

The Localisation of Italian Multilateralism: the Italy-Central Asia 5+1 Format in a Comparative Analysis with China and the United States

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Abstract. This study explores the adoption by external powers, namely Italy, the US and China, of the 5+1 format for engaging Central Asian republics. Made possible by the relaxation of regional conflicts between Central Asian leaders, this inclusive format facilitates semi-institutionalized discussions to identify strategic goals, balance political ambitions, and foster comprehensive regional dialogue. Italy, a forerunner in the European Union, used the forum to successfully extend its engagement beyond bilateral energy and trade agreements, strengthening diplomatic ties with smaller states like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and promoting cultural and scientific collaborations. This established Italy as a dependable partner for Central Asia, eager to cooperate on common agendas. Despite the potential of the format, limited literature exists on this approach, and current works tend to emphasize power imbalances, overlooking the impact of joint partnerships on sensitive issues. The authors assert that the adoption of the 5+1 framework showcases the localisation and cross-contamination of external powers' foreign policies in the region. The study uses document analysis, and semi-structured interviews conducted during fieldwork in the United States and Central Asia.

Keywords: 5+1 format, Central Asia, multilateralism, Italy, localisation.

Introduction

The adoption of the 5+1 format as a framework to develop cooperation with the Central Asian republics has gradually become a promising option for external powers that have political and economic interests in the region, such as the People's Republic of China and the United States. The opportunity to promote an enhanced and comprehensive regional dialogue via such format has mainly emerged following the results of the proactive foreign policy undertaken by Uzbekistan's president Shavkat Mirziyoyev but also reflects the new priorities of Central Asian governments in their attempt to deal with external powers giving priority to regional issues. The 5+1 format allows the creation of flexible semi-institutionalised discussion forums, within which participating governments can identify and discuss their strategic priorities and interests as well as balancing reciprocal political ambitions.

In this evolving scenario, Italy has taken the initiative, becoming the first country of the European Union to adopt the 5+1 format, implementing a wider framework of cooperation compared with previous bilateral relations mainly based on energy and trade issues. Even if Italy has organised only two meetings (see table 1 below), concrete goals have been reached, expanding diplomatic relations, in particular with the smaller states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and cooperation in the scientific and cultural field. The main result is that Italy has been gradually legitimised to play the role of reliable partner in Central Asia, recognised as a "middle power" with no large-scale political interests to claim but interested on working together with local governments on a common agenda (Indeo, 2021). A role that was supported by the institutionalisation of an evolving EU Central Asia Strategy since 2007, which for instance allowed Italy to play a role in the so-called water diplomacy, with several attempts to promote a forum of dialogue among Central Asian countries to discuss the sensitive issue.

Despite the relevance of the 5+1 approach and the promising results that it is achieving, we can observe a lack of literature on this subject. Moreover, much of the literature on Central Asian external relations has prevalently stressed the unbalanced relations between the powerful '1' and the weaker '5', downplaying or ignoring the effects that a shared partnership on some sensitive issues (i.e., water management, vaccine diplomacy, political dialogue) could trigger in influencing actions and policies of foreign powers. We claim that the adoption of 5+1 frameworks, whose characteristics are those of an Asian-style instrument, is a central example of localisation and cross-contamination of foreign policies of external powers in the region.

The main aim of our article is to analyse the development and the use of the 5+1 format in relations between Central Asian and external powers. For this purpose, we developed a comparative study including the United States and China – respectively a Western and an Asian actor capable of building two of the most institutionalised 5+1 forums – and Italy, which has been the first EU country to launch its own 5+1 mechanism with Central Asia in 2019, as the result of concrete Italian political engagement in the region. Another objective is to develop the scarce academic literature on the growing Italian role in Central Asia and its creative diplomacy in the region, inside and outside EU frameworks.

The data that supports our analysis comes from a document analysis of 5+1 declarations released after the relevant meetings, semi-structured interviews during fieldwork, and participation to said formats by one of the authors. The interviews were conducted with American, Central Asian, and Chinese stakeholders (officials, diplomats, businesspeople, and experts) in the United States and Central Asia. For the purpose of this paper and for ethical reasons, the interviewees will remain anonymous.

