

Statement before the
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on South and Central Asia

**“Assessing the Terror Threat Landscape in South and Central Asia and
Examining Opportunities for Cooperation”**

A Testimony by:

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Chairman Huizenga, Ranking Member Kamlager-Dove, Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the evolving terror threat in South and Central Asia, as well as the prospects for U.S. cooperation in addressing these challenges. The views expressed in this testimony are my own and do not represent those of the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies or the National Defense University.

This testimony will outline the terrorist threats facing Central Asia, explain why sustained U.S. engagement is vital to our national security, and discuss current U.S. initiatives and opportunities to expand counterterrorism cooperation with regional partners. The bottom line is that Central Asia is a critical front in the global fight against terrorism. U.S. support for the Central Asian countries is essential to prevent ISIS-K and other extremist groups from exploiting regional vulnerabilities, thus threatening our homeland and our allies and partners. Proactive engagement is necessary now to prevent greater threats (and costs) from emerging in the future.

Central Asia's Vital Importance to U.S. National Security Interests

The Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are situated at a pivotal crossroads between major actors on the Eurasian landmass. Geography significantly influences many of their relationships and shapes their options for political, economic, and security partnerships. As a committed partner for more than 30 years, the United States has supported the countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity since they gained independence in 1991.

Through the C5+1 (five Central Asian countries plus the United States) platform, the U.S. government has facilitated regional cooperation through ministerial meetings, expert sessions, and working groups focused on enhancing security, economic resilience, and sustainable development since 2015.¹ A key C5+1 priority is strengthening security cooperation to address regional threats, including enhancing and sharing best practices in defense, law enforcement, and counterterrorism cooperation.²

Regional stability and security in Central Asia are not distant foreign policy concerns but a frontline defense for the U.S. homeland. By proactively supporting stable and sovereign partners in the region, the United States can help reduce the risk of terrorist attacks at home and abroad. Investments in regional security yield long-term benefits by addressing the root causes of instability that foster radicalization and violent extremist activity. The choice is clear: the United States can invest in its partners' stability now or face greater threats and potential costs in the future.

The Evolving Terror Threat in Central Asia

As the United States has provided increased support for a more stable and secure Central Asia over the past decade, global jihadists have also become more active within the Central Asian states. The region remains largely insulated from domestic terrorist attacks, but individuals

¹ "C5+1 Diplomatic Platform," United States Department of State, 27 February 2023, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/c51-diplomatic-platform/>.

² "C5+1 Leaders' Joint Statement," The White House, 21 September 2023, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/21/c51-leaders-joint-statement/>.

from Central Asia have emerged as some of the most prominent actors in the operations of the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K).³ Formed in 2015 by defectors from militant groups such as Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, ISIS-K pledged allegiance to ISIS and aspires to establish its envisioned caliphate in the historical region of “Khorasan,” which includes parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, and Iran.⁴ With Central Asians implicated in terrorist incidents in the United States, Russia, Europe, and the Middle East, their growing involvement with ISIS-K has raised concerns among both regional and international observers.⁵

This evolution is not the result of a sudden or spontaneous wave of radicalization within the Central Asian region. Rather, it is the product of a long-standing confluence of socio-economic, political, and psychological factors that continue to shape the region’s vulnerability to extremism. More than a decade ago, Central Asia was a significant source of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, with approximately 4,000 men and women traveling to join jihadist movements during the height of the Islamic State’s territorial expansion.⁶ The collapse of the so-called caliphate in 2019 scattered these individuals around the world, and while some returned home, many did not. A large number resettled in migrant communities in Russia, Türkiye, and Europe, where they helped establish new cells and online propaganda and recruitment networks, often drawing on old grievances.

