

II. International

China–Central Asia Summit Adds Momentum for World Development

by Marcia Merry Baker

May 19—China’s President Xi Jinping and the heads of state of the five Central Asian nations officially inaugurated the China-Central Asia Summit Mechanism on May 19, at the conclusion of their two-day meeting in historic Xi’an, in China’s northwest province of Shaanxi. The initiative is hailed by President Xi as being a new “platform” for economic development that “has world significance.” The summit itself was the first-ever in-person meeting of this kind in the 31 years of diplomatic relations among the six countries.

Attending were Shavkat Mirziyoyev, President of Uzbekistan; Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, President of Kazakhstan; Sadyr Japarov, President of Kyrgyzstan; Serdar Berdimuhamedov, President of Turkmenistan; and Emomali Rahmon, President of Tajikistan. They and Xi issued the “[Xi’an Declaration](#)” of the China-Central Asia Summit,” pledging cooperation in many specified areas, and agreeing to coordinate their respective national development strategies with the Belt and Road Initiative.

Having the meeting in Xi’an, a city going back 2,100 years and considered the eastern starting point of the ancient Silk Road, underscored the centuries of interaction among the peoples represented at the summit. President Xi moderated the proceedings personally and said in his keynote that, “Our gathering in Xi’an today to renew our millennia-old friendship, and open up new vistas for the future is of very important significance.”

Not mere rhetoric, this statement was backed up by the announcement of concrete priorities and projects

discussed and ratified during the May 19 group meeting, and during separate bilateral meetings held the day before by President Xi in official state visits with four of the Central Asian nations. Turkmenistan’s President Berdimuhamedov had already had a state visit to Beijing in January.

Crossroads, Then and Now

On the eve of the May 19 group meeting, Xi hosted a banquet with a welcoming ceremony at the Zi Yun



Host Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan pose with the presidents of the Central Asian nations and two of their wives in the first-ever China-Central Asia Summit, Xi’an, China, May 18-19, 2023.

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Pagoda, and a gala post-supper entertainment celebrating music, dance, and customs from Central Asia and ancient China. Even the menu, featuring the Shaanxi Burger, reflected the cuisine of the Silk Road. The next day the Presidents planted pomegranate trees, which had originally come to China from Central Asia.

Under the new Summit Mechanism, heads of state will meet every two years, with the next meeting set

for Kazakhstan in 2025. A secretariat will be set up in China. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry's May 19 statement announcing the Summit Mechanism,

The six countries agreed to promote in-depth cooperation across the board, with priorities given to transportation, trade, investment and industry, agriculture, energy, customs, and people-to-people exchanges.

The five central Asian nations that are today the geographic crossroads of Eurasia, were historically, as well, at the center of the ancient Silk Road. It was here in Kazakhstan in September 2013, that President Xi first announced the "Silk Road Economic Belt," as he recounted in his keynote. Soon thereafter, all five Central Asian nations signed on to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as it came to be called. The new Xi's announcements come atop projects and programs already activated through the BRI and before. Connectivity and energy have been in the forefront.

Foremost is the Khorgos Gateway Dryport, the rail hub on the China-Kazakhstan border, serving rail transit on the China-Europe Railway Express, connecting China, Central Asia, and Europe. An estimated 80% of all China-Europe overland freight travels through Central Asia. "They are the present-day camel caravans," Xi said. Other notable transportation projects include the 19.2 km rail Kamchiq Tunnel in Uzbekistan, opened in 2016, built by the China Railway Tunnel Group and Uzbek Railways.

In terms of energy, the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline has been operating since 2009, conveying Turkmenistan gas to 20 provinces in China, going through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, in a 2,277 mile set of three pipelines to Khorgos.

Grand New Projects

Among the many new projects identified are expansions of these existing infrastructure installations. In his [keynote](#), Xi gave specifics of eight features of what he described as the "new platform" created by



A view of the railway exchange station at the Khorgos Gateway in Kazakhstan, the largest dry port in the world, which connects Kazakhstan and China by rail. Shown, a heavy lifting crane transferring cargo between trains running on Russian Wide Gauge track and those running on Chinese Standard Gauge track.

the summit. Connectivity and energy were points three and four:

Third, we need to deepen connectivity. China will strive to increase the volume of cross-border transportation, support the development of the trans-Caspian international transport corridor, enhance the traffic capacity of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan highway and the China-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan highway, and move forward consultations on the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway. China will seek to modernize the existing border ports at a faster pace, open a new border port at Biedieli, promote the opening of the air transportation market, and build a regional logistics network. China will also step up the development of China-Europe Railway Express assembly center, encourage capable enterprises to build overseas warehouses in Central Asian countries, and build a comprehensive digital service platform.

Fourth, we need to expand energy cooperation. China would like to propose that we establish a China-Central Asia energy development partnership. We should expedite the construction of Line D [added to the three existing lines] of the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline, expand trade in oil and gas, pursue cooperation through-

out the energy industrial chains, and strengthen cooperation in new energy and peaceful use of nuclear energy.

