenges that transcend borders, such as transnational terrorism, climate change, and economic integration. However, the success and sustainability of this initiative hinge on the U.S.'s ability to reconcile its strategic interests with the regional dynamics and the sovereign aspirations of the Central Asian republics.

In retrospect, the C5+1 initiative's evolution resonates with the broader U.S. foreign policy recalibration post-Cold War, adjusting to the multipolar world order and the rising tide of regionalism. Whether this framework can effectively facilitate a balanced and mutually beneficial partnership will depend on the continued engagement that respects the regional context and the evolving interests of both the U.S. and the Central Asian nations.

RESEARCH METHODS

The methodology of this research is grounded in a multi-disciplinary approach that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative analysis, utilizing methods from political science and international relations. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the U.S. cooperation with Central Asian countries within the C5+1 initiative by examining its trends and prospects.

Qualitative analysis is employed to interpret the dynamics of political and diplomatic engagements, cultural exchanges, and the narrative framing of the initiative in policy discourses. Policy documents, official statements, and strategic frameworks related to the C5+1 initiative are subjected to content analysis to discern the stated aims, rhetorical commitments, and projected goals of the stakeholders involved. This analysis helps in understanding the evolving policy landscape and in identifying the emphasis placed on various areas of cooperation. Selective case studies of key projects and programs under the C5+1 initiative are analyzed to assess their implementation, impact, and broader implications for regional cooperation. This approach also allows for the exploration of best practices and lessons learned.

Quantitative methods are used to assess the economic and security dimensions of the initiative. Economic and trade data, investment flows, and aid statistics related to the C5+1 countries are analyzed using statistical methods. This analysis provides insight into the economic underpinnings of the initiative and its material outcomes. Network analysis is conducted to visualize and interpret the interconnectedness of the Central Asian states within the framework of the C5+1, with a focus on security collaborations and counterterrorism initiatives. This allows for an assessment of the strength and depth of these connections.

Comparative analysis is used to contrast the C5+1 initiative with other regional cooperation models and the engagement strategies of other major powers in the region, such as Russia and China. This method helps in identifying competitive and complementary aspects of U.S. involvement in Central Asia.

Each of these methods has been selected to address specific aspects of the C5+1 initiative's complexity. Qualitative methods allow for an in-depth exploration of the political nuances and subjective interpretations of the initiative, while quantitative methods offer empirical evidence of its impacts. Comparative and critical analyses provide the broader geopolitical context and unveil the deeper narratives at play. This mixed-methods approach provides a robust framework for analyzing a multifaceted diplomatic endeavor, enabling a comprehensive evaluation of its effectiveness, challenges, and long-term sustainability.

THE C5+1 FRAMEWORK: AN OVERVIEW

The C5+1 framework emerged as a strategic response to the multifaceted challenges and opportunities presented by the Central Asian region. This initiative has been designed with the explicit objective of strengthening U.S. cooperation with the Central Asian republics across a spectrum of shared interests, aiming to promote regional stability and security, enhance economic integration, and ensure sustainable development. At its core, the C5+1 seeks to advance a vision of Central Asia that is not seen as merely a space of geopolitical competition, but as a region of sovereign states capable of determining their destiny and contributing to global affairs (U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity, 2023).

Key Areas of Cooperation. The security dimension of the C5+1 initiative has been critical, largely due to the region's proximity to Afghanistan and its vulnerability to transnational terrorist networks. Analyzing the evolution of the initiative reveals a persistent focus on enhancing the counterterrorism capabilities of Central Asian states, while also addressing non-traditional security threats such as narcotics trafficking and cross-border organized crime.

Economic development and trade constitute another pillar of the C5+1 initiative. The United States has promoted the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) as a platform to discuss trade-related issues and to improve the investment climate. Yet, a critical analysis suggests that economic cooperation under the C5+1 has been limited by the varied economic structures and levels of development among the Central Asian countries, as well as by the entrenched influence of Russia and China through entities like the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative. Consequently, the scope of U.S. engagement in trade and investment in the region faces intrinsic constraints that need to be strategically navigated.

Energy and environmental concerns have been pivotal areas under the C5+1 framework, with the U.S. supporting Central Asian states in diversifying their energy sectors and promoting renewable energy sources. The United States has encouraged regional dialogues on water security, a critical issue given the transboundary rivers that pose potential for both cooperation and conflict (USAID Regional Water and Vulnerable Environment Activity, 2023). Nevertheless, an analytical critique would highlight that progress in this domain has been uneven, as regional cooperation often succumbs to national interests, especially in the context of hydropower development and water distribution.

While the C5+1 initiative undeniably marks a significant U.S. commitment to Central Asia, an analytical and critical perspective exposes the multifaceted and complex nature of its implementation. The initiative's broad aims must confront the reality of divergent national interests, regional rivalries, and the overarching influence of other geopolitical actors, which collectively shape its prospects and effectiveness.

