



# America Inches Toward A Serious Central Asia Strategy

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This Spring, the Trump administration formally released its official strategy for Central Asia. [1] The occasion marks the first time in more than two decades that the United States has articulated a serious approach to a region where vast economic, geopolitical, and civilizational stakes are in play. Coming on the heels of repeated visits to the region by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the new strategy emphasizes American support for the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian states, encourages the growth of regional cooperation among them, and acknowledges positive steps toward political and economic reform. Crucially, it also supports the expansion of relations between the Central Asian states and Afghanistan.

In releasing this strategy, the Trump administration has made clear that it views Central Asia as a world region where the United States has intrinsic economic and security interests. This represents a significant departure from the past practice of various U.S. administrations, who allowed the region to slip between the cracks of other national security and foreign policy concerns that were deemed more important.

## A HISTORY OF NEGLECT

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, if the U.S. government looked at Central Asia at all, it was through a Russian lens. True, there had been Americans like the budding diplomat Eugene Schuyler (1840—1890) or the geologist Rafael Pompelli (1837—1923) who saw the region as a distinct cultural and political zone in its own right. But these thinkers were few in number, and distant from the councils of government. The perception persisted even after the collapse of the Soviet Union; for a decade after 1991, most American officials dealing with the region perceived it mainly as “Russia’s backyard,” as President Clinton famously put it.

Indeed, until quite recently, Washington subordinated its Central Asia policy to other geopolitical and domestic concerns. These considerations were connected directly with Afghanistan, which after the events of 9/11 suddenly replaced Russia as the main driver of U.S. thinking on Central Asia.

The first post-Afghanistan concern was over the potential for the spread of Islamic extremism in Central Asia. A number of attacks did indeed occur in the region, most notably in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. But the substance of these incidents was largely misinterpreted by the U.S. government – most conspicuously, in the case of the 2005 unrest in Andijan, Uzbekistan, when Islamic extremists precipitated a confrontation with authorities and the State Department effectively took the side of the instigators. Moreover, in the main, U.S. concerns did not turn out to be warranted; over the years, Central Asian governments have generally dealt harshly with extremism and suppressed militant movements where they have appeared.

The second concern revolved around drugs. In the years after 9/11, the U.S. spent huge sums to eradicate poppy production in Afghanistan, and came to view Central Asia as a key hub in the distribution of opium. It held this view even though it was Russians, with their direct access both to Afghanistan and Europe, who dominated the trade, rather than the Central Asians, who were secondary middlemen.

The third worry, driven mostly by the U.S. Congress, pertained to human rights and religious freedom. At several key points during the first quarter-century of U.S.-Central Asian relations, Washington imposed restrictions based upon what it judged to be punitive measures by local states against religious believers. Identifying victims ranging from Jehovah’s Witnesses to what the Department of State termed “especially pious Muslims,” Washington used the issue to curtail relations at critical moments. This approach served to alienate the U.S. from its potential regional partners. Even when the United States accurately identified problems, its method of addressing partner shortcomings—which, more often than not involved hectoring rather than working with them to solve the problem—proved ineffective, breeding resentment and hostility in the very places that America was trying to steer toward constructive engagement.

The first sign of a change to this status quo occurred in 2016, when the U.S. established regular meetings with Central Asian countries as a group. The resulting “C5+1” structure, instituted by then-Secretary of State John Kerry at the instigation of Kazakhstan, introduced a regional dimension to U.S. actions as a supplement to existing bilateral relationships. However, the question of Afghanistan’s place in the region remained unresolved. By then, Americans had sacrificed several thousand lives in Afghanistan and expended nearly a trillion dollars there. Moreover, Washington knew full well that Afghanistan shares common borders with three of the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, that those countries all had co-nationals within Afghanistan itself, and that they all considered Afghanistan to be a part of Central Asia instead of an inconvenient neighbor. Yet the United States new “regional” initiative of 2016 did not include Afghanistan, nor does it today.

