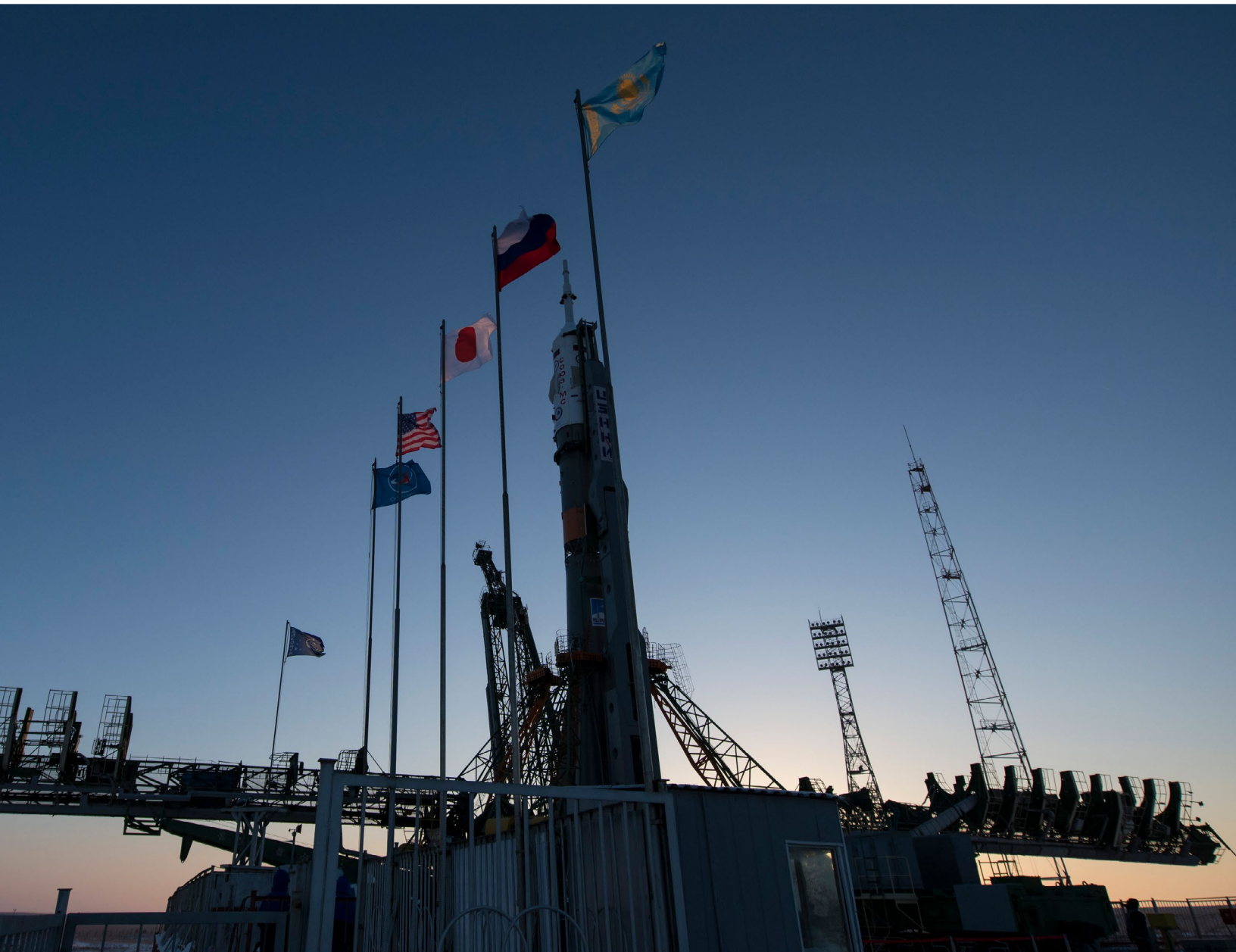


POLICY BRIEF

New Directions in U.S. Policy for Central Asia





New Directions in U.S. Policy for Central Asia

By Stephen Blank

Executive Summary

In late 2019, the Trump administration did something no other U.S. administration had done: it issued a new Central Asian strategy. This strategy commendably envisions Central Asia and Afghanistan as a single region and does not subordinate policy in Central Asia to the requirements of the war in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, this strategy faces serious challenges.

