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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the October 2025 issue of AFPC's Defense Dossier. As Eurasia's balance of power continues to shift, Greater Central Asia has emerged as a region of growing strategic importance. Once seen as a peripheral region, it is fast becoming a crossroads where sovereignty, connectivity, and great-power rivalry converge. The challenge for the United States is no longer whether to engage. Rather, it is how to do so with coherence, consistency, and purpose.

This issue explores that challenge from multiple perspectives. We begin with an examination of how regional states are forging new patterns of cooperation and independence in pursuit of shared prosperity and stability. A subsequent analysis considers how emerging partnerships beyond the traditional great powers are reshaping the region's diplomatic landscape. From there, we turn to the contours of an American strategy for Greater Central Asia—its conceptual foundations, practical implementation, and the institutional reforms needed to translate vision into action. Finally, we conclude with a realist assessment that underscores the necessity of credible deterrence to secure both the region's sovereignty and America's long-term interests.

Taken together, these essays trace both a regional awakening and an American opportunity. Greater Central Asia's trajectory will help define the future of Eurasia. Whether it evolves as a space of sovereignty and partnership or one of renewed dependency and coercion will depend on choices made now in Washington and across the region.

All the best,

Ilan Berman
Chief Editor

Richard M. Harrison
Managing Editor

Opportunities and Challenges in A New Central Asia

Javlon Vakhabov

In an era of shifting global power dynamics, Central Asia is becoming a more unified region through emerging diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties. Uzbekistan is prioritizing these efforts within its foreign policy, believing cooperation will be Central Asia's opportunity to accelerate regional development. Central Asia must also take advantage of its integration efforts to form cultural ties among its regional peoples. While Uzbekistan hopes to emulate international multilateral economic and diplomatic organizations, such as the early European Coal and Steel Community, within Central Asian frameworks, Uzbekistan also supports a policy of engagement towards Afghanistan. Instead of sanctioning and excluding Afghanistan, Uzbekistan hopes to integrate it into the Central Asian community and leverage economic interconnectivity for stability.

This is a time of immense opportunity for Central Asia—a moment filled not only with promise, but with purpose. For far too long, the region has been seen through the narrow lens of crisis and competition, treated as a geopolitical afterthought rather than a dynamic force in its own right.

But that narrative is beginning to shift. This article covers not only that shift, but the journey Central Asians are undertaking together—the progress the region has achieved, the challenges that remain, and Uzbekistan's vision for a stronger, more united, and self-assured Central Asia. A region that no longer waits to be defined by others, but boldly defines its own place in a rapidly changing world.

PROGRESS MADE IN CENTRAL ASIA

In the past eight years, Central Asia has seen significant progress—politically, economically, and diplomatically. These changes are not just important, they are lasting and set the foundation for a new chapter in the region's future.

Political and Diplomatic Reconciliation

Nevertheless, the scale of the Chinese and Russian systems now available for military and counterspace operations is a reminder of how fundamentally space has become a contested region. Moreover, these capabilities are integrated with other land-sea-air dimensions of adversary forces. And, as is the case with conventional military operations, counterspace operations cover a similar range of capabilities and can be implemented over time with either reversible or non-reversible effects.

Over the past several years, Uzbekistan has placed reconciliation and regional unity at the core of its foreign policy. Uzbekistan's foreign policy is firmly rooted in the principle of "zero problems with neighbors," reflecting a strong commitment to regional peace, cooperation, and mutual respect. Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and guided by the principles of openness and good-neighborliness, the country has taken meaningful steps to resolve longstanding disputes and rebuild trust across Central Asia.

The results are tangible and transformative. Long-running border disagreements have been resolved, opening the door to deeper regional cooperation. Most recently, in Khujand, the Presidents of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan signed a historic agreement finalizing the demarcation of their shared border junction. This milestone not only settles all remaining territorial issues among Central Asian states but also marks the beginning of a new chapter of integration and shared progress.

Cooperation over shared water resources has also taken a significant step forward. Uzbekistan and Afghanistan have signed an agreement on the joint management of the Amu Darya river basin, a crucial development in the context of Kabul's ongoing construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal. Similarly, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have reached an understanding on the delimitation of their

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border near the Chashma spring—a site of previous tensions in 2020. Under the agreement, the spring remains on Kyrgyz territory, while Uzbekistan will have access to two-thirds of the spring's actual water flow. Furthermore, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have signed an agreement on preparations for the construction and operation of the Kambarata Hydropower Plant, recently Tajikistan has approved an agreement with Uzbekistan for the supply of electricity generated by the Rogun Hydropower Plant.

Where once there were divisions, there is now growing connectivity. Borders that historically symbolized separation are becoming bridges of cooperation. A powerful illustration of this change is that today, citizens of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan can cross borders using only their national ID cards— something almost unimaginable just a decade ago. A similar initiative is now being discussed with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

Dialogue among Central Asian leaders has been institutionalized through the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State—a cornerstone of regional cooperation and consolidation. The initiative to hold these meetings was proposed by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2017 at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly and was supported by all regional countries. Since then, six such meetings have taken place in all the capitals of Central Asian states.

At the 2023 Dushanbe Summit, a significant milestone was reached: the decision to establish a Council of National Coordinators—a major step towards further institutionalizing cooperation. This body is designed to enhance the day-to-day effectiveness of interstate engagement and provide coherence to ongoing initiatives.

Last year in Astana, regional leaders adopted the "Concept for the Development of Regional Cooperation: Central Asia – 2040" —a strategic vision to deepen integration in trade, energy, transport, environment, digital connectivity, and cultural identity. It envisions transforming the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State into a formal regional structure.

Key priorities include enhancing intra-regional trade and industrial cooperation, developing trans-Eurasian transport corridors, jointly managing water and energy resources, coordinating climate and environmental policies, expanding digital connectivity, and fostering a shared Central Asian identity through education, culture, tourism, and public diplomacy. With a commitment to neutrality and international law, the Concept positions Central Asia as a stable, interconnected, and globally recognized region by 2040.

This year, Uzbekistan will host the seventh Consultative Meeting, where the country will address critical issues and take further steps towards regional integration. More specifically, Uzbekistan sets clear priorities—integration in trade and industry, energy and water coordination, diversification corridors, digital infrastructure, and fostering a shared cultural identity. It also outlines plans to evolve the consultative meetings into a permanent regional governance structure, grounded in shared values and respect for sovereignty.

In parallel, regular meetings of the Heads of National Security Councils are now in place demonstrating the region's commitment to shared responsibility in tackling common threats.

Where once there were divisions, there is now growing connectivity. Borders that historically symbolized separation are becoming bridges of cooperation.

Uzbekistan continues to advocate for the swift establishment of the Economic Council of Central Asian States—a forward-looking institution designed to harmonize regional trade, investment, and development agendas. This Council will serve as a catalyst for deeper, more comprehensive economic integration across the region.

Furthermore, the idea of establishing an "integration core" in Central Asia is gaining traction, drawing inspiration from early Eu-

ropean models like the European Coal and Steel Community. The region already possesses both the historical foundation and practical experience necessary for such integration. Notably, the establishment of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea in 1993 stands out as Central Asia's first regional institution dedicated to coordinating efforts on transboundary environmental challenges. This Fund has demonstrated the region's capacity for collective action and provides a unique platform that could evolve into a broader foundation for regional integration. Over the decades, the region has also advanced cooperation in economic and security spheres—for example, through the Central Asian Cooperation Organization and the landmark 2006 Semipalatinsk Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone, an initiative originally put forward by Uzbekistan. Both of these initiatives further cemented the tradition of collaboration. These achievements attest to the fact that today's movement towards regional consolidation rests on a robust legal and institutional base, with the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea poised to play a central integrative role.

Regional Economic Integration and Growth

Since 2016, the region has witnessed a dramatic surge in economic cooperation, with the region's economy now surpassing $500 billion. Intra-regional trade has grown by an impressive 250 percent, reaching $11 billion, while mutual investments have almost doubled, reaching $840 million. Uzbek enterprises are expanding their presence across Central Asia, and Uzbek investments in neighboring economies have tripled, signaling a new era of shared growth and trust.

