

America's Growing Stake in Central Asia

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This year marks the 20th anniversary of independence for the five republics of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. This anniversary is a good opportunity to reflect on America's growing stake in Central Asia. Since 1991, our desire for a stable, independent, and prosperous Central Asia has guided US policy priorities in the region, with each of the five nations working towards building strong, market-oriented democracies. In recent years, the United States has sought to increase engagement with this region on a broad range of issues, particularly as we work to bring stability, security, and prosperity to Afghanistan, which borders three of the Central Asian republics. Located at the critical geostrategic crossroads of Eurasia, the region is rich not only in natural resources, economic opportunity, and human capacity, but also in its diversity of people, culture, and ideas. Just as the region was at the center of the Silk Road of centuries past, Central Asia has the potential once again to serve as a hub of trade, transport, and ideas in Eurasia, linking the people and markets of East and West, and North and South. We look forward to working with the Central Asian republics, their neighbors, and international partners to create a new Silk Road that integrates this strategically vital region and offers new opportunities for its people.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States embraced an ambitious foreign policy in Central Asia that remains the core of our efforts in the region today. Since 1991, we have sought to preserve the sovereignty of the Central Asian states, to eliminate Soviet-era weapons of mass destruction (WMD), to facilitate the development of the region's energy reserves, and to foster cooperation, not only among the five republics, but also with the region's neighbors and the United States. We also have encouraged political liberalization, the establishment of democratic institutions and practices, transparent governance, and full respect for human rights. In their twenty years of independence, the Central Asian states have made substantial progress in specific areas. They have solidified their sovereignty and renounced WMD. They have established productive relations within the region while preserving their autonomy and developing unique national identities. The Central Asian republics have pursued viable partnerships with the United States on a range of other critical issues affecting the region, most notably on security cooperation and Afghanistan. We hope all the countries of Central Asia will follow the example of Kyrgyzstan in pursuing political liberalization and greater respect for human rights.

The events of September 11, 2001 fundamentally altered the trajectory of US-Central Asian relations. The attacks on 9/11 made abundantly clear our mutual security concerns and led to a considerable broadening of our relations. Central Asia became a key outpost in the US war against terrorism and served as a vital entry point for coalition forces and supplies as we initiated efforts against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Since

then, cooperation on counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and border security have expanded rapidly.

Expanded security cooperation underpins our efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan, most visibly through the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) and the Transit Center at Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan. The participation of most Central Asian countries in the NDN has allowed for the transport of supplies into Afghanistan for US and coalition forces. The Manas Transit Center likewise serves as a vital logistical hub for US forces deploying to and from the Afghan theatre.

Central Asia's contributions are not limited to security cooperation. Each Central Asian country has contributed in important ways to Afghanistan's economic development and stabilization. Uzbekistan constructed an important rail link between Hairaton and Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan. As Turkmenistan supplies electricity to western Afghanistan, Uzbekistan also provides desperately needed electricity at discounted rates to Kabul and surrounding areas. Kazakhstan has invited 1,000 Afghans to train at Kazakhstani universities, while Tajikistan, which shares a 1,400-kilometer border with Afghanistan, coordinates with the Afghan government on border security and trade. Afghanistan's long-term success will depend in part on boosting cooperation with its neighbors, developing a shared vision for the future, and building up trade, energy, economic, and political links that will embed Afghanistan into its neighborhood along a new Silk Road.

Expanded engagement with our Central Asian partners on this critical priority has also bolstered interaction on a range of other issues, making clear the need for a sustained, long-term approach to US policy in the region. Recognizing this need, the Obama administration in 2009 undertook a comprehensive review of US strategy in Central Asia. We wanted not only to build an atmosphere of trust and cooperation, but also to create viable, long-term partnerships to address critical global issues, from terrorism and nonproliferation, to counternarcotics and energy security. Through this framework we have also addressed issues unique to the Central Asian countries themselves, including political liberalization and institutional capacity building, respect for the rule of law, and the protection of human rights. These concerns are interconnected, and progress on one issue can help reinforce progress on others.