First, unless Afghanistan's government can coalesce, the agreement with the Taliban will not hold and the possibilities for spreading violence will grow. Second, China and Russia will certainly oppose any strategy and policies designed to enhance the U.S. presence in what they both consider to be their imperial peripheries. Third, the scope and magnitude – if not the duration – of the coronavirus pandemic will lead many domestic sectors to oppose the use of U.S. resources for a Central Asian strategy, which those sectors consider superfluous. Since Central Asia's needs due to this crisis will be enormous, it is imperative for Washington to work as much as possible with its allies: the European Union, South Korea, India, and Japan, all of whom have substantial Central Asian portfolios to maximize trade and investment opportunities. And apart from fostering trade and investment opportunities for the United States in Central Asia and vice versa, the United States can provide valuable help in improving governance along key trade routes and borders to enhance Central Asian connections to the entire world and reduce the strangling costs created by corruption or inefficiency.

At the same time, Washington must – despite the demands on its resources – redouble its efforts to communicate to both elites and the public at large in Central Asia and demonstrate the benevolence and effectiveness of these policies. And it must do the same thing at home to build enduring support for the strategy. Other desirable forms of support include security cooperation between the U.S. and Central Asian militaries or

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COVER: The Soyuz rocket is seen after being raised into a vertical position on the launch pad at the Baikonur Cosmodrome on Dec. 17, 2017 in Kazakhstan. Expedition 54 Soyuz Commander Anton Shkaplerov of Roscosmos, flight engineer Scott Tingle of NASA, and flight engineer Norishige Kanai of Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) spent more than five months living and working aboard the International Space Station. (Joel Kowsky/NASA via Getty Images)





Introduction: The New Strategy and its Obstacles

The year 2020 marks a major turn in U.S. policy toward Central Asia. For the first time, Washington issued a public statement of its strategy for the region, recognizing the Central Asian states' inherent increased strategic importance in world affairs. Indeed, the strategy states, "Central Asia is a geostrategic region important to United States' national security interests, regardless of the level of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan." More-

Executive Summary

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cooperation with thriving defense industries in the region. Since the U.S. administration clearly casts China as its main adversary, this coordination with local governments, allies, and partners must aim to give Central Asian states alternatives to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative and expand local governments' capacity to deal with Moscow and Beijing even while opening up to the rest of the world.

over high-ranking officials like the National Security Council's regional director for South and Central Asia, Lisa Curtis, publicly reiterated this line.

But Afghanistan is not distinct from Central Asia; events and trends there are integral to Central Asia's future. If Afghanistan remains in turmoil while U.S. public support



President of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (3rd L) meets U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (3rd R) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan on Feb. 03, 2020. (BAHTIYAR ABDULKERIMOV/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)



for the war there continues to decline, achieving any significant strategic objectives becomes harder throughout Central Asia. In fact, failure to continue the real, albeit incomplete, progress made in Afghanistan puts all of Central Asia at risk, as Central Asian governments also know.

Therefore, it is probably no coincidence that Washington concurrently negotiated a truce with the Taliban that could, if implemented, lead the way to peace in Afghanistan. The linkage between these events is not merely that Afghanistan is part of Central Asia, but also that Washington has accepted the idea that the rest of Central Asia merits a strategic approach apart from events in Afghanistan. This idea has also gained steady traction in Central Asian governments' approach to Afghanistan. So while the war's outcome is critical to the region, it is hardly the only or primary driver for U.S. policy.

For the Obama administration, Central Asia was unimportant except for the war in Afghanistan. The conflict drove Washington's regional strategy until Secretary of State John Kerry instituted the 5+1 process. But a mechanism is neither a strategy nor a policy. To its credit, the Trump administration has consistently recognized that Central Asia is an increasingly important multidimensional arena of U.S. strategic competition with China and Russia and has, albeit with limited resources, sought to diversify and broaden the basis of the U.S. presence there. The new strategy builds on three years of

policies and seeks to build lasting ties in Central Asia through largely non-military means.

However, for this strategy to have some chance of lasting success it must generate additional U.S. or allied resources to support it (including lasting domestic support in Washington), foster cooperation with Washington's EU and Asian partners and allies, and bring the war in Afghanistan to a satisfactory conclusion. Apart from visible war fatigue in the United States and at the highest levels of the administration, this last point's importance for Washington's Central Asia strategy is probably one of the major considerations behind the agreement negotiated with the Taliban. Nevertheless, this accord may fail. Indeed, within 72 hours of its signing, the Taliban broke the pact by launching attacks on Afghan targets, challenging the agreement's viability. Moreover, this agreement may not command the necessary domestic support to sustain it and is apparently under attack from within the government and military. Other observers have strongly criticized the agreement for selling out the Afghan government and being militarily and politically defective in many ways, not least the existence of classified sections and a failure to commit the Taliban to genuine de-escalation.

