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## The Great Balancing Act: U.S. Engagement in Central Asia

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Central Asia is a diverse region with a critical geographic disposition, various natural resources, and rapidly developing industries such as energy production. The region comprises Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, all of which are former Soviet republics. Given this history, Central Asia remains mainly influenced politically by Russia. However, Russia's influence has waned since it invaded Ukraine last year. Meanwhile, China has played a more prominent role in Central Asia in recent years by investing in new regional projects through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This dynamic has prompted Central Asian countries to balance these two local powers. As Central Asian countries balance Russia and China, what are U.S. interests in the region? How can the United States avoid entanglement in regional conflicts with fellow great powers?

U.S. policymakers could decide that an expansive foreign policy is in Washington's interests; however, the United States should instead focus on pursuing a narrow set of economic and diplomatic interests. Historically, U.S. regional engagement has been characterized by military intervention, mainly due to the war in Afghanistan. Today, the United States faces more pressing challenges related to energy security and excavating rare-earth minerals. It can address these issues through cooperation with partners in Central Asia.

The United States relies on interventionist, autocratic regimes like Saudi Arabia, the world's largest crude oil producer, for energy production and to modulate oil prices. Meanwhile, countries like Kazakhstan are looking for new partners and host largely untapped potential to bring more energy to the global market. While Central Asian countries are not traditional U.S. partners, American innovation and oil extraction and production expertise could help make this a mutually beneficial relationship.

Similarly, rare-earth minerals found in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, such as lithium and cobalt, are critical for many modern technologies, including products from computers, smartphones, and household appliances.<sup>1</sup> The United States is particularly vulnerable to disruptions in rare-earth mineral supply chains, as it relies heavily on foreign sources to meet domestic demand for a critical commodity.<sup>2</sup> The United States and its partners can work to stabilize these markets and diversify production by facilitating interaction between their mining sectors and those of Central Asian countries, thereby improving access to foreign markets and investment.

Additionally, the safe and efficient transport of goods through the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), or Middle Corridor, will be critical to mitigate the geographic challenges of connecting Central Asia with Europe. The Middle Corridor represents the only trade and infrastructure route between Europe and China that transports goods through the Caspian region while circumventing Russia.<sup>3</sup> Coordination with countries within the Caspian region, including Turkey and Azerbaijan, is necessary as the Middle Corridor passes through their territory.

Lastly, exercising transparency and cooperating with Russia and China on shared interests must be among U.S. interests rather than direct competition, which could unnecessarily increase tensions. Central Asian countries do not want to be the battleground for great power competition but also want to avoid economic dependence on Russia and China. The United States should consider opportunities to find common ground with Russia and China by optimizing the extraction of these resources, which could serve as an off-ramp for current tensions and reduce the risk of future wars.

## **U.S. Interests in Central Asia**

Under a grand strategy of realism and restraint, the United States should abandon the pursuit of American leadership as an end in and of itself, acting instead as a facilitator and convener. Individual countries will do what is necessary to preserve their own interests. However, building coalitions of willing partners wherever possible should take precedence over reckless competition. America must preserve its values at home but not foist them upon other nations. Instead, the United States can provide an example for other countries to follow.

In Central Asia, the United States must act pragmatically by pursuing a narrow set of interests critical to Americans' economic security. The United States is in the market for new energy providers for several reasons. The United States produces around 18.8 million barrels per day (b/d) and consumes approximately 20.5 million b/d.<sup>4</sup> If this rate continues, the United States will perpetually need oil from outside sources. Although it could increase oil

production, the costs for U.S. producers significantly trump those in countries like Venezuela and Russia.

While the United States gets most of its energy from friendly neighbors Canada and Mexico, it also has relied on energy-providing actors that are provoking conflicts in their local regions, such as Russia and Saudi Arabia. For example, of the 7.86 million b/d the United States imported in 2020, Canada provided 4.13 million barrels of oil, while Mexico, Russia, and Saudi Arabia exported 751,000, 540,000, and 522,000 barrels, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Without the Keystone Pipeline, transport of crude oil from Canada to the United States will be limited to more expensive methods like rail, as existing pipelines are operating at or near capacity.<sup>6</sup> This roadblock may force the United States to turn to other partners.

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict has further complicated matters, as President Joe Biden issued an executive order prohibiting the importation of Russian petroleum products, liquid natural gas (LNG), and coal products.<sup>7</sup> This is undoubtedly a rational and appropriate decision by U.S. leadership. However, it will further Saudi Arabia's leverage to modulate oil prices and production. Saudi Arabia's oil production cuts have prompted U.S. diplomatic visits to Riyadh, in which the Biden Administration pleaded with the Saudi government to increase oil production to no avail.<sup>8</sup> While both the United States and Saudi Arabia have promised each other economic "consequences," Riyadh could utilize dangerous points of leverage.<sup>9</sup> This may include deepening the U.S.'s involvement in Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, which has led to a myriad of human rights abuses.<sup>10</sup> Assisting Central Asian countries to produce more oil can be a less confrontational and risky measure to increase global energy supplies.

Ultimately, the United States should exercise transparency with other great powers involved in the region, including Russia and China. Countries like Kazakhstan are enjoying greater autonomy regardless of Chinese and Russian influence.<sup>11</sup> With Moscow hampered by its war in Ukraine, there is not much it can do to dissuade the Central Asian countries from seeking new partners. While energy cooperation with China and especially Russia may seem unlikely, reducing the environmental consequences of oil and gas production and extraction in Kazakhstan is

low-hanging fruit and could be mutually rewarding. Western energy companies like BP and Exxon Mobil have identified methane reduction as one of their objectives.<sup>12</sup> Cooperation to decrease methane emissions would serve the Central Asian countries, Russia, China, the EU, and the United States.

Rare-earth minerals are another vital commodity critical for the U.S. economy common to Central Asia. Currently, the United States has only one rare-earth mine and lacks the capability to process rare-earth minerals.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the United States has relied completely on outside sources to attain these materials. China, on the other hand, accounts for 63% of the world's rare-earth mining, 85% of rare-earth processing, and 92% of rare-earth magnet production.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, China's demand for raw-earth materials surpasses the available supply.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, China might also be in the market for alternative rare-earth mineral markets.

