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# U.S. POLICY TOWARD CENTRAL ASIA 3.0

Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky,  
and Paul Stronski



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## Summary

Major geopolitical shifts and internal dynamics are setting the stage for possible increased great-power competition in Central Asia between Russia and China at a time when the region is becoming less hospitable to the projection of U.S. power and to the promotion of democracy. U.S. policy will need to adapt to these changes in order to bring Washington's ambitions in Central Asia into better alignment with limited U.S. interests and means. Overpromising and setting ambitious but unrealistic goals will lead to mutual frustration, cynicism, and disappointment among the five states of Central Asia. A policy grounded in a realistic view of the region and U.S. interests there will better serve everyone's interests.

### The Case for Rebooting U.S. Policy

- As the United States continues on a glide path toward a substantially smaller military footprint in Afghanistan, Central Asia's importance as the gateway to Afghanistan will decline in America's strategic calculus.
- Central Asia's first quarter century of independence was marked by a geopolitical orientation toward the West. The United States helped the five Central Asian states establish their independence and sovereignty. America fulfilled its promise of partnership at that crucial stage, and these states have been important partners to the United States at critical times.
- Central Asia is on a different trajectory now. The region is in the midst of a major geopolitical shift that will diminish its ties to the Euro-Atlantic community and will elevate China's influence in and importance to Central Asian states. For the foreseeable future, Beijing and Moscow will be the region's principal economic, political, and security partners due to China's preeminent regional economic power and Russia's residual presence.
- These developments portend declining American presence in and influence over the region—and greater difficulty in transforming Central Asian states into democratic, free-market economies knitted together by regional economic integration.
- Advancing Washington's priorities in this new environment will require significant changes in U.S. policy.



### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

- Prioritize U.S. regional engagement with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.
- Recognize that the United States shares some interests with Russia and China and seek to harness Russian and Chinese actions to advance U.S. interests.
- Let demands for change be locally driven and focus the U.S. reform agenda on improving social and economic conditions rather than on democracy promotion.
- Do not condition security cooperation on human rights performance.
- Avoid militarizing U.S. policy by overreacting to the threat of Islamic extremism.
- Use leverage more effectively by playing harder to get and pursuing more realistic and prioritized goals.

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## Introduction

U.S. policy toward Central Asia has passed through two phases since the five countries comprising the region—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—gained their independence in 1991, and it has recently entered yet another phase that remains a work in progress. During the first period, which lasted from the dissolution of the Soviet Union until the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, U.S. policy focused on three priorities: securing the legacy of Soviet weapons of mass destruction; helping the Central Asian countries attain and defend their newly won sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity against a potential resurgence of Russian neoimperialism; and breaking up Russia's monopoly over pipelines and transit routes for Central Asian oil and gas as a means of ensuring the region's independence from Russia. The United States explicitly rejected the geopolitical approach to Central Asia, and instead embarked upon a long-term effort to support the creation of democratic governance, free-market economies, and regional economic integration. Despite at times lofty rhetoric, U.S. policymakers generally viewed the region as a relatively low priority, and American engagement to achieve greater stability, security, and prosperity as well as better governance remained limited. This approach can best be described as U.S. policy toward Central Asia 1.0.

Washington's perspective on and engagement in the region changed dramatically after September 11, when U.S. policy toward Central Asia 2.0 began to take shape. To be sure, there was continued interest in pursuing the long-term political and economic reform agenda of the previous decade, but military and security considerations became more important factors in U.S. engagement in Central Asia. The logistical requirements of supporting large-scale U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and the resulting heavy dependence on access to regional military facilities took precedence over commitment to the promotion of political and economic reforms and human rights. The United States elevated the importance of security cooperation with basing countries and, more broadly, America's geopolitical position in the region. Central Asia changed from an area of peripheral interest to one that commanded a much higher priority in America's strategy, although the region's importance was based primarily on its role as an adjunct to Afghan stabilization efforts rather than a priority in and of itself.

The first two phases of America's encounter with an independent Central Asia had one theme in common: the region's significance to the United States was largely derivative of interests that were not indigenous to Central Asia itself

but rather were functions of U.S. policies, priorities, and relationships with countries around the region. As the United States transitions to a substantially smaller footprint and role for U.S. combat forces in Afghanistan, Washington will once again need to define and prioritize its interests and relationships in the region at a time when Russia is showing greater willingness and capability to intervene in the internal affairs of its neighbors. Furthermore, the long-term goal of both Moscow and Beijing to expand their influence in Central Asia could increase tensions between these two powers and possibly among regional states. The competition between the two powers has encouraged Central Asian states to seek continued Western involvement in the region to check Russian and Chinese ambitions. All these developments provide the backdrop for U.S. policy toward Central Asia 3.0.

The United States's approach to Central Asia, of course, will not be made in a vacuum: U.S. engagement in the region will be defined in the context of America's other global interests and priorities, limited defense spending and foreign assistance, and competing demands on the bandwidth of senior U.S. government officials. Indeed, the outbreak of multiple crises elsewhere at the same time is crowding out Central Asia from the West's foreign policy and security agenda. The campaign against the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the crisis in Ukraine, civil wars in Yemen and Libya, implementation of the nuclear agreement with Iran, and dealing with a more assertive China have taken precedence over the region, which is neither the scene of a major disaster nor a source of major threats to U.S. security. In fact, with the drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Central Asia offers few major opportunities to advance important American interests. In this context, there are several key questions that should shape U.S. policy and strategy for Central Asia:

- What are U.S. interests and objectives in Central Asia, and how important are they to U.S. security and prosperity or to the attainment of critical foreign policy and national security objectives?
- How should the United States prioritize these objectives, given the tension between some of them? What trade-offs should the United States be prepared to make among these goals?
- Of the objectives that are most important to the United States, which are the most realistic and attainable in the next ten years and which are more long-term and aspirational?
- What is the most effective and sustainable strategy for achieving these objectives and what means does the United States have at its disposal?
- What are the sources of U.S. influence over the policies of Central Asian states? What steps can the United States take to enhance its leverage and employ it more effectively?

These questions and the answers to them should be considered against the backdrop of America's encounters with the region over the past quarter century and the successes and failures of American policy. Together, this record, coupled with domestic and geopolitical trends in the region, suggests that future opportunities to advance American interests will be limited, and U.S. relations with Central Asian countries will be challenging.

## A Retrospective on U.S. Policy

The United States has accomplished some of the major strategic objectives it set for its policy in this region but has fallen short on others.

### Successes

- U.S. support for Central Asian countries has paid off; they have established their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence.
- The United States secured the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan and the dismantlement of the nuclear infrastructure it inherited from the former Soviet Union.
- No single country has established its hegemony over the region.
- Russia no longer has a monopoly on the flow of Central Asian oil and gas.
- The United States was able to effectively use facilities in the region to support military operations in Afghanistan and the drawdown of U.S. forces.