Tourism within the region has nearly doubled, a clear reflection of the region's collective openness and growing people-to-people ties. According to recent data, Uzbekistan's top three sources of tourists this year are all neighboring countries: Kyrgyzstan (1.2 million visitors), Tajikistan (about 1 million), and Kazakhstan (890,000).

At the same time, international investment drawn to the region reached $ 24.8 billion in 2024.

Active role of Central Asia in the Global Arena

Turning to engagement with external partners, the proliferation of multilateral platforms under the "C5+" umbrella has significantly deepened the cooperation with key global actors. Initiated by Japan in 2004 and expanded with South Korea in 2007, these platforms now include China, the European Union, the GCC countries, Germany, India, Italy, Russia, the U.S., and others for a combined eleven formats, enabling collaboration with nearly 40 countries and two regional organizations. When looking at the potential and opportunities for cooperation, it is important to highlight that the states within this economic space account for 75 percent of the world's GDP and are home to nearly four billion people.

These platforms provide valuable mechanisms to jointly address pressing security, economic, investment, humanitarian, and environmental challenges. While not all of these formats align perfectly, their very existence signals two important trends: first, Central Asia is increasingly recognized as a coherent region of growing geostrategic significance; and second, global powers are repositioning themselves within this emerging multipolar world, one in which Central Asia holds a central and enduring place on the map.

The region has become more cohesive and active on the international stage. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have all publicly endorsed a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and stressed the need for a just peace based on international law. All five Central Asian countries have voted at the UN for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and supported the Palestinian right to self-determination. They have also called for a peaceful resolution to the recent Israel-Iran conflict, emphasizing dialogue and respect for international law.

UN resolutions introduced by Central Asian states in recent years highlight shared priorities such as regional security, sustainable development, water cooperation, climate resilience, and intercultural dialogue. These coordinated efforts show Central Asia's shift from a fragmented region to an increasingly unified and proactive international actor – one that no longer simply reacts to global agendas, but actively helps to shape them.

The recognition of these processes by the international community is what defines the international legal personality of Central Asia.

Meanwhile, the development of a sense of belonging among citizens of national states to regional processes becomes an important driver of sustainable, long-term

development of cooperation, strengthening the unity of countries, and fostering friendship among peoples.

Green Transformation

Uzbekistan, like its neighbors across Central Asia, stands at a unique crossroads, being an energy power on the one hand, but being situated in one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions on the other hand.

Over the past three decades, the region has warmed by 1.5°C—twice the global average—placing mounting stress on agriculture, water systems, and critical infrastructure.

In 2024, renewables accounted for 18 percent of Uzbekistan's electricity production—twice the share just a year earlier. The country's ambition is to raise this to 40 percent by 2030. More than 25 GW of green energy capacity is now under development, spanning solar, wind, and hydroelectric projects. These are not just for domestic needs, but also for cross-border integration and export.

One of the most ambitious undertakings is the Green Energy Corridor—a trilateral initiative with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan to transmit renewable electricity generated in Uzbekistan across the Caspian and Black Seas to Europe. This project, involving deep-water cables and transnational energy infrastructure, exemplifies both strategic foresight and the power of regional collaboration.

But for these efforts to reach their full potential, technical, financial, and political partnership is essential. As the European Union leads the global green transition, Central Asia can and should become a reliable pillar of that effort.

What Can Central Asia offer foreign partners?

Central Asia occupies a uniquely strategic position in the global race for critical minerals and strategic resources. The region holds approximately 7% of the world's oil and gas reserves alongside substantial deposits of rare earth and critical materials essential for digital and green transformations. Specifically, Central Asia has 384 deposits of rare earth and other rare minerals, in particular in Kazakhstan - 160, in Uzbekistan - 87, in Kyrgyzstan - 75, in Tajikistan – 60.

Between now and 2029, Uzbekistan plans to implement 76 projects across 28 rare minerals, valued at $2.6 billion. These projects emphasize value addition rather than simple extraction, positioning Uzbekistan as a key supplier of high-purity, high-value strategic inputs for the global green economy. To support this vision, technology parks are being established in Tashkent and Samarkand to advance the full production cycle—from raw material extraction and scientific research to innovation and finished products. Additionally, modern laboratories and training centers are being opened to build local expertise and prepare workforce to lead in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

This wealth of natural resources is complemented by a growing and youthful labor force. According to UN projections, Central Asia's population will exceed 100 million by 2050, with an average age around 30 years. This demographic dividend enhances the region's attractiveness for long-term investment and industrial cooperation.

Interest from external actors in the region's resources and markets has surged accordingly.

China has consolidated its position as the top trading partner of Central Asian countries, with their total trade volume reaching $94.8 billion in 2024-from $89.4 billion in 2023. Chinese goods and service exports to Central Asia added up to $64.2 billion, making up more than two-thirds of the total trade volume. China has become the primary destination for most of the region's critical mineral exports, benefiting from geographical proximity, established trade infrastructure, and early commercial engagement.

Russia also remains one of the most significant economic partners for Central Asia, accounting for 33% of the region's total foreign trade. In 2023, the total trade turnover between Russia and the Central Asian states exceeded $44 billion. Much of this cooperation is facilitated by a growing use of national currencies in mutual settlements, which now account for up to 80% of trade with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, 55% with Uzbekistan, and 24% with Turkmenistan.

Russia also plays a major role in the region's energy sector. For example, Russia has recently reached agreements with both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to construct nuclear power plants in each country.

In parallel, the European Union has sought to secure sustainable supply chains vital for the green and digital

transitions by signing strategic partnership agreements with Kazakhstan in 2022 and Uzbekistan in 2024. The historic EU-Central Asia Summit in Samarkand earlier this year established cooperation in key areas, including trade, transport, energy, digital connectivity, and water resource management. The EU announced a €12 billion investment package for Central Asia under the EU's Global Gateway initiative. In addition, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is developing a separate project pipeline worth approximately €7–8 billion through 2027, targeting critical minerals and renewable energy.

At the same time, the GCC has also become an increasingly important partner for Central Asia, not only through growing investment and trade, but also as a rising provider of development assistance. With significant financial resources and established aid agencies, the GCC is well placed to support Central Asia's economic development, infrastructure, and transition to new sectors such as renewable energy. Investment from GCC countries into Central Asia has grown steadily, nearly tripling since 2022 and increasingly challenging China's position as the region's leading external investor. Financial cooperation is also expanding within Islamic financing frameworks, with the Islamic Development Bank investing $9.1 billion in CIS countries, 60 percent of which is directed to Central Asia. In 2024, trade turnover between Central Asia and the GCC countries amounted to about $4 billion. Leading companies from GCC countries, such as ACWA Power, Masdar, Mubadala, TACA, and Nebras Power, are actively involved in projects to build solar and wind power plants in Central Asia.

CHALLENGES

Despite the progress Central Asian states have made, the full consolidation of a resilient, integrated Central Asia remains a work in progress. Central Asia continues to face both inherited and emerging challenges—challenges that demand shared responsibility and collective action.

Lack of Regional Cooperation Mechanisms and Institutions

Regional cooperation in Central Asia has become more sustainable than ever before. Yet, to deepen it further, the region must reinforce the institutional foundations that underpin it.

Sovereignty sharing with supranational organizations remains a subject of careful consideration in Central Asia. Regional governments consistently approach any initiatives involving the transfer of decision-making authority to regional bodies with caution, keenly aware of the importance of preserving national independence. This perspective is shaped not only by political and security considerations, but also by each country's diverse economic interests, unique national priorities, and distinct historical experiences.

Furthermore, the foreign policy objectives of Central Asian states differ considerably. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members of the World Trade Organization (WTO), while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are actively working towards accession. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan also participate in both the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), with Tajikistan holding membership only in the CSTO and Uzbekistan maintaining observer status in the EAEU. These differences reflect the region's complex policy landscape and underscore the importance of consensus and respect for mutual interests as cooperation moves forward. Ensuring that any steps towards further institutionalization foster regionalism—without compromising the autonomy or independent foreign policy of each state—remains a guiding principle.

Different organizations can lead to different free trade agreements, for example, within the EAEU and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This phenomenon of overlapping regionalism creates additional obligations for member countries, requiring careful coordination and alignment in the process of establishing a distinct Central Asian Free Trade Zone.