Neither can the United States expect support from the other great powers. Moscow coordinated negotiating positions with the Taliban in late 2019 and continues to strengthen its position across Central Asia through all means

possible, whether military or energy/economic. Predictably, Moscow accused Washington of violating the treaty with the Taliban, even though the Russians long advocated negotiations with the Taliban in order to reduce Washington's footprint in Central Asia. Clearly Moscow still harbors imperial delusions of controlling the region. Indeed, Russia has reportedly stated its willingness to send forces to keep the peace if it is asked to do so. Nobody will request Russian troops, but the inclination to send them shows Moscow's desperate desire to play a role here through any means.

China, too, will resist American policies in Central Asia, since they have consistently been overtly anti-Chinese, directly targeting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) either unilaterally or with allies. Nevertheless, China remains the leading foreign economic powerhouse in Central Asia and is slowly but steadily increasing its military presence there with bases in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Moreover, China has already essentially made Tajikistan its protectorate.

With these sets of circumstances and interests, the main obstacles to successful U.S. engagement in Central Asia will be Russia, China, and the Taliban, along with those parties who stand with or behind them.

Then there is the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on this area of U.S. policy. Undoubtedly, the pandemic and the accompanying economic crisis will require Wash-





U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (R) speaks during a meeting with the five Central Asian Foreign Ministers Sept. 22, 2019 in New York City. Pompeo met with the foreign ministers of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. (JOHANNES EISELE/AFP via Getty Images)

ington to reshape its economic priorities, and this process could lead to more U.S. neglect of Central Asia. There are already signs that some of the poorer states in the region, e.g. Kyrgyzstan, might be unable to cope with the crisis at home. On the other hand, Uzbekistan, a major regional player, is spearheading efforts at mutual regional aid and coordination that builds on its past record of pushing for regional cooperation and integration. Central Asia's post-pandemic needs for reconstruction and development will be enor-

mous. No one country is likely to be able – or willing – to contribute more than a fraction of the total costs.

How Washington Can Exploit Its Opportunities In Central Asia

Paradoxically, for Washington to succeed in reorienting the conceptual and geographical center of its Central Asian policies away from the war in Afghanistan, it must deepen rather than reduce its presence in Afghanistan along

with the rest of the region. As Earl Anthony Wayne and Hugo Llorens recently wrote:

Nevertheless, despite the unprecedented breakthrough achieved in the U.S.-Taliban talks, ensuring a real peace in Afghanistan that protects U.S. and allied security interests will require persistent U.S. diplomacy, sustained on the ground U.S. and NATO military leverage, and substantial U.S. and other international assistance programs to



help bring Afghanistan to peace. The back and forth between the parties over possible prisoner releases and the upswing in violence just underscore the need for persistent U.S. engagement.

And by deepening its regional engagement, the U.S. must also, as recognized in the strategy statement, diversify the policy instruments upon which it has primarily relied. Its greater involvement in the region must not be exclusively or primarily military in nature – although security cooperation across Central Asia remains important, and the strategy explicitly refers to U.S. military and civilian partnerships with local governments against terrorism and violent extremism. If Central Asia comprises all of the former Soviet republics plus Afghanistan, and the security challenges in the region are therefore as much economic-political as they are military, then in order to strengthen Afghanistan as much as possible, Washington must increase the use of non-military tools.

Washington also needs to conduct an information campaign based on the accurate dissemination of the incontrovertible examples of socio-economic progress in the former Soviet republics and Afghanistan since the end of the Soviet Union. Only in this way can any American government generate the enduring bipartisan support needed to strengthen America's presence in Central Asia on a lasting and solid basis. It is a safe assertion that walking away from

Afghanistan in the misguided belief that it is a hopeless bog will not only bring about the outcome the United States fears most, it also will leave Central Asia in the lurch. This is especially true given the unreliability and unpredictability of the Trump administration, e.g. in Europe, and the increasingly overt lack of trust or confidence in it. Therefore, abandoning Afghanistan would generate even more regional aversion to Washington, especially as the region is caught between the Russian and Chinese geostrategic millstones. Finally, Washington must also enlist the support and aid of its allies like South Korea and Japan, who both have substantial economic-political programs in play in Central Asia, as well as the EU, which recently brought forward a new and more focused strategy for Central Asia.¹