We will start by providing a detailed overview of Italy-Central Asia relations. The section will function as a review of the limited literature on Italy-Central Asia relations and will give the context for the creation of the 5+1 forum. The second section will zoom out and describe the events that led to the development of similar forums in the American and Chinese cases respectively, also focussing on the institutional development of their multilateral presence in the region. The following two sections will analyse the institutional setting and content of the Italian 5+1 to then compare it with the Chinese and American examples. Finally, we will provide some conclusions.

Italy in Central Asia: historical context of the development of the 5+1 format

Since the independence of Central Asian states, Italy has cultivated bilateral ties with the five republics developing political and diplomatic relations. However, in 1992 Italy opened full embassies only in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, whose work covered also Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan respectively. In Turkmenistan an honorary consulate was established in Ashgabat that was linked to the Italian embassy in Moscow. Other European Union countries, such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom took the decision to develop political and diplomatic relations with all Central Asian countries. Italy privileged instead the development of political relations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, identified as key actors, aimed at enhancing energy and trade cooperation as well as to bolster

geopolitical security in the region after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Capisani 2000, Hyman 1994).

In the Italian strategy, trade and energy represented a privileged field of cooperation with the new Central Asian independent states. Trade relations between Italy and Central Asia mainly reflected the complementarity of their economies, because Italy was interested in importing raw materials, hydrocarbons, crude oil and refined products, while exporting to the region mechanical and electronic equipment (Italian Government, 2023).

Starting from the energy sector, since 1992, Eni, the largest Italian petroleum firm, was able to successfully enhance its strategic presence in Kazakhstan, offering its know-how, experience, and investments to develop the country's promising energy sector. Eni's engagement alongside other American and European energy companies supported Kazakhstan's ambitions to erode the monopoly of Russian energy companies, which also controlled the oil export routes, with the purpose of building an independent national energy sector (Ebel and Menon 2000). Eni holds a 29.25% share in the Karachaganak Petroleum Operating BV international consortium to exploit Karachaganak's oil and gas field and a 16.81% working interest in the North Caspian Sea Production Sharing Agreement to exploit the offshore oil field of Kashagan (Eni 2023).

Aside of energy cooperation, in the 1990s Italy and the Central Asian republics were slow in developing a comprehensive political and diplomatic dialogue. Soon after independence, Uzbekistan's former President Islam Karimov and Kazakhstan's former President Nursultan Nazarbayev exchanged visits with other European countries. The first visit by a Central Asian leader to Italy happened only in 2009, when Nazarbayev visited the country, 18 years after Kazakhstan's national independence (Pujol 2005, Jalcin 2002).

Moving to security, potential instability in Central Asia, linked to political and ethnic tensions between nations or provoked by social and political consequences of authoritarian regimes, could have represented a serious threat to Italian trade and energy interests in the region. Nevertheless, historically, Italy has not been directly involved in security cooperation in Central Asia, limiting its involvement to the NATO missions in Afghanistan. Between 2002 and 2021 Italy has been an important partner of the ISAF and Resolute Support missions, deploying the fourth largest contingent (approximately 4000 troops), mainly located in the Western region of Herat and involved in both hard and soft security initiatives under the NATO umbrella (Indeo 2012).

Hence, Italian perception of security in Central Asia has been connected to the stabilisation of Afghanistan and focused on defence cooperation programs and arms sales. In 1999 Italy and Uzbekistan signed

an intergovernmental agreement on defence cooperation, which included periodical bilateral meetings, but Italy did not replicate the agreement with the four remaining Central Asian countries. Yet, due to the shared border with Afghanistan, cooperation with Tajikistan is also relevant to Italy's security strategy. Italy was one of the major donors in the creation of the Agency for Drug Control under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan (DCA) in 1999, aimed at fighting against organized crime and drug trafficking (Tajikistan's MFA, 2022).

The launch of the first comprehensive European Union Strategy towards Central Asia in 2007, the first time in which the EU produced a document discussing cooperation with Central Asia beyond aid and assistance (Cornell and Starr 2019), was a game changer in terms of Italy-Central Asia relations. In 2007 the then Italian Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Gianni Vernetti toured all five Central Asian republics, and the Italian MFA organised an international conference aimed at developing Italian-Central Asian relations both bilaterally and in the perspective of the new EU Strategy. These initiatives represented the first sign of concrete Italian political attention towards the region, with the aim of involving Central Asian republics in a wider dialogue, not limited to energy and regional security issues but also extended to political values and humanitarian issues.

