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## **COOPERATION OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES WITH EXTERNAL PARTNERS IN THE “5+1” FORMATS: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FOR IMPLEMENTING INITIATIVES**

### **Abstract**

In the context of the growing strategic importance of Central Asia against the backdrop of the global transformation of the international relations system, the "5 + 1" formats are becoming an important instrument of foreign economic and foreign policy interaction of the countries of the region with the leading world powers – the USA, China, the EU, Russia and Japan. However, the implementation of initiatives within these formats faces a number of systemic challenges and constraints. The purpose of this study is to identify and comprehensively analyze difficulties slowing down the implementation of joint projects, as well as to find opportunities to improve the effectiveness of international cooperation. The paper examines institutional, political and economic, infrastructural, geopolitical and socio-cultural barriers that limit the effectiveness of cooperation. The scientific significance of the study lies in the structured comparative approach to assessing cooperation in the five "CA+1" formats, as well as in identifying institutional deficits and contradictions between the interests of the parties. The results of the study enrich the theoretical base on regional cooperation, sustainable development and international economic integration. The practical significance lies in the development of applied recommendations for strengthening coordination, institutional support and increasing the effectiveness of foreign economic initiatives within the framework of “5+1”.

**Keywords:** “5+1” format, regional integration, strategic partnership, sustainable development, international initiatives, international relations, economic integration.

## Introduction

Against the backdrop of global instability caused by protracted military conflicts (in particular, the ongoing crisis in the Middle East, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Palestinian-Israeli escalation), as well as the aggravation of the geo-economic confrontation between the world's centers of power, Central Asia is increasingly perceived as a region of strategic importance. There is a growing interest from external players in cooperation with the countries of the region in the areas of infrastructure, energy, logistics and investment. In this context, the “5+1” formats – models of interaction between Central Asia and key international partners: the United States, China, the EU, Japan and Russia – are of particular importance. Cooperation in these formats opens up opportunities for the economic modernization of the region and sustainable development. At the same time, it faces a number of challenges – sanctions pressure, geopolitical competition, as well as internal restrictions of the Central Asian countries themselves.

In the context of a multi-vector foreign policy and inconsistency of national priorities, partnership is often fragmented and unsystematic. This reduces the effectiveness of the initiatives being implemented and complicates the development of a unified regional position in the international arena.

An analysis of the existing scientific literature shows that most works focus on the political or geoeconomic significance of Central Asia in the context of competition between powers, while the issues of practical implementation of projects within the framework of the “5+1” formats remain insufficiently studied. The issues of institutional design, inconsistency of priorities of the parties, the impact of infrastructure and humanitarian restrictions are especially poorly studied.

At the same time, from 2023–2025, there has been an increase in activity in all areas: the EU-CA and China-CA summits, business forums of Japan and the USA with the participation of countries in the region, the launch of investment packages and transport initiatives. This creates a new research situation that requires a systemic analysis of current challenges and barriers.

The relevance of the study is due to the need to rethink the effectiveness of the current “5+1” formats in the context of global competition, sanctions regimes, transformation of the regional agenda and the growth of domestic demand for sustainable development. The object of this study is the economic interaction of Central Asian countries with external partners within the framework of the “5+1” formats. The subject is institutional, geopolitical and infrastructural limitations, as well as risks that impede the effective implementation of joint initiatives.

The purpose of the study is to identify and analyze key barriers that impede the effective implementation of agreements and projects within the “5+1” formats, as well as to suggest possible areas for optimizing cooperation.

To achieve the goal, the following tasks have been formulated:

- ♦ study the structure and features of the “5+1” formats, determine their institutional characteristics, the presence of coordination mechanisms, as well as weaknesses in the management and implementation of decisions;
- ♦ compare key areas of cooperation between Central Asian countries and external partners (USA, China, EU, Russia and Japan), identify common and specific problems that hinder the successful implementation of joint initiatives;
- ♦ develop practical recommendations for improving the work of the “5+1” formats, including proposals for strengthening coordination, institutional support and harmonization of interests between the countries of the region and external actors.

The hypothesis of the study is that, despite the existence of official platforms and economic programs, the lack of sustainable institutional mechanisms, divergence of interests of the parties and high fragmentation significantly reduce the effectiveness of the “5+1” formats and their impact on the sustainable development of the region.

The methodological basis of the study is the principles of comparative analysis, institutional and systemic approaches. The work uses methods of content analysis, structural and functional analysis, case studies, as well as elements of SWOT assessment.

The practical significance lies in the development of proposals for institutional strengthening of regional economic dialogue, which can be useful for public policy bodies, international advisory structures and research centers dealing with issues of geoeconomics and sustainable development.

