

China-Central Asia Cooperation: Old Wine in a New Bottle, or a New Cocktail in the Making?

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ABSTRACT. *In recent years, Central Asia has garnered much attention from the international community, thanks in part to the Belt and Road Initiative and China's continuing expansion in Eurasia, and the renewed interest of the United States, Japan, India, and the European Union in the region. The latter has spurred an institutional race in the region that bares semblance to the Great Game, a term popularized by Peter Hopkirk to describe competition between Russia and Great Britain in Central Asia in the 19th century. The emerging "New Great Game" is centered on Central Asia plus dialogues that a number of countries have established to gain an inroad into Central Asia and establish cooperation with the five "Stan" countries.*

Resting on its geopolitical and economic advantages, China has established a series of communication channels with countries in Central Asia, including the most recent establishments of the China-Central Asia Cooperation or the C+C5 in 2020, and the C+C5 Summit in 2023. Together with the Belt and Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China has shown clear interest in expanding its influence westward and shaping a favorable regional community in Central Asia. Centered on China-Central Asia Cooperation, this article examines China's latest endeavor in Central Asia and other similar initiatives in the region that jointly serve as the driving force for the New Great Game. This article suggests that the C+C5 is not merely a branch of existing initiatives, but a new initiative that holds great potential for further cooperation between China and Central Asia.

KEYWORDS: *China-Central Asia Cooperation, C+C5, Belt and Road Initiative, Silk Road, New Great Game, Institution.*

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, China has gained considerable spotlight on the world stage – from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the trade war with the United States, China's role and influence are discussed and hotly debated. In May 2023, in light of discussions about the New Cold War that places the competition between China and the US at center stage, two concurrent summit meetings brought further attention to the US-



China rivalry and raised questions as to whether the competition was escalating. On May 18 and 19, the inaugural China-Central Asia Cooperation or C+C5 Summit was held in the historical Chinese city of Xi'an. On the second day of the C+C5 Summit, the annual G7 Summit opened in Hiroshima, Japan. In recent years, participants in the G7 Summit have lashed out at China, in particular, concerning rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait, regional security, and COVID-19 among other issues. The successive hosting of the summits makes narratives on the New Cold War and great power competition easy food for thought.

Strategically, the US, along with its partners in the Indo-Pacific, has sought to push back against China's regional and global expansion through the Indo-Pacific Strategy. While China has reinforced relations with Southeast Asian states, it seems to have more trouble with improving relations with neighboring countries in the Pacific such as Japan and South Korea than strengthening relations inland, with countries in Central Asia and beyond. An assessment of the BRI, an initiative that has been established for over a decade, also suggests that China seems to have more success pushing forward the continental Silk Road Economic Belt than the Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road, with the latter hindered by developments including confrontations in the South China Sea, competition with India and controversies related to debt traps. Meanwhile, in Central Asia, China continues to strengthen relations with the region through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRI, outpacing competitors outside the region by a wide margin. In a sense, noting how the US and its partners in the Indo-Pacific try to balance and contain China's growing influence in the region, China is investing much effort towards expanding its influence in Eurasia, which to some extent, avoids direct competition with the US and other powers, and moves attention away from the New Cold War.

The C+C5 Summit is the latest institution established by China to advance its interests and cooperation in Central Asia. The summit was founded on the China-Central Asia Cooperation, a multilateral platform initiated in 2020 to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among the members. From an institutional perspective, this article examines the China-Central Asia Cooperation and other similar initiatives in the region that jointly serve as the driving force for the New Great Game. Centered on the C+C5, this article first looks at the main drivers for the establishment of the initiative and then considers how the C+C5 complements concurrent initiatives, the BRI and Silk Road Fund (SRF) among others, in advancing integration on the Eurasia continent. This article then presents the C+C5 as a continuation of China's long-term strategy of harmonious worldview and good neighbor policy. Following the discussion on China, the focus shifts to institutional efforts by other powers to push back against Beijing's gaining influence, which together, have given rise to a New Great Game in Central Asia. The conclusion considers the potential challenges China may confront in its westward push in the near future. The author suggests that the C+C5 is not merely a branch of existing initiatives. The C+C5 is a new initiative that holds great potential for further cooperation between China and Central Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