In light of these factors, it might be appropriate to point to ASEAN as a relevant example. ASEAN's flexible, consensus-based approach to regional cooperation allows member states to deepen ties and coordinate on shared challenges, while still maintaining their sovereignty and independence. This model offers valuable lessons for Central Asia as it seeks to balance regional collaboration with national priorities.

Recognizing these factors, Uzbekistan consistently upholds the sovereignty of its neighbors and is com-

mitted to advancing regional institutions only as far and as fast as regional partners are prepared to proceed. At the heart of Uzbekistan's vision is an approach grounded in consensus and cooperation, built on trust, equality, and mutual respect. This inclusive strategy aims to foster regional unity while fully respecting the independence and diverse priorities of all Central Asian states. In this context, Central Asia does not want its own version of "Brexit"; rather, the region's future lies in deepening integration and solidarity, with all countries remaining engaged in the shared endeavor of building a stronger, more united Central Asia.

Water Security

Despite several agreements signed by Central Asian states, water security remains a critical issue. All five countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—are already grappling with severe water shortages, a problem made worse by global climate change. According to the World Bank, over 37 million Central Asians currently live in water-stressed areas, a figure projected to rise to 75 million by 2050.

Experts warn that worsening water scarcity could hamper economic growth, intensify food insecurity, and even spark new conflicts. The situation is especially acute in Kazakhstan, where only 3% of the territory is covered by water and the country relies heavily on transboundary rivers. Uzbekistan, the region's most populous nation and a major agricultural producer, now ranks 25th globally for water stress. In Turkmenistan, where 90% of the land is desert, water shortages grow more severe each year. Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, though rich in water resources, struggle with outdated infrastructure that limits access to drinking and irrigation water. Furthermore, the rapid melting of glaciers in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan poses a growing concern for the water security and ecological resilience of the entire region. In the Pamirs and Tian Shan ranges, these countries collectively host over 20,000 glaciers, many of which are retreating at alarming rates—Kyrgyzstan's glaciers have lost more than 16 % of their total area over the past 50 years, while over a thousand glacial bodies in Tajikistan have already disappeared in recent decades.

The lack of a comprehensive regional approach to water management in Central Asia continues to present certain complexities for regional integration. Developing coordinated, long-term solutions for equitable and sustainable water use remains an important task to fulfill for the countries of the region.

In this regard, Uzbekistan's water policy is focused on strengthening interstate cooperation in the use of transboundary water resources. Efforts include the development of mutually acceptable mechanisms for joint water management and effective water use programs to balance the interests of all countries in the region. Uzbekistan actively collaborates with neighboring Central Asian states through bilateral commissions and regional bodies such as the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination and the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea. Constructive dialogue and practical cooperation—such as joint automation projects with Kazakhstan, collaborative management of reservoirs with Kyrgyzstan, and agreements on Amu Darya water use with Turkmenistan—have helped resolve many disputes and improve water management. Multilateral protocols with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, as well as ongoing negotiations on new hydropower projects, further demonstrate a shared commitment to addressing water challenges together. Such cooperation is vital for the sustainable development of Central Asia, especially as the region faces growing water scarcity and climate change impacts.

Cooperation based solely on interest can be fleeting. But when it is grounded in shared identity—common history, culture, and values—it gains the power to endure.

Furthermore, Uzbekistan believes that the effective functioning of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) as a truly regional organiza-

tion is only possible with the participation of all Central Asian states. In this regard, Uzbekistan fully supports the resumption of participation of Kyrgyzstan to IFAS, recognizing that its involvement is essential for strengthening regional cooperation and ensuring that the organization can best address the interests and needs of all its member states.

Only with the full engagement of all five Central Asian countries can the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea attract increased donor contributions. This, in turn, will strengthen the Fund's ability to implement effective regional projects and deliver tangible benefits for the sustainable development of the entire Aral Sea basin.

Central Asian countries have successfully resolved all outstanding border issues, which were once among the region's most difficult challenges. This achievement shows that, through consensus and mutual understanding, the countries can also find solutions to remaining water management issues.

Transport and Logistics-Related Challenges

Despite notable achievements in railroad modernization and new cross-border corridors, like the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan and Transafghan railroads, a range of well-documented challenges continues to impede deeper regional integration in Central Asia. Reports from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and OECD highlight significant disparities in infrastructure quality, with some countries operating modern railroads and others still relying on outdated Soviet-era systems. Operational inefficiencies, such as fragmented management models and limited adoption of digital solutions, further hinder progress.

Persistent cross-border bottlenecks—including inconsistent customs procedures, the lack of harmonized technical standards, and slow digital transformation across transport, customs, and border management—regularly cause transit delays. Moreover, varying national priorities and uncoordinated investment strategies prevent the development of a truly seamless regional network. Capacity mismatches on key corridors also contribute to congestion and underutilization, limiting Central Asia's competitiveness as a global logistics hub.

Forging a Shared Regional Identity

Cooperation based solely on interest can be fleeting. But when it is grounded in shared identity—common history, culture, and values—it gains the power to endure.

All five Central Asian states are custodians of a unique and interconnected civilization. Rediscovering and revitalizing this shared heritage is essential to shaping a unifying regional identity.

Uzbekistan believes that without this foundation, regional cooperation risks remaining transactional. For a regional identity to truly take root, people across Central Asia must be able to experience tangible benefits whether through educational and healthcare opportunities within the region, feeling safe and protected, or enjoying the ability to travel freely without barriers, as illustrated by the use of ID cards between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Ultimately, all these socio-cultural processes require time and patience to develop, much as European identity evolved over many decades before reaching its current form. Strengthening people-to-people ties and enhancing civil society collaboration will be essential for building a broad and resilient foundation for regional unity, grounded in both shared experience and practical advantages.

Importantly, the formation of a regional identity in Central Asia does not mean the loss of national distinctiveness. On the contrary, a shared sense of belonging to the region can actually encourage greater respect for the rich historical, cultural, and linguistic traditions of each nation. Regional identity provides a platform where every country can both preserve and actively promote its own uniqueness, contributing to the diversity and cohesion of Central Asia as a whole.

Joint efforts to promote regional identity will lay the foundation for future generations of the five countries to develop a strong sense of belonging to a common regional space and a sense of pride in the region: "We, the peoples of Central Asia."

UZBEKISTAN'S NEW APPROACH TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

Uzbekistan considers Afghanistan an integral part of Central Asia and advances its foreign policy approach "Stability through Connectivity."

Given the historical and geographic closeness of the

two countries, Uzbekistan consistently supports a peaceful, stable, and economically sustainable future for Afghanistan. The country's policy is grounded in good neighborliness, respect for sovereignty, and non-interference in internal affairs.

Today, Afghanistan faces a deepening humanitarian crisis, especially due to reduced international support and the mass return of refugees—over 3.4 million people since 2023, according to the UN. Such returns, without proper conditions, heighten vulnerabilities, particularly for women and children. About 23 million Afghans are projected to need humanitarian assistance in 2025.

It is worthwhile to note positive developments: reduced violence, improved logistics, anti-corruption measures, and a 95% decrease in opium production according to UN reports. These changes, though not solving all problems, should serve as a basis for further engagement and building trust.

Since 2017, Uzbekistan has shifted from a security-centered view of Afghanistan to one based on engagement. We began to see Afghanistan not as a source of threats, but as a partner full of potential. This pragmatic policy has continued in the aftermath of the withdrawal of foreign troops. The new authorities in Kabul have demonstrated a willingness to cooperate peacefully with all neighbors and international stakeholders.

A stable and connected Afghanistan benefits all countries of Central Asia. It offers a growing labor force, opens new markets, and improves overland access to global trade routes. Uzbekistan is therefore advancing transformative infrastructure initiatives such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and the Surkhan–Puli-Khumri power transmission line. These projects aim to make Afghanistan a continental connector between Central and South Asia.

The countries of Central Asia also increasingly understand this. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were among the first to reengage, launching bilateral trade and infrastructure projects. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have removed the Taliban from their terrorism lists and are developing economic and humanitarian cooperation. Tajikistan continues to supply electricity and maintain trade.

This growing regional engagement reflects a sense of collective responsibility and shared interests.

In 2024, Uzbek-Afghan trade surpassed $1.1 billion —a concrete sign of this deepening partnership. But aid and trade alone are not enough. That is why Uzbekistan is creating sustainable platforms for economic, educational, and social reintegration.