## Materials and methods

The methodological basis of the study included a comparative analysis, which allowed us to compare the institutional features of formats and differences in levels of coordination; content analysis, applied in the study of official rhetoric, declarations and reports; an institutional approach, which made it possible to assess the presence of coordinating bodies, monitoring mechanisms and sustainable interaction platforms. Case analysis was also used for an in-depth examination of individual initiatives, such as the CKU Railway, TIFA, Global Gateway, CLDP and others.

The study included three consecutive stages: the preparatory stage involved selecting sources and defining criteria for comparative analysis; the analytical stage included systematizing data in five key areas (institutional, political and economic, infrastructural, geopolitical and socio-cultural aspects), constructing a comparative matrix and identifying typical barriers and implementation mechanisms; the interpretation stage involved interpreting the results, comparing them with practical cases and formulating recommendations. The materials used included official documents and protocols of summits, strategies and statements adopted within the framework of the C5+1 formats; analytical reports from international research centers such as the Silk Road Studies Program, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Crossroads Central Asia; statistical and regulatory data from international organizations (European Commission, MOFCOM, JICA, EIB), as well as expert publications, interviews and news materials from authoritative sources (Reuters, Modern Diplomacy, The Diplomat, Global Times, etc.).

The study is based primarily on open sources, which limits access to internal information on the mechanisms for implementing initiatives in the “5+1” formats. The emphasis on qualitative comparative analysis without in-depth quantitative assessment reduces the accuracy of economic conclusions. In addition, the asymmetry of Central Asian countries and limited transparency of external partners make it difficult to objectively and unifiedly assess the effectiveness of cooperation.

## Results and discussion

Figure 1 presents a visualization of the structure of foreign policy cooperation formats in Central Asia, dividing them into key (with the participation of Russia, China, the United States, the EU, and Japan) and secondary (with Turkey, India, and South Korea). The figure also reflects the involvement of the countries of the region in these mechanisms, demonstrating the complexity and multi-level nature of interaction within the framework of multilateral platforms. This visualization served as a starting point for the subsequent analysis of the limitations and challenges that the Central Asian countries face in implementing initiatives within the “5+1” formats.

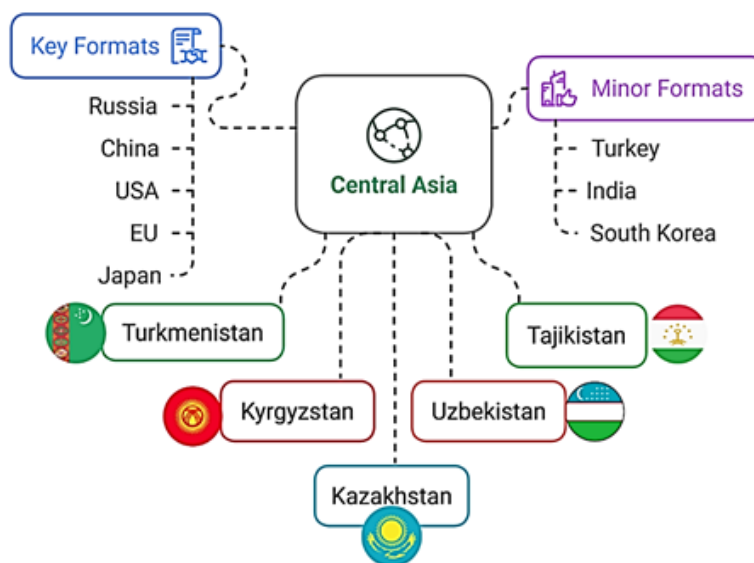


Figure 1 – Formats of interaction between Central Asia and external partners in the “5+1” model

Note: Compiled by the authors.

The Figure illustrates the distribution of the region's foreign policy vectors into key and secondary formats of interaction.

An analysis of various sources has revealed the problems that the Central Asian region and its partners face in implementing economic cooperation within the framework of the key “5+1” formats. These problems are persistent and make it difficult to achieve the stated goals in the field of regional development, trade, investment and infrastructure connectivity (table 1).

Table 1 – Comparative matrix of “5+1” formats: priorities, barriers and mechanisms for implementing initiatives

Format	Key priorities	Key issues	Implementation mechanisms (or lack thereof)
CA–USA	Security, sustainable development, climate, education, anti-corruption	Limited economic presence, no permanent secretariat, political volatility	C5+1 working groups, TIFA initiative, B5+1 forum (but irregular and weak coordination)
CA–China	Infrastructure, logistics, energy (BRI), digitalization	Risks of debt dependence, public mistrust, duplication with the SCO, weak regional coordination	Permanent Secretariat (Xi'an), summits, thematic platforms (19+), BRI projects, CKU railway
CA–EU	Transport, green economy, sustainability, legal reform	EU bureaucracy, weak business engagement, complex ESG standards	Global Gateway (€12–13 billion), Team Europe, investments via EIB, Erasmus+, Horizon (low coverage)
CA–Russia	Energy, migration, transport, education, EAEU, security	Sanctions, isolation, mistrust, competition with China, falling attractiveness	CIS, CSTO, SCO, EAEU (lack of a single regional coordinator, weak implementation and monitoring)
CA–Japan	Education, healthcare, personnel, ecology, digitalization	Lack of institutional mechanisms, geographical remoteness, low scale of investment	JICA, Central Asia + Japan Dialogue, business forums, cultural centers (but no permanent secretariat or logistics base)
Note: Compiled by the authors.			

