

**Intersecting Strategies:  
A Comparative Analysis of the BRI, C5+1 and Eurasian Economic Union in Central Asia**

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**Abstract:**

This paper explains that although the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and C5+1 frameworks are frequently portrayed as rival geopolitical projects in the region, in reality, all of them reproduce asymmetric power relations that constrain the strategic autonomy of regional state. This study employs a comparative qualitative research design and relies both primary and secondary sources to examine the BRI, EAEU and the C5+1 framework as rival but overlapping systems of external impact on Central Asia. By applying a comparative institutional and geo-economic approach, the paper reveals that China through its infrastructure driven financing, Russia through its regulatory assimilation and the United States through its governance-based diplomacy represents distinct but complementary mechanisms of external influence. Although the governments of Central Asia use multi-vector diplomacy to multiply partners and maximize the benefits, the given strategy is mostly used within the frames of structural constraints imposed by external forces. The results indicate that multi-vectorism functions less as a route to actual regional empowerment and more as an adaptive survival strategy within a disintegrated Eurasian order.

**Key Words:** Central Asian Republics, Belt and Road Initiative, Eurasian Economic Union, C5+1, intersecting strategies, asymmetric power relations, strategic autonomy

**INTRODUCTION**

Central Asia occupies a strategic geopolitical position at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, South Asia and East Asia and is therefore among the most disputed regions in the contemporary international system (Masharipov & Khasanov, 2025). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were left with weak economies, inadequate infrastructure and limited integrated into the international markets. These vulnerabilities created structural gaps that enabled external powers to influence the political economy of the region using economic, institutional and diplomatic resources (Jash et al., 2024).

Over the past decade, the strategic environment in Central Asia has been dominated by three large external structures, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) of Russia and the C5+1 diplomatic platform of the United States. Each initiative

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reflects the model of international influence. The BRI prioritizes infrastructural funding and connectivity; the EAEU institutionalizes regulatory integration and labour mobility; and C5+1 encourages governance reform, security cooperation and diplomatic interaction (Laruelle, 2020). Although these initiatives have been studied individually, they increasingly overlap and interact within the same political and economic arenas.

This paper proceeds from the premise that despite such initiatives seem to provide Central Asian states a range of strategic choices, they ultimately produce structural dependency rather than true autonomy (Kuzmina, 2020). Multi-vector diplomacy, often viewed as a sign of emerging regional agency, operates within asymmetrical power relationships that constrain policy independence. The governments of Central Asia can diversify external partners, but their room for maneuver remains limited by the external financial leverage, regulatory structures and security dependencies.

The article contributes to the existing body of knowledge as it provides a comparative study of the BRI, EAEU and C5+1 within a single analytical framework. Instead of analyzing these initiatives as a stand-alone project, the paper examines the interaction between them and how it redefines the regional order (US Department of State, 2023). The article argues that Central Asia is less an emerging autonomous center than a negotiated periphery embedded within competing external systems of power, shaped through institutional designs, geo-economic mechanisms and strategic outcomes.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature of the external engagement in Central Asia can be largely divided into three overlapping strands i.e. studies of the Belt and Road Initiative, analyses of the Eurasian Economic Union and the research on C5+1 framework. The available literature is still too divided and not comparative enough even though the different bodies of scholarship provide considerable information (Laruelle, 2021).

To a considerable extent, scholarship on the Belt and Road Initiative conceptualizes it as both development project and a geo-economic strategy. According to Rolland (2017) and Summers (2016), BRI constitutes a grand strategy designed to reposition China at the center of a reconfigured Eurasian order. Rather than simply enhancing connectivity, BRI can be defined as a tool of state-controlled capitalism aimed at exporting excess capacity in industries, expanding control over energy flows (Karrar, 2019) and gaining a greater political presence in China. Critics highlight the risks of debt dependence and political leverage, especially in the economically fragile states (Hillman, 2020; Rolland, 2019). Focusing on the Central Asian context, Laruelle (2018; 2020) contends that while BRI aligns with the domestic development agendas, it may also deepen long-term dependence on Chinese capital and technology in the long term.

