



# DEFENSE DOSSIER

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## THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF CENTRAL ASIA

*S. Enders Wimbush*

## UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA AND CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA

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## AMERICA INCHES TOWARD A SERIOUS CENTRAL ASIA STRATEGY

*S. Frederick Starr*



AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the May 2020 edition of the American Foreign Policy Council's *Defense Dossier* e-journal. In this edition, we focus on Central Asia, a region rich in culture but often neglected by policymakers in Washington – and one that could play an increasingly important role on the world stage in the years ahead.

In the pages that follow, we take a look at Central Asia's geopolitics, the role of external actors like Russia and China, and how the region has transformed over the past quarter-century into a global energy hub. We also explore the secret behind the success Central Asian governments have had to date in dealing with the scourge of Islamic extremism. We conclude with a review of the Trump administration's new Central Asia strategy, which marks a notable step in elevating the region in terms of American strategic thinking.

As always, we are confident that this collection will provide new insights and food for thought.

Sincerely,

Ilan Berman  
Chief Editor

Richard M. Harrison  
Managing Editor



# The Changing Geopolitics of Central Asia

*S. Enders Wimbush*

**T**he essence of geopolitics is how geography both shapes and restricts the range of choices available to nation-states. Over time, in turn, history and culture reflect these choices – and by doing so demonstrate geography’s dynamism.

Central Asia provides a case in point. If one views a map with Central Asia at its center rather than as a distant borderland to larger powers, the changes, collisions and interactions occurring on the region’s periphery—and which help shape its internal discourse—begin to come into focus.

## OLD POWERS...

Russia has been Central Asia’s hegemon for most of the last two centuries, but is now the posterchild for irreversible economic decline. Russia is a poor candidate to survive as a viable state long into the future. Its economy is no larger than Portugal’s and comprised principally of hydrocarbons—now more abundant and cheaper elsewhere. Its vaunted educational system is in tatters, and its ability to remain in the forefront of technological development is fatally eroded. Many Russian hospitals operate without running water, and the onrush of HIV/AIDS infections, cardiovascular disease, and many pathologies associated with alcohol abuse have fueled a rampant public health crisis. Russia also faces a deepening demographic crisis: a dying countryside, rising ethnic tensions and strong regional centrifugal forces, and several hundred thousand educated Russians departing permanently every year for the promise of better futures in the West. This drain of human capital, in turn, has placed a severe strain on the Russian economy. Exacerbating these trends is an increasingly inflexible political system headed by a few kleptocrats without attachments to Russia’s larger population. For

Central Asians, the preeminent geopolitical reality is of a Russia in precipitous and probably terminal decline.

Closely associated with this megatrend is the rising specter of Central Asia’s other large borderland player, China. Beijing is midway through an unpredictable transition from regional power to global competitor. China’s own internal discrepancies raise legitimate questions about whether it is an economic superpower or a fragile construct of irreconcilable tensions and pressures. Through its decades-long one-child policy, it enshrined demographic engineering that has now backfired spectacularly on the nation’s prospects for long-term growth and social and cultural cohesion. Its titanic thievery of other countries’ intellectual property suggests upward limits on its inherent ability to stimulate innovation.

In some ways, China’s problems mirror those of Russia – specifically its public health crisis, depopulation of the countryside, growing political restiveness and outright revolt in regional population centers and minority regions, and unresponsive political system. Meanwhile, Central Asia’s markets are flooded with Chinese goods, and, increasingly, with Chinese nationals themselves, who arrive to staff the growing number of Chinese-owned businesses, manufacturers, and farms – something Central Asia’s nationalistic citizens increasingly resent.

For Central Asians, China’s interests in their neighborhood are rife with paradoxes. On the one hand, Beijing seeks to penetrate their domains economically along the famous Belt and Road, often with loans and assistance that cannot be easily repaid. On the other, China has targeted upward of a million Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uighur and other co-ethnics and co-religionists for “reeducation” in newly built prison

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facilities just across China's border in Xinjiang. Central Asians are not blind to these geopolitical contradictions.

what India perceives to be its own strategic sphere of influence.

Ultimately, Russia's weakness is sure to disappoint in this regard. Nevertheless, India has distinct advantages in this geopolitical competition – namely, a long tradition of friendship with Central Asia, and people-to-people ties through educational exchanges during Soviet times and intermarriage. If India can export its entrepreneurial savvy and attractive business models to Central Asia while moderating Hindu aggression against its own vast Islamic population, it should find itself highly competitive there. Moreover, its growing strategic relationship with the United States should be a net benefit in this regard, assuming the U.S. can make the strategic connection and build on it.

**The most striking feature of Central Asia's geopolitical universe—contrary to most expectations—is the stability at the center. The region has not exploded in civil war or anything more than episodic conflict... For now, at least, the geopolitics of Central Asia is destined to be largely driven by its edges.**

### ...AND NEWER PLAYERS

Further along Central Asia's fluid borderlands are Afghanistan and Pakistan, the former still at war decades after the Soviets invaded in 1979, and the latter careening toward becoming a failed state. While occasional signs of hope for stability and development flicker in both, neither is likely to provide near-term geopolitical strength to any vision of a consolidated Central Asia. Perhaps the best hope for Afghanistan is for Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan, to embrace it economically and politically, with India playing a supporting role. The outlines of a more positive future are visible. Pakistan, on the other hand, will remain an unstable outlier.

India, an integral part of Central Asian civilization, is a better bet to shape Central Asia's geopolitics in a constructive fashion, although – as in most things India undertakes – the ebbs and flows in its willingness to act leave a strong odor of indecision and uncertainty. Indians of a strategic bent see China's incursions into Central Asia as flanking movements that threaten the Indian homeland. They hope that Russia, a longtime ally and supplier of military equipment, will restrain China's envelopment of Central Asia and in effect preserve

Then there is Iran. As the strategist Robert D. Kaplan recently noted, Iran “is economically, culturally and demographically suited to be at the crossroads of Central Asia.”<sup>1</sup> But that country, encumbered by its entrenched 1970s revolution, is now “a pauperized and lonely nation” whose rich civilization has been reduced to “a bleak lumpen proletariat.” In truth, the story should be very different. Iran's population is large and highly-educated, and its culture is transcendent. Its enviable geography abuts Eurasia, the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent, and even Europe. In short, Iran possess key assets that should make it the fulcrum of Central Asia's geopolitics. But with an economy a fraction of what it might have been without its current theocracy, and which conspicuously trails its more dynamic neighbors like India and Turkey, Iran's geopolitical impact on Central Asia will be a function of the future, not the present.