In more detail, the main problems can be classified into the following categories:

1) Institutional:

♦ Central Asia – USA format. Although the initiative was launched in 2015, the lack of a permanent secretariat to manage processes between meetings remains a key problem. According to regional experts, this leads to poor preparation of meetings and an excess of declarations without practical implementation: “no serious practical steps have ever emerged from C5+1 [1]. Despite the creation of thematic working groups (on the economy, ecology, security, etc.), the mechanism is strictly dependent on the political will of the US administration, and its sustainability changes with its change. At the same time, intraregional coordination between the Central Asian countries remains fragmented: Central Asia does not develop a unified position on key issues, which reduces the effectiveness of the format as a whole [2].

♦ Central Asia – China format. The first summit of leaders was held in Xi'an in May 2023, where a mechanism for meetings of heads of state every two years and a permanent secretariat were established, which began operating in March 2024 in Xi'an. However, the process still duplicates the functions of the SCO and may become a source of strategic competition, especially with Russia, which seeks to maintain influence in the region [3]. Although more than 19 thematic cooperation platforms have been created (transport, energy, culture, e-commerce, etc.), the implementation of initiatives often depends on China, which raises concerns about the sovereignty of regional states and their ability to withstand external influence [4]. Journalists and analysts note that the format is

actively instrumentalized to expand Chinese influence, while weak internal coordination in Central Asia reduces the possibility of a regional collective position.

- ♦ Central Asia – European Union format. In 2019, the EU adopted a new strategy for the region, focused on sustainability, development and regional cooperation. In April 2025, the first EU–Central Asia Summit was held, where a Strategic Partnership was established and an investment package of approximately €12–13 billion was announced through the Global Gateway initiative [5]. However, the EU’s institutional structure limits its ability to act as a unified and responsive foreign policy player, especially in the dynamic environment of the region. Complex regulations, strict ESG standards and bureaucracy hinder the implementation of projects (for example, within the framework of Team Europe and the Global Gateway) [6]. There is also a dilemma between the promotion of democracy and human rights and pragmatic economic policy: the desire to strengthen economic ties can be seen by Central Asian countries as ideological pressure.

- ♦ Central Asia – Russia format is the main platform for interaction, as well as such institutions as the CIS, CSTO and SCO. At the same time, key structures such as the SCO Secretariat (in Beijing) and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent are largely controlled by China and Russia, while their effectiveness in combating transnational threats remains low. The CIS/CSTO format does not have advanced mechanisms for implementation and monitoring. Despite the creation of interdepartmental contracts (for example, to combat drug trafficking), real operational joint actions are implemented episodically, through special operations. The main problem is the lack of a mature permanent regional secretariat that could ensure strategic coordination not only at the security level, but also in the economic sphere. Russia’s role remains primarily a “curator”, and the weak intra-regional independence of the Central Asian countries reduces the sustainability of the formats themselves.

- ♦ Central Asia – Japan format. Japan is actively promoting the “Central Asia + Japan Dialogue” format, which was founded in 1997 through the concept of “Silk Road diplomacy” [7]. Despite regular political contacts, the implementation of specific projects often remains declarative, since the format faces a lack of political dynamism, goal-setting and systemic support from Tokyo. Regional Japanese centers have been created (in Tashkent, Astana, Bishkek), many of which have been transferred to the management of JICA or local authorities. However, their institutional influence is limited and often depends on funding from Japan [8]. There is no single permanent secretariat for the format. Although dialogue has been established, there are no mechanisms for vertical coordination, monitoring and reporting, which makes it less effective in comparison with other external formats. Thus, the “5+1” formats do not have a full-fledged management architecture: there are no permanent secretariats, platforms for monitoring and coordinating the agenda. The parties interact episodically, without mechanisms for implementing and evaluating the agreements reached. Internal coordination among the Central Asian countries is also not well-established, which reduces their ability to speak from a single position.

