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Central Asia in a Reconnecting Eurasia

U.S. Policy Interests and Recommendations

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*A Report of the CSIS Russia
and Eurasia Program*

CSIS

CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Preface

In January 2014, the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program launched its new *Eurasia Initiative*. The vast Eurasian landmass, stretching from China in the East to Europe in the West and from the Arctic in the North to the Indian Ocean in the South, includes some of the world's most powerful and dynamic states, as well as some of its most intractable challenges. Scholars and analysts are accustomed to studying Eurasia's various regions—Europe, the former Soviet Union, East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia—rather than the interactions between them. The goal of the *Eurasia Initiative* is to focus on these interactions, while analyzing and understanding Eurasia in a comprehensive way.

More than any time since the collapse of the Silk Road five centuries ago, this focus on Eurasia as a whole is necessary today. Over the past two decades, Eurasia has begun to slowly reconnect, with the emergence of new trade relationships and transit infrastructures, as well as the integration of Russia, China, and India into the global economy. Even as this reconnection is underway, the center of economic dynamism in Eurasia, and in the world as a whole, has increasingly shifted to the East. The impact of these shifts is potentially enormous, but the shifts remain poorly understood because of our tendency to limit analysis to a single country or region within this broader Eurasia.

The first fruits of the *Eurasia Initiative* include six studies, this being one, making up our series *Central Asia in a Reconnecting Eurasia*. Our decision to start with Central Asia stems from a concern that the drawdown of U.S. and allied troops from Afghanistan will augur declining international interest in the region, which has played a critical role over the course of the conflict. For U.S. policymakers, turning away from Central Asia now would be a serious miscalculation. The five states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) are located at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, close to four of Washington's biggest foreign policy challenges: Afghanistan/Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China. For that reason, the United States has a strong interest in developing economic and security ties with the states of Central Asia, and doing so in a way that is no longer driven by the exigencies of the war in Afghanistan, but is responsive to the needs of the region itself, as well as enduring U.S. interests.

So in the spring, summer, and fall of 2014, we embarked on a “listening tour” to Central Asia that included extended visits to each country, where we interviewed government officials, experts, private-sector actors, and representatives of international organizations to understand how Central Asian elites perceive the economic and security environment changing around them. We sought to discover how they are coming to define their national interests in the post-Afghanistan conflict world, including what they would like to see from the United States.

This report and the others in the series reflect what we gleaned from these interviews, along with analysis of published data and secondary literature, to provide a broad overview of how Central Asia sees the world. We should emphasize that the focus of these reports is on the foreign economic and security policies of the five Central Asian states. These reports do not seek to address domestic political issues, human rights, and many other issues, not because we think they are unimportant, but rather because we are interested in the strategic implications of a reconnecting Eurasia, which means concentrating on how these countries interact with the outside world. Of course, internal issues often do impact foreign ties. For instance, one of the main impediments to foreign investment in Central Asia is corruption, coupled with inefficient regulatory frameworks and bureaucratic institutions. The reports analyze these phenomena, but only insofar as they affect the Central Asian states' foreign engagement.