In 2024, the country opened a 36-hectare Free Economic Zone in Termez, city located in the southern part of Uzbekistan, at the border with Afghanistan, fully equipped with customs, warehousing, hospitality, academic, and medical infrastructure. Afghans can stay in the zone for 15 days without any visa restrictions. Over 90,000 visitors, including more than 40,000 Afghans, have passed through. This zone is a hub not just for commerce, but for connection.

Furthermore, last year Uzbekistan signed a 10-year contract to invest nearly $1 billion in Afghanistan's energy sector, starting with gas exploration and electricity generation at the Tuti-Maidan gas field in Jawzjan province.

In light of these developments, Uzbekistan calls on the international community to support meaningful engagement with Afghanistan and to ensure its participation in all relevant regional and global discussions. Only through inclusive dialogue and practical cooperation—rather than isolation—can the region and global community help Afghanistan become a stable, connected, and constructive partner, ultimately contributing to the security and prosperity of the entire region.

CONCLUSION

We are living through an era of profound uncertainty. Global power is shifting. Technology is reshaping every facet of life. Conflicts continue to rage in far too many parts of the world. Yet amid this turbulence lies a powerful opportunity—for Central Asia to stand tall. To choose cooperation over confrontation. To embrace openness, resilience, and shared responsibility. Uzbekistan is deeply committed to this vision. But the country knows it cannot achieve it alone. That is why Uzbekistan values genuine partnerships all around the world—with China, the European Union, the GCC countries, Russia, the U.S., and many more. Partners who do not see the region as a periphery to be managed, but as a region to be invested in.

All five Central Asian states are custodians of a unique and interconnected civilization. Rediscovering and revitalizing this shared heritage is essential to shaping a unifying regional identity.

Mongolia's Pivot to Central Asia and the Caucasus

Chimguundari Navaan-Yunden and Tuvshinzaya Gantulga

Mongolia's diplomatic engagement with Central Asia and the Caucasus marks a pivotal evolution of its "third neighbor" strategy, aimed at strengthening partnerships beyond its traditional ties with Russia and China. This strategic shift has gained urgency in light of changing regional dynamics within Greater Central Asia. Since 2020, Mongolia has intensified its diplomatic activities, exemplified by presidential visits to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 2024. Economic interactions, while still modest, show promising growth, notably in trade with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, where exports have notably increased. These developments align with broader regional trends towards greater independence from Russia and China, as Central Asian countries seek to establish cooperative mechanisms. Ultimately, Mongolia's westward pivot not only enhances its sovereignty but positions it as a crucial player in promoting regional stability and cooperation in the evolving Eurasian geopolitical landscape.

BACKGROUND

Mongolia's diplomatic engagement with Central Asia and the Caucasus represents the latest evolution of its third neighbor strategy—a long-standing policy aimed at cultivating partnerships beyond Russia and China to enhance Mongolia's sovereignty. This westward pivot has emerged as a strategic necessity for Mongolia, particularly as regional dynamics across Greater Central Asia undergo significant transformation.

Mongolia's diplomatic activity with Central Asia has accelerated markedly since 2020. High-level visits, previously sporadic, have become increasingly frequent and substantive. President Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh's recent state visits to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 2024 resulted in numerous bilateral agreements, bolstering cooperation in trade, transport, and cultural exchange. The visit to Uzbekistan yielded 14 bilateral agreements and the inauguration of Mongolia's Embassy in Tashkent. Similarly, the Kazakhstan visit established a formal strategic partnership. Mongolia's diplomatic outreach extended to Turkmenistan, marking the first bilateral presidential visits since diplomatic relations began in 1992, and to Kyrgyzstan, where bilateral relations have steadily improved following President Sadyr Japarov's 2023 visit to Mongolia and the opening of the Kyrgyz Embassy in Ulaanbaatar.

Economic engagement, while still modest, demonstrates upward momentum. Trade with Kazakhstan has reached approximately $150 million annually, with Mongolian exports of horse meat growing from $2.9 million in 2017 to $8.3 million in 2022. Kazakhstan's exports to Mongolia, primarily industrial and consumer goods, increased from approximately $72.9 million to $93 million during the same period. Mongolia's trade with Kyrgyzstan doubled from about $2 million in 2017 to over $5 million by 2022, driven by re-exported used cars and consumer goods. Trade with Uzbekistan grew dramatically from under $1 million in 2017 to nearly $10 million by 2022, focused on meat exports and Uzbek fertilizers. Meanwhile, trade with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan remains negligible. For Mongolia, with $20 billion GDP and over 90%of export goes to China, this is a significant development.

Mongolia's engagement with the Caucasus remains nascent but shows promising signs. High-level diplomatic exchanges include former President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj's official visits to Armenia in 2015 and Georgia in 2016, enhancing trade and cultural ties. Azerbaijan received a working visit from former President Khalt-

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maagiin Battulga in 2018, exploring collaborations in energy and investment. While trade volumes remain limited, recent growth is evident, particularly with Azerbaijan, where exports surged to approximately $1.6 million in 2024, primarily in livestock products.

These developments have occurred against the backdrop of emerging region-wide structures in Greater Central Asia, as countries seek to develop collective mechanisms for cooperation outside the frameworks dominated by Russia and China. Mongolia's engagement with these structures aligns with the broader regional trend toward developing greater agency and connectivity across Central Asia and the Caucasus.

IMPLICATIONS

Mongolia's deepening engagement with Central Asia and the Caucasus presents crucial economic and strategic diversification opportunities. Enhanced diplomatic and economic ties provide Mongolia with a hedge against over-reliance on China, currently its dominant trading partner, and alternative options given restrictive Western sanctions against Russia. The geographic and economic profiles of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, with their combined population of approximately 56 million, offer ample market opportunities for Mongolia. Politically, Mongolia's democratic governance, a distinctive feature in the region, offers a stable and transparent framework for engagement.This reliability in governance and commitment to international norms facilitates more predictable and trustworthy partnerships in areas crucial for regional development, such as trade facilitation, infrastructure investment, and the establishment of robust legal frameworks for transport corridors. This unique identity enhances Mongolia's value to Western partners and provides a practical model for how democratic principles can support economic and strategic cooperation in a challenging geopolitical landscape. Furthermore, Mongolia's active participation in cultural events like the World Nomad Games reinforces shared heritage with Central Asian states, promoting a regional identity that bridges East and West. The integration into regional mechanisms offers Mongolia access to emerging transport corridors, particularly the "Middle Corridor" that connects Asia to Europe without crossing Russian territory. This connectivity could mitigate Mongolia's landlocked status and provide more direct routes to global markets. The successful development of these corridors would significantly reduce Mongolia's vulnerability to geopolitical pressures from its immediate neighbors.

Central Asian and Caucasus countries benefit from Mongolia's outreach through expanded diplomatic networks and opportunities for collaborative initiatives in transport, energy, agriculture, environment and mining. Mongolia's strategic neutrality and pragmatic foreign policy approach are viewed positively in the region, enabling enhanced collaboration without triggering sensi-

Mongolia's deepening engagement with Central Asia and the Caucasus presents crucial economic and strategic diversification opportunities. Enhanced diplomatic and economic ties provide Mongolia with a hedge against over-reliance on China, currently its dominant trading partner.

tive geopolitical responses from Russia and China. The burgeoning regional integration subtly shifts dynamics for Russia and China. Although both powers are likely to tolerate Mongolia's increased engagement due to its non-military, primarily economic and diplomatic nature, deeper regional cooperation could eventually dilute their influence. Increased regional activity that transcends Russian and Chinese dominance, along with coordinated economic policies, could reduce regional dependency on Moscow and Beijing, leading to cautious observation from both capitals. China's Belt and Road Initiative has significantly shaped regional infrastructure development, but Mongolia's growing ties with Central Asia introduce an alternative approach to connectivity that might circumvent Beijing's leverage. Similarly, Russia's attempts to maintain regional influence through the Eurasian Economic Union face challenges as Mongolia and Central Asian states pursue more diverse partnerships. This diversification of regional relationships represents a gradual but significant shift in the geopolitical landscape.