In cooperation with the European Commission, Italy coordinated the "EU regional initiative on environment and water in Central Asia", one of the three main regional EU initiatives for Central Asia as part of the EU Strategy, launched on 3 December 2008 in Ashgabat. Following the Third High Level EU-Central Asia Conference organized in Rome in November 2009, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs worked on implementing the European Union Water Initiative focused on the exploitation and management of regional water resources, promoting the cooperation and the dialogue among Central Asian states in water management.

The launch of the EU strategy also paved the way to the intensification of high-level visits and meetings. In November 2009, Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev met Italian government representatives in Rome, where a Strategic Partnership Treaty was signed, which included cooperation on issues such as democratisation and rule of law. During this period, Italy also developed political relations with gas-rich Turkmenistan. In 2009 President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov paid an official visit to Rome, in the context of Italian involvement in the use of the Turkmenistan's gas reserves. Following the purchase of the British company Burren in 2008, Eni had also consolidated its presence in the Turkmen oil field. In 2009 Eni signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Turkmenistan becoming the second foreign company, after the Chinese

National Petroleum Company, to have an onshore contract to develop Turkmen energy fields.

From energy cooperation Italy and Turkmenistan have moved to develop diplomatic cooperation. After an official visit of the former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, Italy opened its embassy in Ashgabat in 2014, while Turkmenistan's embassy in Rome was opened a year later. Another focus of cooperation has been in the defence sector. In addition to the export of military hardware, Italy represents an important partner for Turkmenistan in the area of technology. In 2015 Thales Alenia Space, a joint venture between Thales (67%) and Leonardo (33%), built and launched Ashgabat's first telecommunication satellite (Thales 2015).

In July 2016, Tajikistan's government signed a cooperation agreement (3.9 billion US dollars) with the Italian company Salini Impregilo for the construction of a dam for hydroelectric power plant at the site of Rogun, on the Vakhsh river, which would double Tajikistan's current power production (Sorbello 2019). Also, Italy aimed at enhancing economic cooperation with Uzbekistan, the most populous country and the potential largest market in the region. In October 2011 the official visit of the Italian Undersecretary of State Catia Polidori to the Tashkent Business Forum had the objective of involving Italian Small and Medium Sized businesses in Uzbekistan's economy (Indeo 2012). During the meeting Polidori highlighted that "Italy has a great interest to development of cooperation with Uzbekistan," while "the promising areas of cooperation are trade, energy, textile, construction and many others" (Uzbekistan Embassy in Italy, 2011).

These steps show that the 2010s represented a period of expansion of Italian presence in the region that led to the institutionalisation of Italian diplomatic regional presence, also through the 5+1 forum after nearly a decade.

The US, China and multilateral cooperation in Central Asia

This section contextualises the development of the Italian 5+1 initiative through a comparative analysis of contextual characteristics in similar multilateral forums with a focus on the American C5+1 mechanism and the Chinese C+C5. The first countries to establish a 5+1 mechanisms were Japan in 2004 and South Korea in 2007. In the following years the same multilateral diplomatic tool has been used by the United States, India, China, Italy, and most recently the Russian Federation. We chose to focus on the United States and China as they present two of the most institutionalised 5+1 forums, and they are respectively a Western and an Asian actor, which provides an opportunity to look at differences and sim-

ilarities in Western and Asian use of the 5+1 framework. Also, the choice was guided by the authors' expertise on China-US-Central Asia relations, as well as availability of data.

Starting from the American C5+1 framework, at its inauguration in 2015, similarly to Italy and unlike Russia and China, the United States had not established any previous institution that went beyond bilateral mechanisms and did not participate to any regional grouping involving Central Asian countries (Rakhimov 2018). As for American political relations at bilateral level, the US had just left its last remaining military base at the Manas Airport in Kyrgyzstan in 2014, which was established in 2001 soon after 9/11 to support the US-led alliance in its invasion of Afghanistan. Another base was established in 2001 in Uzbekistan, and was abandoned in 2005, in the larger context of American political support to the Colour Revolutions sweeping Asia and Eastern Europe during the G.W. Bush administration (Sullivan 2019, Maracchione 2023a).