Several high-profile attacks last year demonstrated that ISIS-K is increasingly utilizing dispersed networks of Central Asian operatives to project force internationally. In January 2024, ISIS-K claimed the suicide bombing that killed at least 95 people at a memorial gathering for Qassem Soleimani in Kerman, Iran.⁷ Tajik nationals planned the attack, including one of the bombers and the planner, who transited through Türkiye for training.⁸ Turkish security services responded with sweeping crackdowns and arrested more than 350 suspected ISIS-K affiliated individuals, with the majority being from Central Asia.⁹ The most devastating of these operations occurred in March 2024, when four Tajik nationals stormed Moscow’s Crocus City Hall in a deadly terrorist attack that killed more than 130

³ Tucker and Lemon argue that claims that Central Asia is a “hotbed” of terrorist activity are alarmist since the region only accounts for approximately 0.001% of all terrorist attacks recorded worldwide since 1970. Noah Tucker and Edward Lemon, “A ‘Hotbed’ or a Slow, Painful Burn? Explaining Central Asia’s Role in Global Terrorism,” *CTC Sentinel*, July/August 2024: 20-25. <https://ctc westpoint.edu/a-hotbed-or-a-slow-painful-burn-explaining-central-asias-role-in-global-terrorism/>.

⁴ “ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K),” Terrorist Groups, Counter Terrorism Guide, National Counterterrorism Center, March 2025. https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/isis_khorasan.html.

⁵ In March 2023, Uzbek national Sayfullo Saipov was sentenced to life in prison for the October 2017 terrorist attack in which he ran down eight people on a bike path in New York City. “Sayfullo Saipov to be Sentenced to Life in Prison for 2017 Truck Attack for ISIS,” United States Department of Justice, 13 March 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/sayfullo-saipov-be-sentenced-life-prison-2017-truck-attack-isis>.

⁶ Ekaterina Stepanova, “Foreign Terrorist Fighters from Russia in and after Syria and Iraq,” (Trans) National Trends and Threats, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 46, no. 11 (2023): 2229.

⁷ Aamer Madhani, “US Warned Iran that ISIS-K was Preparing Attack Ahead of Deadly Kerman Blasts, a US Official Says,” *AP News*, 25 January 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/kerman-us-warning-isis-k-bombings-bcb47f04165b3eb7b9bc7b4868c8399c>.

⁸ Turkish authorities later tied the perpetrators of the attack on Santa Maria Catholic church in Istanbul to the same transnational network behind the Kerman plot. Further investigation revealed that these attacks were coordinated by ISIS-K affiliates in Afghanistan, with assistance from diaspora-based logistics and recruitment networks in Russia and Türkiye. Eric Schmitt, “ISIS Affiliate Linked to Moscow Attack Has Global Ambitions,” *New York Times*, 25 March 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/25/us/politics/moscow-attack-isis.html>.

⁹ Riccardo Valle, “Central Asia: Annual Threat Assessment,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, January 2025, 17, no. 1: 77-86. <https://rsis.edu.sg/ctta-newsarticle/central-asia>.

people and injured more than 140 others.¹⁰ ISIS-K quickly confirmed the connection on its media channels, which published Tajik language content praising the attackers.¹¹ It was a dramatic illustration of ISIS-K's expanding transnational network and the pivotal role Central Asians play within it.

The appeal of ISIS-K to Central Asians lies in its proximity, ideology, and messaging. The group positions itself both as a vanguard of global jihad and an avenger of perceived injustices against Muslims by secular regimes. ISIS-K media exploits domestic policies, such as Tajikistan's hijab ban and suppression of religious education, to portray Central Asian governments as apostate oppressors.¹² ISIS-K's launch of its first Tajik language magazine, *The Voice of Khorasan*, following the Crocus City Hall attack marked a significant escalation in this strategy. Later issues were published in additional languages to target Tajik, Uzbek, and Russian speakers across Central Asia and the diaspora.¹³

Propaganda for Central Asians is no longer mass-produced but precision-targeted. After anti-Muslim incidents in Europe, ISIS-K quickly mobilized online followers and published calls to action in multiple languages.¹⁴ What makes this messaging particularly dangerous is its resonance with marginalized individuals abroad. Migrant communities in Russia and Türkiye have become especially fertile ground for ISIS-K recruitment. When they are socially isolated, trapped in economically precarious situations, and subject to discrimination or xenophobic policing—as seen after the Moscow attack—many young Central Asians find a sense of identity, purpose, and belonging in jihadist narratives that is absent in their everyday lives.¹⁵ Anecdotal accounts show that radicalization often begins not in madrassas but in labor migrant communities, prisons, or online messaging platforms, where violent extremists weaponize personal grievances into ideological commitments.