Meanwhile, Turkey is realigning itself with new objectives, new partners, and new suitors. Turkey's historic, ethnic, and linguistic ties to Central Asia explained the draw a number of its elites felt to the prospects of a pan-Turkic movement in the decades following the creation of the Turkish Republic. That





drive, which lasted until at least the 1960s, was intended to include most of the Soviet Union's Central Asian Turkic peoples. But political opponents in Turkey thwarted these efforts, believing them too risky for the nation. Much later, in the 1990s, following the breakup of the USSR, Turkey again disappointed hopes in the U.S. and Europe that its fusion of moderate Islamism with secular democracy could provide a model for Central Asians to promote de-Sovietization and Western values.

More recently, Turkey has launched a series of efforts to deepen its position in Central Asia through investment and trade. Turkish investments in energy and telecommunications now amount to several billion dollars in Kazakhstan alone. The country is the largest investor in Turkmenistan, and has growing positions in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Turkish-funded universities, high schools, and cultural institutes are prevalent throughout the region. Turkish-language media are available most places. Large historic and contemporary diaspora communities of Central Asians live in Istanbul and other large Turkish cities, and traders from their states enjoy special markets within them.

Turkish leaders today are frequently accused of neo-Ottomanism, a desire to recover Turkey's dominant position in historic Ottoman lands. Yet in truth, Ankara's efforts in Central Asia today are more focused, and tactical. Even so, whether Turkey under its powerful president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, can pull off even a diminished sphere of influence in Central Asia remains to be seen.

Central Asia's geopolitics will of course include other actors possessing different objectives and strategies to achieve them. Middle Eastern actors, particularly the Saudis, have been players for some time through a combination of investment and Islamic outreach. The European Union has a special ambassador for Central Asia, but as in most of its foreign policy the EU postures and promises to little

effect. It is unlikely to be a significant geopolitical actor in Central Asia in the future.

U.S. policy is dealt with elsewhere in this collection, so suffice it to say here that it seems to be waking from a long and deep strategic slumber. Washington has taken steps to identify American interests in this region and to organize its thinking on them, but in truth America is still a sleepy player in Central Asia. It may yet fully wake when other actors with immediate interests in Central Asia pursue them more explicitly.

**The reality is that none of Central Asia's edge players is sufficiently powerful by itself to change the shape of this competitive landscape... The question, therefore, is not who is a great power, but who is a "great enough" power to pursue interests while stymieing other actors in pursuit of theirs. Aligning with resource-rich, geographically-central, and militarily-capable states in Central Asia could prove to be decisive here.**

#### LOOKING OUTWARD

The most striking feature of Central Asia's geopolitical universe—contrary to most expectations—is the stability at the center. The region has not exploded in civil war or anything more than episodic conflict. Efforts to consolidate a distinct Central Asian strategic perspective have made headway, with efforts to design



and implement policies that reflect this worldview becoming more evident, although it would be taking liberties to suggest that Central Asia is at the moment a strategic actor in its own right. For now, at least, the geopolitics of Central Asia is destined to be largely driven by its edges.

Edge geopolitics has several features. First, stability along Central Asia's borderlands is nowhere to be found. The significant players are either failing, realigning, asserting themselves aggressively, or flirting with revolution. Several states exhibit combinations of these dynamics. Central Asians will not remain isolated from this churn, and some of them may be swept up in it.

Second, the forces just described are likely to be highly interactive and reinforcing. It is hard to imagine Russia weakening, Iran revolting, Turkey shifting defense or pursuit of its interests from West to East or North, or China proving less robust, without those trends having an effect on Central Asia itself.

Third, despite all the current talk of a new age of Great Power competition, the reality is that none of Central Asia's edge players is sufficiently powerful by itself to change the shape of this competitive landscape. Possessing nuclear weapons in this environment confers few advantages because all the key players—Russia, China, India, Pakistan—are either already nuclear capable or can be so fairly quickly (think Iran and Turkey). The question, therefore, is not who is a great power, but who is a “great enough” power to pursue interests while stymieing other actors in pursuit of theirs. Aligning with resource-rich, geographically-central, and militarily-capable states in Central Asia could prove to be decisive here.

All of this suggests that the contest to shape Central Asia will be intense and the contestants numerous. American planners have never been convinced that their interests, let alone Americans' vital interests, are joined to Central Asia. As the geopolitics of Central Asia evolve, these interests will come into sharper focus. Understanding how to think about the range of probable scenarios involving – and emanating from – the region should be a high priority for strategic thinkers and policymakers in Washington.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “Coronavirus and the Tragedy of Iran,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2020.





# Understanding Russia and China in Central Asia

*Roger Kangas*

In classic geopolitics or security studies, discussions invariably revolve around the interests of “great powers” as they vie for influence or domination in “contested” regions. Scholars and policymakers often conceptualize Central Asia in this way. When looking at the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, it is easy to resurrect the great game analogies and boil the competition down to two states: Russia and China.

The impulse is natural. After all, other interested parties—among them Turkey, Iran, India, and Pakistan—lack the capacity to project power as robustly as these two large states. Meanwhile, actors situated outside of Asia, such as the United States and the European Union, are preoccupied with challenges elsewhere, and pay only minimal attention to Central Asia. While the policy statements, strategic plans, and programs of these nations express clear interests in and around Central Asia, in practice they often fall short of the sustained efforts being made there by Russia and China.

However, to assume as a result that the nations of Central Asia are now under the control of Moscow and Beijing would be a mistake. The reality is considerably more complex. One needs to assess the real interests of these large neighbors, as well as understand that the Central Asian countries themselves have the inherent capacity to make choices.