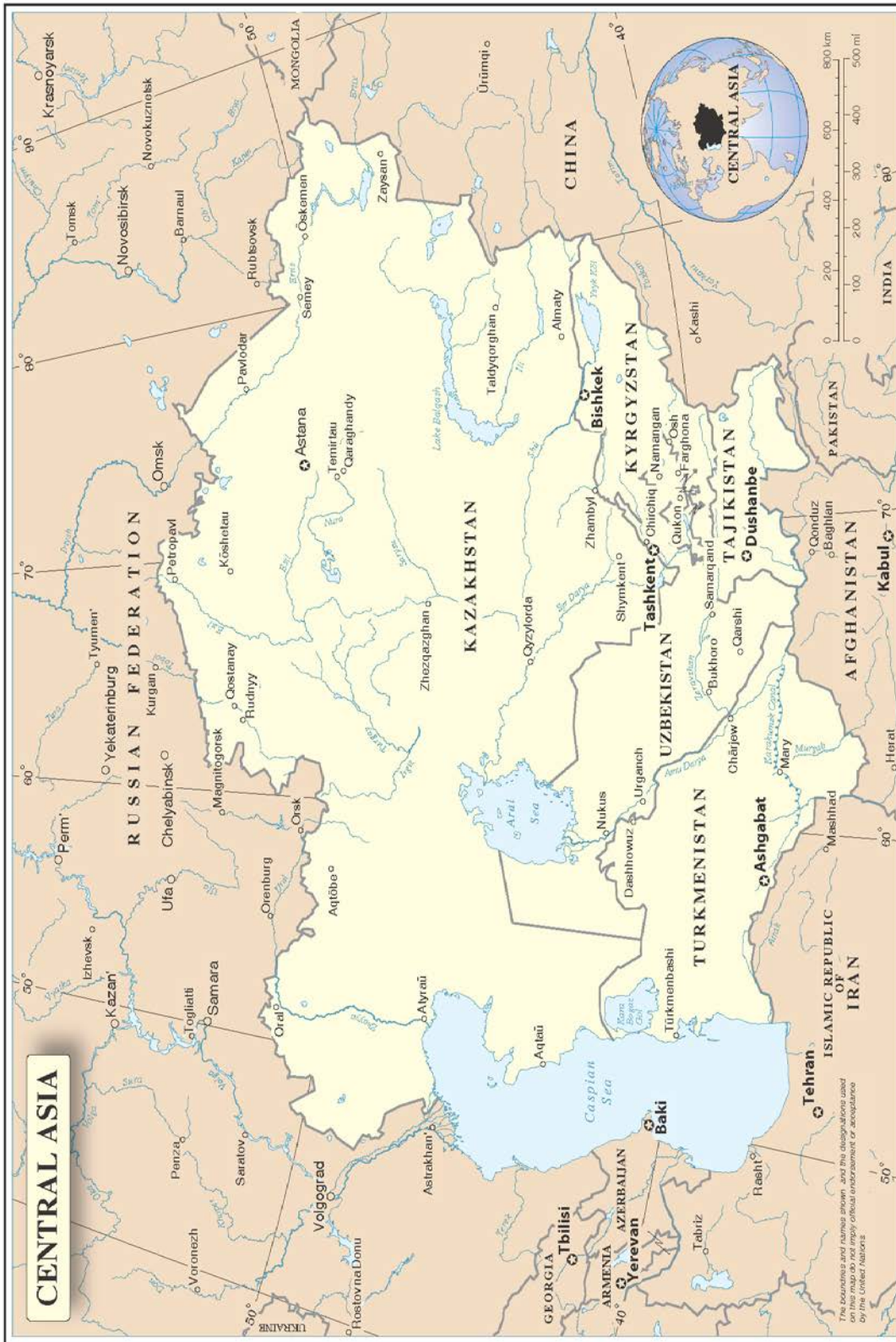
Central Asia lies at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, and in many ways has the most to gain from transcontinental reconnection. That process can only reach its full potential, however, if the interests of the Central Asian states themselves are given proper consideration. The goal of the *Central Asia in a Reconnecting Eurasia* series is to analyze the perspectives of these countries, and bring them to the attention of policymakers in the United States.

Acknowledgments

There are many institutions and individuals we would like to acknowledge for their crucial roles in the production of the six reports in the series. We first thank the Smith Richardson Foundation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and Carlos Bulgheroni for their generous financial support for this project. We also thank the Carnegie Corporation of New York for their support of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia program. We would like to thank all of the government officials, experts, private-sector actors, and representatives of international organizations that graciously shared their thoughts with us during our “listening tour,” all of whom we promised not to quote by name. We also express particular gratitude to the embassies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in the United States for facilitating our research trips to their countries. Ambassadors Kairat Umarov of Kazakhstan; Kadyr Toktogulov and Muktar Djumaliev of Kyrgyzstan; Farhod Salim of Tajikistan; Meret Orazov of Turkmenistan; and Bakhtiyar Gulyamov of Uzbekistan deserve special thanks. Dana Kurmasheva with the Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan, Dana Masalimova with the Embassy of Kazakhstan, Mukhamed Lou with the Embassy of Kyrgyzstan, Abat Fayzullaev with the Embassy of Uzbekistan, and Mirlan Isamidinov with the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic named after K. Dikambaev also deserve special thanks.