This recommendation contradicts the prevailing "discourse of danger" about Central Asia – that jihadists are about to overrun the region or that the governments are all hopelessly backward and corrupt.² This discourse has some truth to it (though not nearly so much as its adherents maintain) and possesses ample self-serving benefits for local governments, which are all authoritarian. However, it also discourages the foreign interest and support these governments need and want. Worse yet, it is only part of the story, and the negative part at that. Even in war-torn Afghanistan, which admittedly faces severe problems, examples of progress are indisputable and a tribute to the success of U.S. and international programs to help modernize

the economy, society, and overall governance there. Neither is it feasible to believe that Afghanistan looks like South Vietnam in 1973, as has recently been charged.

As S. Frederick Starr observes,

the Taliban controls a far smaller part of Afghanistan than is reported in the American press. Not one of the country's 34 provincial capitals is in their hands and they are able to control no more than 75 of the 400 district capitals for more than an occasional few days. The statement that the Taliban controls a high percentage of Afghan territory is deceptive because most of that territory is in the unpopulated desert South, and not in areas of significant economic activity.

Similarly, with assistance from the International Monetary Fund, Afghanistan preserved macro-economic stability between 2015 and 2019. During this time, state revenues more than doubled, and the budget now provides an unprecedented level of transparency. Government revenues since 2015 have increased by 90% and are anticipated to grow another 10% annually. The Afghan government directly executes 90% of its development budget, thus strengthening accountability. GDP has quintupled since 2001. Exports have grown from \$66.3 million in 2001 to \$879 million in 2017. Imports have similarly grown from 2001-2017 from \$366 million to \$5.07 billion. Trade





Complete sets of large building materials and equipment were exported to Uzbekistan from Hai'an City, Jiangsu Province, China in May 2020. (Costfoto/Barcroft Media via Getty Images)

growth is 11.38%, easily surpassing the global average of 3.5%. Afghanistan has met IMF benchmarks set for it, and has been taken off the G-7 FATF (Financial Action Task Force) gray list, whose countries are plagued by money laundering. There are many more similar indicators of real socio-economic modernization, growth, urbanization, and improved governance. Therefore, Afghanistan merits continued support to sustain and extend these genuine improvements.

While security cooperation remains essential, as high-level discussions with Central Asian governments demonstrate, the new strategy's emphasis on economics and

governance represents the correct path. This is particularly true considering that the Central Asian states have more capacity for growth and that Washington can cooperate with its allies to maximize the benefits from non-military approaches to the region.

This is especially important given that public support for the war in Afghanistan is rapidly ebbing. Given the many demands on U.S. power, without a concerted and truly strategic presentation of what Washington's interests are regarding Central Asia, including Afghanistan, support from the elite and the public for any policy will quickly diminish to indifference. Should that occur, it will become

impossible to sustain any U.S. policy for Central Asia. Moreover, the challenges to U.S. and allied interests there come not just from the Taliban but also from China via the BRI, Sino-Russian efforts to repress genuine attempts at reform and to export the worst aspects of their governments to Central Asian rulers, and residual Russian efforts to abridge the sovereignty of local governments.³ Indeed, Moscow announced its support for the political course the Taliban outlined to it in late 2019. Russia's policies extend its decade-long effort to enhance its presence and influence across Central Asia and Afghanistan, where it has largely sought to undermine U.S. policy.⁴





The Need for Security Cooperation

Even though the agreement with the Taliban is supposed to lead to the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces, a cease-fire, and intra-Afghan dialogue with the Taliban and government and the Taliban's barring of the way to foreign fighters, it is far too early to project that it will work smoothly. The intended mutual release of prisoners has gone much more slowly than anticipated due to both sides' reluctance to implement the intra-Afghan dialogue. And the Taliban, after a brief cease-fire, has resumed attacks across the country. Afghanistan's continuing insecurity clearly shows the need to extend security cooperation with Central Asian governments against the terrorist threat. But while the threat of terrorism remains and is regularly hyped up by Moscow if not others, it probably is over-exaggerated, often deliberately. Therefore, security cooperation should not be the primary aspect of the U.S. presence in Central Asia; it should be part of a local policy emphasizing more purely political and economic ties meant to enhance the overall resilience of regional governments. For instance, one way to pursue this policy is to foster cooperation with local defense industries that actually have a worthwhile product or products to help them survive and provide for their own or their neighbors' defense and security.⁵

