



Rethinking Uzbekistan

A Military View

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By taking a new look at the United States' posture and defense spending in Central Asia, the United States can more accurately and efficiently build lasting, mutually beneficial relationships with valuable partners, which is a clear U.S. goal.¹ Within the Central Asian region, Uzbekistan shows the greatest promise to yield maximum results for minimum investment. It is hard to overstate the importance of a sustained and stable Central Asia because the effects of stability there will have dramatic second- and third-order effects, not only for the United States but also for others that have been involved in the region. This includes bolstering regional stability and prosperity and providing overt signaling from the United States to support its values.

A strong regional leader could possibly take the lead on development in the entire region. If the United States backs this specific partner, it can aid in stabilizing the region further, which would have short- and long-term benefits for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Investing in such a partnership in Central Asia could bolster regional dialogues to include the C5+1 organization (consisting of the five Central Asian states and the United States), which soon may begin to morph into the C6+1 with recent overtures from the administration of Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Kabul in hopes of extending stability south of its

borders.² A stronger C5+1, especially one that includes Afghanistan, will bolster the cohesion of the Central Asian countries but will also allow the United States to find its way onto the ground floor of influence.

The historical background of Uzbekistan has made many policy makers shy away from extending focus and funding to that country. Due to the recent social shift in the country (particularly under the leadership of President Mirziyoyev), Uzbekistan provides a valid option for a long-term U.S. partnership in the region.

History of U.S./Uzbek Relations

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan was one of the new countries that fought hardest against economic transition to a market economy, a fact that shows even today as its economy lags behind several other regional states in various areas like economic development.³ The late Islam Karimov became Uzbekistan's first president in 1991 and stayed in power for more than twenty years. During his rule, he created an authoritarian government that routinely ranked as one of the harshest authoritarian regimes in the world, particularly in the areas of religious freedom and human rights.⁴

The United States began fostering relations with the region through NATO's Partnership for Peace program shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁵ Moreover, following the events of 11 September 2001, Uzbekistan was one of the key supporters of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, going so far as to offer the use of its Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base in southern Uzbekistan for the transit of aircraft and troops to Afghanistan.⁶ However, these closer relations were short-lived because Uzbekistan removed its U.S. presence following the Andijan incident in 2005.⁷

The incident in Andijan led to a freeze in relations that followed the event and explains why U.S. policy

Previous page: Soldiers from U.S. Army Central and the Uzbekistan army participate in Mountain Warfare Exchange August 2018 in Forish, Uzbekistan. Over the five-day event, six instructors from the U.S. Army Northern Warfare Training Center and fourteen Uzbekistan army personnel shared processes and procedures related to operating in a mountainous environment and practiced various mountaineering techniques. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan)



U.S. Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper meets with the Uzbekistan Minister of Defense Bakhodir Kurbanov 12 July 2019 at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Sgt. Amber I. Smith, U.S. Army)

makers and many scholars are hesitant to commit increased funding to Uzbekistan. In the early 2000s, the Bush administration saw Uzbekistan as a strategic foothold in the region and a “key strategic partner” in the Global War on Terrorism.⁸ However, in 2005, police allegedly beat up local citizens for protesting the trials of prominent local businessmen. Several dozen locals then stormed the police station, stole arms, and released several prisoners (including the aforementioned businessmen). The resulting reaction from Karimov, who flew to Andijan to direct operations personally, resulted in over one hundred deaths, allegedly from firing on civilians by the Uzbek security forces.⁹ No accurate figures can be agreed upon, since outside authorities were not allowed in to investigate. The U.S. government’s working figure from 2005 was 173 deaths.¹⁰ Some scholars, especially locals, place the number of deaths significantly higher.¹¹

The United States was hesitant to comment on or condemn the incident, but eventually did, breaking with one of the implied conditions of the United States’ use of the K2 Air Base; specifically, that the United States would not comment on anything relating to alleged human rights abuses in Uzbekistan.¹² The Andijan

incident, paired with Islam Karimov’s ejection of U.S. forces from the K2 Air Base, led to a complete freeze in aid funding and bilateral military cooperation, which is still felt in today’s military and diplomatic environment in Uzbekistan. This complicated past suggests a culture that understands group identity, belonging, and relations with outside populations very differently than most Western powers, a point that should be kept in mind.