## 2) Political and economic:

- ♦ Central Asia – USA format. In 2024–2025, US trade and economic relations with most Central Asian countries (except Kazakhstan) remain underdeveloped: trade turnover with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan does not exceed \$400 million per year. The bulk of these countries’ exports are raw materials, textiles and agricultural products, while the US supplies the region mainly with machinery and medicines. Trade between Kazakhstan and the US reached \$4.2 billion in 2024, of which about \$2 billion was export to the US and \$2.2 billion was import from the US. The total trade turnover between Central Asia and the US is approximately \$3–4 billion per year, significantly inferior to the volumes with China or the Russian Federation [9]. In the TIFA initiative, the US focuses on promoting democracy, anti-corruption and climate reforms, while Central Asia is focused on large-scale export and infrastructure projects. This causes a divergence in priorities, leading to selective support for initiatives and limited coverage by regional economies. Tightening US tariffs (for example, 25–27% on goods from Kazakhstan from August 2025) creates additional barriers to trade and trust.

- ♦ Central Asia – China format. In 2024, the total trade turnover between China and Central Asia exceeded \$95 billion, with almost half of this trade (≈\$44 billion) occurring with Kazakhstan [10]. By 2025, the volume of contracts reached \$120 billion, and the turnover was \$75.6 billion as of April 2025 [11]. Chinese infrastructure expansion includes the construction of the CKU railway (Kashgar–



Andijan), the new multimodal corridor Middle Corridor, and projects in energy and minerals, including the hydrogen hub in Kuchar and transport rail extensions. At the same time, Chinese financing is often provided in the form of loans, leading to a debt burden of over 7% of GDP in some Central Asian countries. This exacerbates the imbalance between Chinese strategic logic and local economic priorities, complicating coordination and causing fragmentation of interactions.

- ♦ Central Asia – European Union format. At the EU–CA summit in Samarkand (April 2025), the EU launched a €12bn investment package under the Global Gateway, including €3bn for the transport corridor, €2.5bn for critical minerals chains, and €6.4bn for green energy and water management. The European Investment Bank provided €365m in guarantees, raising the potential for up to €1bn in sustainable infrastructure investment [12]. Over the past seven years, EU trade with CA has grown to €54bn, but bureaucracy, high ESG standards, and a focus on human rights create barriers to participation by regional companies. The EU seeks to build institutional reforms and sustainable partnerships, but its practical contribution is inferior to China's large-scale infrastructure projects and reduces its attractiveness from CA.

- ♦ The Central Asia – Russia format. In 2023, Russia ranked third in terms of foreign trade with Central Asia – about \$44 billion. Through the EAEU and joint energy and transport projects, it remains an important partner. However, Central Asian countries are actively diversifying their ties, cooperating with China, the EU and Turkey, reducing their dependence on traditional Russian integration mechanisms. Russia's economic orientation is integration and transit through Russian routes, while Central Asia strives for market diversification and autonomy. This leads to competing development tracks, different returns on initiatives and a general fragmentation of efforts.

- ♦ Central Asia – Japan format. In August 2024, a large-scale C5+Japan Business Forum was held in Astana. It was attended by more than 450 representatives from Central Asia and over 100 large Japanese companies, including sectors such as energy, ecology, transport, digital technologies, education and medicine [13]. At the forum, 22 cooperation agreements were signed between regional and Japanese companies, covering key sectors of infrastructure and human capital. Japan presented a support package with an emphasis on trade logistics (Middle Corridor), decarbonization, human resource development and digitalization, as well as commitments to promote skilled labor mobility from Central Asia and JICA educational programs – all these are plans for the coming months. Japan focuses on human capital development, sustainable development and environmental standards, while Central Asian countries are focused on infrastructure, raw material exports and quick economic effects. The volume of Japanese investment in the region remains limited and is inferior in scale to projects from China or the EU. The format does not have a permanent institutional mechanism, which reduces the effectiveness of coordination. Geographical remoteness and weak logistical connectivity also make it difficult to implement large joint projects. As a result, interaction is declarative in nature, with limited practical impact on the regional economy.

Thus, differences in the priorities of foreign economic policy and the level of openness of the economies of the Central Asian countries create difficulties in coordinating joint initiatives. In addition, external partners pursue their own strategic interests, which often do not coincide with regional goals. This leads to a selective approach to partnership and fragmentation of efforts.

### 3) Infrastructure:

- ♦ Central Asia – USA format. The USA, through the CLDP (Commercial Law Development Program) project and support for TITR (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), promotes alternative routes bypassing Russia, but the volume of investment remains limited [14, 15]. The lack of coordinated standards in transport and port areas – the absence of a single operator or tariff structure makes it difficult to scale the metro-modal route. The volume of container traffic via TITR in 2023–2024 increased sharply, but infrastructure bottlenecks in ports and railway networks limit further growth. The USA has not invested comparable funds in the development of physical infrastructure (railways, ports), acting more as a political driver than an infrastructure investor. Without a stable coordination framework between the Central Asian countries and American agencies, projects remain episodic. For example, port terminals on the Caspian Sea and railway sections in Kazakhstan require foreign investment, which the USA does not yet provide.