## RESURGENT RUSSIAN INTEREST

Russia colonized most of Central Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and incorporated the region into that nation as the Soviet Union in the 20<sup>th</sup>. With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Moscow was forced to engage with these five states as independent actors. In this new environment, Russia’s interests in Central Asia have remained relatively constant. During the 1990s, Russia was barely able to maintain its own stability and sovereignty, and

appeared to gravitate toward Western security and economic structures. Consequently, Moscow paid minimal attention to the Central Asian states, at least outside of the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

This focus, however, changed with the ascension of Vladimir Putin, who harbors the desire to “make Russia great again.” Doing so, however, requires Russia maintain a major presence on the international stage, and to push back the influence of the U.S. and Europeans whenever and wherever possible.<sup>1</sup> It also necessitates a clearer understanding of Russia’s relationship with its immediate neighbors. Putting aside the complex relationship with Ukraine, Russia sees itself as an indispensable partner to these countries, which it periodically suggests are “artificial.” Most summaries of Russian priorities in Central Asia reflect four main themes: (1) preserving a preferential economic relationship, (2) serving as the priority security partner, (3) maintaining a “shared cultural environment,” and (4) minimizing the influence of outside powers that might rival Russia’s role.

In the first several years of the post-Cold War era, Russian-Central Asian trade ties indicated that the old Soviet linkages remained in place. Central Asian nations sent raw materials to Russia, and finished goods went in the other direction. Moreover, millions of Central Asians spend time in Russia as “guest workers,” sending remittances home and bolstering the economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular. For these two states, remittances make up over 30% of their GDP (some estimates quote even higher figures). Moscow founded the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in January 2015 to capitalize on these connections and further integrate some of the countries with Russia. At present, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the EEU, with Tajikistan on track to join at a future date. Turk-



menistan and Uzbekistan are not, although some pundits believe that Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev has an interest in having his country join.<sup>2</sup>

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Russia also has clear security interests in the region. Central Asia remains a “front line” defense from transnational threats emanating from the south, which include narcotics trafficking and violent extremist groups.<sup>3</sup> Russian security forces have worked with their Central Asian counterparts for years, and the shared legacy of the Red Army experience remains in place, even if it is now more than a quarter century old. Russia has military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and further military cooperation exists via the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which was founded in 2002. There is also a concurrent desire, at least on Moscow’s part, to not have the militaries of other states present in the region. The departure of the U.S. from Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan in 2005 and the Manas Transit Center, Kyrgyzstan in 2014 were applauded in Moscow. Indeed, Russian officials are known to have put considerable pressure on the Kyrgyz government for years to force the closure of the U.S. facility.

Finally, Russian officials and security documents refer to a right to protect Russians living abroad. While Russia has not yet exercised this claimed prerogative in

Central Asia, given the dearth of ethnic Russians in the states other than Kazakhstan, it still uses it as a reminder of Russia’s preeminence. The emigration of Russians

over the past thirty years means that they make up barely 19% of the population in Kazakhstan and single-digit percentages in the other four states. Nevertheless, Moscow believes that Central Asia has an organic connection with Russia that transcends the transactional relationships found with other nations of the world. In this way, Mr. Putin and friends risk taking the region for granted.

#### CHINA’S INROADS

China’s interests in the region, by contrast, appear to be more pragmatic. While Chinese officials and scholars periodically highlight “historic linkages” between the Middle Kingdom and these countries to the west, the reality is that Chinese engagement with Central Asia is still quite new.

Economic interests and the desire to consolidate a safe and secure western border dominated early discussions between the Chinese government and the respective Central Asian states. These priorities were the foundational elements of the permissive shuttle trade that developed in the 1990s and the “Shanghai Forum,” which started in 1995 and morphed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001.

Each country has a slightly different composition of economic ties with China. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are energy sources for China, as well as import destinations for its consumer goods. Uzbekistan is the largest consumer market for Chinese products, given its sheer size relative to its neighbors, as well as a modest energy exporter to China. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan both see opportunities for infrastructure development. Annual trade turnover between China and Kazakhstan exceeds \$20 billion, while trade between China and Uzbekistan surpasses \$7 billion, and even Chinese-Tajikistan trade is just under \$2 billion. By the end of the last decade, China has solidified its position as the top



economic partner with each of the Central Asian countries.<sup>4</sup>

Three distinct features flow from this reality. The first is the importation of Chinese commercial goods into Central Asia. The second is the export of raw materials, especially energy, from Central Asia to China. Finally, there is the development of infrastructure projects that will establish Central Asia as a transit region for Chinese trade with the Middle East, Europe, and beyond.

The “One Belt, One Road” initiative—now known as the “Belt Road Initiative” (BRI)—addresses the final trend. In terms of economic development, the BRI tightens the strings that connect commerce, energy routes, and the economic welfare of the Central Asian states. However, Central Asian governments have raised concerns over the use of Chinese workers in BRI projects, especially in Tajikistan. Likewise, these governments are also wary of debt-trap engagement, something that has already been experienced by other BRI partners.

China’s security interests in the region, meanwhile, are increasing, although not to the level of Russia’s. There are limited opportunities for the People’s Liberation Army to deploy to Central Asia or to conduct exercises there. Even the well-publicized SCO Peace Support exercises are technically “transitional threat/counter-terrorism” exercises that focus on eliminating extremist elements, rather than on the military forces of an opposing nation state. In contrast, CSTO exercises focus on state-on-state operations. Chinese officials, academics, and media repeatedly stress the security concerns China has in the region, from insulating their western province of Xinjiang from “separatism” to protecting valuable economic infrastructure and even personnel located in Central Asia. At present, police and military officers are able to attend training programs in China, and information sharing exists with the states bordering China on individuals and groups suspected of being extremists.<sup>5</sup> Over time, therefore, one should expect to see Chinese security cooperation

increase to include more robust weapons sales, professional military training, and cooperative exercises.