While few would argue that a measured reaction to the Andijan incident was called for, the American handling of the situation caused severe consequences to the bilateral relationship with Uzbekistan. Security aid resumed in the late years of the Karimov era in Tashkent, but it was nothing compared to pre-Andijan levels.¹³

Post-Karimov Uzbekistan

After the death of Islam Karimov in September 2016, Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev was elected

president. Mirziyoyev immediately set an agenda to restructure the government, increase religious tolerance, and reform the economy.¹⁴ After releasing a new five-year development strategy in mid-2017, Mirziyoyev proceeded to liberalize the economy by adopting new policies designed to eliminate the black market in currency and allow the exportation of profits for local businesses.¹⁵ New policies have encouraged more foreign investment and fostered social change, including the unblocking of websites, the release of political prisoners, labor changes, and the adoption of a “good neighbor policy” with regard to Central Asia.¹⁶ This final piece has already begun a positive shift with Uzbekistan improving relations with governments in the region.¹⁷

None of this should overshadow Mirziyoyev’s changes to the defense and security sectors. Uzbekistan’s new defense doctrine, released in December 2017, was seen by the U.S. defense community as a positive step due to its new emphasis and direction for military modernization and professionalization, as well as articulating the situation in Afghanistan as a significant issue that the country needed to tackle, with noted approval at the very highest levels of government.¹⁸ Mirziyoyev also dismissed the head of the oft-feared and endemically corrupt National Security Service, Rustam Inoyatov. As one of the final remaining holdovers from the Karimov era, Inoyatov’s firing was a clear indication that Mirziyoyev was intent on reforming the security sector in Uzbekistan and removing those who were not “engaged in the tasks they are assigned.”¹⁹ In explaining the shakeup of many aspects of Uzbek governance, Mirziyoyev spoke plainly, saying that many relieved security officials failed to live up to the trust placed in them, utilized methods that belonged to the previous administration, and showed a lack of connection with the troops they led.²⁰

The Validity of Uzbekistan as Primary Partner in Central Asia

In Central Asia, the United States needs a partner that will not only pair well and provide opportunities for regional power projection but will also take a leading role in a solution for Afghanistan. While many other powers are involved in Afghanistan, scholars Kristin Fjaestad and Heidi Kjaernet observed that Afghanistan is specifically an “arena where Central Asian states can participate.”²¹ The examination that follows of the other countries in the Central Asia region reveals both that

building partnerships in the region supports U.S. effort to stabilize Afghanistan and that Uzbekistan is the best situated country toward which to focus U.S. partnership efforts, despite the freeze in relations that occurred during the Karimov regime.

Kazakhstan. The United States has put in considerable effort to develop a closer partnership with Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan was a successful model of economic transition after the fall of the Soviet Union, and natural resources have provided it with a great deal of financial stability. However, it still suffers from many authoritarian regime issues without seeming authoritarian to many outsiders, or as Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way term it, “competitive authoritarianism.”²² Many policies enacted by the administration under former President Nursultan Nazarbayev benefit the wealthy in many different areas such as energy, economics, and even land reform.²³ Further, Kazakhstan has failed to diversify its economy beyond the exploitation of raw materials, has retained harsh treatment of the press, and has failed to reform the country’s political processes.²⁴

Kazakhstan sits firmly within the Russian sphere of influence. While Kazakhstan pursues multivector diplomacy to include China and several Western states, Russia is still its partner of preference when it comes to trade and military affairs. Many argue that despite changing geopolitical conditions, Kazakhstan’s long border with Russia will likely influence continued close security ties.²⁵ Finally, Kazakhstan does not share a border with Afghanistan.