Mongolia's third neighbors (the U.S., EU, India, Japan, South Korea, and Turkiye) view this westward pivot positively. Strengthening Mongolia's regional ties aligns with broader Western strategic goals, including promoting stability and sovereignty in Central Asia. High-profile European visits to Mongolia, followed by tours to Central Asia (e.g., French President Emmanuel Macron's and former UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron's multi-leg visits), illustrate growing interest in Mongolia's bridging role. These engagements allow Western countries to enhance their regional presence without being perceived as exclusively engaging with authoritarian regimes. The U.S., which has traditionally engaged Central Asia through the C5+1 format, could consider integrating Mongolia into this dialogue, potentially transforming it into a C6+1 arrangement. As outlined in the American Foreign Policy Council's (AFPC) April 2025 report, such integration would better reflect Mongolia's shared strategic and economic challenges with the region, particularly in critical minerals essential to global supply chains. Similarly, Japan and South Korea recognize Mongolia's potential as a gateway to continental Asia, leveraging soft power and economic investments to enhance regional integration.

CONCLUSIONS

Mongolia's pivot toward Central Asia and the Caucasus is driven by strategic necessity and presents significant opportunities for regional integration. The past years' diplomatic and economic initiatives signal genuine, albeit incremental, progress. Although concrete outcomes remain limited, the diplomatic momentum could lead to substantive cooperation in trade, transport, and infrastructure.

For Mongolia, regional integration serves as a diplomatic insurance policy, enhancing strategic autonomy amid geopolitical uncertainty. The pragmatic approach toward bilateral and multilateral cooperation

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mitigates potential pressure from Russia and China while strengthening ties with Western democracies. The development of region-wide structures that exclude external powers could create space for greater collective agency among the states of Greater Central Asia, including Mongolia.

Mongolia's westward orientation strategically positions it as a significant actor capable of bridging regional divides, promoting economic cooperation, and advocating democratic governance. As suggested in the AFPC's strategy document, the emergence of a more integrated Greater Central Asia, including Mongolia, could serve as a stabilizing force across the region. Whether this evolves into more tangible regional integration or remains predominantly at the diplomatic level will significantly impact Mongolia's role in the evolving Eurasian geopolitical landscape.

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The increasing American strategic interest in Greater Central Asia, with its emphasis on developing exclusive region-wide structures and enhancing connectivity, aligns with Mongolia's objectives. This convergence of interests offers Mongolia an opportunity to reinforce its sovereignty through regional integration while contributing to a more balanced regional order less dominated by Russia and China. In this evolving framework, Mongolia's distinctive political identity and strategic positioning could turn the country into an indispensable player.

An American Strategy for Greater Central Asia

Dr. S. Frederick Starr, S. Enders Wimbush, Dr. Svante E. Cornell,
Dr. Mamuka Tsereteli, Laura Linderman

America needs to design and implement an effective strategy for Greater Central Asia to enhance the United States's competitive position in a region that will affect the Russia-China relation- ship, the geopolitical competition in Asia, and key resource markets, particularly uranium, oil, and natural gas.

The proposed strategy ensures open access in Greater Central Asia to mitigate potential security breakdowns among powerful nuclear states, and secures opportunities for profitable American investment through technological partnership, resource extraction and development, and logistic facilitation.

The proposed strategy also strengthens America's ability to address four principal areas of U.S. concern: Iran's possible nuclear breakout; opportunities for U.S. investment and private sector profit from engaging Central Asia; Islamic terrorism as a prevailing concern; and the focus of

U.S. global security strategy currently shifting to China, which it views as an emerging peer competitor.

SPECIFIC POLICY MEASURES: U.S. GOVERNMENTAL DIMENSIONS

- Adopt an inclusive definition of the region to include Azerbaijan, renaming it "Greater Central Asia;" rebrand the U.S. platform for interaction as C6+1 and emphasize common actions and activities, and prioritize region-wide initiatives over those directed solely to individual states.
- Appoint a Special Presidential Envoy for Greater Central Asia at the National Security Council with responsibility for designing and monitoring U.S. activities in Greater Central Asia and for coordinating the activities of the U.S. regional embassies.
- Address bureaucratic obstacles to a unified regional approach within the Department of State and other U.S. Government bodies. Beyond appointing a Special Envoy, this should include exploring institutional realignments to better reflect the transregional nature of America's interests in the region, without requiring full reorganization. This would ensure that the interlinked Americans interests in the core Central Asian states and their logical geopolitical and economic extensions in the South Caucasus, Mongolia and Afghanistan are reflected in the U.S. government approach.
- Create a non-governmental U.S.–Greater Central Asia Business Council based in the United States, with satellites in each core country to assist in the creation of protocols for common visas for business and tourism, fast border crossings, region-wide communications, and standardize trade.
- Establish a Greater Central Asia Regional Security Framework focused on intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism cooperation, and joint security initiatives, with support from institutions like the George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies.

THE OBJECTIVE

To design and implement an effective strategy that enhances the United States's competitive position while reducing adversaries' advantages in an arena that is firmly within America's larger strategic and economic interests. The proposed strategy ensures open access in Greater Central Asia to address uniquely four principal areas of U.S. concern:

First, Iran's possible nuclear breakout is of particular concern to U.S. interests. In fact, six states of Greater Central Asia are surrounded by major powers, four of

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which—China, India, Russia and Pakistan—are today nuclear powers. A fifth, Iran, actively aspires to that status, while a sixth, Turkey, has the potential to become one. Conflict in this region thus carries formidable global risks that heighten the possibilities of conflict while reducing deterrence. Greater Central Asia lies at the intersection of these states' converging or colliding interests.

Greater Central Asian states are the source of abundant energy and rare minerals and other resources that increasingly power the economies and technological revolutions of the U.S. and potentially its adversaries.

Second, opportunities for U.S. investment and private sector profit from engaging Central Asia are among the most appealing anywhere in the world. Critical transport corridors traversing Greater Central Asia, including what is often referred to as the 'Middle Corridor' warrant America's support, for they promise to reduce the region's isolation from world markets, thereby normalizing trade patterns that advance U.S. competitive advantage. Greater Central Asian states are the source of abundant energy and rare minerals and other resources that increasingly power the economies and technological revolutions of the U.S. and potentially its adversaries. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, for example, are rich in uranium, rare earths, lithium, and other critical materials the U.S. and other actors seek. U.S. interest in gaining priority access to these resources for itself or its allies is paramount, as is acquiring the capability to deny them to U.S. adversaries, particularly to China.

Third, Islamic terrorism is a prevailing concern of both the states of Central Asia and U.S. authorities who track this pathology's movement into the West and the larger world. Some terrorism is homegrown, the result of marinating ideologies and power rivalries with deep roots in history, while a great deal more is transported into Greater Central Asia across porous borders from states like Iran and Pakistan, as well as through efforts by more distant Middle Eastern Islamic regimes to expand their area of influence and operations. Afghanistan is a dynamic crossroads of both trends. Aggressive monitoring of this dynamic and close cooperation with the Greater Central Asian states in aggressive counterterrorism efforts is a key American interest.

Fourth, the focus of U.S. global security strategy is currently shifting to China, which it views as an emerging peer competitor. Far from being a distant and unrelated appendix to this competition, Greater Central Asia is central to it. Beyond sharing critical borders with the region, China's pathway to Europe and the Middle East runs through Greater Central Asia, which links China's strategies geopolitically to both Russia and Iran. Greater Central Asia is thus a lynchpin in these fluid geopolitical and economic dynamics, which are susceptible to U.S. influence and shaping through effective engagement. This strategy supports efforts to reduce China's geographic and economic advantage by fostering alternate trade corridors and diversified mineral supply chains that benefit the U.S. and its allies.

THE ANALYSIS: THE EMERGENCE OF GREATER CENTRAL ASIA

Since the collapse of the USSR the United States has adopted a series of strategic documents pertaining to Central Asia. While these contain important affirmations, they are less true strategies than lists of unrelated projects deemed worthy at the time. Still less did they relate the region to the United States' global strategy as a whole.

Thus, U.S. strategy to date has accepted the Soviet definition of Central Asia, i.e., Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Three decades later this is no longer valid. The group of core Central Asian states must now include Azerbaijan, as the Central Asian states themselves and Azerbaijan see them- selves as a distinct political-economic region. This understanding warrants the use of "Greater Central Asia" as the term denoting the geopolitical focus of U.S. strategy. But the "Greater" strategy must also include proximate and bordering states on whom the success of the core depends. These include Georgia, Armenia, and Mongolia, which comprise the flanks of the economic region and provide existential support via facilities (transport, ports), economic self-interest, and long-standing geopolitical comity.