The feasibility and extent of cooperation between the United States and China in the Central Asian rare-earth mineral market would depend on multiple factors. While some may consider the competition aspect of acquiring these minerals zero-sum, the environmental effects of excavation, extraction, and processing are not. Central Asian countries have shown they do not want to be beholden to China and want to work with new partners. These partners include countries such as South Korea and France. China has struggled to mitigate the harmful effects of its excavation and all parties could experience mutual benefits by cooperating in this area.

Despite Central Asia's abundance of rare-earth minerals, the republics lack the proper technology to exploit their resources. The United States and its allies that invest in Central Asian rare-earth minerals, like South Korea, could work to improve Central Asian technologies and gain access to Central Asian markets.

The United States should also mimic Europe's engagement model in Central Asia. Europe has correctly identified important industries in Central Asia that could provide economic benefits, such as energy. This is in conjunction with a strong emphasis on European diplomacy and a complementary

approach to China's BRI.

All economic engagement will be futile without a transport path. While Europe and Turkey should take the lead in facilitating the transport of goods through the Middle Corridor since they will be most affected by this development, the United States can play the role of a mediator and facilitator. The United States can help Europe, China, and the Central Asian countries identify bottlenecks that pose problems for practical transport. Digitization of multimodal data and document exchange will also be essential to locate cargo and account for uncertainty, thus enhancing trust in mitigating constraints.

Finally, the United States must recognize that Russia and China will always be the most influential actors in the region. For example, it is unrealistic to expect that Central Asian countries will sever rare-earth mineral trade with China, given its proximity and abundant reserves. However, the United States could include China in discussions regarding rare-earth extraction by leveraging Chinese dependence on the United States to export its rare-earth minerals for processing.<sup>16</sup>

## **The Great Game in Central Asia**

### **Russia's History in Central Asia**

Russia is the dominant historical and cultural influence in Central Asia. During the nineteenth century, Central Asia was the arena for the "Great Game" between the Russian Empire and the British Empire. The Russian Empire engaged in imperial expansion throughout the nineteenth century by conquering Central Asia, adding 1.5 million square miles to its territory and at least six million people.<sup>17</sup> These conquests were eventually integrated into the Soviet Union as five Soviet socialist republics in 1936.<sup>18</sup>

During the Soviet period, Moscow incorporated Central Asia into its centralized production and distribution system.<sup>19</sup> Regional borders were officially closed off from many outside products and exchanges.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, Afghanistan became a focal point for Moscow's Central/South Asia policy in the 1950s as Afghanistan served as an area of Cold War competition with the West.<sup>21</sup>

The Soviet Union worked to establish close relations with Kabul by providing economic aid and military assistance through its 1956 Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty.<sup>22</sup> This treaty was an attempt to offset American ambitions to gain political clout in Afghanistan and to support a pro-Soviet government in Kabul. Daoud Khan led a 1973 coup overthrowing Mohammed Zahir Shah's unpopular monarchy, which appeared to solidify the Soviet Union's standing in Afghanistan further.<sup>23</sup> However, this government was short-lived, as Khan was assassinated in 1978, and the new government proclaimed independence from Soviet influence.<sup>24</sup>

This threat to its dominance in Afghanistan prompted the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan on December 24, 1979, under the pretext of upholding the Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty.<sup>25</sup> In 1988, upon failing to install a sympathetic communist regime in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union signed an accord with the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and agreed to withdraw its troops the following year.<sup>26</sup>

The Soviet-Afghan war facilitated the rise of the Taliban, which rose to power after the collapse of the communist government three years following the Soviet withdrawal. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan precipitated the fragmentation of the Soviet Union and the independence of its Soviet republics. After becoming independent in 1991, Central Asian countries liberalized their economies and opened their borders to foreign trade and investment.<sup>27</sup> Russia has remained highly influential in Central Asia, with Central Asian countries adopting a similarly authoritarian political model.<sup>28</sup>

## Russian Interests in Central Asia

On March 31, 2023, the Kremlin released its "Russian Concept of Foreign Policy," outlining its various foreign policy aims.<sup>29</sup> Concerning Central Asia, Russia plans to strengthen systems of mutually advantageous, comprehensive, multilateral cooperation by utilizing established groups, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which aims for economic integration in the former Soviet region.<sup>30</sup> This group, which encompasses Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, has the objective of creating a common market similar

to the EU.<sup>31</sup> While public support for participation in the EAEU is high among its Central Asian members, Russian culture and language are losing their dominant position in Central Asia, especially among Central Asian youth.<sup>32</sup> Those skeptical of closer economic integration with Russia worry about the risks and costs of reliance on Russia, especially amid the Russo-Ukrainian War.<sup>33</sup>

Given its proximity, security is the primary Russian interest in Central Asia, as it worries about the potential spillover of terrorism from Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> Regional threats Russia considers to be security risks include the drug trade, human trafficking, illegal migration, and terrorism.<sup>35</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the flow of militants flowing across Afghanistan's Central Asian borders has been an especially salient issue.<sup>36</sup> Some of the most active militants in Afghanistan have their roots in neighboring Central Asian countries, such as the Islamic movements of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; the Turkistan Islamic Party (formerly East Turkistan Islamic Movement), founded in western China; and Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K), which, unlike the Taliban, has broader regional ambitions.<sup>37</sup> In the past, Russia worried about the potential for Islamic extremism to take root in places where historical anti-Russian sentiments are prevalent, such as Chechnya.<sup>38</sup> After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia has increased security assistance to Central Asia.<sup>39</sup> However, due to its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has been forced to move troops from its bases in Central Asia to support its war in Ukraine.<sup>40</sup>

Since 1992, Russia has relied on the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) alliance—which includes Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—to pursue its regional security interests. The CSTO serves as a forum for political-military cooperation, including through arms sales, training, and joint exercises.<sup>41</sup> This alliance has become more relevant since the United States withdrew from Afghanistan owing to the prospect of potential conflict between CSTO members and the Taliban government.<sup>42</sup> After the Taliban took Kabul, Russia coordinated with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to hold military exercises.<sup>43</sup> Russia also maintains military facilities in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>44</sup>

Russia also fears the possibility of anti-regime protests known as “color revolutions” in its near abroad, including in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan has had two such revolutions, with the outing of Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev via the “Tulip Revolution” in 2005 and the “People’s April Revolution,” which overthrew then-President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. These removals of authoritarian leaders who initially had good relations with Moscow led Russian officials to accuse the United States of funding NGOs and media outlets to interfere in the domestic affairs of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>45</sup>

The CSTO received a boost in credibility among its members when Kazakhstan called upon Russia to assist in stabilizing the 2022 Bloody January protests, which erupted after a sudden sharp increase in liquefied gas prices following the lifting of a government-enforced price cap on January 1, 2022. Through this intervention, Russia displayed its ability to reassure the countries under its security umbrella.