The Eurasian Economic Union literature is generally more skeptical on its integrative potential. According to Dragneva and Wolczuk (2017; 2018), the EAEU is a kind of a hegemonic regionalism, where informal supranationalism conceals the excessively powerful role of Russia (Taliga, 2021). Even though EAEU is claimed to be associated with free movement of goods, labour and capital, Eurasia-based empirical research indicates that the integration is not balanced and politically limited (Libman, 2020). Researchers emphasize the tendency of regulatory harmonization to

restrict the policy sovereignty of smaller member states and concentrate Russia structural dominance (Laruelle, 2021; Roberts, 2018).

The studies of C5+1 framework remain relatively scarce, although the body of scholarship is growing. Nichol (2016) and Cooley (2019) conceptualize C5+1 as a soft balancing process in the context of which the United States achieves strategic relevance at a lower cost than Chinese or Russian involvement. Compared to BRI or EAEU, C5+1 is more based on normative power, governance reforms and security cooperation (Cornell, 2020). However, its material influence remains limited due to scanty funding and lack of institutionalized binding structures (Taliga, 2021).

New comparative scholarship has begun to connect these literatures. Kaczmarski (2017) and Laruelle (2021) claim that BRI and EAEU are incompatible visions of Eurasian order, but coexist in the pragmatic form of accommodation. Peyrouse (2023) further states that C5+1 offers a third axis that complicates Sino-Russian dominance more difficult, as there are diplomatic options. Nevertheless, the interaction of all three frameworks within a shared regional context is rarely studied in a systematic manner.

The article differs with the available literature by rejecting the hypothesis that a multiplicity of partnerships is an indispensable requirement to the regional autonomy (Dadabaev, 2018). Rather, it advances a structural interpretation where BRI, EAEU and C5+1 functions as various forms of external control that have the effect of restricting the strategic space of Central Asian states.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a comparative qualitative research design to examine the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the C5+1 framework as rival but overlapping systems of external impact on Central Asia. The data used in the analysis are organized in five analysis dimensions: strategic intent, institutional depth and governance, financial scale and economic instruments, geopolitical and security implications and, patterns of overlap and conflict. These dimensions enable the study to go beyond the level of describing the situation surface and rather, examining the exercise of various types of power, including economic, regulatory and diplomatic ones at the regional level.

The study is based on two types of sources. Primary sources comprise official policy papers, government approaches, institutional reports and proclamations made by Chinese, Russian, U.S. and Central Asian administration. The secondary sources include scholarly articles, monographs and policy analysis published by large think tanks and international organizations.

The methodological goal is not to evaluate the success or failure of individual initiatives but to assess the manner in which Central Asian states maneuver through structurally unequal external systems. The comparative paradigm thus favors interpretation over prediction and focuses on power relations, institutional asymmetries and strategic outcomes.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study employs a hybrid theoretical framework that combines institutionalism, geo-economic statecraft and regionalism theory to examine BRI, EAEU and C5+1 interaction in Central Asia. This

stratified system of analysis enables the analysis of both the formal systems and the power relations.

The institutionalism framework provides foundation for assessing how each initiative structures political and economic behaviour. EAEU is a high-institutionalization model, which is marked by binding legal systems, supranational regulators and legal dispute institutions (Masharipov & Khasanov, 2025). BRI on the other hand is not a centralized system of bilateral agreements, investment projects and strategic memoranda and does not have a single institutional authority. The C5+1 framework takes a middle ground, as it is based on informal means of coordination without legal rules. According to an institutionalist view these differences define the degree at which states in Central Asia forfeit their sovereignty in favor of accessibility and cooperation.

Geo-economic statecraft constitutes the second level of analysis that looks at the use of economic instruments to attain strategic goals (Cooley & Laruelle, 2022). China's model of development-oriented state capitalism operates through infrastructure financing, concessional loans and policy-bank investments with the objective of transforming connectivity within the region (World Bank, 2019). Russia's approach relies more heavily on regulatory integration, labour mobility and energy interdependence, which is based on post-Soviet structural linkages. The US, on the other hand, focuses on governance support, security collaboration as well as institutional change as means of indirect power. These models are unique processes by which economic might is changed into political capital.