Afghanistan, too, must be included in any Greater Central Asia strategy, at first as an outlier but eventually as part of the organic whole. A core without its extensions can never be larger than the sum of its parts. Afghanistan fits naturally into this strategic pathway. America currently approaches that country as a problem to be contained, and with scant reference to the larger geopolitical environment. While affirming its historical justification, that approach must now be reevaluated, and in such a way as to promote Afghanistan's long-term evolution from an unremitting problem to a more manageable contributor to the region's stability and prosperity.

In fact, over the millennia Afghanistan has been an integral and at times even dominant part of Greater Central Asia. Leaders and populations in all core states and in Afghanistan itself acknowledge shared strategic interests and the necessity of pragmatic regional partnerships, based on bonds with the rest of Greater Central Asia that are organic and permanent. Moreover, the increasing tempo of security and economic dynamics involving Afghanistan and its bordering or nearby states (e.g., China, Pakistan, Iran and India), poses challenges and opportunities for U.S. strategic engagement that until now remain unacknowledged and undefined.

Finally, it is the fate of the six states of Greater Central Asia to be surrounded by major powers, four of which—China, India, Russia and Pakistan—have nuclear arms; a fifth, Iran, actively aspires to that status, while a sixth, Turkey, has the potential to become a nuclear power. Conflict in this region thus carries formidable global risks, which the United States has a fundamental interest in preventing.

Many outside powers, beginning with Japan and now including South Korea, the EU, Russia, China, Turkey, and the U.S., have created consultative mechanisms with the Central Asians. While largely beneficial, such arrangements exert a powerful centrifugal force on Greater Central Asia; importantly the region also needs strong centripetal forces. It should be the mission of the U.S. and friendly powers to encourage and strengthen the collective agency of the states as an emerging regional entity on the global stage that can serve as a stabilizing force across its neighborhood.The states of Greater Central Asia themselves are actively working to expand their formal collective structures by drawing selectively on the experience of ASEAN, the Nordic Council, and other multinational bodies. The presidents of the states of Greater Central Asia will welcome America's support for that process, provided those structures remain exclusively for Greater Central Asians. Such regional structures began to emerge with the creation of a Central Asia Economic Union in the 1990s, which was abolished when Russia's president first sought to join, then replacing it with his Eurasian Economic Union. The U.S. must help to assure that such a takeover does not occur a second time.

The stability of Greater Central Asia, and hence the success of any American strategy, must be grounded in the recognition that the regions' states themselves are the best instruments through which effective strategy must be channeled. The United States must therefore work with, rather than on, the region's governments. This can be done in the confidence that prosperity in Greater Central Asia will over time lead to greater political freedom, free markets, and openness to the world. The advancement of democratic norms and human rights concerns may follow, as they have in other societies, but the U.S. must not make their achievement a condition for engagement or a test to be passed beforehand.

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STRATEGIC ACTIONS WITHIN GREATER CENTRAL ASIA

The U.S. cannot hope to invest economically in Greater Central Asia at the level of, for example, China's Belt and Road (BRI) or even Turkey's proliferating projects. Nor can the U.S. guarantee the region's security with boots on the ground, significant military intervention, or membership for the states of Greater Central Asia in larger security organizations. Acknowledging this, the following measures are both possible and potentially beneficial:

- **Facilitate the creation of exclusive region-wide structures:** A severe constraint on U.S. policies in Greater Central Asia in the past has been the need to deal on any given issue with five to eight separate states. As a collective, Greater Central Asia lacks region-wide coordinating institutions and, hence, a single voice on key issues. This condition, favored by the former colonial power, invites "divide and conquer" tactics. A prime strategic goal for the regional states now is to develop linking institutions that are exclusive to the region that enable its member states to act in concert when circumstances demand it. The United States should welcome this development of exclusive region-wide structures and facilitate it, but it must leave the work of constituting such entities and their actual operation to the countries themselves.

- **Aggressively champion the U.S. private sector's interests in the region:** There are significant existing American investments in Greater Central Asia across a range of industries, from oil and gas to the IT sector, and the region is an increasingly attractive market for American industrial and consumer goods. The U.S. should enhance the economic viability of the region by promoting U.S. corporate investment in and management of trade corridors that link the region with Europe and South and Southeast Asia, as well as ports and transit point in all directions. It should also welcome imports from the region in carefully defined areas.

- The proposed **Greater Central Asia Regional Security Framework** must address local and regional threats including cross-border terrorism and other opportunistic disruptions. Its purpose is to promote coordination and integration among the region's military and national security professionals. This should be advanced through the development of common security protocols, intelligence sharing, joint operations, and technical interoperability. Underlying these initiatives should be increased opportunities for military officers and security personnel from Greater Central Asia to interact with American counterparts at the six U.S. Department of Defense Regional Centers, especially the George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies in Garmisch, Germany; command training centers, such as the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; war colleges; and defense and military analytical institutions. Such engagements will promote common understandings of security challenges and of both U.S. and regional approaches to them.

- **Accelerate efforts for engaging emerging elites through programs that attract them to the U.S. for educational and professional advancement, and activities within the Greater Central Asia region that link them with peers**. The U. S. should preserve and expand educational grants and enlist universities and corporations to create specific programs for students from Greater Central Asia, with the goal of familiarizing them with America's free market system, political processes, and media and information organizations.

- **Through new initiatives on a region-wide basis, the U.S. should foster press, internet, and TV in the English language and local languages**. Only with difficulty can citizens of Greater Central Asia inform themselves on region-wide developments or gain access

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to American perspectives on world events. Recognizing that it is in a severely competitive situation with other major powers, the U.S. must update and improve its narrative through both official and private information channels, emphasizing the region as a whole rather than a collection of separate countries, and in such a way as to advance the use of the English language across the region.

- **Identify and pursue convergence of U.S. interests in Greater Central Asia with the strategies of other friendly powers.** The U.S. should initiate a consultation and coordination with similarly engaged friendly powers, including Europe, Japan, Turkey, Korea, and India, with the objective of leveraging shared strategies where the interests of parties converge.

DISCLAIMER AND ATTRIBUTION

The views and analysis presented in this publication reflect the collective assessment of the Staff and Fellows of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (CACI), developed through extensive consultation with subject matter experts across the United States, Europe, and Greater Central Asia. While individual contributors have provided valuable insights, this report represents an institutional perspective rather than any single author's viewpoint. The conclusions and recommendations herein are intended to advance informed policy discussion on matters concerning Central Eurasia and should be attributed to the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute as an organization.

The U.S. approach to Greater Central Asia has been largely a number of disjointed projects from different agencies, a dog's breakfast of program mainstays and leftovers, absent strategic protein. Projects are not strategy.

Implementing A New Regional Strategy

S. Enders Wimbush

The analysis below builds upon the comprehensive strategy framework outlined in the April 2025 CACI report "An American Strategy for Greater Central Asia," offering a more focused examination of how the U.S. can implement these strategic recommendations in practice. While the original report laid out the institutional and policy foundations needed for effective engagement with the region, this follow-up piece explores the practical steps required to operationalize America's approach to this geopolitically critical area.

Any pivot to Asia must prioritize a comprehensive strategy for Greater Central Asia, yet the U.S. has offered no coherent regional strategy to date. Greater Central Asia is the connective tissue bridging Europe to Asia through energy, trade, transport, and resources, a cornucopia of commercial opportunities.

The region figures prominently in the strategies of U.S. adversaries for securing competitive advantage against American interests. Ignoring Greater Central Asia thus exposes the U.S. to lost opportunities and unwanted strategic surprises.

Any discussion of a U.S. strategy for Greater Central Asia must begin with the obvious. To date, no coherent U.S. strategy exists. The U.S. approach to Greater Central Asia has been largely a number of disjointed projects from different agencies, a dog's breakfast of program mainstays and leftovers, absent strategic protein. Projects are not strategy.

