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INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF ECONOMIC COOPERATION BETWEEN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES AND EXTERNAL PARTNERS WITHIN THE “5+1” FORMATS: MECHANISMS AND IMPLEMENTATION INSTRUMENTS

Abstract

The past decade has witnessed the active institutionalisation of multilateral “5+1” formats between the Central Asian states and external partners. This trend has been reflected in the growing number of summits, ministerial meetings, and joint declarations, although these political developments have not always been followed by economic implementation of a comparable scale. This article examines the institutional mechanisms and instruments that facilitate the transition from political agreements to the implementation of economic projects within the “5+1” formats involving the United States, China, and the European Union between 2015–2025. Drawing on comparative institutional analysis, content analysis of official documents, and case studies, each format is assessed according to six qualitative criteria: regularity of interaction, permanent coordination bodies, specificity of roadmaps, financial provision, monitoring mechanisms, and project outcomes. Multilateral commitments are consistently distinguished from parallel bilateral agreements. The analysis demonstrates that all three formats demonstrate comparable institutional maturity in terms of high-level engagement and permanent coordination mechanisms. However, they differ substantially in the specificity of roadmaps, the alignment of financial instruments with the multilateral level, and the availability of monitoring arrangements. The European Union format has the most developed roadmap and monitoring architecture, whereas the US and Chinese formats reveal a persistent gap between announced funding volumes and their institutional linkage to multilateral rather than bilateral cooperation. The research’s novelty lies in developing a qualitative, non-aggregated comparative framework connecting institutional architecture with documented project outcomes. Its practical significance concerns its applicability to Central Asian ministries, regional coordination bodies, and development institutions.

Keywords: institutional mechanisms, “5+1” formats, economic cooperation, roadmaps, implementation monitoring, project-level performance, multilateral and bilateral cooperation, regional integration.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) have attracted growing institutional attention from external partners. Alongside the frameworks of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union, multilateral “Central Asia + 1” dialogue platforms have developed, through which a single external partner establishes institutionalised engagement simultaneously with all five countries of the region. The “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue was initiated by Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi in August 2004 and represented the first instance in which a major external actor approached the five Central Asian states as a single collective partner [1]. Three years later, in 2007, the Republic of Korea established a similar framework. To date, the countries of the region participate in more than a dozen such mechanisms, including formats with the United States, operational since 2015, as well as with the European Union, China, and Russia, the latter two having been institutionalised in 2022–2023 [2].

The US-led “C5+1” format was launched on 27 September 2015 on the margins of the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly, when US Secretary of State John Kerry met with the foreign ministers of the five Central Asian states. The first ministerial meeting within this framework was held in Samarkand on 1 November 2015 [3]. Significantly, the proliferation of dialogue platforms has been accompanied by an increase in the number of summits, ministerial meetings, and joint declarations. However, this has not always resulted in a comparable expansion of practical economic cooperation. During the initial years of its existence, the C5+1 format was not supported by sufficient political attention or resource commitments from Washington, whose focus was concentrated on conflicts in the Middle East and South Asia and, subsequently, on its strategic pivot towards the Indo-Pacific region [2].

The three formats (Central Asia – United States (C5+1), Central Asia – China (C+C5), and Central Asia – European Union (C5+1)) constitute an appropriate subject for comparative analysis, as they demonstrate structurally distinct institutional trajectories despite comparable levels of formal institutionalisation.

Over the decade of its existence, the US-led format has evolved from a consultative platform into a structure increasingly oriented towards the implementation of joint projects. This evolution is reflected in the expansion of its agenda: from security and Afghanistan-related issues in 2015–2019 to trade, investment, and critical minerals in 2023–2025 [4].

The format with the European Union has evolved from a predominantly normative agenda encompassing democracy, human rights, and the rule of law towards a broader strategic narrative incorporating connectivity, supply-chain resilience, and the energy transition. At the same time, the normative component has been retained as a parallel, although not obstructive, element of cooperation [5].

The format with China developed through a combination of Beijing’s domestic political priorities and the logic of great-power competition, becoming institutionalised without the mandatory participation of Russia, in contrast to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation [6].

The existing literature on “Central Asia + 1” formats may be systematised into several strands. The first strand comprises studies addressing the general logic of regionalism in the post-Soviet space. The distinction between regionalism as a deliberate institutional policy pursued by states and regionalisation as the spontaneous expansion of cross-border interactions, proposed by A. Libman and E. Vinokurov [7], together with their subsequent analysis of the institutional architecture of Eurasian connectivity and the role of extra-regional actors [8], provides a theoretical framework within which Central Asia is viewed as a “laboratory of Eurasian integration” – a region characterised by the highest density of overlapping and not always mutually coordinated institutional arrangements on the continent [7].

The second strand of literature focuses on the history and institutional evolution of individual “5+1” formats, which are generally examined in isolation rather than through systematic comparison. With regard to the US-led format, the literature provides detailed accounts of its transformation from the ministerial to the presidential level [9, 10], the establishment of a secretariat in 2022 [9, 11], and the subsequent shift in its agenda towards critical mineral resources and a more transactional logic under the Trump administration [4, 12].

With respect to the format with China, the literature identifies a consistent process of institutionalisation, extending from virtual ministerial consultations in 2020 to the Xi’an Summit in 2023 and the establishment of a permanent secretariat in 2024 [6, 13].

Regarding the format with the European Union, existing studies document its evolution from the strategies adopted in 2007 and 2019 to the first full-scale summit in 2025 and the implementation of the Global Gateway strategy [5, 14].

The third strand consists of a limited number of studies offering evaluative judgements concerning the effectiveness of individual formats, often shaped by the geopolitical positions of their authors. In particular, several Russian analytical centres have questioned the practical effectiveness of the C5+1 format in the economic and investment spheres [15]. Such assessments, however, are not based on a systematic comparative methodology and therefore do not provide a sufficient basis for a verifiable scholarly conclusion.