The United States is looking for a partner that can help take a leadership role in

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finding a solution in Afghanistan. While Kazakhstan has generally taken a role in supporting Afghan stability, its commitment and cooperation will always be limited when compared to a country that borders Afghanistan. A good example of the primacy of Afghanistan's border states is the recent peace talks in Tashkent and a further call from Uzbekistan for additional talks.²⁶ Whether this may change under the new presidential administration is uncertain, but the recent protests following elections in the capital do not bode well for Kazakhstan as a stable partner for the United States.²⁷

Tajikistan. Tajikistan has shown a strong desire to partner with the United States under President Emomali Rahmon.²⁸ However, since the end of its civil war in 1997, Rahmon has consolidated his power through authoritarian rule.²⁹ This extends to all aspects of life in Tajikistan, as the country has fallen into further poverty. Religious freedom is nearly nonexistent; Rahmon considers devout Muslims an extremist threat.³⁰ Tajikistan further houses a permanent Russian military base, which may preclude significant cooperation.³¹ Simply put, Tajikistan's meager economic means, expansive corruption, and authoritarian rule make it a risky gamble for the United States for stable, long-term partnership-building.³²

Kyrgyz Republic. The Kyrgyz Republic, in the past, provided a key example of a post-Soviet state seeking to work more closely with the West. In the early years of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, the Kyrgyz government allowed the U.S. military use of Manas International Airport. However, relations soured following several incidents, the most recent of which saw the arrest and detainment for eight months of two Kyrgyzstani citizens who worked at the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek. The United States has accordingly cut off military aid and appears to have given up, for the time being, on closer military relations with the Kyrgyz Republic.³³ Although the Kyrgyz government, under the leadership of its new president, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, appears to be showing signs of seeking reconciliation, the recent relations and freeze in aid makes any argument of forging a closer military relationship with Kyrgyzstan a tough sell.

Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan provides the least viable option among the Central Asian states for closer cooperation for a multitude of reasons. It has isolated itself from the greater world, relying on the exploitation of natural resources to keep its economy afloat.³⁴ The ruling regime has been compared to North Korea for its severity,

with a Freedom Ranking below both Afghanistan and Sudan.³⁵ The Turkmen government routinely rebuffs efforts by partners. For instance, in 2017, when all Central Asian states sent delegations to Arizona to conduct a border walk with U.S. Border Patrol in an effort to learn best practices and increase its own border control efforts, Turkmenistan was the lone missing state.

Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan appears to be breaking out of the post-Soviet mold through new leadership, revised social policies, an emerging economy, and most important, a focus on increasing the professionalism of its military.³⁶ The ruling out of other states and current wave of change leaves Uzbekistan as one of the best options for a security partner in the region. The U.S. government has slowly ramped up its focus on Uzbekistan, as indicated by an increase in VIP visits to the country. It is therefore vital that the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) reassess its goals and outcomes accordingly.³⁷

How the United States Builds Security Partnerships

Historically, the United States has taken a multi-modal approach to military diplomacy. That is to say that the United States has a litany of tools anywhere on the spectrum from large sums of defense aid to American military hardware to American boots on the ground. While at first, this approach may seem disjointed or even chaotic, it underlines the fact that no single approach will work for every military partner. However, the inherent weakness to this approach is that although it provides many different tools to build partnerships, it does not specifically tailor programs to a country's needs and requirements. These very needs and requirements form the bedrock of a well-crafted security cooperation plan. To plan a better approach to security cooperation and military-to-military relationships, it is important to understand the framework that exists to build these relationships.