♦ Central Asia – China format. China is actively investing in railway infrastructure, especially the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway project, which started in June 2024. However, different track gauge standards (Chinese 1435 mm versus Russian 1520 mm) require a change of train or special stations (break of gauge) in Kyzyl Ark. China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) model provides significant capital, but suffers from weak coordination between Central Asian countries and geopolitical dependence on Beijing. Rail and port capacities require standardization of tariffs, schedules and technical standards, but this has not been systematically worked out. The construction of a second track on the Dostyk–Moiynty section in Kazakhstan accelerates freight traffic, but coordination with Chinese operators has not yet been completed. Infrastructure plans concern energy and logistics corridors, but synchronization in technical standards is still lagging.

♦ Central Asia – European Union format. The EU has announced an investment package of up to €10–13 billion in 2024–2025 to develop transport links with Central Asia via the Global Gateway and Team Europe. The problem is bureaucratic complexity, strict ESG requirements and regulatory conditions slow down the practical implementation of infrastructure projects. The TITR route is receiving the EU's attention, but the lack of a unified tariff policy or coordination of operators in different countries slows down its effectiveness. The EU lacks a single logistics platform to coordinate projects in Central Asia, which limits the scale of transport integration.

♦ The Central Asia – Russia format. Russia remains a key transit route (the Northern Corridor), but its use is limited by sanctions and geopolitical risks. Many Central Asian countries are looking for an alternative, which reduces the strategic importance of the Northern Route and calls into question Russian infrastructure investments. Infrastructure (routes, ports, standards) in terms of interaction with Central Asia is being modernized locally, but is not coordinated with the systems of neighbors. Russia's investments in the modernization of Central Asian infrastructure are not large-scale – cooperation remains fragmented. The lack of unified regional coordination and the lack of common standards between Central Asian countries and Russia hinder the implementation of transit routes. For example, the planned improvements to the Northern Route are poorly synchronized with the TITR or INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor) corridors.

♦ The Central Asia – Japan format. Japan acts as an investor in cultural and educational projects, but the scale of infrastructure investments in the region remains insignificant. The format does not provide for mechanisms for transport coordination or technical standards – the projects are mainly bilateral. Japan is interested in diversifying corridors, but does not directly participate in the legal or technical infrastructure of TITR or INSTC. No investment in railway or port projects; the main focus is expertise and consultation. Japan supports the development of logistics centers, but does not directly participate in the construction of transport hubs.

The underdevelopment of transport, energy and logistics corridors remains one of the main obstacles to deepening economic cooperation. The implementation of large-scale initiatives – such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route or regional digitalization projects – faces a lack of agreed standards and coordination between countries.

#### 4) Geopolitical:

♦ Central Asia – USA format. In March 2024, the first B5+1 business forum was launched in Almaty, designed to strengthen the business dimension of the C5+1 dialogue and attract the private sector [16]. However, due to growing instability in transit (including the influence of Afghan and Iranian factors), Western companies remain hesitant. Growing tensions in the Middle East and risks of energy routes further complicate supply chains. Sanctions against Russia also limit American cooperation with transit structures in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Despite the emphasis on minerals and supply chains, the United States is forced to act more cautiously so as not to provoke local states to balance between global players.

♦ Central Asia – China format. On June 17, 2025, the President of Kazakhstan issued a decree “On signing the Treaty of Eternal Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the Republic of Uzbekistan and the People's Republic of China” [17]. In many Central Asian countries, there is geopolitical wariness regarding China's long-term presence in strategic sectors, especially in the

context of expanding Chinese soft power and security. This hinders deepening cooperation and causes internal political constraints and pushes the region to cautiously reassess risks.

- ♦ Central Asia – European Union format. The EU is promoting the Global Gateway initiative, but faces limited political and logistical influence compared to China's BRI and Russia's long-term military and cultural presence. The EU is betting on the Trans-Caspian Route (TITR), but instability in the South Caucasus (especially around Azerbaijan and Armenia) and Iran is holding back the development of sustainable logistics chains. The EU offers assistance through sustainable development and legal reform projects, but these “soft” measures are not always competitive in an environment where Central Asia prefers infrastructure and loans (where China and Russia are strong).

- ♦ Central Asia – Russia format. After the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, Russia is losing its role as an economic and political dominant in the region. Sanctions and economic isolation have limited its attractiveness in the eyes of Central Asian countries, which are adjusting their foreign policy guidelines, reducing dependence. Russia's tough migration policy, especially towards Tajik and Kyrgyz migrants, is destabilizing the Central Asian economy due to a drop in remittances and rising tensions. This creates social and economic vulnerability.

- ♦ Central Asia – Japan format. Although Japan has been actively involved in the CA+Japan format since 2004, its economic presence is minimal. This reduces the real effectiveness of the initiatives (especially compared to China and the EU).