The internet has been the key enabler of this shift. ISIS-K's digital operations have grown more sophisticated as the organization has increasingly used encrypted platforms, coded language, and AI-generated content to evade detection and manipulate audiences. Terror financing has also transitioned into the digital realm. Central Asian operatives have adapted to new technologies, utilizing platforms such as QIWI Wallet, YooMoney (formerly Yandex

¹⁰ Russian investigators initially attributed the attack to Ukraine before eventually admitting the perpetrators were affiliated with ISIS-K. "Russian Spy Chief Says More Than 20 Arrested Over Deadly Concert Attack," *Reuters*, 24 May 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-spy-chief-says-ukraine-was-directly-involved-moscow-concert-hall-attack-2024-05-24/>. "One Year On, Hundreds Pay Tribute After Deadly Crocus City Hall Attack," *Moscow Times*, 23 March 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/03/23/one-year-on-hundreds-pay-tribute-after-deadly-crocus-city-hall-attack-a88450>.

¹¹ Uran Botobekov, "Crocus City Hall Attack: Deciphering Central Asian Jihadism and Russian Counterterrorism," *The Diplomat*, 25 March 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/crocus-city-hall-attack-deciphering-central-asian-jihadism-and-russian-counterterrorism/>.

¹² "Tajik Parliament's Upper Chamber Second Law Banning Hijab," *Tajikistan News ASIA-Plus*, 20 June 2024, <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/power/20240620/tajik-parliaments-upper-chamber-second-law-banning-hijab>.

¹³ Riccardo Valle, "Central Asia: Annual Threat Assessment," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, January 2025, 17, no. 1: 77-86. <https://rsis.edu.sg/ctta-newsarticle/central-asia>.

¹⁴ In March 2024, German police arrested two Afghan nationals accused of planning an attack on Sweden's parliament in Stockholm, after ISIS-K propaganda called for retaliation against Sweden over Qur'an desecrations. Amira Jadoon, et al., "From Tajikistan to Moscow and Iran: Mapping the Local and Transnational Threat of Islamic State Khorasan," *CTC Sentinel*, May 2024: 1-12. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/from-tajikistan-to-moscow-and-iran-mapping-the-local-and-transnational-threat-of-islamic-state-khorasan/>.

¹⁵ "Russia: Xenophobic Crackdown on Central Asian Migrants," *Human Rights Watch*, 18 March 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/17/russia-xenophobic-crackdown-central-asian-migrants>.

Money), Monero, and cryptocurrencies to discreetly transfer funds.¹⁶ Investigators have uncovered schemes where seemingly charitable donations were funneled through encrypted apps and anonymous wallets to support ISIS-K fighters or their families. In one instance, more than \$2,000 was raised and transferred to perpetrators of the Moscow attack via online fundraising appeals disguised as humanitarian aid.¹⁷ This growing digital sophistication in terror financing has forced the Central Asian governments to evolve their counterterrorism strategies beyond traditional law enforcement.

As they confront the risks posed by both virtual financial networks and returning foreign terrorist fighters, the Central Asian states have come to recognize that disruption alone is not enough. Preventing radicalization and fostering long-term stability also requires a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration, particularly for women and children who may have been victims as much as participants. As a result, the governments have increasingly engaged in the rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters and their families. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have led these efforts with comprehensive repatriation programs—Kazakhstan through its “Zhusan” and “Rusafa” operations, and Uzbekistan through its “Mehr” initiative—that combine repatriation with mental health support, education, vocational training, and religious re-education.¹⁸ Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic have focused primarily on repatriating women and children, often favoring prosecution over rehabilitation and reintegration for male foreign terrorist fighters due to limited institutional capacity and heightened security concerns.¹⁹ Despite resourcing challenges, the regional response reflects a growing recognition of the importance of reintegrating returnees as part of a comprehensive counterterrorism and domestic security strategy.

ISIS-K’s enduring appeal stems from deep-rooted socio-economic and political grievances. High unemployment, weak governance, and repression of legitimate religious and political expression create fertile ground for radicalization. This fragmentation highlights the urgent need for a holistic and unified approach that progresses beyond security-based responses. Long-term counterterrorism success depends on addressing root causes through structural reforms that promote education, combat corruption, and support community and economic development. Programs intended to reintegrate former fighters, expand religious literacy, and support migrant workers must be revitalized and sustained. Equally vital is the empowerment of moderate religious leaders and civil society actors who can provide credible alternatives to extremist narratives. A balanced strategy that reduces underlying discontent is as essential as tactical counterterrorist operations.