For now, Beijing is combining “soft power” engagement strategies with these practical measures. China’s well-known “Confucius Institutes” exist in the region, as do educational and media exchanges between China and the Central Asian states, although to varying degrees of cooperation.<sup>6</sup> But because the region is more familiar with Russia, China’s soft power campaign nonetheless faces an uphill battle. On a political level, China is working to align the Central Asian states with its key diplomatic positions, as expressed in stated policies on issues such as the Dalai Lama, the South China Sea, and Taiwan.

As China’s political equities in Central Asia increase, regional actors will be watching closely for any signs of tension between Beijing and Moscow. Some scholars posit that an “agreement” exists between Russia and

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China in terms of their respective domains in Central Asia—namely, Russian military dominance and Chinese economic preponderance.<sup>7</sup> Others, however, predict that Russia and China will compete to establish a holistic sphere of influence over Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> In reality, both powers place Central Asia among the broader range of their own domestic and geopolitical priorities. As much as Russia has an interest in Central Asia, Moscow must balance it with a broader set of Europe-Eurasia challenges and global commitments. Likewise, China remains a country looking eastward, with additional security challenges in South and Southeast Asia. A stable Central Asia allows China to focus on these more immediate concerns.

#### CENTRAL ASIA'S BALANCING ACT

Do the Central Asian states accept Russian and Chinese so-called domination of the region's economic, security, and political domains? The answer is complicat-

ed. The trade figures noted earlier underscore the importance of these two external actors to the countries of Central Asia. For regional states, the economic benefits of engagement with both Beijing and Moscow are clear. Likewise, if Russia and China can be viable partners in thwarting transnational narcotics trafficking, criminality, terrorism, and extremism, their presence in the region is a net positive not only for Central Asian states, but also for those countries' assorted foreign partners.

Significantly, regional states tend to view Chinese and Russian engagement not as a bar to greater engagement with other nations, but as a compliment to it. This "multi-vectored" approach, popularized by former President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, envisions a system in which a country engages with a multitude of partners and participates in international organizations that are inclusive and expansive, rather than restrictive.<sup>9</sup> To wit, Kazakhstan views the EEU as a foundational organization that does not restrict its ability to trade

outside of the immediate members. In principle, this sense of "multi-vectorism" also applies to Kazakhstan's membership in the SCO and the CSTO. Uzbekistan is a member of the first, and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are members of both.

Support for Russia and China in Central Asia is far from unanimous, however. Over time, citizens of all the Central Asian countries have expressed mixed views of these outside powers. While Russian media is pervasive throughout the region, accessible alternative sources reinforce the perception that Russian influence is not always positive. Likewise, while there is an appreciation of Chinese commercial goods and investment in the region, there is a shared view that China may seek to dominate the Central Asian states. When rumors of Chinese efforts to purchase land, or alter common borders, arise, demonstrations against such actions are not uncommon. Simply put, Sin-

**Over time, citizens of all the Central Asian countries have expressed mixed views of these outside powers. While Russian media is pervasive throughout the region, accessible alternative sources reinforce the perception that Russian influence is not always positive. Likewise, while there is an appreciation of Chinese commercial goods and investment in the region, there is a shared view that China may seek to dominate the Central Asian states.**





ophobia exists in Central Asia, and government officials and experts alike acknowledge it.<sup>10</sup> This represents a conundrum for local governments, as they would like to maintain positive relations with their large neighbor to the east, but also to avoid appearing as vassal states in the eyes of their populations. So far, however, the hope that the benefits of the Belt & Road Initiative will ameliorate such negative views remains unfulfilled.

Finally, it's necessary to note that Russia and China are operating in an increasingly crowded geopolitical sphere. While other powers may not have the direct impact that Moscow or Beijing does in Central Asia, the security and economic influence of India and the GCC states are on track to increase in the coming years. Likewise, the United States and European Union countries will continue to boast a significant regional presence, with perhaps a renewed interest becoming visible in Washington and European capitals in seeing the Central Asian states further establish rule of law, accede to international norms, and maximize their economic and security capacity.

In short, the Central Asian states will continue to explore their own "agency" and seek multiple opportunities for engagement. Russia and China are key actors, but hardly the only ones—and fall far short of exercising the influence necessary to dictate the actions and political priorities of Central Asia's five increasingly prosperous and independent states.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place," *Foreign Affairs* 95/3 (May-June 2016), 30-37.

<sup>2</sup> Early suggestions of Uzbekistan joining Russian-centered regional organizations following the election of President Mirziyoyev include "Uzbekistan and Russia: Chilly weather, warm relations," *Eurasianet*, October 17, 2018. More recently, this is been clarified as wanting to "work with" the EEU, among others. See Umida Hashimova, "Uzbekistan Will 'Cooperate' with the Eurasian Economic Union," *The Diplomat*, January 27, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Ivan Safranchuk, "Russian Policy in Central Asia, Strategic Context," *Observatoire Franco-Russe* no. 8, November 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Bhavna Dave and Yuka Kobayashi, "China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative in Central Asia: Economic and Security Implications," *Asia Eurasia Journal* no.16 (2018), 267-281.

<sup>5</sup> Lisollette Odgaard, "Beijing's Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood: China's Relations with Russia in Central Asia," *Asian Security* 13, no. 1 (2017), 41-58, which also raises the concerns of protecting vital transregional infrastructure.

<sup>6</sup> Nurlan Aliyev, "China's Soft Power in Central Asia," *CACI Analyst*, December 19, 2019. There is greater cultural and educational engagement with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, although efforts with the other three countries are being developed.

<sup>7</sup> See "Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries, Europe and Central Asia," International Crisis Group *Report* no. 245, July 27, 2017, 20-22; Xiaoquin Chen, "Central Asian Factors in Energy Relations between China and Russia," *Asian Social Science* 8, no. 7, June 2012, 33-39; see also Filippo Costa Buranelli, "Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – the Case of Central Asia," *Geopolitics* 23, no.2 (2018), 378-403.

<sup>8</sup> See Dhananjay Sahai, "Russian Far East and Central Asia: Impediments to Sino-Russian Partnership," *ORF Issue Brief* no. 280, February 2019, 2, 11-12; see also Carla P. Freeman, "New Strategies for an Old Rivalry? China-Russia Relations in Central Asia After the Energy Boom," *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 5 (2018), 635-654.

