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The Gains and Losses of U.S. Central Asia Policy in the Context of Geopolitical Rivalry

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Abstract

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian region has undergone profound geopolitical transformations. With the successive independence of the five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—a power vacuum emerged, enabling the United States to engage comprehensively in Central Asian affairs. This theoretical paper aims to analyze the evolution of U.S. policy in Central Asia through a geopolitical lens, identifying the core objectives, strategic shifts, and assess the gains and losses of its policies in the region. The findings indicate that U.S. policy has transitioned through three phases: (1) the "power vacuum period" prioritizing stability and independence from Russian influence, (2) the "forceful intervention period" following 9/11 focused on counterterrorism and democratization, and (3) the "strategic balancing period" after the Afghanistan withdrawal emphasizing multilateral cooperation and economic interests. While the U.S. has established a degree of presence in Central Asia, its long-term influence remains constrained by Russia's enduring historical and cultural ties and the rising economic presence of other powers. Due to five Central Asian countries historical reality, the U.S. Central Asia policy should aim at promoting regional economic development and improving people's livelihood rather than ideological control.

Keywords

Geopolitics, Central Asia, U.S. Strategy, Regional Stability, International Relations

1. The Geopolitics of Central Asia from the U.S. Perspective

Central Asia, situated at the crossroads of Eastern and Western civilizations, yet it also stands at the periphery where various civilizations interact. From an Eastern perspective, it is viewed as the distant "Western Regions," while from the West, it is regarded as the mysterious "Orient." "Due to its unique geopolitical significance, Central Asia has long attracted the attention of scholars from both East and

West.

In 1904, British geopolitical theorist Halford Mackinder introduced the concept of the 'Pivot Area,' identifying Central Asia and its surrounding regions as the geopolitical 'pivot' of international politics. Soon afterwards, Mackinder further expanded the concept, renaming it the 'Heartland' and developing his renowned Land Power theory. He argued that the mountainous regions of Central Asia were inaccessible to maritime powers. By controlling Eastern Europe from this central point, maritime powers can be excluded (Mackinder, 1904). Thus, Central Asia became a focal point of conflict between land and sea powers.

As early as the beginning of the 19th century, two great empires—the British Empire and Tsarist Russia—engaged in a 'Great Game' over political, diplomatic, and military influence in Central Asia and its surrounding regions. The ultimate outcome was Russia's recognition of Afghanistan as within Britain's sphere of influence, while Britain acknowledged Russia's annexation of the three major Central Asian khanates. Consequently, for much of the 20th century, the five Central Asian states remained under the control of Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union, dominated by Russia. This historical turning point only emerged with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, when a geopolitical and political vacuum arose in Central Asia. The Clinton administration seized this strategic moment, extending U.S. influence into Central Asia, leveraging economic power to compress Russia's sphere of influence and transforming the region into a strategic energy base for the United States in the 21st century.

At that time, U.S. geopolitical thinking distinguished between global-level geopolitical strategic competition and regional-level geopolitical competition. It argued that defining a geopolitical domain depended on its degree of 'maritime' or 'continental' characteristics. Central Asia, as the core region of 'The Eurasian Convergence Zone,' naturally became a strategic arena contested between the 'Eurasian Continental Realm,' represented by Russia, and the 'Trade-Dependent Maritime Realm,' represented by the United States (Cohen, 2005). This argument essentially extended the classic land-sea power rivalry, with U.S.-Russian competition in Central Asia being a continuation of the 19th-century Great Game.

