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CENTRAL ASIA, RUSSIA, AND CHINA: U.S. POLICY AT EURASIA'S CORE

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SUMMARY:

Located at the center of the Eurasian supercontinent, Central Asia is more appealing for great powers now more than ever. Its abundant natural resources and geographic position offer significant economic and political opportunities. Russia, China, and the United States all look at the region through the prism of their national interests. Moscow would like to retain the security leverage over the region. Beijing's current focus is on trade and energy. And Washington, under the administration of Donald Trump, yet again is rethinking its policy toward Central Asia.

U.S. strategists do not seem to have a clear approach to the region. The genuine interests of the United States in this part of the world should be addressed and existing policy tools should be enhanced. One recommendation is clear: It is crucial for Washington not to cede this arena to Russia and China and to maintain a long-term commitment in the region.

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How Central is Central Asia?

Central Asia, once remote and unknown, is now more accessible than ever. At the turn of the 21st century — after the Soviet Union collapsed — the countries of the region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) were reborn to the outside world. Their first steps in this new reality were uncertain. A quarter century later, the great economic promises of the region, as well as the nature of the security perils it faces, have made Central Asia a subject of international attention. Russia, China, the United States, and, to a lesser degree, the European Union all wish to influence regional dynamics. As a result, the region is becoming a critical arena where the interests of multiple players compete and coincide. Moscow, as one of them, for years pursued a strategy based on its military hardware on the ground. Beijing's primary concerns, next to regional stability, are energy and economic development.

Today, both Russia and China challenge Washington on numerous fronts, including Central Asia. Moscow and Beijing deeply penetrate the region's economics as well as energy and security sectors. Given Central Asia's strategic position and the continuous involvement in Afghanistan it is essential that the United States does not cede the region to Russia and China, but instead looks for ways to cooperate with, and when necessary, to counter, their policies.

A Brief History

The history of Central Asia is a tale of war and flux. From Alexander the Great to Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, the region has seen the rise and fall of great conquerors. Waves of Turkish, Arabic, and Uzbek tribes flooded the region only to yield to subsequent challengers. This tumultuous history has bequeathed the region with a unique mosaic of cultures, religions, and cities, such as Bukhara and Samarkand — capitals of ancient civilizations — that fascinate historians and tourists to this day.

It was the nomads of the Central Asian steppes who brought the West and the East together and created the Silk Road that flourished under the Chinese Han dynasty and reached its peak in the 13th century. Innovation in navigation and shipbuilding techniques eventually overshadowed the land-based Silk Road and relegated Central Asia to the background for several centuries.

The political landscape changed again in the 19th century when European powers began to send commercial and military expeditions to the khanates of Central Asia. The two leading actors — the British Crown and the Russian Empire — tirelessly competed over the vast lands of Central Asia in what has come to be known as “The Great Game.” By the end of the 19th century the Russians had won the rivalry and dominated the entire region.

A new era in Central Asia started in 1917 when the first soviet (council or assembly in Russian) in Tashkent was founded. The arbitrary decision carried out by communist planners in the 1920s divided the region of Central Asia into five republics. Those artificially fixed borders, drawn with no regard for ethnicity or culture, have endured to the present day.

Under the Soviet Union, Central Asia drifted into a limbo. It would not be until the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. in December of 1991 that a new chance to open the region would arise. However, undeveloped and underinvested, the region's transition from socialism to capitalism was difficult. In 1992, when subsidies from Moscow stopped, the budgets of the Central Asian countries fell into ruin. As the skilled Russian workforce began to leave, industrial companies closed and unemployment and prices for basic consumer goods went through the roof.

Yet, economic turmoil was not the only threat that the Central Asian states faced. The rise of nationalism and the revival of Islam were equally challenging phenomena. In the early 1990s Saudi Arabia sent one million Korans to the region, thousands of mosques were built across Central Asia, and people began rediscovering their Islamic and ethnic roots after more than a century of imperial and Soviet control. The infant regimes applied authoritarian methods, such as close surveillance, censorship, and imprisonment, that kept both Islamic fundamentalists as well as militant nationalists at bay. These movements, however, offered a convenient excuse for those in power to consolidate their influence over society, which has been extended over the last 25 years.

