

Opinion – An Environmental Focus for US-Central Asia Relations

Written by Wilder Alejandro Sánchez

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During the United Nations General Assembly in September, a historic gathering took place: US President Joe Biden met with the presidents of the five Central Asian states. The outcome of this presidential C5+1 was the New York Declaration, which will serve as a blueprint for future relations between Washington and Central Asia. The following milestone will occur in early 2024, when a Business 5+1 will reportedly happen in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The next step must be a high-level US-Central Asia summit on environmental affairs, a Green 5+1.

The New York Declaration highlights the importance of addressing environmental issues, including water security. “We are invested in enhancing Central Asia’s water security and environmental quality, working to increase regional cooperation on water and ecological issues,” explains the joint document. Specific areas mentioned include the development of climate-adaptable agriculture, preserving endangered species habitats, improving water resource management, and introducing water-saving technologies to Central Asia. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) is mentioned as a vital player, as the Agency’s Regional Water and Vulnerable Environment Activity program will be the catalyst for Washington to engage Central Asia to “address water, energy, food, and environmental needs that simultaneously combat climate change.”

Interestingly, a month after the General Assembly, on 23-24 October, USAID Administrator Samantha Power visited Samarkand, Uzbekistan, to participate in the first C5+1 Regional Connectivity Ministerial. During the visit, Power announced additional funding for two USAID programs in Uzbekistan: USD14.3 million in regional programming and USD18.7 million “to boost collaboration in global health, governance, education, and economic growth.”

Power’s visit will help maintain the momentum of high-level meetings. Next year, the first-ever Business 5+1 will occur in Kazakhstan; the objective is to promote Central Asia as a location for US investment. Ironically, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was helpful for non-energy or mining industries and companies to discover Central Asia as a potential location for their operations. For example, Honeywell moved their operations from Russia to Kazakhstan after the war started. Besides the high-level diplomatic and business meetings, Washington should seek to diversify its engagement by sending Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry to Central Asia to participate in what I am calling a Green 5+1 summit.

Central Asia faces several environmental challenges, some natural and others human-made, which will be exacerbated by climate change. For example, the region suffered an intense drought in the summer of 2021. The destruction of the Aral Sea, shared by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, is a human-made disaster that commenced during the Soviet era. While Astana has carried out some projects to heal its side of the Sea (which resembles a group of lakes nowadays), climate change-exacerbated droughts and Uzbekistan’s irrigation projects will continue to damage water levels and the local wildlife.

Moreover, research also shows that the Caspian Sea – shared by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Russia, and Turkmenistan – is losing water too. The 2003 Tehran Convention, aimed at protecting the Sea, and the 2018 Aktau Convention, which resolved the territorial dispute between the five littoral states, have not been adequately utilized to protect this critical regional body of water. Additionally, Uzbekistan is teaming up with Russia’s Rosatom nuclear

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agency to build a nuclear power plant in a seismic-prone area of Uzbekistan; this project stirred “unease and skepticism” in the region. Finally, access to vital resources can turn violent, too. Between 2021 and 2022, there were a series of small clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over a border dispute and access to water resources. (The researcher Assel Murzakulova recently published an in-depth analysis of climate change and Central Asia’s hydro-politics for the University of Central Asia).

Given this complex regional situation, more cooperation, dialogue, and investments in green projects are necessary. The United States government can help its Central Asian partners with environmental challenges. USAID Administrator Power’s visit to Uzbekistan is undoubtedly important. Nevertheless, it would be significant if Special Envoy Kerry also traveled to the area to meet with senior Central Asian officers for an *in situ* discussion primarily focused on environmental issues. In June 2021, Kerry and climate policy leaders from the Central Asian states had a virtual C5+1 Climate Ministerial meeting, but an in-person gathering is preferable. This proposed, in-person Green 5+1, as I call it, would have the secondary goal of maintaining high-level interactions between Washington and the five Central Asian states post-New York Declaration.

It is worth noting that not all five Central Asian countries are carrying out green policies with the same tempo. Turkmenistan maintains its isolationist policies with a dictatorial president, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have yet to focus on environmental issues – a shame since Kyrgyzstan’s capital, Bishkek, experiences significant air pollution. On the other hand, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are promoting green policies and developing environmentally friendly strategies. (To be fair, they have a long road ahead since air pollution in Almaty and Tashkent is a significant health risk.)

Astana, for example, aims to go carbon neutral by 2060. In a 1 September speech, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev pledged to reform the “entire water management system” as the water deficit across the country is expected to increase severely by 2040. The president also pledged to develop hydroelectric power and called out the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC), saying that this Astana-based financial hub must attract green funding. Thus, it is logical for this proposed Green 5+1 to take place in Astana or Almaty (the country’s business capital), given that Kazakhstan is the Central Asian country that is more aware and proactive about the consequences of climate change and environmental threats.

The presidential C5+1 summit in New York between President Biden and his five Central Asian counterparts was a significant development. Since the region became independent in the early 1990s, Washington has not developed a comprehensive strategy towards Central Asia; moreover, when the United States approaches the region, it is due to extra-regional developments (violent extremism in Afghanistan, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, or China’s growing presence and ambitions) rather than a direct interest in approaching these countries.

Biden’s interest in environmental issues means that green policies and climate change are often discussed in high-level meetings and mentioned in agreements with Washington’s global partners. Thus, it is no surprise that the New York Declaration discusses environmental cooperation prominently. Moreover, while Central Asia is barely mentioned in the 2022 US National Security Strategy, the document explains how Washington “will continue to work through the C5+1 diplomatic platform ... to advance climate adaptation, improve regional energy and food security.”

Thus, environmental cooperation is another avenue for Washington to engage with Central Asia, which will result in stronger partnerships and assist the populations of the five countries in tackling today’s and tomorrow’s environmental challenges. A Green 5+1 would be ideal for discussing and streamlining green strategies and delineating timelines and specific projects regarding how Washington can assist its Central Asian partner’s green objectives. There is much for Washington to discuss with its Central Asian partners.

A Green 5+1 summit may sound irrelevant, given other regional challenges and priorities. However, Central Asia is as exposed to the devastating effects of climate change as the rest of the world, not to mention ongoing human-caused environmental disasters and disputes over access to vital water resources. Moreover, environmental protection is a topic where much good work can be done with low geopolitical stakes. Ultimately, a Green 5+1 summit would allow Washington to continue its high-level engagement with Central Asia.

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