### Failures

- Central Asia has made little progress toward democratic, open societies based on free markets, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. To the contrary, there has been backsliding across the region on all these issues.
- The U.S. project to connect Central Asia to Afghanistan and Pakistan via the American vision of the New Silk Road has failed to get off the ground thus far.
- Progress toward greater regional economic integration and security cooperation under U.S. leadership has been scant.

## Regional Currents

There are five interrelated factors that will shape the internal evolution of the five countries of Central Asia: leadership succession, economic challenges, corruption and poor governance, political repression, and the threat of Islamic extremism.

### Leadership Succession

The prospect of leadership changes has cast a long shadow across the region, particularly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Central Asia's two most powerful countries. Elderly leaders rule both countries—Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan and Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan—and they have been in power since the late Soviet era, maintaining domestic stability through the force of their personalities, patronage, and political skills. Both leaders lack designated successors despite their advanced ages and questions about their health.<sup>1</sup> The process of succession in both countries has been the subject of widespread speculation based largely on secondary clues and gossip. In Uzbekistan at least, the looming leadership change has led to infighting among the country's political elite,<sup>2</sup> highlighting a potential challenge to the country's domestic stability.

Most of the attention regarding succession focuses on what will happen in Astana and Tashkent, but there are questions about political succession elsewhere in the region as well. Kyrgyzstan, the region's one nominal democracy, has been perennially unstable. Since 2005, it has seen two governments overthrown, a major outbreak of ethnic violence, and a series of smaller protests.

President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan is sixty-three years old. He has run the country since 1992. Rahmon has spent much of his time in office consolidating his—and his family's—control over the country's economic assets in order to secure his and his successor's hold on power. His custom is to squeeze out political and economic rivals—often provoking outright rebellions by his targets, as happened in September 2015.<sup>3</sup> With socioeconomic problems on the rise, the threat of instability bubbling over from Afghanistan, and a history of civil war, Tajikistan's political institutions are fragile and could collapse under the weight of a succession struggle after Rahmon departs the scene, if not before.

Turkmenistan underwent a smooth succession in 2006, when its megalomaniacal leader Saparmurat Niyazov died suddenly, and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov was elected president. Berdimuhamedov faced no meaningful opposition, and the electoral process was completely nontransparent to Turkmenistan's citizens and the outside world. It is precisely this lack of transparency that virtually guarantees that the next political succession—whenever it takes place—will be marked by as much uncertainty as the previous process.

### Economic Challenges

With most of the region's main exports (oil, natural gas, cotton, and gold) at historic low prices because of major changes in global commodities markets and the slowing Chinese economy, it has become increasingly evident that Central Asian states have not succeeded in diversifying their economies and most of them now must cope with severe budgetary pressures and a slowdown in economic growth.<sup>4</sup> The current and next generation of leaders in Central Asia will increasingly confront new economic challenges, some the result of price fluctuations in

the international commodities markets and others a product of poor governance. The failure of Central Asian governments to diversify and modernize their economies to reduce their heavy dependence on natural resource extraction poses a major long-term challenge to the region's growth.

The economic contraction in Russia and the drop in the value of the Russian ruble have also dealt a major blow to Central Asia. Remittances from Central Asian guest workers in Russia have been essential to the survival of their home countries. For Tajikistan, remittances from migrant laborers in Russia amount to the equivalent of approximately 50 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>5</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, the figure is over 30 percent.<sup>6</sup> But these have seen a steep decline<sup>7</sup>—as much as one-quarter in some countries—and are projected to drop even more. The effects of the ruble's devaluation on Kazakhstan's exports to Russia have been severe,<sup>8</sup> leaving the government with no choice but to let the value of its currency drop as well,<sup>9</sup> a decision that continues to send shockwaves through the country's economy and political system. As prices for hydrocarbons remain low, there are indications that Turkmenistan is struggling to sustain its social-welfare network, a bulwark of its repressive regime.<sup>10</sup>

All Central Asian countries have major barriers to attracting foreign investment. Kazakhstan, the country with the best business climate in the region, was ranked 77 out of 189 countries in the World Bank's *Doing Business 2015* report.<sup>11</sup> The worst, Tajikistan, was ranked 166.

### **Corruption and Poor Governance**

According to the World Bank's governance indicators, all five Central Asian states suffer from poor governance. Corruption and the absence of rule of law and transparency, both deep-seated problems, are also a drag on economic growth.<sup>12</sup> Billions of dollars have been siphoned off by the governing elites across Central Asia who are adept at dividing the economic spoils among their families and various economic, political, and clan interests—often at the expense of more productive economic uses.<sup>13</sup> Combined with the lack of an independent judiciary, corruption can be an expedient tool of governance, allowing Central Asian autocrats to enforce the political loyalty of some insiders and to punish rivals.<sup>14</sup>

Without a transparent judicial system, there is no reliable mechanism to enforce contracts or protect private property from either the state or more powerful figures in governing structures. Economic crimes are often prosecuted selectively, effectively enabling ruling elites to sideline either political or economic competitors.<sup>15</sup> The absence of basic rule of law retards investment, economic growth, and the development of new industries that are not based on the extraction and export of hydrocarbons or other natural resources.

Corruption is not confined to large-scale graft by political elites but permeates all sectors and levels of life in most Central Asian countries.<sup>16</sup> Levels of corruption across all five countries have seen little improvement over the

past decade. Corrupt practices diminish the ability of Central Asian states to provide quality goods and services to their citizens. These include quality healthcare, adequate education, comprehensive drug addiction prevention and treatment, reliable electricity, widespread sanitation, and more effective and transparent border controls.<sup>17</sup> Shortcomings in all of these areas endanger the security of Central Asian citizens and impede their social mobility and individual economic prospects. Pervasive corruption, poor governance, and few economic opportunities for large sections of the population are a toxic mix that often increases state and regime fragility.<sup>18</sup>

Notwithstanding the ill effects of corruption and poor governance, quality of life indicators in all five Central Asian countries have shown slight improvements over the past decade in both life expectancy and Human Development Index ratings. These positive trends, however, are modest and the outlook is uncertain.

### Political Repression

To varying degrees, most Central Asian leaders actively, and at times brutally, seek to prevent viable political alternatives<sup>19</sup>—either in the regime or the opposition—from challenging authoritarian rule.<sup>20</sup> Opposition parties and politicians are harassed,<sup>21</sup> intimidated, incarcerated, or run out of the country. Most forms of civil society have been brought under government control.