The last analytical dimension draws on regionalism theory to explain how Central Asian states respond to the external pressure (Libman & Vinokurov, 2018). The concept of multi-vector foreign policy emphasizes the idea of planned diversification policies pursued by states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in order not to be over-reliant on any one external force (Schatz, 2019). Nevertheless, this paper cautions against overly optimistic interpretations of multi-vectorism. Instead of being actual autonomy, here regional agency is theorized as asymmetric structural adaptation under the condition of constricted adaptation.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives allow the article to get beyond simplistic accounts of rivalry or collaboration. Rather, they uncover the role of BRI, EAEU and C5+1 as interdependent structures of power that create policy space and at the same time, dependency.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE THREE INITIATIVES**

The paper examines the BRI, the EAEU and the C5+1 model not merely as policy programmes, but as specific models of external power projection (Kassenova, 2017). Rather than tracing their institutional histories the analysis focuses on how each initiative entraps Central Asia within broader strategic systems.

### **The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

The Belt and Road Initiative is the largest and the most financially prominent foreign intervention in the Central Asia. Proclaimed in 2013 during Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan, the BRI aims to coordinate the restructuring of the connection between Eurasia in terms of transport corridors, energy networks, digital infrastructure and logistics centers (Clarke, 2017). Even though this is

occasionally presented as a development project, BRI is more accurately characterized as a form of geo-economic statecraft that is designed to transform the politics of the region economy.

Central Asian flagship projects, like the China-Central Asia gas pipelines, the Khorgos dry port and transnational railway corridors, make the region an important transit area in the global supply chains of China. These projects give physical advantages in terms of connectivity and modernisation of infrastructure. Finance mechanisms however are dependent on Chinese policy banks which include the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China which establish long-term financial commitments to recipient states.

Structurally, BRI brings the economies of Central Asia into Chinese-centered production and trade systems (Peyrouse, 2017). Host governments still have formal sovereignty, although their choice of projects, terms of financing and the manner of implementation are highly influenced by the Chinese strategic priorities. This gives rise to what can be said to be asymmetric interdependence where economic integration is widened but the bargaining power remains distributed unevenly.

### **The Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU)**

The Eurasian Economic Union represents a contrasting model of external influence, grounded in regulatory and institutional integration. The EEAU was established in 2015 to formalize economic relations between Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Armenia through common customs regimes, technical standards and labour mobility schemes.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan hold the strategic positions in the EEAU, in Central Asia. The membership opens up Russian labour market and eliminates internal trade barriers, which yields short-term economic returns. Nonetheless, institutional regulations also limit policy autonomy among the domestic policymakers by aligning tariffs, regulations and trade policies within frameworks and agreements that are agreed upon collectively and to a large extent under the influence of Russia.

The EEAU is structured on the concept of integration as opposed to the BRI project-based approach, which transforms domestic institutions and regulatory regimes (Sengupta, 2021). Despite being described as multilateral union; empirical evidence indicates persistent asymmetries in the decision-making power. Smaller member states have constrained power to set the agenda whereas Russia exercises unequal power in terms of setting the strategic direction. Consequently, the membership of EEAU not only stabilizes the economic relations but also institutionalizes the reliance on the Russian markets, labour regimes and security frameworks.