Despite success on many policy priorities, Central Asia remains one of the least integrated regions in the world. The United States believes regional cooperation and integration mark opportunities of enormous unfulfilled promise. We are committed to coordinating with our Central Asian partners to achieve an environment in which business and trade can thrive, which is why we support WTO accession for each of the Central Asian republics. We have supported the efforts by the UN Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) to facilitate greater consultations and cooperation within the region. We also seek to help Central Asia to develop greater regional linkages by connecting Europe to China, Russia to India, Central Asia to South Asia, and beyond. As Secretary Clinton noted during the US-India Strategic Dialogue in July, this new Silk

Road would not be “a single thoroughfare like its namesake, but an international web and network of economic and transit connections.”

Linking Central Asia to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, for instance, will foster stability, economic development, and energy security in these countries and the wider region, and the foundation for a new Silk Road is already being laid. An important step towards this goal will be to connect the road and rail projects in Afghanistan to the Asian Development Bank’s extensive road and rail plan in Central Asia to provide the necessary infrastructure for exports from those countries to reach western markets. When realized, these efforts could one day allow for Indian goods to reach markets in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and beyond; and for Central Asian exports to traverse Afghanistan to the ports and burgeoning markets of Pakistan, India, and beyond. Regional economic cooperation and integration is critical to Afghanistan’s future—and to that of Central and South Asia as a whole.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), ratified by both parties in January and implemented on June 12 of this year, is another initiative that will pave the new Silk Road. This agreement, in addition to the benefits it will afford Afghanistan and Pakistan, has the potential, if expanded north and south, to transform Central Asia and the entire region by facilitating trade, reducing transit costs and delays, and improving trade relations at the borders. APTTA will encourage economic growth and lead to expanded commercial ties throughout the region; more importantly, it will provide a climate of optimism and contribute to greater regional security as US military forces transition out of Afghanistan. Implementation of APTTA will help facilitate a growing trade area that will eventually connect South and Central Asia, paving the way for peace and prosperity throughout the region.

Energy diversification and resource linkages such as pipelines are also necessary components for greater regional integration. One such project is the proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline. This project would provide revenue and jobs for Afghanistan and Pakistan at a critical time in each country’s economic development, and would afford clean fuel to the rapidly expanding economies of Pakistan and India. TAPI’s route may also serve as a peace corridor, linking neighbors together in economic growth and prosperity. Despite the challenges associated with this project, the United States is encouraged by recent progress—and important steps continue on the part of the participating governments. In December 2010, the presidents of Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and the Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas of India signed an Intergovernmental Agreement on the TAPI pipeline. Price negotiations are now underway. Though the road ahead may be difficult, the benefits could provide considerable economic opportunity to the region and are certainly worthy of the diligence demonstrated by these four countries thus far.

Support for the APPTA and the TAPI are just two of the current efforts to facilitate further regional integration—and much work remains to be done. Economic opportunity and greater regional integration will not be fully realized, however, if the people of Central Asia cannot be assured of their basic rights. While it is up to the governments and citizens

of Central Asia themselves to forge a democratic, secure future, the United States will continue to encourage and support efforts to this end. For that reason, we have leveraged foreign assistance programs to advance democratization, civil society, and rule of law as a sign of our unflagging commitment to the people of Central Asia and to our belief in the universal human rights values that must safeguard their dignity, security and prosperity. We continue to work multilaterally through regional organizations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to build support for democratic processes and encourage respect for human rights.

Cooperating with other major powers such as Europe, Russia, India, and China, and working towards our common interests in this part of the world, we can attain our goals of a stable, secure, and prosperous Central Asia. Only when borders are secure from drug traffickers and terrorists; when goods from New Delhi flow freely through Pakistan and Afghanistan to Dushanbe, Bishkek, Tashkent, Ashgabat, Astana, and beyond; and energy resources from Central Asia also flow south to Islamabad, Lahore, New Delhi, Mumbai, Dhaka, and Bangalore, will our goal of a stable and prosperous region be realized. With hard work and sustained focus, historians twenty years from now—reflecting on forty years of US-Central Asia relations—will point to our engagement today as a key moment for Central Asia and the region.