We further express our gratitude to the members of our *Eurasia Initiative* advisory council, who provided critical guidance throughout the project. The advisory council includes Najia Badykova, Stephen Benson, Edward Chow, Ambassador William Courtney, Rosemarie Forsythe, Roger Kangas, Ambassador Batu Kutelia, Johannes Linn, Michael Matera, Martha Brill Olcott, David Sedney, Craig Steffensen, and Ambassador Kairat Umarov. Aitolkyn Kourmanova, Marlène Laruelle, and Timur Shaimergenov also deserve thanks for their insights. We would like to thank Oliver Backes for his assistance in the preparation of this report. Finally, we thank the many present and former members of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program who contributed to this project, including Yulia Danilina, Eric Griffith, Kendra Harkins, Peter Krivicich, Allen Maggard, Sung In Marshall, Kirill Prudnikov, Dylan Royce, Narek Sevacheryan, Jason Siler, and Nic Wondra.

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Central Asia in a Reconnecting Eurasia

U.S. Policy Interests and Recommendations

Andrew C. Kuchins and Jeffrey Mankoff

Since the Central Asian states became independent in the early 1990s, U.S. policy toward them can be divided into two distinct eras, separated by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Prior to 9/11, the United States sought to open Central Asia up to foreign investment and build new energy pipelines to reduce Central Asia's inherited dependence on Russia. Washington emphasized policies meant to secure the sovereignty and independence of the five Central Asian states, while devoting some effort to promoting democracy and the rule of law as part of a broader effort to encourage democratic transitions across the territory of the former Soviet Union.

After 9/11, Washington's focus shifted heavily to security, as Central Asia emerged as a critical strategic rear for U.S. and coalition military operations in Afghanistan. Governance issues, never a primary emphasis for the United States, fell almost entirely by the wayside as Washington's attention shifted to logistics, counterterrorism, and other forms of security cooperation. Central Asia became a crucial transit route for the supply of military goods and other supplies to Afghanistan, particularly with the opening of the Northern Distribution Network in 2009. The Central Asian states were also important security partners, with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan offering the use of military bases on their soil and all five providing some degree of access for U.S. forces.

Today, with the winding down of combat operations in Afghanistan, U.S. policy toward the states of Central Asia is transitioning to a third era. The United States now has an opportunity to refashion its approach to the region. In doing so, it should capitalize on trends already underway, in particular the expansion of trade and transit linkages, to help integrate Central Asia more firmly into the global economy, while also working to overcome tensions both within the region itself and among the major neighboring powers with interests in Central Asia.

As U.S. policy transitions into this post-Afghanistan conflict period, Washington has a golden opportunity to rebalance its approach to Central Asia away from the security focus that has predominated since 9/11 to give more attention to promoting economic growth and the realization of the gains offered by cooperation and connectivity, all while continuing to promote security.

Central Asia Begins Integrating

Long among the least connected, least integrated regions of the world, Central Asia today is beginning to develop a growth model based on increasing regional trade ties and connectivity. Between 2005 and 2013, trade with Central Asian partners more than quadrupled for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; more than tripled for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; and nearly doubled for Tajikistan. The growth of trade between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the two largest economies in Central Asia, is particularly notable. Bilateral trade turnover in 2013 amounted to \$2.3 billion, a nearly five-fold increase from 2005. While these figures are low in absolute terms, they are significant relative to the size of the local economies, and also underestimate the full scope of trade and economic relations. Central Asia is deeply interconnected through a web of informal flows, where region-wide informal linkages facilitate the cross-border movement of capital and goods while avoiding the heavy regulations and other controls formally imposed by countries themselves. According to some estimates, if these restrictions were removed, the volume of recorded trade could easily double.