¹⁶ Nodirbek Soliev, “The Digital Terror Financing of Central Asian Jihadis,” *CTC Sentinel*, April 2023: 20-27. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-digital-terror-financing-of-central-asian-jihadis/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “UNICEF Experts Agree that Kazakhstan’s Experience Repatriating and Reintegrating Children and Women Returned from Conflict Zones Serves as an Example for Many Countries,” UNICEF, *unicef.org*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/kazakhstan/en/press-releases/unicef-experts-agree-kazakhstans-experience-repatriating-and-reintegrating-children>. “Uzbekistan: UN Expert Applauds Return of Women and Children from Conflict Zones, Recommends Further Reforms,” OHCHR, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/12/uzbekistan-un-expert-applauds-return-women-and-children-conflict-zones>.

¹⁹ “Syrian Kurds Repatriate 146 Tajik Women and Children from Camps Holding Relatives of IS Fighters,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 26 July 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/syrian-kurds-repatriate-tajik-women-children-is-fighters/31959893.html>. “United States Applauds the Kyrgyz Republic’s Repatriation of Women and Children from Northeast Syria,” United States Department of State, 19 July 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/united-states-applauds-the-kyrgyz-republics-repatriation-of-women-and-children-from-northeast-syria/>.

Shifting regional and international dynamics complicates these domestic efforts. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan presents both a potential counterbalance to ISIS-K and a source of regional instability. Meanwhile, as Russia has reduced its role in the region to focus on its war in Ukraine, China has increased military-technical and counterterrorism cooperation with its Central Asian neighbors. Considering these evolving dynamics, the Central Asian countries are demonstrating growing regional cooperation. Establishing a more unified regional framework that encompasses intelligence sharing, coordinated border management, and contingency planning in response to potential regional instability remains essential.

Central Asia's stability and U.S. national security interests are deeply intertwined, particularly in terms of counterterrorism, homeland security, and strategic competition. Stable governments in Central Asia are better able to disrupt terrorist networks, secure borders, and share intelligence, thus preventing the emergence of ungoverned spaces that could serve as a base for attacks on the United States or its allies and partners. A stable Central Asia serves as a crucial buffer against threats to the U.S. homeland, but if left unchecked, ISIS-K and its affiliates could exploit conditions to plot and execute attacks. Investing proactively in regional stability through capacity building, intelligence sharing, and economic development costs far less than responding once a full-blown crisis or existential threat has developed.

Current U.S. Initiatives and Opportunities for Future Cooperation

The United States has historically played a critical role in countering radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorist attacks in Central Asia through a range of foreign assistance programs tailored to the region's complex socio-political and security issues. These initiatives recognize that effective prevention requires a comprehensive approach that promotes sovereign, prosperous, and secure Central Asian states. A secure and stable Central Asia supports U.S. efforts to counter terrorism, protect the homeland, and enhance economic prosperity globally.

U.S. foreign assistance has significantly enhanced American access in Central Asia by supporting security cooperation, economic development, and regional connectivity. Since the early 1990s, the United States has provided over \$9 billion in direct assistance to the region, focusing on peace, security, democratic reform, and economic growth, which has fostered stronger bilateral ties and enabled the United States to maintain a strategic presence.²⁰ Security assistance, especially after 9/11, provided secure access to airbases and logistical routes for operations in Afghanistan, deepening military and diplomatic engagement with the Central Asian states. Economic aid and development programs, such as those that USAID implemented, have promoted market reforms and infrastructure projects, creating resilient markets that benefit both the region and U.S. exporters. Educational and technical exchange initiatives have also built long-term relationships and increased U.S. soft power, while ongoing assistance has helped counterbalance the influence of Russia and China in the region.

Current U.S. security cooperation programs focus on combating transnational threats, securing borders, promoting the professionalization of security forces, and advancing respect for the rule of law. Under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) and

²⁰ Maria Blackwood, "Central Asia: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, 24 September 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46924>.