Central Asia Today

The Eurasian supercontinent produces 60 percent of the world's economic output and is a home to two-thirds of the global population. Central Asia lies at the very heart of it.

The region stretches to China's Western provinces in the east, to the Caspian Sea to the west, and it shares long frontiers to the north with Russia and with Iran and Afghanistan to the south. After independence, its position as a bridge between Asia and Europe, vast energy deposits, and uncertain security milieu created momentum for the region. All five Central Asian countries have been able to capitalize on more than two decades of international interest.

Despite several regional trends, the Central Asian states do not form a cohesive whole. There are several significant differences between them pertaining to international leverage, local politics, and ethnic dilemmas. Kazakhstan is a prime example of a success story. Astana, rich in both oil and gas, is also the world's largest exporter of uranium. It was the only state in the region to support the U.S. operation in Iraq by sending troops. And in 2016, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to win a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

For decades, Uzbekistan has silently competed with Kazakhstan for the role of regional leader. Uzbek authorities believe their country to be at the forefront of efforts to combat the terrorist threat in Central Asia. Uzbekistan shares borders with all the other Central Asian countries and Afghanistan, and constitutes half of the region's population. Home to some of the most abundant gas reserves in the world, Turkmenistan has been able to provide relative stability for its citizens. However, Ashgabat has repeatedly chosen isolation by refusing to take part in regional initiatives. Additionally, Turkmen society is kept under a constant state surveillance that does not allow for independent political activities.

The two poorest countries of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, go with the historic flow. Aware that their bargaining power is insufficient to influence the geopolitics of the region, they accept their weaker position vis-à-vis their more powerful neighbors. However, the majority of water in the region originates in these two mountainous countries and is often the cause of political clashes with their downstream partners.

Due to its landlocked position, the Central Asian countries have traditionally opted for a multi-vector approach to foreign policy. The United States, China, and Russia have been dominant players in the new contest for influence in the region.

U.S. Priorities and Constraints

The United States can neither ignore nor be ignored by Central Asia. Even though it lacks direct geographic access to Central Asia, the United States is still an important partner for the local regimes.

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington had no direct dealings with Central Asian capitals. The U.S.S.R. was treated as one entity with Moscow serving as the contact point for all of the republics. Since the end of the Soviet era, U.S. engagement in Central Asia can be divided into three phases: limited interest, verging on ignorance (1991–2001); increased cooperation after 9/11 (2001–14); and devising a regional post-Afghanistan strategy (2014–onward). Each period has had its own priorities and nuances, but all have had one trait in common: Central Asia has never been a significant strategic priority for the United States. Washington's agenda in the region has instead been informed by other theaters of geostrategic action: Russian, Chinese, Iranian, and Afghan.

The key U.S. objective in the region in the 1990s was the elimination of nuclear weapons in Kazakhstan. The Clinton administration placed nonproliferation at the top of its foreign policy program. The former Soviet satellites (including Belarus and Ukraine) were a major component of that agenda. By 1995 — with assistance from the United States that included significant financial support — Kazakhstan was deemed a nuclear-free country.

In 1997, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott said the United States had no interest in participating in a rerun of the 19th century's "Great Game" in the region.¹ Indeed, until the terror attacks of September 2001, Washington was short on initiatives in Central Asia — a situation that would undergo significant change in the coming years.

¹ Mike Field, "Talbott Defines U.S. Central Asia Policy," *The Johns Hopkins University Gazette*, August 1997.

In the wake of 9/11, the region became a crucial element of the U.S. anti-terrorist mission in Afghanistan. Hard security concerns have since become central to the relationship between the United States and Central Asia. All of the Central Asian republics participated in the Afghan transit operations. Uzbekistan allowed Americans to open a base on its territory in 2001, which was then closed four years later as a result of U.S. criticism of human rights violations. Kyrgyzstan also agreed to host U.S. troops, who then left the country in 2014. Although Central Asia itself has never been a key theater for the United States, there were signs of an increased interest from militant Islamist groups in U.S.-related targets. In 2004 and 2015, two unsuccessful attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan took place. In 2011 and 2015, several Uzbek citizens were apprehended in the United States on charges of planning to assassinate President Barack Obama.