While trade with neighbors helps the Central Asian states, they also stand to gain the most from the emergence of transcontinental linkages across Eurasia, which could see Central Asia emerge as a hub at the crossroads of growing ties between Europe and Asia. A multilateral system of international transport-communication corridors would provide Central Asia with sustainable access to global markets. The emergence and success of these corridors will depend heavily on outside powers, notably China, but also Russia, India, Iran, Turkey, the European Union, and, to some extent, the United States. Foreign governments and development banks will provide the financing for new infrastructure, such as roads, railways, energy pipelines, and electricity grids, that connect Central Asia to global markets, and can collaborate to promote the institutional “soft infrastructure” that remains among the biggest obstacles to trade across Eurasia. These projects, and the trade connections underpinning them, could become a platform for increased cooperation among the major outside powers, as well as among the Central Asian states themselves.

Conversely, one of the greatest obstacles to the emergence of this more connected, more prosperous Eurasia is possible competition and rivalry among these outside powers. Efforts to craft in Central Asia a sphere of influence of one (or more) of the major regional powers would be a recipe for keeping the region divided and cut off from the benefits of globalization. The United States is well placed in this regard since, as a non-Eurasian power, it is never going to be in a position to assert domination over Central Asia. Elites in Central Asia understand that a more engaged, visible United States does not threaten their sovereignty; indeed, most of them would like to see a United States that is more invested in Central Asia in part because a U.S. presence helps insulate them from the geopolitical ambitions of others.

Engagement with Central Asia must, however, also be consonant with the interests of the United States itself. Throughout the long campaign in Afghanistan, U.S. engagement with Central Asia was predicated on the national security imperative of defeating the Taliban and al Qaeda, and ultimately securing the U.S. homeland from future attack. While counterterrorism will remain a piece of Washington's continued engagement with Central Asia, especially given concerns about the spread of the Islamic State to the region, security no longer provides a sufficient rationale for devoting substantial resources to Central Asia when Washington faces a host of challenges elsewhere in the world.

Though not a Eurasian power, the United States nevertheless maintains important interests in the region. The five states of Central Asia sit at the nexus of Washington's most significant foreign and security policy challenges: Afghanistan/Pakistan, China, Russia, and Iran. The United States' ability to achieve its strategic goals in all of these areas will depend in no small part on its ability to effectively manage its relations with the Central Asian states. A stable, prosperous Central Asia fully integrated with global trading networks is, moreover, less likely to become a breeding ground for transnational challenges like extremism, terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, trafficking, and organized crime. Such a Central Asia is also much less susceptible to the ambitions of its larger neighbors.

U.S. Interests in Central Asia and Regional Security

Afghanistan/Pakistan

For nearly 14 years the United States and its allies in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) have played a central role in efforts to defeat the Taliban and create a stable, secure future for Afghanistan. While ISAF troop levels have diminished greatly, the problem of Afghanistan remains far from solved. In addition to training and equipping Afghan forces to secure the country, the United States is seeking to integrate Afghanistan into global trade and transit networks through its New Silk Road vision, which aims at ensuring Afghanistan's long-term stability. This vision emphasizes connectivity between Central and South Asia, centered on Afghanistan. The two most significant projects being implemented under the New Silk Road rubric, CASA-1000 and TUTAP (Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan), are designed to deliver surplus electricity from Central Asia to the large, electricity-poor markets of South Asia. Still on the drawing board is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, which could allow Turkmenistan to reduce its dependence on China and Russia while addressing growing demand for energy in South Asia. These projects, and the hopes for a more stable Afghanistan that is motivating their development, require continued U.S. engagement and investment in Central Asia.

Unfortunately, enthusiasm for the New Silk Road vision in Central Asia is modest and the obstacles to connecting Central and South Asia, including difficult geography, security

challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and questions about the commercial viability of projects like TAPI, are significant. The Central Asian states instead tend to look at Afghanistan primarily through the lens of security, seeing it as a source of threats, including narcotics trafficking and Islamist militancy. Getting Central Asian buy-in for the New Silk Road will remain difficult under the best of circumstances, and the vision will have a chance to succeed only if their security concerns can be addressed. In that sense, ensuring Afghanistan's long-term future requires support from Central Asia, but securing Central Asia's support requires the United States to do more in the short term to insulate the region from the challenges that continue to flow from an unstable Afghanistan.