In the early 21st century, following the 9/11 attacks, the establishment of U.S. military bases in Kyrgyzstan and the success of the 'Tulip Revolution' and other color revolutions appeared to place the U.S. in an advantageous position in its competition with Russia in Central Asia. However, the core of geopolitical theory posits that geographic distance is the decisive factor because neighboring countries cannot be altered. "However dramatic the accomplishments of individuals, geographical forces, acting upon human cultures, tend ultimately to win through" (Kaplan, 2012, p. 87). Geographically, Central Asia is naturally contiguous with Russia, and the five Central Asian countries are inevitably influenced by Russia. Historically, these five nations and Russia were part of the same country for nearly 200 years, fostering natural cultural affinity. Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a large Slavic population (especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) remains in Central Asia, and Russian continues to serve as a lingua franca in the region. In the long term, the outcome of this 'new Great Game' may

resemble that of the historical struggle with Britain—the U.S.'s chances of success are not high. U.S. political and academic circles have long recognized this reality. As early as the time of the Soviet Union's dissolution, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who had served as National Security Advisor under President Carter, outlined a new geopolitical strategy for the U.S. in Central Asia in his seminal work on geopolitics.:

In the short run, it is in America's interest to consolidate and perpetuate the prevailing geopolitical pluralism on the map of Eurasia. That puts a premium on maneuver and manipulation in order to prevent the emergence of a hostile coalition that could eventually seek to challenge America's primacy, not to mention the remote possibility of any one particular state seeking to do so. By the middle term, the foregoing should gradually yield to a greater emphasis on the emergence of increasingly important but strategically compatible partners who, prompted by American leadership, might help to shape a more cooperative trans-Eurasian security system. Eventually, in the much longer run still, the foregoing could phase into a global core of genuinely shared political responsibility. (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 198)

In Brzezinski's vision, the United States' geopolitical role on the Eurasian continent should mirror Britain's role in the European geopolitical landscape during the 19th and 20th centuries—identifying Eurasian “geostrategic powers” to ensure that social and economic tensions continuously influence relations among these major powers. Central Asia, as a core region of Eurasia, plays a pivotal role in this strategy due to its geostrategic significance, making control over Central Asia essential to shaping the broader Eurasian dynamics. By maintaining influence in Central Asia, the U.S. can uphold a balance among major Eurasian powers. In the medium term, the U.S. focus is to identify the “Eurasian core powers” most likely to serve as agents of American interests, with partnerships in Central Asia playing a key part. The long-term objective is to establish a “Eurasian security system” in which the United States acts as an “arbiter,” ensuring its own dominance. Later, in 1999, the first official U.S. policy document on Central Asia highlighted a strategic approach for the region, leading to the passage of the “Silk Road Strategy Act” (P.L., pp. 106-113) by the U.S. Congress. This act authorized increased policy and aid efforts to address conflict resolution, humanitarian needs, economic development, transportation and communications infrastructure, border controls, the promotion of democracy, and the establishment of civil societies within Central Asia (Nichol, 2006).

In the new century, S. Frederick Starr, a Central Asia expert at Johns Hopkins University, further refined Brzezinski's ideas. Starr's 'Greater Central Asia Partnership for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors' (GCAP) advocated for fostering partnerships among Afghanistan and the five Central Asian countries, promoting cooperation in politics, security, energy, and transportation across Central. The goal was to establish a new geopolitical bloc composed of pro-American countries practicing market economies and secular political systems, thereby advancing U.S. strategic interests across Central and South Asia. To achieve this goal, GCAP should “led by a senior officer of the Department of State, that will coordinate and integrate the U.S.' bilateral and region-wide programs in diverse fields, including economic and social development, governance, trade, counter-narcotics, anti-corruption, democracy,

and transparency, as well as security” (2005,6). This vision became reality in 2006 with an adjustment in the U.S. State Department’s regional bureaus. In February 2006, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reorganized the Central Asia desk from the European bureau into the South Asia bureau, renaming it the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. Former State Department spokesperson Richard A. Boucher was appointed Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. The Bureau of South Asian Affairs was expanded to include the nations of Central Asia (U.S. Department of State, 2012). This move was not merely an organizational adjustment but reflected a profound shift in U.S. strategy toward Central Asia, indicating the gradual formation of a new "Greater Central Asia" strategic framework centered on Afghanistan and encompassing both Central and South Asia.