Central Asian states were particularly keen to cooperate with Washington on security. The narrative that the terrorist spillover from Afghanistan could exacerbate the domestic situation in Central Asia was, and still is, popular among the local regimes. Other U.S. goals — democracy promotion and human rights, energy security, regional cooperation, and drug and human trafficking — have not gained as much traction.

Human rights, in particular, have made little progress in the region. Political repressions — including imprisonment of opposition figures, media bans, regular crackdowns on civil society movements, and restrictions on freedom of speech — have been a central feature of the region's politics. The Kremlin has inspired some actions in Central Asia, such as the recent anti-LGBT and foreign agent draft laws in Kyrgyzstan.

Democracy promotion in Central Asia has also never been high on the U.S. agenda. Values have been at odds with the primary goal of U.S. policymakers in the region — security cooperation — and there has been a limited appetite in Washington to carry the beacon of democracy. Officially, the United States considers the Central Asian regimes be either semi or fully authoritarian. All are listed by the U.S. Department of Labor as countries that use child labor to pick

cotton. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are on the register of religious freedom violators. In 2015, Kyrgyzstan terminated a cooperation agreement with the United States as a form of protest against granting a human rights award to an imprisoned Kyrgyz activist. However, each year the countries in the region are exempt from sanctions, with priority instead placed on continued military cooperation.

Double Reboot

Under the Obama administration, as the region's role as an Afghan transit hub diminished, a new scheme for Central Asia was required. In 2011, then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attempted to remodel U.S. standing in Central Asia, culminating in the announcement of the New Silk Road Initiative. The project envisioned fostering regional trade and transport links with Afghanistan at its core.

Energy has become a top priority — at least on paper. There are two projects under the Silk Road umbrella that the United States has advocated. The CASA-1000

is an electricity transmission system that would allow for summer energy surpluses from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to be transported to energy-hungry Afghanistan and Pakistan. Washington also supports the construction of the 1800 kilometer TAPI gas pipeline,

which is designed to deliver gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and into Pakistan and India.

However, the U.S.-promoted Silk Road has lacked both political substance and sufficient funding from the beginning. Washington has committed only \$15 million to the CASA-1000, which will cost an estimated \$1.2 billion.

Furthermore, after a brief period of the decline in military spending in the region, the United States has refocused on security. In 2015, Washington provided \$1 million in equipment to Tajik security agencies and donated over 300 armored vehicles to Uzbekistan's army. The soft power projection through the Silk Road project has proven to be a temporary diversion and security topics have again dominated the agenda.

Regional Dynamics

Today, U.S. strategists seem to be resigned to a modest and pragmatic role in Central Asia. The Trump administration has given some indications what the contours of U.S. policy in Central Asia might be. In May 2017, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced that democratic values will not stand in the way of advancing U.S. national security and economic interests.² The U.S. global retreat on human rights will favor an even more pragmatic approach to militarization of the region and even less focus on civil liberties.

If the U.S. cuts its 2018 foreign aid budget significantly, the role of the United States as a guardian of democracy in the region will be further diminished. In the proposed document foreign assistance for the Central Asian countries, with the exception of Uzbekistan, has been significantly reduced. If these changes enter into effect, Central Asia will be at the mercy of Russia and China, who do not follow democratic principles or promote open societies.

The institutional framework for cooperation with Central Asia is already in place. The C5+1 format, announced in 2015, brings all five republics and the United States together. The format aims to reassure Central Asian governments of Washington's support. It is difficult to imagine that the C5+1 platform, through training and technical assistance, will counter a full-scale military involvement of Russia and a deep Chinese economic penetration of the region. An additional bilateral component in the U.S.–Central Asia relationship will be crucial.

