



Why the Trump Administration's Central Asia Strategy Improves Over Its Predecessors

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In a recent opinion piece, *Diplomat* editor Catherine Putz offered a thoughtful criticism of our Feb. 18 article marking the publication of a new U.S. Strategy for Central Asia. While the main purpose of our article was to note the areas in which U.S. policy needs further development, we do indeed believe that the approach of the present administration to the region to be an improvement on those of its predecessors, both Democratic and Republican.

Putz challenges our contention that the new strategy marks the first time in two decades that the U.S. has come up with a serious approach to the region. She points to the 2011 “New Silk Road,” a 2015 Strategy document, and that year’s creation of the C5+1 mechanism as evidence that the American approach to the region was equally serious during the Obama Administration.

We are, of course, well aware of the steps taken by the Obama administration, and were in fact involved in their creation. One of us called for the establishment of a U.S. “Partnership for Central Asia” as early as 2005, and the *Diplomat*, among others, credited our 2007 book *The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia* for having played a role in nudging Hillary Clinton’s State Department to design the “New Silk Road” strategy. Finally, in 2014 we published a more specific call for a “Central Asia Six Plus One” entity, which differed from John Kerry’s C5+1 only in the latter’s decision to leave Afghanistan out of the mechanism. Why, then, our bold assertion that Trump Administration’s strategy – in which we played no similar role – marks a fundamental improvement?

Our criticism of past administrations, both Democratic and Republican, refers both to conceptual flaws and failures of execution. We presented our critique in a 2018 book, *The Long Game on the Silk Road: U.S. and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus*. It is important to note that our criticism is bipartisan in nature: we view the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations as having pursued essentially identical policies toward Central Asia, which were inferior both to the strategies of their Democratic predecessor and their Republican successor.

The first flaw of the Bush-Obama era was conceptual: neither viewed Central Asia primarily as an area where the U.S. had intrinsic interests. Both were fixated on the issue of terrorism and Islamic extremism, something that led them to view Central Asia as an appendix to Afghanistan policy – essentially, as a highway with a pit stop, the highway being the transportation routes leading across the region to Afghanistan, the pit stop being the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan. Neither viewed the region on the basis of its intrinsic importance as a land of small and mid-size Muslim-majority states with secular government, surrounded by the most influential powers on the Eurasian continent. This is not to say that various officials in government agencies did not see this value: many did, and we worked closely with them. But they were never able to fundamentally shift the policy of their administrations in this strategic direction.

Our second critique of the Bush-Obama years focused on the manner in which the U.S. treated the internal flaws and shortcomings of Central Asian states. The lack of meaningful democratic development in Central Asia for much of the thirty years since the Soviet Union’s collapse is well-known. The question has been what America should do about it. Should it work *with* Central Asian governments to address these deficiencies, through a policy of engagement focused on building trust and working toward gradual progress that will, in the long term, make their societies more free and equitable? Or should it, by contrast, work *on* or *against* them, by loudly pointing out these deficiencies, berating regional states for their shortcomings, and perhaps even apply sanctions, in the hope that a policy of naming and shaming will coerce them to make meaningful change?

From the promulgation of the “Freedom Agenda” in 2004, the U.S. government strongly tended in the latter direction, i.e., it worked *on* rather than *with* Central Asian governments. It didn’t work. We have long argued that this approach failed to bring about the desired change and instead served only to alienate the Central Asian countries and push them closer into the Russian and Chinese orbit.

It is true that the Obama Administration eventually came to realize that this approach had reached the end of the road, and we applauded it at the time for changing course. But neither of the two initiatives that reflected its desire to follow a more constructive path got off the ground.

The 2011 “New Silk Road” was an initiative that Secretary Clinton, to her credit, adopted at the urging of the U.S. military leadership. But for reasons beyond our comprehension, neither the National Security Council nor President Obama himself evinced the slightest support the strategy. In fact, neither so much as mentioned it publicly. The main effect of the New Silk Road Strategy was to challenge both Russia and China to come up with a counter strategy. Russia began preparing seriously its Eurasian Economic Union. China, pinching the name from the American program, launched its own “Silk Road Economic Belt,” which it eventually rebranded as part of the broader “Belt and Road” initiative.

By contrast, C5+1 has proved to be more lasting in nature. Still, it should be noted that the United States was the last major power to create a regional mechanism for consultations with Central Asia: both Japan and the EU had already done so several years before John F. Kerry approved C5+1. And in reality, it was not the State Department but the Central Asians themselves, who for years had lobbied for it, who initiated this project. It was adroit pressure from Kazakhstan, not any internal initiative from State, that made the difference.

Having launched C5+1, State has pursued it in a lackadaisical fashion. This is in sharp contrast to the European Union, which has developed detailed regional strategies in several spheres and appointed a Special Representative for the region as a whole, who has pursued his task with strong backing from Brussels.

In launching the C5+1, Kerry did not include Afghanistan, where the U.S. has invested considerable lives and treasure, even though it is an integral part of Central Asia and all the Central Asian governments are expanding their links there.

In this sense, the Trump Administration's policy is reminiscent of the Clinton Administration's fruitful approach to the region in the late 1990s: it appears grounded in a realistic approach to the region's political development, a constructive attitude focused on working *with* rather than *on* Central Asian governments, as indicated in its hosting of the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 2018. The Administration's policies show an appreciation of the region's value relative to great power politics. In fact, the Trump Administration's interest in Central Asia no doubt rests with its identification, in the National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy, of great power competition as the key challenge to U.S. global interests.

But as we point out in our article, there remain a number of areas in which U.S. policy toward Central Asia can and should be improved. However, the new strategy certainly departs from the consensus of its two immediate predecessors years in important and positive ways that future administrations, whether Republican or Democratic, should build upon.

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