However, the CSTO’s prestige has faded since Russia invaded Ukraine. Russia could not deliver on Armenia’s security requests as clashes occurred along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. This event has made CSTO members like Armenia question Moscow’s ability to act on its security commitments while tied up in Ukraine.<sup>46</sup> Violence has also broken out among CSTO members as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have waged several border clashes, with the latest occurring from September 14-20, 2022. The internal clashes between CSTO members have shed light on the absence of mechanisms in the CSTO that can address conflicts between its member states.<sup>47</sup>

Another goal for Moscow is to support energy projects in the oil, gas, and hydropower industries.<sup>48</sup> After the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow inherited the infrastructure Central Asian states needed to transport energy, which created a dependence on Russia’s pipelines and energy market.<sup>49</sup> During the 1990s, many industrial enterprises in Central Asia lost their previous markets and were unable to compete under the new market conditions.<sup>50</sup> Over time, the Central Asian countries slowly transitioned from their previous command economies and coordinated with Russia on energy issues.

Russia and Kazakhstan, which share the world’s second-longest land border, have collaborated on significant energy projects strengthening cross-border cooperation.<sup>51</sup> Russia and Turkmenistan also have a history of cooperation in the energy sector. In 2003, the two countries signed a 25-year natural gas shipment contract to increase the transfer of natural gas from 5 billion cubic meters per year in the first phase to 70 to 80 billion cubic meters (bcm) annually in Russia.<sup>52</sup> In 2019, after a three-year hiatus, Russia’s Gazprom resumed gas purchases from Turkmenistan by signing a five-year contract with an annual volume of 5.5 billion cubic meters.<sup>53</sup>

Russia maintains diplomatic contact with Central Asian countries via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which meets annually regarding trade, energy, and education.<sup>54</sup> The SCO was founded in Shanghai on June 15, 2001, by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>55</sup> The organization aims to strengthen relations among member-states by promoting cooperation in political affairs, economics, and trade, scientific-technical, cultural, and educational spheres. The SCO also seeks to maintain energy, transportation, tourism, and environmental protection.<sup>56</sup> For the SCO, safeguarding regional peace, security, and stability is necessary to facilitate the creation of a democratic, equitable international political and economic order.<sup>57</sup> However, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has prompted Central Asian countries to seek a more stable partner. Russia’s role in Central Asia has been declining over the years and overshadowed by another great power: China.

## **China is a Relative Newcomer**

While Russia has deep historical and cultural ties in Central Asia, China is a relative newcomer to the region. Despite this, China has become increasingly influential in Central Asia and even overshadows Russia in certain areas. Beijing has primarily invested in three key areas: energy, transport, and security.

Relations between China and Central Asia have improved since the republics’ independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. During the Soviet period, shared borders between China and the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik Soviet Socialist Republics were unsettled and a source of tension.<sup>58</sup> After these

republics became sovereign nations, they swiftly demarcated their borders with China. These border demarcations led to the 1996 formation of the Shanghai Five, consisting of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.<sup>59</sup> This group held summits to promote more significant mutual cooperative efforts in trade, culture, military, and security affairs.<sup>60</sup> The Shanghai Five became the SCO in 2001 when it expanded to include Uzbekistan as a partner. Pakistan and India became members in 2017.<sup>61</sup> The SCO's newest permanent member is Iran, which gained its member status on July 4, 2023.<sup>62</sup>

China tapped into its “Silk Road” roots with Central Asia when President Xi Jinping announced the BRI in Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2013.<sup>63</sup> This initiative established China as a significant global player aspiring to expand its influence through infrastructure, transportation, and energy projects. In addition, it outlined China's intention to increase economic links to Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Russia, and Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>64</sup> Central Asia stands out among these areas because of its strategic location, natural resources, and ripeness for investment.

## China's Moves in Central Asia

China has increasingly prioritized Central Asia in its diplomatic strategy because of its geographic importance to the BRI network. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were the first countries President Xi visited after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.<sup>65</sup> On January 25, 2022, President Xi hosted the five leaders of Central Asia to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and their countries.<sup>66</sup> At this summit, China announced its goal to increase trade between China and the region to \$70 billion by 2030.<sup>67</sup> Through the BRI, infrastructure projects like the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway and the Central Asia–China gas pipeline have solidified Beijing's economic influence in Central Asia.

**Figure 1: A Map of the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline**



Source: Wikimedia Commons (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CentralAsiaChinapipeline.png>)

As a result of the BRI, China has engaged in significant trade with Central Asia. While Central Asia does not rank highly on China's list of trading partners, China is the region's most important trading partner. By 2018, China held a 29% share of regional trade, while trade with Russia declined to 18%.<sup>68</sup>

China sees Central Asia as vital for its energy security, unlike Russia, which has vast energy reserves. Overland trade routes through this region allow China to reduce its dependence on seaborne Middle Eastern imports for energy.<sup>69</sup> China now imports oil, gas, uranium, and other minerals from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>70</sup> Following the advent of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, China began to bypass trade through Russia by increasing cargo transit through Kazakhstan by a factor of six.<sup>71</sup> This connectivity could prophylactically serve Beijing's long-term interest in maintaining economic stability and keeping supply chains open if a conflict over Taiwan arose.<sup>72</sup>

While Beijing has generally deferred to Moscow on security matters in the region, regional stability is still a high priority for China, especially following the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. China aims to avoid the potential spillover of terrorist activity from Afghanistan into western China and the Xinjiang Autonomous Region.<sup>73</sup> China views the Turkistan Islamic Party, a group that seeks to liberate the Xinjiang Province and the Uyghur people from Chinese government control, as a severe threat.<sup>74</sup>

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have been responsive to the Chinese presence in the region, which includes military exercises, military equipment transfers, the construction of security infrastructure, and the deployment of private security companies.<sup>75</sup> China supplied Central Asian countries with 13% of their arms from 2015 to 2020, a significant increase from the 1.5% provided from 2010 to 2014.<sup>76</sup> These figures may increase if Russia remains preoccupied with its conflict in Ukraine and cannot fulfill its security duties in the region.<sup>77</sup>