State-run media outlets are the main source of information for most residents of the region.<sup>22</sup> A number of independent media outlets face harassment or operate from overseas. Journalists who have questioned the leaders and their policies have often been pressured to stop writing, and some have suffered the same fate as political opponents and activists, a reality that promotes self-censorship. Furthermore, uneven Internet penetration, which is partly due to the high costs of Internet access for many of the region's impoverished citizens,<sup>23</sup> limits the scope of online media.<sup>24</sup>

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**Civil rights and individual liberties of ordinary citizens in Central Asia are severely curtailed.**

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Civil rights and individual liberties of ordinary citizens are severely curtailed, and most forms of social and economic protest are prohibited, subjected to strict limits, or explained away as the result of outside interference—either that of Western governments or Islamic radicals. With few exceptions, these actions have pushed dissent underground, complicating efforts to accurately gauge the extent of popular dissatisfaction with ruling regimes or the presence of extremist ideologies or groups throughout the region.<sup>25</sup>

### Threat of Islamic Extremism

Central Asian governments have voiced growing concerns about the threat of Islamic extremism in the region,<sup>26</sup> but they often exaggerate these risks and misrepresent legitimate political protest as extremism in order to justify

repression and to deflect Washington's criticism of human rights abuses.<sup>27</sup> Several militant Islamic groups, like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and its splinter group Islamic Jihad Union, have moved from Central Asia to South Asia, largely due to the success of Central Asian governments in driving them away. In fact, the extremist threat to the region has thus far been managed and contained largely south of the border. Nonetheless, the threat is there, and these groups could potentially exploit a crisis in the region caused by economic problems, leadership succession, or some other development to raise their profile.

In addition to these deeply rooted internal problems, the governments of Central Asia now have to contend with a rapidly shifting external environment that will present new challenges and opportunities in the years to come.

## From Eurasia to Aseuria: Shifting Geopolitical Realities

A major rebalancing is taking place in the heart of the Eurasian landmass. Central Asia is undergoing a fundamental geopolitical shift that entails new roles for and new relationships with China, Europe, Iran, Russia, South Asia, and the United States. Together, these changes will move Central Asia's geopolitical orientation toward Asia and away from Europe and the United States. Despite the Kremlin's rhetorical emphasis on promoting Eurasian integration on its own terms, Central Asia's neighbors to the east, south, and southwest will play an increasingly important role in its economic and political development and security environment. Over the next decade, five trends will generate far-reaching consequences for Central Asia.

### The China Factor

China has emerged as the region's most significant geopolitical and economic actor. The country's economic footprint in Central Asia has increased dramatically, and its ambitious plans for expanding it further will have important economic and political implications.

Trade has been the principal driver of this new relationship. The geographic proximity of China and Central Asia's mineral wealth make the two natural partners. Trade statistics tell a compelling story of the rapidly expanding relationship. Trade between China and Central Asia is estimated to have been between \$350 million and \$750 million a year in the early post-Soviet period of the 1990s.<sup>28</sup> In 2013, it passed the \$50 billion mark, far surpassing the region's trade with Russia.<sup>29</sup> Energy exports have been a major factor in the expanding economic relationship between Central Asia and China. Since the mid-1990s, Beijing has invested billions of dollars in energy-related infrastructure projects and acquisitions in the region's energy sector. Central Asia



is projected to supply 20 percent of China's gas consumption by the end of 2015,<sup>30</sup> and this share is expected to grow as China continues to expand its pipeline network in the region.<sup>31</sup>

The scale of potential Chinese investment projects in Central Asia betrays an ambition for expanded economic influence over the region. In 2013, the Chinese government announced \$64 billion in infrastructure deals in the region. These plans were followed in 2015 by Chinese President Xi Jinping's announcement of the ambitious Silk Road Economic Belt initiative—a nearly \$46-billion project that, if it materializes, promises additional infrastructure development funds for Central Asia, intended to link China, Central and South Asia, and Europe with a network of road, rail, and maritime routes.<sup>32</sup> China's growing economic and political clout has made Beijing a regular destination for Central Asian leaders.<sup>33</sup>

China's emergence as the dominant actor in the region's energy sector has profound geopolitical and geoeconomic consequences. Prior to Central Asia's opening to China, the landlocked region had only one outlet for its energy exports—through the Soviet-era pipeline network and Russia. Although Russia remains an important outlet for Central Asia's exports, including energy exports, its monopoly over trade with and access to these markets has been broken, and with it Russia's ability to dictate its will to Central Asia.

However, while China's emergence as the leading economic and geopolitical force in Central Asia is unmistakable, how Beijing will exercise its influence remains to be seen. Chinese leaders have not yet declared any naked geopolitical ambitions in the region—for example, unlike Russia, China has not claimed neighboring countries as a Chinese sphere of privileged interests, which is how Russia has framed its relationship with countries on its border.<sup>34</sup> Beijing has also maintained a low profile on security issues. Again, in contrast to Russia, China has not sought to project its military power or maintain military bases in Central Asia. Nor has it sought to create a military or collective security organization for the region, and it does not belong to the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which currently includes Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Chinese security activities are channeled primarily through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which comprises China, Russia, and all the states of Central Asia except Turkmenistan. Established in 2001 as a jointly led Chinese-Russian forum for Central Asia, it is neither a military alliance nor a security organization. Rather, the SCO's initiatives are focused on counterterrorism,<sup>35</sup> reflecting Beijing's interest in securing its own restive northwest provinces rather than ambitious plans for military expansion beyond its border.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, Beijing can be expected to protect its economic stakes in the region, and it could develop capabilities to play a security role. This role could include the potential for military intervention in Central Asia, if instability in the region makes it necessary to protect Chinese investments there. Given Moscow's failure to intervene during the 2010 interethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan, China is

cognizant that it cannot depend exclusively on Moscow to be the regional security provider. For the time being, however, China prefers to rely on political rather than military means to protect its equities, and some analysts have even argued that Beijing has ruled out military intervention in Central Asia under any circumstances.<sup>37</sup>

Beijing will keep a watchful eye on the region's domestic politics and succession scenarios to make sure that new Central Asian leaders take care to protect Chinese interests. To the extent that outside actors will play a role in the region's opaque leadership politics, few will be more important than China. Gaining Beijing's assurances of political and economic support will be an essential precondition for any new leader in Central Asia to consolidate and remain in power. Whereas in the past Moscow was the sole capital determining the political fortunes of the region, its monopoly as the arbiter of Central Asia's politics has been broken. It has not yet been supplanted by Beijing, but China has become the region's indispensable partner and patron.

### **Russia's Retreat**

Russia's economic troubles and the lasting repercussions of its aggression in Ukraine are likely to further shrink its already reduced footprint in Central Asia and its political influence in the region. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia's unchallenged monopoly over the region's economic, political, and security affairs was helped by its ability to control oil and gas export routes from the region to Russia and through its pipelines to Europe. China's economic penetration of the region filled a vacuum left by the contraction of Russia's economic presence, and China's oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia broke the Russian monopoly on export routes. Central Asia is still an arena of zero-sum competition between its two largest neighbors. The relentless expansion of China's footprint in the region has come largely at the expense of Russia's influence.

To be sure, Russia remains an important trading partner for Central Asia, but China's trade with the region has grown even more rapidly over the past decade, surpassing Russia's.