Cooperation in the 5+1 formats takes place in conditions of increased competition between global powers. Sanctions regimes, military conflicts (including crises in the Middle East and Eastern Europe), as well as the aggravation of international tensions have a negative impact on the implementation of projects, provoking political instability and limiting investments.

#### 5) Socio-cultural:

- ♦ Central Asia – USA format. In a number of countries in the region (especially Turkmenistan and Tajikistan), there is a wariness of Western NGOs, educational programs and American initiatives, which is associated with domestic propaganda, the legacy of post-Soviet thinking and competition with Russia and China. This reduces the level of involvement of the local population in soft power projects, despite the availability of USAID grants and programs. Despite the work of EducationUSA and scholarship programs, many residents of Central Asia have limited knowledge of English, which prevents them from participating in educational, cultural and research initiatives in the United States. Despite the existence of programs such as Fulbright, IVLP and TechGirls, the number of actually covered participants from Central Asia remains small due to bureaucracy, visa difficulties, or political barriers. The lack of bilateral recognition of diplomas and educational standards also hinders the development of academic ties. Central Asia – China format. In a number of Central Asian countries (especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), there is a high level of mistrust towards the Chinese presence, fueled by rumors of “selling land” or “demographic expansion”. This causes protests and hinders the implementation of joint projects. The issue of Uyghurs and Kazakhs in Xinjiang remains a sore subject. China's harsh policies in the region cause a negative reaction among ethnic groups in Central Asia, making it difficult to deepen humanitarian contacts.

- ♦ Central Asia – European Union format. EU cooperation formats often require knowledge of English or German, but the low level of language proficiency in a number of Central Asian countries limits the involvement of the population and local NGOs. The population of Central Asia is often poorly informed about EU programs (e.g. Erasmus+, Horizon), unlike in Russia or Turkey. This reduces the effect of cultural diplomacy and limits the EU's influence in society.

- ♦ Central Asia – Russia format. In the Central Asian countries (especially in Kazakhstan), the discussion on decolonization, revision of the role of the Russian language, historical memory is intensifying, which complicates humanitarian and educational cooperation with the Russian Federation. Millions of labor migrants from Central Asia in Russia face discrimination, everyday nationalism and legal insecurity. This creates a negative background and undermines the sustainability of the format. Due to international sanctions, Russia is becoming increasingly isolated, which narrows the opportunities for normal cultural exchanges and scientific cooperation within the framework of “5+1”.

- ♦ Central Asia – Japan format. Despite the interest in Japanese culture, the presence of Japanese centers, language programs and exchanges remains limited. This reduces the influence of Japan as



a cultural partner. Japan is perceived as an economically and culturally distant partner. The lack of historical and ethnic ties makes cooperation formats cold and technocratic. Japanese projects rarely involve young people and local communities of Central Asia – they are aimed mainly at infrastructure and official visits, which reduces their social effect.

The insufficient level of humanitarian exchange, educational cooperation and intercultural dialogue makes it difficult to build trust between countries. This is especially noticeable in relations with those partners with whom the Central Asian countries do not have a common historical and cultural background.

To better systematize the results, a summarized SWOT analysis was conducted for each of the five cooperation formats. The table below outlines the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that characterize each bilateral format.