China demonstrated its intent to expand its influence in Central Asia during the Xian Summit, where Central Asian and Chinese presidents met at a summit in Xian, China, on May 18-19, 2023. The Xian Summit was the first summit where China singularly met with the Central Asian countries, signaling its independence from Russia in its Central Asia strategy. At the summit, President Xi announced \$3.8 billion for financial support and grants to bolster building infrastructure and boost trade, including the construction of the 523-km Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-China railway that would bypass Russia.<sup>78</sup> China has sought to construct a “New Silk Road” spanning westwards for years, and Russia’s decline makes this more likely. A land-based connection to Europe allowing for efficient economic activity, which the U.S. Navy cannot blockade, is a major goal for China and might be a solution to their “Malacca Dilemma” (which refers to China’s lack of alternatives and vulnerability to a naval blockade of the strait). The Xian Summit showed that China’s priorities to expand BRI throughout Central Asia and maintain stability have not changed.

## U.S. Policy in Central Asia Needs to Change

On February 5, 2020, the U.S. Department of State released the *United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity*.<sup>79</sup> Its list of objectives includes “working with Central Asian states to build their resilience to short and long-term threats to their stability; to strengthen their independence from malign actors and to develop political, economic, and security partnerships with the United States.”<sup>80</sup> Ultimately,

the U.S. Department of State aims to “foster regional independence and not create dependency.”<sup>81</sup>

Recent U.S. diplomacy in Central Asia has yet to help matters. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Donald Lu, visited Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan in November 2022 to “reinforce the United States’ commitment to each country’s independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.”<sup>82</sup> Assistant Secretary Lu echoed this message during his subsequent April 2023 trip to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the recent U.S. *National Security Strategy* (NSS), released in October of 2022, frames Russia and China as presenting “different challenges” in Central Asia, while the NSS also asserts that Russia “poses an immediate threat to the free and open international system.”<sup>84</sup>

Stressing Central Asian countries’ independence is unnecessary for the United States and will complicate constructive cooperation in Central Asia. The Central Asian countries are already hedging their bets by balancing Russia and China. China is strongly interested in preserving its investments in Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan. Therefore, China’s increase in security commitments in Central Asia signals that China has red lines in the region that Russia should not cross, including invading its Central Asian neighbors. Therefore, the United States has no fundamental role to play in the security realm in Central Asia.

Furthermore, emphasizing meeting political goals, such as protecting human rights via “strengthening civil society organizations,” could exacerbate Russian and Chinese fears of potential “color revolutions” in their professed sphere of influence. As Secretary Lu said preceding Antony Blinken’s February 2023 trip to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, “Advancing human rights in Central Asia has always been a top priority of the United States.”<sup>85</sup> USAID is currently funding the Central Asia Media Program (MediaCAMP), which aims to “develop a more balanced information environment in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.”<sup>86</sup> Despite these efforts, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan’s overall freedom has stagnated at a “Not Free” level, according to Freedom’s House’s latest *Freedom in the World* index.<sup>87</sup> Aggressively promoting radical social

changes in Central Asian civil society will exacerbate regime security fears in Russia and China.<sup>88</sup>

The U.S. Department of State report includes promoting U.S. private sector investment in the region, fostering educational and cultural exchange, and interacting through diplomatic platforms like the C5+1, where the United States has met annually with the leaders of Central Asian nations since 2015. While using non-military tools is welcome and preferable to military coercion, these goals are too broad and vague. Rather than focusing on comprehensive initiatives, fostering cooperation with Central Asian countries, China, and Russia in areas like energy and rare-earth mineral extraction and processing will provide more concrete benefits.

At its worst, the report's rhetoric suggests an expansion of U.S. military interests. For example, it discusses confronting terrorist threats via joint military exercises like Steppe Eagle, a U.S. Army-led exercise promoting regional stability and interoperability in Central and South Asia.<sup>89</sup> While no Steppe Eagle exercise has occurred since 2019, likely because of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, future U.S. military exercises in Central Asia could occur.

Additionally, given the relevance of Russian and Chinese interests, stressing cooperation on "border security" and "stabilizing Afghanistan" will likely be met with dampened enthusiasm from Central Asia's great power neighbors. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov outlined Russia's red line when on August 24, 2021, he said that he does not want to see American soldiers in Central Asia and that this region constitutes a common security area.<sup>90</sup> Border security and regional stability should be the concern of countries in the region, which can most effectively respond to the threats they face.

Lastly, the United States should repeal the outdated 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment. This legislation initially prohibited any nation with a non-market economy which restricted the emigration of its people from achieving the most-favored-nation trade status with the United States.<sup>91</sup> It particularly aimed to help Jews emigrate from the Soviet Union. Independent Kazakhstan is still directly affected by the amendment despite having changed significantly

since its independence by embracing free markets and displaying tolerance towards minority communities. Kazakhstan has a vibrant Jewish community among many other minority groups.<sup>92</sup> In fact, Jews in Kazakhstan have reportedly requested its repeal as it inhibits economic activity in Kazakhstan.<sup>93</sup>

From a human rights perspective, the amendment penalizes Kazakhstan despite its progress by lumping it together with countries like Cuba and North Korea.<sup>94</sup> In contrast, the United States removed China from Jackson-Vanik in 2002 after it joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and did the same for Russia upon its accession to the WTO in 2012.<sup>95</sup> How can Kazakhstan be motivated to improve its human rights record when it does not expect rewards for progress? By repealing the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, the United States would formally recognize Kazakhstan's improvements and show that it sees Kazakhstan as a true partner.

Additionally, as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has stated, the Jackson-Vanik Amendment unnecessarily puts American companies at a comparative disadvantage in the Kazakhstani marketplace.<sup>96</sup> Recently, United States Representatives Jimmy Panetta (CA-19), Robert Aderholt (AL-04), Dina Titus (NV-01), Darin LaHood (IL-16), and Ami Bera, M.D. (CA-06) introduced the bipartisan Kazakhstan Permanent Normal Trade Relations Act of 2023, which would repeal the amendment.<sup>97</sup> A repeal would allow American and Kazakhstani companies to cooperate and flourish.