Nonetheless, Russian investment in Central Asia still plays an important role in the region's economic development,<sup>38</sup> and Moscow has also struck several major debt forgiveness deals with Central Asia, providing cash-strapped governments with much-needed relief.<sup>39</sup> However, when compared with China's multibillion-dollar schemes in Central Asia, Moscow's prospects for building on existing economic ties with the region appear modest.

The reversal of Russian economic fortunes, the current recession, and the outlook for slow growth in the years to come portend a bleak future for Russia's

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ties with Central Asia, and it likely will continue to be eclipsed by China as an economic partner to Central Asia. Further, Beijing's dominance in the economic sphere is accentuated by Russia's own increased desire for closer economic ties to China as a result of sanctions Western countries imposed on Russia in response to its aggression against Ukraine. Moscow's pivot to Asia and pursuit of an economic partnership with China restrict its room for geopolitical maneuver in Central Asia.

Russia has achieved a measure of success in asserting itself in Central Asia through its latest economic and geopolitical construct—the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Intended to enhance Russian influence in the former Soviet space, the union now counts Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan among its members. The government of Tajikistan has expressed lukewarm interest in the union and has yet to join.<sup>40</sup> Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have shown no interest in joining.

The impact of membership in the EEU for Russia's partners has yet to be felt, as its common market is not planned to go into effect until 2025.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, trade between several EEU members and Russia has declined over the past year, raising doubts about the long-term viability of the bloc.

Ironically, the EEU could become a vehicle for Chinese rather than Russian influence in Central Asia. In May 2015, Presidents Vladimir Putin of Russia and Xi Jinping of China discussed the possibility of coordinating and even integrating China's Silk Road Economic Belt with Russia's EEU with the goal

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of creating "a common economic space," as Putin put it.<sup>42</sup> They even signed a joint document committing China to hold multilateral talks through the EEU on linking the two projects, as opposed to negotiating with individual states.<sup>43</sup> This declaration has not been well received by individual Central Asian states. In September 2015, Kazakhstan and

China declared their intention to coordinate Astana's Nurly Zhol (Bright Path) national development program with Beijing's Silk Road initiative—a decision that suggests that the EEU could end up as a Potemkin village used by Russia to project a false image of economic power and influence in the region.<sup>44</sup>

Prospects for extending Russian influence in Central Asia through the SCO look equally modest. The organization has occasionally served as a platform from which Moscow has sought to exercise regional leadership, especially when it came to challenging U.S. presence and influence there.<sup>45</sup> Moscow has also sought to present the SCO as an alternative to the West's political fora, along with the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) gathering.<sup>46</sup> However, the planned addition of India and Pakistan to the SCO, apparently encouraged by Russia to raise the organization's weight and prestige in global affairs and to balance China's influence, is unlikely to enhance Russian standing in it.<sup>47</sup> Both India and Pakistan pursue foreign policies independent of Russia,

driven by their national agendas rather than Russian interests. Moreover, the center of gravity within the SCO will almost certainly change to reflect the growing imbalance of power within the region between Russia and China.

Arguably, military security is the only sphere where Russia continues to play a unique and leading role in Central Asia. Moscow's ties via the CSTO with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan represent a special link to Central Asia. The two Russian bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as well as the space launch facility in Kazakhstan make up for some of Russia's deficiencies in the economic sphere and help Moscow counterbalance China's influence in Central Asian affairs.

It is, however, an open question how long China will rely on Russia to be the lead security provider in Central Asia.<sup>48</sup> Even in the military sphere, the outlook for Russia to maintain its leadership in Central Asia is not encouraging. The key rationale for Russian military presence in the region is to guard against the threat of instability spreading from Afghanistan and to secure a buffer along Russia's southern periphery.<sup>49</sup> Yet, Russia's ability and commitment to play the role of security manager for Central Asia is not a foregone conclusion. As previously mentioned, when violence broke out in 2010 between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, and the government of Kyrgyzstan appealed to Moscow for help,<sup>50</sup> the Kremlin ignored its pleas and chose to stay out of the clashes.<sup>51</sup>

Despite improved military capabilities, Russia's resources for intervening in ethnic or sectarian conflicts are limited. The conflict in eastern Ukraine and Russia's military intervention in Syria have undoubtedly been a drain on such resources. The latter has also generated a vigorous debate among Russian commentators about the dangers and costs of Russian involvement in these types of messy and protracted conflicts, especially since the downing by the Islamic State of a Russian commercial airliner over the Sinai in November 2015. The lessons of the long and unsuccessful war in Afghanistan in the 1980s are still remembered in Russia, and Russian officials have made clear that there will be no deployment of Russian troops to Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup>

Russia's actions in Ukraine could also contribute to further loss of its influence in Central Asia. From a military and security perspective, the Ukraine conflict threatens to become a major burden for Russia, leaving Moscow little bandwidth and fewer resources for dealing with security problems in Central Asia.

Politically, even if the Ukraine crisis is resolved, Russia is unlikely to be an attractive partner to Central Asian neighbors who fear Russia's territorial claims, militant nationalism, and heavy-handed approaches to weaker states. Few of Russia's former client states in the region are likely to seek an outright confrontation with Moscow. But all can be counted upon to seek partners elsewhere to help balance their difficult northern neighbor. Russia's goal of securing a privileged sphere of interest in Central Asia will prove elusive.

### Iran's Return

The nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States plus Germany—holds out the prospect of the lifting of sanctions on Iran and expanding relations with one of Central Asia's key neighbors. Iran's emergence—however slowly—from its pariah status is a new and, on balance, probably welcome development for Central Asia. Progress toward normalizing and expanding relations with Iran promises to unlock a number of important economic, political, and strategic opportunities.

With a population of over 80 million, a land border with Turkmenistan, access to the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, a major role in the global energy market, and a regional transportation hub, Iran could over time become a uniquely significant partner to Central Asia. The prospect of renewed relations with Iran holds out the possibility of developing new transportation routes for the region that bypass Russia and China.<sup>53</sup> New pipelines from Central Asia across Iran could reopen long-abandoned schemes for exporting the region's hydrocarbons to markets other than Russia or China—to South Asia and Europe, which is eager to reduce its dependence on and vulnerability to manipulative Russian energy policies. For the frontline states—Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—that share a border with Afghanistan, Iran could once again be an important partner in addressing instability in Afghanistan.

The normalization of Iran's ties with Central Asia, however, could also create frictions and concerns. It would mean the entry of a new and as yet untested actor in the region—a theocracy developing relations with secular regimes that perceive the revival of religious activity in their countries as one of the chief causes of domestic instability. Iran would likely seek to exploit its geographic position vis-à-vis Central Asia in considering new export routes for its oil and gas. It would also compete with Central Asia for foreign investment and, given its size, location, and energy potential, would probably enjoy some major advantages in that contest.

