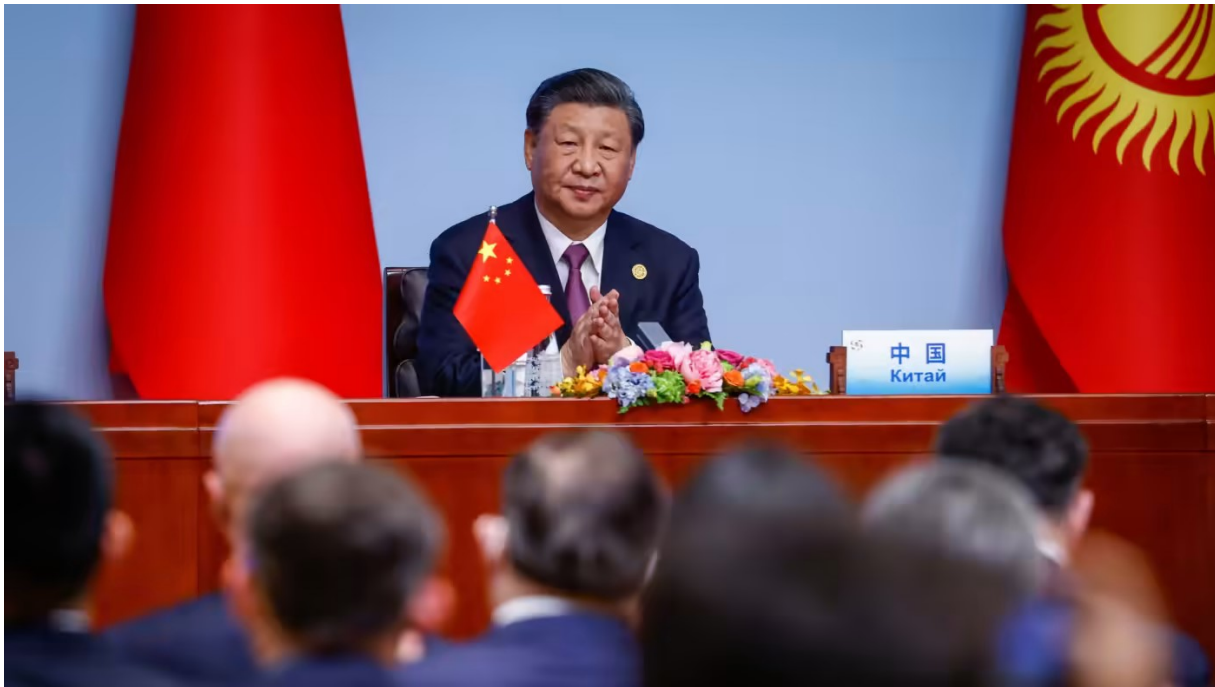


**Central Asia**

## Xi Jinping pushes Central Asian defence co-operation plan

Chinese president's offer to help with security comes as Russian influence in the region weakens



Xi Jinping told the China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an that Beijing would provide \$3.7bn in financing and assistance to the region © Mark R Cristino/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

**Joe Leahy** in Hong Kong YESTERDAY

China's president Xi Jinping on Friday laid out an ambitious plan for co-operation with Central Asian countries on defence and security, pushing into a region traditionally seen as Russia's backyard at a moment when Moscow is distracted by the war in Ukraine.

Hosting his first [in-person summit](#) with leaders of the group of Central Asian countries known as the "C5", Xi also offered to increase transport and energy ties with the region. The group consists of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

"Xi stressed that China is ready to help Central Asian countries improve their law enforcement, security and defence capacity building in an effort to safeguard regional peace," state news agency Xinhua reported.

For Beijing, Central Asia is critical to the security of its politically sensitive western Xinjiang region, where it has been [accused of suppressing](#) the Muslim Uyghur population. The region is an important source of land-based energy imports and a gateway to overland trade with Europe.

Russia is the dominant power in Central Asia, but its attack on Ukraine has caused

disquiet in the region. Moscow has also traditionally served as a peacekeeper, but its ability to maintain stability is in doubt after it failed to quell border skirmishes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan last year.

Xi, who hosted the two-day summit in the Chinese city of Xi'an, said Beijing would provide Rmb26bn (\$3.7bn) in "financing support" and "free assistance" to Central Asian countries. He did not give further details.

Beijing would also boost cross-border freight volume, including supporting a "cross-Caspian Sea" transport corridor by upgrading ports, developing China-Europe freight train hubs and encouraging the construction of warehouses in Central Asian countries.

China sees Central Asia as a crucial overland alternative for the sea trade to Europe. But since the start of the Ukraine war, the northern part of this route through Russia has been disrupted.

This has led to efforts to strengthen alternative corridors through the region that do not pass through Russia.

Xi said China would accelerate construction of oil pipelines and increase oil and gas imports.

While Xi did not provide further details of the defence co-operation, analysts said China would be keen to introduce a formal security co-operation arrangement.

This could take the form of further efforts to stem terrorism — China is concerned the region could act as a conduit for separatists entering Xinjiang — as well efforts to export its model of state control to help countries with internal security.

Temur Umarov, a fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, said China was likely to focus on reviving joint drills in Central Asia involving its People's Armed Police. Such drills were held across the region in 2019, but suspended during the pandemic.

Tajikistan would be of particular interest to Beijing as the only country bordering both China and Afghanistan, Umarov said.

"Tajikistan's military is not the strongest in Central Asia. So that is why, from China's point of view, it's an extension of Chinese national security" to deepen co-operation there, he said.

Analysts said Beijing could also help the region build 5G networks equipped with its social monitoring and control systems, such as advanced facial recognition software.

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Moscow and Beijing both fear insecurity in the region from so-called “colour revolutions” — pro-democracy movements they claim are backed by western governments.

“They are helping the Central Asian local authorities not to be overthrown by colour revolutions,” said Chienyu Shih of Taiwan’s Institute for National Defense and Security Research.

The EU launched a fresh push on Friday to counter Chinese influence in the region. Valdis Dombrovskis, the bloc’s trade commissioner, said after a meeting in Kazakhstan with ministers from the five Central Asian states that the EU saw “clear possibilities” for much more collaboration and investment.

*Additional reporting by Max Seddon in Riga and Alice Hancock in Brussels*

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