<sup>9</sup> An earlier assessment of "Kazakhstan's regional strategy can be found in Murat Laumulin and Farkhod Tolipov, "Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan: A Race for Leadership?" *Security Index* 2 (91), vol. 16 (2010), 43-60; A more recent overview is provided by Mariya Y. Omelicheva and Ruoxi Du, "Kazakhstan's Multi-Vectorism and Sino-Russian Relations," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 4, Fall 2018, 95-110.

<sup>10</sup> This is a difficult sentiment to quantify as one relies on anecdotal evidence and few surveys. Recent pieces in popular media suggest anti-Chinese feelings in the region, such as Jacob Mardell, "Fear of the Middle Kingdom in Central Asia," *Berlin Policy Journal*, January 16, 2020. An explanation of differing issues and some survey work can be found in Eric McGlinchey, "Questioning Sinophobia in Central Asia," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* no. 630, December 2019.



# The Evolution Of Central Asian Energy

*Mamuka Tsereteli*

In the mid-1990s, independent Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan—three littoral states of the Caspian Sea—started developing their hydrocarbon resources with the help of Western companies. Beginning in the early 2000s, exports of hydrocarbons from the region supported these countries' economic development, strengthened their national sovereignty, and bolstered the role of the broader trans-Caspian as an energy transit corridor.

While initial estimates of the energy reserves of the Caspian basin proved to be overly optimistic, the region still boasts world-class oil and gas reserves and some of the world's top energy fields. Kazakhstan is the richest country of the region in terms of energy resources: the on-shore Tengiz oil field in western Kazakhstan has recoverable oil reserves of up to 9 billion barrels, and the off-shore Kachagan field in the Kazakhstani sector of the northern Caspian Sea has recoverable reserves of up to 13 billion barrels. Turkmenistan, meanwhile, has the world's fourth largest natural gas reserves, with the Galkynysh field in the southeast of the country one of the world's largest with up to 14 trillion cubic meters of reserves.

In total, the region is home to almost three percent of the world's proven oil reserves, and produces about three percent of the world's crude. It also contains more than 12 percent of the world's natural gas reserves, while producing less than five percent of the global gas production in 2018.<sup>1</sup>

These numbers underscore the nature of the energy business, as well as the geographic and geopolitical realities of Central Asia. Fundamentally, it is easier to monetize oil resources than natural gas resources. Oil is a global commodity that can be shipped to markets by pipelines, rail cars, and tankers, while natural gas is a predominantly regional commodity that usually travels via pipelines from source to end user. This pattern is changing gradually as liquified natural gas, or LNG, which can travel by sea, grows in importance. But Central Asia is a landlocked region, and access to the market for producing countries is a geographic, as well as geopolitical, challenge.

Three stages of development of Caspian energy resources followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first stage, stretching from the dissolution of the USSR in the early 1990s until the mid-2000s, was fueled by Western companies and the westward orientation of regional energy trade toward hungry consumers in Europe and America. This stage was supported by strong political leadership from the U.S., Turkey, and assorted regional governments. By contrast, the second stage—stretching from the late 2000s until 2016–2017—focused east, on the Chinese market, and was driven by China and its state-owned companies. The third stage, which is now underway, is marked by renewed investments from Western companies, allowing for a greater diversification of markets for regional suppliers. Throughout all three, the governments of energy-producing countries in the region have learned to balance the interests of their larger neighbors while gradually assuming greater ownership of their own geopolitical and economic decisions.

## AN INITIAL LOOK WESTWARD

The successful enlargement of the Transatlantic partnership—embodied by the expansion of NATO and growth of the European Union—marked the turn of the twentieth century. But this growth brought with it real-world needs. An enlarged Europe required alternative sources of energy to break its overwhelming dependence on Russia, and the Caspian provided a perfect fit. Europe had the purchasing power to buy Caspian resources, while the continental market was an exceedingly attractive one for Caspian producers eager to access the West.

Cementing this alignment, both the U.S. and Europe had made it a major priority to help the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union build their own sovereign economies. As a result, the U.S. initiated a multiple pipeline strategy in the region, which envisioned creating multiple new commercial pipelines crossing several countries, including Russia, but preventing any one nation from securing a stranglehold on the Caspian. Subsequently, the close collaboration of the U.S., Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia,

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and Kazakhstan in the implementation of this strategy played a crucial role in building a strong and lasting regional partnership. The construction of major oil and natural gas pipelines, in turn, made possible a radical regional break from Russian energy dominance. Several major pipelines that now connect the Caspian region to world markets represent the legacy of this strategy:

- The Caspian Pipeline Consortium, or CPC, was commissioned in 2001 and connected the western Kazakhstani oil field of Tengiz to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. In addition to oil from Tengiz, the pipeline currently also carries oil from the off-shore Kachagan and Karachaganak fields, as well as some Russian crude. The pipeline's initial capacity was 700,000 barrels a day.
- Two other pipelines connected oil-producing fields in the Azerbaijani section of the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea port of Supsa and the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The smaller (100,000 barrel per day capacity) Baku-Supsa pipeline and the larger million-barrel capacity Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. In particular, the BTC was a project of major geopolitical significance, connecting Caspian resources from multiple Azerbaijani fields directly to the Mediterranean Sea.
- Another important route is the so-called South Caucasus Gas Pipeline, also known as the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline. It started with the production of eight billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas annually at the Shah-Deniz field near Baku. Since 2007, it has been used to export gas to Georgia (2 bcm yearly) and Turkey (close to six bcm a year). This pipeline, and the natural gas from the Shah-Deniz field, has provided Georgia with a much-needed alternative to Russian natural gas supplies, and has helped Turkey to diversify its supplies as well.