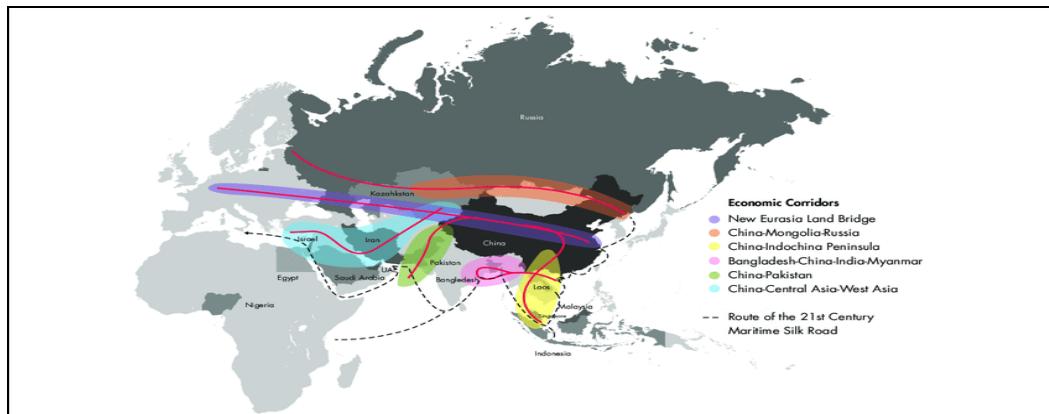
### **The C5+1 Framework**

The C5+1 model represents a markedly different form of external interaction, where diplomatic coordination and normative power are utilized. It was launched in 2015 and offers a framework of collaboration between the United States and five Central Asian states on such matters as security, governance, climate resilience and economic reform (Putz, 2020).

In contrast to BRI and EEAU, C5+1 lacks both a centralized financial mechanism and binding institutional structures in place. It conducts its operations mainly through the U.S government agencies like the State Department and the USAID, in terms of capacity-building, training programmes and institutional reform.

C5+1 also functions as a strategy of soft balancing that keeps the United States in the region without the necessity to compete on a massive scale in terms of infrastructure rivalry. Its symbolic and diplomatic significance is substantial, even though its material presence is small (Popescu, 2014). It provides governments of central Asia with a means of diversifying foreign relationships and indicating that they are no longer dependent on Sino-Russian domination.

Nevertheless, the C5+1 cannot be as transformative because of the lack of substantial financial leverage. Security cooperation and governance assistance increase institutional capacity, but has no effect on underlying economic dependencies. At the same time, the C5+1 framework does not necessarily seek to reconfigure the region's economic or institutional architecture, its core function is to expand the diplomatic space and coordination.



**Figure 1** MAP Image of major BRI corridors, EAEU member states, and C5+1 cooperation nodes across Central Asia.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This section provides a comparative analysis of BRI, EAEU and C5 +1 across five dimensions of analysis: strategic intent, institutional depth, economic instruments, geopolitical implications and patterns of overlap (Yu, 2022). This analysis reveals that despite variations in the form and scope of these initiatives, these initiatives are all united towards a consistent reinforcement of asymmetric power relations that limits the autonomy of Central Asia.

### *Strategic Intent*

The strategic intent of each initiative reflects the broader positioning of their sponsor on the global scale. The BRI of China is provided by the purpose to unify the connectivity across Eurasia under the economic leadership of China, ensuring supply chains, exporting industrial capacity, as well as reducing the overproduction in the country. The EAEU of Russia attempts to maintain a post-Soviet influence by institutionalizing economic dependence and avoiding geopolitical disintegration of its near abroad. The C5+1 of the United States is determined to be relevant in the region without incurring the financial expense involved with the large-scale infrastructure competition in its efforts at pursuing diplomatic interactions (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017).

Although these strategies may seem opposing, they all come together in the important fact that all three of them prioritize external interests before the empowerment of the region. Participation can yield benefits for Central Asian states, but the strategic architecture of these frameworks is not

intended to promote their regional leadership to be independent. Rather, both frameworks allow the region to be a target of action, instead of a generator of strategic action.

### ***Institutional Depth and Governance***

A key point of divergence the three initiatives lies in their institutional design. The EAEU is the most institutionalized, with agreements that are legally binding, supranational regulatory bodies and dispute settlement mechanisms. This institutional depth provides predictability and integration, but it can also limit domestic policy flexibility.

Conversely, BRI operates through a decentralized and bilateral system. Although this flexibility enables host governments to bargain on specific terms of the project, it also breaks accountability and makes it prone to external pressure. The governance structures are still not transparent and there is not much transparency in terms of financing conditions and long-term commitments (Rolland, 2019).

C5+1, in its turn, lacks binding institutional power whatsoever. It has relatively loose coordination systems that enable diplomatic inclusiveness but restrict enforceability and long-term sustainability. A lack of formal governance systems implies that collaboration is superficial and very reliant on the political priority changes in Washington.