TRENDS IN U.S.-CENTRAL ASIA COOPERATION

The frequency and quality of high-level visits and dialogues under the C5+1 framework are indicative of the initiative's robustness in fostering political and diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Central Asian countries. Notably, the series of visits by U.S. secretaries of state to the region, and reciprocally by Central Asian leaders to Washington, D.C., have underscored a mutual interest in strengthening ties. These exchanges, as documented by the U.S. Department of State, have set the stage for discussing a breadth of issues ranging from regional security to economic cooperation (U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity, 2023). A critical analysis, however, must question the tangible outcomes of these dialogues beyond their symbolic value. While they demonstrate a sustained commitment, there

is a need to scrutinize whether these high-level engagements translate into actionable policies or remain largely ceremonial.

The legal framework underpinning U.S.-Central Asia relations has expanded with numerous bilateral and multilateral agreements. For instance, the U.S. pursuit of enhanced cooperation in education and cultural exchanges is manifested in agreements like the U.S.-Kazakhstan Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue. Yet, it is crucial to evaluate the implementation and enforcement mechanisms within these agreements (Joint Statement on the Kazakhstan-United States Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue, 2023).

The Trade and Investment Framework Agreements (TIFA) Council meetings have been central to U.S.-Central Asia economic and trade relations. The outcomes from these meetings, such as those aimed at improving the business climate, enhancing regional trade, and addressing non-tariff barriers, are positive indicators of economic diplomacy. Nevertheless, an analytical perspective must also consider the asymmetric nature of these relationships and how they impact domestic industries in Central Asia, potentially leading to economic dependency or the prioritization of U.S. commercial interests (US, Central Asia Affirm Joint Commitment to Strengthen Trade and Investment Ties, 2023).

The U.S. has signaled its intention to be a partner in the infrastructure development of Central Asia, partly as a counterbalance to the extensive investments made by China under its Belt and Road Initiative. Investment trends show a diversified approach by the U.S., including support for private sector involvement and development finance initiatives. It is essential to examine the enduring sustainability of these investments and assess how much they support or hinder the development objectives of the beneficiary nations (Sitenko, 2023).

While the trends in U.S.-Central Asia cooperation within the C5+1 framework exhibit a pattern of deepening engagement, a critical and analytical perspective raises questions about the depth, efficacy, and reciprocal nature of these relationships. As this cooperation evolves, it will be essential to continuously assess not only the strategic interests but also the implications for the broader regional dynamics and the domestic contexts of the Central Asian states.

ANALYSIS OF THE C5+1 EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of the C5+1 initiative can be observed through several achievements and milestones that have shaped the course of U.S.-Central Asian relations. For example, the enhancement of regional economic connectivity and the fostering of trade liberalization have been key successes. Initiatives such as the “Central Asia Energy Links” project demonstrate the U.S.’s commitment to regional integration by aiming to establish an interconnected Central Asian power market (Central Asia Energy Links, 2023).

When compared to the influence of Russia and China in Central Asia, the C5+1 initiative presents both contrasts and similarities. Russia’s historical ties and its

security arrangements through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) have established it as a dominant military partner in the region. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), on the other hand, has significantly increased Beijing's economic footprint, providing extensive infrastructure investments and becoming a leading trade partner for several Central Asian countries.

The U.S. engagement through the C5+1, by comparison, emphasizes a partnership approach rather than overt influence or control. The initiative tends to prioritize the promotion of sovereignty and regional connectivity over the establishment of military bases or the creation of economic dependency. However, the U.S. presence in the realm of hard security and economic investments is considerably modest when compared with the entrenched and rapidly expanding Chinese and Russian roles in the region.

The competitive dynamic among these powers in Central Asia raises questions about the sustainability of U.S. influence via the C5+1. While the initiative has indeed made strides in establishing the U.S. as a partner in the region, whether it can effectively balance the contrasting approaches of Russia's security-driven model and China's economy might remain an open question.

The C5+1 has marked significant achievements in fostering cooperation between the U.S. and Central Asian countries, yet it faces challenges that question its effectiveness when compared to Russian and Chinese engagements. The initiative's prospects will likely hinge on its ability to adapt to the region's evolving geopolitical landscape, balance its strategic interests with value-driven policies, and maintain a consistent and compelling presence amidst great power competition.

THE FUTURE OF THE C5+1 INITIATIVE

The expansion of digital infrastructure and connectivity presents a substantial opportunity for the C5+1 initiative. With a young and increasingly tech-savvy population, Central Asia's digital market is burgeoning. The U.S. can play a pivotal role in assisting these countries to leapfrog into the digital era, which would not only foster economic growth but could also serve as a soft power tool, promoting open information and innovation ecosystems. Strategic investments and partnerships in digital infrastructure can yield mutual benefits and help counter the digital Silk Road being paved by China.

Renewable energy is another area ripe for U.S. cooperation with Central Asian states. The region's vast potential for solar and wind energy can be harnessed to promote sustainable development. The U.S. could offer both technological expertise and financial mechanisms, such as the Development Finance Corporation, to spur renewable projects that align with global climate goals. Such projects would not only have environmental benefits but could also reduce Central Asian states' dependency on fossil fuels and external power supplies, enhancing their energy sovereignty (DFC, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan Announce Central Asia Investment Partnership to Bolster Investment in the Region, 2023).

