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The Central Asian states are stepping up their game

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan show new self-confidence in world politics — and attract the interest of other powers

Every year in September, country leaders and delegates from all over the world gather at the United Nations headquarters in New York to debate the most pressing issues of our times. The appearances and speeches of the heads of state or government before the UN General Assembly are followed especially closely. This year, a top-level meeting on the margins of the general debate particularly caught the eye. For the first time, a US President met with the heads of state of five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – a 'historical moment', according to Joe Biden. Even though the dialogue format C5+1 has existed between the US and Central Asia since 2015, meetings had, until now, taken place at the foreign minister level. The summit in New York can certainly be viewed as a sign of the upgrading of the region in US foreign policy.

The priorities specified by Biden include, among other things, cooperation with the Central Asian countries in the fight against terrorism and its financing. In addition, Washington wishes to expand its economic cooperation with the region, via the exploitation of natural resources and renewable energy, as well as the establishment of a C5+1 dialogue on critical minerals, to guarantee long-term energy security and supply chains. China is currently the most important source of imports for 26 of the 50 minerals that have been classified by the US government as critical, including lithium, cobalt and nickel, while uranium comes predominantly from Russia. The US is clearly looking for ways to diminish its reliance on China and Russia for the supply of critical raw materials and regards Central Asia as an alternative.

Greater interest in the region

This significant interest in Central Asian countries is, however, a development that is not only limited to the US administration. Since the

Russian invasion of Ukraine, the five countries in the region have, to differing extents, been enjoying the international limelight, behind which geopolitical motives often lurk. Several regional and extra-regional players have been playing a greater role in the area since the start of 2022, not least in the form of various C5+1 summits.

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On 18 and 19 May this year, the first C5+1 summit took place between China and the five Central Asian countries in Xi'an, attracting much international interest. China presented a *Grand Development Plan*, which was to offer the country alternative routes for the transport of raw materials, food products and other goods via a network of trade corridors. Beijing also declared its commitment to the cause of regional security and its readiness to support Central Asia's efforts in fighting terrorism. Within the context of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative that was announced in Kazakhstan in 2013, the agreements concluded by the parties included the completion of the railway line linking China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and the start of the China-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan motorway construction. In the current situation, China sees the possibility of counter-balancing Russia economically in the region. As a result of the latter's focus on the war in Ukraine, however, it is also trying to assume the role of a security policy guarantor that had previously been reserved for Russia.

India had pre-empted China's diplomatic policy and already initiated a virtual C5+1 meeting in January 2022. In a common declaration, the participants invoked the age-old civilisational traditions and trade links, and agreed, among other things, to cooperate more closely in the fields of infrastructure, healthcare, education, technology and bank lending. China's interaction with the region has, however, until now been clearly more substantive and advanced.

In addition to existing formats such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Russia also launched a new dialogue format with the countries of Central Asia in 2022 — the Russia

and Central Asia Summit. The first meeting took place upon Moscow's initiative in Kazakhstan's capital Astana on 14 October 2022. The Russian delegation emphasised that Moscow wants to maintain its presence in the region: they do not regard Europe and the US as long-term partners. 'But in Central Asia and the Caucasus, they listen to us, which is a good thing, even though we understand that a pragmatic approach prevails in both regions.'

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One new development is the formalisation of interregional cooperation between the countries of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. This agreement was finalised at the first summit between the Arab monarchies and Central Asia that took place in Saudi Arabia on 19 July 2023, with regional Islamic unity also being a clear focus. The participants agreed on a *Plan of Cooperation 2023-2027* that encompasses political and security policy dialogue and cooperation in the fields of business and investment.

The summit between the EU and Central Asia at Cholpon Ata in Kyrgyzstan also took place in July. On the table were matters relating to cooperation in the fields of business, trade, technology transfer and mutual investments, as well as digital connectivity. The fact that the EU intends to employ diplomatic means to convince Central Asian countries to comply with the sanctions imposed on Russia, rather than penalise them for failing to abide by them, demonstrates the importance that the EU currently attributes to visibility in this region.

