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US FOREIGN POLICY MAKING IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Russia's war in Ukraine has exacerbated security risks in Central Asia and is pushing Washington to refocus some attention to the region, as seen with Secretary of State Antony Blinken's trip to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in early 2023. The overarching goals for the United States in the region remain consistent with the past, albeit with Afghanistan deemphasized. Senior Biden administration officials today make clear that the U.S. continues to support Central Asian states' efforts to secure their independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity—issues that have risen back to the forefront amid Moscow's brutal war in Ukraine. However, supporting the sovereignty and independence of Central Asian states is not new U.S. policy. Instead, it is consistent with long-standing U.S. national interests in the region and has been a common theme of U.S. policy over the past thirty years across six U.S. administrations.

Foreign policy formation in the United States for the most part falls under the mandate of the executive branch. The U.S. constitution has devolved significant power over domestic issues to the state and local levels, which means that the president has the most leeway in the foreign policy field. The executive branch, for example, drafts national security strategies, appoints senior defense, economic, foreign policy and intelligence officials, and conducts diplomacy on behalf of the United States. There are certainly checks on presidential power in the U.S. constitution. Congress has the power to declare war, enjoys significant power over the budget and must confirm all presidential nominees from the assistant secretary and ambassadorial levels to cabinet officials. Congress also has the power to earmark or dedicate specific funds to defense, foreign or international development programs, essentially forcing the administration's hand in pursuing a specific policy. This enhances the power of the branch - and those who lobby Congress - in the foreign policy arena.

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HOW THIS PLAYS OUT TODAY?

The Biden Administration's pullout from Afghanistan and the rapid fall of that country to the Taliban damaged the image of the United States in Central Asia; it also undermined the image of the Biden administration as a capable foreign and defense actor among republicans in Congress and many Americans-at-large. In fall 2021, the Biden presidency looked weak and ineffective on the global and domestic stage. However, the fallout from the crisis in Ukraine now provides the U.S. with new opportunities to engage. The administration's use of intelligence in warning about an impending Russian invasion has bolstered the image and clout of the intelligence community, particularly that of the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Ambassador Bill Burns. A career and highly decorated former foreign service officer, he today performs quiet diplomatic functions as well as being the head of the largest U.S. intelligence agency. Intelligence and security cooperation moving forward will remain an important part of U.S. outreach to partners and allies, including those in Central Asia.

So, how is foreign policy formed in the U.S.? As mentioned above, it is based largely on U.S. interests, as opposed to the whims of a specific president. While the rhetoric of former President Donald Trump on NATO, Russia, democratic values and global trade often was out of sync with traditional U.S. foreign policy, his actual administration did not veer too far off course on many issues, including enhanced sanctions against Russia, support to the Syrian opposition, strong ties with Israel, Taiwan and the U.K, continued NATO expansion (in the Balkans) and a continued U.S. commitment to the C5+1 initiative in Central Asia. That initiative was a signature of the Obama administration, yet it has so far survived through three different U.S. presidents. Even the frictions within NATO of the Trump era turned out to be short-lived. NATO turned out to be surprisingly strong and unified in 2022 when war returned to Europe.

U.S. policy is made through the "interagency process" in which the National Security Council oversees policy formation. The President, National Security Advisor and Cabinet officials may set the tone and priorities, but leave actual policy making to the working levels, particularly in regions where the U.S. has peripheral interests, such as Central Asia. Working-level officials – namely NSC Directors and deputy assistant secretaries of various departments – meet to discuss and propose policy ideas, which the NSC usually brings together in a working paper. The NSC's overall job is to coordinate the policy making process, develop strategies, and assign tasks to specific agencies with the agencies themselves largely left to develop specific plans of action.

These working papers gradually move up the chain from the working level to the NSC Senior Director/Assistant Secretary level, and then up the chain all the way to the “Deputies’ level” (consisting of deputy Cabinet secretaries) or the “Principal’s level” (consisting of President, National Security Advisor and Cabinet secretaries), where the policies are refined and eventually approved.

Today, the U.S. needs to present itself to Central Asian governments and societies at large as a friendly partner with global clout. Yet, as a geographically distant partner, Washington can and should show itself as neither posing security risks nor possessing aspirations for deep influence in the region, despite Russian and Chinese rhetoric to the contrary. Washington must help mitigate the financial repercussions of the war and Western sanctions as they are exacerbating political and economic insecurity across the Eurasian landmass. That insecurity sadly is reinforcing the region’s autocratic tendencies.