Central Asia itself is neither a major security priority nor a top-tier economic partner for the United States — it amounts to less than 1 percent of U.S. global trade. Currently, Washington has no intentions to advocate for democratic changes in the region. Despite this, it is imperative that policymakers in the United States remain active in ensuring a secure and stable Central Asia. For the foreseeable future, the United States will continue to be an attractive alternative for the Central Asian countries.

Historically, Central Asia has always been in Russia's backyard. Today, the Kremlin no longer calls the shots in the region. Moscow wants to preserve the status quo, which encompasses both a significant military presence and high political status.

Above all, Russia fears instability in the region and its number one priority is to avoid political chaos in Central Asia that could adversely impact Russia's southern border. After the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, preserving stability has become an even more pressing issue. The Kremlin thinks of Central Asia both in terms of a bridge as well as a buffer zone against terrorism emanating from the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Moscow's other primary objective is to also contain foreign infiltration of the region, with a particular emphasis on limiting the role of the United States. The Tulip revolution that broke out in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 was, in Russia's opinion, a U.S.-inspired event that strived to undermine Kremlin's position. A top priority for Moscow is to keep Washington away from its sphere of influence.

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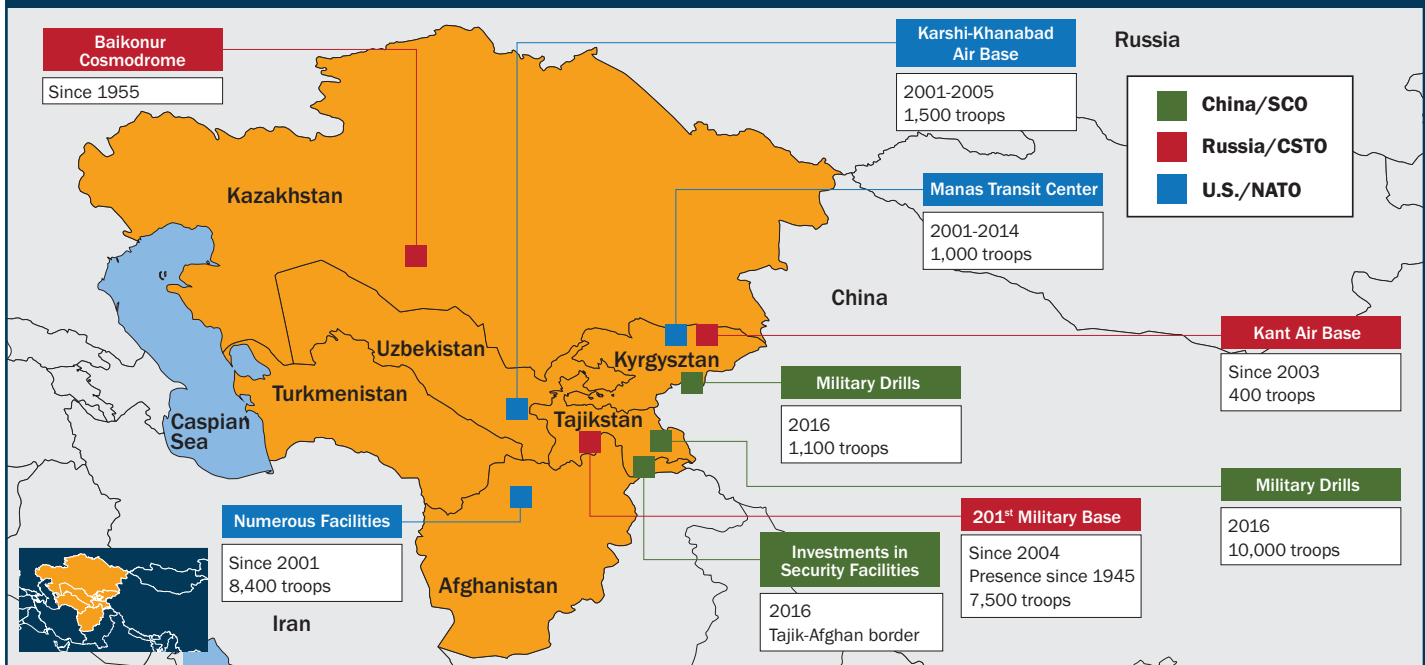
Most recently, Russia has used the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as the main political instrument in Central Asia. The EEU is a Moscow-led bloc that includes the former Soviet republics of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. The Central Asian countries are integral to the EEU's success.

