

China-Central Asia Summit- Key Takeaways

By

Uroosa Khan

Research Associate

China-Pakistan Study Centre (CPSC), ISSI

Edited by

Dr. Talat Shabbir

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On May 18-19, 2023, China hosted its first-ever summit with the heads of five Central Asian countries in Xian.¹ The summit was attended by President Xi Jinping along with Presidents Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan, Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, Sadyr Japarov of Kyrgyzstan, Serdar Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan, and Shavkat Miromirjonovich Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan. The main agenda of the summit was to underscore the need for deepening multi-lateral cooperation primarily in the political and economic domains. During the bilateral meetings of President Xi Jinping with his Central Asian counterparts, both sides expressed strong determination to upscale cooperation in myriad fields. President Xi unveiled a comprehensive plan for Central Asia's development -- ranging from infrastructure development to enhanced trade with the region.² The Central Asian leaders expressed their full support for China's proposed initiatives of global development, security and civilization.³ Undoubtedly, the summit opens a new chapter in China-

1 Chris Devonshire Ellis, "The China-Central Asian Summit Begins In Xi'an," May, 18, 2023 <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/the-china-central-asian-summit-begins-in-xian/>

2 Ibid

3 "China, Central Asia vow to build a closer community with a shared future at milestone Xi'an summit," CGTN, May 19, 2023 <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-05-19/China-Central-Asia-vow-to-build-closer-community-with-shared-future-1jVLJrBkwul/index.html>

Central Asia relations, placing China in a pivotal position - helping Beijing fortify its economic and strategic engagement with the region. Furthermore, this platform will enable the Central Asian States to realize vast economic opportunities with the outside world and also add positive energy to regional efforts for peace and stability.

President Xi Jinping's Keynote speech at CCS: Key takeaways

The China-Central Asia Summit commenced with the key-note speech delivered by President Xi Jinping, titled: "Working Together for a China-Central Asia Community with a Shared Future Featuring Mutual Assistance, Common Development, Universal Security and Everlasting Friendship."⁴ This summit has been labelled as the first major diplomatic event hosted by China this year. While a number of issues of significance were deliberated upon, one of the key objectives behind this gathering for China was to secure greater economic and political partnerships with its Central Asian neighbours. President Xi and the Central Asian leaders expressed a keen desire to intensify bilateral relations and multi-lateral cooperation.⁵

In his remarks, President Xi noted that over a decade, China and Central Asian states have jointly worked to revive the Silk Road and deepen cooperation focused onto future. The China-Central Asia relationship has strong historic linkages, impelled by economic needs and built on popular support. On enduring peace in the region, he stressed that a stable Central Asia is what the world needs and therefore the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Central Asian states should be upheld, their choice regarding the trajectory of development should be respected, and their efforts for peace and stability must be fully supported. Moreover, China and Central Asia should come up with policies which will have zero-tolerance for the three social ills, terrorism, separatism and extremism and both sides should actively try to deal with the security challenges in the region.⁶

On the evolving strategic environment, while acknowledging the importance of Central Asia regionally and globally, President Xi said the world needs a harmonious and inter-connected Central Asia which holds the potential to become a major economic hub of the Eurasian region which can contribute

⁴ "President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, May 19, 2023
https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/

⁵ Alexandra Sharp, "Xi Hosts Historic China-Central Asia Summit," May 18, 2023
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/18/china-central-asia-summit-xi-jinping-bri-trade-diplomacy/>

⁶ "President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, May 19, 2023
https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/

significantly in enhancing regional trade, interplay of civilizations, and in the development of science and technology.

While talking about the nature of China-Central Asia relationship, President Xi alluded to the vision of “China-Central Asia community” based on shared future.⁷ He stated that it is important to stay committed to four key principles: Mutual Assistance, Common Development, Universal Security, and Everlasting Friendship. Referring to China’s Centenary goals and vision for global development, he said, China is making efforts to realize its Second Centenary Goal of making China a great modern socialist country in all respects and place it on the path of ‘modernization’ according to its said principles. He reiterated that, China will strengthen cooperation with Central Asian states theoretically as well as practically on the grounds of modernization and harmonization of development strategies by creating new opportunities for cooperation and both partners will jointly embark on the journey of modernization process.⁸

On economic engagement and its historical underpinnings, President Xi said that, initially the foundation of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was laid down in Kazakhstan and since then China has spent millions of dollars to improve infrastructure and transportation in the region. He noted that last year trade between Central Asia and China was a record high of around \$70 billion and with Kazakhstan alone China shared a trade of \$31 billion. According to Chinese Ministry of Commerce, as of March 2023, China’s direct investment in Central Asia was nearly over \$15 billion.⁹ He acknowledged that Beijing depends on key resources of Central Asia just as Central Asia depends on trade and investment with China.

While talking about cooperation in the traditional areas, President Xi also suggested that China and Central Asia should explore other avenues of cooperation in finance, agriculture, poverty reduction, green and low-carbon development, medical service, health and digital innovation etc.¹⁰

On cultural connectivity and people-to-people linkages, President Xi noted that Chinese universities have been awarding fully-funded scholarships to students from Central Asia. Before COVID-19 pandemic, the annual growth of Central Asian students studying in China was over 12 percent. More efforts will be made in the future to increase cultural cooperation between China and Central Asia

⁷ Ibid

⁸ “Full text of Xi Jinping's keynote speech at China-Central Asia Summit,” May 19, 2023
http://english.www.gov.cn/news/202305/19/content_WS6467059dc6d03ffcca6ed305.html

⁹ China, Central Asia vow to build a closer community with a shared future at milestone Xi'an summit,” CGTN, May 19, 2023
<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-05-19/China-Central-Asia-vow-to-build-closer-community-with-shared-future-1jVLJrBkwul/index.html>

¹⁰ Ibid

through additional educational exchanges and cultural tourism within the framework of China's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI).¹¹

Conclusion

The China-Central Asia summit and President Xi Jinping's opening speech on this occasion reflect that China has neither any apparent ambitions to play a dominant role in Central Asia; nor seek to fill any power vacuum created. Rather, its objective is to solidify its relations with its neighbours, diversify mutual cooperation, and help maintain stability in this region. Furthermore, China's political and diplomatic priorities as a whole answer the question regarding its interests in Central Asia. China's three global initiatives -- Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) -- lay down Beijing's diplomatic blueprint, which highlights the importance it attaches to developing countries, to international solidarity and cooperation for sustainable development and security, and to cooperative multi-lateralism as a preferred course in inter-state relations. In the evolving dynamics, China's outreach to Central Asia at the summit level represents a significant step aimed at deepening engagement with this region and its pivotal place in Beijing's overall strategic calculus.

¹¹ Ibid