China

In 2012 the Obama administration announced that the United States would “pivot” (or later “rebalance”) its global strategic engagement to focus on Asia. While administration officials emphasize the economic rationale of the pivot, lingering in the background is growing concern about how the rise of China will affect the regional and global strategic balance.

Since the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry's ships in Edo Bay in 1852, the United States has approached Asia through the prism of the Asia-Pacific maritime realm. To this day, Washington's key partners in Asia hug the Pacific Rim. But Asia is more than the Asia-Pacific. China, which will remain the principal focus of U.S. grand strategy for the foreseeable future, conceives of Asia in a fundamentally different way than does the United States. For Beijing is not only an Asia-Pacific power, but a Eurasian power as well, sharing land borders with Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, as well as North Korea, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Laos—not to mention Russia. China's main strategic interests may lie in the Asia-Pacific, but it faces serious challenges around its other frontiers as well.

Central Asia is an important, if often overlooked, resource as the United States develops a new strategic vision for Asia and its relationship with Beijing. This vision need not be confrontational; indeed, U.S. and Chinese interests in Central Asia, and Eurasia more broadly, overlap to a considerable degree, with both emphasizing trade, transit, and infrastructure, all of which require political stability. Increasing the Eurasian dimension of U.S.-Chinese relations could at a minimum help balance a relationship that has become increasingly conflictual in the Asia-Pacific.

Russia

All of Russia's neighbors are affected by the crisis in Ukraine, and by the emergence of a Russia that no longer appears willing to accept the regional order that emerged with the end of the Cold War. The resulting uncertainty creates demand for a more visible U.S. presence in a region that has long had close security and political ties to Moscow, and which is now the subject of Russian efforts at economic and political integration. To the extent that Washington seeks to avoid returning to a geopolitical standoff with Moscow centered on the

orientations of Russia's post-Soviet neighbors, it too should remain involved in Central Asia to ensure that states in the region can maintain their de facto as well as de jure sovereignty.

Of course, the current breakdown in Russia's relations with the West places the Central Asian states in an awkward position. All these states require good relations with Moscow for their own stability and prosperity. At the same time, they recognize that a resurgent, expansionist, and nationalistic Russia creates serious challenges. Participation in Russian-led multilateral organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) holds uncertain costs and benefits, though many Central Asians worry that the EEU and related groups could prove a stalking horse for Russia's neo-imperial ambitions.

Across Central Asia, our interviews with government officials and analysts revealed an interest in stronger ties with Washington, in part to ameliorate the consequences of dependence on Russia. Yet our interlocutors also recognized that the United States is far away, and will never be able to match Russia in political or strategic influence. For that reason, our interlocutors were virtually unanimous in emphasizing the commercial dimension of their relations with the United States. Greater U.S. investment and trade offer an opportunity not only to enhance prosperity throughout Central Asia, but to ensure the United States retains a stake in ensuring Central Asia's continued sovereignty and independence. It also creates the greatest opportunities for win-win outcomes, potentially including Russia as well, insofar as Moscow also has much to gain from a more prosperous, stable Central Asia.

Iran

U.S. interests in Iran will depend heavily on whether the recently negotiated interim nuclear agreement can be finalized and, ultimately, on whether it contributes to a wider rapprochement and normalization over the longer term. The secular states of Central Asia have long been wary of the Islamic Republic, which they view as a source of radicalism and potential destabilization. Yet in contrast to its actions in the Middle East, Iran has mostly been a constructive partner in Central Asia, eschewing sectarianism in a region with few Shi'a and prioritizing economic and cultural engagement over the promotion of Islamism.

Iran also sits astride the shortest route from Central Asia to the sea, and many Central Asians look forward to the day when their ability to export through Iran is no longer hampered by international sanctions. Whether the United States will openly support more Central Asian engagement with Iran, for example through the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman transit corridor announced in September 2014, will depend on the nuclear agreement and the degree to which Washington and Tehran can address their differences elsewhere in the Middle East. While Central Asia will remain a peripheral issue in U.S.-Iranian relations, a rapprochement with Tehran that removes sanctions and allows Central Asia to benefit from transit connections through Iran would strongly bolster the Central Asian states' sovereignty, allowing them to benefit from more commercially viable transit routes and reinforcing their multivector approach to foreign policy.