However, with the ongoing economic crisis in Russia, the bloc — to a large degree dependent on the Russian market — seems to be suffering from a recession as well. In Kyrgyzstan, the latest of the EEU members, the results of the membership — including a drop in trade and a rise in unemployment — are mixed at best. Bishkek has lost its position as a middleman benefiting from significant customs revenues on Chinese products re-exported to its neighbors, mainly Kazakhstan. Now, within the EEU free trade zone, the goods from China travel directly to union's members omitting Kyrgyzstan.

In the last decade, China has made significant strides in weakening Russia's economic centrality in Central Asia. However, while Beijing has become a

2 U.S. Department of State, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, “Remarks to U.S. Department of State Employees,” May 3, 2017.

Map of Major Military Facilities and Security Operations in Central Asia



major trade partner for the region, China's economic investments have not been enough to unseat Russia's influence. Remittances from Russia to Central Asia are an important economic factor. In 2014, they accounted for 8.9, 23.4, and 32 percent of GDP for Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, respectively. Although there was a sharp decline in transfers in 2015, it is estimated that around 3.5 million labor migrants from Central Asia currently work in Russia.

Yet, it is the military cooperation with Central Asia that has helped Russia grow the most. Moscow maintains bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the latter being the largest Russian army contingent abroad. It also has several military facilities in Kazakhstan. The Kremlin positions itself as the sole security provider in the region. Its security presence in Central Asia both shields the Russian territory and serves as a control mechanism of the Russian former colonies.

Russia still tends to think about Central Asia in Soviet terms. Hence, the countries of the region are not partners, but passive recipients of financial aid, military equipment, and political decisions. Though Russian influence in the region has faded over the past 25 years, Moscow will continue to be the political player with

the most comprehensive palette of pressure points in Central Asia ranging from soft power to the economy to security for the foreseeable future.

China's (Un)Expected Rise

Having only boosted its regional presence in the early 2000s, China is a relative newcomer to Central Asia. However, it is a quick learner. In little more than a decade, Beijing has become the largest trade partner and investor in the region.

Chinese interests in Central Asia concentrate on security, economic development, and energy. Sharing a 3000-kilometer border with the region, Beijing's chief political concern, like Russia's, is to preserve stability. This issue is closely connected to the Uyghur separatist movement, which shares ethnic, cultural, and religious ties with the Central Asian nations, and operates in the western Chinese province of Xinjiang. Anti-government terrorist incidents by these separatists are regular occurrences both inside and outside of the area as well as beyond the Chinese borders. In August 2016, a suicide car bomber struck the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan wounding three Kyrgyz employees of the mission. Bishkek claims the attack was conducted by a Uyghur fighter.

Beijing's strategy is to expand its economic power deeper into the Eurasian continent, and Central Asia is a crucial element of this geopolitical puzzle. Speaking in Kazakhstan in 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the creation of the Silk Road Economic Belt. The project, along with its maritime equivalent, the 21st century Maritime Silk Road, is a multi-billion dollar infrastructure investment with the aim of increasing connectivity between and enhancing integration of the Eurasian countries. This initiative, jointly known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is intended to reinvigorate the land trade corridor to Europe. The economic transformation of the rebel Xinjiang province, which is a part of the BRI project, would also facilitate stability and increase domestic economic activity on the Chinese western flank.

Beijing has no ambitions to remake the local politics of Central Asia. It is business and trade investments that are at the center of its interests in the region. Between 2000 and 2013, its trade with Central Asia increased from \$1 billion to \$50 billion and it has made China the top trade partner in the region. This impressive growth should be put into perspective. In 2014, the region accounted for only 0.01 percent of the Chinese global balance sheet.