Drawing on the distinction between regionalism and regionalisation [7, 8], the authors of this article consistently differentiate between an institutional mechanism and an implementation instrument. An institutional mechanism is understood as an organisational form of interaction, including a summit, ministerial dialogue, secretariat, or working group. An implementation instrument refers to a specific means through which agreements are translated into economic outcomes, such as a roadmap, credit facility, investment fund, or grant. The central research problem concerns a potential institutional gap between the adoption of political decisions and the actual implementation of economic projects. The existence of such a gap is suggested by individual observations reported in the literature reviewed above. However, it has not yet been subjected to a systematic comparative analysis encompassing all three formats examined in this study.

The aim of the article is to provide a comparative assessment of the institutional mechanisms and instruments that facilitate the transition from political agreements to the practical implementation of economic projects within the three “Central Asia + 1” formats during the period 2015–2025.

The principal research question is: how do institutional mechanisms and implementation instruments differ across the three formats, and to what extent is their connection to project implementation documented?

The supplementary research questions are as follows: What permanent and temporary bodies have been established within the formats under consideration? Do the adopted documents specify concrete timelines, responsible implementing actors, sources of financing, and measurable indicators? Which initiatives have progressed from the stage of political declaration to practical implementation? How do the cooperation models pursued by the United States, China, and the European Union in their relations with the Central Asian states differ?

The main research hypothesis is that the practical effectiveness of these formats depends not so much on the intensity of diplomatic interaction as on the existence of permanent coordinating bodies, the specificity of roadmaps, committed financing, and monitoring mechanisms.

The supplementary hypothesis proposes that formats equipped with specialised financial instruments demonstrate a higher level of practical effectiveness than those based predominantly on political and diplomatic dialogue.

The scientific novelty of the study stems from the absence in the existing literature of comparative research that systematically relates the institutional architecture of the three formats under consideration to actual project implementation outcomes through a common methodological framework, rather than analysing each format separately.

Materials and methods

The research compares three cooperation formats involving the same five Central Asian states and different external partners. Each case is analysed using the same set of questions and six qualitative criteria, which allows for a consistent comparison of their documented institutional arrangements. However, the study does not assess the causal effects of these arrangements on economic outcomes and does not aim to produce statistically generalisable results.

The selection of the three formats involving the United States, China, and the European Union is based on three considerations. First, each of these cases involves an officially institutionalized multilateral dialogue conducted in a “5+1” format, unlike the less formalized frameworks of cooperation with other external partners. Second, these formats represent substantively different initial models of cooperation – namely, political-dialogue, investment-infrastructure, and regulatory-programmatic models – thereby providing the variation required for comparative analysis. Third, a sufficient body of publicly available and verifiable documentation exists for each format for the period from 2015 to 2025. Cooperation formats involving other partners – Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, and Russia – are excluded from the principal comparative analysis because of differences in their institutional trajectories and are referred to only for the purpose of outlining the historical context.

The chronological scope of the study covers the period from 2015 to 2025, which represents the phase of the most intensive institutionalization of all three formats. Selected developments predating 2015, particularly the establishment of cooperation formats with Japan in 2004 and the Republic of Korea in 2007, are mentioned solely as background elements of the institutional context and are not included in the comparative analysis.

The units of analysis comprise official declarations and joint statements adopted following summits, action plans and roadmaps, documents establishing coordinating bodies and working groups, financial and project-based programmes, and official implementation reports, where such reports have been published. Documents were selected on the basis of three criteria: the official status of the source, public accessibility, and direct relevance to the multilateral format. Documents relating exclusively to the bilateral relations of an individual Central Asian state with an external partner were explicitly excluded unless their connection to the multilateral format was formally confirmed.

The study combines content analysis of official documents with comparative institutional analysis. The documents are examined to identify implementation timelines, responsible actors, measurable indicators, funding mechanisms and monitoring arrangements. Individual initiatives are assessed according to their implementation status and their documented link to the relevant multilateral format. The analysis clearly distinguishes between formal institutional commitments and documented evidence of project implementation. It therefore focuses on institutional mechanisms and implementation processes rather than providing a comprehensive assessment of completed project outcomes.

The institutional effectiveness of the formats is assessed not through an aggregated scoring system but by means of a document-based and verifiable qualitative classification according to six criteria. For each criterion, one of three statuses is assigned on the basis of a formal indicator, namely the presence or absence of a specific type of documentary evidence. Table 1 presents the operational definition of each criterion.

Table 1 – Criteria for the qualitative classification of the institutional effectiveness of cooperation formats

Criterion	Operational Indicator	Possible Statuses
Regularity of interaction	The frequency and predictability of meetings at various levels, including heads of state, ministers, and experts	Regular / irregular / not documented
Permanent coordinating bodies	The existence of a clearly designated permanent body with a formally documented mandate	Established / announced but not confirmed / absent
Specificity of roadmaps	The inclusion of implementation timelines, responsible actors, and/or measurable indicators	Specified / partially specified / absent
Financial support	The availability of a specific financial instrument indicating the source and volume of funding	Secured / indicated without further detail / not indicated
Monitoring	The publication of implementation progress reports or the existence of a mechanism for reviewing and revising roadmaps	Established / limited / absent
Project-level effectiveness	The existence of formally documented ongoing or completed projects attributable to the relevant cooperation format	Confirmed / partially confirmed / not confirmed
Note: Compiled based on the research methodology.		

The comparison of the formats is based on an analysis of their qualitative profiles across six dimensions. The comparative findings are presented descriptively, with explicit reference to the specific criteria along which the formats differ.

