



China's Role in Central Asia

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Introduction

Central Asia has become an area of interest in Eurasian affairs and is likely to play a major role in determining Eurasia's future. During Soviet domination, it was effectively isolated from the outside world. Over the last 25 years, the region has experienced expanding economic activity. China, the European Union (EU), Iran, India, Russia, and the United States (US) are among the actors seeking partnership opportunities. Potential trade agreements leveraging the region's vast energy resources promise to raise living standards for domestic audiences. Furthermore, its position among north-south and east-west trade routes provides a ready-made incentive for foreign interests to pursue economic ventures in Central Asia. The inherent benefits of engagement with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – including natural resource availability, their value as transit routes, and their untapped markets – are clearly displayed through China's One Belt, One Road initiative. As Beijing looks to mature its partnership opportunities with Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, Central Asian states offer important assets in providing an efficient and secure transit route for goods traveling across Eurasia. Developing economic opportunities for partnership in the region offers further benefits for states such as China already seeking to move products through the region. Given the geographic advantages of partnering with capital cities Bishkek, Dushanbe, Ashgabat, and Tashkent, states from throughout the eastern hemisphere will seek opportunities to cooperate.

Analyzing the approaches of Beijing, Moscow, and Washington to advance their own interests in the region would reveal opportunities for China-US cooperation. Specifically, from Washington's perspective, reviewing Beijing's approach with an eye toward developing joint ventures in Central Asia is prudent. China's successful implementation of soft power measures and mechanisms demonstrates a mutually beneficial avenue for Beijing and Washington to engage with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The approach taken by the People's Republic of China (PRC) lies in stark contrast to the more assertive and domineering tack taken by Russia, one that risks alienating indigenous population(s). When considering how the Kremlin has successfully compelled membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), time is of the essence for both Beijing and Washington. Curtailing Russia's mounting influence must be a major consideration for both China and the US. If Beijing and Washington do not respond to Moscow's advances, they may both find themselves in a disadvantageous position in the region. Neither can afford such a development given the Kremlin's efforts to fortify its influence across the international community. Momentum gained in Central Asia would embolden Russia elsewhere, which, given the Putin administration's realist approach, would be to the detriment of both China and the US.

From Washington's perspective, developing cooperative mechanisms with Beijing offers the best opportunity to stem Moscow's advance. However, identifying the best means to partner with China requires careful analysis of how the PRC has worked to achieve its own objectives in Central Asia. Equipped with a more comprehensive knowledge of where China and the US may partner is prudent given the complex nature of trilateral relations among Beijing, Moscow, and Washington, particularly given potential changes associated with the Trump Administration. Ultimately, strengthening ties with the PRC and the four

Central Asian states to counter Russian aggression is within reach but will require comprehensive analysis and a strategic approach that leverages Chinese and US strengths.

Post-Cold War Cooperative Strategies

China, Russia, and the US have all pursued partnership opportunities in Central Asia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. What distinguishes these global powers from one another is the strategies they have employed to achieve their partnership objectives. Beijing has opted for economic engagement with a focus on access to energy reserves to help fuel its economy. A byproduct of such cooperation has been increased revenue for Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which in turn has played an important role in minimizing ethnic and religious strife in Central Asia and China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region. In contrast, Moscow has pursued an engagement strategy that attempts to reassert its regional dominance at the expense of regional living standards and human security. If successful, this tactic will allow the Kremlin to control a greater portion of the Eurasian energy market and broader economy, thereby helping to shape regional politics in its favor. Washington's approach, complicated by geographic separation, has been more focused on developing long-term necessities such as good governance standards and resident industries, inherently principled and ethically proper efforts. Should this American strategy bear fruit, it will allow the Central Asian states far greater autonomy while permitting them to better leverage their resources – both natural materials and affordable labor. Analyzing the policies and practices China, Russia, and the US have applied to implement their respective strategies provides a basis for recommendations for how the US might engage with China in the furtherance of mutually-beneficial objectives in Central Asia.

Chinese Engagement Approach

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Beijing has substantially increased its involvement in Central Asia, largely to Moscow's detriment. At the core of the PRC's efforts have been access to reliable and secure energy resources as well as secure transit routes across the eastern hemisphere. Developing overland routes that minimize the distance required for energy goods to reach Chinese territory is instrumental to Beijing's ability to confront challenges from potential adversaries. Moreover, Central Asia provides a readily available market for goods manufactured in China's western territories. Without access to consumers and overland transit routes, the challenges of moving goods to China's coast lines is prohibitive for firms looking to expand into Xinjiang Autonomous Region and elsewhere. Equally important, Central Asia is one of the first steps in moving goods on overland routes from China across the eastern hemisphere. From a security standpoint, the mutually-beneficial relationships China is cultivating help local governments stunt the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. Through improved standards of living and increased revenues for internal security forces, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are able to erode potential sources of support for Uighur fundamentalists that could otherwise threaten security in Xinjiang. In short, by implementing a host of soft power tactics, China has been able to advance its interests in Central Asia.