China-Central Asia cooperation is not a new topic. In the two decades since the establishment of the SCO, a large corpus of literature on the organization has accumulated over time. A significant portion of the discussion, needless to say, centers on security cooperation and the geopolitics of Central Asia. Akhtar and Javaid's (2021) proposal for the SCO to develop into "NATO of the East" is an interesting example of the security discussion surrounding the organization. The proposal adds to the debate in the Indo-Pacific arena in recent years, where the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), under the leadership of the United States, is touted as the "Asian NATO." In light of the long-term global rivalry between China and the US, Popovic and Stevic (2021) and Khan and Sultana (2021) among others, have pointed out that China is using the SCO to realize the so-called "new security concept" and prevent the US from further expansion into the region. Centered on the SCO, observers have invested much attention on two important questions: what does China seek to achieve through the SCO, and what are the geopolitical consequences of the SCO?

Concerning China's ambition in Central Asia – utilizing the SCO platform – a number of readings and interpretations have emerged. For Rauf and Saud (2020), the SCO complements the Collective Treaty Security Organization (CSTO) in the sense of providing an additional alternative to Western countries for dealing with security challenges. Such reading suggests that China is not seeking to compete with Russia for regional leadership. Nurimbetov and Vasa (2022), on the other hand, point out that through the SCO, China may be seeking hegemonic regionalism, or using institutional structures "to strengthen their position in relations with other regions of the world and power centers." Yazdani (2021), reviewing the SCO's development in the past two decades, points out that China is "exporting models of social development" through the platform to Central Asia while "trying to align the SCO's agenda with China's economic and development initiatives." Most notably, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) comes to mind. As Azizi (2024), Chao (2022), and Abajyan (2021) among others note, the BRI is a key method of increasing interdependence between Central Asian states and China. As such, the SCO is slowly evolving into an organization that promotes both security and economic cooperation.

Besides China's strategic endeavors, observers have also invested their attention in understanding the evolving geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia, with the SCO playing a major role amidst developments. Uzakbaev and Movkebaeva (2022) discuss strategic competition in Central Asia in terms of the balance of power and interplay of various state actors in the region. Due to the history of competition between Russia and the United Kingdom in Central Asia in the 19th century, many observers have come to interpret the current competition among different powers in Central Asia as the "New Great Game." It is important to note that the "New Great Game" has evolved over time to address different strategic contexts in Central Asia. Writing in the mid-2000s, Rogers (2007) described the new game as primarily between China and the

US. A decade onward, Pradhan (2018) described the New Great Game as “economic competition for pipelines, oil and gas, new markets as well as political influence and strategic advantages to claim stakes in the geopolitical resources of Central Asia,” a process that involved Russia, China, US, and India and Pakistan. The ascension of Iran into the SCO in 2023 and Japan’s efforts to expand relations with Central Asia in recent years further influenced the changing great game.

MAIN DRIVERS FOR THE CHINA-CENTRAL ASIA COOPERATION (C+C5)

In light of the SCO, in some sense, the establishment of the China-Central Asia Cooperation or “C+C5” in 2020 seemed excessive. Since its inception in 2001 as the first regional integration initiative advanced by China, the SCO has matured into a well-functioning institution that responds to the security and geopolitical concerns of its members. In addition, the SCO also serves as a platform for communication among Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, China, and Russia, or states that do not necessarily share the same national interests as their Western counterparts. Following the SCO’s expansion in membership to include India and Pakistan in 2017 and Iran in 2023, the organization seems to have grown into a representative body of the Global South that warrants increased attention.