Foreign Military Financing Programs, the United States has provided border security and counterterrorism capabilities and training to the countries in Central Asia.²¹ U.S. Central Command organizes an annual multilateral exercise, REGIONAL COOPERATION, which fosters collaboration among the Central Asian and other regional nations. Additionally, the National Guard Bureau's State Partnership Program has established long-term relationships between U.S. National Guard units and each of the Central Asian militaries, focusing on border security, counterterrorism, special operations forces' training, combat medical care, humanitarian aid, disaster relief, and officer development.

Security cooperation programs in Central Asia offer a high return on investment, delivering significant impact at relatively low cost in a decidedly competitive environment. Since the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, however, Central Asia has received less attention, with limited security cooperation resources increasingly redirected to the Indo-Pacific to align with broader U.S. strategic priorities. Given this shift, it is worth considering whether these resources could be more effectively utilized in lower-profile regions like Central Asia, where even modest investments can yield substantial security benefits.

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Kazakhstan addressed some of the root causes of extremism, including weak governance, youth exclusion, and economic isolation. Programs like the Resilient Communities Activity (RCA), Employment and Enterprise Development Activity (EEDA), and Market Driven Rural Development (MDRD) project helped reintegrate returning foreign fighters, support vulnerable populations, and address rural poverty. Broad development projects, like AgroTrade in the Kyrgyz Republic, created jobs and reduced economic vulnerability, issues that are critical for countering radicalization. Regional initiatives, such as the Central Asia Media Program, strengthened media literacy and social cohesion, offering peaceful alternatives to extremist ideologies.

In 2023, U.S. aid obligations to Central Asia totaled approximately \$154 million, covering health, economic development, peace and security, and governance programs. However, by April 2025, nearly all USAID programs in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were canceled, with the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan losing 69% and 78% of their USAID-backed programs, respectively.²² This drastic reduction has raised concerns about the impact on local development, humanitarian aid, and U.S. soft power. The cuts reflect a strategic shift in U.S. foreign assistance priorities, with uncertain prospects for continued cooperation in the near term.²³

Countering radicalization and violent extremism requires sustained investments in civil society, economic opportunity, transparent governance, and regional cooperation. In the short term, local partners have lost funding for initiatives that supported regional resilience. In the absence of U.S.-supported programs, extremist narratives could flourish, undermining societal cohesion and enabling extremist recruitment. In the long term, the United States will abandon this space to other actors if it ceases to be present. If the United States is genuinely

²¹ "U.S. Security Cooperation with Central Asia," United States Department of State, 20 January 2025, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-central-asia/>.

²² Catherine Putz, "USAID Cuts Devastating to Central Asia Programs," *The Diplomat*, 28 March 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/usaids-cuts-devastating-to-central-asia-programs/>.

²³ Sadokat Jalolova, "Cuts to USAID Leave Central Asia Facing Development Challenges," *The Times of Central Asia*, 21 May 2025, <https://timesca.com/cuts-to-usaid-leave-central-asia-facing-development-challenges/>.

committed to confronting terrorism at its source, then it must not cede its influence to adversarial powers or permit extremism to take hold in a region of vital importance to U.S. national security interests.

The United States has a critical opportunity to strengthen its role as a stabilizing force in Central Asia. With groups like ISIS-K expanding their influence, exploiting socio-economic instability, and leveraging transnational recruitment networks, the region requires decisive and sustained U.S. engagement to counter these dangers effectively. A strategic approach that bolsters bilateral and regional engagement, scales existing programs, and reinforces diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation can make a significant impact to reduce radicalization and violent extremism in the region.

One of the most immediate and practical steps the United States can take is to maximize current development and security programs already occurring in the region. Expanding foreign assistance initiatives focused on economic growth, public health, education, and youth engagement can help address the underlying conditions that fuel radicalization. These efforts are particularly critical in areas where high unemployment and political exclusion leave young people vulnerable to extremist recruitment. With the elimination of the State Department's Assistance for Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia (AEECA) funding, support for such programs through the America First Opportunity Fund will be essential to make the United States safer and stronger.

