



A new strategy for Central Asia

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This month, the Trump administration released its strategy for Central Asia. This marks the first time in more than two decades that the United States has come up with a serious approach to a region where vast economic, geopolitical, and civilizational stakes are at issue. It follows visits by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the first trip to the region by someone in that role in half a decade.

Long seen as a stagnant land of Soviet holdovers, Central Asia is undergoing a dramatic transition led by its two most powerful countries, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Both have plunged into meaningful domestic reforms focused on expanding citizen rights, governmental responsiveness, and the rule of law. They have also taken important steps toward establishing their own structures for regional cooperation, a process that could result in a kind of Central Asian version of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Other world powers have taken notice. Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the behemoth Belt and Road Initiative in the capital of Kazakhstan seven years ago. Moscow, desperate not to be marginalized by Beijing, is coercing regional states to join its Eurasian Economic Union, and has also launched a fanciful vision of a "Greater Eurasia" in which all would be subordinated to Russia and China. Indian, Japanese, and South Korean leaders have all extensively toured the region. The European Union released its own strategy last year, focused on supporting regional cooperation rather than mere bilateral ties.

Neither George Bush nor Barack Obama bothered to think strategically about Central Asia, shifting their attention instead to Afghanistan and the war on terror. Afghanistan has been intimately linked with Central Asia for 3,000 years, but for the past two decades, the United States treated the two as separate worlds. Subordinated to American concerns in Afghanistan, Russia, and China, Central Asia became an afterthought. But in an era where great power competition is seen as the most serious challenge to national security, it follows that the United States should care about countries sandwiched between Russia, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan.

The new strategy emphasizes American support for the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian states. It encourages the growth of regional cooperation among them, and acknowledges positive steps toward political and economic reform in the region. It also supports the expansion of relations between Central Asian states and Afghanistan. It emphasizes the importance of partnership with regional states to achieve progress on sensitive topics such as human rights and religious freedom.

In releasing this strategy, the Trump administration makes clear that it views Central Asia as a world region where the United States has intrinsic national security and economic interests. This is an important departure from the past practice of allowing this region to slip between the cracks. We have long argued for exactly this approach to the region, and therefore have ample reason to applaud the strategy drafters. However, the task has not been completed, for several important omissions must be attended to.

First, Washington has yet to grasp the fundamental role of Central Asia as a bastion of Muslim societies with secular governments, laws, and education. The United States should acknowledge this role, and work to sustain and promote secular government in Central Asia and elsewhere. Next, the United States has yet to fully recognize that, as Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has noted, Afghanistan is itself a Central Asian country. Acknowledging this, the logical next step is for the United States to fully include Afghanistan in its mechanism for consultations with Central Asian states.

The strategy does not mention the crucial east to west corridor linking Central Asia to Europe through the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus. Expanding the Central Asian linkages with lands to the west should be a priority of American engagement. Finally, the strategy acknowledges the very real security challenges Central Asian states face from Russia and China. But it offers little detail on how the United States could help shore up their security.

Central Asia, including Afghanistan, presents geopolitically important real estate in the world. Building on their rich indigenous cultures, its countries now look to the Americans to provide a balance to other major powers in the region. They believe that such an arrangement can provide the basis for better relations among all involved. Until now, the United States has hesitated to embrace this challenge. The new strategy indicates that at long last Washington is beginning to take Central Asia seriously. Having finally taken important first steps, it should now finish the job.

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