The other six points are equally concrete. First, is “institution building,” to serve economic cooperation, and on May 19, the inaugural meeting of the China-Central Asia Business Council took place. Second, is expanding “trade ties.” Many measures are to be taken, such as “expedited customs clearance of agriculture and sideline products at border points.” The \$70 billion equivalent worth of China-Central Asian trade will reach new heights. Fifth, for “green innovation,” the intent is to—

conduct cooperation in such areas as improvement and utilization of saline-alkali land and water-saving irrigation, build together a joint laboratory on agriculture in arid lands, and tackle the ecological crisis of the Aral Sea.

The last three features of commitment for the new platform concern social and foreign relations objectives. Point Six is for “poverty reduction through science and technology.” There will be a grant of RMB 26 billion of support (approximately \$3.9 billion) “to set up more Luban Workshops [a vocational training program, named after Lu Ban, a woodcraft master who represents the Chinese tradition and spirit of craftsmanship —ed.] in Central Asian countries, and encourage Chinese companies in Central Asia to create more local jobs....” The seventh point addresses strengthening the “dialogue between civilizations.” China will continue to provide college study scholarships, and support Central Asian institutions joining the University Alliance of the Silk Road. Tourism, media, and other channels of interaction will get support.

Lastly, the eighth point commits to the “need to safeguard peace in the region,” for which China offers to help Central Asian nations in many ways, from law enforcement to cyber-security. Most importantly,

We will continue to leverage the role of the coor-

dination mechanism among Afghanistan’s neighbors, and jointly promote peace and reconstruction in Afghanistan.

Significance for Afghanistan

The growing prosperity of Central Asia is a direct benefit to the current condition and future prosperity of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), which, after 40 years of enforced strife and foreign occupation, is now suffering the impact of persisting sanctions, and of the United States and European collaborators seizing the nation’s national banking assets. In contrast, there is a critical, if limited, degree of economic, diplomatic and other engagement with Afghanistan from its neighbors—in trade, humanitarian aid, education, energy, and other areas—though none of the neighboring nations have yet formally recognized the Emirate.



Kabul Times

The Qush Tepa Canal under construction in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Scheduled for completion before 2026, the 285 km canal will irrigate 500,000 hectares, bringing food security, finally, to millions.

Kazakhstan, for example, is currently hosting 1,000 Afghanistan students, including women.

One infrastructure example is the flagship project for food security in Afghanistan, the Qush Tepa Canal. Its long-delayed construction started in 2022 by the IEA government in the northern Balkh province, and is moving ahead of schedule to be completed before 2026. Projected at 285 km in length, it is intended to irrigate over 500,000 hectares. Uzbekistan recently initiated the formation of a joint task force with Kabul on the project, to provide technical help for construction, to engineer the minimal loss of water in the final design, since the shared Amu Darya River flow is in short supply already, affecting Uzbekistan downstream. The new China-Central Asia “platform” aims to find agricultural

and water solutions for this ecological challenge.

Underneath the political boundaries, the social and physical geographic make-up of the entire Central and South Asian region and Afghanistan is a continuous map of shared resources of river basins, oil and gas fields, and geological features, and of complex ethnic diversities. The principle stated by Uzbek and many other Central Asian leaders is that dialogue and cooperative projects among them will provide mutual benefits, which is the basis for security and peace, and this includes Afghanistan.

A striking case of this approach is the desire by Uzbekistan for a Trans-Afghan Railway, running from its rail center Termez at the border, diagonally across Afghanistan, to Pakistan, and south to the Arabian Sea. Uzbekistan is the world's only landlocked nation (apart from Luxembourg) that must cross two nations to reach the sea.

Xi Jinping: Principles for a Shared Future

China's president explicitly presented, in his keynote, four principles for the "China-Central Asia community with a shared future," in terms he has stated for international relations at large.

First, mutual assistance. It is important to deepen strategic mutual trust, and always provide each other unequivocal and strong support on issues concerning core interests such as sovereignty, independence, national dignity, and long-term development.

Second, common development. He called for new drivers of growth in the Belt and Road Initiative, to un-



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China's President Xi Jinping delivers his keynote address to the China-Central Asia Summit, which he hailed as a new "platform" of "world significance" for economic development, May 19, 2023.

lock potentials for the Global Development Initiative.

Third, common security. Xi reiterated his call for acting on the "Global Security Initiative," to stand firm against interference in nations' domestic affairs and against attempts "to instigate color revolutions."

This and the prior points are very much in the same spirit as a [resolution](#) initiated by Turkmenistan in the UN General Assembly. Adopted July 28, 2022, it "Declares the region of Central Asia as a zone of peace, trust and cooperation."

The fourth principle in Xi's summit keynote was "everlasting friendship. It is important that we implement the Global Civilization Initiative, carry forward our traditional friendship, and enhance people-to-people exchanges."

Plans for special train routes for cultural tourism are in the works from China. Soon, China and Kazakhstan plan to open a new visa-free, 30-day tourist opportunity for their nationals. Uzbekistan began the program in 2018, for anyone over 55 from the United States. The Islam Karimov Tashkent Airport is already almost unable to handle the increased flow of travelers.



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Registan Square and the Ulugbek Madrasah Mosque, historical landmarks in the ancient city of Samarkand, in modern Uzbekistan, built by the Turkic-Mongolian leader, Timur (Tamerlane).