U.S. military relationships can be better understood as an umbrella within the framework of fostering foreign relations. The United States seeks to exert soft power through the State Department and other programs, but on that "rainy day," it still needs a strong military relationship that can protect personnel and vital interests. It is also important to cement the primary function of the U.S. military, which first and foremost exists to fight and win the country's



conflicts. However, within this concept, there is still much lateral freedom to conduct relationship building. Within the realm of formal security cooperation, there are a wealth of programs and funding available for use by foreign partners. In peacetime, this is the major tool the U.S. military uses to build partnerships. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) jointly administers these functions with the Department of State and “delivers effective, enduring, and timely partner capabilities that advance U.S. national security and foreign policy interests.”³⁸

DSCA’s programs include defense trade and arms transfers, which provide the opportunity for foreign partners to receive funding to purchase U.S. military weapons and equipment, as well as to acquire unneeded U.S. military equipment. Some notable beneficiaries of these programs are Turkey, that has purchased many missile and defense systems from the United States; Afghanistan, that recently received over one hundred Blackhawk helicopters to help its growing air corps; and of course, the thousands of armored vehicles exiting Iraq

Service members from Tajikistan, the United States, and Uzbekistan collaborate on a mission plan for a fictional scenario 13 August 2019 during Exercise Regional Cooperation 2019 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Exercise Regional Cooperation is an annual exercise to help strengthen military-to-military relationships between the United States and partners in Central and South Asia. (Photo by Sgt. Jennifer Shick, U.S. Army Reserve)

during the drawdown that were distributed to numerous partners, including those in Central Asia.³⁹

Further, DSCA provides global train-and-equip as well as institutional capacity-building programs. Under these programs, foreign partners can receive extensive training for modernizing policies, military-legal process building, and many other areas. Finally, DSCA also administers the International Military Education and Training program (IMET). IMET is an extremely valuable method for building partnerships with foreign nations’ militaries. Under IMET, foreign soldiers can receive slots to highly sought-after U.S. military courses.

For the foreign partner, this can fill gaps in its force with top-notch training, but for the United States, this means that foreign soldiers spend considerable time improving their English-language skills, learning about American culture, and seeing the level of training the United States

equipment to a partner nation creates a multiyear relationship in which U.S. trainers help the partner learn to handle and maintain the equipment. Further, if a partner is using the same equipment as the United States, then U.S. troops can work much more seamlessly with their



U.S. Army Central and the Uzbekistan army participating in Mountain Warfare Exchange August 2018 in the Forish training area, Uzbekistan. Almost the entirety of the exchange was hands-on training. Topics included various climbing and rappelling techniques, the use of mechanical assists, establishing a one-rope bridge, and methods for safely evacuating a casualty from rugged terrain. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan)

can provide. Additionally, the capabilities foreign soldiers bring back home allow for increased interoperability with U.S. troops. DSCA even openly notes that IMET can help to “build alliances for the future.”⁴⁰

Interoperability is sought throughout all these programs. This concept requires some explanation, however. A U.S. aircraft, weapon system, or communications system requires extensive training, not only for the end user but for maintainers also. This means that selling U.S.

partners in training and if the need arises, on the battlefield. In this, interoperability can be viewed as the gold standard for military partnerships.

Predictably, there are numerous cases of wasteful use of government time and money with regard to partner building.⁴¹ However, the proper application of funding programs to enhance partner relations can have dramatic effects. South Korea, with whom the United States has a comparatively strong relationship,

is an example of a partner nation that has benefited greatly from funding for equipment, training from U.S. specialists, and joint training exercises.⁴² The inherent interoperability that this training stimulates should not be underestimated. While many point out the inherent risk involved in sending lethal aid and combat training to regimes that could destabilize in the future, the United States utilizes extensive analysis to avoid unjust violence done with U.S. equipment and training.