All these institutional models, in aggregate, present a trade-off between depth and autonomy: the more the framework is institutionalized, the more losses are suffered in terms of policy autonomy.

### ***Financial Scale, Trade Dynamics and Economic Instruments***

Among the three initiatives, BRI vastly leads in the financial basis. Chinese investment in Central Asia exceeds that of Russia and the United States on their own especially in the infrastructure and energy projects. Nevertheless, the size of the finances does not correlate to the economic empowerment. BRI financing is not based on grants, but heavily on sovereign loans, which puts a country in more debt exposure and reduces its fiscal sovereignty.

EAEU does not affect regional economies by capital flows, but instead by harmonizing the regulation and integrating the labour market (Kassenova, 2017). On the one hand, this makes it easier to access markets and remittance flows but on the other hand, it traps it in its dependency on Russian labour markets and system of trade.

C5+1 has minimum direct investment, but it is concerned with governance and technical support. Whilst these programmes may increase capacity within institutions, they lack the economic size to counter structural dependence generated by the Chinese and Russian involvement.

Overall, the comparative evidence indicates that diversification of the economy has remained limited. The Central Asian economies continue to operate within externally regulated financial and regulatory frameworks.

### ***Geopolitical and Security Implications***

Geopolitically, the BRI functions primarily as a strategic facilitator rather than a formal security system geopolitically. Even though it lacks formal military pledges, its infrastructural networks enhance the long-term strategic presence of China.

The EAEU, by contrast, works in co-operation with the security structure of Russia, especially the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Masharipov & Khasanov, 2025). The interdependence of the economies and security strengthens each other, restricting the strategic options of the member states to redefine their ways.

The C5+1 has a focus on counterterrorism and procession of the border, as well as regional stability, yet it does not have the coercive power to match the influence of Russia or China. It plays an advisory role in its security rather than a structural role.

Such dynamics create a stratified security space where Central Asian states remain reliant on Russia in terms of hard security, on China for economic stability and on the US in terms of diplomatic balance.

### ***Overlapping and Conflicting Interests***

The situation involving BRI and EAEU explains the dynamics of intersecting external systems. The transport corridors supported by China work on the basis of the regulatory frameworks administered by Russia, which creates coordination problems and potential strategic tensions. Sino-Russian cooperation has so far grown theoretically; however, practical integration has not yet grown.

The C5+1 rarely generates direct conflict, but it can introduce normative tensions via encouraging sovereignty, governmental reform and diversification. Its existence makes the dominance of Sino-Russia harder but not completely destroys it (Yu, 2022).

These overlaps do not produce genuine multi-polarity, but managed competition, in which out-groups can live together without intervention of outside powers in structural hierarchies.

The comparative analysis shows that BRI, EAEU and C5+1 have various models of operations of the power, yet they are similar in the final result. Both frameworks increase specific opportunities, but each of them entails Central Asia more profoundly into the asymmetrical systems of control. Multi-vector diplomacy is thus a better tactical development which lacks strategic autonomy.

### **Country-Specific Perspectives**

Central Asia is not politically homogenous, and the involvement of each state in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the C5+1 platform is predetermined by domestic priorities, geopolitical limitations and economic structures. While all five republics seek to maintain the sovereignty and rake greatest rewards out of major external powers, their approaches vary significantly (Dadabaev, 2018). A country-by-country analysis therefore reveals how the national policies influence the relationship between the Chinese, the Russian and the American initiatives.

#### ***Kazakhstan***

Kazakhstan represents the most developed and active model of multi-vector foreign policy in Central Asia, a strategy initially developed by former President Nursultan Nazarbayev and later confirmed by the current president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Kazakhstan's aspiration to become a middle power in Eurasia drives its activity in EAEU, BRI and C5+1 at the same time. Being a founding member of the Eurasian Economic Union, Kazakhstan enjoys tariff-free access into the

Russian market, unified technical standards and free mobility of labor throughout the area. The benefits are particularly significant to the industries, which depend extensively on the export channels via Russia, including metallurgy, agriculture and manufacturing (Popescu, 2014).