The focus on the 'freedom agenda' and the link between security, stability and democratic reform that characterised the late Bush administration was partially abandoned during the first Obama administration¹. Important tools of this new season of US-Central Asia relations were the development of America's own (failed) idea of a New Silk Road connecting economically Central Asia and Europe through the Caucasus, supported by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Kim and Indeo 2013). The second mandate of the Obama administration started in the context of a reconfiguration of American presence in the region connected with the end of operations Enduring Freedom and ISAF in 2014, substituted by non-combatant missions (UN 2014). At the same time, the Middle East was once again unstable due to the expansion of the self-proclaimed Islamic State since 2014. Farhod Tolipov (2015) underlines how actions in Syria directly impacted US views on Central Asia due to disagreements with Russia over its role in the region. This occurred in the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The regional context in Central Asia was also quite turbulent, as countries were recovering from the ethnic clashes in Southern Kyrgyzstan that had caused numerous deaths. This in a more general context of enmity added to regional incommunicability and disunity. Hence, it can be said that differently from the Italian case, the development of the American 5+1 framework happened at a time of crisis of American presence in Central Asia, where US regional security priorities were being impacted by tepid relationships with Central Asia leaders, tense relations with other regional powers (see Russia) and regional enmity and tensions between Central Asian countries.

¹ Interviews with American diplomats in Washington DC in early 2022.

In contrast, China is a protagonist in the Central Asian political context, whose role in the region is that of an insider/outsider. Hence, the context behind the development of a 5+1 system by China in 2020 is quite different from that of the United States or the Italian Republic. Firstly, both the US and Italy have struggled in terms of political legitimacy due to ideological differences with local leaders. For example, both engaged in democracy promotion and related warfare in the Middle East, which led to lukewarm ties with Central Asian leaders in the early 2000s.² China did not support these types of normative frameworks (Kavalski 2007) and has maintained stable relations with the regional leadership throughout the three decades after independence, at least at the elite level. Secondly, China's multilateral footprint in the region was and still is much more stable and institutionalised. When China's version of the 5+1, usually referred to as C+C5, was established, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a regional multilateral organisation promoted by China and founded in 2001, was already 19 years old. However, the SCO did not involve Turkmenistan and was founded in tandem with the Russian Federation, whose presence shaped its development and priorities (Šćepanović 2022). Staying in the region, at the eve of the establishment of the Chinese C+C5, the U.S. had just announced their intention to leave Afghanistan (April 2020), an action that will lead to a new takeover of Kabul's government by the Taliban. At the same time, the two biggest and more stable countries and economies in Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, were going through some changes due to the retirement or death of respective leaders Nursultan Nazarbayev and Islam Karimov that had governed over the two countries since independence (Blackmon 2020; Maracchione 2023a). This level of change although potentially destabilising was providing interesting opportunities for the PRC particularly in the liberalising Uzbekistani economy, whose new leadership showed a renewed interest in foreign investment, an opportunity the Chinese leadership seemed ready to take (Dadabaev 2019). In this context, Russian conflictual global behaviour, particularly in the second part of the 2010s and related economic sanctions, was already pushing local partners to try to balance Russian presence, often through collaboration with Chinese companies and investors. These balancing policies thus favoured alternative partners.

Zooming out, the establishment of the C+C5 took place during the second global wave of the Covid-19 epidemic. This was a time in which most countries, particularly in the West, were struggling to contain the virus. Differently, in the PRC, the zero-Covid policy was still holding, and citizens enjoyed many freedoms that were still denied abroad due to

² Interviews with American experts, diplomats, and officials in Washington DC in early 2022.

emergency measures. The PRC's leadership was using this comparative advantage in its foreign public relations in what was described as health diplomacy (later vaccine diplomacy, Kobierecka 2022, Maracchione 2020). At the same time, Xi Jinping was in his second mandate and well into the second phase of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is Xi Jinping's signature global investment and connectivity policy, whose first phase was characterised by large energy and infrastructure investments (a total \$40 billion up to 2020, most of it in Kazakhstan, the region's largest economy, that grew to \$70 billion in 2022, Standish 2023), to then also include and often prioritise smaller projects more focused on local needs in a second phase (Van der Kley and Yau 2021, Maracchione 2023b). However, this more positive outlook in the South and East of the world was overshadowed by the start of the trade wars started by Donald Trump's US government against China, also followed by strong Western criticism of human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, which led the country's image in the West to a decline.