Historical Partnership with Uzbekistan

The U.S. military has historically viewed Central Asia as a backwater, especially during times when budgets become more constricted.⁴³ This has resulted in a half-hearted military relationship with Uzbekistan. The United States committed considerable funding to Uzbekistan following the signing of the K2 use agreement in 2001.⁴⁴ However, this was more of a quid pro quo as the use of the K2 Air Base was given by the Karimov regime for free.⁴⁵ This approach makes sense considering that U.S. focus quickly shifted to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. As such, Central Asia remained neglected, and the United States missed a significant opportunity to become a key partner.

In 2015, Uzbekistan received 328 modernized armored vehicles through the EDA program.⁴⁶ This was preceded by a foreign military financing case (under the auspices of the Defense Trade and Arms Transfers program) for over two hundred night-vision devices.⁴⁷ This provides a clear indication of Uzbekistan's concentrated push toward the accomplishment of its security goals.⁴⁸ Further, a recent paper from a senior Uzbek military officer made Uzbekistan's security priorities quite clear, including building capacity and deeper security relationships.⁴⁹

Considering the shakeup of the defense and security sectors, there is an indication that Mirziyoyev wants his military leaders to not only change how they conduct business but also the way they think. Uzbekistan's Armed Forces Academy in Tashkent has brought in several foreign militaries to help diversify teaching techniques. One example of this is the establishment of a Ministry of Defense advisor (MoDA), a position that the United States has in several foreign countries. However, in Uzbekistan, the MoDA is housed at the Armed Forces Academy instead of the Ministry of Defense. This

position was established in Uzbekistan to aid the Armed Forces Academy in providing subject-matter expertise and building core competencies.⁵⁰ The previous MoDA, Dr. Bob Baumann from the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College, spent a yearlong assignment teaching, observing, and aiding the revitalization of military curriculums. He noted that although there was an initial reluctance from students and faculty to adopt the concept of instructors as curators of lesson content, students began to take to this method instead of performing as regurgitators of information.⁵¹

Uzbekistan has shown remarkable interest in navigating stability for its southern neighbor and seems to understand the complexities involved and that the process may take longer than most would like.⁵² No matter the timeline, after eighteen years of direct involvement, it is likely that the need for a secure supply chain in and out of Afghanistan will continue to be important.

During the early years of operations in Afghanistan, the United States partnered with neighboring Pakistan in order to push ground supplies to Afghanistan from the port of Karachi. Due to the deteriorating relations with Pakistan, it became vital to develop a second avenue of approach. In March 2009, for the first time, supplies transited Uzbekistan from a point of entry into northern Afghanistan.⁵³ This became the northern distribution network (NDN). While the NDN came at a time of uneasy relations with Uzbekistan, in 2011 the Senate Appropriations Committee approved an avenue for a waiver on Uzbek aid on the grounds of national security.⁵⁴ Despite the protests of certain human rights groups, many analysts noted that resuming aid to Uzbekistan would go a long way to protecting the NDN.⁵⁵ Uzbekistan continues to have a central role in the NDN, "with a majority of supplies transiting Uzbekistan as a point of entry."⁵⁶

There has been considerable military partnership with Uzbekistan since the unfreezing of relations. Since 2012 the number of military-to-military events per year has steadily increased to the point where now there is a comparable number of annual events in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.⁵⁷ The two countries further refine their plans for specific events at an annual meeting that reviews the previous year of events and solidifies the following year's events.⁵⁸ Speaking specifically to the aforementioned goals of modernization, the United States has paid special attention to medical

exchanges and foreign military financing cases, and modern equipment for special forces, along with highly sought-after joint combined exchange training.⁵⁹

All of this marks the perfect time to capitalize on the U.S. relationship with Uzbekistan. As Mirziyoyev reforms the country, Afghanistan continues to occupy a large proportion of the DOD's bandwidth. As Uzbekistan builds, it knows it needs help. An increase from current levels of support is required to solidify a long-term relationship that will bring Uzbekistan closer to the United States, thereby helping fulfill a wide range of U.S. goals abroad.