Repeatedly, the government has randomly assigned the states of Greater Central Asia into agencies' larger groupings where they are thought to fit, but do not. This strategic sloppiness has resulted in the Greater Central Asia states, including those of the South Caucasus, being addressed in a nebulous post-Soviet analytical and operational framework. At one time, the South Asia basket was their preferred destination. The current State Department has inexplicably returned them to its Russia account. It is hard to imagine how any serious strategist in possession of a map and an understanding of the geopolitical dynamics of the last two decades could make this decision. This Russia-centric intellectual paradigm has not been able to pass the strategic smell test for many years. The political and economic dynamics of the Greater Central Asian states affect the strategies of all the states surrounding the region, and they, in turn, reflect those dynamics in their own strategies. Russia is part of this world, but this isn't even remotely the Russian world.

Neither is Greater Central Asia some distant appendage of Asia. Rather, it is the connective tissue that attaches Asia to Europe and Russia through energy, trade, transport, and resources.

If a strategy of pivoting to Asia, as American strategists intend, mistakes Greater Central Asia as a distant flank, it will miss opportunities for enhancing U.S. competitive advantage while encouraging unwelcome strategic surprises. Moreover, this pivot will lose opportunities to thwart efforts by our adversaries to enhance their interests at the expense of our own in and around a region most covet. A focused strategy for Greater Central Asia must be central to any pivot to Asia, not independent of or divorced from it.

The strategy published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute recommends a number of ways to build U.S. power and influence in Greater Central Asia without breaking the bank. We understand that the U.S. has many strategic priorities and limited resources. We believe that gaining a considerable advantage for the U.S. in Greater Central Asia is possible at an acceptable cost. This can be accomplished by good decision-making and strong implementation.

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

Decision-making starts with putting someone in charge. Within the corridors of American power, Greater

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Central Asia has always been a strategic orphan. This must change.

We recommend that a Special Presidential Envoy for Greater Central Asia, who is responsible for designing and implementing strategy for Greater Central Asia, be added to the National Security Council. Greater Central Asia must be that official's professional focus and operational priority, not just an additional responsibility. Similarly, unique analytical and operational groupings at key institutions like State, DOD, Commerce, and Trade should be created to mirror this concentration and coordinate with it.

GREATER CENTRAL ASIA BUSiNESS COUNCIL

The incumbent administration must focus attention and resources on aggressively championing the U.S. private sector's interests in the region. This means making seeding, stimulating, and multiplying commercial efforts high priorities. Commerce is America's sweet spot. Greater Central Asia is a pregnant consumer space with large and growing populations. Our strategy calls for advocating and pursuing opportunities for U.S. businesses in trade, transport, manufacturing, tourism and travel, and resource development and extraction. With regard to rare minerals, Greater Central Asia has many in abundance, yet most USG interest today focuses on China or Greenland.

To energize this effort institutionally, we recommend that the government create a Greater Central Asia Business Council, for example at the Department of Commerce, with a presence in the U.S. and in each Greater Central Asia country. As we envision it, this is where cross-border and regional commercial opportunities can be born, investors can be identified, new ideas for commercial development can be cross-pollinated, regional projects can be designed, partners can be engaged, and U.S. support can be coordinated. We know from extensive contact with Greater Central Asian business people that they have a considerable appetite for such an initiative.

COUNTER-TERRORISM

A sound strategy must aim to enhance counter-terrorism efforts by engaging the states of Greater Central Asia in close cooperation, a key American national security interest. As we note, Islamic terrorism is sometimes homegrown in Greater Central Asia, while a great deal more is transported into Greater Central Asia across porous borders from states like Iran and Pakistan, as well as through efforts by more distant Middle Eastern Islamic regimes to expand their area of ideological influence and operations. Afghanistan is a crossroads and transmission belt of these trends, which is why the retreat of the U.S. military presence there has been particularly corrosive to U.S. national security planning. The strategy we propose

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> **Within the corridors of American power, Greater Central Asia has always been a strategic orphan. This must change.**

embraces Afghanistan within the organic context of Greater Central Asia, thereby offering an opportunity to impede the negative trends unleashed by this earlier mistake.

REGIONAL SECURITY FRAMEWORK

U.S. strategy for Greater Central Asia should include a robust Regional Security Framework whose purpose is to promote coordination and integration among the region's military and national security professionals. The U.S. military has long been one of America's most effective institutions for engaging foreign security elites—socialization, as political scientists might say—which in the past has included Greater Central Asia military and security elites in its programs at the institutions we identify in our strategy. These efforts could be expanded and intensified significantly at low cost. Engagement would include developing common security protocols, military ethnics, intelligence sharing, joint operations, and technical interoperability.

Our strategy suggests a number of ways and places military and national security professionals from the Greater Central Asia states can be plugged into existing U.S. capabilities for low cost. Influencing these security professionals through contact, training, and cooperation that results in growing familiarity with U.S. security practices and confidence in the possibilities of cooperation will pay significant dividends for planners and operators in both Greater Central Asia and the U.S.

STRATEGIC MULTIPLIER

As part of the Regional Security Framework our strategy calls for creating a strategic multiplier effect by …mechanisms for cooperating with allies whose interests overlap or align with ours in Greater Central Asia. For example, U.S. partnerships for assessment and consultation might include Europe, India, Turkey, Israel, Japan, and perhaps several Gulf states. The Department of State would lead, and U.S. embassies in the region would serve as conduits of joint thinking, cooperation, and coordination among allies.

MULTINATIONAL COOPERATION

We recommend assisting Greater Central Asia governments to expand their own formal collective structures by drawing selectively on the experience of other multinational bodies. The aim should be to help Greater Central Asia states to build a solid foundation for working together, and, importantly, not become hostage to collective organizations dominated by Russia or China.

NARRATIVE SHIFT

Our strategy calls for developing a serious communications strategy for Greater Central Asia. Ideally, this would go beyond current efforts to simply deliver information into a digital media environment that is saturated with what many competitors say is unbiased information, but which, in fact, is badly disguised narrative warfare that advances their interests while undermining ours. America's government communications institutions, like the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, have long positioned themselves as political opposition voices to Greater Central Asia policies and practices, a questionable vocation going forward. The current uncertainty about the future of these institutions is an opportune moment to examine this legacy, assess the competitive communications landscape anew, and recast a communications strategy that aspires to engage, especially, young elites of the Greater Central Asia region. Using local languages is important, but so is English, which, unlike Russian, connects this generation to the larger world of global business and Western ideas and conventions. The objective should be to explain American interests, motives, and visions effectively,

while exposing the fallacies of those of our competitors as harmful to Greater Central Asians' own interests.

CONCLUSION

Pieces of some of these initiatives have surfaced independently, some might say serendipitously, in various parts of the U.S. government, but they have never been welded into a coherent strategy that seeks to enhance U.S. interests in Greater Central Asia. Over the past three decades, there have been lots of projects funded by the U.S. taxpayer, but nothing greater than the sum of their parts has emerged. In the 1990s, this was explicable because few U.S. strategists knew where Greater Central Asia was and what it represented. In 2025, the strategic importance of Greater Central Asia can no longer be ignored. The region is home to significant U.S. interests that extend into the states around it. Meanwhile, rare commercial opportunities that can help anchor a strategy have become increasingly attractive. To secure these interests and pursue these opportunities, putting a comprehensive strategy in place for Greater Central Asia is the first step.

Needed: A Russia Containment Component

John DiPirro

The Central Asia and Caucasus Institute's proposed 'American Strategy for Greater Central Asia' (ASGCA) offers a timely recalibration of U.S. engagement, centering on sovereignty, investment and regional interconnectivity. It challenges those of us steeped in democracy and governance work—that is, human rights, transparency, rule of law and institutional reform—to look beyond the normative ideals and confront the hard, often uncomfortable realities of power politics. It offers a serious and rare opportunity for the United States to redefine its role in a region that remains strategically vital and capitalize on a fleeting window of geopolitical advantage. Yet, without a robust policy of Russian containment, the strategy misses a key opportunity. To be effective, the U.S. must help solidify a regional bulwark capable of resisting Russian military, economic and ideological coercion, while cultivating durable, mutually beneficial partnerships.