Regional Prosperity in a Reconnecting Eurasia

While security considerations underpin the need for continued U.S. engagement in Eurasia, the most significant macro-level change taking place in the region is the gradual reconnection of Eurasia's disparate regions through new trade and transit infrastructure, accompanied by efforts in Eurasia's leading economies—China, Russia, and India—to partake of the fruits of globalization.

Until about 500 years ago, Eurasia was deeply integrated with the global economy through the network of trade routes known as the Silk Road. When the Silk Road collapsed around the turn of the sixteenth century in the face of political upheaval and the development of sailing ships capable of moving goods between Asia and Europe more cheaply than the old Silk Road caravans, Central Asia went from the center of the global economy to its periphery. As trade dried up, Central Asia was also cut off from the technological and intellectual revolutions taking place elsewhere. While medieval Central Asia was home to what Frederick Starr has called the “Lost Enlightenment,” a flourishing of poetry, science, music, and scholarship, from the beginning in the sixteenth century, the region gradually sank into stagnation. It remained stagnant and backwards throughout much of the Soviet era too, with Moscow looking to Central Asia mainly as a provider of natural resources and a dumping ground for industrial, nuclear, and human effluvia.

Central Asia's isolation was compounded by the autarkic approach to development that prevailed for much of the Soviet period. Not only did the Soviet Union trade little with its neighbors, Mao's China and India under Nehru and the Gandhis were also economically isolated during much of the late twentieth century. Only in the past few decades have Eurasia's three largest states begun reintegrating with the global economy. The reforms of Deng Xiaoping, the collapse of the USSR, and the transition away from import substitution in India collectively transformed the economic and geopolitical map of Eurasia. Iran's potential emergence from isolation in the coming years would extend this transformation further.

Two decades ago, trade between China and India amounted to just \$300 million per year; today the figure is more than \$100 billion, and China is India's top trade partner. These economic ties are helping to ameliorate the security dilemma that China and India face, along with tensions dating back to the bloody border conflict the two states fought in 1962. Just one small example: for years China opposed Indian membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Association (SCO). In the past year, however, Beijing reversed course, in no small measure because SCO membership would help further develop economic relations between Beijing and New Delhi. China's trade with Russia has similarly boomed, reaching more than \$90 billion in 2013, up from barely \$20 billion in 2005 and making China Russia's largest single trade partner. Growing economic ties provide a foundation for an increasingly close political and strategic relationship too, one that has received further impetus from Russia's standoff with the West in Ukraine.

For the Central Asian states, Eurasia's reconnection and emergence into globalization represent an unmatched opportunity to overcome the past five centuries of isolation. Of course, a little perspective is warranted. Overland trade through Central Asia is not going to eclipse seaborne trade any time soon—if ever. More than 90 percent of trade between Asia and Europe continues to travel by sea. Overland trade is, and will likely remain, confined to a limited number of high-value added goods whose competitiveness increases with the shorter shipping times associated with overland trade. Nevertheless, given the comparatively small Central Asian economies and populations (the five states total around 60 million people, more than half living in Uzbekistan; by comparison almost 200 million people live just in Pakistan), the total volume of trade does not have to expand by much to have an appreciable effect on regional economies. Moreover, the development of new infrastructure and trade agreements facilitates more local trade, both between the Central Asian states and their neighbors, and within Central Asia itself. The emergence of new transit corridors ultimately will reinforce the sovereignty of the Central Asian states by giving them additional options and reducing their dependence on any single trade partner.

Central Asia itself has much to do if it is to fully seize the opportunity this reconnection presents in order to become, in the words of the development economist Johannes Linn, “land-linked” rather than land-locked. Central Asia faces two challenges in particular. The first is building physical infrastructure. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, virtually all of Central Asia's infrastructure ran north to Russia, including roads, railways, and energy pipelines. Fortunately, recent years have seen progress on this front. The new rail line between Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran is a good example, as are the gas pipelines linking Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan (and soon Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as well) to China that have been developed over the past five years.