Educational and cultural exchanges have been a cornerstone of U.S. soft power. The Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program, for instance, has been particularly successful in the region. Expanding such programs could foster mutual understanding, promote democratic values, and develop a cadre of regional leaders with a nuanced understanding of the U.S.

Regional security issues pose a significant challenge to the C5+1 initiative. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the ensuing instability have implications for Central Asian security, especially in bordering states. The threat of extremism and drug trafficking continues to be a concern that can overshadow cooperative efforts and strain resources.

Geo-economic competition, particularly with China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union, remains a daunting obstacle. The economic might and geographic proximity of China and Russia give them substantial leverage in the region. The U.S. must navigate this space carefully, ensuring its initiatives are perceived as complementary rather than adversarial, to avoid forcing Central Asian states into a zero-sum game of geopolitical alignment.

The initiative has a pathway to enhance its role in Central Asia through emerging opportunities in the digital economy, renewable energy, and educational exchanges. However, this potential is matched by significant obstacles related to regional security, geo-economic competition, and the internal political dynamics of member states. The initiative's future will depend on how well it can harness these opportunities while navigating the challenges that lie ahead.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The C5+1 initiative has marked several achievements, particularly in fostering diplomatic relations and promoting economic collaboration. The qualitative content analysis of policy documents has highlighted the U.S. commitment to enhancing the economic resilience of Central Asian states.

The analysis of the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) meetings and their outcomes indicates a strategic engagement with an emphasis on enhancing trade and investment ties. However, the quantitative data suggest that while there is growth, it is incremental and faces stiff competition from China and Russia, whose economic footprint in the region is much larger.

Counterterrorism initiatives have been significant, with network analysis revealing a complex web of security cooperation. However, there remains a critical gap between the intent and capability, as the qualitative case studies reveal challenges such as coordination difficulties and varying security priorities among the Central Asian states.

The initiative has facilitated a series of high-level visits and dialogues, indicating a deepening of political ties. The qualitative analysis of these engagements suggests a U.S. strategic intent to maintain a stable presence in the region and to serve as a counterbalance to Russian and Chinese influences. However, the comparative analysis

shows that the level of engagement from the U.S. is still outpaced by the more entrenched relationships that Central Asian countries have with Russia and China.

The qualitative critical discourse analysis brings to light the delicate balance the U.S. attempts to maintain in advocating for human rights and better governance while pursuing its strategic interests. This dual approach has drawn criticism, as reflected in scholarly debates, suggesting that economic and security interests often overshadow the promotion of democratic values.

The C5+1 is competing in a geopolitical space heavily influenced by Russia and China. Comparative analysis elucidates that the U.S. initiatives are modest in comparison, both in scale and scope. While the U.S. promotes a vision of connectivity and openness, the extent of its influence is limited by the sheer magnitude of investments funneled by China through the Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's historical ties in the region.

The results indicate a complex interplay of diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions within the initiative framework. The U.S. has made discernible progress in establishing itself as a partner to Central Asian countries, with noticeable advances in economic and diplomatic relations. However, these achievements are tempered by the significant challenges of regional security concerns, geopolitical competition, and internal political dynamics of the Central Asian states.

Thus, while the C5+1 initiative has created avenues for cooperation and has facilitated the U.S.'s re-engagement in Central Asia, its effectiveness and long-term impact remain contingent upon consistent strategic commitment and the ability to offer an attractive alternative to the offerings of other regional powers.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the C5+1 initiative emerges as a strategic recalibration of the United States' engagement in Central Asia, striving to transcend the shadow of post-9/11 policies and grappling with the entrenched Russian influence and China's expanding economic might. It has successfully laid down the framework for cooperation but faces an ongoing challenge to balance the promotion of governance with *realpolitik*. The trajectory thus far indicates a commitment to deepening connections through multifaceted involvement, yet it must navigate the inertia of pre-existing regional ties and the allure of competing initiatives like China's Belt and Road.

The initiative has charted a course of steady involvement, marking significant strides in energy, security, and infrastructure. These areas showcase the potential for meaningful collaboration and are testaments to the U.S.'s sustained interest in the region's growth and stability. However, the internal political dynamics of the Central Asian states, the overarching regional complexities, and the jostle for geopolitical space by global powers underscore the fragility of this engagement. The future of the C5+1 initiative thus seems contingent on its adaptability to these evolving landscapes and its capacity to address the nuanced challenges that accompany such a partnership.

To forge a robust path forward, a strategic and coherent U.S. policy that harmonizes its economic, security, and diplomatic goals with respect for Central Asian sovereignty is essential. Alongside this, continuous and incisive research into the long-term efficacy of the C5+1 is imperative to understand its impact comprehensively. As the initiative stands at this pivotal junction, the extent of its influence and success will fundamentally rely on the ability of U.S. policy to respond dynamically to the complex matrix of geopolitical shifts that define this crucial region.

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