The proposed methodology is subject to several limitations. The qualitative classification captures the institutional structure of the formats only to the extent that it is documented in publicly available sources and therefore cannot be regarded as an exhaustive account of actual institutional practice, including non-public aspects of cooperation. Asymmetries in data transparency across the formats – particularly the greater public availability of reporting on cooperation with the United States and the European Union compared with the China-Central Asia format – may affect the assignment of statuses under the monitoring and project implementation criteria. This is treated as a limitation of the evidentiary base rather than as a substantive conclusion regarding the cooperation mechanism itself.

The absence of a comparable quantitative database covering all three formats precludes the application of statistical and econometric methods. Bilateral projects involving individual Central Asian countries and external partners are systematically excluded from the assessment of the

multilateral format unless their institutional affiliation with the “5+1” framework is directly confirmed by documentary evidence. In ambiguous cases, the project is assigned the status “partially confirmed” under the project implementation criterion, accompanied by an explicit qualification in the text of the study.

Finally, the relatively short observation period for the key institutional developments across all three formats, most of which occurred between 2023 and 2025, limits the possibility of assessing the durability of the identified differences over the medium term.

Results and discussion

The Central Asia-United States format (C5+1) was launched on 27 September 2015 on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly as a consultative platform at the level of foreign ministers. The first ministerial meeting was held in Samarkand on 1 November 2015, where the Joint Declaration of Partnership and Cooperation was adopted [3]. In subsequent years, the format operated through annual ministerial meetings and three thematic working groups focusing on the economy, energy and the environment, and security [3]. In 2022, a permanent “C5+1” Secretariat was established to formalise procedures for setting priorities and coordinating communication among the participating governments [3].

A qualitative institutional shift occurred on 19 September 2023, when the first summit at the level of heads of state in the history of the format was held in New York on the sidelines of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly. US President Joseph Biden met with the presidents of the five Central Asian states [10; 16]. The summit resulted in the adoption of the New York Declaration, in which the parties reaffirmed the establishment of the Secretariat and working groups in 2022 and agreed to continue regular dialogue [16]. The intention to launch a Critical Minerals Dialogue was also announced at the summit [10].

The second summit at the level of heads of state was held in Washington, D.C., on 6 November 2025. It was the first summit in the history of the format to take place at the White House and the first to be attended by President Donald Trump [11]. Held to mark the tenth anniversary of the platform, the summit was accompanied by activities within the Critical Minerals Dialogue, whose most recent meeting had been conducted virtually on 22 May 2025, as well as by an in-person meeting of the C5+1 Secretariat in Dushanbe on 4 September 2025 [17]. The “B5+1” business platform was conceived as a link between intergovernmental dialogue and commercial initiatives. The second “B5+1” Forum was held in Bishkek on 4–5 February 2026 and brought together approximately 400 representatives of government and business, including delegates from more than 40 US companies [17].

Following the 2025 summit, aggregate commercial commitments were announced, with their total value estimated by different sources at between USD 100 billion and USD 130 billion [18]. In addition, the US Department of Commerce announced the “C5+1” Deal Zone framework initiative, valued at more than USD 25 billion [19]. Nevertheless, most of the specific transactions constitute bilateral arrangements between individual Central Asian states and the United States rather than instruments of the multilateral format itself. These include a USD 1.1 billion agreement between Cove Capital and the state-owned company Tau-Ken Samruk on the development of a tungsten deposit, with potential financing of up to USD 900 million from the Export-Import Bank of the United States [20]; Uzbekistan’s declared intention to invest more than USD 100 billion in the US economy; a package of eight agreements in geological exploration, water conservation, and agriculture [18]; and contracts for the delivery of up to 37–40 Boeing aircraft to airlines in three Central Asian states [18].

No specialised multilateral financial instrument comparable in its level of detail to the corresponding EU mechanisms was identified in the sources examined. Data on publicly available reporting concerning the monitoring of the implementation of decisions adopted within the format are likewise absent [12]. In this context, the assessment of Russian analyst R. Alimov of the Valdai Club, as cited by the Jamestown Foundation, is illustrative: the format “has not evolved into an effective platform for coordinating interests ... in the economic and investment spheres” [15]. This assessment represents one pole of the existing discourse rather than an independently verified conclusion.

The secretariat, thematic working groups, the Dialogue on Critical Minerals, and the B5+1 platform collectively form a fairly well-developed institutional architecture. The disconnect arises at the next stage of the institutional chain—the transition from commitments to their financial backing. The large-scale financial commitments discussed here are predominantly bilateral in nature and are not formally integrated into a dedicated multilateral financing mechanism, making it difficult to directly attribute the announced investment outcomes to the C5+1 format itself.

The Central Asia-China format (C+C5) was institutionalised later than the other two formats. Consultations at the level of foreign ministers had been held virtually since 2020, while the first summit of heads of state took place in Xi'an on 18–19 May 2023, resulting in the adoption of the Xi'an Declaration and the Xi'an Vision for China-Central Asia Cooperation [6]. The parties agreed to hold summits every two years, alternately in China and in the Central Asian states, and to establish a permanent secretariat for the mechanism in China. The Secretariat was officially inaugurated in March 2024 [13].

The second summit was held in Astana on 17 June 2025. Its outcomes included the adoption of the Astana Declaration of the Second China-Central Asia Summit and the signing of the Treaty on Eternal Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation between China and the five Central Asian states. Four new institutional platforms were also established: cooperation centres for poverty reduction, educational exchange, and desertification control, as well as the Unimpeded Trade Platform [21, 13]. The parties designated 2025 and 2026 as the “Years of High-Quality Development of China–Central Asia Cooperation” and agreed to hold the third summit in China in 2027 [21].

In addition to the declaration, a package of documents was signed, including a Memorandum of Understanding on investment cooperation in the field of green minerals, a Memorandum of Cooperation on the China-Central Asia-Europe high-speed railway project, and an Action Plan for the High-Quality Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative [13].