A further C5+1 meeting has been planned for 29 September 2023 in Berlin, this time between German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the five Central Asian heads of state. The topics referred to above are expected to be further discussed.

Growing more and more autonomous

The Central Asian countries are using the current geopolitical changes to transform their relative isolation into a strategic advantage. For decades, they have been conducting an extremely balanced foreign policy and were able to find the right equilibrium in relationships with their powerful neighbours China and Russia, as well as with Europe, the United States and Turkey. Kazakhstan is pursuing a so-called multi-vector foreign policy; Uzbekistan describes its foreign policy principle as 'balanced equidistance' to existing and emerging global powerhouses;

Turkmenistan has committed itself to ongoing neutrality in a UN General Assembly Resolution from 12 December 1995. It is, however, only since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that the Central Asian countries have emerged as key players at the heart of international politics because they have skilfully applied their tried and tested equidistance approach during this conflict. For example, their representatives have abstained at all UN votes condemning Russian aggression or did not vote at all, as was the case with Turkmenistan. None of the five countries recognised the annexations of Ukrainian territory by Russia. They have also firmly resisted Russian attempts to recruit their citizens for the battle in Ukraine. At the same time, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were among the countries to admit the most people from Russia in 2022.

Regardless of whom the Central Asian countries meet in the C5+1 format, one aspect never changes: the representatives of all five countries sit at the same table and operate as a group – a development that has only been observed recently and is closely linked to Russia's war against Ukraine and the withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan.

Following the retreat from Afghanistan and the start of the Russian war against Ukraine, the Central Asian countries have themselves been increasingly playing the role of the regional stabiliser. Whereas, in the past, the region was a bridgehead for Western operations in Afghanistan and could count on Russia to guarantee its security, it now needs to handle security policy challenges largely on its own. For this reason, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev proposed the creation of a mechanism to allow representatives of the respective security councils to consult regularly on the development of common solutions to security threats.

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In the context of the war against Ukraine, the Central Asian countries have proven their growing autonomy by expanding their political, economic and security policy contacts without cutting their existing ties to Russia in any way. Instead of attempting to form an exclusive alliance with large regional or extra-regional players, their aim is to foster the regional integration that has been faltering for decades. The Fifth Consultation Meeting of the Central Asian heads of state on 19 September resulted in an agreement to intensify industrial cooperation and utilise the region's transit

potential efficiently. Furthermore, the agenda included regional cooperation in the area of climate policy, particularly in relation to the work of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), and also a gradual increase in the share of local currencies in regional trade coupled with a reduction of the trade in US dollars. Nonetheless, the geographical and socio-economic differences of the individual countries, as well as their exposure to Islamism and terrorism, continue to pose a significant challenge.

The five presidents' declared intention to resolve all regional issues exclusively by diplomatic means and to respect mutual interests is therefore of particular importance: it suggests that the countries wish to put aside their differences, regardless of whether these relate to border or water supply issues, and to represent the region as a single entity towards the outside world. A prime example of this is the fact that the largest country, Kazakhstan, and the most populous one, Uzbekistan, which had long been vying for regional supremacy, are now emphasising their strategic partnership and are working closely together within the framework of international and regional organisations, such as the UN and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Interaction between the Central Asian countries is taking on a new dimension, with the aim of strengthening peace and security in the region and beyond, as well as participating in the design of the global security architecture on an equal footing. Of particular note in this regard is the offer extended by Kazakhstan's President Tokayev before the UN General Assembly to actively promote dialogue between the Global North and the Global South. The challenge for Central Asian countries lies in participating in global political processes without getting embroiled in geopolitical power games. If they succeed in this, the region has the potential to establish itself as a middle-sized power in global politics and to help shape the international order.

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