AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL
CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS INSTITUTE

SPECIAL REPORT

APRIL 2025

AN AMERICAN STRATEGY FOR GREATER CENTRAL ASIA

ABOUT AFPC

For more than four decades, the American Foreign Policy Council (AFPC) has played an essential role in the U.S. foreign policy debate. Founded in 1982, AFPC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to bringing information to those who make or influence the foreign policy of the United States and to assisting world leaders with building democracies and market economies.

AFPC is widely recognized as a source of timely, insightful analysis on issues of foreign policy, and works closely with members of Congress, the Executive Branch and the policymaking community. It is staffed by noted specialists in foreign and defense policy, and serves as a valuable resource to officials in the highest levels of government.

ABOUT CACI

The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (CACI) has been instrumental in the U.S. policy debate on Greater Central Asia for nearly three decades. Founded in 1997, CACI is dedicated to providing information, research and analysis on the vast territory stretching from Turkey to Western China, encompassing eight former Soviet republics as well as Mongolia, Afghanistan, and the North Caucasus.

CACI is led by its founding Chairman, S. Frederick Starr, and formally affiliated with the American Foreign Policy Council in 2017. CACI established a Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center with the Stockholm-based Silk Road Studies Program in 2005, creating the first institution of its kind in Europe and North America focused on this region. With offices in Washington and Stockholm, the Joint Center serves as a valuable resource for understanding this critical geopolitical region.

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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.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

S. FREDERICK STARR, PH.D. joined the American Foreign Policy Council as Distinguished Fellow for Eurasia in January 2017. He serves as the founding chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. Starr is also a Research Professor at Johns Hopkins University-SAIS in Washington and Head of Advisory Council at the Institute for Security and Development Policy in Stockholm. Starr has focused on the challenge of reopening continental-wide transport passing through Central Asia and Afghanistan, which he sees as a key to success in Afghanistan itself. This issue was the subject of a series of articles between 2000 and 2008 and of a book, *The New Silk Roads*, published in 2007. For writings that have had a direct impact on policy see *The Key to Success in Afghanistan* [with A. Kuchins et al] and *Afghanistan Beyond the Fog of Nation Building: Giving Economic Strategy a Chance*. Starr is a frequent commentator on the affairs of the region, and the author of numerous articles in journals including *Foreign Affairs*, *The National Review*, *Far East Economic Review*, and op-eds in various leading American and international newspapers. One of his recent books, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane*, has been widely acclaimed. In this book on the history of the region between the 8th and 11th centuries, he argues that Central Asia was the center of the world. Starr was the founding Chairman of the Kennan Institute in Washington, and served as Vice President of Tulane University and President of the Aspen Institute and of Oberlin College. He was closely involved in planning the University of Central Asia and the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy and is a trustee of the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan. He earned his PhD in History at Princeton, MA at King's College, Cambridge, and his BA at Yale, and holds five honorary degrees.

S. ENDERS WIMBUSH joined the American Foreign Policy Council as Distinguished Fellow for Strategic Studies. Prior to joining AFPC, Mr. Wimbush worked as a defense and security strategist for Booz Allen Hamilton, Science Applications International Corporation, and his own company, StrateVarious Inc. He has held senior positions at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Hudson Institute, and the Rand Corporation. Mr. Wimbush served as Director of Radio Liberty in Munich, Germany at the end of the Cold War, when the Berlin Wall was torn down and the USSR collapsed. Later, he was nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate as a Governor on the Broadcasting Board of Governors, overseeing all U.S. government-funded international media, including the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. He has testified to Congress to promote refocusing and reforming this vital U.S. capability. Mr. Wimbush is the author or editor of six books on Central Asia and the Caucasus, including *Muslims of the Soviet Empire and Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (both co-authored with Alexandre Bennigsen), *Soviet Nationalities in Strategic Perspective*, and, more recently, *Russia in Decline*. He is the author of dozens of analytical policy studies on alternative futures and their implications for defense, security, and corporate strategic planning, and has written for the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *Survival*, *The National Interest*, and *The American Interest*, among many other publications.

SVANTE E. CORNELL, PH.D. joined the American Foreign Policy Council as Senior Fellow for Eurasia in January 2017. He also serves as the Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, and a co-founder of the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm. His main areas of expertise are security issues, state-building, and transnational crime in Southwest and Central Asia, with a specific focus on the Caucasus and Turkey. He is the Editor of the Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, the Joint Center's bi-weekly publication, and of the Joint Center's *Silk Road Papers* series of occasional papers. Cornell is the author of several books, including *Small Nations and Great Powers*, the first comprehensive study of the post-Soviet conflicts in the Caucasus, *Azerbaijan since Independence*, and with S. Frederick Starr, *The Long Game on the Silk Road*, a study of 25 years of Western policies toward Central Asia and the Caucasus. Cornell was educated at the Middle East Technical University, received his Ph.D. in Peace and Conflict Studies from Uppsala University, and holds an honorary degree from the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. He is a member of the Swedish Royal Academy of Military Science, and a Policy advisor to JINSA's Gemunder center for Strategy. Formerly, Cornell served as Associate Professor of Government at Uppsala University and Associate Research Professor at Johns Hopkins University-SAIS.