Xi Jinping announced a grant of CNY 1.5 billion, equivalent to approximately USD 208 million, to support public welfare projects in the five countries of the region [21]. This constitutes a financial instrument established at the multilateral level, although its volume remains relatively modest in comparison with the overall scale of cooperation.

The principal volume of economic interaction continues to be implemented at the bilateral level. For example, the package of 24 intergovernmental and interdepartmental agreements between Kazakhstan and China signed on the sidelines of the Astana summit [22], as well as bilateral trade between Kazakhstan and China, which reached USD 43.8 billion in 2024 and increased by 9% compared with the previous year [23], represent bilateral indicators that are not directly attributable to the multilateral mechanism.

Aggregate statistics are also cumulative rather than genuinely multilateral in institutional terms. China's total trade turnover with the five Central Asian states reached USD 94.8 billion in 2024, increasing by USD 5.4 billion compared with 2023 [24]. Aggregate trade turnover in 2024–2025 approached USD 100 billion, representing a 35% increase since the Xi'an Summit, while the number of joint ventures and projects exceeded 10,000 [22]. However, these figures aggregate China's bilateral trade flows with each of the five states separately.

No data were identified in the sources examined concerning public reporting by the Secretariat on progress in implementing summit decisions.

Within the “China–Central Asia” framework, the primary analytical challenge lies not in a lack of economic activity, but in the complexity of institutional attribution. The scale of trade, investment, and joint projects attests to China's active economic presence in the region; however, open sources do not always make it possible to distinguish these outcomes from bilateral cooperation or the broader Belt and Road Initiative. This indicates a key institutional gap between the multilateral coordination mechanism and the project implementation stage, although these difficulties may stem in part from the limited transparency of sources rather than the structure of the framework itself.

The Central Asia–European Union format has the longest institutional history among the three cases under consideration. The European Union has engaged with the region since the early 1990s. The first dedicated strategy, The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, was adopted in 2007, while the current version of the strategy dates from 2019 [5].

The institutional structure of the format comprises three levels:

1. EU-Central Asia ministerial meetings, held on a regular basis: the 19th meeting took place in Luxembourg in October 2023, while the 20th was held in Ashgabat on 27 March 2025;
2. regional meetings between the heads of state of Central Asia and the President of the European Council, held in Astana in 2022 and Cholpon-Ata in 2023;
3. the first full-scale summit between the heads of state of Central Asia and the EU leadership, held in Samarkand on 3–4 April 2025, following which the parties elevated their relations to the level of a strategic partnership [25].

The principal programmatic instrument is the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the European Union and Central Asia, adopted in Luxembourg on 23 October 2023. The document comprises 79 specific action points structured around five priority areas [25].

Importantly, the Joint Declaration of the Samarkand Summit contains an explicit commitment by the parties to conduct periodic assessments of progress in implementing the Joint Roadmap in order to ensure its effectiveness and alignment with regional priorities [26]. Among the three formats examined, this represents a rare instance in which a monitoring mechanism is directly institutionalised in the text of an official document.

According to the official statement made by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the Global Gateway financial package announced at the summit amounted to EUR 12 billion, equivalent to USD 13.2 billion. The funding was allocated across four areas: EUR 6.4 billion for environmental projects, including hydropower; EUR 3 billion for the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, also known as the Middle Corridor; EUR 2.5 billion for the exploration and extraction of critical raw materials; and EUR 100 million for the development of satellite connectivity [27, 28].

In addition, specific operational instruments of the European Investment Bank (EIB) were formalised through four memoranda of understanding with partners in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, with a total value of up to EUR 365 million. The funds are intended to support projects in sustainable transport, water management, energy-efficient housing, and climate resilience. A decision was also taken to open an EIB regional representation office in Uzbekistan [28].

The activities of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) provide relevant background on development finance in the region. However, its reported EUR 2.26 billion across 121 projects in 2024 covers six economies [29], including Mongolia, and therefore does not correspond exactly to the five-country scope of this study. Moreover, annual investment commitments should not be equated with full disbursement or completed project outcomes. This aggregate is therefore treated as contextual information rather than direct evidence of the effectiveness of the EU–Central Asia format.

Furthermore, in January 2024, at the EU-Central Asia Investors Forum for Transport Connectivity in Brussels, European and international financial institutions announced the mobilisation of EUR 10 billion to support the Trans-Caspian route. In 2022, two regional Team Europe initiatives were also launched: a EUR 700 million initiative on water, energy, and climate, and a EUR 40 million initiative in the field of digitalisation [14].

The EU case differs from the US and Chinese formats primarily in the degree to which institutional mechanisms, financial instruments and monitoring arrangements are formally linked. The presence of a detailed roadmap, identified financing channels and an explicit commitment to periodic review reduces the institutional gap between political decisions and implementation. At the same time, the available evidence does not yet permit the EUR 12 billion Global Gateway package announced in 2025 to be treated as a completed economic outcome, since the observation period remains too short.

Table 2 demonstrates a substantive asymmetry among the three formats specifically at the level of instruments rather than mechanisms.

Table 2 distinguishes between organisational mechanisms and instruments designed to support implementation. All three formats have coordination mechanisms, but their financial instruments differ in scope, specificity and institutional basis. The EU package provides a detailed sectoral breakdown, the Chinese format includes an announced regional grant, while the US format relies mainly on commercial commitments implemented through bilateral channels. These differences reflect how implementation support is organised and documented, but they do not by themselves demonstrate differences in project effectiveness.