The evolution of China's multilateral behaviour in Central Asia towards an independent path speaks to all these contextual developments such as enmity with the U.S. paralleled by weaker American regional presence, Russian rogue behaviour in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and subsequent need for credible alternative partners in the region, and new possibilities coming from the global health crisis and political developments in Central Asia. Yet, it also needs to be collocated in a natural evolution of China's enormous political and economic capital dedicated to the region between the independence and nowadays, in particular through the SCO, the BRI and intense bilateral relations (Reeves 2018; Dave and Kobayashi 2018).

To summarise, both the American and the Chinese 5+1 formats arose from complicated situations in their external policies. Yet, while the American format represented an instrument to promote American presence in the region after a period of tepid relations, and with the prospect of military retreat from Afghanistan, China's format had the purpose to move Sino-Central Asian cooperation to a further qualitative level. The latter rests on three decades of political and economic dedication from the PRC, its government and companies to build ties with the region.

The Italy-Central Asia 5+1: themes of discussion and results

The Italian political decision to institutionalise relations with Central Asian states within a 5+1 format has represented an evolution of the growing commitment of the national government in the region in the

later 2000s. In twelve months, between November 2018 and November 2019, the former Italian Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Manlio Di Stefano visited all five Central Asian states, with the purpose to enhance political and diplomatic relations in the region (Italian MFA, 2019). Moreover, Turkmenistan's President Berdimuhamedov paid an official visit in Italy at the beginning of November 2019. This in the occasion of the Italy-Turkmenistan Business Forum that was organised in Milan, where political and business representatives discussed new opportunities of cooperation beyond the traditional energy sector. Berdimuhamedov had talks with Italian President Sergio Mattarella and with then Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte signing bilateral documents to enhance cooperation in the security-military field, in the energy sphere, culture and transports.

On 13 December 2019 the Italian Government organized the first 5+1 forum in Rome, the international conference "Italy and Central Asia: Strengthening Mutual Understanding, Cooperation and Partnership", involving high-representatives and political delegations from the five Central Asian republics. Italy has become the first EU country to adopt this multilateral format, attended by the Foreign Ministers of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan together with the Deputy Foreign Ministers of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and involved officials from international financial institutions, the business community, academia, and culture.

For the Italian government, this meeting was significant in order to increase trade cooperation and investment opportunities in Central Asia as well as to enhance its political weight in the relations with Central Asia not only in bilateral terms but in the wider framework represented by the new EU Strategy for Central Asia. The leading aim of the Italian government is to further develop relations with the region, given its geostrategic relevance and centrality for the implementation of the Euro-Asian connectivity, one of the EU flagship projects. The first result of the new political dialogue within the 5+1 format was to allow Italy to fill the gap in terms of bilateral relations with Kyrgyzstan. Bishkek opened its first embassy in Rome in August 2020, while in November 2021 Kyrgyzstan's

Table 1. Meetings of the Italy-Central Asia 5+1 format at ministerial level.

Date	Place	Most senior participant from Italy
13 December 2019	Rome, Italy	Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Luigi di Maio
8 December 2021	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Luigi di Maio

Foreign Minister paid an official visit to Italy for the first time in the history of their diplomatic relations.

On 8 December 2021, Uzbekistan's capital city Tashkent hosted the 2nd Italy-Central Asia Conference. Then Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio and the Deputy Minister Manlio Di Stefano chaired the event, also attended by the Foreign Ministers of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, together with the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Ambassador Terhi Hakala. Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister was not able to reach Tashkent but sent a video message. Afghanistan was one of the key topics discussed during the most recent conference, because according to the Italian and the European perception Central Asian republics appear dangerously exposed and vulnerable in the case of destabilizing threats (namely jihadist terrorist attacks) coming from Afghanistan as well as to manage a potential rising flux of refugees and migrants which could be reallocated in their countries. Italian and Central Asian representatives also agreed on the further development of economic and trade cooperation and to enhance healthcare cooperation in the field of pandemic control (see Table 2 for a full list of discussion topics).

