

THE EMERGENCE OF CENTRAL ASIA, 2018, AND U.S. STRATEGY

Hearing before House Committee on Foreign Affairs

18July2018

S. Frederick Starr
Chairman, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute
American Foreign Policy Council
starr@afpc.org

[An Updated U.S. Strategy for Central Asia](#)

During the first quarter century after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the five former Soviet republics of the USSR were isolated from each other and, to a considerable extent, from the world economy. Focused on preserving their sovereignty against perceived revanchist pressures from Russia, each went its own way, strengthening ties with China, the U.S., and Europe as a balance. In the process, many of the states adopted policies—or continued policies from Soviet times-- that limited the civic freedoms of their citizens, which they defended in terms of the preservation of sovereignty. The U.S. built solid relations with all five countries, but in every case qualified its relationship on the basis of that country's perceived record in the field of human rights. Moreover, it increasingly subordinated all five of these relationships to its project in Afghanistan. After 2012 it focused more on what it was *not* doing in Central Asia than what it *was* doing there.

Beginning in late 2017 the entire region entered a period of dynamic and fundamental change which is still gaining momentum today. The chief driver for this shift was the election of Shafkat Mirziyoyev as President of Uzbekistan following the death of his predecessor, Islam Karimov. Mirziyoyev, who had served as Prime Minister for thirteen years under Karimov, had prepared himself well. The economy, while not strong, was stable and free from crisis. Various reforms had already been quietly worked out and members of a talented younger generation of officials were eager to implement them.

Mirziyoyev unleashed a many-sided reform campaign, covering areas as diverse as law, human rights, elections, currency the economy, foreign relations, and religion. Never had any country in Central Asia (or in the entire Muslim world, for that matter) adopted such fundamental reforms as those which Uzbekistan introduced in 2017-2018.

In an effort to chronicle this many-sided effort, my colleagues at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute have enlisted a team of western experts to catalog the specific legislative initiatives, in law, human rights, finance, regional relations, governance, religion, and so forth. These reports, the most detailed in any language, are already available on line at silkroadstudies.org and within the next few weeks will be published as a book entitled Uzbekistan's New Face.

Uzbekistan's Surprising Reforms.

Rather than provide an inventory of these reforms, which time will not permit, let me list three initiatives under each of six headings:

- 1) Economy: fully convertible currency for first time in 25 years; freedom to launch private businesses and simplified registration; ability to seek investors abroad and to invest abroad.
- 2) Foreign relations: Prioritize relations with immediate neighbors, resolving all outstanding conflicts; opening borders and allowing visa-free trade with neighbors; regular joint meetings with presidents and senior officials; and joint projects with neighbors on matters of common interest.
- 3) Law: Create profession of defense attorneys meeting western standards; extensive revision of legal codes along western lines, including penal code; establishment of western (probably American) law school in Tashkent; opening of contact with major UN human rights bodies and other private agencies and the solicitation from them of suggestions for further reform.
- 4) Governance: Charge parliament with initiating laws and not merely passing laws drafted by President; call on local elective bodies, local citizenry, and the

press to report and correct malfeasance by public officials; and encourage Parties to forge links with like-minded parties abroad.

5) Religion: Release of religious dissidents and removal of thousands of names from proscribed list; establishment of Center for Enlightened Islam in Tashkent and of an Imam Bukhari Center in Bukhara; and educational support for "Enlightened Islam."._

Afghanistan Now Part of Central Asia

A conference on Afghanistan convened on March 28, 2017, in Tashkent and a Regional Cooperation Conference of Afghanistan held on 14-15 November in Ashgabat held special significance for the future of that country and of the region. At those meetings all five former Soviet states treated Afghanistan not merely as a *neighbor* of Central Asia but as an *integral part* of the region, with shared interests, understandings, culture, and history. Acknowledging this, the five states agreed to launch—in close collaboration with Kabul-- a many-sided effort to foster stable economic, social, and political development in Afghanistan. A wave of visits has already led to increased trade, investments, and educational projects, as well as to important initiatives in transport and energy. These amply deserve strong support from Washington.

The Balance Between Positive and Negative Trends Region-Wide

The reforms taking place in Uzbekistan are far from the only positive changes evident in Central Asia today. To be sure, negative trends persist in several countries, but in every case the country is engaged also in positive efforts that promise to strengthen the regional economy and open it to international forces of development. Several of these developments are of direct interest to the United States.

Kazakhstan is in the midst of a major effort to diversify its economy. Supported by a major new research university (Nazarbayev University), this effort is attracting investors and joint projects from East and West. A new Regional Financial Center has just been launched in Astana, providing international investors with access to adjudication under

British common law. And a rising general of young men and women with western educations and practical experience in the modern world are rapidly taking their place in both government and business at a time when rising prices on Kazakhstan's oil and gas has lifted the economy out of the doldrums.

Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan suffer from problems of governance, albeit for opposite reasons. Kyrgyzstan's effort at parliamentary rule has partially stalled under the burden of outside pressures and corruption. One-man rule continues to hamper Tajikistan which, like Kyrgyzstan, is buffeted by geopolitical pressures from Russia, China, and Afghanistan. Both countries are subject to pressures from foreign-sponsored Islamic extremists. Lacking energy resources, the economies of both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are stagnant.

However, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are rich in potential hydroelectric power. A major new World Bank-funded project (CASA 1000) will transmit electricity from both countries to Afghanistan and thence to Pakistan, while regional and international investors are attracted to new power-generation projects in both countries, thanks to the more open economic environment created by the changes in Uzbekistan. Further, transport projects funded by China promise to open inaccessible regions of both countries to market-based international trade and to link them to continental corridors. In short, both countries face difficulties but are on the lip of changes that have the potential both to lift their economies and subject them more to market-based discipline.

Low world prices on gas, along with profligate expenditure on social projects, has hurt the economy of Turkmenistan. Its government has responded with near-panic, strengthening controls over the economy, which remains solidly in the hands of the state, and severely limiting the rights and freedoms of its citizens. Under severe and coordinated pressure from both Russia and Iran, Turkmenistan justifies these measures in terms of the preservation of sovereignty.

At the same time, Turkmenistan has used its own resources to build major new roads and railroads linking Afghanistan and the Caspian. Its modern new Caspian port at

Turkmenbashi is starting to function, linking Central Asia to Turkey and the West. The new corridor to the East and the real possibility of exporting its gas to Europe have the potential to open Turkmenistan to market-based development and lift the prevailing state of national emergency.

Even as it has pursued repressive policies at home, Turkmenistan has worked with Afghanistan, Pakistan and India to advance the long-stalled TAPI gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. This ambitious project could become a major source of stability within Afghanistan and an avenue of cooperation between India and Pakistan. Suffice it to say that both President Ghani and the Taliban support it, as do Pakistan and India. And for Turkmenistan itself, the close involvement with major economies that the pipeline would create would compel certain needed reforms.

When the U.S. government failed to offer strong support in 2014, American oil majors dropped out, leaving the Turkmen on their own. With help from the Asia Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and various national governments the project is now moving forward. It is not too late for the U.S. to reclaim an interest in this strategic project, which meshes with several key American interests in the region. If it goes forward without U.S. help, Washington will have handed China and Russia decisive voices in Kabul, after sacrificing thousands of lives and spending a trillion dollars in that country.

Summing up, the situation across Central Asia has changed dramatically during the past year, with further changes to be expected in the coming period. Most of these major changes are fundamental and positive. But uncertainties in Afghanistan, a looming leadership transition in Kazakhstan, economic woes in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan's difficulty in finding a second purchaser for its ample gas resources, all thwart positive developments in the region. And all lend support to the more regressive tendencies that are still felt there.

Seven Elements of a New United States Approach to the Region.

Against this background, what should be the U.S.'s strategy for dealing with this dynamic situation? The challenge for the US (and for the West generally) is to be cognizant of the negative trends in the region yet at the same time to recognize and support the many positive trends evident there as the best engines for advancing constructive developments that serve US interests.

The following recommendations for US and western policy are drawn from a book, The Long Game on the Silk Road, which my colleague Svante Cornell and I have just published. Allow me to reduce these in the form of seven main points:

1) First, embrace the region. The most significant development of recent decades has been the reemergence of Central Asia as a cultural, geopolitical, and economic zone. Its constituent countries have far more in common with each other than ASEAN countries. They have now actively embraced a new *regionalism* which they are asking the world community (and especially major powers) to recognize and respect. US policy should be framed, first, in terms of Central Asia as a region and then adjusted to the specifics of each country, never losing track of the whole.

In pursuing a regional policy, the US should soberly recognize problems but in each case seek solutions. Its task is to solve problems rather than to hand out rewards and punishments for what it considers good or bad behavior. Stated differently, the US should cease practicing its own version of Russia's "divide and conquer" policy.

2) Second, the US should follow the lead of Central Asian countries themselves and of Afghanistan itself and henceforth consider Afghanistan as fully a part of the Central Asia region. An immediate first step in this direction will be to transform Washington's existing "C5 Plus 1" initiative into a "C6 Plus 1."

3) The first concern of all Central Asian countries is to protect their national sovereignty and security. If either fails, this vital region, surrounded by nuclear powers and contested by Russia, China, and the West, will immediately become a source of great-power contention and strife. Better for Central Asia's security to be built from within than without. The U.S. must *begin* its negotiations with regional states and any new regional entity by acknowledging the importance of security and indicating that it will henceforth consider this a central element in its overall regional policy and not merely one isolated consideration among many.