The only unsuccessful project of the period was a planned Trans-Caspian Pipeline to connect the Eastern and Western shores of the Caspian with a large-scale natural gas pipeline, thereby strengthening the energy security of Turkey

and Eastern Europe. However, political and commercial considerations—including the undefined status of the Caspian Sea, and overall Russian pressure on Turkmenistan's leadership<sup>2</sup>—prevented the pipeline from becoming a reality. Overall, however, the Western strategy, led by the U.S. and actively supported by Turkey and the regional producer and transit countries, resulted in the successful functioning of major export pipelines, advancing the economic and political interests of the countries in the Caspian region.

**The U.S. initiated a multiple pipeline strategy in the region, which envisioned creating multiple new commercial pipelines crossing several countries, including Russia, but preventing any one nation from securing a stranglehold on the Caspian. Subsequently, the close collaboration of the U.S., Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan in the implementation of this strategy played a crucial role in building a strong and lasting regional partnership.**

#### TURNING EAST

China's rapid economic growth over the past two decades has required significant resources. Beginning in the mid-2000s, the planet's second largest economy began looking to Central Asia as a major source of energy, as a market for Chinese goods and a potential transit area to other parts of the world.

After the financial crisis of 2008–2009, China began to outpace Western countries and donor institutions in the scale of its financial aid to the Central Asian states. The Chinese financial aid and investments played an important role in the economic growth, and by extension in the political



viability, of the region's existing governments. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan all welcomed growing infrastructure connectivity with China, which allowed them to sell more of their resources to China. Beijing became the major trading partner for the region, and energy export represented a major part of the growing trade turnover.

Two infrastructure projects in particular greased the skids for increasing energy exports to China from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The first, and oldest, is the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, which was built in several phases beginning in 2003. The pipeline system originates in western Kazakhstan and ends in Alashankou in China's northwest Xinjiang region, with a capacity of 400,000 barrels a day (or 20 million tons a year). The second is the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China natural gas pipeline, which was completed in 2009 and consists of three parallel lines. Currently, these three routes allow for the transshipment of 55 bcm of natural gas annually to China<sup>3</sup>—up to 35 bcm from Turkmenistan, as well as up to 10 bcm each from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

In the latter case, China is clearly benefiting from the lack of export infrastructure from Turkmenistan to European markets. The only available option is shipping gas via Russia,

but Russia prohibits free commercial access of its pipeline system for Turkmen gas. In the past, Russia used to buy Turkmen gas at lower prices, and then resell it to other customers at much higher ones—something that served as a significant source of tension in bilateral relations. After the start of construction of the Central Asia-China pipeline in 2007, Russia signed an agreement with the Turkmen government, committing to larger purchases of Turkmen gas at fixed prices. But with the fall of energy prices in 2008–2009, the Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan-Russia pipeline suspiciously exploded, preventing any Turkmen export to Russia for a period of several years. Since 2019, Russia has been buying about five bcm annually from Turkmenistan, but Turkmenistan is desperately searching for alternative markets in order to break its dependency on unreliable and discounted markets in Russia, Iran, and China.

One such diversification project, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI), has been under discussion for over twenty years. Construction of the 1,127-mile pipeline finally began in 2015 at the Galkynysh gas field in southeastern Turkmenistan, with the route projected to run through central Afghanistan and Pakistan, ultimately terminating in Fazilka, India. The eventual capacity of the project is expected to be approximately 33 bcm per year, of which Afghanistan will receive 5.1 bcm, while Pakistan and India would each receive 13.9 bcm. In 2018, representatives from Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India gathered in Herat, Afghanistan to inaugurate the pipeline. But not much progress has been achieved since, and it appears that more legal and bureaucratic delays lie ahead.<sup>4</sup> The absence of a strong commercial sponsor for the project makes its future uncertain.

For Turkmenistan, the Trans-Caspian option of sending natural gas to Europe remains the greatest potential source of reliable export revenue, as well as providing the political benefits of integration with more stable actors in the global economy. This option also allows greater regional integration between Eastern and Western shores of the Caspian Sea and between the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean basin.

#### BROADENING AND DIVERSIFYING

Beginning in the second decade of this century, two major expansion projects emerged in both the west and east of the Caspian region.

**For more than two decades, the United States has invested significant resources in strengthening the political and economic sovereignty of the countries of the Caspian... But gradually, due to declining U.S. interest and a waning American presence in Central Asia in recent years, China has emerged as a main beneficiary of these investments, using its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an instrument to advance its geopolitical presence and interests.**



In the east, the CPC expanded to 1.4 million barrels a day in 2017, and is slated to reach a daily capacity of 1.6 million barrels by 2023. The pipeline shipped 1.35 million barrels of oil a day in 2019. Chevron, the key shareholder and the operator of the Tengiz field, initiated the \$37 billion expansion project (the cost of which is now estimated at \$45 billion<sup>5</sup>), to be completed in 2022, which will allow larger volumes of the field's crude to reach European refineries.

In the west, the BP-led Shah-Deniz Consortium manages the backbone project for the Caspian natural gas connection to Europe. The \$45 billion expansion, the largest energy project in the world between 2014–2020, allows production of additional 16 bcm per year. The largest recipient of the gas will be Italy. The system of pipelines will link an upgraded South Caucasus Pipeline to the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) in Turkey, which will bring Azerbaijani gas to the western border of Turkey, and from there to European markets via the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) that stretches between Greece, Albania, and Italy. The first supply of gas reached TANAP in Turkey in 2018. Initially, 10 bcm of natural gas will be exported through TAP each year, but annual capacity can be increased to 20 bcm.<sup>6</sup> Once fully completed, this chain of infrastructure projects will directly connect natural gas fields in the Caspian to EU markets for the first time. The importance is difficult to overstate. Although initial volumes will cover only about two percent of total European demand, the project has the potential to expand substantially based on increased volumes from other fields in both Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

An analysis of the energy landscape of Central Asia would be incomplete, however, without mentioning the region's significant coal, uranium and hydro-power resources. The region has potential to emerge as a major power generation hub in its own right. In addition to ongoing work on greater connectivity between neighboring states, a major project is now underway to supply power-starved Afghanistan and Pakistan with electricity from hydro-power stations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan via the \$1.2 billion, 1,200 km CASA-1000 power line. This project will strengthen the economic position of the two non-oil and gas producing countries while facilitating regional collaboration and interconnectivity.

