

# CENTRAL ASIAN FOREIGN POLICY MULTI-VECTORISM PAYS OFF

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'This pragmatic approach certainly pays off, as it provides the benefits of maintaining friendly ties with multiple players, including Russia' | Photo Credit: AFP

Between May 18 and 19, China hosted what was called the "C+C5 summit", in the city of Xi'an (the first of its kind), which saw the participation of the leaders of five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). The six countries then jointly signed the 'Xi'an Declaration' and issued a blueprint for the future development of China-Central Asia relations. In their discussions, the six countries focused on the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road cooperation to be a 'new starting point'. In focus also were people-to-people exchanges, a 'Cultural Silk Road' programme, and issues of regional terrorism and extremism.

Importantly, the [China-Central Asia Summit](#) mechanism was officially inaugurated, which paves the way for future biennial summits between these countries. The next summit will be held in Kazakhstan in 2025.

Some may view this summit as testament to an ever-expanding Chinese influence in the region, which poses a challenge to Russia's ambitions. Despite being a valid argument, it only partly reflects regional complexities and shifting dynamics. In 2022, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace said that in the same year, Russian President Vladimir Putin had held more than 50 meetings (both online and in person) with Central Asian leaders. The fact that all five Central Asian Presidents visited Moscow for the May 9 Victory Day parade indicates that these former Soviet republics intend to maintain balanced regional and international engagements.

To their credit, the Central Asian countries have been able to successfully implement a multi-vectorized foreign policy that stretches beyond the Russia-China axis. In the context of the post-Soviet states, this policy has been traditionally associated with their sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia, since it implies stronger economic and political ties with other centres of power.

Notably, in October last year, the European Council President Charles Michel visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, 'sending a strong political signal of the EU's commitment to the region and of the EU's wish to strengthen ties and bolster interregional cooperation'. In the same month, Mr. Michel also attended the first high-level meeting with the Central Asian leaders, that was held in Astana.

The basic parameter of Turkmenistan's foreign policy since its independence in 1991 has been the country's official status of 'neutrality'. After succeeding his father in 2022, Turkmenistan's new President, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, issued a statement, saying his country 'will continue the policy of neutrality based on good neighbourliness, equality and mutually beneficial cooperation with all the countries of the world'.

In the case of Uzbekistan, the main priority of its foreign policy is regional security in Central Asia, which includes the precarious environment in Afghanistan. Other priority directions cover relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member-states, Russia, China, the United States, the European Union (EU), Turkey, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam.

Economic and security concerns have been the decisive factor in formulating the foreign policy strategies of Kyrgyzstan in the post-independence era. After his election in 2021, Sadyr Japarov chose Russia for his first official visit as a new Kyrgyz President, an indication that Russia remains the main security partner for Bishkek, which hosts Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) troops at the Kant military airbase. In terms of multilateral engagement, Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, CSTO, and the Organization of Turkic States.

The foreign policy of Tajikistan is 'open doors' and a peace-seeking policy, indicating the 'country's readiness to build friendly relations with all countries and recognize shared interests based on reciprocal respect and equality'.

The brief overview of the foreign policy trajectories in Central Asia highlights their common characteristics, i.e., multi-vectorism. This pragmatic approach certainly pays off, as it provides the benefits of maintaining friendly ties with multiple players, including Russia.

In this sense, the Central Asian republics could serve as a relevant example for other post-Soviet countries, e.g., Georgia and Moldova. Their long-term aspirations for EU/North Atlantic Treaty Organization membership should not be fulfilled at the expense of workable relations with Russia. If anything, this prospective membership would hardly guarantee absolute security due to the spread of unconventional warfare, which is more difficult to detect and counter.

On May 21, tens of thousands of Moldovans rallied in the capital Chisinau to support the pro-western government policy. Moldova intends joining the EU by 2030 — which its President, Maia Sandu, describes as 'the chance for our people to live in peace and prosperity.'

Regardless of this 'pivot to West', 'belligerent' Russia will geographically remain where it is. Though Georgia and Moldova have legitimate reasons not to trust their neighbour, a multi-vectored foreign policy should be viewed as the only optimum solution for a lasting peace in the region. Anything short of this would perpetuate an unstable environment, with the constant threat of escalation and a greater sense of insecurity.

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