It wasn’t until February 2020, toward the end of the Trump administration, that the *United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity* was released, recognizing Central Asia for the first time as an independent geopolitical region. The core principles of this new strategy is “Central Asia is a geostrategic region important to United States national security interests, regardless of the level of United States involvement in Afghanistan” (Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2020). This marked a shift in U.S. strategic focus, reflecting Central Asia is gradually becoming an independent strategic focus for the United States. This evolution underscores the United States' pursuit of deeper influence in the region, moving beyond its traditional role as a “stepping stone” for involvement in Afghanistan or as a supplement to the "Greater Central Asia" strategy focused on Afghan-centric objectives. Although this new Central Asia strategy was developed during the Trump administration, a Republican government, it was not abandoned by Democratic President Joe Biden upon assuming office. Instead, Biden's administration pursued its implementation with strategic adjustments. According to the National Security Strategy report released on October 12, 2022, the Biden administration’s approach to Central Asia emphasizes not only enhancing energy security but also intensifying geopolitical competition with Russia in the region. “Elsewhere in Eurasia, we will continue to support the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Central Asia. We will foster efforts to enhance resilience and democratic development in the five countries in this region” (The White House, 2022, p. 39).

An analysis of the above timeline reveals that, it is evident that while Central Asia is not a primary focus of U.S. foreign policy, it remains an important land-based arena for the Great Game between the U.S. and Russia. The U.S. geopolitical objectives in Central Asia are not to directly incorporate the five Central Asian countries into its "sphere of influence" but to steer the region’s developmental trajectory. This involves fostering greater openness and integration into a U.S.-led international order, maintaining their independence under a Western liberal framework led by the United States, and preventing external actors from influencing their development path. By diminishing Russia’s geopolitical influence and ending its traditional dominance in the region, the United States aims to ultimately control Central Asia’s oil, gas, and other natural resources. This approach also aligns with the geopolitical strategies

outlined in Zbigniew Brzezinski's theory, which emphasizes preventing any Eurasian challenger from emerging that could dominate the region and challenge U.S. global pre-eminence.

2. The Evolution of U.S. Central Asia Policy

The adjustments in the U.S. strategy toward Central Asia have always been products of evolving international dynamics and shifts in national interests. Since the independence of the five Central Asian countries in 1991, U.S. policy in the region can roughly be divided into three phases: the "power vacuum period" from the collapse of the Soviet Union until the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks; the "forceful intervention period" following 9/11; and the "strategic balancing period" after the Obama administration announced plans to withdraw troops from Afghanistan in 2011. This study identifies three distinct phases of U.S. engagement in the region, highlighting their key characteristics and underlying strategic considerations.

2.1 *power vacuum period after the Cold War*

In December 1991, the Soviet Union officially disintegrated, and the Central Asian countries legally and practically became independent states. On one hand, the U.S. government was unprepared and inexperienced in dealing with the newly independent Central Asian states. On the other hand, these countries continued to be significantly influenced by Russia following their independence. As a result, in the early 1990s, the United States faced both subjective and objective challenges in directly engaging with Central Asian affairs. The American academic community also exhibited a negative attitude towards the region's importance, with statements such as "The importance of the Caspian region to American foreign policy is grossly exaggerated. Until the demise of the Soviet Union, not even Antarctica was more remote from the American mind than were the lands around the Caspian Sea" (Lieven, 1999). During this period, "U.S. policy goals in Central Asia include fostering stability, democratization, free market economies, free trade and transport throughout the Eurasian corridor, denuclearization in the non-Russian states, and adherence to international human rights standards" (Nichol, 2003, p. 1). The core objective was to prevent Central Asia from falling under the control of neighboring powers. Martha Brill Olcott expert on Central Asia once stated "The United States should teach them how to become independent states, which first means independence from Russia; only then can Central Asia's legal independence transform into actual independence, a stance that aligned with U.S. interests in the region" (2005).