The initial step in Beijing's strategy has been to develop multilateral constructs capable of corralling the inherently decentralized regimes in Bishkek, Dushanbe, Ashgabat, and Tashkent. To date, three entities serve China's goal of bringing form and substance to its Central Asian engagement strategy. First, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a Chinese- and Russian-promoted economic and security community, has served as a mechanism for advancing economic cooperation. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are all SCO members and have reached lucrative trade agreements with China during SCO meetings. Russia likewise has attempted to use the SCO as a vehicle for economic engagements in the region. In addition, this organization holds a nascent security capability although it has only been used to conduct joint counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism exercises. Second, the same three members are part of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). As Beijing works to make the One Belt, One Road initiative a reality, the AIIB will serve as a primary conduit for developing physical capital programs in the region. Already, in June 2016, the Silk Road program advertised the opening of the Qamchiq Tunnel; promoted as the longest railway tunnel in Central Asia, it connects greater Uzbekistan with the restive Ferghana Valley.¹ Third, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) is designed to "promote peace, security, and stability in Asia."² This entity has become a useful measure for improving transparency and provides China a leadership position to complement the economic role it holds in the SCO and AIIB.

Beyond the multilateral constructs, understanding China's overall trade relationships with the four Central Asian states is also prudent. Beijing is Bishkek's largest trading partner. As of 2015, in terms of overall trade it comprises nearly half of Kyrgyzstan's market. China is Kyrgyzstan's largest importer and seventh largest export market.³ The majority of Kyrgyz imports to China are animal hides while China imports finished clothing.⁴ Dating back to 2014, China is the sixth largest export market for Tajikistan with an overwhelming majority of the \$46.9 million coming from trade in ore minerals. Conversely, Beijing is Dushanbe's leading import market with a volume of \$2.46 billion, largely focused on clothing and household goods.⁵ In the case of Turkmenistan, China is over tenfold its largest export destination, as of 2014, with over \$8.95 billion, over 80 percent of which was in the petroleum gas sector. Beijing is Ashgabat's third largest importer, primarily centered on physical capital goods such as construction equipment, computers, iron pipes, and railway passenger cars.⁶ On one hand, China is Uzbekistan's leading export market with a total of \$1.51 billion in volume as of 2014. Beijing largely acquires petroleum gas, raw cotton, and radioactive chemicals from Tashkent. On the other hand, China is Uzbekistan's second

¹ M.K. Bhadrakumar. "Russia-China Entente: Lofty Rhetoric, Shifty Discourse," *Asian Times*, last modified July 3, 2016, <http://atimes.com/2016/07/russia-china-lofty-rhetoric-shifty-discourse/>.

² "About CICA," *Secretariat of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia*, last modified Sept. 16, 2016, http://www.s-cica.org/page.php?page_id=7&lang=1.

³ "European Union, Trade in goods with Kyrgyz Republic," *European Commission*, last modified June 21, 2016, http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/Sept./tradoc_113409.pdf.

⁴ "Kyrgyzstan," *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, date accessed Sept. 25, 2016, http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/chn/kgz/show/2014/.

⁵ "Tajikistan," *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, date accessed Sept. 28, 2016, <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/tjk/>.

⁶ "Turkmenistan," *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, date accessed Sept. 28, 2016, <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/tkm/>.

largest import market with a total volume of \$2.66 billion as of 2014 centered on industrial goods.⁷ Collectively, China's market penetration engenders incentives for all parties in the pursuit of continued growth in economic cooperation with Central Asia.

While China has used multilateral organizations as a conduit for engaging with the Central Asian states, the primary focus of its ventures has been to improve access to energy resources. To reach this objective, Beijing has finalized a host of bilateral agreements. Turkmenistan is China's largest supplier of natural gas. In 2013 Xi Jinping inaugurated production at the second largest gas field in the world, Galkynysh.⁸ First reported in 2014, the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has also invested a reported \$4 billion in the Bagtyarlyk natural gas field.⁹ Similarly, in 2013 Uzbekistan finalized a \$15 billion deal with China for oil, gas, and uranium.¹⁰ This agreement is significant as it further eroded Russia's privileged position in the region. To move these resources to markets in the Middle Kingdom, the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, a 3,666 km long entity and the region's largest by length and volume, extends from the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan border to Jingbian in China.¹¹ Already it supplies 55 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China annually which accounts for 20 percent of Beijing's yearly consumption. An additional line, referred to as Line D, is under construction as part of the Silk Road initiative and will add 30 billion cubic meters annually.¹² These initiatives account for significant revenue for the Central Asian states and a quantitatively noteworthy, safe, and secure source of energy for China.

Beyond economic cooperation, China has utilized its bilateral and multilateral engagement opportunities to cultivate the defense component of its newfound presence in the region. For instance, as part of the SCO agenda, the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent was established in 2002 to counter extremism, separatism, and terrorism.¹³ Aside from cooperative ventures, China has pursued opportunities for direct cooperation. In 2014 it provided Kyrgyzstan with \$16 million in military aid.¹⁴ At meetings in August 2016, Chinese and Tajik counterparts reaffirmed their commitment to

⁷ "Uzbekistan," The Observatory of Economic Complexity, date accessed Sept. 28, 2016, <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/uzb/>.