Building a Closer Relationship with Uzbekistan

With Mirziyoyev's new direction for Uzbekistan, the United States has increased military cooperation accordingly. This has meant more partnership events, joint training events, and military aid. This shift saw a new high during the May 2018 visit of Mirziyoyev to the United States, the first Uzbek presidential visit since 2002. The visit was seen by many as an opening for the United States to return to the region as a power player and an open acknowledgment by the Mirziyoyev administration that it needed Washington for its goals of military modernization and social revitalization.⁶⁰ Among other topics discussed during the visit, Mirziyoyev spoke with U.S. officials on military equipment acquisition.⁶¹

Quite naturally, cooperation efforts by the United States will always have to contend with other geographical realities. The U.S. approach will constantly need to be adjusted as the balance of power continues to shift across the globe. Contending with Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia must not be forgotten amidst all the other hotspots around the globe. This was concisely noted by Gen. Joseph Votel, former commander of U.S. Central Command, in his posture statement before the U.S. Senate when he said that Russia "also maintains significant influence in Central Asia, where countries of the former-Soviet Union rely on Russia to varying degrees for their economic and security needs."⁶² And further, regarding Uzbekistan, "our bilateral relations serve to counter Russian and Chinese influence in the region."⁶³

One issue of note that should not be neglected is the historical weakness of U.S. military personnel knowledge on host-nation history and culture. Specifically,

in Central Asia, this means a firm understanding of Islam and an understanding of how the military interacts in the public and private space with religion. Most Central Asian Muslims are followers of the moderate Hanafi school, which favors an adaptive and innovative approach to Islam.⁶⁴ Recent developments in Central Asia have seen a rising population of young, energetic Muslims who feel that "Islam is applicable to every aspect of life. It is a fluid and unsystematic set of beliefs that is open to change and adaptation in accordance to local conditions."⁶⁵ However, Russia's Soviet past immediately causes some hesitation on the part of modern Central Asians regarding religion due to the antireligious leaning of Soviet philosophy. China not only has a history of suppressing religion but even today has also taken a suspicious approach to the Central Asian-adjacent, Muslim-Uyghur populations of its Xinxiang Province.

Additionally, the past divide between what the United States considers acceptable behavior and what local governments consider acceptable governance has been problematic. The West tends to view human rights as universal, while many in Central Asia view them as culturally relative.⁶⁶ International norms that are considered contradictory to local cultural and social values are commonly resisted.⁶⁷ This is not to say that the United States should simply abandon its values. Instead, it should take note of and appreciate modest improvements from its partners around the globe as they strive, however slowly, for stability and safety while not abandoning the values that they consider important. These issues notwithstanding, the preceding discussion paints a picture of a nation that is not only ready for change but also ready for more Western involvement and partnership.

Outcomes

As other Central Asian countries see positive outcomes and increased stability as a result of closer work with the United States, they may seek to replicate these results for their own benefit. In the context of the current poor relations with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan's transitional issues, stability and increased focus from an outside partner might be timely. This in turn might cause a natural shift closer to a U.S. sphere of influence. The United States, for its part, would need to continue sustaining focus on the region, which this article argues to be prudent due to the common military dictum that anything can be surged for the military, from equipment

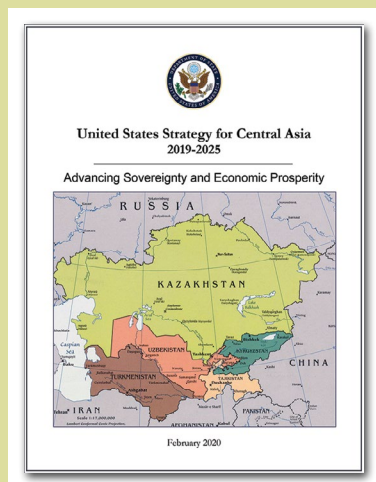
to money to troops. What cannot be surged is relationships. By fostering the Uzbek relationship and allowing further cooperation with other regional players, the United States would see its investment in Uzbekistan pay dividends beyond Uzbek borders.