Equally important is the opportunity to deepen bilateral cooperation with individual Central Asian states. Each country faces unique challenges, and the U.S. government must tailor its engagement accordingly. In the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, the United States should assist law enforcement officials and legal advisors with investigating and prosecuting extremist activity, while also supporting rehabilitation and social reintegration programs for returning foreign fighters and their families.²⁴ Uzbekistan presents an opportunity to support the government's reform agenda by offering technical assistance on religious freedom, promoting interfaith dialogue, and encouraging judicial reform. Even in Turkmenistan, the United States can maintain engagement through quiet diplomacy, focusing on technical cooperation in areas such as border security and youth engagement to preserve channels for future collaboration.

In addition to strengthening bilateral ties, the United States should intensify its regional security cooperation. Existing initiatives such as the State Department's Anti-Terrorism Assistance Program provide platforms for expanding intelligence sharing, law enforcement collaboration, and regional training exercises. Through U.S. leadership in the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, there may be additional opportunities for burden sharing, particularly in intelligence sharing, counter-threat financing, and counter-radicalization programs targeting diaspora populations. Allies and partners, especially those that have experienced plotting or attacks linked to Central Asian militants on their soil, may be receptive to deepening intelligence and law enforcement cooperation. Increased coordination and collaboration could create opportunities for

²⁴ "UNODC and Prison Service of Tajikistan Co-Operate to Address Foreign Terrorist Fighter Threats in Prison," UNODC, undated, accessed 23 June 2025, <https://www.unodc.org/roca/en/news/unodc-and-prison-service-of-tajikistan-co-operate-to-address-foreign-terrorist-fighters-threats-in-prison.html>.

Vagit Ismailov, "Tajikistan Launches Program to Reintegrate Convicted Extremists into Society," *The Times of Central Asia*, 24 April 2025, <https://timesca.com/tajikistan-launches-program-to-reintegrate-convicted-extremists-into-society/>.

corresponding sanctions regimes, synchronized prosecutions, and targeted capacity building in third countries that serve as transit or recruitment hubs for ISIS-K-affiliated networks. Through these venues, the U.S. government could continue to promote common standards, provide regional security assistance, and sponsor initiatives to disrupt the transnational logistics and online infrastructure used by Central Asian terrorists.

Finally, sustained diplomatic engagement remains critical. High-level visits, public diplomacy, and strategic dialogues reinforce the U.S. commitment to Central Asia and help align security and governance priorities. In a region where external influence is contested and local governments seek signs of long-term U.S. interest, such signals can be as important as material assistance. This ongoing engagement is especially important as regional powers—such as China—actively compete for influence in Central Asia and seek to fill any perceived gaps in U.S. involvement. Last week, Kazakhstan hosted the second Central Asia – China Summit in Astana. During the summit, Chinese president Xi Jinping cited the U.S. tariff rates as one of the ways in which China is a more reliable partner to Central Asia than the United States. The Central Asian heads of state joined Xi in launching a platform to promote free trade as well as cooperation centers focused on poverty alleviation, desertification, and education. Xi also pledged approximately \$200 million in grant assistance to the Central Asian countries this year to support employment and development projects.²⁵

Without bold and sustained U.S. engagement, global jihadist radicalization in Central Asia will continue to spread, increasing the risk of new terrorist safe havens that threaten both regional stability and U.S. security interests. By acting now, the United States can help the countries in Central Asia resist these influences, protect their citizens, and develop regional cooperative networks to secure themselves in the future. Some scholars have described Central Asia's encounter with jihadism as a smoldering ember capable of reigniting under certain conditions.²⁶ Events have shown that the region is no longer a passive observer of global terrorism, but an active, if unintended, participant. Its citizens serve as operatives, fundraisers, and ideological vectors in a transnational network that stretches from Kabul to Cologne. Confronting this reality will demand that the United States exercise vigilance and utilize all available resources in support of its national security interests.

²⁵ Xiuhao Chen, et al., "China's Xi Signs Treaty to Elevate Ties with Central Asia," *Reuters*, 17 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/chinas-xi-signs-treaty-elevate-ties-with-central-asia-2025-06-17/>.

²⁶ Noah Tucker and Edward Lemon, "A 'Hotbed' or a Slow, Painful Burn? Explaining Central Asia's Role in Global Terrorism," *CTC Sentinel*, July/August 2024: 20-25. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-hotbed-or-a-slow-painful-burn-explaining-central-asias-role-in-global-terrorism/>.