Maintaining security cooperation with local governments, and particularly Afghanistan, is necessary

because the U.S. security strategy emphasizes economic-political coordination, regional cooperation, and connectivity plus a deeper commitment to economic-political reform than it does to defense issues. Notwithstanding the de-emphasis on hard security issues, with the new strategy the U.S. government clearly continues its tradition of aiming to strengthen the sovereignty and independence of the local governments. Even if Central Asian states consider U.S. attention as a means of diversifying their security rather than just counterbalancing China and Russia, as some argue, this statement and its reiteration in the visits of senior State Department personnel is necessary. Indeed, this Central Asian perspective fully comports with U.S. policy – or should comport with it, even if conceptually the U.S. inclines toward counterbalancing.

The fact is that the United States' physical distance makes hard balancing almost impossible since, as the Chinese proverb states, "Distant water cannot quench nearby fire." And as they have demonstrated, neither Russia nor China truly accepts that Central Asian sovereignty or territorial integrity are immutable facts of world politics. Indeed, China has already "rectified" its border with Tajikistan and could easily try to impose that tactic again if it deems it necessary. The Kazakh government, meanwhile, is constantly vigilant about Russian hints of trying to undermine its sovereignty, independence, and integrity.

Therefore, Washington's invocation of sovereignty for Central Asian governments is an advocacy for joint efforts to improve economic and governance conditions. It is also tied to another theme that has persisted in U.S. foreign policy toward Central Asia throughout the Trump Administration: increasingly forthright opposition to the BRI and an emphasis on China as the enemy of Central Asia – or at least a power local governments should be very wary about. Indeed, in London, while en route to Central Asia, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated openly, "The Chinese Communist Party presents the central threat of our times."

If China is the main threat, then it is necessary to counter China with tangible resources, not just rhetoric. Accordingly, the strategy talks of increasing programmatic assistance to support local efforts at more democratic governance, prosperity, and regional governance. A unified Central Asian electricity grid, which is already in progress, is one way to strengthen economies, regional integration, and regional energy security, thereby reducing dependence on Russia. Other examples of this approach are projects to increase connectivity and simplify visa and customs processes to support the Lapis Lazuli corridor (from Afghanistan through Turkmenistan and the Caucasus to Turkey and on to Europe). Washington will also promote technical expertise to help Central Asian states develop their justice systems to both improve human rights and bolster a legal re-





U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad (L) and Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar sign a peace agreement during a ceremony in the Qatari capital Doha on Feb. 29, 2020. The U.S. signed a landmark deal with the Taliban, laying out a timetable for a full troop withdrawal from Afghanistan within 14 months as it seeks an exit from its longest-ever war. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on the Taliban to honor its commitments to sever ties with jihadist groups as Washington signed the deal with the Afghan insurgents. (KARIM JAAFAR/AFP via Getty Images)

game that will entice foreign investment. This accompanies efforts to promote U.S. investment and support for educational reforms and exchanges to introduce Central Asians to the United States and attract local investment.

The Need for Allies

In its conclusion, the U.S. strategy document reaffirms its vision of a Central Asia that continues to

undergo reforms that open the door to foreign investment and democratization. Washington will strive to ensure greater connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia, the Caucasus, Europe, and other global markets to strengthen these countries' sovereignty in economics and politics as well as their connections to multiple global markets. Obviously, this will also advance U.S. national security interests and prosperity. However,

coordination with Washington's allies in Europe and Asia will give the U.S. strategy its best chance of success.

Europe has reformulated its strategy for the region to make its presence more strongly felt and effective. The new EU strategy offers real opportunities for fruitful multilateral coordination with Washington to achieve at least some of the key goals of Ameri-





can policy. Most importantly, the EU can function as an engine for boosting Central Asian cooperation with Afghanistan and with the South Caucasus. The EU has yet to fully coordinate its policy toward Afghanistan with its policy toward Central Asia, whether in terms of seeking alliances and coordination for its assistance programs or, more deeply, its strategic approach to these countries.

As for Washington's Asian allies, India, Japan, and South Korea have long had important and obviously growing interests in Central Asia. For example, India has long talked about its Central Asian vision and strategy but has done little beyond Afghanistan until the BRI galvanized India's strategic imagination with the realization of a formidable new threat to its vital interests from China. Consequently, India has now launched several initiatives to establish itself as a serious player in Central Asia.