It is access to the natural resources of Central Asia that is the overriding objective of China. Beijing's hope was to keep a low profile on its energy engagement in the region. It can no longer do so. China, with its energy intensive economy, broke Russia's historic energy monopoly. Now regional oil and gas pipelines increasingly run in an eastward direction. Kazakhstan began oil deliveries to China in 2006. Today, Beijing owns about a quarter of oil production in the country. The case of Turkmenistan, a gas champion in Central Asia, is even more extreme. A decade ago Russia was purchasing nearly all gas exports from Ashgabat. After the creation of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline Moscow no longer has any gas deals with its former satellite. Currently, Turkmenistan supplies 44 percent of China's natural gas consumption. With the fourth spur of the pipeline being constructed, the Turkmen–Chinese gas cooperation is set to expand.

Beijing considers ensuring favorable trade conditions for energy resources and securing regional stability to be the pillars of its strategy in Central Asia. Recent Chinese economic power has begun to translate into political and security influence. Military drills conducted in the region as well as the 2016 China–Tajikistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan security agreement are the first heralds of the upcoming change. Beijing is finally ready to muscle into Central Asia. This is unwelcome news to both Russia and the United States.

Interactions in the Region

None of the Central Asian regimes — given their weak militaries and the scope of terrorist dangers they face — are able to guarantee their own security. This is a partial reason that Central Asian leaders have expressed such a strong interest in additional support from Russia, China, and the United States. Over the past 25 years, the countries have excelled in

exploiting maximum concessions from all interested international partners. The Central Asian states often play the major actors against one another to improve their own bargaining position.

The United States has begun to realize that it will never match the geopolitical potential of its rivals in the region. Over the years, U.S.

officials have reiterated that relations with Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia are not a zero-sum competition.³

Moscow and Washington have always been deeply at odds over democracy promotion in the region. However, since the Trump administration has declared that it will decouple its foreign policy from values such as human rights and civil liberties, it may now be more feasible for the United States to reach a constructive accord with Moscow in the region.

An acknowledgement that there are overlapping U.S.–Russian objectives in Central Asia, including curbing international terrorism and countering narcotics, could open up new opportunities for compromise. In the past, the two powers have successfully collaborated

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***Washington and
Beijing share
the vision of
regional stability
and prosperity.”***

3 U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Affairs Daniel Rosenblum, “Examining the President’s FY 2017 Budget Proposal Europe and Eurasia,” June 9, 2016.

in the greater region agreeing on the UN sanctions against the Taliban in 2000. Contingent on a major Washington–Moscow deal, a closer U.S.–Russian cooperation in Central Asia could be reached on issues pertaining to regional security and development.

Occasionally, U.S. officials have been positive about Chinese policy in Central Asia/Afghanistan.⁴ Both Washington and Beijing share the vision of regional stability and prosperity. The United States has made constructive comments about the role of China in supporting the transition in Afghanistan. While Washington seeks to build north-south links, Beijing seeks to augment east-west connections. In this sense, the strategies are convergent. One might risk a statement that the approach to democratization in the region, although not a key topic on the U.S.–China agenda, divides Washington and Beijing on a philosophical level. Under the administration of President Trump, Washington may be less likely to interfere in local politics in Central Asia, which could result in a more pragmatic relationship with China.

There are three major actors present in Central Asia operating on the basis of three overlapping goals. Currently, cooperation between China, Russia, and the United States in the region is limited. However, their interests converge on issues surrounding counterterrorism, as well as more generally on research and education exchanges, and environmental protection. Washington should seize opportunities to find common ground with Russia and China for collaboration in Central Asia.

Recommendations

There is a detectable fatigue on both sides of the relationship between the United States and Central Asia. From the U.S. perspective, civil society development and democracy promotion in the region have not borne fruit. Washington has lost its hope to stimulate political change through soft power advocacy and has chosen to focus on hard security cooperation instead. Today, the United States must rekindle its policy vis-à-vis Central Asia. Washington should re-evaluate its advantages and shortcomings and formulate a new approach to the region.