Table 2 – Distinction between the mechanisms and instruments of economic cooperation

Format	Mechanism (Organisational Arrangement)	Instrument (Means of Implementation)
United States (C5+1)	C5+1 Secretariat (since 2022); Critical Minerals Dialogue; working groups on economic, energy and environmental issues, as well as security; B5+1 platform	C5+1 Deal Zone, with an indicative value exceeding USD 25 billion; bilateral investment agreements, including projects related to tungsten mining, the acquisition of Boeing aircraft, and cooperation with Uzbekistan
China (C+C5)	Secretariat in Xi'an (since March 2024); four thematic cooperation centres established in Astana in 2025	Grant amounting to CNY 1.5 billion; Action Plan for the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative; bilateral loan and investment agreements
European Union (C5+1)	Regular EU-Central Asia ministerial meetings (the 19th in October 2023, the 20th in March 2025); regional meetings of heads of state (2022, 2023); decision to open an EIB regional representation office in Uzbekistan	EUR 12 billion Global Gateway package allocated across four priority areas; EIB memoranda amounting to EUR 365 million;
Note: Compiled based on sources [3, 13, 17, 21, 25, 28].		

Table 3 summarizes the institutional structure and development chronology of the three formats.

Table 3 – Institutional structure and chronology of key events in the formats under review

Parameter	United States (C5+1)	China (C+C5)	European Union (C5+1)
Year of establishment	2015 – launched at the ministerial level	2020 – launched at the ministerial level	2007 – adoption of the Strategy; 2019 – revision of the Strategy
Establishment of a secretariat	2022	March 2024, Xi'an	No unified secretariat has been established; coordination is carried out through a decentralised institutional system
First summit of heads of state	19 September 2023, New York	18–19 May 2023, Xi'an	3–4 April 2025, Samarkand
Most recent summit	6 November 2025, Washington, D.C.; held at the White House for the first time	17 June 2025, Astana; the second summit since the format's establishment	3–4 April 2025; the first and, to date, the only summit
Frequency of summits	No fixed schedule has been established	Once every two years; the next summit is scheduled to be held in China in 2027	No fixed schedule has been established; ministerial meetings are held regularly
Note: Compiled based on sources [3, 6, 10, 11, 13, 25].			

The comparison shows that all three formats demonstrate a similarly high level of institutionalization in terms of regular interaction and the presence of permanent coordinating bodies. Each has established permanent coordination structures and maintains a predictable, although differently organized, schedule of meetings.

More substantial differences emerge in the specificity of roadmaps and are particularly evident in financial arrangements and monitoring mechanisms. According to these criteria, the EU format demonstrates a more developed institutional framework than the other two formats. Only the EU framework includes an explicitly documented commitment to monitoring, together with the most detailed allocation of financial resources across specific areas of cooperation.

The chronology also indicates that the duration of a cooperation format does not necessarily correspond to its level of institutional development. Although the EU framework has existed for the longest period, China established a permanent secretariat relatively quickly, while the US format created its Secretariat only several years after its launch.

Table 4 presents a comparative qualitative matrix developed on the basis of six criteria and visualized in figure 2.

Table 4 – Comparative qualitative matrix of institutional characteristics

Criterion	United States (C5+1)	China (C+C5)	European Union (C5+1)
Regularity of interaction	Regular interaction	Regular interaction	Regular interaction
Permanent coordination bodies	Established since 2022	Established since 2024	In place; a decentralised coordination system is operational
Specificity of roadmaps	Partially specified	Partially specified	Clearly specified; 79 action points are included
Financial backing	Indicated without further specification	Indicated and partially institutionalised	Formally secured and detailed across four priority areas
Monitoring	Limited	No data available	An explicit monitoring obligation is formally established
Project implementation outcomes	Partially confirmed; predominantly at the bilateral level	Partially confirmed; predominantly at the bilateral level	Partially confirmed; includes EBRD-financed projects

Note: Compiled based on the data presented in tables 2 and 3.

The data presented in table 4 show that differences among the formats emerge primarily at the later stages of the criterion chain, particularly in financial support, monitoring, and project-level performance, rather than at its initial stages related to the regularity of interaction and the existence of coordinating bodies. This suggests that the main source of variation among the three formats lies not in the degree of institutionalisation itself, but in their capacity to implement institutional commitments in practice. In other words, the formats are broadly similar in terms of political and organisational institutionalisation, but differ in their ability to translate these institutional arrangements into financed, monitored, and verifiable outcomes.

Thus, the institutionalisation of meetings does not appear to be the main bottleneck in any of the formats. The key constraint arises at the implementation stage, when established institutional mechanisms must be converted into concrete financial and project outcomes that can be directly attributed to the respective cooperation format. Figure 1 illustrates the stage of this process at which the main gap emerges in each of the formats examined.