## **TOWARD DEEPER ENGAGEMENT**

In early 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, both of which had recently undergone transitions in presidential leadership. Then, in February of this year, the State Department formally released its new strategy for the region—a document that had been several years in the making.

To some extent, the strategy—and the shift in Washington’s thinking that it encapsulates—came about as a result of changes in the region itself. For one thing, the new presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have, in recent years, each signaled their intention to introduce basic changes that would curb bureaucratic caprice and elicit the views of elected bodies and civil society on a range of policy issues. Additionally, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev have sought to reform laws, courts, and the legal profession in order to strengthen the rights of citizens, private businesses, and foreign investors in their countries. Notably, the reform process has advanced further in Uzbekistan,[2] which in turn has inspired would-be reformers elsewhere in the region (although it has also elicited official resistance in some quarters as well).

Washington’s decision to create region-wide consultations and structures also follows initiatives arising from the Central Asian governments themselves. It was the five former Soviet republics of Central Asia that banded together back in 2006 to declare their region a nuclear-free zone. And it was those same governments that successfully lobbied the United Nations General Assembly to approve a resolution recognizing Central Asia as a distinct economic and cultural reality comparable to the lands comprising the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the Nordic Council. The General Assembly also called on world powers to recognize and respect the common interests and actions of the countries that comprise it. The region’s five leaders have likewise taken steps toward establishing their own structures for regional cooperation, a process that could result in a kind of Central Asian version of ASEAN.

These significant developments mark the region’s shift from a random collection of post-colonial states concerned above all with preserving their newly-won sovereignty to a grouping of more self-confident states that seek to raise their standing on all key indices of development. While still protective of their sovereignty, all now see the practical benefits of cooperation and coordination. They are convinced that such an approach not only advances economic development but also enhances security by making it more difficult for foreign powers to play one of their number off against another.

America’s stated intention to engage more actively at the regional level follows a path opened first by Japan in 2003 and followed by the European Union, which adopted a region-wide strategy in 2007 and then substantially expanded and upgraded it in 2019. Meanwhile, the leaders of India, Japan, Pakistan, South Korea, and several European countries have all toured the region. Significantly, the leaders of both China and Russia have also taken notice of Central Asia. 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.[3]

The shift is a logical one. Neither President George W. Bush nor President Barack Obama bothered to think strategically about Central Asia, focusing exclusively on Afghanistan and the war on terrorism. However, in an era where great power competition is seen as the most serious challenge to national security, it is inevitable that the United States should focus more specifically on those countries sandwiched between Russia, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan.

America’s new strategy, in turn, emphasizes U.S. 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. Even if it falls short of incorporating Afghanistan into the C5+1 format, making it C6+1, it does lend support to the expansion of relations between Central Asian states and Afghanistan. Finally, it emphasizes the importance of partnership with regional states to achieve progress on sensitive topics such as human rights and religious freedom. This represents a shift from “working on” those countries to advance these causes to “working with them” in order to do so.

## **REMAINING CHALLENGES**

In releasing its 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 the region to slip between the geopolitical cracks. However, it would be a serious mistake to conclude that the challenge has been met and the task has been completed. Several important matters remain to be attended to.

First and foremost, Washington has yet to grasp the key role of Central Asia as a bastion of Muslim societies with secular governments, laws, and education. This model stands in a stark contrast to nearly all other members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which combines state and religion in various ways, and to the several formerly French colonies in West Africa that inherited anti-religious constitutions based on the idea of laïcité. When viewed from this larger context, Central Asia’s model actually parallels the American system in many respects. For all the missteps made by Central Asian governments—nearly all of which can be traced to the heritage of Soviet thinking—the fact that their constitutions separate religion from the state may make their experience a model for Muslim societies elsewhere. The United States should acknowledge this opportunity, and work to sustain and promote secular government in Central Asia and elsewhere.