From the outset of Central Asian independence, the United States actively worked to establish relations with these countries across multiple domains. In the realm of geoeconomics, the U.S. established diplomatic ties with all Central Asian states within two years of the Soviet Union's dissolution. Beginning in 1992, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) initiated assistance programs for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, providing nearly \$1.5 billion to support the development of economic sectors, education and healthcare systems, and democratic institutions in the region (USAID, 2007). On July 21, 1997, Strobe Talbott, the U.S.

Deputy Secretary of State responsible for matters concerning the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, delivered a speech at Johns Hopkins University, providing a detailed summary of U.S. policy toward Central Asia since the Clinton administration took office in January 1993:

In the four-and-a-half years since the Clinton Administration came into office, our message to the states of the region has been simple: As long as they move in the direction of political and economic freedom, of national and international reconciliation, we will be with them.....Our support has four dimensions—the promotion of democracy, the creation of free market economies, the sponsorship of peace and cooperation within and among the countries of the region, and their integration with the larger international community. Over the course of the past year, we have broadened and deepened our engagement with the region in each of these areas. (Talbot, 1997)

It is evident that during this phase, the United States had limited interest in Central Asia. Neither the region's geostrategic value nor its economic potential had fully emerged. Moreover, the geographical distance, combined with Central Asia's position as part of Russia's "backyard," relegated the region to a lower priority in U.S. security considerations. The United States primarily sought to provide long-term support for establishing democratic governance, free-market economies, and a framework for regional economic integration. The overarching goal was to prevent Central Asia from re-entering Russia's sphere of influence or falling under the control of other major powers, while gradually bringing the region into the orbit of U.S. influence.

2.2 Forceful Intervention Period after 9/11

The events of September 11, 2001, profoundly altered Washington's perception of Central Asia's global strategic significance. While long-term economic and political reforms remained on the agenda, the immediate priority shifted to military security and counterterrorism, making Central Asia's geostrategic security interests the foremost concern for the United States in the region. On December 13, 2001, Elizabeth Jones, then Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Central Asia and the Caucasus, outlining three significant national interests in Central Asia: "preventing the spread of terrorism, providing tools for political and economic reform and institution of the rule of law, and ensuring the security and transparent development of Caspian energy reserves" (U.S. Department of State, 2001). This indicates that, following 9/11, combating terrorism became the top priority of U.S. policy in Central Asia, while advancing political and economic reforms was relegated to a secondary position, mainly aimed at creating conditions for the long-term presence of U.S. forces in the region. This phase marked the beginning of comprehensive and robust U.S. involvement in Central Asian affairs, with military security becoming the dominant factor in U.S. policy. Central Asia emerged as a critical component of the United States' global strategic framework.

At the same time, advancing political democratization in the region remained a consistent objective of U.S. global strategy. The requirements of the war on terror, to some extent, heightened the urgency of promoting democracy, aligning it with the overarching security goals of the United States. According to

The *2002 National Security Strategy*, for effectively combat terrorism, the United States needed to “support moderate and modern government, especially in the Muslim world, to ensure that the conditions and ideologies that promote terrorism do not find fertile ground in any nation” (White House, 2002). To achieve this objective, the U.S. government not only sought to legitimize the long-term stationing of American troops in Central Asia through the signing of a series of bilateral agreements—for instance, starting in October 2001, the U.S. military leased Uzbekistan's Karshi-Khanabad Air Base as a military base—but also resorted to more radical means of regime change against Central Asian countries. For example, the *2006 National Security Strategy* explicitly endorsed the “Color Revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, and declaring that the promotion of democracy justified employing all necessary means, including openly supporting publicly democratic reformers in repressive nations, tailoring assistance and training of military forces, and imposing various sanctions (White House, 2006).