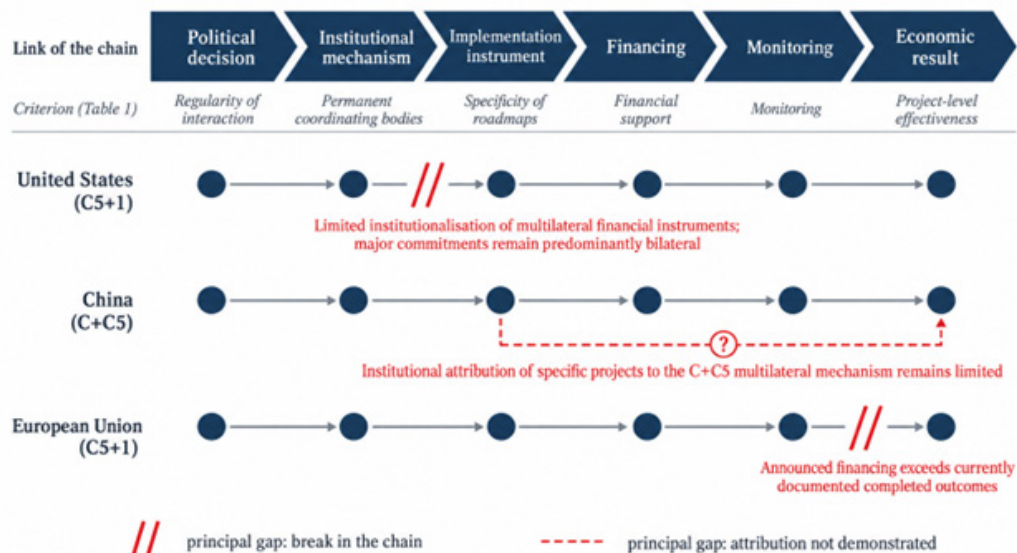


Figure 1 – Institutional chain linking political decisions to economic projects

Note: Compiled based on the analysis of the research findings. The lower row indicates the classification criteria from Table 1 associated with the respective stages of the institutional chain. Red marks show the principal gap identified in each format: a break in the chain for the US and the EU, and an attribution gap for China. Other partially documented links are summarised in figure 2.

Figure 1 shows that all three formats face limitations in linking political decisions to verifiable economic outcomes. However, the nature of these limitations differs across the institutional chain: political decision → institutional mechanism → implementation instrument → financing → monitoring → economic result.

In the US format, the principal gap concerns the link between established coordination mechanisms and dedicated multilateral financial instruments, with major financial commitments remaining predominantly bilateral. In the Chinese format, the main limitation is the difficulty of attributing specific projects to the multilateral mechanism itself, as distinct from bilateral cooperation or the broader Belt and Road Initiative. This represents an attribution gap rather than a break at a single stage of implementation. In the EU format, the principal limitation concerns the final stage of the chain: the transition from announced financing to documented completed project outcomes. The relatively short observation period following the key decisions limits the extent to which such outcomes can be assessed.

Figure 2 – visualises the same pattern across six criteria.

	United States (C5+1)	China (C+C5)	European Union (C5+1)
Regularity of interaction	Regular	Regular	Regular
Permanent coordinating bodies	Established since 2022	Established since 2024	Established; decentralised coordination system
Specificity of roadmaps	Partially specified	Partially specified	Clearly specified (79 action points)
Financial support	Indicated, without further specification	Indicated, partly institutionalised	Secured; detailed across four priority areas
Monitoring	Limited	No data available	Explicit monitoring obligation established
Project implementation outcomes	Partially confirmed; mostly bilateral	Partially confirmed; mostly bilateral	Partially confirmed; includes documented EBRD project implementation

Present / confirmed
 Partial / limited
 Data unavailable

Figure 2 – Comparison of qualitative institutional profiles of the three formats

Note: Compiled based on the classification presented in table 4. Cell labels reproduce the corresponding statuses; grey shading indicates cases in which sufficient documentary evidence was unavailable.

Figure 2 compares the documented institutional features of the three formats. Regular interaction and coordination mechanisms are common to all three, while the main differences concern the specificity of roadmaps, financial arrangements, and monitoring mechanisms. The EU format is distinguished by a more detailed roadmap and an explicit commitment to periodic review. However, the available evidence does not demonstrate that these institutional features have resulted in better project outcomes attributable specifically to the format. Grey shading indicates insufficient documented evidence and should not be interpreted as evidence that no activity has taken place.

The intermediate institutional level – comprising thematic working groups and sectoral dialogues – also warrants separate analysis. In the institutional chain presented in figure 1, this level occupies a position between the institutional mechanism, including the secretariat, and the financial instrument.

Within the US format, this level is represented by three working groups that have operated since 2015–2016, focusing respectively on the economy, energy and the environment, and security [3]. In 2023–2024, these mechanisms were supplemented by the Critical Minerals Dialogue [10] and the B5+1 business platform [17].

Within the China format, a comparable function is performed by four thematic cooperation centers established simultaneously at the 2025 Astana Summit [13]. Their recent establishment, however, makes it difficult to assess their operational maturity at the time of writing.

Within the EU format, this function is fulfilled by sectoral Team Europe initiatives in the fields of water resources, energy and climate, as well as digitalisation. These initiatives were launched as early as 2022, three years before the first full-scale summit was convened [14].

This distinction demonstrates that the sustainability of thematic tracks is not determined solely by the convening of a summit at the level of heads of state. Within the EU format, these tracks became institutionalised earlier and independently of the summit, whereas in the US and China formats they developed either concurrently with the summit or prior to it, but as part of the same broader institutional process.

The constraints identified across the three formats are different in form but similar in function: in each case, they reduce the traceability of the transition from political commitment to verifiable economic outcome.

Table 5 – Key institutional constraints and directions for improving the formats

Format	Main Institutional Constraint	Direction for Improvement
United States	Absence of a dedicated multilateral financial instrument; no publicly available monitoring data were identified.	Assign financial commitments to the Secretariat or the Critical Minerals Dialogue rather than relying exclusively on bilateral agreements; introduce public reporting on project implementation progress.
China	Systematic conflation of aggregated bilateral statistics with the outcomes of the multilateral mechanism itself.	Clearly distinguish, in official reporting, between projects implemented under the “C+C5” format and bilateral initiatives or projects undertaken within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); publish reports prepared by the Secretariat.
European Union	A gap between the volume of commitments announced under the Global Gateway initiative in 2025 and the documented evidence of completed outcomes.	Accelerate the transition from the signing of memoranda to reporting on the actual disbursement and utilisation of funds; align the reporting practices of the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) with the overarching roadmap.
Note: Compiled by the authors based on the findings of the analysis presented in tables 2–4.		

Table 5 – translates the identified constraints into specific priorities for improving implementation transparency. In the US case, this requires clearer identification of which financial commitments belong to the multilateral format. In the Chinese case, format-specific projects should be more clearly distinguished from broader bilateral cooperation. In the EU case, greater attention should be given to documenting the implementation of the announced financing.