## European Engagement in Central Asia

Since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the landscape of diplomatic and economic engagement in Central Asia has drastically changed. All Central Asian countries have refused to support Russia's invasion and annexation of sovereign Ukrainian territory.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, they are generally adhering to Western sanctions against Russia, meaning that the region's banks do not accept Russian MIR payment cards, Russia's primary payment system.<sup>99</sup>

Due to the uncertainty caused by the conflict, Central Asian countries have exercised greater autonomy by



diversifying their partnerships, signaling that they are more open than ever to Western engagement.<sup>100</sup> While Turkmenistan remains relatively closed off to the West, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have warmed to foreign investment. The EU coordinated with Central Asian countries on several fronts with its Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (ECPA).<sup>101</sup> Unlike China, Russia, and the United States, the EU has not prioritized security issues in its approach to Central Asia. Instead, the EU has emphasized enhancing economic connectivity with Central Asia through strategic and transparent economic cooperation while not seeking political favors. Lastly, the EU does not aim to increase connectivity with Central Asia by competing with China's BRI developments. Instead, the EU takes a complementary approach via the EU-China Connectivity Platform to promote the free movement of people, goods, and services.<sup>102</sup>

## EU-Kazakhstan Cooperation

The EU takes a practical approach by not treating Central Asia as a monolith. Instead, it has formulated a cohesive strategy with specific objectives. At the Sharm el-Sheikh Climate Change Conference (COP27), the EU signed an agreement with Kazakhstan to focus on three areas: "closer economic and industrial integration in the strategic value chains of raw materials, batteries, and renewable hydrogen, increasing the resilience of raw materials, battery, and renewable hydrogen supply chains, and closer bilateral cooperation on capacity-building, skills, and research & innovation on topics like decarbonization and the sustainability of mining processes."<sup>103</sup> With the EU being Kazakhstan's biggest trade partner, this newly defined partnership will allow it to focus on a narrow set of goals.<sup>104</sup>

Through this partnership, the EU gains access to the rare-earth minerals needed to produce in-demand technologies like renewable car batteries, wind turbines, and semiconductors. Kazakhstan has extensive uranium reserves and ranks first globally in producing and exporting raw uranium.<sup>105</sup> It is the single largest supplier to the EU's nuclear energy industry and meets more than 21% of the bloc's uranium demand.<sup>106</sup> The partnership also provides clear benefits to Kazakhstan by improving its extraction methods and reducing negative

environmental impacts, which is vital for many rural communities.

The mining sector in Kazakhstan is prospering from Western investment because it can transition from a bureaucratic, inefficient state-run enterprise tainted by corruption and rent-seeking.<sup>107</sup> This contributes significantly to Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's efforts to promote a market reform program, which aims to combat stagnation and oligarchic capture of the economy.<sup>108</sup>

With over 70% of its oil exports going to the EU (6% of EU oil demand), Kazakhstan has become the EU's third-largest non-OPEC supplier.<sup>109</sup> Kazakhstan has exercised effective diplomacy by utilizing its new leverage with powers like Russia to open its markets westward. For example, Kazakhstan secured approval from Russia to use its pipeline infrastructure to transport 300,000 tons of oil to buyers in Germany in the first quarter of 2023.<sup>110</sup> In exchange, in December 2022, Kazakhstan reached an intergovernmental agreement with Russia, valid until 2034, which allows Russia to utilize Kazakh territory for the transit of oil to China.<sup>111</sup> With China becoming one of Russia's most important energy customers, Russia needs secure access to Central Asia to transit oil eastward.

In 2022, the EU pledged to double gas imports from Azerbaijan by 2027.<sup>112</sup> Kazakhstan recently announced that it would start using Azerbaijan's Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline to begin transporting its crude oil to global markets in 2023, ending Russia's two-decade monopoly of transporting Kazakhstani oil.<sup>113</sup> The Southern Gas Corridor, which spans from Baku, through Turkey, to Italy, will also be critical for its efforts to diversify energy sources and facilitate its agreement with Azerbaijan. On April 10, 2023, President Tokayev and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev discussed leveraging the transport potential of the Middle Corridor.<sup>114</sup> Making inroads with Azerbaijan, a country that is increasingly friendly toward the West, will give Central Asia connectivity to Europe and will provide Europe opportunities to cater to its energy security needs.

Lastly, Europe has noticed increased activity along the Middle Corridor. Specifically, it has caught the attention of European companies, including Denmark's Maersk, the Netherlands' Rail Bridge Cargo,

Austria's Rail Cargo Group, France's Ceva Logistics, and Finland's Nurminen Logistics.<sup>115</sup> Russia's war in Ukraine has accelerated this trend, as all shipping between Russia and Europe has been affected. Due to the disorder caused by the war, shipments along the Northern Corridor, a land-based series of trade routes connecting China with Europe via Russia, are down 34%.<sup>116</sup> The downward trade trend along the Northern Corridor makes the Middle Corridor a more attractive option.

## EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation

While Uzbekistan does not boast the same level of energy resources that Kazakhstan does, it plays an equally important role: assisting in the regional stability of Central Asia. Uzbekistan has not only improved domestically with more transparent government bodies and greater economic freedom, but it has also made it a priority to transform Central Asia into a zone of stability and sustainable development, as well as to establish an atmosphere of trust and good neighborliness.<sup>117</sup> To achieve this, Tashkent aims to facilitate the development of mutually beneficial cooperation with the EU and its member states in bilateral and multilateral formats. Notably, the Samarkand EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference "Global Gateway," which took place on November 18, 2022, facilitated discussions regarding how to create "win-win" scenarios in identifying sustainable transport corridors between the Central Asian countries and the EU's extended Trans-European Transport Network.<sup>118</sup>

Uzbekistan is also an important transportation hub connecting Central Asia with the West.<sup>119</sup> Uzbekistan seeks to decrease its dependency on Russia as an economic partner by opening new trade routes, including creating an alternative corridor to traditional Russian-Kazakhstani routes and attracting companies from China, the EU, and the United States.<sup>120</sup> This will make Uzbekistan less susceptible to disruptions caused by regional crises like the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and diversify investments in Central Asian markets.