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The U.S. and like-minded states also should help bolster Central Asian countries’ ability to shore up their own political and economic sovereignty. However, limited direct U.S. economic or security interests in Central Asia in the post-Afghanistan environment require Washington to temper expectations and avoid the lofty promises of the past. Instead, it should work through friends and allies with growing interests in the region and help Central Asian states bolster their independence and integration into global markets.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Russia’s war in Ukraine has disrupted the status quo in Central Asia. It damaged Russia’s image as a capable security provider, economic partner and ally. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the five Central Asian states went their separate ways, each eager to shore up their own national identities and manage their individual relationships with Moscow, their former colonial power. Yet, weak institutions, authoritarian practices, conflicts in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and lingering ethnic tensions between and within countries have vexed the region ever since. Unable to resolve regional tensions on their own, the countries of Central Asia generally looked back to Moscow to help manage regional insecurity, with the United States later coming in to address instability emanating from Afghanistan.

Events of the past two years, however, have upended that arrangement. First came the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to power. Second was Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and ethnic cleansing of Ukrainians, which has unnerved both regional elites and large sectors of Central Asian societies. Both were wake-up calls for Central Asians to manage their affairs independently and push for greater regional cooperation, a key component of doing the former. Recognizing that a united region is more effective at attracting global attention and encouraging new foreign partners, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are taking the lead in these efforts. For that reason, Astana and Tashkent remain the key interlocutors for Washington in the region.

Furthermore, Moscow's brutal war in Ukraine is accelerating the end of the post-Soviet era by encouraging Central Asian states' efforts to delink themselves from Russia economically, politically and culturally. While this process has only begun, the war notably launched regional discussions of the need for complete de-colonization; Moscow's denial of another former Soviet state's right to exist is facilitating a spike in local Central Asian nationalism with an anti-Russian tinge—all to Moscow's chagrin. Although wary of directly confronting Moscow over Ukraine, Central Asian governments do not recognize Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory; several even have deployed humanitarian aid to Ukraine; all appear unnerved by the conduct and failures of the Russian military in Ukraine, raising questions over the capabilities of the Russian army and quality of Russian-origin defense material.

Russia certainly should not be counted out in the region; it has multiple coercive tools it can use to try to retain its political, economic and cultural influence. On the surface, diplomatic and economic ties seemed to have increased over the past year. Yet, the war is providing regional leaders with greater leeway and agency in how they orchestrate their foreign and security policies. With Moscow facing a stalemate in Ukraine and pariah status in key parts of the globe, the region certainly is getting more of Moscow's attention, but it is also garnering interest from the rest of the world. The European Union, India, Japan, Pakistan, South Korea, Turkey and parts of the Middle East are now more active in the region. The Biden administration has recommitted itself as a partner to the region through the C5+1 format, the third U.S. administration to support this initiative, suggesting this Obama-era structure is here to stay.

However, given their countries' geographic vulnerabilities, the governments of the region must walk a [fine line](#), eager to avoid antagonizing Moscow; Washington needs to give them the space to do so. On the diplomatic front, the Kremlin still sees the region as friendly, particularly in comparison to some other parts of the world. Russian officials repeatedly have engaged their Central Asian counterparts throughout 2022

and 2023 in virtual, bilateral and multilateral formats despite growing frictions in those relationships. With the exception of the Turkmen leadership, Central Asian political figures are willing to be courted by Moscow but prefer focusing their engagements far more on the symbolism of high-level diplomacy than the substance of linking their countries more closely with Moscow.

Nonetheless, these states have not signed onto Western sanctions against Russia and are unlikely to do so. This has allowed the region to become a hub for Moscow to get around sanctions and its geopolitical isolation, a point of tension with Washington and several European capitals. Central Asian trade boomed with Russia in 2022, largely due to sanctions evasion and parallel imports of commercial goods no longer available on the Russian market. [Financial flows](#) from Russia to the region also have risen over the same time period, defying early expectations of reduced labor remittances as Russia's economy slowed. On the surface, this rosier-than-expected economic boost is good news for the region, although these financial flows likely could end up as a temporary trend of the first year of the war, as International Monetary Fund officials have warned. The United States is also likely to ramp up sanctions enforcement, as indicated by the April 2023 visit to Central Asia of the senior [U.S. Treasury](#) official responsible for combatting terrorist financing and financial crimes. However, as Washington pushes for greater sanctions compliance, it must address the fallout of stricter enforcement.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE UNITED STATES?

The United States has five broad and interconnected goals for Central Asia in the post-Afghanistan/post-Ukraine era. The first is to support the diversification of Central Asia's economic and security policy options—something the U.S. can do in partnership with its allies and friends, as outlined above. Russia's war in Ukraine is accelerating multipolarity globally. While U.S. politicians frequently express alarm about the shift away from a U.S.-dominated world, multipolarity is not necessarily bad for U.S. interests in the long term, especially given the American people's concern about Washington being stretched overseas.