Accordingly, despite differences in wording, the proposed areas for improvement converge on a common principle: ensuring a closer institutional alignment between the reporting system and the multilateral mechanism itself.

The findings generally support the main hypothesis. Although all three formats have regular interaction and permanent coordination structures, they differ in the specificity of roadmaps, financial arrangements, and monitoring mechanisms. However, these differences reflect the documented institutional design of the formats rather than proven differences in their economic effectiveness. Since project outcomes cannot yet be clearly attributed to the respective formats, the analysis does not show whether stronger institutional arrangements lead to better project results.

The supplementary hypothesis concerning the relationship between specialised financial instruments and the practical implementation of initiatives is only partially supported. The decisive factor is not the mere announcement of a financial package at a summit, but rather the institutional linkage of funding to permanent mechanisms, particularly to the development finance institutions of the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Their activities are not confined to individual summits and have been conducted over many years, including prior to the 2025 summit. For example, the EBRD’s investments amounting to EUR 2.26 billion relate to 2024 and therefore predate the announcement of the Global Gateway package [28, 29].

This explains why the large volumes of investment announced at summits cannot be regarded as unambiguous evidence of the effectiveness of the multilateral format itself. In most cases, the reported amounts include bilateral deals publicly presented within the framework of a multilateral event but institutionally connected neither to the format's secretariat nor to its joint financial instruments.

Differences in the scale and structure of the three partners' financial commitments reflect the divergence in their strategic objectives in the region. In the case of the United States, the financial logic of engagement during 2023–2025 became increasingly transactional and was primarily oriented towards concluding deals in the field of critical minerals amid intensifying competition with China [4, 12]. China's instruments remain embedded within the logic of the Belt and Road Initiative, under which the boundaries between the “C+C5” format and bilateral financing continue to be blurred [6]. EU financing is structured around the Global Gateway initiative and retains a pronounced normative dimension [5, 26]. These differences substantiate the methodological decision not to apply a single numerical scale of comparison without accounting for the institutional anchoring of financial commitments.

The findings also refine the theoretical framework outlined in the introduction. The distinction between regionalism as a deliberate institutional policy pursued by states and regionalisation as the spontaneous expansion of cross-border linkages [7] makes it possible to interpret the “5+1” formats primarily as manifestations of regionalism, that is, as the outcome of the intentional institutional construction of relationships by an external partner. At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that, even where the format undergoes consistent institutional development, actual economic outcomes continue to be generated to a considerable extent at the bilateral level, and thus outside the deliberately constructed multilateral mechanism. This conclusion is consistent with the cautious assessment of the depth of Eurasian integration processes advanced by Libman and Vinokurov [8].

A significant limitation of the study remains its narrow temporal horizon. The key institutional developments across all three formats occurred during 2023–2025, which does not yet allow for well-substantiated conclusions regarding the persistence of the identified differences over a longer period.

Conclusion

The comparison reveals differences in the institutional conditions for translating political agreements into concrete economic projects. All three formats are characterised by regular interaction and permanent coordination mechanisms, but they differ in the development of roadmaps, financial instruments, and monitoring arrangements. Based on the reviewed evidence, the EU format has the most detailed roadmap and clearly defined provisions for periodic review. However, these institutional advantages do not necessarily indicate greater effectiveness in project implementation. Overall, the findings support the institutional logic of the main hypothesis, while the link between specialised financial instruments and actual project outcomes remains insufficiently clear.

The three formats demonstrate distinct models of institutionalisation. The United States format tends towards a political-dialogue model with an emerging investment component that has not yet been institutionally embedded at the multilateral level. The secretariat and the Critical Minerals Dialogue provide a stable organisational framework, whereas the largest financial commitments are implemented through bilateral channels. The China format is structurally oriented towards investment and infrastructure cooperation, implemented predominantly through bilateral channels and mechanisms associated with the Belt and Road Initiative. At present, however, the “C+C5” mechanism performs a coordinating rather than a financing function. The EU format combines a normative and programme-based framework with the most detailed financial toolkit among the three cases examined – EUR 12 billion allocated across four priority areas – as well as monitoring mechanisms and the activities of permanent development institutions, namely the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

The Central Asian states are recommended to develop an agreed regional portfolio of priority projects and coordinate their positions in advance of meetings with external partners; designate responsible public authorities and coordinators to oversee the implementation of commitments under each format; include deadlines, indicators, and sources of financing in roadmaps with a level of detail comparable to that of the EU-Central Asia Roadmap, which contains 79 action points; establish a

unified register of announced and implemented initiatives, clearly distinguishing regional projects from bilateral ones; publish regular reports on the implementation of agreements, following the model of periodic review established in the 2025 EU-Central Asia Joint Declaration; and strengthen cooperation with permanent development institutions rather than relying primarily on one-off commitments announced following summits.

The limitations of the study include the relatively short observation period for assessing key institutional developments, since the first presidential summits of all three formats took place between 2023 and 2025; the asymmetry in the public transparency of sources across the formats, which is particularly pronounced in the case of cooperation with China; and the qualitative rather than aggregated quantitative nature of the comparison. This approach provides a stronger documentary basis for the conclusions but does not allow for the construction of a single composite indicator of institutional effectiveness.

Future research should include a repeated comparison of the same formats in two to three years in order to assess the durability of the identified differences; the extension to other “Central Asia + 1” formats involving Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, and Russia; and a separate examination of the role of permanent development finance institutions as an independent determinant of institutional effectiveness, irrespective of the existence of a multilateral diplomatic mechanism as such.