## Turkey and the Middle Corridor

On June 22, 2023, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and

Azerbaijan signed an agreement to reduce operational delays, eliminate bottlenecks, and streamline the tariff process.<sup>121</sup> This agreement followed the May 2023 G7 meeting, where members announced a \$600 million budget to develop the potential of the Middle Corridor.<sup>122</sup> While this initiative signals a strong commitment to improving the efficacy of the Middle Corridor, closer integration with Turkey and China will likely be necessary.

Coordination with middle powers like Turkey will also be critical for transporting commodities effectively. Turkey is at the geographic nexus of Europe, Russia, and Central Asia, which has driven Ankara to adapt quickly to geopolitical trends to capitalize on opportunities. In doing this, Turkey has integrated itself with China to facilitate the development of the Middle Corridor.<sup>123</sup> By 2034, the Middle Corridor will form what China calls its "Iron Silk Road."<sup>124</sup> Ankara has worked to become a hub of containerized freight and the leading Mediterranean shipping outlet. Meanwhile, Beijing can diversify its trade routes. As a result, Turkey has made itself indispensable as a connector between China and Europe.

Middle Corridor connectivity will be conducive to effectively transferring energy and rare-earth minerals from East to West. Before the war in Ukraine, the Northern Corridor was the more utilized corridor due to its higher capacity compared to the multimodal land and sea Middle Corridor route.<sup>125</sup> However, the Middle Corridor has the advantage of being around 2,000 kilometers (km) shorter than the Northern Corridor, which shortens the travel time by a third (15 days).<sup>126</sup> This will especially help countries looking to reorient their trading routes after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Turkey executed its plan to become a transport hub by coordinating with leaders in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan to open the 500-mile Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway in 2017.<sup>127</sup> This railway connects Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia and bypasses Russia. Turkey has also increased investment in port infrastructure in recent years, including a \$3.8 billion upgrade to the Mersin port and a \$1.2 billion upgrade at Izmir.<sup>128</sup> Following these investments, Izmir and Mersin have the potential to become efficient regional hub ports.

Until recently, several problems have impeded the progress of the Middle Corridor. The combination of sea and rail was considered inefficient compared to Russia's more direct rail line through the Northern Corridor. Moreover, Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan were concerned about potential blowback from Russia. However, after sanctions were imposed on Russia following its annexation of Crimea, Central Asian countries began to look for alternative trade routes. The 2018 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea border trade treaty, signed by Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, removed an essential impediment to regional integration.<sup>129</sup> As a result, trade volume along the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, a component of the Middle Corridor, increased by 52% from 2020 to 2021.<sup>130</sup>

The Middle Corridor's success stems from the lack of viable alternatives. The wealth and prosperity offered by the new trade route present an opportunity for countries to cooperate on a mutually beneficial commercial project.

## **U.S.-Kazakhstan Energy Cooperation**

Given these parameters and factors, what should the United States do to best utilize its investment? First, the United States can cooperate with great powers in their existing lanes of engagement. China is primarily the economic influencer, while Russia aims to provide transport routes and export oil through its territory. China seeks to maximize profits from its financial investments in the region, while Russia is concerned with maintaining stability and security through its hard power.

The United States should prioritize working with Central Asia's most influential actors: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Cooperation should include diversifying U.S. energy sources, increasing the global energy supply, and accessing additional sources of rare-earth commodities. In 2022, at its peak, the United States purchased 619,000 b/d from Saudi Arabia.<sup>131</sup> This is a sharp decrease from previous years due to oil supply cuts imposed by Saudi Arabia. In comparison, Kazakhstan produced approximately 1.68 million b/d in 2022 and has 30 billion in reserves as of 2021.<sup>132</sup>

Kazakhstan's primary energy export destinations are Europe and China.<sup>133</sup> In 2022, the United States bought 4.3 million barrels of Kazakhstan's Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) Blend, down from 13.2 million in the same period a year ago.<sup>134</sup> This is mainly due to a decline spurred by pipeline and terminal outages, as well as worries about the status of exports from a Russian port.<sup>135</sup>

Kazakhstan would have far less energy potential than it currently does if it were not for the investment of U.S. companies. In 2019, U.S. firms contributed 30% of all oil production in the country.<sup>136</sup> Several of the leading Kazakhstani oil producers and the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) are owned by Western companies. Tengizchevroil, a \$20 billion joint venture between Chevron and a subsidiary of Kazakhstan's state-owned oil enterprise (Kazakhstan's largest oil producer), is led by Chevron and Exxon Mobil, which own approximately 75% of the interest in the project. Russia's LUKOIL and Kazakhstan's KazMunayGaz have lesser stakes in Tengizchevroil.<sup>137</sup> Chevron has continued to show interest in Kazakhstan by announcing in March 2023, during the CERAWEEK conference in Houston, that Chevron would increase oil production in Kazakhstan from 700,000 b/d to one million b/d.<sup>138</sup>

USAID previously worked with Kazakhstan by providing training and technical assistance to enable Kazakhstan to modernize its energy sector while safeguarding the environment.<sup>139</sup> This support has focused on energy efficiency, renewable energy, and increasing private investment in the energy sector.<sup>140</sup> While currently only 1.5 million tons of oil will flow from Kazakhstan through the BTC, the United States can help Kazakhstan reach its potential and raise this number considerably.<sup>141</sup> Given that BP is the operator of the BTC, the United States and Europe have room to expand their capacity.<sup>142</sup> To meet this end, USAID can help the private sector facilitate cooperation with EU companies to boost Kazakhstan's oil exports via the BTC.

There is a reason for optimism as USAID has had strong results in Kazakhstan by enabling extensive training for about 700 business leaders, leading to more than 50 submitted policy change recommendations to the Government of Kazakhstan.<sup>143</sup> Additionally, USAID has successfully

facilitated business development tours from Kazakhstan to the United States for private sector representatives.<sup>144</sup> These efforts should include Europe to enhance East-West energy connectivity.

U.S. cooperation with Kazakhstan to reach its potential could also be an area that mutually benefits the United States and China. Despite enduring tensions, China and the United States are deeply connected economically, so it is in their best interest to find areas of cooperation. As of November 2022, Chinese refiners are still major U.S. crude oil buyers.<sup>145</sup> With China's interest in shifting trade and energy dependence from sea to land, China can use its influence to contribute to Western efforts to modernize Kazakhstan's energy sector. China also shares an interest with the U.S. in lowering global energy prices and fostering a supply increase.