However, the United States’ true motive behind promoting democracy in Central Asia was not to foster independent development within these nations. Instead, democracy promotion served as a pretext to shift Central Asian countries toward a pro-Western orientation, ultimately enabling U.S. control over their political regimes and societies. This approach to democratization in Central Asia led to internal divisions and, in some cases, even civil conflict. Certain American scholars astutely observed:

The increased U.S. military presence in Central Asia gives the public the impression that Washington supports these repressive regimes, while providing authoritarian leaders reason to hope that U.S. forces would back them up in case of a mass effort to oust them....a situation in which the U.S. military presence appears to be supporting a less than democratic leader instead of encouraging the development of political pluralism. U.S. troops stationed in Central Asia also make good targets for anti-government insurgents and are as vulnerable as the weak states that host them. (Wishnick, 2002, p. 29)

It can be said that the 9/11 terrorist attacks marked a turning point in U.S. global strategy, elevating Central Asia's geopolitical significance within Washington's strategic calculus. From this moment, the scope of U.S. policy in the region expanded beyond the traditional concept of the five Central Asian states to encompass the broader “Greater Central Asia” framework mentioned earlier. However, the U.S. government's assertive intervention and its indiscriminate promotion of democracy in the region led to significant political instability within Central Asian states. This instability not only undermined the effectiveness of U.S. strategies but also set the stage for the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces and Washington's marginalization in Central Asia.

2.3 Strategic Balancing Period after the Afghanistan Withdrawal

Beginning with President George W. Bush’s second term, U.S. policy toward Central Asia underwent a significant shift. The earlier emphasis on stabilizing existing regimes to support the war on terror was replaced by a policy prioritizing the promotion of democracy. This adjustment stemmed fundamentally from the fallout of the Iraq War, launched by the Bush administration on March 20, 2003. The war

faced staunch opposition not only from Russia but also from key U.S. allies, including Germany and France, as well as many other countries. As a result, the international counterterrorism coalition led by the United States in the aftermath of 9/11 effectively dissolved, leaving the U.S. unable to rally global support under the banner of counterterrorism. The "Bush Doctrine," which combined counterterrorism with hegemonic ambitions, required international support for both the war on terror and the neoconservative agenda of reshaping the world. However, the unilateralism inherent in the "Bush Doctrine" significantly weakened the willingness of many nations, including U.S. allies, to cooperate. Its aggressive approach—characterized by preemptive military strikes and disregard for international law—provoked a surge of anti-American sentiment worldwide. This unprecedented international isolation for the United States since World War II undermined its ability to maintain a counterterrorism-based narrative in Central Asia. Critics argue that the Bush Doctrine's approach led to significant geopolitical instability, particularly in the Middle East. The U.S.-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, intended to dismantle terrorist organizations and rogue regimes, have been criticized for failing to achieve long-term political stability and for contributing to ongoing regional conflicts (Löfflmann, 2023).

In 2011, then-U.S. President Barack Obama announced the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and introduced the "New Silk Road Initiative" as a cornerstone of U.S. policy toward Central Asia. This initiative aims to integrate Afghanistan further into the region by resuming traditional trading routes and reconstructing significant infrastructure links broken by decades of conflict (U.S. Department of State, 2011). This policy shift also saw the establishment of the "C5+1" dialogue mechanism, aimed at fostering cooperation between the United States and the five Central Asian states. The Obama administration sought to move away from the unilateralism and military-driven counterterrorism strategies characteristic of the Bush Doctrine, placing greater emphasis on multilateral agreements in addressing terrorism and other critical international issues. With respect to Central Asia, U.S. policy after the troop withdrawal primarily focused on leveraging the region's role in maintaining Afghan stability, protecting American economic interests in both Central Asia and Afghanistan, and ensuring a competitive edge in great power rivalries. As then- Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert O. Blake observed, " The United States will continue to encourage the Central Asian countries to support Afghanistan's economic and political development. A peaceful, stable, prosperous, and democratic future for the Central Asian states is directly linked to the prospects for peace, stability, prosperity, and democracy in Afghanistan" (U.S. Department of State, 2012). Meanwhile, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized that the policy adjustments in Afghanistan and Central Asia reflected a strategic pivot by the United States toward prioritizing economic dimensions. " The United States will continue shifting our development efforts from short-term stabilization projects, largely as part of the military strategy, to longer-term sustainable development that focuses on spurring growth, creating jobs, invigorating the private sector, and integrating Afghanistan into the South and Central Asia economy" (U.S. Department of State,