Nonetheless, while the SCO members may have overlapping security interests in and near Central Asia, it is clear that with the expansion in membership, the power structure of the organization transformed as well, giving rise to the consequence that cooperation in the SCO may be potentially undermined or complicated through linkage with issues outside the region. The Russo-Ukrainian War is a case in point. Since the outbreak of the war, China has criticized the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a driver for the conflict while calling for Moscow to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine (China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis, 2023). Meanwhile, India and Pakistan maintain a position of neutrality in the war while Iran provides both military and diplomatic support to Russia. Thus, in the future scenario of the SCO confronting a difficult issue, it may not be hard to imagine that member states may disagree and jointly challenge the integrity of the organization.

For China, an obvious benefit of the C+C5 is the establishment of a channel for communication between Beijing and Central Asia that is free of complications from other competing powers. On the other hand, in contrast with the SCO, the C+C5 is not limited to security concerns – a difference that reflects the evolution of international politics and the changing environment of Central Asia over the past two decades. While security remains important, China’s rise and Central Asia’s continued search for development and economic growth suggest that the potential for greater economic cooperation exists between China and its neighbors to the West. The C+C5 may facilitate discussions for economic cooperation between China and Central Asian countries in the sense that the interests of external actors do not need to be taken into account at the

same time. The C+C5 also complements the China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum, a platform that was initiated in 2012 to discuss and promote cooperation among the members (Li, 2023).

It is worth highlighting that China is not the first or only country in the world that has adopted the C5 plus one framework to cooperate with Central Asia. In 2004, echoing the “Silk Road Diplomacy” concept proposed by former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto (Murashkin, 2020), along with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, Japan launched the “Central Asia plus Japan” dialogue. The Central Asia plus Japan platform paved the way for state visits by PM Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe to Central Asia and return visits by Central Asian leaders to Japan subsequently. In 2015, on the foreign minister’s level, the US and the five “Stan” countries also established the C5+1 platform intending to promote cooperation between the US and the region. In the same year, noting the strategic importance of Central Asia, Indian PM Narendra Modi visited the region and spearheaded the launching of “Connect Central Asia,” a policy that seeks to advance cooperation between India and the “Stan” countries (Kaushiki, 2013). Lastly, corresponding to the listed developments while not strictly abiding by the C5 plus one framework, since the mid-2000s, the European Union has engaged Central Asia and continues to make efforts to improve cooperation between Europe and Central Asia. The rank of actors that have shown an interest in cooperating with Central Asia suggests that China is not alone in its endeavor to engage its Western neighbors, and a new episode of the “Great Game” – an expression made popular by Peter Hopkirk – is in the making.

REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA AND BEYOND

Noting the development of regional integration in the Asia Pacific over the past thirty years, in contrast, Central Asia looks desolate and stagnant. Despite the shortage of a strong economic initiative among other things, Central Asian countries did make efforts towards integration over the past twenty years. Established in 2014 and inspired by the European integration process, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) includes Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan as its member states, with Cuba, Moldova, and Uzbekistan holding observer status. Moscow plays a leading role within the organization. In terms of cooperation that includes all five states of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC), established under the auspices of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), warrants attention. Founded in 1997, in addition to the “Stan” countries, CAREC membership also includes Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, Mongolia and Pakistan.

Despite their positive intentions, unfortunately, both the EAEU and CAREC have not yet fully met their initial expectations. As Aidarkhanova (2023) points out, the EAEU suffers from enormous internal disagreements and uneven markets – union members have very different goals while clashing over the application of non-tariff regulations

and accusations of protectionism. On the other hand, CAREC, despite its long history, is undermined by institutional challenges as well as a missing motivation for pushing forward integration. As an ADB (2023) technical assistance report notes, “CAREC remains among the least integrated and diversified subregions in Asia and the Pacific... particularly because of nontariff barriers, operational inefficiencies, and structural constraints.” Perhaps a key reason that CAREC has struggled relates to its diverse membership in addition to the Central Asian states. Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, Mongolia, and Pakistan all possess vastly different economies that challenge integration. The continued role of the ADB, an extra-regional organization, as the secretariat for CAREC, is an unusual arrangement. Without strong momentum from within the region, integration projects are severely challenged.