Shared apprehensions about Chinese (and Pakistani) initiatives in Afghanistan and Central Asia should bring Washington and New Delhi together to cooperate on a program to advance their shared interests in democratic governance and counterterrorism, among other issues, in Central Asia. But the complexities of the Indo-U.S. relationship have hitherto impeded such cooperation. Given the ongoing improvement in relations between the United States and India, Central Asia should become an important part of their mutual agenda where they work to uphold the regional governments' sovereignty as

well as improved economic performance and governance. Japan and the United States have worked on programs to counter the BRI since 2017-2018, and they anticipated trilateral cooperation with India. But since then, it appears that Japan has decided to reconcile with the BRI and not challenge China in Central Asia. South Korea, too, has pursued an important policy with Central Asia, but Seoul is apparently more concerned with asserting its own interests than with countering China or allying itself with the United States. Certainly both Seoul and Tokyo have an interest in enhancing trade and investment with and in Central Asia and have taken steps toward those ends.

While the opportunities for multilateral alliance with Washington regarding Central Asia appear to be limited, the opportunities for less restrictive forms of such cooperation clearly are open, and U.S. diplomacy can help to increase the effectiveness of such programs and of Washington's strategy. But for this to happen, policymakers cannot simply ignore Afghanistan and must devote real, tangible resources to it and the entire region as a whole. Otherwise, as happened before, well-intentioned documents will remain merely that – not policies that have been implemented. That outcome risks not only Central Asian but also U.S. interests.

As Balbina Hwang wrote in 2012, "Located at the nexus of such a crucial strategic region, however, means that the success of these republics is crucial for the entire in-

ternational system. Multilateral and transnational cooperation will be essential to encourage stable and responsible development of the region." That insight is even more pertinent today, and the means to seize the opportunities to advance the interests of Washington, its allies, and the Central Asian states is there if U.S. decisionmakers are willing to act strategically. Otherwise, Washington may have to relearn the lessons of what happens when it neglects Central Asia and Afghanistan – and at even greater cost.

Recommendations

Based on this analysis, to implement this strategy in the face of its many obstacles Washington should undertake the following policies:

- 1.** Continue to pressure Afghanistan's two presidential rivals while keeping forces there to hold the Taliban's feet to the fire and induce the Taliban to uphold their word and reduce violence in the country.
- 2.** Both institutionally and intellectually, Afghanistan and all policies connected with it should be joined with Central Asia as one region rather than treated as an adjunct to South Asia, Eurasia, or anywhere else. Institutional liaisons to those areas are needed, but that coordination can occur when needed. Central Asia merits its own institutional focus in U.S. policymaking.
- 3.** Washington must upgrade the quality and content of its information program and use innovative





U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and foreign ministers of five Central Asian countries -- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan meet in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Feb. 3, 2020. Pompeo and the ministers held a dialogue aimed at strengthening Central Asia's ties with the United States. (ZAFAR KHALILOV/Xinhua via Getty)

ways to overcome linguistic and other barriers to communicate with Central Asia's elite and public. The United States should promote its policies to gain support for them and not leave the field to Moscow and/or Beijing. Beyond that, Washington must build public and elite support for this strategy in the United States for its Central Asia policy to have any chance of success over time.

4. Washington should promote economic investment in Central Asia and open up trade barriers. Indeed, the opening of trade and

investment opportunities should be tied to progress in liberalizing and improving governance and economic policy. Washington must also encourage bilateral and particularly multilateral projects that foster regional cooperation and reward them tangibly.

5. These economic programs must also include security cooperation and more joint exercises as well as support for indigenous defense-related industries to reduce Central Asia's dependence upon Moscow and Beijing.

6. Cooperation with allies is essential in view of the limits that will necessarily be placed on the United States' resources. The United States must work closely with South Korea, Japan, India, and the EU on projects of common interest that will improve economic and conditions, governance, and political freedom in Central Asia. This cooperation can be bilateral or multilateral as the situation requires, but it must also coordinate closely with local governments. □





¹ Dadabaev, T. (2019) *Transcontinental Silk Road strategies: Comparing China, Japan and South Korea in Uzbekistan*. Routledge Contemporary Asia Series (Vol. 67). Routledge.

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³ Ambrosio, T. (2008) *Catching the 'Shanghai spirit': How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization promotes authoritarian norms in Central Asia*. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60(8), 1321-1344.

⁴ Stepanova, E. (2019) *Russia and the Afghan peace process*. Program On New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia) Policy Memo, No. 618.

⁵ Blank, Stephen. *Strengthening Central Asian security*. Forthcoming.



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