Furthermore, multipolarity is not happening to Moscow's benefit in Eurasia. Today, Russia faces growing Turkish ambitions and presence in Central Asia through the Organization of Turkic States. As Russia's war effort falters and sanctions take their toll on the Russian arms industry, its Turkish counterpart is increasingly seen throughout Eurasia as an alternate and more effective supplier of defense material. India and Pakistan likewise have stepped up their engagement in the region, largely in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan with the former serving a similar

role as Turkey as potential arms supplier. The Ukraine crisis, Russian defense industrial sector difficulties and Moscow's distraction provide India with openings to engage economically, politically and in the security sphere over the long term.

Other U.S. partners, including the EU, several U.S. Asian allies and Middle Eastern allies, are also increasingly focusing on the region from an economic standpoint. This is all good news for Central Asia and the U.S. Washington should support Central Asian states' efforts to move beyond their traditional "multi-vector" foreign policies of balancing China, Russia and the United States to embrace this larger set of interlocutors.

Washington also sees how Russia uses a variety of threats and coercive methods against its Central Asian neighbors to stymie their efforts to diversify their economic and foreign policies. [Russian officials](#) and [media personalities](#) have deployed harsh language questioning Kazakhstan's historical and territorial legitimacy. Citing "technical" and "environment" concerns, Moscow also suspended the CPC pipeline through which Kazakhstan exports oil to global markets; it also banned Kyrgyz [dairy imports](#) on false sanitary grounds in response to a local drive to reduce Russian cultural influence in the country (i.e., growing calls to follow other Turkic-speaking former Soviet states in switching the Kyrgyz language from the Cyrillic to Latin alphabet.) A second U.S. goal therefore is to support Central Asian efforts to diversify the region's export routes and markets—something that the recent uptick in cooperation between Central Asian states also should facilitate. Russian pressure on the region has reinvigorated longstanding discussions for the Middle Corridor transport artery that would skirt Russia by linking Central Asia to global markets via the Caucasus. The political will is there in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey, although the logistics and financing of building such a project remain daunting.

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The reform agenda remains a priority for the Biden administration, although reform has stalled across the entire region. Given the region's harsh climate towards democratization, U.S. expectations for success on this agenda remain low. Yet, Washington should continue to push for economic reform and good governance initiatives—both of which tie into the previous goal of helping the region diversify its slate of economic partners, export routes and export markets beyond its immediate neighbors. Washington will continue to push on reform issues, including tying them

with the region's ability to shore up its sovereignty. However, the U.S. will focus primarily on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan where there has been rhetorical support and occasional progress.

Although U.S. forces have left the broader region, security cooperation with the United States continues in key areas: addressing Soviet nuclear, biological and chemical legacies in the region, enhancing border security, managing the fallout from the Taliban's return to power, and encouraging Central Asian states to enhance security ties with U.S. friends and partners. On the Afghan issue, U.S. cooperation and communication with Tashkent, which has an open dialogue with the Taliban government, will remain an important component of the U.S.-Uzbek relationship as well.

Finally, the U.S. right now hopes to take advantage of the growing appetite for intra-Central Asian cooperation to help the region address climate change, the energy transition and other emerging challenges—all issues that have risen in importance in U.S. foreign policy since Joe Biden won the presidency. How the Biden Administration will make progress on this front remains unclear, particularly if it is replaced by a republican counterpart in the next election cycle. However, the reality is that the world is moving away from fossil fuels no matter who is in charge in Washington. Central Asian economies, particularly those of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and to some extent Uzbekistan, are ill-equipped to manage that transition. Regional energy and water shortages also mandate reform; both are issues in which the U.S. has expertise from tackling similar problems on the local level at home. Washington is focusing assistance and financing to these efforts, but U.S. partners can help on this front too. Recognizing this trend, several hydrocarbon-rich Gulf states are moving into renewables, including investing in wind and solar power projects in Central Asia. China is doing the same.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Russian revanchism and the steep decline in U.S.-Chinese relations mandate that the U.S. engage cautiously in Central Asia, first, doing no harm, and second, avoiding Trump-era zero-sum approaches. Washington should also temper expectations. The American people in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections made clear that they want Washington to focus on issues closer to home and pull back globally. However, Russia's war in Ukraine and the brutality committed by its troops in Ukraine have refocused U.S. public and policymaker attention to the possibility of greater instability in the broad Eurasian landmass. Putin's folly in Ukraine and the arrival of additional

outside powers to Central Asia will complicate Russia's goal to keep Eurasia as part of its "privileged sphere of influence." In fact, both U.S. and Central Asian policy makers likely see eye-to-eye that Central Asia is not and should not be seen as exclusively in Moscow's "backyard."

The U.S. has no need to step in to fill that growing void of Russian power in Central Asia; others that are closer geographically and have greater interests in the region are already doing so. Yet, Washington certainly should be encouraging that trend, aiding Central Asian efforts to diversify away from Russia, and facilitating local efforts to integrate more directly into global markets and supply chains, which will enhance the region's efforts to stand on its own.

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