BACKGROUND

For decades, U.S. engagement with Central Asia rested on flawed assumptions that development assistance, conditioned on commitments to democratic reform, would gradually yield stable, pro-Western partners. In reality, democratic reforms were largely performative and cosmetic, designed to appease U.S. interlocutors and secure continued funding. Russia and China, by contrast, offered a far more attractive alternative to Central Asian elites, including security guarantees, regime support, non-interference in internal affairs and tacit acceptance of corruption. These partnerships came with fewer conditions, demanding only loyalty.

Against this backdrop, the U.S. promise of prosperity through democratic transformation remained abstract and unconvincing in the face of authoritarian realpolitik. Even reformist leaders or color revolutions were quickly co-opted or violently displaced. In private, many regional elites sought a different offer: *security, investment and recognition of sovereignty...without the "democracy business."* Beijing and Moscow responded with infrastructure development and military cooperation, creating entrenched dependencies.

The Trump administration's pivot toward transactional diplomacy that prioritizes economic and security partnerships over ideological demands has opened a window of opportunity to recalibrate U.S. engagement on terms regional governments find more palatable. Washington cannot and should not replicate the corrupt bargains offered by authoritarian powers, but it can offer something categorically superior: access to global markets, cutting-edge technologies, diversified security cooperation and entry into a predictable, rules-based order. This model, though imperfect, offers autonomy without the coercion, instability and dependency imposed by Moscow or Beijing. A pragmatic U.S. strategy grounded in sovereignty, prosperity and alignment could finally forge resilient and durable partnerships.

Meanwhile, Central Asia's younger, urban, and globally connected populations are increasingly disillusioned with both domestic authoritarianism and foreign exploitation. Nationalist and pro-sovereignty sentiment has surged, particularly in Kazakhstan,

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Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its denial of Central Asian sovereignty and its mobilization of ethnic minorities into the Russian war effort have further fueled this backlash. Many citizens across the region have grown tired of being pawns in great-power rivalries.

It is within this context that the ASGCA represents a meaningful shift. By acknowledging regional priorities and accepting transactional diplomacy, it replaces Western idealism with strategic realism. ASGCA's central innovation is its proposal to view these states not as isolated, vulnerable peripheries, but as a potential collective bloc, with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan at its core, and Afghanistan, Mongolia and the South Caucasus anchoring each end. This corridor would align sovereign interests with US strategic goals and offer three critical advantages:

- Strategically, it would anchor a contiguous bloc that counters the Russia-China-Iran axis and dilutes their regional influence.
- Economically, it would unlock immense investment opportunities, from critical minerals and renewable energy, to trade corridors like the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor), bypassing Russian chokepoints and providing an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.
- In terms of security, it would foster regional self-sufficiency in counterterrorism, border control and internal stability, thereby reducing the need for U.S. military presence. This feature aligns with both American and regional preferences.

Yet, ASGCA's vision omits a crucial dimension. Without an explicit strategy for *containing Russian influence*, the project risks being strategically incoherent.

IMPLICATIONS

While international law affirms Russia's 1991 borders, the Kremlin's own doctrine tells another story. The *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) ideology, a cornerstone of Moscow's aggressive expansionism, asserts a transnational Russian civilization that overrides international borders whenever it is politically expedient. Russia's borders, in its own eyes, end only where they are met with sufficient resistance. This has become painfully clear since the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale war on Ukraine. The Kremlin's disregard for sovereignty is not the exception: it is policy. This is why any peace settlement in Ukraine is likely to be tactical, not transformational. Moscow will use the opportunity to rearm and resume aggression when conditions are more favorable. As such, the West cannot afford another cycle of accommodation and illusion. A sustainable U.S. strategy must empower regional actors to deter Russian pressure without direct American military deployment.

For this reason, any effort to unify and empower Greater Central Asia must explicitly incorporate Russian containment. By systematically investing in the region's defense capabilities, economic integration and institutional resilience, the U.S. can help Central Asia and the South Caucasus form a cohesive bloc capable of withstanding Russian pressure. These nations offer unique strategic value, including deep familiarity with Russian tactics, a pragmatic understanding of hard power and a growing desire to pursue independent paths. Unlike Western policymakers who often misread Moscow through a liberal, rational-actor lens, Central Asians and Caucasians harbor no such illusions, fully recognizing the necessity of strength and self-reliance.

Six reasons underscore this imperative.

First, without containment, sovereignty will remain fragile. Russian influence is not limited to tanks and troops. It manifests itself in cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, political subversion, cultural hegemony, economic blackmail and manipulation of ethnic minorities. In Kazakhstan, Russia's rhetoric about "protecting Russians abroad" has stoked deep anxieties among political elites. In Armenia, Moscow's failure to intervene during the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive exposed the hollowness of its security guarantees. If Greater Central Asia is to be more than a vision, it must be hardened against the hybrid Russian threats from the outset.

Second, containment is a precondition for regional integration. The Middle Corridor, a central component of ASGCA's economic vision, cannot function without security. However, these corridors remain vulnerable to disruption without regional security guarantees. Russian influence over rail, road and energy infrastructure, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, makes any ambitious transit strategy susceptible to sabotage or political manipulation. A concerted effort to reduce Russian leverage is essential to ensuring the viability of east-west connectivity.

Third, Russia exploits regional divisions. Moscow excels at divide-and-rule tactics. It amplifies nationalist tensions, exacerbates border disputes and fuels distrust between neighbors. The longstanding water and border tensions between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are fertile ground for Russian interference. A Greater Central Asia bloc must prioritize coordinated responses to hybrid threats, including joint intelligence sharing, cybersecurity collaboration and counter-disinformation mechanisms. Containment is not just a military goal. It is the precondition for durable regional unity. Geographically, this effort should concentrate along Russia's southern flank, with the support of Turkey, India, Pakistan and the United States.

Fourth, U.S. credibility depends on strategic clarity and continuity. In Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the West's failure to provide hard security guarantees has had devastating consequences. Central Asian states have taken note. U.S. commitments must be unambiguous and they must endure beyond election cycles. If Washington abandons this strategy after four years, it will validate Russian and Chinese narratives about American unreliability and drive regional partners back into the arms of Moscow and Beijing.

Fifth, containment can be achieved without escalation. A containment strategy does not require U.S. troops on the ground. Instead, it must empower local states to serve as their own first line of defense, resilient enough to resist Russian coercion. This includes arms transfers, defense cooperation,

Central Asia's younger, urban, and globally connected populations are increasingly disillusioned with both domestic authoritarianism and foreign exploitation. Nationalist and pro-sovereignty sentiment has surged, particularly in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its denial of Central Asian sovereignty and its mobilization of ethnic minorities into the Russian war effort have further fueled this backlash. Many citizens across the region have grown tired of being pawns in great-power rivalries.

A deliberate, long-term effort to help Central Asian and Caucasian states resist Russian coercion is not just a regional necessity: it is a global imperative.

cybersecuritypartnerships, sanctions enforcement and media resilience. It also means supporting sovereign decision-making and reducing dependence on Russian economic systems. Containment, if done smartly, is a stabilizing force, not a destabilizing one.

Sixth, a containment strategy accelerates the end of the Ukraine war. Central Asia and the South Caucasus are critical nodes in Russia's sanctions evasion networks. Enforcing export controls, cutting off trans-shipment of dual-use goods and closing legal loopholes in countries like Kazakhstan, Armenia and Georgia would severely disrupt Russia's war economy, hasten its operational exhaustion and enable a faster, more favorable resolution to the conflict. Building a coalition of states committed to rejecting Russian revisionism not only weakens the Kremlin. It also creates the conditions for an eventual peace on Ukrainian terms.

CONCLUSION

An American Strategy for Greater Central Asia marks a welcome and overdue shift in U.S. policy thinking. By prioritizing realism over ideology and sovereignty over conditionality, it opens the door to credible and pragmatic partnerships. However, without Russian containment, the strategy is incomplete. The U.S. has a narrow window to act, not with maximalist ambitions or military deployments, but with strategic clarity and regional investment. A deliberate, long-term effort to help Central Asian and Caucasian states resist Russian coercion is not just a regional necessity: *it is a global imperative*. If executed with consistency, pragmatism and strategic patience, such a strategy could reshape Eurasia's geopolitical landscape, provide a lasting check on authoritarian revisionism and forge enduring partnerships with the United States. The stakes are high, but so is the potential payoff: lasting peace, durable prosperity and a new architecture for regional sovereignty.

ENDNOTES

1. This excludes Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Russian territory.

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