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«5+1» ФОРМАТТАРЫ АЯСЫНДА ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ ЕЛДЕРІНІҢ СЫРТҚЫ СЕРІКТЕСТЕРМЕН ЭКОНОМИКАЛЫҚ ҰНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҒЫНЫҢ ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛДЫҚ АРХИТЕКТУРАСЫ: ІСКЕ АСЫРУ ТЕТІКТЕРІ МЕН ҚҰРАЛДАРЫ

Андатпа

Соңғы он жыл ішінде Орталық Азия мемлекеттері мен сыртқы серіктестер арасындағы көпжақты «5+1» форматтарының белсенді институционалдануы байқалды. Бұл саммиттер, министрлік деңгейдегі кездесулер мен бірлескен декларациялар санының артуынан көрініс табады. Алайда мұндай саяси белсенділік әрдайым ауқымы жағынан соған сәйкес келетін практикалық экономикалық нәтижелермен ұштаса бермейді. Мақала 2015–2025 жж. аралығында АҚШ, Қытай және Еуропалық одақ қатысатын «5+1» форматтары шеңберінде саяси уағдаластықтардан нақты экономикалық жобаларды іске асыруға көшуді қамтамасыз ететін институционалдық тетіктер мен құралдарды зерттеуге арналған. Салыстырмалы институционалдық талдау, ресми құжаттардың контент-талдауы және кейс-стади әдісі негізінде әрбір формат алты сапалық критерий бойынша жіктелді: өзара іс-қимылдың тұрақтылығы, тұрақты үйлестіруші органдардың болуы, жол карталарының нақтылық деңгейі, қаржылық қамтамасыз етілуі, мониторинг тетіктерінің болуы және жобалық нәтижелілігі. Бұл ретте көпжақты міндеттемелер мен қатар жасалатын екіжақты келісімдер дәйекті түрде ажыратылды. Талдау нәтижелері жоғары деңгейдегі кездесулердің тұрақтылығы және тұрақты үйлестіру тетіктерінің болуы секілді параметрлер бойынша үш форматтың да институционалдық жетілу деңгейі өзара салыстырмалы екенін көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар олар жол карталарының нақтылану дәрежесі, қаржылық құралдардың көпжақты деңгеймен байланыстырылуы және мониторинг тетіктерінің болуы тұрғысынан елеулі айырмашылықтарға ие. Еуропалық одақ форматы жол карталарын әзірлеу және олардың іске асырылуын мониторингтеу тұрғысынан неғұрлым дамыған институционалдық архитектурамен ерекшеленеді. Ал АҚШ пен Қытай форматтарына жарияланған ірі қаржыландыру көлемдері мен олардың екіжақты емес, нақты көпжақты өзара іс-қимыл деңгейіне институционалдық тұрғыдан бекітілуі арасындағы тұрақты алшақтық тән. Зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы форматтардың институционалдық архитектурасын жобаларды іске асырудың құжаттармен расталған нәтижелерімен байланыстыратын сапалық, агрегатталмаған салыстырмалы талдау шеңберін әзірлеуден тұрады. Алынған нәтижелердің практикалық маңыздылығы оларды Орталық Азия елдерінің министрліктері, өңірлік үйлестіру құрылымдары және даму институттары қызметінде пайдалану мүмкіндігімен айқындалады.

Тірек сөздер: институционалдық тетіктер, «5+1» форматтары, экономикалық ынтымақтастық, жол карталары, іске асыру мониторингі, жобалық нәтижелілік, көпжақты және екіжақты ынтымақтастық, өңірлік интеграция.

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ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ АРХИТЕКТУРА ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКОГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА СТРАН ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ С ВНЕШНИМИ ПАРТНЕРАМИ В ФОРМАТАХ «5+1»: МЕХАНИЗМЫ И ИНСТРУМЕНТЫ РЕАЛИЗАЦИИ

Аннотация

За последнее десятилетие наблюдалась активная институционализация многосторонних форматов «5+1» между государствами Центральной Азии и внешними партнерами. Это выражается в увеличении числа саммитов, министерских встреч и совместных деклараций, за которыми, однако, не всегда следует сопоставимая по масштабам практическая экономическая реализация. Статья посвящена институциональным механизмам и инструментам, обеспечивающим переход от политических договоренностей к реализации экономических проектов в форматах «5+1» с участием США, Китая и Европейского союза в период 2015–2025 гг. С применением сравнительного институционального анализа, контент-анализа официальных документов и метода кейс-стади каждый формат классифицирован по шести качественным критериям: регулярности взаимодействия, наличию постоянных координационных органов, конкретности дорожных карт, финансовой обеспеченности, наличию механизмов мониторинга и проектной результативности. При этом последовательно разграничиваются многосторонние обязательства и параллельно заключаемые двусторонние соглашения. Анализ показывает, что все три формата демонстрируют сопоставимую институциональную зрелость по таким параметрам, как регулярность встреч на высшем уровне и наличие постоянных координационных механизмов. Вместе с тем они существенно различаются по степени конкретизации дорожных карт, привязке финансовых инструментов к многостороннему уровню и наличию механизмов мониторинга. Формат Европейского союза обладает наиболее развитой архитектурой дорожных карт и мониторинга, тогда как форматы США и Китая характеризуются устойчивым разрывом между крупными анонсированными объемами финансирования и их институциональной привязкой именно к многостороннему, а не к двустороннему уровню взаимодействия. Научная новизна исследования состоит в разработке качественной неагрегированной сравнительной рамки, связывающей институциональную архитектуру форматов с документально подтвержденными результатами реализации проектов. Практическая значимость полученных результатов заключается в возможности их использования министерствами стран Центральной Азии, региональными координационными структурами и институтами развития.

Ключевые слова: институциональные механизмы, форматы «5+1», экономическое сотрудничество, дорожные карты, мониторинг реализации, проектная результативность, многостороннее и двустороннее сотрудничество, региональная интеграция.

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