An additional lacuna in the new U.S. strategy is the woefully inadequate attention it devotes to Afghanistan. The bureaucratic excuse for this shortfall – namely, that the organizational chart of the State Department does not consider Afghanistan to be part of Central Asia – is absurd. Without close cooperation with Afghanistan, its five northern neighbors will never “open windows” to the South, specifically to the Indian sub-continent, Pakistan, and the Middle East. Stated differently, the failure to solve Central Asia’s transport problem in Afghanistan would force all five of the Central Asian countries north of the Amu-Darya/Panj river into a state of dependence on Russia and China for all their exports.

By not including Afghanistan in its Central Asian construct, the United States misses the region’s larger geopolitical picture. To wit, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline is finally becoming a reality, after a generation of failures. The fact that it might be financed by Middle Eastern sources and built by the Turkmen themselves does not make it less important to U.S. interests, for transit fees collected from the TAPI pipeline could become a major source of income for Afghanistan, and also of fertilizer made from Afghanistan’s portion of the gas. Most importantly for America, TAPI could break the monopoly control over Turkmenistan’s economy now exercised by Russia and China, thanks to their current domination of the region’s two existing export routes. A failure by the U.S. to embrace this issue would hurt Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, as well as America itself. Washington needs to recognize that Afghanistan is, as Afghan President Ashraf Ghani himself has noted, in fact a Central Asian country, and fully include Afghanistan in its mechanism for consultations with Central Asian states.

Thirdly, 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 Central Asia’s linkages with lands to the west should be a priority of American engagement, for it is a matter of prime importance not only to all five of the former Soviet states but also—if not especially—to Afghanistan. If the trans-Caspian corridor is not fully developed, it will be Afghanistan that will suffer, no less than Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. All these countries would be left with only one exit route to the West. For Kazakhstan, this would be Russia and for Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, it would be Iran. Besides the obvious geopolitical blow this would inflict on these countries, it would mean the absence of competition over export routes and hence higher prices.

The failure to open an active trade route across the Caspian from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan would have very grave consequences for Azerbaijan and Georgia as well. The large investments in roads and railroads made by these countries, the European Union, and Turkey would all have been in vain. If the countries along this corridor were to become a direct and efficient “Land Suez” for trade between China and Europe, the major powers would have a direct interest in preserving their sovereignty and independence. If not, they will quickly become ripe geopolitical fruit ready for picking by Russia or Iran.

Finally, the strategy acknowledges the security challenges Central Asian states face from Russia and China, but offers little detail regarding how the United States should address them. Doubtless Washington seeks to move away from the old zero-sum chess game that has dominated Central Asian life for a generation, but silence will not solve the problem. Washington should embrace the concept of balance as devised by the Central Asians themselves, and state emphatically that such an arrangement is not against anyone and does not exclude anyone. This may in fact be the thinking that underpins the new strategy. But by not stating it directly, the U.S. denies itself the basis for what could be a productive dialogue with Russia and China, and may in the end destabilize the region by leaving it no choice but to tilt more fully toward either the Chinese or Russian camps.

Central Asia, including Afghanistan, represents geopolitically important real estate. Building on their rich indigenous cultures, its countries now look to the United States to provide a balance to other major powers in the region. They believe that such an arrangement can provide the basis for better relations for everyone involved. Until now, America has hesitated to embrace this challenge. The new strategy indicates that, at long last, Washington is beginning to take Central Asia seriously.

Having taken important first steps, however, it should now finish the job.

## ENDNOTES

[1] U.S. Department of State, United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity, February 20, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>.

[2] See generally S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, eds., *Uzbekistan's New Face* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

[3] S. Frederick Starr, “Greater Eurasia: Russia’s Asian Fantasy,” Wilson Center Kennan Cable no. 46, January 2020, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KI\\_200106\\_cable%2046\\_v1.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KI_200106_cable%2046_v1.pdf).