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan constitutes a flagship corridor for the BRI. The vision of the Silk Road Economic Belt first was proclaimed in Astana in 2013, with the representation of the centrality of Kazakhstan in the continental connectivity of BRI. Significant infrastructural developments like the Khorgos International Centre of Boundary Cooperation, Khorgos-Almaty railway renovation and energy pipelines connecting western China with the Caspian region highlight the strategic importance that China gives to Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has partially aligned BRI financing with the national development strategy, Nurly Zhol, announced in 2014, which has allowed the country to modernise highways, logistics centres and energy plants.

Engagement with the United States through the C5+1 focuses on the governance reforms, renewable energy development, border management and climate resilience in Kazakhstan. Washington can support Russia in integrating its market, while China can do the same with its development, which is based on investments, which strengthens the multi-vector aspirations of Kazakhstan. Hence, the case of Kazakhstan is characterized by a strategy of maintaining a balance where no one party prevails in the external environment, so that the country can remain strategically independent.

### ***Uzbekistan***

The foreign policy of Uzbekistan has undergone a significant shift since 2016, when the country started to open more actively to the international community accompanied by the economic liberalization of the country under the new president Shavkat Mirziyoyev has altered the situation in the region. Uzbekistan has been historically isolationist in the times of President Islam Karimov but is now a dynamic player in BRI and C5+1, however, it is hesitant about joining the EAEU. Its hesitation to join the Russian-led bloc reflects concerns about losing flexibility over tariff policy, ability to control its economic sovereignty and external trade policy (Cooley & Laruelle, 2022).

However, Uzbekistan is a cooperating member of the EAEU by the observer status and the sectoral agreements. The Uzbek migrant remittances to Russia continue to play a crucial role in supporting the household incomes and domestic consumption forcing Tashkent to adopt a pragmatic stance with Moscow.

The Chinese activity in Uzbekistan has been increasing very fast especially in terms of energy infrastructure, modernization of Angren-Pap railway tunnel and industrial work in the free economic zone of Navoi and Jizzakh. To Uzbekistan, BRI is seen as a means of enhancing foreign direct investment, enhancing transportation connectivity and other energy supply routes. Simultaneously, Uzbekistan attaches importance to C5+1 as it contributes to education, institutional reform, border control and economic modernization, areas in which U.S. can complement rather than directly compete with Chinese and Russian policies.

The growing strategic agency of the states of the Central Asian region can be exemplified by the "middle-ground" status of Uzbekistan who decided to involve all major powers, but not to permanent alignment.

### ***Kyrgyzstan***

Kyrgyzstan has a totally different picture, which is defined by its economic weaknesses, political instability and structural reliance. Being one of the poorest states in the region, the accession of Kyrgyzstan to the EAEU is much more motivated by the necessity to gain entry into the Russian labor market. The remittances make a relatively large portion of its GDP and the free movement of labor in the EAEU ensures the security of the rights of migrant workers and minimizes the transaction costs (Putz, 2020).

At the same time, Kyrgyzstan is highly exposed to Chinese development financing. Some of the key BRI projects encompass the power plant in Bishkek, several road upgrades and planned railway lines between China and Uzbekistan. Such investments have enhanced connectivity but have also added to the level of public debt, placing Kyrgyzstan among the most China-indebted countries in Central Asia. Sovereignty, transparency and sustainability of loans are domestic debates constantly produced by anxieties of the population about financial dependence on China (Dadabaev, 2018).

The third external engagement platform is the C5+1 which is mainly delivered via the support of governance, environmental programs and anti-corruption efforts. Considering the political unrests in Kyrgyzstan, such as revolutions in 2005, 2010 and 2020, U.S. support in institutional changes and strengthening the civil society has a specific worth.

Kyrgyzstan therefore finds itself in the crossroads of Russian security as well as labour market, exposure to Chinese capital and American governance participation.