In light of the existent conditions, the establishment of the C+C5 is persuasive in the sense that China can step in and provide the momentum and leadership that is required for furthering regional integration in Central Asia. Coupled with the BRI and the SRF, centered on Central Asia, China has in place establishments that would facilitate the advancement of comprehensive cooperation. While the C+C5 serves as the platform for multilateral communication, and the SRF serves as the provider of project funds, the BRI provides the overarching framework that connects Central Asia to Eurasia and beyond. Seen in this light, the C+C5 is a critical piece in China’s efforts to realize the BRI and integration on the Eurasia continent. Tactically, China has gone about advancing the BRI in regional blocs or in the fashion of “China plus,” a development that can be found in Central Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. The C+C5 simplifies China’s engagement with small and medium states along the Silk Road Economic Belt and establishes a foundation for engaging other neighboring states in the future.

In some sense, noting the complicated cultural, historical, and political make up of states that border the “Stan” countries to the south, namely Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, the establishment of the C+C5 effectively delineates a geographic scope that is more manageable for economic cooperation. Hosting a population of 241 million people that is closer to South Asia in culture, Pakistan is larger than all the “Stan” countries combined and does not fit nicely into the region in light of its nuclear capability. After the United States terminated the war on terror in August 2021, the Taliban government took over the leadership in Afghanistan and remains largely isolated from the international community. Straddling Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, Iran is also strategically located while being isolated by the US and Europe through sanctions. In sum, due to the unique status of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, it is more efficient and rational for Beijing to treat the three countries separately rather than including them in multilateral initiatives, especially in terms of economic cooperation.

Under the BRI, China laid out plans for the establishment of the China-Central Asia-West Asia (CCWA) economic corridor, one of six international economic corridors that will facilitate market integration and connectivity in Eurasia (Lei, 2023). The planned CCWA economic corridor connects Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Autonomous Region,

with Ankara, going through Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran. Noting random attacks on merchant ships transferring through the Red Sea by the Houthi militant group, the economic corridor serves as a potential alternative land route that facilitates trade between China and Europe. Corresponding to the planned corridor, the expansion of integration with Iran and Turkey may be a future possibility, perhaps under a C+C5 plus framework. China and Iran currently enjoy a strong relationship manifested in a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” which commits China to invest four hundred billion USD in the Iranian economy over the span of twenty-five years, in exchange for the provision of oil at a discounted price from Iran.

COMMUNITY BUILDING AND CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY

In May 2023, on the occasion of the inaugural China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an, President Xi Jinping delivered the keynote address titled “Working Together for a China-Central Asia Community with a Shared Future Featuring Mutual Assistance, Common Development, Universal Security and Everlasting Friendship” (President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech, 2023). The summit, which gathered the leaders from the Central Asian countries in Xi'an, marked a step forward towards the institutionalization of C+C5 and offered a separate channel - in addition to the SCO – for communication among China and its Central Asian partners. In March 2024, China and the “Stan” countries pushed institutionalization further with the joint establishment of the C+C5 Secretariat in Xi'an. The main function of the newly established secretariat is to facilitate communication and coordination for cooperation among the members.

Institutionalization aside, another equally important feature of C+C5 that is worth noting is the development of a common identity or “community building.” One year before the inaugural China-Central Asia Summit, on the occasion of a virtual summit commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the five countries of Central Asia in January 2022, Xi Jinping proclaimed that “China stands ready to work with Central Asian countries to build on the good momentum and strive shoulder-by-shoulder to build an even closer Central-Asia community with a shared future” (China, Central Asian Countries Vow to Build Community with Shared Future, 2022). The theme of “community” was echoed in the keynote address at the inaugural summit in 2023, in which Xi Jinping emphasized stability, prosperity, harmony, and interconnectivity as the most important pillars that undergird China-Central Asia relations (President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech, 2023).