2011). This approach reflected a strategic recalibration, emphasizing regional cooperation and multilateral frameworks while balancing the competing priorities of security, economic interests, and geopolitical influence in a post-war context.

After Donald Trump assumed office, the United States gradually placed troop withdrawal from Central Asia on its agenda. During this period, the Trump administration prioritized promoting reforms in the region while preventing any single major power from dominating it. In December 2017, the administration released its first *National Security Strategy* report, emphasizing that the primary U.S. interest in Central Asia was to preserve the independence of its states and prevent their control by other powers. "We seek Central Asian states that are resilient against domination by rival powers, are resistant to becoming jihadist safe havens, and prioritize reforms" (The White House, 2017, 50). Subsequently, on January 19, 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense unveiled the *2018 Summary of the National Defense Strategy*, which highlighted a shift in focus: "Long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department... Concurrently consolidate our gains in Iraq and Afghanistan while moving to a more resource-sustainable approach" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p. 4). This marked a significant shift in U.S. defense strategy, as state-to-state strategic competition replaced counterterrorism as the foremost focus of U.S. national security.

3. Discussion

The analysis of U.S. policy evolution in Central Asia reveals a consistent prioritization of political objectives over economic, and economic over military concerns across three distinct phases. First, while the democratization of the Central Asian states has been a core objective since the post-Soviet era, the intense focus on security following the 9/11 attacks temporarily created an illusion of full-scale U.S. engagement. As noted earlier, "However dramatic the accomplishments of individuals, geographical forces, acting upon human cultures, tend ultimately to win through" (Kaplan, 2012, p. 87). The complete U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan underscores the inherent limitations of American influence in Central Asia. Unable to exert direct control over the region, the U.S. has instead sought to ensure that no single major power dominates Central Asia, thereby preserving its own access to regional energy resources.

In latest the *United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity*, the U.S. government explicitly aimed to reassure Central Asian countries and build their confidence in cooperating with the United States. In the beginning of strategy stated, "The United States' efforts are intended to promote the independence and sovereignty of regional states rather than foster dependency on the United States" (Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2020). Similarly, during a visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan on March 2, 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated that "Amid strategic competition, the U.S. should help Central Asian states achieve balance in their foreign relations, not force them to pick sides" (Helf, 2023). This approach clearly signals Washington's intent to adopt an "offshore balancing" strategy to ensure that Central Asia does not

become a satellite of any neighboring power. This strategy aims not to foster dependency but to build confidence among Central Asian states, allowing them to maintain independence while integrating into a U.S.-led international order.

In sum, while U.S. policy in Central Asia has evolved in response to shifting global dynamics, its long-term impact remains limited by persistent regional forces. While Mackinder's and Brzezinski's frameworks suggest that controlling the Heartland is crucial for global dominance, the U.S. experience in Central Asia illustrates the complexities of intervening in a region where historical, cultural, and economic ties significantly constrain external influence.