Italy's renewed interest on environment and water cooperation in Central Asia represents one of the dimensions of the Italian 5+1 format, which could be profitably implemented within the wider EU Strategy for the region. In February 2023, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted the seventh EU-Central Asia High Level Conference, organised under

Table 2. Topics of cooperation in the Italy-Central Asia 5+1 forums.

Theme	2019	2021
Connectivity	X	
Sustainability/ environment	X	
Transboundary threats	X	X
Afghanistan		X
Humanitarian issues		X
Covid 19		X
War in Ukraine (and related)		X
Economic growth	X	X
Investment	X	X
Trade	X	X
Energy	X	X
Regional security		X
Education	X	X
Border security		X

the EU–Central Asia Platform for Environment and Water Cooperation. Representatives of all five Central Asian countries and EU diplomats attended the meeting, which was co-chaired by the Italian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Edmondo Cirielli, and European Special Representative for Central Asia, Ambassador Hakala (WECCOP 2023).

Comparative analysis of Italian, Chinese and American 5+1 formats

This section will provide a comparison between the Italian 5+1 framework and the American and Chinese versions. We will focus on the institutional setting, the type of participants, the results and the themes of discussion during the forums. Starting from timing, a significant difference between the Italian 5+1 and the other two is time commitment. Since their foundation both the American C5+1 and the Chinese C+C5 were held once or twice a year (see Tables 3 and 4). Since 2019, when Mike Pompeo took control of American foreign policy, meetings of the C5+1 forum became more frequent, a trend that continued under Secretary Blinken in the Biden administration. While 10 ministerial meetings were organised under the framework, only 3 happened in person in Central Asia (2017, 2020, 2023), which means that only three times the US Secretary of State took the time to travel to the region to participate in the format. In September 2023, the Biden administration elevated the format to the Presidential level for the first time in what President Biden described as “a historic moment, building on years of close cooperation.” (Powell 2023).

Table 3. Meetings of the US-Central Asia C5+1 at ministerial and presidential level.

Date	Place	Most senior participant from USA
1 November 2015	Samarkand, Uzbekistan	Secretary of State, John Kerry
3 August 2016	Washington, D.C., USA	Secretary of State, John Kerry
22 September 2017	New York City, USA	Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson
22 September 2019	New York City, USA	Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo
3 February 2020	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo
30 June 2020	Online	Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo
23 April 2021	Online	Secretary of State, Antony Blinken
22 September 2021	New York City, USA	Secretary of State, Antony Blinken
22 September 2022	New York City, USA	Secretary of State, Antony Blinken
28 February 2023	Astana, Kazakhstan	Secretary of State, Antony Blinken
19 September 2023	New York City, USA	President, Joe Biden

Table 4. Meetings of the China-Central Asia C+C5 at ministerial and heads of state level¹.

Date	Place	Most senior participant from PRC side
16 July 2020	Online	Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi
3 August 2021	Xi'an, People's Republic of China	Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi
8 June 2022	Astana, Kazakhstan	Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi
19 May 2023	Xi'an, People's Republic of China	President, Xi Jinping

¹ The multilateral meeting at Heads of State level in January 2022 for 30th Anniversary of relations between China and Central Asia, was deliberately excluded as it was a celebratory regional meeting that was not in the framework of the C+C5.

In the Chinese case, four forums since 2020 took place of which three in-person and only one in Central Asia. China was the first to develop the framework to the Heads of State level, with President Xi Jinping inviting the five Central Asian leaders to a meeting in 2023 in Xi'an. The sumptuous inauguration ceremony of the Heads of State meeting in Xi'an, full of civilisational symbolism referred to the common Silk Road heritage, is a sign of the centrality of the new exclusive Sino-Central Asian forum in the minds of China's foreign policy establishment. Both the forums are also developing a secretariat, which was already inaugurated in an online format in the American case.