### ***Tajikistan***

Tajikistan arguably exhibits the highest level of dependency on China in the region and more than half of the external public debt in the country is owed to Chinese creditors. The biggest contributor to investments in Tajikistan has been China, through BRI projects which have changed the road systems, hydro power and mining industry of the country. Dushanbe-Kulma highway and various hydropower plants have enhanced the connectivity and power production of Tajikistan and further this is backed by the long-term goal of the country to become a regional exporter of electricity (Laruelle, 2020).

Despite this substantial Chinese presence, Tajikistan is still bound to Russia with security facilities and labour migration. Tajikistan as a member of the CSTO is dependent on Russian military force to defend a very long border with Afghanistan. The household incomes are still stabilized by Tajik remittances in Russia.

The Tajikistan's engagement in C5+1 framework is focused on security collaboration, counterterrorism and border control. Even though the level of U.S investments is not high, it all helps in boosting the institutional capability of Tajikistan particularly in regards to transnational security issues.

### ***Turkmenistan***

The external interactions of Turkmenistan are influenced primarily by the self-proclaimed neutrality rather than any binding ties or organization. Even though it is neither a core member of the EAEU nor a core member of C5+1, Turkmenistan is of critical importance to BRI because of its

huge reserves of natural gas and pipeline networks. China depends heavily on Turkmenistan to supply the majority of Chinese gas imported in the country, which is supplied by the China-Turkmenistan gas pipeline that has been operational since 2009, providing over half of the imported Central Asian gas into China (US Department of State, 2023).

The foreign policy of Turkmenistan is conservative, which does not allow engaging in close political or economic relations with Russia or the United States. It however interacts selectively with all external actors in order to enhance energy exports, market diversification and regime stability. In this context, BRI offers a commercial route that does not have regulatory or political strings attached, aligning with the Turkmenistan's propensity towards low-commitment partnerships.

**Table 1.** Comparative Participation of Central Asian States in BRI, EAEU, and C5+1

Country	BRI Participation	EAEU Status	C5+1 Engagement	Notes
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Major BRI hub; key rail corridors; Khorgos dry port.	Full member since 2015.	Active participant.	Multi-vector diplomacy; aligns BRI with <i>Nurly Zhol</i> .
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Expanding BRI projects in transport and energy.	Observer; not a member.	Highly active.	Diversifies to avoid dependence on any single partner.
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	Heavy BRI infrastructure borrowing.	Full member.	Moderate participation.	Relies on China for loans and Russia for remittances.
<b>Tajikistan</b>	High reliance on BRI for hydropower and roads.	Not a member.	Mainly security-focused.	China is largest creditor; Russia key for labor income.
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	Gas pipelines central to BRI energy routes.	Not a member.	Minimal involvement.	Neutrality limits cooperation depth; China main gas buyer.