4. Conclusion: Gains and Losses of U.S. Policy in Central Asia

The five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—have consistently pursued policies of multi-vector diplomacy to navigate their complex geopolitical environment. Kazakhstan, for instance, explicitly enshrined multivectorism in its *On the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030* released in March 2020. The document articulated its commitment to a "Multi-vector, pragmatic and pro-active policy, which means the development of friendly, equal and mutually beneficial relations with all states, interstate associations and international organisations of practical interest to Kazakhstan," emphasizing its intention to "further development of allied relations with the Russian Federation, comprehensive strategic partnership with the People's Republic of China, expanded strategic partnership with the United States of America, strategic relations with Central Asian states, expanded partnership and cooperation with the European Union (EU) and EU member states" (The Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020). Similarly, Uzbekistan has demonstrated varying alignments with major powers at different times, adopting what is often referred to as "pendulum diplomacy" or a "zigzag policy" to describe its frequent reorientations in the direction of external policy (Romashov, 2016). Meanwhile, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan also declared "permanent neutrality" or "active neutrality" as guiding principles of their foreign policies upon gaining independence. This strategy of rejecting dominance by a single external actor has allowed Central Asia countries to leverage the "asymmetric competition" among major powers to create a regional balance of power that minimizes strategic risks and maximizes national interests. Beyond the U.S.-led C5+1 platform, other external or regional powers such as The China-Central Asia Summit hosted in Xi'an China 2023; India's virtual C5+1 conclave of top security officials on 2022; and Turkey's C4+1 Organization of Turkic States (excluding, for now, Farsi-speaking Tajikistan). These initiatives reflect the five Central Asian state's driven by geopolitical considerations, are unlikely to align completely with any single major power. Instead, they adopt a "great power balancing" diplomatic strategy by participating in various functional regional organizations to better safeguard and expand their interests across multiple domains.

However, the United States has exhibited a short-sighted approach by hastily promoting

"democratization" in Central Asia. This democratization process is not aimed at fostering regional economic development or improving local infrastructure but rather seeks to prevent the region from falling under the control of neighboring powers. The U.S. has aggressively advanced political and economic reforms modeled on Western systems, even resorting to contentious and illegitimate methods such as "color revolutions." For the Central Asian states, which have been independent for just over three decades and prioritize political stability above all, such external interventions are naturally met with strong caution and resistance. As noted by the prominent think tank Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in its analysis of U.S. policy toward Central Asia:

Democratic change and good governance in Central Asia cannot be imposed from the outside. American efforts in this area have been largely unsuccessful due in large measure to the absence of broad domestic coalitions for change and intense mistrust of U.S. motivations. In the future, the United States can offer assistance to promote positive change, but it should focus on areas where change is possible or would improve the plight of the region's citizens....In this vein, U.S. aid programs should deemphasize the promotion of democratic practices as an end in themselves and focus more on improving quality of life, especially in the areas of healthcare, education, the environment, economic transparency, and the rule of law. (Stronski & Sabol, 2016)

Looking forward, with Donald Trump reelected as President, U.S. policy toward Central Asia is likely to continue emphasizing the strategic priorities of his previous term—reducing direct military engagement, fostering economic partnerships, and countering the influence of major competitors such as China and Russia. From the current trajectory of Trump's strategic policies, he seeks to return the U.S. to a modern iteration of the early 20th-century "Monroe Doctrine"—abandoning global expansionism, focusing on domestic priorities, and consolidating strategic resources within the Americas to fortify the nation's foundational strength and "Make America Great Again." On that basis, Central Asia—the traditional cornerstone of America's external strategy—would likely remain marginalized, serving, at best, as a symbolic lever to unsettle the regional stability surrounding China and Russia. While the dissolution of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and drastic cuts to foreign aid programs have significantly reduced the feasibility of externally driven "color revolutions," this does not preclude the Trump administration from pursuing regime change operations if deemed necessary or advantageous.

Finally, it must be pointed out that to achieve the strategic objective of ensuring that the region does not fall under the dominance of a single power, particularly in safeguarding U.S. interests in local energy resources, it will be essential for the U.S. to genuinely respect the independence and sovereignty of Central Asian states. This would require de-emphasizing geopolitical adventurism and tempering ideological rhetoric, fostering trust among Central Asian nations that U.S. outreach and aid initiatives are not covert attempts at regime change but instead aim to support regional stability and mutual development.

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