Italy positions itself somehow in the middle between the two. While the meetings of the framework are less frequent and regular, they are limited to the ministerial level, and do not present institutional developments, diplomatically Italy has shown sign of greater engagement with the region, as an Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, has visited Central Asia in-person, a very uncommon decision for Western leaders. While President Xi Jinping visits Central Asia on a regular basis, no US President has ever set foot in the region up to the time in which we are writing. As of now only two multilateral 5+1 forums have been organised by Italy, but the third is in preparation in the coming months.

Both the American and Chinese formats include numerous annual meetings of thematic working groups that meet separately from the ministerial/head of state level. Working groups usually discuss the most relevant themes of cooperation in the respective forums, for example climate, security and connectivity in the American case, and environment, digital cooperation, Afghanistan and security, and regional connectivity for China. Other significant topics contained in the declarations are more specific. For example, the situation in Afghanistan is a common specific theme of discussion in the C5+1, following American priorities. Other related topics are China's role in Central Asia, Covid-19, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Notwithstanding the shorter history, the thematic content of discussions in the new PRC-Central Asia C+C5 format is wider than in the case of the American and Italian 5+1, as can be seen comparing tables 2, 5 and 6. Some core topics are common to the two formats. For example, security issues related to Afghanistan, transnational threats, energy or trade. Yet, economic cooperation has a different connotation as compared with the Western 5+1 forums. While macro themes such as trade, connectivity, investment, energy, are important topics, the format also moved to include discussions on economic integration such as legislative exchanges, industrial cooperation, employment, visa, and workers' exchange.

This set of themes is central for understanding the different level of PRC involvement in the region, as compared to other partners. It also signifies a shift in the importance of issues such as energy security – a central theme of China's cooperation with Central Asia in the later 1990s and 2000s – in dictating China's policy in the region. This is also the limit of Italian engagement in the region, while macroeconomic cooperation is strong in the trade and energy sectors, the lack of proximity and

Table 5. Topics of cooperation in the American C5+1 meetings.

Theme	2015	2016	2017	2019	2020	2020	2021	2021	2022	2023	2023
Connectivity	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X
Environment and Sust.	X	X		X	X		X		X	X	X
Transboundary threats	X	X		X	X		X		X	X	X
Afghanistan	X		X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Humanitarian issues	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X	X
China					X						
Covid-19						X		X			
War in Ukraine										X	
Economic growth	X	X			X		X		X	X	
Investment	X	X		X			X		X	X	X
Trade	X	X		X	X	X				X	X
Energy	X	X		X			X		X	X	X
Regional security	X	X			X	X	X			X	X
Human rights / Democr.	X			X	X		X			X	X
Education	X			X		X			X		X
Border security										X	X
Law enforcement											X
Mineral resources											X
Supply chains											X
Employment											X

Table 6. Topics of cooperation in the Chinese C+C5 meetings.

Theme	2020	2021	2022	2023
Covid-19 epidemic and health	X	X	X	X
Trade	X	X	X	X
Agriculture	X	X	X	X
Afghanistan	X	X	X	X
Economic development	X	X	X	X
Global governance and values	X	X	X	X
Security and stability	X	X	X	X
Transnational security threats	X	X	X	X
Connectivity and infrastructures	X	X	X	X
Digital and technological innovation	X	X	X	X
Environment and sustainability	X	X	X	X
Tourism	X	X	X	X
Humanitarian and cultural issues		X	X	X
Education		X	X	X
Regional Cooperation		X	X	X
Institutional development of C+C5		X	X	X
Investment	X		X	X
Energy			X	X
War in Ukraine			X	
Financial innovation			X	
Local-to-local diplomacy		X		
Legislative exchange				X
Industrial cooperation and value chains				X
Employment, visa and workers exchange				X

involvement on people's day-to-day economic life makes Italian role in the region, similarly to that of the US, qualitatively different as compared to China's. Yet, the EU-backed involvement in Central Asian environmental cooperation could become a driver of Italian inclusion in the lives and economies of Central Asian people.

In term of practical outcomes, 5+1 meetings generally involve few pledges for investment, which is quite usual in terms of US-Central Asian relations. The lack of practical outcomes or agreements that often characterises these formats makes the comparison with other Asian multilateral forums quite attractive. For example, the SCO has often been described as a "talk shop" (reference), whose role was more that of developing bilateral understanding than to produce real multilateral outcomes.