The prospect of Iran reemerging from its isolation and resuming ties with its Central Asian neighbors is a new development in the region's geopolitics and presents both opportunities and new challenges. The balance of the two is uncertain at this time. However, what is certain is that the foreign policy agendas of the Central Asian states will become more crowded with the entry of a new actor that is likely to displace or fill the void left by some of the actors presently engaged in the region.

### The Afghan Problem

The decade and a half of war in Afghanistan has left an indelible imprint on the region's security. The ongoing conflict remains the top external security concern for Central Asian leaders and underscores the critical nature of South Asia for the region. Central Asian governments have long held a dim view of

Afghanistan's ability to transform itself and have feared the spillover of instability across Central Asia's southern border.<sup>54</sup> They have been mistrustful of the strategy pursued by the United States and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) coalition partners in Afghanistan. This strategy focused on Taliban strongholds and concentrated forces in the south of the country, leaving the north relatively unattended. The spread of instability and violence to Afghanistan's northern provinces and U.S. President Barack Obama's decision to halt the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan no doubt are being viewed in Central Asian capitals as vindication of their earlier fears about the future of their restive neighbor.<sup>55</sup>

Instability in northern Afghanistan poses a dual threat to Central Asia. It moves the external conflict right to the region's doorstep and could fuel Central Asia's homegrown problems with extremism.<sup>56</sup> The presence in Afghanistan of terrorist groups originating in Central Asia and with declared ambitions to return to their homeland is viewed by Central Asian leaders as a direct threat to their security<sup>57</sup>—one that the ISAF coalition had long underappreciated and neglected, and now has left for Central Asia to deal with on its own. Porous borders are likewise a concern, particularly given large-scale transit of drugs, people, and various illicit goods through the region. This problem is compounded by the complicity of regional governments—through corrupt border guard services and police—in smuggling operations. The possibility of the external contagion spreading deep into Central Asia's political landscape is arguably the worst security and political nightmare for Central Asian leaders. Afghanistan—given its potentially significant impact on Central Asian domestic order and defense and security partnerships—will trump other security concerns, including the geopolitical encroachment by China and Russia.

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**The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan remains the top external security concern for Central Asian leaders and underscores the critical nature of South Asia for the region.**

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### **The West's Disengagement**

Since 2001, the requirements of the military campaign in Afghanistan have defined U.S. and Western interest in Central Asia. Predictably, ISAF's limited combat mission since 2013 has led to diminished U.S. and European attention to and engagement in the region. Indeed, signs of the West's fatigue with Central Asia—a remote region that was not willing to follow the model of economic and political transformation prescribed by Western advisers—were already visible in the late 1990s.<sup>58</sup> By then, the European Union, the United States, and even Turkey had a clear view that, although market reforms had made some headway in Central Asia, political reforms had stalled and the West's hopes of transforming Central Asia into a zone of stability, democracy, and market-based prosperity were not taking root. Central Asia's energy potential proved considerably smaller than initially hoped, as the opening of

its hydrocarbon reserves to commercial exploration and the construction of multiple Western-backed pipeline projects confronted the realities of building major infrastructure projects in a complex political, economic, and geopolitical environment. The collapse of the price of oil in the late 1990s further dampened the West's interest in Central Asian energy reserves. By 2000, Ankara, Brussels, and Washington had begun to refocus their efforts elsewhere.

The eventual phasing out of ISAF combat operations in Afghanistan is not the only cause of Western disengagement from Central Asia. The United States and Europe face considerable impediments to developing closer ties with Central Asia. Some of them are rooted in the region's geopolitics. Central Asia is landlocked and distant, and it lacks historical, cultural, or ethnic ties to the United States and Europe, neither of which has a natural domestic constituency advocating closer relations with the region. Central Asia is surrounded by major powers with closer ties to and more significant interests in the region that are wary of other powers' attempts to gain a foothold there. The United States and Europe lack compelling interests in Central Asia but have such interests in China, Iran, and Russia. Together, these factors add up to an agenda for the West that is heavily skewed to emphasize the importance of Central Asia's neighbors at the expense of Central Asia proper.

In addition, there is little reason to believe that shared values or economic ties will motivate the United States and other Western countries to develop closer political relations with the region. The values-based aspects of both U.S. and European foreign policies have not been able to overcome the obstacle of the region's domestic politics—the closed political systems, abuse of basic civil rights, and lack of respect for the rule of law. Trade relations between Central Asia and Europe as well as the United States have been and are likely to remain anemic.<sup>59</sup> The decline in the price of oil and changes in the global energy marketplace have not only hurt the region's producers and exports but also dampened prospects for new investment in the energy sector.<sup>60</sup> Because of high entry barriers into Central Asia for foreign businesses and widespread poverty, the region—with the possible exception of Kazakhstan—is not an attractive target for American or European investors.<sup>61</sup> Unlike China's project, America's own New Silk Road (NSR) initiative to construct transportation and energy infrastructure connecting the states of Central Asia to Afghanistan, announced in 2011, does not promise major investment in the region.<sup>62</sup>

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) also appears to be losing interest in Central Asia since the decline of its active combat mission in Afghanistan. There has been solid cooperation between NATO and Kazakhstan within NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. However, the rest of the region's participation in PfP has been rather limited in scope.<sup>63</sup> NATO's attractiveness as a partner to Central Asia is likely to continue to fade as the region becomes increasingly preoccupied with the threat to its security from Afghanistan, and as the organization shifts its attention from Afghanistan

to other challenges closer to home, including Russia and the Middle East. Moreover, in an atmosphere of increased NATO-Russia tensions, close contacts with the organization could create additional problems for some Central Asian states by triggering a negative reaction from Moscow.

These five factors represent a major shift in the region's economic, political, and security affairs and its overall geopolitical orientation over the quarter century following the breakup of the Soviet Union. The next phase in the region's development—the new normal—will be guided to a large degree by the shifting geopolitical realities described above. These new facts on the ground will exert a major influence on how the United States advances its modest interests in the region with the limited means and resources it has at its disposal.

## U.S. Interests and Objectives

The evolution of Central Asia over the past quarter century points to an important conclusion: the region is likely to remain beyond the reach of U.S. transformational diplomacy because of its own internal and regional dynamics, geopolitical surroundings, and limited American interests and resources. Between 1992 and 2014, U.S. economic and military assistance to the five states of Central Asia totaled just under \$6.8 billion (in constant dollars), reaching a peak of \$649 million in 2010 during the period of the U.S. surge in Afghanistan and an unprecedented U.S. military presence there of some 100,000 troops.<sup>64</sup> Troop rotations to and from Afghanistan relied on the U.S. Transit Center at Manas, Kyrgyzstan, and the scale of U.S. operations at that time called for a massive logistical effort, of which the overland transport route across Central Asia was an essential element. However, it should be noted that the Northern Distribution Network was used mostly to transport nonlethal cargo to Afghanistan,<sup>65</sup> and that lethal cargo was shipped by air. As U.S. combat operations wind down, and as no future U.S. plans envision anything approaching the size of its earlier massive military deployment in Afghanistan, U.S. reliance on the network and, accordingly, on Central Asia will wane. In 2014, U.S. assistance amounted to just \$148 million.<sup>66</sup>

These are not arguments to disengage from Central Asia or to abandon efforts to advance American ideals, promote good governance and regional economic development, and sustain a meaningful security posture. But the resources to support U.S. policy in Central Asia are likely to remain modest. In the future, therefore, America's expectations for and demands on the states of Central Asia should be tempered by the investment Washington is prepared to make in this region. This includes determining where U.S. interests overlap with the region's other major powers—particularly Russia and China—and how to harness their interests in and approach to the region in the United States' favor.



### Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation

Preventing weapons of mass destruction proliferation has long been a top U.S. concern in Central Asia. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan was left with one of the largest remnants of the Soviet nuclear arsenal and associated nuclear infrastructure. The removal and dismantlement of those weapons and infrastructure is one of the great achievements of U.S. nonproliferation policy, and America's cooperation with Kazakhstan on nonproliferation remains a key element of the relationship between the two countries.<sup>67</sup> Kazakhstan's interest in pursuing an active role in global nonproliferation efforts presents an opportunity for the United States to sustain its engagement with the biggest economy in Central Asia.

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**For the most part, Central Asia will remain an area of general interest for U.S. nonproliferation efforts rather than a region of special concern.**

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Beyond Kazakhstan and its active role in the field of nonproliferation, Central Asia will remain an area of general interest for U.S. nonproliferation efforts rather than a region of special concern.

The United States will need to continue to address the residual potential for nuclear smuggling and the security of a handful of nuclear material and facilities that do not have effective security arrangements. This can be accomplished through relatively inexpensive measures to improve the physical security of these facilities and to strengthen border controls—a more challenging problem, as previously noted, given high levels of corruption among many of the region's border guards. Some of these tasks can be pursued in cooperation with Russia and China, which share similar nonproliferation concerns.

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### Radical Islamic Terrorism

The United States has an interest in ensuring that Central Asia does not become a sanctuary for radical Islamic militants. Several terrorist groups that originated in Central Asia have been operating in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan since 2000. While these groups currently do not present and are unlikely to emerge as a direct terrorist threat to the United States or Central Asia in the near future, some have cooperated with the Taliban,<sup>68</sup> some have been affiliated with al-Qaeda,<sup>69</sup> and some fighters from Central Asia are known to have joined the Islamic State.<sup>70</sup> That said, most of Central Asia has been hostile territory for militant groups, in large measure because of the extensive presence of government security personnel.

However, in some areas, such as remote and poorly governed parts of Tajikistan, militant organizations could find opportunities to establish a foothold, especially if there is a spillover of conflict and instability from Afghanistan, where the Taliban has been gaining territory in the northern provinces. If this were to occur, the expansion of these militant organizations into Central Asia could over time develop into a more significant threat to the

stability and security of the region. Sustained American counterterrorism assistance to Central Asia could help to prevent this threat from emerging.

### **Energy and Economic Cooperation**

The United States continues to have an interest in constructing a regional energy market for Central Asia that is linked to Afghanistan, South Asia, Europe, and East Asia. To date, U.S. efforts have focused on the plan to build a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (TAPI). In December 2015, the leaders of the four countries participated in the groundbreaking ceremony for the TAPI gas pipeline in Turkmenistan. However, the feasibility of the project remains in question. Turkmenistan has proven to be a difficult partner, and it may not have the gas to fulfill its contractual obligations. Furthermore, financing for the pipeline continues to be a challenge, and there are continuing long-term security concerns in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The P5+1 nuclear agreement with Iran could change the energy dynamics of the region, and, as a result, pipeline projects and other energy links between Central and South Asia could be reinvigorated.

Moreover, U.S. commercial interests would be well served by expanded regional economic cooperation and diversification beyond extracting and exporting hydrocarbons and other natural resources. The United States should build on Kazakhstan's 2015 entry into the World Trade Organization and on Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's compliance with the standards in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) to encourage Central Asian states to cooperate with the international financial institutions—a process that could help advance the adoption of a rules-based and more open business climate.<sup>71</sup> Pushing for transparency and accountability in this sector could help advance the U.S. goal of promoting the rule of law across the region.

### **Regional Integration and the New Silk Road**

Greater regional integration among Central Asian states has been a long-standing goal of U.S. policy. As previously noted, America's NSR initiative is the signature project in this enterprise. However, with the United States not willing to provide financial resources to back up this project, the results thus far have been disappointing, and its longer-term prospects as well as the potential more broadly for regional economic integration are problematic at best for several reasons.

- With the exception of Turkmenistan, Central Asian states have shown little commitment to regional economic integration or to a north-south transportation network that would connect the region to its neighbors in South Asia.
- Central Asian governments may desire improved relations with India and Pakistan, but none has sought closer ties to Afghanistan, and they have been

suspicious that the real motivation for the NSR was Washington's support for Afghanistan rather than Central Asian economic or security interests.

- India, the most important potential member of the NSR, has shown little enthusiasm for it, and both Pakistan and Afghanistan are being wooed by China with offers of infrastructure investment.
- Russia is opposed to the NSR because it fears the initiative will undermine Moscow's influence in the region by pulling Central Asian states southward.
- China's Silk Road Economic Belt offers Central Asia a compelling alternative to NSR and is backed by a potential \$46-billion fund, as well as potential financing from the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

None of the prospective regional stakeholders in the NSR has bought into the project. The inability thus far of the U.S. government to find private investors for the project and the political, legal, logistical, and security problems of doing business in Central Asia are further obstacles in the road. It remains to be seen whether China will actually deliver on its ambitious and expensive plans. But even if Beijing scales back its plans by 50 percent or more, a comparable U.S. financial commitment to its project appears highly unlikely.

### **Fragile States**

A number of Central Asian states are afflicted by varying degrees with internal weaknesses—poor governance, corruption, weak rule of law, lack of economic opportunities for large sectors of the population—that increase state fragility. Predicting whether and when a weak or a failing state will become a failed state is an inherently difficult task, and even Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the weakest states in Central Asia, have repeatedly defied predictions of their imminent demise.

The task of preventing state failure is equally challenging. Besides considerable resources, it would require host governments' consent and cooperation. However, the recipes America prefers for preventing state failure, such as greater openness and fairness in governance and the economy, are at odds with host governments' preferences and thus are likely to be ignored or subverted. As a result, U.S. options to intervene in the event of a dire threat to a Central Asian state, other than to protect a critical asset or deliver humanitarian assistance, are almost certain to be very limited. Even a limited American intervention would require cooperation and possibly coordination or at least consent from Russia, China, or both. The United States did not intervene in the ethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, despite concerns about the survival of the provisional government following the overthrow of then president Kurmanbek Bakiyev and the security of the former U.S. military transit center near Bishkek. Moreover, the lack of any permanent U.S. military presence in

or near the region (excluding Afghanistan) would further complicate any U.S. effort to respond to a security or humanitarian emergency in Central Asia.

