

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

The China-Tajikistan Treaty: Formalisation of Chinese Influence in Central Asia

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S*ummary*

Unlike the 2025 China–Central Asia Treaty, the 2026 China–Tajikistan Treaty places explicit constraints on Tajikistan's external alignments, institutionalises crisis consultations and military cooperation, and embeds China's vision of global governance through binding treaty language.

The international system is currently consumed by wars in Ukraine and West Asia, increasingly shaped by the intensifying great power competition between the US and China and confronted with escalating concerns over Taiwan. Against this backdrop, a seemingly obscure treaty signed between China and Tajikistan in May 2026 received little international attention. Yet the ‘Treaty of Permanent Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Tajikistan’¹ may prove to be one of the most revealing documents of contemporary Chinese statecraft.

The significance of the treaty does not lie in Tajikistan's size or power, but in what the agreement reveals about China’s evolving approach to its continental neighbourhood in terms of influence, security and regional order. Notably, China signed a similar treaty² in June 2025 with all Central Asian countries—the ‘Treaty on Permanent Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan’. But there is a major difference in the scope and language of the two documents, even though their objectives are similar. While the 2025 treaty was multilateral, the 2026 China–Tajikistan treaty is bilateral.

The treaty between China and the five Central Asian states (C5) works as a regional framework for cooperation, consultation, dispute resolution and broader intergovernmental coordination. Its most consequential provision is Article 3, which places reciprocal constraints on the parties' external relations by stipulating that they should not participate in alliances, groups or activities directed against the sovereignty, security or territorial integrity of the other party.

The provision therefore goes beyond a general commitment to good-neighbourliness: it seeks to ensure that none of the signatories permits its territory or political partnerships to be used in ways that could threaten Chinese interests. While China has other regional cooperation models like Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), it is not a binding treaty between China and the five Southeast Asian States. This treaty with C5 is China’s only multilateral treaty directly binding China to the region, which tells us how important this region is for China and how amenable Central Asian nations are to a China-centred institutional framework.

¹ “习近平同塔吉克斯坦总统拉赫蒙会谈” [[Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon](#)], *People’s Daily*, 13 May 2026.

² “中华人民共和国和哈萨克斯坦共和国、吉尔吉斯共和国、塔吉克斯坦共和国、土库曼斯坦、乌兹别克斯坦共和国永久睦邻友好合作条约” [[Treaty on Permanent Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan](#)], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 18 June 2025. Treaty signed in Astana on 17 June 2025.

While the 2026 Treaty is formally reciprocal and framed around sovereignty, non-interference and mutual benefit, Articles 4 and 5 potentially create a deeper form of strategic alignment, and Article 11 accepts China’s alternative governance model, thereby promoting and supporting its normative power. This brief analyses the contents of the treaty and illustrates how China may be institutionalising its influence in Tajikistan through a binding legal instrument. The analysis reveals how Beijing translates the language of partnership and a “community with a shared future for mankind” into a deeper strategic relationship with a small, economically dependent but geopolitically critical neighbour.

Why Tajikistan or Central Asia?

Since the early 2000s, China has expanded strategic partnerships with its Western neighbours—Kazakhstan and Tajikistan—due to the Xinjiang conflict. In 2005, China signed³ an agreement of Strategic Partnership with Kazakhstan which included opposition to “the three evils”: terrorism, separatism and extremism. But soon, under Xi Jinping in 2013, relations with all five nations were elevated to Strategic Partnership, and the Silk Road Economic Belt (later the Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI) was announced in Kazakhstan. This was the first glimpse of China’s diplomatic architecture in Central Asia and its long-term strategy.

Through Central Asia, China sought secure access to Europe, energy supplies, mineral resources, strategic depth against maritime containment and stability in Xinjiang. Therefore, China needed greater influence in the neighbourhood to secure its interests. Subsequently, through BRI, the region saw large investment⁴ in major projects and also became heavily reliant and indebted⁵ to China, with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan becoming most vulnerable. In successive years, China has embedded itself more deeply in Central Asia and the region has become a vociferous promoter of various Chinese policies.

While economic leverage does result in strategic influence, it’s the normative power—to set standards, define what is legitimate and acceptable in international politics—that defines a superpower. There is little doubt that BRI functioned as an instrument of China’s expansionist foreign policy and geopolitical consolidation. But Beijing recognised that a rising power cannot depend solely on economic statecraft or

³ [“Hu in Kazakhstan for Talks on Terrorism, Energy”](#), *China Daily*, 4 July 2005.

⁴ Christoph Nedopil Wang, [“China Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\) Investment Report 2025”](#), Green Finance & Development Center, FISF Fudan University, 18 January 2026.