But while building bridges, roads, rail lines, and pipelines is essential, these objects are of limited value if the accompanying “soft infrastructure”—the legal and regulatory frameworks and agreements to facilitate trade and transit—are not modern and efficient. In virtually every study on trade in the region, it is not the lack of physical infrastructure that is the biggest handicap, but rather the proliferation of red tape and corruption. Visualize caravans of trucks and railcars stuck at international borders because of stifling paperwork or venal border guards, both of which Central Asia has in abundance. These inefficiencies make both the timing of goods' arrival as well as the cost of transit unpredictable, providing shippers a disincentive to risk sending goods over these routes. Shipping goods by sea may be slow, but time and cost are predictable.

Addressing these “soft infrastructure” challenges is a significant part of the Obama administration's New Silk Road vision. The European Union and Japan also have a major interest in making transit through Central Asia work more effectively, and have their own assistance programs focusing on this challenge. China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) seeks progress in this area too, even as Beijing is more focused on building physical infrastructure.

Ultimately, of course, the lion's share of the challenge lies with the Central Asians themselves. Each state would clearly benefit from a more open, transparent, and efficient system of trade and transit, which would contribute to prosperity, as well as sovereignty, throughout the region. The irony, of course, is that the Central Asian states will have to give up a bit of sovereignty to develop norms and patterns of cooperation among themselves. They will also have to address the deep-seated culture of corruption that pervades Central Asia, a step that will require considerable political courage given the extent to which corruption pervades the ruling elite in each country.

Recommendations for the United States

While it is unrealistic to expect Washington to be a dominant player in the region, on the basis of our research and travels in Central Asia we are convinced that, through a more focused strategy that plays to our comparative advantages and to the demands from the region itself, the United States, together with its partners, can help promote regional prosperity and stability.

1. Create a senior-level position on the National Security Council with responsibility for Eurasia.

The U.S. government, like most analysts, continues to focus on Eurasia's disparate regions separately, with little consideration of Eurasia as a whole or the forces increasingly tying Eurasia together. While overcoming this "stovepiping" in the various Cabinet agencies is a longer-term challenge, the White House can move quickly to establish a Directorate for Eurasia within the National Security Council, while maintaining the existing regional directorates. The senior director for Eurasia should be charged with advancing U.S. interests across the Eurasian landmass, with a special focus on promoting trade and economic engagement.

2. Rebalance U.S. engagement to emphasize trade and investment.

All the Central Asian states would like to see U.S. engagement focus more directly on promoting trade and investment ties. Though the volume of U.S. trade and investment will remain relatively limited, the United States has several comparative advantages from which the Central Asian states would like to benefit, including a culture of innovation, technology, and management. From the U.S. perspective, a greater emphasis on economic diplomacy would create a platform and relationships for deeper engagement down the road on other issues. A focus on economic diplomacy would also create an opening to focus on the governance and rule-of-law issues that have held back Central Asia's development and remain an obstacle to deeper regional integration. It would, for example, be fairly simple for the United States to boost the number of trade delegations to Central Asia and to develop low-cost training programs for regional entrepreneurs without undermining existing U.S. initiatives.

3. Give substance to the New Silk Road vision.

Central Asian elites are understandably skeptical of U.S. talk about a New Silk Road, especially when the resources do not match the rhetoric. Too much U.S. thinking about the New Silk Road to this point has focused on Afghanistan. While Afghanistan will benefit from any improvement in trade conditions in the region, Afghanistan is too remote, and the political risks too high, for it to serve as the keystone of a trade and transit strategy for Eurasia. Instead, the United States should seek to leverage its comparative advantages to promote the reconnection taking place throughout the region without necessarily focusing on its impact on Afghanistan. Those comparative advantages lie in particular in developing the “soft infrastructure” to simplify border crossing, customs clearance, and the like, as well as the operations of private companies.