### CEDING THE ADVANTAGE

For more than two decades, the United States has invested significant resources in strengthening the political and economic sovereignty of the countries of the Caspian. This effort facilitated the development of vibrant trade and transit between the Caspian region and the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean. Resource-rich Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and

Turkmenistan, as well as transit and consumer countries like Georgia and Turkey, are the major beneficiaries of the resulting (and expanding) pipeline, railway, highway, and port infrastructure. Enlargement of NATO and the EU brought more security and economic development to the western shores of the Black Sea and to Bulgaria and Romania, countries that also benefit from transit and trade links with the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

But gradually, due to declining U.S. interest and a waning American presence in Central Asia in recent years, China has emerged as a main beneficiary of these investments, using its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an instrument to advance its geopolitical presence and interests. That represents a clear challenge for the U.S., because the westward orientation of the region's energy resources is in America's long-term strategic interest. As such, the U.S. needs to demonstrate renewed regional leadership and work with producer, consumer and transit countries on the design and implementation of the missing large-scale infrastructure—like a new, larger scale pipeline connecting Azerbaijan to Europe—that can spur even greater integration of the region with the West in the years ahead.

### ENDNOTES

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# How Central Asia Has Handled Islamic Extremism

*Svante E. Cornell*

Radical Islamic extremism established a presence in Central Asia in the late Soviet era. Spurred by the war in Afghanistan and clandestine contacts with South Asia and the Gulf, Salafi ideology gained a foothold in eastern Uzbekistan and parts of Tajikistan during the 1980s. In both countries, these groups sought to take advantage of the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union to introduce Islamic governance across the region.

Islamic extremists attempted to take over Uzbekistan's eastern Ferghana valley region, but the country's fledgling government stymied their efforts. In Tajikistan, meanwhile, these elements managed to secure an influential role over the opposition in the country's civil war, which lasted from 1992 to 1997, and pushed more moderate Islamic forces in the opposition in an increasingly radical direction. But there too, Islamist forces failed to achieve their goals. Russian and Uzbek support for the Tajik government helped it to gain the upper hand, allowing authorities to strike a power-sharing deal with the opposition that limited its influence to a third of official posts. Dushanbe subsequently marginalized and blocked these representatives from any meaningful role in the government and bureaucracy.

In turn, the defeat of extremists in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan led to the consolidation of secular governments across the region, with existing regimes imposing restrictions on religious life in various degrees. This was part of a broad regional effort to interdict not only violent extremism but any form of extremist ideology, and sought to prevent alien religious ideas from gaining a foothold in local societies. Such measures were prompted in part by the rapid spread in the 1990s of *Hizb-ut Tahrir* (HuT), a transnational extremist organization that aims to recreate a global Caliphate—albeit, unlike al-Qaeda and ISIS, to do so through peaceful means. Nonetheless, Central Asian governments saw the

group's core ideology as a clear challenge and therefore invested considerable resources in suppressing HuT and like-minded groups.

But Central Asian extremists did not disappear. Instead, they moved abroad. Pushed out by their failures at home in the 1990s, they found a haven in neighboring Afghanistan. Teaming up with the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Central Asian extremists made several attempts to destabilize their homelands through terrorist attacks. The American response to 9/11, however, pushed them further away. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the region's foremost extremist group, sustained heavy losses and relocated to Pakistan's Tribal Areas—a region where, unlike in northern Afghanistan, they had no ethnic and linguistic commonalities with the local population. Although the IMU was subsequently expelled from Pakistani soil, its activities offered what amounted to a safety valve for Central Asian governments: extremist sympathizers in the region, it appeared, were as likely to join their brethren abroad as to stay in the region.

Indeed, by the time of the 2011 Arab uprisings, there were numerous Central Asians in extremist milieus abroad. These groups had military training and experience from the wars in Afghanistan, and were thus prime targets for recruitment for the new holy war in Syria and Iraq—a theater far more central to Islamic history than Afghanistan or northern Pakistan.

## PATTERNS OF RECENT RECRUITMENT

Up until 2011, Central Asia saw gradually receding incidences of radical Islamic extremism. The period following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, however, has led to a second wave of extremism, with political uncertainty in Afghanistan exacerbating the violence. Several thousand Central Asians are estimated to have fought in the Syrian conflict, both within the Islamic

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State and as part of dedicated units connected with the al-Qaeda-aligned Nusra Front, presently known as *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*.<sup>1</sup> The most well-known group is *Katibat al-Imam Bukhari*, which also established a presence alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2016. The number and origin of fighters, however, remains a source of controversy. Given that Uyghurs from western China speak a language closely resembling Uzbek, and that both Uzbek and Tajik are widely spoken in Afghanistan, it is difficult to discern the origin of fighters.

What is clear, however, is that the patterns of this wave are considerably different from those of the first one. First, the magnitude of the problem is not comparable to the 1990s within Central Asia's borders. While several thousand Central Asians did indeed travel to join the *jihad* in the Levant, few were residents of Central Asia at the time, and even fewer have returned. Local governments, meanwhile, are considerably better prepared to handle the situation. A number of small-scale terrorist attacks have nonetheless taken place in Central Asia in recent years, but they do not stand out on the international scene, and there is no evidence of a challenge that can pose a threat to the stability of the region.

Second, the geographic patterns of extremism diverge from the situation that prevailed during the 1990s. Whereas the extremism of that decade was concentrated in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, no such geographic concentration is visible in the more recent wave. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have seen a growth in extremism, including several terrorist attacks, while Uzbekistan has not seen a single case in the past fifteen years. Tajikistan, by contrast, has again seen a growing problem, most spectacularly with the defection of a senior commander of its interior forces to the Islamic State in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Kyrgyzstan has also experienced a notable growth in terrorist recruitment.