⁵ Sergei Gretskey, [“China’s Debt-Trap Diplomacy and Central Asia”](#), Jamestown Foundation, 27 July 2026.

institutional dominance. To exert and sustain influence over a long period, China must also rewrite the terms of engagement and establish norms, standards and global governance frameworks within which international politics and commerce could operate, an alternative to the America-led system.

Subsequently, China introduced a series of initiatives like the Global Data Security Initiative (GDSI) (2020), the Global Development Initiative (2021), the Global Security Initiative (2022), the Global Civilisational Initiative (2023), and the Global Governance Initiative (2025). This is one of the starkest examples of China’s alternate vision for the future of international order, away from American-led norms and standards. Central Asia emerged as one of the primary theatres for this experiment in Chinese global governance. The region is not just a transit corridor for the BRI, but increasingly a testing ground where China integrates infrastructure, digital governance, security cooperation, elite political alignment, and civilisational discourse into a comprehensive and durable model of influence. The C5 have more formally endorsed Chinese initiatives through joint statements and summit declarations.

The treaty with Tajikistan is therefore significant not merely as another bilateral agreement, but as an attempt to institutionalise a relationship in which China's security, economic, political and normative interests converge. Its significance lies in the way it combines obligations of different kinds: Article 4 creates negative obligations restricting activities that could threaten the other party's security or territorial integrity; Article 5 establishes a mechanism for crisis consultation; and Article 11 embeds the relationship within China's broader conceptual framework of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind and its Global Initiatives. The result is neither a conventional friendship treaty nor a formal military alliance. Rather, it represents a form of institutionalised strategic partnership that may constrain the external strategic choices of the weaker party while providing the stronger party with a durable framework for political and security influence.

The brief argues that the treaty should be understood as part of the evolution of Chinese statecraft in Central Asia: from economic engagement and connectivity towards the institutionalisation of strategic relationships. The treaty does not by itself establish Chinese primacy or a formal sphere of influence in Tajikistan. Rather, its importance lies in the possibility that China's existing economic asymmetry, security cooperation and political influence are being converted into legally codified obligations. The brief therefore examines not only what the treaty says, but also the broader relationship and strategic environment that give its provisions meaning.

The Treaty and its Strategic Importance

The treaty employs language that is much more suitable for a defence treaty, as it significantly constrains Tajikistan's external behaviour, particularly in Articles 4, 5, 10 and 11. A few specific clauses are mentioned below, followed by a detailed analysis of the Treaty.

Article 4⁶

A contracting party **shall not participate in any alliance or group that undermines the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other contracting party, nor take any such action, including concluding such treaties with different third countries**, nor support any actions hostile to the other contracting party.

A contracting party **shall not allow a third country to use its territory to engage in any activities that harm the interests of the other contracting party**, including using its territory to undermine the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other contracting party.

A contracting party **shall not permit the establishment of any organisation or group on its territory that would harm the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other contracting party**, and shall prohibit such activities.

Article 5

In the event of a complex international or regional situation or crisis that could threaten the peace or security interests of one of the contracting parties, **the contracting parties will immediately consult and formulate measures to prevent such threats**.

Article 11

The contracting parties will deepen cooperation within the framework of the **concept of a community with a shared future for mankind and global development, global security, global civilisation, and global governance initiatives**, which is of great significance for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and maintaining world peace and security.

⁶ “[习近平同塔吉克斯坦总统拉赫蒙会谈](#)” [[Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon](#)], no. 1.

While not equivalent to NATO’s Article 5,⁷ Article 4 effectively limits Tajikistan’s strategic autonomy by preventing participation in alliances, agreements, or activities that China may perceive as harmful to its sovereignty or security interests. It severely constrains Tajikistan’s agency to operate and model its own foreign policy in the future. It further prohibits third countries from using Tajik territory in ways deemed hostile to China and restricts the establishment of organisations or groups that may threaten Chinese interests. It is worth pondering over who decides what constitutes harm to the other party’s “security” or “interests”? Now, due to the deep economic dependence, debt exposure, trade asymmetry and political leverage, Tajikistan is not in a position to define the scope of the Treaty. Therefore, China has immense flexibility to control Tajikistan’s external behaviour.

For instance, although India’s earlier presence at Ayni Air Base in Tajikistan has ended, the provision could potentially apply to any future agreement permitting a third country to establish a military, intelligence, or other security installation on Tajik territory. Given Tajikistan’s proximity to China’s Xinjiang region, Beijing could regard certain foreign military or intelligence activities in Tajikistan as harmful to its security interests. In such a case, Article 4 could provide China with a legal basis for objecting to, and potentially seeking the termination of, such an arrangement. The provision thus extends beyond mutual non-aggression: in principle, it limits the extent to which Tajikistan can invite external strategic actors into its security environment. Therefore, the bilateral treaty contains a much more developed concept of strategic denial.