### **Regional Stability**

Beyond the risk of internal collapse, there is also the potential over the next several years for intraregional tensions to spark armed conflict—for example, a resurgence of intercommunal violence in Kyrgyzstan, a troubled political transition in one of the states, or a dispute over access to water. A big unknown is what neighboring powers would do in the event of destabilization of one of the Central Asian states. The Fergana Valley, in particular, is rife with political, economic, and social problems. Any unrest there would affect Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and could be used by extremist forces to expand their foothold in the region.

Although Russia aspires to organize regional security in Central Asia under the CSTO and the SCO, its will and capacity to perform the role of regional security manager are problematic. China appears loath to assume greater security commitments in the region, though this could change if regional conflict threatens to spill into western China or if major Chinese investments and energy infrastructure in the region are directly threatened. However, a U.S. military intervention in Central Asia could only be justified if a direct threat to the American homeland or U.S. facilities in the region were involved—a threat that, as previously noted, appears highly unlikely at the moment. China and Russia have far greater interests in the region and assets stationed nearby than the United States and should therefore bear the greatest share of responsibility for assisting the governments of Central Asia on security matters.

### **Democracy and Human Rights**

More than two decades of U.S. efforts to promote democracy and respect for human rights in Central Asia have yet to produce sustainable and meaningful results in most of the region. Kyrgyzstan, arguably the most democratic state in Central Asia, is also its least stable and has been through two popular uprisings that resulted in the overthrow of presidents who had won office in relatively competitive elections. The current president was elected in a competitive vote, but his tenure has also been associated with concerns about his consolidation of power and the quality of democratic politics in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>72</sup> Central Asian leaders harbor suspicions that U.S. democracy and human rights promotion efforts seek to engineer more color revolutions. Severe limits on independent media, civil society, and domestic and international nongovernmental organizations leave little space for U.S. activities to advance democracy and defend human rights, and change will be slow at best. Over the longer term, internal changes in Central Asian states could create opportunities for the United States to champion this agenda. In the near term, however, such opportunities are likely to remain very limited.

## Rebooting U.S. Policy

Over the past quarter century, the U.S. government has articulated a number of bold visions for Central Asia and its relations with the region, most recently when Secretary of State John Kerry visited all five Central Asian states in November 2015.<sup>73</sup> These included a space free of superpower competition, a global powerhouse in energy, an ally in the global war on terror, and a partner in the economic development of the region. Invariably, these visions offered a glimpse of American interests that more often than not proved transitory. America lacks close economic, political, or societal bonds with Central Asia. It also is continuing to shrink its military footprint in Afghanistan and is preoccupied with crises elsewhere. For these reasons, the United States needs to put its engagement with the region on a long-term, sustainable basis, commensurate with its interests and available resources.

The United States lacks the geographic advantage enjoyed by Russia and China in Central Asia as well as those two countries' significant interests in the region. Given these realities, America should adopt a version of offshore balancing, using its political, economic, and—as needed—security tool kit to selectively act as a partner to Central Asia to help offset the geopolitical weight of the region's immediate neighbors. As one expert has observed, offshore balancing is a way to relieve the United States of its burdens of managing the security affairs of unstable regions by transferring to others the task of maintaining regional power balances.<sup>74</sup> This approach is similar to the posture adopted by Russia and China after September 11 when they in effect relied on the United States to be the security provider for the region. Any offshoring by the United States needs to be carefully calibrated—it should match the demands of host governments but avoid overcommitting the United States, especially to the role of first responder in situations that do not call for active U.S. engagement.

The following six guidelines for U.S. policy toward Central Asia could help achieve this goal.

### Prioritize Engagement

Kazakhstan presently offers the best opportunity for U.S. engagement. It has the vision, resources, and institutional capacity to play a greater leadership role and to help put Central Asia on a more positive trajectory. In its foreign and domestic policy, Kazakhstan has a number of important accomplishments to its credit, and, unlike other states in the region, it has set out an ambitious agenda for the future. Its leaders have sustained a skilled, complicated diplomatic strategy, which has effectively balanced the country's ties with China, Russia, and the United States. U.S. support and encouragement could help Kazakhstan make progress toward becoming a more modern, transparent, and diversified economy. Over time, it could resemble Dubai or Singapore—a goal set out by Kazakhstan's leaders—more than it does Russia. Kazakhstan is far from realizing this vision and, notwithstanding the country's progress,

Astana has a history of setting out ambitious goals and not fully accomplishing them. U.S. support and encouragement cannot transform Kazakhstan into Singapore, a city-state that enjoys the benefits of political stability, rule of law, and sustainable economic development. But any U.S. assistance that could help Kazakhstan make progress toward that goal would be a good investment.

Uzbekistan could assume a higher place in U.S. regional diplomacy if a post-Karimov government proves to be less repressive and more reform-oriented. It is arguably the most important country in the region from the standpoint of security and U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. Although U.S. policy aims to reduce America's involvement in Afghanistan, as long as the United States has an interest in the security of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan will remain an important partner.

Kyrgyzstan could be a useful partner if it manages to stabilize its political system, but it is unlikely to serve as a pillar of U.S. engagement in the region because of its small size and lack of resources. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are troubled states; the United States has neither the resources nor the interests to change their trajectory, and should gauge its engagement with them accordingly.

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**Kazakhstan has the vision, resources, and institutional capacity to play a greater leadership role and to help put Central Asia on a more positive trajectory.**

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### **Recognize and Accept Others' Contributions and Potential**

The stability, security, and prosperity of the region, based on improved governance and greater regional integration, are clearly of interest to the United States, but these regional "public goods" are of greater importance to China and Russia. Now, as before, the United States shares with Russia and China an interest in Central Asia's economic development and stability. Unlike the United States, however, Russia and China also have considerable resources to assist Central Asia.

American policy toward Central Asia should be based on the premise that it is a region of convergent rather than competitive interests, offering greater space for policies that do not work at cross-purposes and are even complementary. Thus, where possible and appropriate, Washington should better harness Russian and Chinese presence in the region to its favor. The United States should not necessarily rush to assume that Russia's security presence in Central Asia is inherently problematic, given the danger that interethnic and intraregional tensions could create lasting security vacuums. In such circumstances, Washington may face a painful choice between greater Russian assertiveness and any number of unpalatable local actors, including Islamic extremist groups, filling those vacuums. Similarly, Washington should not try to impede China's Silk Road Economic Belt initiative. It is not necessary and will prove ineffective for Washington to take an overly competitive approach to challenging Chinese and Russian political, economic, and security engagement in the region.

