

C5+C SUMMIT: WHAT DOES IT TELL ABOUT CHINA AND ITS RELATIONS WITH CENTRAL ASIA? - 31.05.2023

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On May 18, 2023, China started its first-ever Central Asia Summit in the ancient city of Xian, the terminal of the ancient Silk Road. The leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan participated in this two-day Summit. The leaders of the Central Asian countries met one on one with Chinese President Xi Jinping on May 18 before the group discussions on May 19**[1].**

As mentioned by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, this event was the first diplomatic event that China has hosted this year**[2]**. This meeting, which coincided with the G7 Meeting in Hiroshima, Japan, was declared of milestone significance by the Chinese Officials**[3]**. This can be explained by the fact that China planned the two-day meeting in Xian to build influence in Central Asia.

There were many topics on economy in the Summit. First, the sides appreciated the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and expressed their readiness for its harmonization and alignment with the initiatives and national development strategies of the Central Asian countries. The economic projects and action plans that will be implemented between China and the Central Asian countries were among the prominent topics at the Xian Summit.**[4]**. In addition, the sides discussed ways of increasing trade quality, developing cooperation in instruction and sustainable development**.[5]**. Furthermore, the parties agreed to hold the Forum of Industrial and Investment

Cooperation, Central Asia-China regularly in order to increase the investments and encourage the expansion of industrial cooperation**[6]**. Moreover, the leaders of the Xian Summit discussed how to develop the Central Asia-China transport corridor, and they discussed constructing Kazakh-Chinese Ayaguz-Tachang Railway as well as modernizing other roads connecting China and Central Asia**[7]**. To that end, China agreed to give 3.7 billion dollars of financial support for development assistance in Central Asia.**[8]**.

Also, cooperation in energy and combatting climate crises were among the topics discussed at the Xian Summit. For instance, the sides declared in the Xian Declaration that they backed the creation of a partnership on energy development between China and Central Asia**.[9]**. Besides, the sides expressed their commitment to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement to combat climate change.**[10]**. It also called for closer cooperation in combatting the climate crisis and adopting green solutions by the parties**[11]**. Therefore, the parties appreciated the initiative to open a regional center for climate technologies in Central Asia**[12]**.

Security and stability issues were also on the agenda at the Xian Summit. The sides condemned all forms of terrorism, separatism and extremism and declared their support for combatting drug trafficking, transnational organized crime and cybercrime.**[13]**. Within this context, the parties signed the Samarkand Solidarity Initiative for Common Security and Prosperity**[14]**. The leaders stated their support for the peaceful formation of Afghanistan**[15]**.

During This meeting President Jinping told his Kyrgyz Counterpart that Beijing is willing to work with Kyrgyzstan in order to build a community of good neighborliness, friendship, shared prosperity and shared future on the Thursday meeting**[16]**. President Jinping also met with the leaders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and lauded the close ties between China and those countries, as well as stressing the necessity to intensify economic and cultural cooperation**[17]**. Moreover, Kazakhstan President Kassym Jomart Tokayev emphasized the unique scope of those meetings with China ahead of the Summit **[18]**.

The statements of the leaders at the Xian Meeting produces echoes. According to Jessica Washington, a reporter for Al Jazeera Newspaper, This is an opportunity to diversify economic prospects for many of them and the region as a whole."**[19]**. She added, China is already the largest trading partner, and they will be looking to expand upon opportunities-perhaps various visa and trade initiatives**.[20]**. It was commented that China is seeking to build a profile as the keeper of regional security in the region, including acting as a mediator in the Ukraine Conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Furthermore, it is commented that Central Asian countries are essential for China as they represent potential allies in forums like the UN.**[21]**. Central Asia is also seen as a buffer for China against the security threats from Afghanistan.**[22]**.

The Central Asian countries have been vital partners for Beijing.**[23]**. In 2013, China declared that it had started its trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Kazakhstan, and it has spent billions of dollars on transportation and infrastructure in Central Asia; since then.**[24]**. In addition to this, it is worth remembering that China is the largest

trading partner in Central Asia**[25]**. The trade between China and Central Asian countries was 70 billion dollars, including 31 billion dollars with Kazakhstan alone**[26]**. It is assumed that this year will be indifferent since China and Central Asian Countries have conducted 24.8 billion dollars already**[27]**. In this context, Chinese trade is crucial for the countries in the region. On the other hand, China is dependent on the resources of Central Asia. Indeed, many cities in China are dependent on natural gas pipelines from Turkmenistan and oil from Kazakhstan**[28]**. For this reason, Beijing has invested millions of dollars in connecting Central Asia's energy resources to China. In this sense, the region is of importance to Beijing in terms of its economic relations, and Xian Declaration should be read within this context.

In addition to developing economic ties further, China aims to curb US influence in the region and combat ethnic unrest in the Xinjiang District. Also, it was commented that China wants to fill the vacuum in Russias place. However, it was also emphasized by some analysts that the presence of China in the region does not mean that Russia is less important in Central Asia**[29]**. This is due mainly to the no limits partnership, which China and Russia agreed on last February before Russia invaded Ukraine.**[30]**. The Russo-Chinese cooperation demonstrates itself in almost every area. Chinese President Xi Jinping went to Moscow last March to meet with his Russian counterpart, and the duo signed a deal to enter into a new era of cooperation**[31]**.

In general, it can be concluded that China has started to increase its influence in Central Asia. It has been the first trading partner of the Central Asian countries and, it can be said that the presence of China in the Central Asia affairs will increase more in the future with the decisions taken at the Xian Meeting.

**Photograph: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/china-central-asian-nations-vow-to-collaborate-on-core-interests/2901970*

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