4) Security inevitably involves a military component, but the best means of fostering and guaranteeing it is to develop vital market economies based on modern techniques and skills. A major objective of US policy should be to concentrate equally on the national and regional levels in order to remove impediments to their development. This will require clarity and frankness on issues involving investment and trade.

5) All of the above involve issues that one or both sides consider highly sensitive. For the US, human rights concerns have often played an outside role in policy, while national security and fear of centrifugal forces has played a similar role in the thinking of Central Asians. These are realities, and we are not proposing that they should, or can, be changed. Rather, we propose adopting new ground rules for pursuing them. Hectoring, scoldings, and shaming, by the U.S. have not worked, any more than have the Central Asians' tendency to cut programs and walk away. Henceforth, the U.S. should adopt the firm policy with respect to Central Asian countries to *work* with rather than *on* them, and to seek joint solutions to identified and recognized problems.

6) Sixth, U.S. relations with the individual countries of Central Asia, including Afghanistan, are not conducted in a vacuum, and nor will its future relations with the region as a whole. Other major powers, including China, Russia, Europe,

India, Japan, Korea, etc. are all similarly engaged and will take note of a new US strategy.

It is not the job of the U.S. to lecture other major countries on how they should conduct their relations with the region. But it is important to point to all that the U.S. intends to respect the full sovereignty and self-determination of all six Central Asian states and that it expects other powers to do the same.

Such an approach best promotes the security of the region and hence advances the stated interests of other powers in peace a security there. The US seeks to promote the security of Central Asian countries by strengthening their internal capacities and their capacities as a group rather than by subordinating either of them to some externally imposed order. In other words, the U.S. is prepared to practice a strategy of carefully delineated self-restraint and expects other powers to do the same. This could lead to open discussions among the powers, but these should not take the form of negotiating over the heads of the Central Asians themselves.

In advancing this proposal, we note that it is fully in accord with UN Resolution No.65 of 18 June, 2018, "Strengthening Regional and International Cooperation to Ensure Peace, Stability, and Sustainable Development in the Central Asian Region." Fifty-five countries, including the U.S., China, Europe, and Russia, co-sponsored the resolution, which called for the development of regional institutions in the areas of security, economic development, water management, and cultural areas.

7) For this new strategy to succeed, "inter-agency" process between the departments of State, Defense, and Commerce must be activated and strengthened. For a quarter century U.S. policy towards Central Asian countries has been parceled out subordinate officials in State Defense, and Commerce, who rarely, if ever coordinate their programs for the greater good. This glaring problem causes our regional partners to conclude they are negotiating with at least three separate countries. The strategy proposed here, which is put forward in direct response to the changing realities in Central Asia and

Afghanistan, cannot be effectively implemented if the separate agencies of the U.S. government that implement it fail to coordinate their efforts. "Interagency processes must therefore be regularized and greatly strengthened.

Are the Positive Trends Real? Will They Continue?

A skeptic, reading the above, may be tempted to point out that the new currents in Central Asia and the emergence of Central Asia as a distinct region with its own consultative structures depends heavily on the success of the reform program launched in Uzbekistan during 2017. It is true that several early changes instituted by President Mirziyoyev, including making the currency exchangeable and the opening of borders with neighbors, had an immediate and significant impact throughout the region. Many others, however, are more statements of intention than accomplished facts. Like many Uzbeks themselves, Uzbekistan's neighbors are watching with interest to see which of the countless reform measures are successfully implemented. Thus, it is fair to say that the biggest and most positive regional impact of the Uzbek reforms has yet to be felt.

What then, are Mirziyoyev's chances of success? Our skeptic might point to habits formed during centuries of rule by retrograde local khanates followed by tsarist and then Soviet rule, not to mention the repressive policies of the first quarter century following the collapse of the USSR. Can one expect habits to change overnight? Against this negative prognostication, one might note that the current reforms are being instituted not to stave off imminent collapse but from a basis of relative strength and self-confidence. Nor were the reforms conjured up overnight: we now know that many had been carefully prepared over many years prior to Mirziyoyev's election as president. It is important also to note that a driving force for reform is the younger generation of cosmopolitan and professionally competent Uzbeks who have studied abroad and are eager to see their country catch up with the developed world. Finally, the very habits of social discipline that caused Uzbeks to accept the government's stern policies between 1991 and 2016 may cause them to embrace the more open practices embodied in the reforms, provided they lead to economic progress.

Nor is the spirit of progress without deep routes elsewhere in the region. It is hard to imagine that any successor to President Nazarbayev will be less open to modernity than Nazarbayev himself, or that young Kazakhs will be any less energetic in advancing their interests. Kyrgyzstan, too, boasts a large modern sector maintained by the younger generation, as indeed does Afghanistan. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan may be lagging in civic initiatives designed to push their economies and societies into the modern world, but this could change quickly as their governments remove impediments to investing in Afghanistan and developing its educational and civic institutions. These and other factors, reinforced by the ongoing process of reform in Uzbekistan, the largest and most central country in the region, make the prospects for progress throughout the region brighter today than at any other time since the establishment of the new sovereignties.