Concretely, the United States, the EU, and China could enter a joint venture to make oil production cleaner and less harmful to local environments. Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest metropolis, is one of the 25 most polluted cities in the world.<sup>146</sup> Despite past ambivalence from the Kazakh government, President Tokayev signed a new environmental code on January 2, 2021. The regulation requires 50 of Kazakhstan's largest companies, which account for 80 percent of emissions in Kazakhstan, to replace their old technologies with the best available technologies (BATs) by 2025.<sup>147</sup>

The United States and China have much to offer Kazakhstan in this area. China and the United States have worked on science and technology-related issues together for over thirty years, including energy efficiency, electricity, and transportation.<sup>148</sup> While the rhetoric of U.S.-China climate cooperation has not lately led to many concrete results, collaboration in Kazakhstan is an opportunity to reignite this historically significant area of bilateral cooperation.

## **U.S.-Kazakhstan Rare Earth Mineral Cooperation**

Environmental restrictions in the United States make mining for rare-earth minerals difficult. As a result, in 2020, the United States imported 100% of its usable rare-earth compounds and metals.<sup>149</sup>

However, Kazakhstan could assist the United States in diversifying rare-earth mineral import sources.

The United States, while wholly reliant on foreign sources, was once the leader in mining and refining rare-earth minerals from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s.<sup>150</sup> The cost and environmental concerns, including releasing toxic chemicals, led to regulations against rare-earth mineral mining in the United States. However, the United States is starting to make extracting these rare-earth minerals a priority.

On September 19, 2022, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) announced up to \$156 million in funding from President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law for a first-of-a-kind facility to extract and separate rare-earth elements (REE) and critical minerals (CM) from unconventional sources like mining waste.<sup>151</sup> While this project will take significant time to get off the ground, the United States can demonstrate its ability to extract these materials in the most environmentally friendly way possible. In addition, these methods can be shared with U.S. allies' companies in Central Asia, expanding supply routes.

There are signs that U.S. policymakers recognize this is a crucial bilateral priority with Kazakhstan. The United States has identified 384 critical raw material sources scattered across 160 sites in Kazakhstan.<sup>152</sup> On June 21, 2022, representatives of the Department of Commerce, Department of State, and U.S. Geological Survey met with Kazakh heads of the Ministries of Industry and Infrastructure Development, Ecology, Geology, and Natural Resources.<sup>153</sup> They reached an agreement on extracting and processing rare-earth metals in Kazakhstan using American technology.<sup>154</sup>

Yet, while American mining businesses could establish themselves in Central Asia, some barriers may make entry difficult. The remote geography of Central Asia and its relatively unfamiliar investment climate might prompt American companies to coordinate with established companies instead. For example, in 2012, Japanese Trade and Industry Minister Yukio Edano signed an agreement with Kazakhstan to construct a rare-earth production facility in Stepnogorsk. Sumitomo Corp., Japan Oil, Gas, and Metals National Corp, and Kazatprom

collaborated on this project.<sup>155</sup>

On the European side, France and Germany have signed agreements to develop rare-earth element projects based in Kazakhstan.<sup>156</sup> Kazakhstani companies are particularly interested in utilizing German technology.<sup>157</sup> Kazakhstan and France also agreed to conduct joint research to improve production technology for processing these precious metals.<sup>158</sup> Coordinating with established foreign firms as investment partners would carry fewer risks than entering the Central Asian market outright and serve U.S. interests in increasing resource diversification.

How can great powers like China be brought to the table? Working with China in the rare-earth mineral sector can be incorporated into future climate change cooperation. In the past, China has struggled with the toxic waste byproducts of its rare-earth mineral extraction.<sup>159</sup> These extractions have led to air, water, and soil pollution.<sup>160</sup> Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan are surely not interested in extraction projects that could harm their local populations, which as a result could reduce China's influence in the regional rare-earth mineral market. The United States and its allies could coordinate with China by sharing newly developed extraction methods that would benefit China's environmental efforts. The United States also plays a critical role in exporting China's rare-earth minerals for processing, which can serve as leverage in negotiations.<sup>161</sup> In exchange, the United States and its allies should be allowed to peacefully engage in Kazakhstan's rare-earth mineral market, which poses little threat to China's dominance in the rare-earth mineral sphere.

## **U.S.-Uzbekistan Rare Earth Mineral Cooperation**

Supporting research efforts could pay dividends if the United States aims to improve its security in the rare-earth mineral sector. Uzbekistan, the United States, South Korea, and EU partners have a history of coordinating this research to optimize extraction methods. In addition, bolstering research initiatives could help the United States eventually mine its domestic rare-earth minerals in the most environmentally friendly way possible.

Recently, Uzbekistan has worked to improve rare-earth mineral extraction through academic avenues. For example, Uzbekistan strengthened its rare-earth mineral extractive sector by working alongside South Korean research institutes to establish Central Asia's first rare-earth mineral research center.<sup>162</sup> This center has allowed Uzbekistan to develop closer ties with the Korea Institute of Industrial Technology and the Korea Institute of Rare Metals. "This center is the only one of its kind in Central Asia. South Korea intends to assist Uzbekistan in training specialists in rare metals and hard alloys. Cooperation with foreign partners will help increase the competitiveness of products, create high value-added products, organize jobs, and reach a new level of quality," Korea Institute of Industrial Technology President Sung-il Yu noted.<sup>163</sup> Uzbekistan's support of multilateral cooperation in the rare-earth mineral sector has paid off. Additionally, Uzbekistan has developed excavation efficiency, favorable infrastructure, and a highly skilled workforce.<sup>164</sup>

Despite these positive developments, Uzbekistan has yet to utilize all its resources. As of 2019, only 20% of Uzbekistan's \$5.7 trillion worth of mineral resource potential has been explored.<sup>165</sup> The United States should encourage and invest in the research of its allies that have established ties to Central Asia, such as France, South Korea, and Japan, to improve the efficiency of extraction techniques and enable reserve exploration.

The United States, its partners, and the Central Asian countries have much to gain from increased cooperation in rare-earth mineral research. Expanding the production and export of these minerals will be essential for U.S. economic security as the demand for rechargeable and electric vehicle batteries will increase over time.