Moreover, Article 5 institutionalises crisis consultation mechanisms during regional instability without qualifying any mutual security assistance or defence clause. This is perhaps the most important security evolution between the two parties as it creates a crisis-consultation mechanism. Here, any regional crisis, whether at the Afghan border or Xinjiang, affecting Tajikistan could become a matter for formal China–Tajikistan strategic consultation and may automatically activate a bilateral consultation process.

⁷ “[The North Atlantic Treaty](#)”, The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 4 April 1949.

Article 5 states: The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.

Article 10 mentions specific military-to-military cooperation absent from other similar agreements, like “deepen mutual trust in the military field, carry out military and military-technical cooperation”, “strengthen military exchanges at all levels, expand mutually beneficial cooperation in military personnel training”. Article 10 creates a legal and political umbrella for future defence cooperation, which could encompass cooperation in: defence equipment, military technology, defence-industrial cooperation, technical maintenance, weapons systems, military research and development, and technology transfer.

The Treaty does not mention which weapons systems or technologies are covered. This ambiguity is important as it allows for the relationship to expand without having to renegotiate the treaty. This formalises the relationship with a degree of strategic predictability and institutional depth, as Article 5 establishes the obligation to consult during a crisis and Article 10 helps create the military relationships and communication channels through which such consultation can actually function.

This is a significant departure from the 2025 C5 Treaty, which is vague and broad on defence. Its Article 8 states: strengthen mutual trust in defence, defence industry and security, and expand bilateral and multilateral cooperation in related areas.⁸ The Tajik Treaty, however, is explicit on military relations. Therefore, defence cooperation through the C5 Treaty is a regional possibility, but military cooperation with Tajikistan is explicitly institutionalised. This also suggests that the bilateral relationship with Tajikistan has a higher security intensity than the general China–Central Asia framework. Another important difference is that the Tajik Treaty has explicit wording on Taiwan, showing its support for China's political position and a central sovereignty claim. This is a form of diplomatic and normative security cooperation.

The closest example of such a mechanism is NATO Article 4, which states: “The parties will consult whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any party is threatened.”⁹ But as a formal alliance, this clause may lead to collective action. In contrast, the China–Tajik Treaty demands immediate consultation without any guarantees of collective action, but

⁸ “[中华人民共和国和哈萨克斯坦共和国、吉尔吉斯共和国、塔吉克斯坦共和国、土库曼斯坦、乌兹别克斯坦共和国永久睦邻友好合作条约](#)” [[Treaty on Permanent Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan](#)], no. 2.

Article 8: All parties should strengthen mutual trust in the defense, defense industry and security fields in accordance with their own laws and their respective international obligations, and expand bilateral and multilateral cooperation on other issues in these fields.

⁹ “[The North Atlantic Treaty](#)”, no. 7.

rather the formulation of preventive measures. The treaty, at its core, provides China with a framework for protecting *its* security interests against potential external interference in Tajikistan and the wider Central Asian region. The model here shows that China does not need a formal military alliance with Tajikistan to acquire alliance-like strategic effects.

Article 11 moves the relationship into the sphere of international order-building by integrating Tajikistan into China’s broader ideological framework built around the “Community of Shared Future for Mankind”, and its various global initiatives. The article is effectively converting China’s major diplomatic concepts into a bilateral treaty commitment. While the previous articles mention deepening economic and security relationships, Article 11 goes further by aligning Tajikistan with China’s preferred vision of international order.

Taken together, these provisions reveal a layered model of Chinese statecraft: strategic denial through Article 4, crisis coordination through Article 5, military institutionalisation through Article 10, and normative alignment through Article 11. The treaty thus extends Chinese influence beyond economic dependence, embedding it within the security, diplomatic and normative choices of its partner. The question here is also why China requires or seeks a treaty-level commitment from Tajikistan or C5? Besides the Xinjiang conflict, which is a major reason for China to secure its Western borders, Tajikistan’s trouble with Afghanistan has also invited Chinese involvement. In 2021, China agreed to fund a new paramilitary facility¹⁰ in the Wakhan Corridor at its request, illustrating the expansion of Chinese security engagement beyond conventional economic cooperation.

However, the wording in both treaties with C5 and Tajikistan prohibiting third-party action suggests Chinese sensitivity towards external powers operating in its immediate periphery. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Tajikistan is only the first country to sign such a treaty, and other C5 nations may be pressed for similar agreements. Since China is carving out a sphere of influence, it is important to eliminate any possibility of the US and allies’ presence in the region.

As great power competition intensifies, Central Asia is emerging as an important battlefield for influence. The treaty’s significance may ultimately depend less on the text itself than on its implementation. Can China convert asymmetric interdependence into institutionalised influence without formal alliance commitments or overt coercion?

¹⁰ Edward Lemon and Ruslan Norov, “[How China is Adapting to Tajikistan’s Demand for Security Cooperation](#)”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 March 2025.

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