Why Central Asia Counts for America.

Drawing back from these practical concerns, a more fundamental question arises: why should the United States care about what happens in Central Asia, including Afghanistan? A standard response of both Democratic and Republican administrations for the past quarter century is that the region is surrounded by nuclear-armed powers and the U.S. is not interested in seeing them come into conflict over it. Allowing a power vacuum to develop there, or for a single power—whether Russia or China—to gain hegemony there, would be a sure formula for conflict. Far better for the region to develop to the point that it can provide for its own security than for any external power to seek to stabilize it from without.

This thesis is definitely valid, and justifies U.S. support for the policy of balanced relations with major external powers that all governments in the region champion. This is not easy. The blunt reality is that to balance pressures from Russia and China, the U.S. and West generally must expand their engagement with Central Asia.

It should be noted that this formulation accepts the terms of what has been called “The Great Game” and merely seeks to minimize its negative impact. It is a strategy that

occurs “over the heads” of the Central Asians themselves, who are reduced nearly to the role of spectators to their own fate.

Central Asia as an Epicenter of Muslim Civilizations

Fortunately, there are further and even more compelling reasons for the United States to engage actively with Central Asia as a region. A half century ago leaders of China, Russia, Europe, and the U.S. shared the view that “Central Asia” is in fact peripheral, a remote and problematic dead zone rendered significant mainly as a buffer between great powers. This has now changed fundamentally. It is increasingly understood that for 3,000 years Central Asia was the one region that was in direct contact with all the other centers of Eurasian economic and cultural life from Europe to the Middle East, India, and China. As such, it dominated trade and finance throughout Eurasia for a millennium.

Beyond this, it was, for more than half that time, the unparalleled center of world scientific and philosophic life. Here were the greatest centers of mathematics, astronomy, and medicine between the ancient Greeks and the Renaissance. Suffice it to say that it was Central Asians who invented trigonometry and reinvented algebra, a Central Asian who was considered the final authority on medicine in medieval Europe, the Middle East, and India, and a Central Asian who, in the year 1025, hypothesized the existence of North and South America as inhabited continents.

Let it be noted that Central Asia, no less than Saudi Arabia or the Arab Middle East, has full claim to being an epicenter of Islam thought and practice. Islam’s second most Holy book was the work of a native of Bukhara in Uzbekistan, while most of the Sufi cults that thrive across the world of Islam today had their origin in Central Asia.

Because of all this, the views of Central Asians on Islam and its relation to the state are of genuine significance to the entire Muslim world. And on both points, Central Asians have much to offer. Thus, they mainly adhere to the Hanafi school of Muslim jurisprudence, theologically the most moderate and also the most business-friendly of

the four main schools. Hanafi Islam gives reason a bigger role in the pursuit of truth than the other schools and Central Asia is in fact the epicenter of Hanafi Islam.

Ther U.S. Should Support Muslim Societies with Secular States, Laws, and Courts.

And what about the relation of religion to the state? Central Asian states are all secular, with secular laws, courts, and educational systems. Even the nominally "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan" in fact has a legal system based on Roman law. Indeed, the five former Soviet countries of Central Asia, as well as Afghanistan, present the largest group of Muslim societies anywhere that are ruled by secular governments, laws, and courts. Together they present a model for the relationship between religion and the state that is all but unique in the Muslim world and which holds great promise for the future.

This is not to say that any country in the region has perfected this model. All, to greater or lesser extent, still show the distorting mark of Soviet Communism's hostility to religion. Yet in recent years every country has moved to free itself from this malign heritage, even as they seek to avoid the fanaticism preached by Islamic extremists from the Middle East, Iran and Pakistan. Several lend support to moderate Muslim institutions, presenting an approach analogous to that of England to the Church of England as opposed to France's policy of laicite towards the Catholic Church. But they all have protected their governments and legal systems from religious interference and are committed to do so in the future.

The United States has a real interest in the success of this model. It can be most effective in advancing it by working with (rather than on) the regional states to identify problems with their current practices and to devise workable alternatives. By this process, Central Asian countries can become models for the moderate and balanced development of Muslim societies elsewhere and a real alternative to Muslim extremism.

Viewed from this perspective, the six countries of Central Asia should be accorded a significant role in America's overall international strategy. The defense of secular states, laws, and courts as the best means of preserving religious freedom in all societies is a truly global concern, and one which the U.S. should be actively advancing. A comprehensive review of its strategy towards the region offers Washington an ideal opportunity to embrace this cause and accord it the centrality it deserves.