Table 2 – SWOT analysis of the “5+1” Formats of Cooperation

	STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES
	WEAKNESSES	THREATS
CA– USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Thematic groups (TIFA, B5+1)</li> <li>- Support for anti-corruption and climate</li> <li>- U.S. scholarships and educational tools</li> <li>- Political visibility of the format</li> <li>- Technological cooperation opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Education and research exchanges</li> <li>- Public-private dialogue growth</li> <li>- Climate and digital cooperation</li> <li>- New supply chains</li> <li>- Diversification of economic ties</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No permanent secretariat</li> <li>- Fragmented coordination</li> <li>- Low trade volume with region</li> <li>- Strong dependency on U.S. political cycles</li> <li>- Limited funding for infrastructure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unstable geopolitical background</li> <li>- Sanction-linked trade risks</li> <li>- Visa and customs barriers</li> <li>- Weak local engagement</li> <li>- Conflicting strategic visions</li> </ul>
CA– EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Global Gateway funding (€12bn)</li> <li>- EIB, Erasmus+, Horizon access</li> <li>- Green economy agenda</li> <li>- Legal and institutional reform focus</li> <li>- Normative power of EU values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sustainable development cooperation</li> <li>- Regulatory modernization support</li> <li>- Research and tech collaborations</li> <li>- Cultural exchange programs</li> <li>- Green transport corridors</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bureaucratic complexity</li> <li>- Limited visibility in CA societies</li> <li>- Strict ESG and human rights criteria</li> <li>- Low local NGO participation</li> <li>- Long implementation cycles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regional insecurity (Caucasus/Iran)</li> <li>- Weak EU leverage in CA</li> <li>- Soft power less effective vs BRI</li> <li>- Institutional rigidity</li> <li>- Language and info barriers</li> </ul>
CA– China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)</li> <li>- Xi'an secretariat and biennial summits</li> <li>- Infrastructure megaprojects</li> <li>- Digital Silk Road platforms</li> <li>- Strategic investment packages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- TITR and CKU corridors</li> <li>- Energy and hydrogen hubs</li> <li>- Digital infrastructure expansion</li> <li>- Bilateral investment agreements</li> <li>- Regional logistics integration</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sovereignty concerns in CA</li> <li>- Weak regional coordination</li> <li>- Overreliance on loans</li> <li>- Public mistrust in China</li> <li>- Strategic tension with Russia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China-Russia rivalry in CA</li> <li>- Debt dependency concerns</li> <li>- Backlash over Xinjiang issues</li> <li>- Uneven investment benefits</li> <li>- Overcentralization in Beijing</li> </ul>
CA– Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Long-standing trade and migration ties</li> <li>- Existing platforms: EAEU, CIS, CSTO</li> <li>- Russian language and media influence</li> <li>- Cultural and historical commonalities</li> <li>- Energy and logistics cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Security and anti-crisis mechanisms</li> <li>- Joint migration policy reforms</li> <li>- Cultural engagement modernization</li> <li>- EAEU renewal and flexibility</li> <li>- Transit diversification</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sanctions and isolation</li> <li>- Weak innovation agenda</li> <li>- Aging integration tools</li> <li>- Migrant discrimination issues</li> <li>- Weak intra-CA coordination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Decline in remittance inflows</li> <li>- Rising nationalism in Russia</li> <li>- Sanctions on Russian infrastructure</li> <li>- Limited project monitoring</li> <li>- Political fatigue</li> </ul>

Continuation of table 3

CA– Japan	STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Human capital development (JICA)</li> <li>- Regular C5+Japan forums</li> <li>- Interest in cultural diplomacy</li> <li>- Medical and ecological initiatives</li> <li>- Respect for sovereignty in dialogue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Environmental expertise sharing</li> <li>- Smart mobility and healthcare</li> <li>- Youth and scholar engagement</li> <li>- Training centers in CA</li> <li>- Joint innovation pilot projects</li> </ul>
	WEAKNESSES	THREATS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No permanent institutional base</li> <li>- Small investment scale</li> <li>- Technocratic dialogue</li> <li>- Cultural and logistical distance</li> <li>- Low youth participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of public awareness</li> <li>- Absence of deep cultural ties</li> <li>- Fragmented project approach</li> <li>- Economic insignificance</li> <li>- No logistic or tech backbone</li> </ul>
Note: Compiled by the authors.		

## Conclusion

The conducted study showed that the key formats of interaction “5+1” between the Central Asian countries and external partners (USA, China, EU, Russia, Japan) have significant potential, but they face persistent institutional, political-economic, infrastructural and geopolitical limitations. Despite the presence of various programs, investment packages and political initiatives, the implementation of agreements remains fragmented and episodic. The main reasons for this are the lack of permanent secretariats, low coordination within the region, as well as the mismatch of priorities of the Central Asian countries and external actors.

CA–USA: the format is predominantly political and symbolic in nature, suffers from fragmentation and dependence on the domestic agenda of the United States.

CA – China: the format is effective in short-term economic initiatives, but increases strategic dependence and requires a more balanced partnership.

CA – EU: the EU’s potential is high, but the format suffers from excessive normativity and lack of flexibility; the effect is limited without adapting the tools to the specifics of the region.

CA – Russia: the format is losing relevance in the context of Russia’s geopolitical isolation; modernization and rethinking of the role of the Russian Federation in the region is necessary.

CA – Japan: the format remains under-implemented; there are prospects, but clear institutional frameworks and increased economic involvement are required.

The practical significance of the study lies in systematizing problem areas and developing proposals aimed at strengthening the coordination and sustainability of the “5+1” platforms. Based on the analysis, the following key recommendations are proposed:

1. It is necessary to form a stable and coordinated institutional base with active formats for external interaction, including the creation of permanent secretariats, coordination structures within the region itself and the introduction of regular mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of initiatives.

2. Develop a “Regional Roadmap for Foreign Economic Cooperation” of the Central Asian countries, containing common goals in the field of trade, logistics, energy, digitalization and other issues, coordinating the priorities and interests of the parties, mechanisms for distributing risks and benefits in the implementation of large infrastructure projects.

3. Ensure infrastructure integration of the region by standardizing the technical parameters of transport corridors (track width, digitalization of document flow, customs procedures) within the framework of general agreements, create a single logistics consortium or operator to coordinate traffic along the TITR, CKU and other corridors.

4. Minimize geopolitical risks and increase the sustainability of formats by promoting the principle of “inclusive neutrality” in regional foreign policy – rejection of bloc logic and priority of balance.