MAMUKA TSERETELI, PH.D. is a Senior Fellow for Eurasia at the American Foreign Policy Council and a Senior Fellow with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. His expertise includes economic and energy security in Europe and Eurasia, political and economic risk analysis and mitigation strategies, and business development in the Black Sea-Caspian region. From 2009 to 2013, he served as Director of the Center for Black Sea-Caspian Studies at American University. Previously, Dr. Tsereteli served for twelve years as Founding Executive Director at the America-Georgia Business Council, and as Economic Counselor at the Embassy of Georgia in Washington. Dr. Tsereteli holds a Ph.D. Degree in Economics from the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, and an M.A. in Social and Economic Geography from Tbilisi State University.

LAURA LINDERMAN joined the American Foreign Policy Council as Senior Fellow and Director of Programs for Eurasia in August 2024. Her research focuses on Georgian politics, economics, and foreign relations. Previously, she was a Senior Fellow with the Eurasia Center at the Atlantic Council from 2015-2024 and Associate Director there from 2012-2014. She also taught South Caucasian studies to U.S. foreign affairs professionals preparing to depart for Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan at the Foreign Service Institute. Linderman was also a senior manager at Splunk, a machine data software company in Silicon Valley and served as a board member for the Transcaucasian Trail Association from 2017-2023. Linderman holds a BA in anthropology and German language and literature from Wellesley College and an MA from Indiana University in anthropology.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 relationship, 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 US 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 US activities in Greater Central Asia and for coordinating the activities of the US 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 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.

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 counter-terrorism efforts is a key American interest.

Tehran - Military Museum, Offensive Missiles of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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.

Source: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute

The annual 2023 CAMCA Regional Form met to discuss ways of advancing economic growth and developmemt in greater Central Asia.

Thus, US 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 themselves 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.

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

Fergana Mountain Range Picturesque Landscape View Point with Cloudy Sky at Afternoon.

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 US should foster press, inter-

net, 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 to American perspectives on world events. Recognizing that it is in a severely competitive situation with other major powers, the US 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.

CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS INSTITUTE (CACI)

The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (CACI) was founded in 1997 to respond to the increasing need for information, research and analysis on the vast territory of Central Eurasia stretching from Turkey to Western China, encompassing eight former Soviet republics as well as Afghanistan, Mongolia, and the North Caucasus.

The Institute's aim has been to help bring greater attention to these regions among officials and policymakers. In 2005, CACI established a Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center with the Stockholm-based Silk Road Studies Program, which was created in 2002 to advance similar objectives in Europe. CACI is led by its founding Chairman, S. Frederick Starr, and Director Svante E. Cornell. More details on the activities of CACI and the Joint Center are available at its dedicated website, www.silkroadstudies.org. The Institute formally affiliated with the American Foreign Policy Council in March 2017.

CACI's chief initiatives are the following:

CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS INSTITUTE SUBSTACK

The CACI Substack provides regular analysis on the evolving dynamics of Central Eurasia. It features concise, expert commentary on regional security, economic developments, and geopolitical trends affecting U.S. interests in this strategically vital region. The publication serves as a complement to CACI's other analytical products and is available at https://centralasiacaucasusinstitute.substack.com.

CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

The bi-weekly *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* is a digital publication exploring political and security issues in the post-Soviet space. For 15 years, it has brought cutting edge analysis of the region to a practitioner audience.

TURKEY ANALYST

Similar to the *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, the *Turkey Analyst* is a bi-weekly digital publication designed to bring authoritative analysis and news on rapidly developing domestic and foreign policy issues in Turkey. It includes topical analysis, as well as a summary of the Turkish media debate, compiled by leading analysts and observers.

SILK ROAD PAPERS

Ranging in length from 40 to over a hundred pages, the Silk Road Papers Series provide an outlet for timely publication of in-depth studies covering important issues in the Central Asia and Caucasus region.

BOOKS AND MONOGRAPHS

Published both independently and in collaboration with established publishing houses, books and monographs provide outlets for CACI's fundamental research. Recent titles include Starr's acclaimed *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* and Cornell's *Arabs, Turks, and Persians*.

FORUM SERIES

CACI's Forum series aims at informing Washington-based policy circles and the educated public on the region. The Institute also convenes smaller private events for policymakers.

RUMSFELD FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

The Rumsfeld Fellowship Program, organized in cooperation with the Rumsfeld Foundation, aims at rising regional leaders in government, commerce, and academia from Central Asia, the Caucasus and Afghanistan. The goal of this program is to foster better understanding and build stronger relations between the United States and countries of the region. Since its inaugural session in fall of 2008, the program has brought dozens of young leaders to the United States to conduct independent research and to meet policymakers, business leaders, journalists, and academics.

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509 C STREET NE | WASHINGTON, DC 20002 | 202-543-1006

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