Further, improved relations in the region would signal to the wider world that the United States not only espouses the concepts of partnership, teamwork, democratization, human rights, and rule of law, but that it is also ready and willing to put adequate funding behind it and push for positive gains in the region. Fostering relationships in a region that may become more aligned and invested in the West in a military sense is a major goal of countless U.S. military programs. This interoperability, as previously discussed, not only means a long-term relationship with partners but also an ability to work closer with partners in peacetime and in war. The power of interoperability should not be difficult to understand, as a close military relationship can easily use interoperability as its foundation.⁶⁸

States. In the current age of reduced budgets, this modest addition is an easy win for the DOD's bottom line.

The United States is especially interested in a partner that is willing to invest in a solution in Afghanistan where mutual interest in border security, counterterrorism, and containing instability intertwine.⁶⁹ For geographical reasons, Kazakhstan is unlikely to play the required part, despite its relatively strong military might. Economic constraints preclude Tajikistan despite its desire. Poor relations with Kyrgyzstan make it a difficult sell, and Turkmenistan is not in a position that makes it a viable option for military collaboration due to its policy of "positive neutrality."⁷⁰ While Uzbekistan is not willing to commit troops for any action outside its sovereign borders, it is invested in a peaceful resolution in Afghanistan.⁷¹

As major powers seek to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian vision, including Central Asia, they will utilize whatever means are at their disposal to bend the region to their whim. China is using its considerable economic strength to carve out influ-



United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025

Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity

The United States was among the first countries to welcome the independence of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and it has worked consistently over the last three decades to support the security, development, and prosperity of each of these countries. Central Asia has always been the strategic and commercial crossroad of civilizations between Europe and Asia. The United States' strategic interest in this region is to build a more stable and prosperous Central Asia that is free to pursue political, economic, and security interests with a variety of partners on its own terms; is connected to global markets and open to international investment; and has strong, democratic institutions, rule of law, and respect for human rights. To read more about the U.S. strategy in Central Asia, please visit <https://uzusembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/78/United-States-Strategy-for-Central-Asia-2019-2025.pdf>.

Difficulties arise surrounding the issue of adjusting military funding in the region; more specifically, it is difficult to decide how to treat this action without further study. However, what seems clear is that the extremely high funding for Kazakhstan may not be yielding the results that the United States is looking for. A modest addition in funding to Uzbekistan could yield much more significant results, while at the same time, would not mean a major increase in expenditures for the United

ence in the region, most notably through its Belt and Road Initiative projects that seek to increase monetary flow, increase Chinese support in the region, and better connect the East and West.⁷² The concern among many in the military and diplomatic sector is the alarming leverage that China exerts on a growing number of developing countries.⁷³ Russia seeks to flex its muscles and regain its status as a first-tier world power. Russia has made inroads in this endeavor

through disinformation, illegal land seizures, and a shift to fierce nationalism. While eliminating Russian or Chinese influence in the region is a fool's errand and should not be the goal, furthering American military influence in the region through a targeted, long-term partnership with Uzbekistan could reduce Russian and Chinese influence.

For all the logical reasons and possible outcomes, Uzbekistan and the Central Asian region should remain important to U.S. military leaders even long after a future stability is navigated in Afghanistan. As Gen. Lloyd Austin, former commander of U.S. Central Command, argued in 2014, "By improving upon our

military-to-military relationships we will be better able to maintain access and influence [and] counter malign activity."⁷⁴ The United States appears to be at a crossroads where its policy and commitment toward Central Asia should be further clarified. While many analysts around the globe have espoused assorted views, the one that rings most true is from a senior diplomat who recently said that it is vital that we "rethink Uzbekistan." This seems particularly apropos in the military context currently, as the United States looks forward to what posture it will take in the coming years and which partners will help the United States realize its mutually beneficial military goals. ■

Notes

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