In light of current efforts towards community building in Central Asia, policies under the preceding Hu Jintao government, namely the “harmonious worldview” and “good neighbor policy,” shed some light as to where the emphasis on community and harmony may have come about. The harmonious worldview, as Hu explained, stresses “multilateralism and common security; mutual benefit, cooperation, and common

prosperity; and the spirit of accommodation and joint construction of a harmonious world” (Tsai, Hung & Liu, 2011, p.28). In practice, the harmonious worldview is supported by the good neighbor policy, which aims to “resolve border conflicts and improve relations through peaceful negotiations; establish companion and cooperative relations and bilateral dialogue; participate in multilateralism and promote joint conflict resolution; and improve economic and trade cooperation” (Tsai, Hung and Liu, 2011, pp.29-30). Taking the harmonious worldview and good neighbor policy together, China sought to integrate with the world while establishing an environment that is beneficial for its continued development.

Noting President Xi Jinping’s address at the China-Central Asia Summit, connections with the preceding Hu Jintao government that reflect the continuation and evolution of China’s foreign strategy can be observed. In the case of Central Asia, in the past two decades, China’s goal of community building and establishing peace in the region remains unchanged. Not only is its commitment to community building renewed regularly through high-level meetings under the SCO every year, but in 2009 and 2011, China also settled longstanding territorial disputes with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan respectively, a move that corresponds to the aim of resolving border conflicts as stated in the good neighbor policy. In addition, highlighting the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism, since 2002, China and fellow member states in the SCO have carried out joint counter-terrorist exercises regularly – another practice that has consolidated China’s relationship with Central Asia by echoing the aim of achieving multilateralism and common security.

Perhaps resting on the harmonious worldview, the BRI expanded China’s aspiration for community building and integration by reaching out to countries and regions beyond Central Asia. Through investments in infrastructural development projects, China has advanced connectivity across Eurasia, which in turn boosts trade and cultural exchange between China and its partners. The BRI allegedly reaches at least sixty-four countries along the planned routes, as claimed by Beijing (Hu, 2019, p.6), which puts the project on a scale that is unrivaled by past integration projects. By connecting Eurasia with the BRI, in the foreseeable future, China may elevate its global status while establishing friendships and partnerships that may coalesce into communities favorable towards Beijing. The BRI in fact provides an overarching framework for China-led regional initiatives to fit under. In this sense, the C+C5 complements the existing structure and serves as another building block that can contribute to broader integration and community building under the BRI.

THE NEW GREAT GAME AND CHALLENGES AGAINST CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA

Noting the strategic competition between the British Empire and Russia in Central Asia in the 19th century, Peter Hopkirk coined the term the “Great Game” to describe the rivalry. In 1996, a short piece in the New York Times titled “The New Great Game in Asia” – an article that did not gain much attention then – pointed out that “Central Asia

has again emerged as a murky battleground among big powers engaged in an old and rough geopolitical game... the object of the revived game is to befriend leaders of the former Soviet republics controlling the oil while neutralizing Russian suspicions and devising secure alternative pipeline routes to world markets” (The New Great Game in Asia, 1996). Since then, more than two decades later, the term “New Great Game” has been used to describe great power competition in different regions. However, following Xi Jinping’s announcement of the initiation of the Silk Road Economic Belt which became the continental leg of the BRI, the international community renewed its interest and attention on Central Asia and the New Great Game narrative.