Recommendations for the U.S. administration could be separated into three categories: short term, medium term, and long term.

In the short term, a series of U.S. high level visits to Central Asia should be conducted. It would provide the opportunity for new officials to study the region and to establish necessary people-to-people contacts. It would also signal that Washington is not ceding Central Asia to China and Russia.

The United States should closely monitor the situation in Uzbekistan. After the December 2016 presidential elections, and the subsequent win of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the power vacuum in the country has been filled. However, there are reports indicating that a struggle between different clans is possible. Should the situation deteriorate, domestic strife in Uzbekistan could further destabilize the region.

The upcoming 2017 presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan might offer the opportunity for the United States to re-establish some of its authority in the country. Washington could leverage the growing dissatisfaction in Kyrgyzstan with the Russia-led Eurasian Union by intensifying bilateral security cooperation and offering economic incentives.

The medium-term approach must concentrate on areas where tangible change is possible, such as health, education, and the environment. The fragmented U.S. approach to democracy promotion and human rights, however noble, has proven to be ineffective and the local regimes remained semi or fully authoritarian. Washington should develop a joint approach to democracy promotion with like-minded allies such as the EU, Japan, and South Korea.

Better follow-up and control methods to ensure quality and impact should also be developed particularly regarding the security assistance. The United States has spent \$40 million on training, equipment, and border stations on the Tajik–Afghan border, but according to numerous reports, the frontier is as porous and poorly managed as before the U.S. engagement.

The role of private sector investment in the U.S.–Central Asia affairs should be highlighted. The successful development project in Kyrgyzstan, where U.S. aid facilitated over 600,000 microloans, could be used in neighboring countries. It would be

4 John Hudson, "China Has a Plan to Take Over Eurasia — And America Loves It," *Foreign Policy*, September 18, 2015.

advisable to revitalize the U.S.–Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement. Kazakhstan, at the latest meeting of this format in early 2016, has already proposed to add a practical component and joint projects to the initiative.

According to the World Bank, half of the Central Asian population is under 30 years old. While devising the concept of the new strategy for the region, U.S. policymakers should prioritize youth-oriented projects aiming at education and culture. This could also help limit radicalization to which young generation is particularly vulnerable.

Finally, the United States should work closely with international institutions and other partners to find synergies between their respective projects. When reasonable, Washington should not pursue its own initiative, but rather support existing ones. The CASA-1000 might be a good case study of a multi-party cooperation.

Looking at the long-term context, the U.S. strategy in Central Asia should play to its strengths. Russia focuses heavily on security. China's domain is the economy and development. Washington, on the other hand, has a lot to offer in the fields of technology, education, good governance, and civil engagement. Security should not be the only U.S. priority.

The C5+1 format should be continued. However, it is important that closer bilateral relations between the United States and individual countries of Central Asia are forged. For the past 25 years, regional cooperation has failed to generate a satisfactory outcome. Bilateral ties, especially in security collaboration, prove to be more goal-oriented.

What's Next

Central Asia has not been treated gently by history. Russian colonization, revolutions, wars, communism, and economic hardships have dramatically impacted the region. At the turn of the 21st century, Central Asia slowly started to move past the burdens of the past. Now it is reconnecting with the world and capitalizing on its key assets: location and energy deposits.

Systemic challenges in Central Asia still persist. The lack of pluralism and willingness on behalf of local authorities to accommodate other interests than their own are greatly alarming.

Central Asia might be the only region in the world where the United States, Russia, and China interact so closely. As Beijing is on the rise, Moscow suffers from a temporary stupor and Washington rethinks its approach to the region.

The United States should not withdraw from Central Asia. It would leave a void that would be quickly filled by Russia and China to the detriment of U.S. national and global interests. Security and terrorism could be the fields in which all three players could reach a mid-term consensus. Washington will be well advised to closely monitor the developments taking place at the core of Eurasia.

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