



Feature Article  
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## A New American Strategy for Greater Central Asia

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*Any pivot to Asia must prioritize a comprehensive strategy for Greater Central Asia, yet the U.S. has offered no coherent regional strategy to date. Greater Central Asia is the connective tissue bridging Europe to Asia through energy, trade, transport, and resources, a cornucopia of commercial opportunities. The region figures prominently in the strategies of U.S. adversaries for securing competitive advantage against American interests. Ignoring Greater Central Asia thus exposes the U.S. to lost opportunities and unwanted strategic surprises.*

Any discussion of a U.S. strategy for Greater Central Asia must begin with the obvious. To date, no coherent U.S. strategy exists. The U.S. approach to Greater Central Asia has been largely a number of disjointed projects from different agencies, a dog's breakfast of program mainstays and leftovers, absent strategic protein. Projects are not strategy.



*Astana, Kazakhstan. Photo Credit: Ken and Nyetta*

Repeatedly, the government has randomly assigned the states of Greater Central Asia into agencies' larger groupings where they are thought to fit, but do not. This strategic sloppiness has resulted in the Greater Central Asia states, including those of the South Caucasus, being addressed in a nebulous post-Soviet analytical and operational framework. At one time, the South Asia basket was their

preferred destination. The current State Department has inexplicably returned them to its Russia account. It is hard to imagine how any serious strategist in possession of a map and an understanding of the geopolitical dynamics of the last two decades could make this decision. This Russia-centric intellectual paradigm has not been able to pass the strategic smell test for many years. The political and economic dynamics of the Greater Central Asian states affect the strategies of all the states surrounding the region, and they, in turn, reflect those dynamics in their own strategies. Russia is part of this world, but this isn't even remotely the Russian world.

Neither is Greater Central Asia some distant appendage of Asia. Rather, it is the connective tissue that attaches Asia to Europe and Russia through energy, trade, transport, and resources. If a strategy of pivoting to Asia, as American strategists intend, mistakes Greater Central Asia as a distant flank, it will miss opportunities for enhancing U.S. competitive advantage while encouraging unwelcome strategic surprises. Moreover, this pivot will lose opportunities to thwart efforts by our adversaries to enhance their interests at the expense of our own in and around a region most coveted. A focused strategy for Greater Central Asia must be central to any pivot to Asia, not independent of or divorced from it.

The strategy published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute<sup>1</sup> recommends a number of ways to build U.S. power and influence in Greater Central Asia without breaking the bank. We understand that the U.S. has many strategic priorities and limited resources. We believe that gaining a considerable advantage for the U.S. in Greater Central Asia is possible at an acceptable cost. This can be accomplished by good decision-making and strong implementation.

### **The Role of the National Security Council**

Decision-making starts with putting someone in charge. Within the corridors of American power, Greater Central Asia has always been a strategic orphan. This must change. We recommend that a Special Presidential Envoy for Greater Central Asia, who is responsible for designing and implementing strategy for Greater Central Asia, be added to the National Security Council. Greater Central Asia must be that official's professional focus and operational priority, not just an additional responsibility. Similarly, unique analytical and operational groupings at key institutions like State, DOD, Commerce, and Trade should be created to

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<sup>1</sup> S. Frederick Starr, S. Enders Wimbush, Svante E. Cornell, Mamuka Tsereteli and Laura Linderman, "A Strategy for Great Central Asia," American Foreign

Policy Council Special Report, April 25, 2025. (<https://www.afpc.org/publications/special-reports/a-strategy-for-greater-central-asia>)

mirror this concentration and coordinate with it.

### **Greater Central Asia Business Council**

The incumbent administration must focus attention and resources on aggressively championing the U.S. private sector's interests in the region. This means making seeding, stimulating, and multiplying commercial efforts high priorities. Commerce is America's sweet spot. Greater Central Asia is a pregnant consumer space with large and growing populations. Our strategy calls for advocating and pursuing opportunities for U.S. businesses in trade, transport, manufacturing, tourism and travel, and resource development and extraction. With regard to rare minerals, Greater Central Asia has many in abundance, yet most USG interest today focuses on China or Greenland.