Yet, the institution of a virtual secretariat in the American case, which met for the first time in June 2023, and the discussion of a similar outcome for the Chinese forum, might imply an enhancement in terms of political significance of the two 5+1 formats. Furthermore, the declaration of the American C5+1 released in February 2023 after the Astana meeting seems to cover a longer list of aspects of cooperation, particularly in terms of military, political and economic security, as compared to previous declarations. The war in Ukraine has boosted the relevance of the region due to its proximity and connections with the Russian Federation. Hence, a stronger Western attention from Western actors is not surprising. This is also exemplified by the elevation of the C5+1 format to presidential level in September 2023 and connected widening of the discussion topics (see table 5), as well as the establishment in March 2024 of the first US-Central Asia Private Business Forum, the B5+1. A similar upgrade can be seen with the C+C5 forum. The sumptuous inauguration ceremony of the Heads of State meeting in Xi'an, full of civilisation symbolism referred to the common Silk Road heritage, is a sign of the centrality of the new exclusive Sino-Central Asian forum in the minds of China's foreign policy establishment.

Italy's own 5+1 might follow a similar growing trend in terms of political importance in the coming months. The current Italian government appears engaged to preserve and implement cooperation with Central Asia, strategically focusing the efforts on Uzbekistan, the most-interested promoter of a regional approach. Recently Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev visited Italy, paving the way to further enhance bilateral relations, upgrading these to a strategic partnership (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Conclusions

Data and results reported in the article clearly confirm the strong potential of the 5+1 format of cooperation, which appears as the privileged forum of dialogue in foreign policies towards Central Asia due to its inclusive dimension and wider thematic content. The format usually involves all five Central Asian countries, and dialogue is comprehensive, going beyond traditional focus on energy and trade. The development of many versions of this type of format is the first step for the localisation of regional cooperation practices that reflects the needs of Central Asian states. However, the main precondition for a durable partnership is the commitment of the parties to build and cultivate a political dialogue based on reciprocal trust and respect, as well as respect the commitments written in the final declarations through tangible political and economic engagement in the region.

The similar characteristics of the SCO and the 5+1 forum, in all the variants we analysed, the Italian, the American, and the Chinese versions, characterise these 5+1 formats as a typically Asian instrument, as the SCO was often described in our interviews.³ Although the PRC has been amongst the latest the players to use this instrument, it can be argued that it perfectly fits its multilateral tradition made up of flexible and symbolic cooperation frameworks paralleled by strong bilateral work, defining features of the SCO and now of the C+C5. Yet, the adoption of such multilateral framework by Western powers such as the United States or Italy are probably signs of an adaptation of Western diplomatic behaviour to fit local preferences.

Focusing on Italy, this comprehensive initiative strengthened the Italian position in the region as a political partner for Central Asian countries and opened new business opportunities for Italian companies. Even if the magnitude is still not comparable to stronger players such as China or Russia, Italy has the potential to become a reliable and alternative partner which would allow Central Asian countries to diversify their external relations, also in the framework of the EU Central Asia strategy. One of the main driving factors will be the allocation of future investments into specific sectors, such as renewable energy and green development, and to work on the promotion of Italian exports to Central Asian markets, especially to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Indeo 2021).

Finally, these positive developments happen in the context of Russian invasion of Ukraine and its repercussions on the region, where Central Asian countries are recalibrating their relations with Moscow. Italy could be identified as a key actor not only thanks to the 5+1 format but also using these improved relations with the framework of the EU Strategy towards Central Asia, supporting a more incisive role of Italy in some dimensions of cooperation. However, we should also consider that Italy's commitment needs to go beyond the two 5+1 summits and proceed in the institutionalisation and routinisation of the format, similarly to what China and US have done by organising a summit every year and by developing a secretariat and several working groups. The lack of time commitment represents an evident weakness in the Italian 5+1 framework, delaying the efforts to increase Italian political visibility and presence in the region. In order to better evaluate the intentions of the present Italian government in Central Asia, we should wait to see whether another 5+1 summit will be organised, as the third summit is in discussion, but not yet scheduled.

³ Interviews with Uzbekistani officials and foreign policy experts in Tashkent, Spring 2022.

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