### **Let Demand Drive Reforms**

Democratic change and good governance in Central Asia cannot be imposed from the outside. American efforts in this area have been largely unsuccessful due in large measure to the absence of broad domestic coalitions for change and intense mistrust of U.S. motivations. In the future, the United States can offer assistance to promote positive change, but it should focus on areas where change is possible or would improve the plight of the region's citizens. U.S. policy should be more cognizant of the region's own reform agendas, such as Kazakhstan's 100 Concrete Steps to Implement Five Institutional Reforms, and make its assistance more demand-driven, rather than supply-driven. The United States should then pressure these governments to move beyond rhetoric and make concrete policy changes in these areas.

The United States needs to be realistic about what it can accomplish in an environment that is inhospitable to the growth of liberal democracies. A more feasible near-term objective would be to support actors who advocate better government performance to reduce transnational security threats and to make more social and economic progress. In this vein, U.S. aid programs should deemphasize the promotion of democratic practices as an end in themselves and focus more on improving quality of life, especially in the areas of health-care, education, the environment, economic transparency, and the rule of law. Concentrating U.S. resources on a few key projects would achieve better results than dispersing them among many and could over time create constituencies for greater change.

### **Strike the Right Balance Between Security and Values**

The United States needs to be clear about the role human rights and democracy will play in its relations with Central Asia. Washington should underscore the importance it attaches to these issues and indicate that continued abuse of human rights will remain an obstacle to closer ties with the United States. Washington should continue to highlight that many domestic policies of Central Asian states risk pushing economic, political, or religious dissent underground, a process that in the long term can fuel instability.

At the same time, however, the United States should signal that despite Central Asia's poor human rights record it will continue to engage with Central Asian leaders, particularly given the instability in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The United States should focus its human rights agenda on concrete and achievable reforms and actions to improve human security in the areas described above.

Similarly, U.S. security cooperation with some Central Asian countries, such as Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, whose human rights records have been widely criticized,<sup>75</sup> is a long-standing problem that calls for reconciling America's commitment to human rights with its security requirements. The resources

the United States is prepared to make available to deal with the underlying problems of poor governance and the democracy deficit in Central Asia clearly fall short of what is required. But even if far greater resources were available to tackle these problems, the region is likely to be well beyond the reach of U.S. transformational diplomacy.

This calls for a difficult trade-off in American policy that gives priority to security over values. Washington has made this trade-off elsewhere, particularly with its Middle East partners, on numerous occasions. It is far from a perfect solution to the problem. As in other parts of the world, however, U.S. pursuit of the best policy in Central Asia should not stand in the way of a reasonably good one. There is no benefit to pretending that U.S. security cooperation is undertaken in the interest of its partners—it is, rather, intended to serve U.S. interests, and by conditioning this assistance on its partners' behavior, the United States serves neither their interests nor its own.

Aid conditionality—cooperation in exchange for improved human rights performance—rarely, if ever, works, as the United States has seen recently with Egypt and Bahrain, where the suspension of or restriction on U.S. military sales has produced very meager, if any, improvements in the human rights behavior of these two governments. Instead, progress in specific cases may be achieved through quiet but forceful high-level diplomacy, as apparently was the case with the November 2015 release from prison of a long-held political prisoner in Uzbekistan.<sup>76</sup>

However, U.S. assistance should be conditioned on reasonable efforts by host governments to use it for its intended purposes. In some areas, U.S. assistance has been wasteful, if not counterproductive. For example, in Tajikistan, U.S. assistance on border security to stem narcotics flows has largely been wasted due to the government's complicity in the smuggling trade.

### **Avoid Militarization**

The United States should not exaggerate and thus not overreact to the threat to U.S. security posed by Islamic militancy in the region. There is a tendency among some Central Asian governments to misrepresent political opposition as being extremist to justify their own authoritarian policies and seek outside assistance. U.S. security assistance needs to be especially vigilant not to fall into that trap. Checking the spread of Islamic extremism rather than terrorism is the major challenge in Central Asia, a problem that is compounded by many of the region's own policies. While there may at times be a limited role for American security assistance to regional states, including training, equipment, and intelligence sharing, there should be no role for direct U.S. military intervention even if the security situation deteriorates. The U.S. military should not undertake direct counterterrorism operations against groups that oppose local regimes but do not threaten the United States.



### Use Leverage More Effectively

The United States could use its leverage more effectively to achieve its limited goals in the region. To varying degrees, the countries in the region value their relationships with the United States in large part because they want American assistance and support to counterbalance China and Russia. This provides the United States with a source of leverage, and Washington should not hesitate to play harder to get. To maximize U.S. leverage, it should be applied in pursuit of realistic and carefully prioritized goals.

## Conclusion

Central Asia's initial period of independence was marked by a growing geopolitical orientation toward the West, including Western political and security institutions and economic models of reform and development. The push for free markets and liberal economic prescriptions for reforms, implemented with varying degrees of success across the region, encountered little political or ideological opposition because there were no credible alternative models. The West was the leading provider of economic and technical assistance to Central Asia for many years following its independence. The first initiatives to unlock the region's energy resources originated from the West and were promoted by U.S. and European companies and governments. Central Asia's emergence in

the international arena took place in predominantly Western organizations. Even Russia was pursuing integration with the West, which indirectly offered Central Asia a connection to the West.

In the early post-Soviet period, the United States successfully helped the five new states of Central Asia become independent and sovereign. America fulfilled its promise of partnership at that crucial stage. And since their independence, Central Asian

states have been important partners to the United States at critical times. Central Asia is now, however, on a different trajectory as a result of China's emergence as the region's preeminent economic power, Russia's loss of economic momentum and dramatically changed policy toward its neighborhood, and the West's declining relevance to and interest in the region's economic, political, and security problems. All these developments foreshadow declining American and Western influence in Central Asia as the region gravitates increasingly toward the Chinese political and economic orbit and, perhaps, seeks occasional refuge under the Russian security umbrella.

This is hardly a cause for alarm. The occasional expansive expressions of American interests notwithstanding, Central Asia will be of limited importance to the United States. It will remain inhospitable to the projection of American power, to efforts at state building, and to the flourishing of democracy and

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**Central Asia will remain inhospitable to the projection of American power, to efforts at state building, and to the flourishing of democracy and American values.**

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American values. Accordingly, U.S. policy toward Central Asia has to be rebalanced to bring American commitments into better alignment with its limited aims and means. A business-as-usual approach of ambitious but unrealistic goals will breed frustration, cynicism, and disappointment.

This is not an argument for U.S. neglect of or disengagement from Central Asia. Rather, it is an appeal for prudence and realism, and for paying more attention to outcomes that the United States can reasonably attain working in a cooperative multilateral framework that takes account of the region's larger and more influential neighbors. Central Asian states have a strong interest in maintaining friendly ties with the United States if only to balance the influence of China and Russia, and that should create meaningful opportunities for U.S. engagement and for advancing mutual interests.



## Notes

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