In recent years, developments in international relations in connection with Central Asia hint at a New Great Game that involves several powers, which stands in contrast with previous versions of the game that mostly centered on two powers. The current episode of strategic competition, to some extent, commenced with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While coming as a shock to the international community, the war also divided the world in terms of support for Russia. In September 2022, after several years of disruption to international travel due to COVID-19, Xi Jinping called on Kazakhstan for his first trip abroad since the pandemic began and subsequently traveled to Uzbekistan for the SCO summit afterward. Xi’s trip was significant in the sense that Kazakhstan was chosen as the Chinese leader’s first destination following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlights the importance of Central Asia in China’s foreign policy. On the other hand, Xi’s trip to Kazakhstan was also worth noting in the sense that China did not support nor criticize Russia in the Russia-Ukraine War, but merely asked Moscow to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Noting the BRI, some observers see China’s response as a sign of Beijing being at odds with Moscow and seeking to gain more influence in Central Asia at the expense of the Kremlin (Avdaliani, 2024).

Meanwhile, under PM Fumio Kishida, Japan has taken on a stronger interest in engaging Central Asia. Since PM Kishida assumed office in October 2021, Tokyo has carried out two rounds of the Central Asia and Japan dialogue on the foreign minister level and one round of the Tokyo Dialogue centered on intellectual exchange. Such activity stands in contrast with efforts by previous administrations, which held the Central Asia and Japan dialogue inconsistently. Perhaps following in the footsteps of PM Shinzo Abe, who visited all the “Stan” countries in October 2015, PM Kishida has plans to call on Central Asia soon, which would make him only the third Japanese prime minister in history to visit the region. Along with its partners in Central Asia, Japan seeks to upgrade the Central Asia and Japan dialogue to the summit level in 2024 (Nemoto, 2023). If successfully carried out, the Central Asia and Japan dialogue would effectively become C5+J and stand as a parallel institution to the C+C5. Such development may add to the strategic competition in Central Asia by extending the chronic competition between China and Japan in the Indo-Pacific into the region.

Alongside Japan, the US has also taken on a stronger interest in recent years, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken making state visits to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan from February 28 to March 1, 2023, and participating in the C5+1 Ministerial Meeting. The trip gained international attention, as before Blinken, no high-level US official traveled to the region except for former Secretary of State John Kerry in 2015, while US activities in Afghanistan and elsewhere attracted more spotlight. The timing of Blinken's visit is worth noting as well, as the trip was made about two months prior to the first C+C5 Summit in Xi'an. Similar to the case of Japan, the C5+1 may extend the competition between the US and China to Central Asia and add another dimension to the strategic interplay between the two countries. In 2019, together with Australia and Japan, the US launched the Blue Dot Network (BDN), a multilateral organization that supports investment in high-quality infrastructure around the world. The BDN was reinforced by the adoption of the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative by the G7 in 2021, which also focuses on the development of infrastructure in low and middle-income countries. In a sense, the C5+1 complements the BDN and the B3W to form a comprehensive institutional framework that attempts to balance China's venture into Eurasia.

India complicates the situation in Central Asia by adding a long-time competitor of China and a long-time friend of Russia to the game. Due to India's strategic importance, Japan and the US also work with India in trying to balance China's influence. As an independent actor though, India has its own national interests in Central Asia that do not necessarily overlap with other interested parties. In June 2012, India, along with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, jointly held the inaugural India-Central Asia Dialogue that seeks to initiate interaction and cooperation among the participating states (Sachdeva, 2022). Since then, while the I+C5 meeting is not held annually, in December 2021, the Third India-Central Asia Dialogue was held in New Delhi and soon after, in January 2022, the first I+C5 Summit was held online. Both events suggest India's increased interest in engaging Central Asia. On another note, in addition to China and Russia, India is the only other country that has SCO membership while cooperating with Central Asia in a parallel institution. Sitting beside Afghanistan and Pakistan, India also has concerns about potential terrorist challenges. In light of possible paradoxes that may arise between Moscow and Beijing, New Delhi may provide an alternative for Central Asian countries to cooperate with.