## DISCUSSION

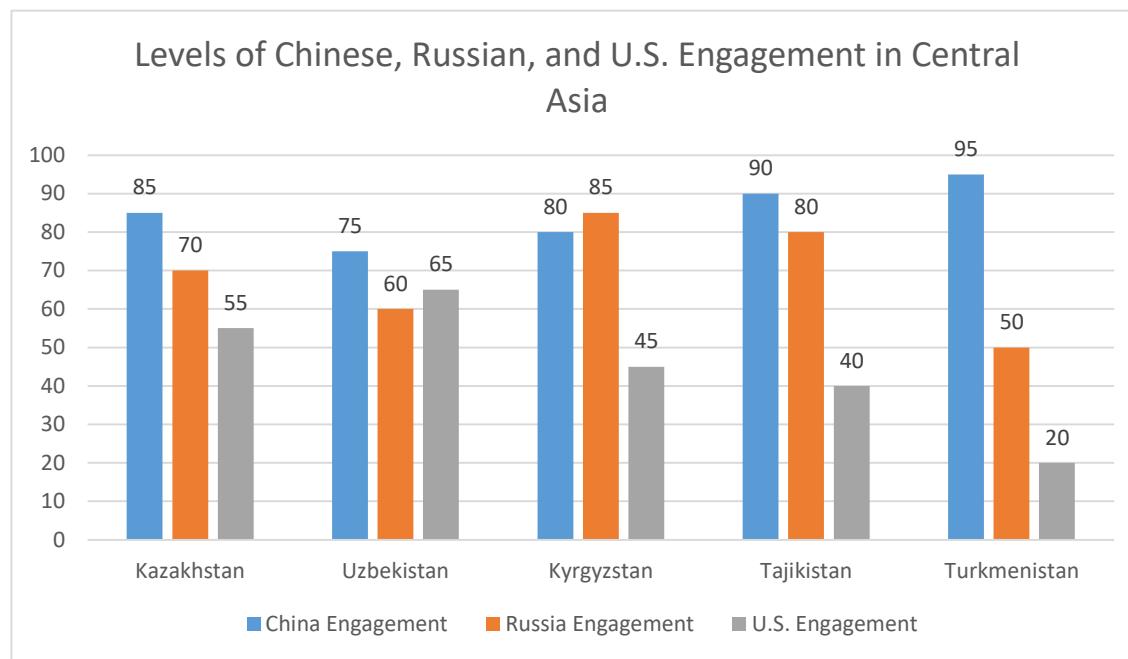
As the comparative analysis suggests, BRI, EAEU and C5+1 exist within a complicated competitive-cooperative environment in which their functions overlap without being completely converging. The BRI of China prevails in the sphere of infrastructure construction and capital investment and the EAEU of Russia provides institutionalized economic integration that is based on the mobility of labor and shared tariff regimes. U.S. led C5+1 platform makes its input in the form of governance reforms, climate programs and security programs that enhance the capacity of the state, but without making them hold huge financial responsibilities (US Department of State, 2023).

These various mechanisms have been leveraged by central Asian states to pursue their own strategic interests through multi-vector diplomacy. This selective alignment as seen by Russia in the infrastructure policies, China in labor and security policies and the United States in governance and diversification policies has allowed the governments of the region to gain maximum benefits with minimum dependency (Laruelle, 2020). There are however costs associated with this strategic diversification. Clashing regulatory demands, conflicting geo-political forces and conflicting economic engagements at times can cause tensions, such as the case of Kazakhstan navigating

between the EAEU standards and hosting key BRI routes, or the Kyrgyz government between Chinese debt obligations and Russian labor-market dependency (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017).

The future of Eurasian regionalism may evolve along several plausible trajectories. The first scenario is known as “competitive co-existence” where the three initiatives exist in their own spheres of influence and the Central Asian states still have to balance between them. Instead, there is a possibility of partial convergence, especially between BRI and EAEU, within wider visions of the likes of China in its Community of Common Destiny or Russia in its Greater Eurasian Partnership (Sengupta, 2021). The third situation is fragmentation induced by a geopolitical crisis, which can be the escalated rivalry between the U.S and China, or the instability in the political regime in Russia.

In the medium term, the selective cooperation is still the most probable scenario because Central Asian states want to be autonomous, integrate regionally and have diversified foreign relations.



**Figure 2** Levels of Chinese, Russian and U.S. Engagement in Central Asia

## CONCLUSION

This article has presented a comparative analysis of the BRI, EAEU and C5+1 in Central Asia based on a wide range of interdisciplinary literature and incorporating the results of empirical research, tabular data and visual comparison. It demonstrates that these three structures are a manifestation of radically different strategic logic yet come together in their rivalry to dominate an area that is increasingly becoming a geopolitical hotspot. Their overlapping engagements have enabled central Asian states with the opportunities to pursue multi-vector foreign policies to increase autonomy and gain benefits off all three outside actors.

Despite the fact that BRI has not yet been able to match C5+1 in terms of financial scope and infrastructural coverage, the EAEU retains considerable institutional depth and regulatory power, and C5+1 offers desirable diplomatic and governance-oriented capabilities. They combine to form

an intricate network of opportunities and challenges that will still keep defining the Central Asian political economy decades down the line.

The article highlights the fact that Central Asia is not merely a passive arena of great-power competition. Instead, its states are becoming more influential in the strategic environment by selective participation, diversification and institutional balancing. The interplay between BRI, EAEU and C5+1 will remain a key variable in predicting the geopolitical and economic future of the region.

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