To the extent possible, the United States should also look to cooperate on these initiatives not only with the Central Asian states themselves, but also with the major regional powers. China’s SREB, which includes substantial resources for infrastructure and other investment, in particular creates opportunities to develop new collaborative initiatives, helping to ensure that Central Asia does not become a playing field for the competing ambitions of Washington and Beijing. The United States and China both would like to see the widest possible expansion of trade and transit in Eurasia, from Southeast Asia to Europe. The strengths of Washington and Beijing in promoting this expansion are also complementary, and both are more likely to achieve their aims if they can figure out how to work collaboratively. The United States should also be willing to pursue cooperation with Russia in the region, to the extent that Moscow is open to greater U.S. involvement.

4. Elevate and diversify high-level visits to Central Asia.

Central Asian elites and officials have long lamented the paucity of high-level U.S. government visits to the region. Given the importance of high-level involvement for moving forward initiatives in this part of the world, U.S. diplomacy—economic and otherwise—would benefit from greater involvement on the part of high-level U.S. officials. Ideally this would mean a presidential visit to Central Asia, something that has never happened during more than two decades of Central Asian independence. While visits from the secretary of defense were more frequent at the height of the war in Afghanistan, the emphasis today should be on visits from diverse institutions including the departments of State, Commerce, Energy, the U.S. Trade Representative, and others. More frequent congressional delegations would be useful as well. Such visits would signal that Washington continues to recognize the importance of Central Asia even after the drawdown of allied forces from Afghanistan.

5. Engage with Central Asia on its own terms.

Central Asian leaders are understandably worried that the United States sees the region primarily, or solely, through the prism of its relations with major regional powers like Russia and China. While relations with these powers will provide an important rationale

for continued U.S. engagement, Washington needs to calibrate its relations with the Central Asian states to reflect their interest in a wider range of issues. Above all, the Central Asians do not want to find themselves in a position of being forced to choose between relations with the United States on the one hand and relations with Russia or China on the other (Central Asia will always prioritize relations with its more immediate neighbors, anyway). The United States should therefore avoid approaching Central Asia in zero-sum terms and search for policies that facilitate the Central Asians' preference for multivector engagement. Particularly helpful would be programs and initiatives that allow other major powers, including Russia and China but also Turkey, the European Union, India, and others, to constructively participate. Again, initiatives focused on promoting trade and connectivity across Eurasia are most suitable for this kind of multilateral collaboration. Developing tools for coping with the consequences of the drawdown of allied forces from Afghanistan is another area where the United States can do more to encourage multilateral cooperation, given the shared interest among the United States, Central Asia, and the major regional powers in counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and preventing the spread of extremist ideas.

6. Encourage intraregional cooperation.

The expansion of intraregional trade ties in recent years suggests that the Central Asian states are to an extent starting to move away from a postcolonial emphasis on sovereignty to focus on pragmatic economic cooperation. U.S. assistance should seek to accelerate and support this process, especially on issues where there is some receptivity in the region to multilateral initiatives. One such area could be food security, broadly defined, which would also encompass related challenges like water management, incorporation of new technology like smart grids, and energy efficiency. Given U.S. support for the creation of regional electricity grids, efforts to promote efficiency and energy sector reform would track well with what the United States is already doing in the region. It would also provide a framework for addressing indirectly one of the biggest obstacles to multilateral cooperation in Central Asia: disputes over water.

Another area for possible multilateral cooperation is public health and health monitoring. Even though several governments in the region remain sensitive about sharing public health data, the cross-border nature of these challenges argues for a multilateral approach that could benefit from external U.S. support. Given local sensitivities about, for instance, HIV/AIDS, a better place to start might be noncommunicable diseases, where the United States can encourage better recording and sharing of information, and the implementation of best practices, including with the cooperation of U.S.-based hospitals and academic institutions.

7. Expand university-based research and exchange and business training programs.

Expanded academic engagement across a range of fields is one of the most important ways the United States can support development and intraregional cooperation. In a March 31, 2015, speech at Georgetown University, U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Hoagland pointed out that over the last 23 years “well over 24,000 citizens of Central Asia have come to the United States on State Department-funded exchange programs.” Such programs are a low-cost, high-impact way to encourage the development of human capital in Central Asia while leveraging one of the United States’ key comparative advantages to create long-lasting connections between current and future Central Asian elites and the United States.

About the Authors

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