The New Great Game is largely completed by Russia, which made its presence in Central Asia known as early as the 19th century and continues to occupy a dominant role in the region, particularly concerning security and geopolitics. In addition to the SCO, which was co-founded by Russia in 2001, Moscow had established partnerships with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan through the founding of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 1992. Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the CSTO in 2012 left the organization with three members from Central Asia, along with Armenia, Belarus, and Russia. While the CSTO focuses on security affairs

and overlaps with the SCO to some degree, nonetheless, in terms of its membership, the organization is similar to a “C3+1 plus 2” with the potential to expand into a platform that hosts discussions on concerns besides security. It is also important to note that Russia is the only major power with membership in both the CSTO and SCO, which demonstrates the dominant role that Moscow plays in regional security. Geographic proximity, cultural and historical ties with Central Asia, as well as a strong security role, all provide Russia with unmatched advantages that other contending powers can only try to equate through the provision of economic benefits

CONCLUSION: THE PROSPECTS OF CHINA-CENTRAL ASIA COOPERATION

Observing the increased interest in Central Asia in recent years, a development that is partly driven by the BRI among other things, China-Central Asia Cooperation can be expected to accumulate significance in the near future. While the New Great Game would bring about new strategic challenges for China in Central Asia and beyond, the fact that China sits beside Central Asia provides it with an unparalleled geopolitical advantage compared with other actors from outside the region. Meanwhile, Moscow’s occupation with Ukraine encourages the Central Asian countries to seek economic cooperation with other partners, preferably one that is economically strong. Without the distraction of war, China seems like a strong contender for influence in Central Asia, and the C+C5 may be the first step towards further cooperation and integration.

Nonetheless, three challenges may hinder the continued success of the C+C5. First, in light of the Russo-Ukrainian War, some observers point out that Central Asian countries have become warier of regional security and the growing influence of external actors, which has in turn prompted the countries to adopt a balance of power strategy towards China among others. Such strategy complicates regional dynamics in the sense that through the established C5 plus platforms, the “Stan” countries can achieve “forum shopping,” or negotiate for the best interests of the region by dealing with interested parties in separate institutions. In this case, Central Asia’s rich oil reservoir translates into bargaining power for the host countries, and China, correspondingly, is among the many bidders with a high energy demand. It remains to be observed whether China will need to compete with other countries with a vested interest in the region over energy in the future.

Second, China may need to play a stronger security role in Central Asia if it seeks to continue to increase its influence in the region. Despite spearheading the establishment of the SCO in 2001 and performing joint anti-terrorist exercises with other member states over the years, China has yet to take up an important security role in Central Asia. Such was evident from the intervention of Russia in Kazakhstan’s domestic unrest in January 2022 through the CSTO mechanism. The intervention goes against some beliefs that China is replacing Russia as the dominant power in the region. It is also worth noting that China does not have a strong tradition of intervention, which becomes somewhat problematic in light of China’s rise to great power status. A sign of

global leadership and status comes from a country's ability to intervene in situations that challenge peace and stability. Hence by distancing itself from conflict intervention, China risks achieving leadership in Central Asia. The C+C5 offers a platform for China to communicate with its neighbors to the West over security cooperation and the opportunity to play a greater role in regional security.

Third, the success of China-Central Asia Cooperation is hinged on the performance of the Chinese economy. Should economic growth continue, China would be in a better position to carry out cooperation with its Central Asian partners, particularly through the BRI, which demands incessant investment from Beijing. The C+C5 is a platform that can be used to advance economic cooperation among the member states, which may in turn increase China's influence in Central Asia. If a slowdown or stagnation sets in for the Chinese economy – as was the worry during the COVID-19 pandemic – China may become more limited in terms of the resources it can put towards development projects in Central Asia. As the US, Japan, and other players pursue further cooperation with Central Asia, an economically less energetic China may find itself in competition with actors that could gain a stronger footing in the region, whether through the provision of official development assistance or project financing. In essence, the New Great Game is not only geopolitical but also institutional and economic.

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