5. Develop anti-crisis protocols in case of waves of sanctions, conflicts or changes in partners’ foreign policy courses (for example, revision of supply chains).

Implementing these measures will not only enhance the institutional resilience of the ‘5+1’ formats but also ensure their alignment with the evolving strategic interests of Central Asian countries.

A comparative analysis has shown that the most promising format today is the Central Asia – European Union format. The EU is a long-term, pragmatic and politically neutral partner. Its multi-level model (Team Europe, EIB, Erasmus+, Horizon) provides an opportunity for a deep and sustainable transformation of interaction. Thus, for effective economic interaction in a complex international environment, Central Asia and its partners need to move from episodic forums to an institutionalized dialogue and coordinated actions aimed at long-term results.

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## **ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ ЕЛДЕРІНІҢ СЫРТҚЫ ӘРІПТЕСТЕРМЕН «5+1» ФОРМАТЫНДАҒЫ ЫНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҒЫ: БАСТАМАЛАРДЫ ІСКЕ АСЫРУДАҒЫ МӘСЕЛЕЛЕР МЕН ПЕРСПЕКТИВАЛАР**

### **Аңдатпа**

Халықаралық қатынастар жүйесінің жаһандық трансформациясы аясында Орталық Азияның стратегиялық маңыздылығының артуы жағдайында «5+1» форматтары аймақ елдерінің жетекші әлемдік державалармен – АҚШ, Қытай, ЕО, Ресей және Жапониямен сыртқы экономикалық және сыртқы саяси өзара іс-қимылының маңызды құралына айналууда. Дегенмен, осы форматтар аясындағы бастамаларды жүзеге асыру бірқатар жүйелік қиындықтар мен шектеулерге тап болады. Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты бірлескен жобаларды жүзеге асыруды бәсеңдететін негізгі қиындықтарды анықтау және жан-жақты талдау, сондай-ақ халықаралық ынтымақтастықтың тиімділігін арттыру мүмкіндіктерін табу болып табылады. Жұмыста ынтымақтастықтың тиімділігін шектейтін институционалдық, саяси және экономикалық, инфрақұрылымдық, геосаяси және әлеуметтік-мәдени кедергілер қарастырылған. Зерттеудің ғылыми маңыздылығы бес «ОА+1» форматындағы ынтымақтастықты бағалаудың құрылымдық салыстырмалы тәсілінде, сондай-ақ институционалдық тапшылықтар мен тараптардың мүдделері арасындағы қайшылықтарды анықтауда жатыр. Зерттеу нәтижелері аймақтық ынтымақтастық, тұрақты даму және халықаралық экономикалық интеграция бойынша теориялық базаны байытады. Тәжірибелік маңыздылығы «5+1» шеңберінде сыртқы экономикалық бастамаларды үйлестіруді, институционалдық қолдауды және тиімділігін арттыруды күшейту бойынша қолданбалы ұсынымдарды әзірлеуде жатыр.

**Тірек сөздер:** 5+1 форматы, аймақтық интеграция, стратегиялық серіктестік, тұрақты даму, халықаралық бастамалар, халықаралық қатынастар, экономикалық интеграция.

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## **СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО СТРАН ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ С ВНЕШНИМИ ПАРТНЕРАМИ В ФОРМАТАХ «5+1»: ПРОБЛЕМЫ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ РЕАЛИЗАЦИИ ИНИЦИАТИВ**

### **Аннотация**

В условиях возрастания стратегической значимости Центральной Азии на фоне глобальной трансформации системы международных отношений форматы «5+1» становятся важным инструментом внешнеэкономического и внешнеполитического взаимодействия стран региона с ведущими мировыми державами: США, Китаем, ЕС, Россией и Японией. Однако процесс реализации инициатив в рамках этих форматов сталкивается с целым рядом системных вызовов и сдерживающих факторов. Целью настоящего исследования является выявление и комплексный анализ проблем, замедляющих реализацию совместных проектов, а также поиск возможностей для повышения эффективности международного сотрудничества. В работе рассмотрены институциональные, политико-экономические, инфраструктурные, геополитические и социокультурные барьеры, ограничивающие эффективность сотрудничества. Научная значимость исследования заключается в структурированном сравнительном подходе к оценке сотрудничества в пяти форматах «ЦА+1», а также в выявлении институциональных дефицитов и противоречий между интересами сторон. Результаты исследования обогащают теоретическую базу по вопросам региональной кооперации, устойчивого развития и международной экономической интеграции. Практическая значимость заключается в разработке прикладных рекомендаций по усилению координации, институциональной поддержке и повышению результативности внешнеэкономических инициатив в рамках «5+1».

**Ключевые слова:** формат «5+1», региональная интеграция, стратегическое партнерство, устойчивое развитие, международные инициативы, международные отношения, экономическая интеграция.

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