



To Avert Disaster in Afghanistan, Look to Central Asia

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American forces have left Afghanistan. Now what? President Biden has yet to settle on the outlines of an approach. What should the U.S. seek to achieve? Who are its partners?

As he mulls these questions, the president should take note of a July 16 conference, hosted by the government of Uzbekistan in Tashkent, on the subject of “regional connectivity.” The Uzbeks and their Central Asian neighbors, including Afghanistan, seek international diplomatic and economic support for new transport and infrastructure projects to connect their region with South and Southeast Asia.

A meeting for technocrats? The list of confirmed participants tells a different story. The foreign ministers of China, Russia, Iran, Turkey and India will attend, as well as the presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These countries recognize that the issue of connectivity will determine the economic orientation of the rising powers of Central Asia, and even their self-determination and openness.

When Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan were still part of the Soviet Union, Moscow controlled their economies and diverted all their international trade and communications through Russia. The Soviet Union ended 30 years ago but elements of these deformations have endured. With the rise of Uzbekistan’s reforming President Shavkat Mirziyoyev five years ago and Kazakhstan’s concurrent effort to diversify and open its economy, barriers to trade began to fall.

Central Asian countries are reclaiming the ancient links among them that Russian colonialism sought to destroy. Thanks to America’s presence in Afghanistan, they could also reach out once more to Kabul as their sixth ancient partner. This quest is at once Central Asia’s key economic project, a bulwark of its cultural rebirth, and its move to secure self-determination in a neighborhood dominated by China, Russia and Iran.

China is best poised to shape the region’s destiny, but Vladimir Putin’s Russia has not abandoned its old dreams. In a new era of great-power competition, preventing any country from dominating the heart of Eurasia should be a goal of American grand strategy. And yet Secretary of State Antony Blinken has shown no inclination to attend the conference in Tashkent. Dispatching an underling will, as they say, send a message—the wrong message.

China, Russia and Iran are exploiting the withdrawal from Afghanistan to convince Central Asian leaders that America and the West are a spent force. The arrival in Tashkent of high-powered European and American diplomatic and economic teams, led by Mr. Blinken, is the best way to refute this malicious claim.

But showing the flag is insufficient. Three changes to American policy are also in order. First, the Biden administration must do more to recognize that Central Asia is not a mere geographic expression but a geostrategic unit whose orientation will have a profound impact on the global balance of power. Washington’s goal should be to enable all the region’s states, including Afghanistan, to maintain balanced relations among the major powers.

The Obama administration began to move in this direction when it created the so-called C5+1—the countries of Central Asia plus the U.S. The Trump administration took the next step and produced the first written strategy for the region. But the subsequent debate in Washington, especially around Afghanistan, indicates that the concept has not moved beyond expert briefing papers.

Second, the C5+1 should be expanded to include Afghanistan. The territory and peoples of Afghanistan have been part of Central Asia for three millennia. Only czarist and Soviet colonialism tried to sever the link. All factions within Afghanistan—including President Ashraf Ghani, Abdullah Abdullah of the High Council for National Reconciliation, and the Taliban—seek to reintegrate their country into the region. But the government of Afghanistan is shellshocked by the American withdrawal. Afghanistan’s inclusion in a larger diplomatic effort would help save some of the gains that are now at risk due to the loss of America’s military support.

Third, the U.S. should throw its weight behind reopening transport and trade to Pakistan, India and all Southeast Asia. This entails the construction of railways from Uzbekistan, a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan, hydroelectric lines and telecommunication links. These initiatives would help build a broad economic constituency that crosses the traditional cultural divides within Afghanistan. It would simultaneously benefit the Central Asian states, the Afghan government, and the impoverished Pashtun regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan that gave rise to the Taliban.

The Tashkent conference thus offers the U.S.—as well as Europe, India and Japan—the best available option for a postmilitary strategy for Afghanistan and the region, one based on trade, commerce and diplomacy. The southern route that the Central Asians propose will enable all their states to balance moves by Beijing, Moscow and Tehran with constructive support from Washington. If the U.S. fails to play a leading role in sponsoring Central Asia's new regionalism, China, Russia and Iran will be all too glad to do so.

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