To energize this effort institutionally, we recommend that the government create a Greater Central Asia Business Council, for example at the Department of Commerce, with a presence in the U.S. and in each Greater Central Asia country. As we envision it, this is where cross-border and regional commercial opportunities can be born, investors can be identified, new ideas for commercial development can be cross-

pollinated, regional projects can be designed, partners can be engaged, and U.S. support can be coordinated. We know from extensive contact with Greater Central Asian business people that they have a considerable appetite for such an initiative.

### **Counter-Terrorism**

A sound strategy must aim to enhance counter-terrorism efforts by engaging the states of Greater Central Asia in close cooperation, a key American national security interest. As we note, Islamic terrorism is sometimes homegrown in Greater Central Asia, while a great deal more is transported into Greater Central Asia across porous borders from states like Iran and Pakistan, as well as through efforts by more distant Middle Eastern Islamic regimes to expand their area of ideological influence and operations. Afghanistan is a crossroads and transmission belt of these trends, which is why the retreat of the U.S. military presence there has been particularly corrosive to U.S. national security planning. The strategy we propose embraces Afghanistan within the organic context of Greater Central Asia, thereby offering an opportunity to impede the negative trends unleashed by this earlier mistake.

## **Regional Security Framework**

U.S. strategy for Greater Central Asia should include a robust Regional Security Framework whose purpose is to promote coordination and integration among the region's military and national security professionals. The U.S. military has long been one of America's most effective institutions for engaging foreign security elites—socialization, as political scientists might say—which in the past has included Greater Central Asia military and security elites in its programs at the institutions we identify in our strategy. These efforts could be expanded and intensified significantly at low cost. Engagement would include developing common security protocols, military ethnics, intelligence sharing, joint operations, and technical interoperability.

Our strategy suggests a number of ways and places military and national security professionals from the Greater Central Asia states can be plugged into existing U.S. capabilities for low cost. Influencing these security professionals through contact, training, and cooperation that results in growing familiarity with U.S. security practices and confidence in the possibilities of cooperation will pay significant dividends for planners and operators in both Greater Central Asia and the U.S.

## **Strategic Multiplier**

As part of the Regional Security Framework our strategy calls for creating a strategic multiplier effect by ...mechanisms for cooperating with allies whose interests overlap or align with ours in Greater Central Asia. For example, U.S. partnerships for assessment and consultation might include Europe, India, Turkey, Israel, Japan, and perhaps several Gulf states. The Department of State would lead, and U.S. embassies in the region would serve as conduits of joint thinking, cooperation, and coordination among allies.

## **Multinational Cooperation**

**We recommend assisting Greater Central Asia governments to expand their own formal collective structures by drawing selectively on the experience of other multinational bodies.** The aim should be to help Greater Central Asia states to build a solid foundation for working together, and, importantly, not become hostage to collective organizations dominated by Russia or China.

## **Narrative Shift**

Our strategy calls for developing a serious communications strategy for Greater Central Asia. Ideally, this would go beyond current efforts to simply deliver information into a

digital media environment that is saturated with what many competitors say is unbiased information, but which, in fact, is badly disguised narrative warfare that advances their interests while undermining ours. America's government communications institutions, like the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, have long positioned themselves as political opposition voices to Greater Central Asia policies and practices, a questionable vocation going forward. The current uncertainty about the future of these institutions is an opportune moment to examine this legacy, assess the competitive communications landscape anew, and recast a communications strategy that aspires to engage, especially, young elites of the Greater Central Asia region. Using local languages is important, but so is English, which, unlike Russian, connects this generation to the larger world of global business and Western ideas and conventions. The objective should be to explain American interests, motives, and visions effectively, while exposing the fallacies of those of our competitors as harmful to Greater Central Asians' own interests.

## **Conclusion**

Pieces of some of these initiatives have surfaced independently, some might say serendipitously, in various parts of the U.S. government, but they have never been welded into a coherent strategy that seeks to enhance U.S. interests in Greater Central Asia. Over the past three decades, there have been lots of projects funded by the U.S. taxpayer, but nothing greater than the sum of their parts has emerged. In the 1990s, this was explicable because few U.S. strategists knew where Greater Central Asia was and what it represented. In 2025, the strategic importance of Greater Central Asia can no longer be ignored. The region is home to significant U.S. interests that extend into the states around it. Meanwhile, rare commercial opportunities that can help anchor a strategy have become increasingly attractive. To secure these interests and pursue these opportunities, putting a comprehensive strategy in place for Greater Central Asia is the first step.

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