## **U.S.-Uzbekistan Diplomatic Engagement**

U.S. engagement in Central Asia will not be effective without diplomatic cooperation from local partners. Transparency and openness should be essential to future U.S. activity in Central Asia. To achieve this, Central Asian countries committed to diplomacy must be at the forefront of this initiative to foster

accountability and inclusivity.

Uzbekistan, the only Central Asian state to border all four of the region's countries, has made strides in recent years to promote cooperation, peace, and stability in Central Asia. Since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's election in 2016, Uzbekistan's progress on economic reform and human rights has grown significantly, as his economic liberalization and democratic reforms have paid dividends domestically and in the country's relations with its neighbors. The reforms have included decreasing the role of the state in favor of the private sector.<sup>166</sup> As a result of these reforms, the volume of trade between the states of Central Asia in 2021 increased by 55%.<sup>167</sup> Additionally, the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) has grown from about \$2 billion in 2017 to over \$8 billion in 2021.<sup>168</sup>

Before President Mirziyoyev's administration, forced labor, particularly in the cotton industry, had been a prevalent issue in Uzbekistan. However, President Mirziyoyev's government has also taken "substantive actions" to combat forced labor.<sup>169</sup> President Mirziyoyev has also received recognition for releasing dozens of political prisoners. By improving itself domestically, Uzbekistan has shown that it can address its own prevailing issues and be an example for other Central Asian countries to follow. Subsequent encouragement from the Trump Administration served as positive reinforcement, which has continued under the Biden Administration.

Uzbekistan's utilization of multilateral fora has effectively facilitated an atmosphere of transparency and cooperation in Central Asia while raising the region's profile for foreign investors. The United States could coordinate closely with Uzbekistan to create a working group to find common ground between Central Asian states and allies. This group could eventually replace the U.S.-led C5+1. France should be Europe's leading representative considering it has a lengthy diplomatic history with the Central Asian countries, as it was one of the first European countries to forge diplomatic relations with those countries.<sup>170</sup> France's expertise in dealing with Central Asian countries in the energy and rare-earth mineral spheres will be useful for the United States.

Openness with the SCO and its great power members,

Russia and China, will be critical for this group's success. The United States cannot and should not attempt to replace the roles of Russia or China. Building trust, constructive relationships, and shared understanding by establishing red lines among all participants would be crucial for the working group's effectiveness. Lastly, forming a working group allows the United States to set the expectation to members that the United States does not have the aim or capacity to get involved in the security sphere and is only interested in pursuing a narrow set of diplomatic and economic interests. Uzbekistan has the experience of serving as a mediator in Central Asia and would be the ideal state to facilitate this group.

## **Promoting Middle Corridor Connectivity**

Tackling Middle Corridor connectivity will require a multilateral effort to maximize its effectiveness and potential to be a "win-win" for those involved. First, the United States and Europe must respect that the Central Asian countries will not completely orient themselves toward the West but instead work toward a strategy considering their proximity to and economic linkages with Russia and China.<sup>171</sup> The optimal approach for the United States and its allies would be to encourage the free flow of commodities to Europe while letting more involved players like Turkey and China do the heavy lifting.

Trans-Caspian corridor cooperation will become more important as the world becomes more multipolar and reckons with the supply chain disruptions resulting from the war in Ukraine. Not only would the Middle Corridor's open lane of transport serve the West in facilitating the movement of energy and rare-earth minerals, but it also gives China alternative connections into the overland "Silk Road" reaching Europe.<sup>172</sup> Russia would also benefit as the Middle Corridor provides new logistic opportunities for Russia while Western countries have blocked the Northern Corridor through sanctions.<sup>173</sup> Since the Central Asian countries would benefit from enhanced connectivity with the West and all major actors, including China, Russia, the EU, and the U.S., have favorable attitudes toward such an initiative, this is a realistic opportunity for cooperation

The United States, with an open multilateral approach and emphasis on predictability, could incorporate cooperation on global supply chains into a working group. The Supply Chain Ministerial Forum comprising the EU and the United States, among other partners, would be a logical place to start by including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and China.<sup>174</sup> This group could work to identify and mitigate bottlenecks and other obstacles affecting transport along the Middle Corridor.

Digitization will also be critical for predictability and reliability. However, digitization should not be propelled unilaterally and rely on one partner's technology. While China has been successful with the digitization of its BRI projects, Central Asian populations could be wary of relying solely on Chinese technology, given the risks of surveillance. The United States and the EU are well-equipped to contribute to the digitization of trade routes and give Central Asian countries assurance that they do need to rely solely on tech from Beijing.

## Policy Recommendations

Implementing the following policy recommendations will require U.S. policy toward Central Asia to adopt a narrower set of interests. The United States should primarily focus on finding cooperative avenues in Central Asia to develop and acquire critical resources while respecting China and Russia's dominant regional roles.

**1. Prioritize U.S. regional engagement with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.** The United States cannot afford to treat Central Asia as a monolith. Working closer with Kazakhstan can help the United States improve its energy security and minimize the economic and political influence of countries such as Saudi Arabia, which have dragged the United States into needless conflict. Similarly, the United States should work with Uzbekistan to facilitate the region's constructive, cooperative working relations since Tashkent's utilization of multilateral forums has shown its commitment to fostering an atmosphere of transparency and cooperation in Central Asia.

**2. Establish working groups that promote transparency and multilateralism.** The exclusionary

nature of existing Central Asia working groups fuels competition and could lead to conflict. Instead, establishing an expectation that the United States aims to primarily work with Central Asian countries on a commercial and diplomatic basis will reduce the chances of conflict between great powers.

**3. Do not resume Steppe Eagle military exercises and similar security activities that aggravate tensions with Russia and China.** Due to their proximity, Russia and China face more significant consequences from the activity of violent non-state actors in Central Asia than the United States. Security should be handled by those directly affected by these local threats.

**4. Do not lead by emphasizing human rights.** Central Asian countries are already making progress in this area irrespective of U.S. intervention. Leading by example rather than forcing Western values on Central Asian countries will be more effective.

**5. Repeal the Jackson-Vanik Amendment.** This outdated legislation only hurts Kazakh-American private-sector cooperation. A repeal would be a sign of respect that Kazakhstan has made in rectifying its past errors.

**6. Play a minimal role in transport while respecting the roles of more established partners.** U.S. diplomacy and technology could be vital assets in developing the Middle Corridor. But the United States should avoid deviating from limited areas of engagement.

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