Third, the dynamics of extremist recruitment remain murky. There is even strong disagreement on the locus of recruitment of Central Asian foreign fighters. While western analysts tend to assume that Central Asians are

recruited to foreign wars in the region itself, a closer examination suggests the opposite. In fact, a substantial body of evidence has emerged to indicate that the lion share of Central Asian foreign fighters are actually recruited in Russia, where several million work as labor migrants.<sup>3</sup> It appears that extremist recruiters in Russia, connected to North Caucasian networks, have targeted socially isolated Central Asians who lack the family networks and social controls that would inhibit such recruitment in their home countries.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, not all Central Asians are recruited in Russia, and there is evidence confirming the departure of individual Central Asians as well as entire families for Syria. Still, returning labor migrants appear to play an important role in spreading the extremist message back to their home communities. In Tajikistan in particular, a significant mobilization of Salafi proselytization appeared a decade ago and played an important role in

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spreading extremist propaganda, leading to government-imposed draconian measures to stop it.

The defeat of the Islamic State fed concerns that masses of Central Asian fighters would seek to return home. The expectation of an American withdrawal from Afghanistan exacerbated these fears, especially since an unstable Afghanistan could lead to a rapidly



growing extremist threat to Central Asia. Thus far, however, this threat has not materialized. There has indeed been a measurable increase in Central Asian-origin fighters in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> So far, however, there is little evidence of a mass return of such extremists to the states of Central Asia. Moreover, should these cadres in fact return, they face a decidedly hostile environment. Not only do Central Asian states have security structures with ample resources to handle isolated extremists, but local societies are also hostile to alien, extremist ideologies.

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### ASSUMPTIONS MEET REALITY

This analysis of the situation stands in stark contrast to the alarmism of NGOs like the International Crisis Group, from great powers like Russia, and—until recently—from many Central Asian governments themselves. For differing reasons, all of these entities have exaggerated the threat of extremism in Central Asia. Russia, of course, sees instability as a tool to increase its military and security presence in the region. Central Asian governments tend to view matters similarly: security concerns have historically been used to legitimize restrictive measures and authoritarian consolidation. More recently, however, regional governments—particularly those of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—have adopted a less alarmist and more self-confident approach, projecting their ability to manage this type of challenge and the capacity of regional states to manage the situation without outside intervention. The weaker states in the region, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, deviate from this pattern to some extent, as they have found it more difficult to manage the issue.

Alarmism concerning extremism in Central Asia has

been present for a long time among western NGOs and governments, and led to a reaction from regional scholars.<sup>6</sup> This alarmism stems from erroneous assumptions about the drivers of extremism. From the late 1990s onward, an influential view held that repression and poverty cause extremism and terrorism because repression drives “pious Muslims” into the hands of extremists, while poverty feeds a motivation to join extremist groups. This view influenced much of the George W. Bush administration’s response to 9/11, particularly its so-called “Freedom Agenda.” However,

the bulk of research on radicalization since then has largely debunked these assumptions.<sup>7</sup> Repression only appears to be a factor if the government carrying out the repression is of a different ethnic or religious identity than the target group. Poverty, meanwhile, is not linked with extremism at all—in fact, most recruits have been found to come from middle-class backgrounds.

In other words, the prevailing Western assumption that Central Asia’s poverty and repression would lead to mounting extremism has proved to be mistaken. In fact, the country that tended to follow western recommendations, Kyrgyzstan, saw an increase in the challenge posed by radicalization; by contrast, those that ignored western admonitions, namely Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, have seen a decrease.

### GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Central Asian states have adopted similar, though not identical, strategies to confront radicalism. Most have moved in an increasingly restrictive direction, imposing ever-greater registration requirements on religious communities, banned proselytizing, and promoted a state-endorsed traditional form of Islam connected to the region’s pre-Soviet history. Meanwhile, they have doubled down on secular governments, secular laws, and secular education systems.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan used to have relatively liberal regulations for religious groups, but these have tightened as the countries have responded to the rise of extremism globally. Still, Kyrgyzstan tolerates the spread of the South Asian-based *Tablighi Jamaat* move-





ment in the country, seeing it as an antidote to extremism – a view that has been questioned by some analysts who see the group as a stepping stone to radicalization. Tajikistan, meanwhile, has adopted among the most draconian religious legislation, forbidding all religious education not under state control and restricting minors from taking part in religious services.

Uzbekistan, by contrast, used to have the most restrictive approach in the region, but under president Shavkat Mirziyoyev has embarked on a process of liberalization where the state has moved from a defensive to an offensive strategy. It now promotes an “enlightened Islam” drawing on the golden age of Central Asian history a thousand years ago, and expects this indigenous and tolerant Islam—together with mechanisms of social control at the local level—to form a strong counterweight to any alien efforts at radicalization.<sup>8</sup>

The growing confidence of Central Asian states is manifested in their willingness to repatriate women and children stranded in Syria and Iraq following the defeat of Islamic State. While European states have been reluctant to bring their citizens home, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have all taken steps to ensure that women and children—whose husbands and fathers are either dead or jailed—are brought home and reintegrated into society.

### TOWARD A CENTRAL ASIAN MODEL?

Central Asian states have faced serious issues relating to Islamic radicalism since their independence almost thirty years ago. The first wave of extremism, and particularly the civil wars in Tajikistan and neighboring Afghanistan, led them to adopt strict measures to ensure state control over the religious field. Almost three decades later, Central Asian states continue to maintain policies that promote secular government, while endorsing the revival of traditional, moderate Islamic practices and institutions that were decimated by Soviet rule.

This Central Asian experiment is faring much better than commonly believed. Not only have Central Asian states managed to keep the problem of Islamic extremism in check; they have also begun to shift from a defensive approach to one that begins to offer the contours of a positive model that is unique in the Islamic world. This model combines secular government with

the restoration of an alternative view of Islam that is open to modernity and science. And while it is far from perfect, the United States has a strong vested interest in supporting this model and helping Central Asian states to improve upon it.

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# America Inches Toward A Serious Central Asia Strategy

*S. Frederick Starr*

This Spring, the Trump administration formally released its official strategy for Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> 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

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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,<sup>2</sup> which in turn has inspired would-be reformers elsewhere in the region (although it has also elicited official resistance in some quarters as well).

**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.**

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.

**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.**

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.<sup>3</sup>

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

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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

<sup>1</sup> 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/>.

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

<sup>3</sup> 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).







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