⁸ "China in Central Asia: Rising China, sinking Russia," *The Economist*, last modified Sept. 14, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21586304>.

⁹ John Roberts, "China Keeps Turkmen Galkynysh in Reserve," *Natural Gas World*, last modified May 30, 2016, <http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/china-quiet-on-galkynysh-field-29846>.

¹⁰ Aynur Jafarova, "CNPC invests \$4 bln in Turkmenistan's Bagtyarlyk contract area," *Azernews*, last modified May 12, 2014, <http://www.azernews.az/region/66927.html>.

¹¹ Michal Romanowski, "Central Asia's Energy Rush: The Region's Major Powers are in a Tussle to Control its Rich Energy Resources," *The Diplomat*, last modified July 3, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/central-asias-energy-rush/>.

¹² Jack Farchy and James Kynge, "The New Trade Routes: Silk Road Corridor," *Financial Times*, last modified May 9, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/ee5cf40a-15e5-11e6-9d98-00386a18e39d>.

¹³ "How Uncertainty in Uzbekistan Threatens China's Energy Security," *Oilprice.com*, last modified Sept. 2, 2016, <http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Asia/How-Uncertainty-In-Uzbekistan-Threatens-Chinas-Energy-Security.html>.

¹⁴ "How Uncertainty in Uzbekistan Threatens China's Energy Security," *Oilprice.com*, last modified Sept. 2, 2016, <http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Asia/How-Uncertainty-In-Uzbekistan-Threatens-Chinas-Energy-Security.html>.

¹⁵ Joshua Kucera, "China Boosts Military Aid to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan," *Eurasianet.org*, last modified Sept. 4, 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69846>.

counterterrorism and other defense cooperation.¹⁶ Arguably most important, in 2015 there were reports of both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan acquiring Chinese HQ-9 air defense systems.¹⁷ Although Beijing and Tashkent have yet to confirm this acquisition, in mid-2016 video of Ashgabat's forces using the system in an exercise emerged.¹⁸ Taken in concert, the actions of the Central Asian states represent a gradual shift away from a reliance on Russia.

Cultural exchanges are increasingly playing an important role alongside Beijing's economic and defense overtures in the region. The PRC has gone to great lengths to emphasize the shared history and cultural goodwill developed by the original Silk Road. Indeed, not just in Central Asia but across the whole continent, in the last three years over 50 sites have been accepted onto the United Nations Economic, Scientific, and Cultural Organization World Heritage list. Interestingly, many of these locations correspond to current or planned elements of the One Belt, One Road initiative. Furthermore, as part of the One Belt, One Road project and other bilateral efforts, China is emphasizing cultural exchanges and tourism. By promoting the shared communal history of the region, the Xi administration hopes to increase buy-in, thereby minimizing suspicions of the Middle Kingdom's growing regional influence. Similarly, by promoting tourism, particularly into western China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is cultivating the economy in Xinjiang. Over the long term, this process will accentuate the utility of the developing and planned overland trade routes as well as countering the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in the area. If successful, the cultural aspect of Beijing's efforts will play a significant role in altering the economic and political landscape in western China and Central Asia.¹⁹

Russian Engagement Approach

Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing end of its direct dominion over Central Asia, Moscow has attempted to retain its privileged position in the region. Through a variety of economic and security initiatives, as well as the omnipresent threat of Russian intervention within the concept of responsibility to protect, the Kremlin has attempted to retain its sphere of influence, thereby monopolizing its control at the expense of regional development. During the 1990s under the Yeltsin Administration, its engagement policy was hampered by Russia's internal vulnerabilities as it lacked the resources to coerce or incentivize its neighbors. However, as Moscow's fortunes have improved, the Putin administration has been able to generate leverage to guide Central Asian policies. Although Beijing has made significant gains in the region, it is the potential impact of the Eurasian Economic Union, Russian forces based in Central Asia, and defense sales that threaten China's gains. Similar arguments could be made of the threats to US investments in the

¹⁶ "China, Tajikistan vow to enhance anti-terrorism cooperation," *Ministry of National Defense, the People's Republic of China*, last modified Aug. 5, 2016, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2016-08/05/content_4707977.htm.

¹⁷ Joshua Kucera, "Has China Made its First Big Military Sale in Central Asia?" *Eurasianet.org*, last modified Feb. 6, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71971>.

¹⁸ Joshua Kucera, "Turkmenistan Shows Off New Chinese Rockets," *Eurasianet.org*, last modified April 2, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/78081>.

¹⁹ Catherine Putz, "What's Happening at the 2016 SCO Summit in Uzbekistan? Depends on Who You Ask," *The Diplomat*, last modified June 24, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/whats-happening-at-the-2016-sco-summit-in-uzbekistan-depends-on-who-you-ask/>.

region. Should the Putin Administration prove successful in bringing the region back under Russia's influence, it could prove seriously damaging to regional stakeholders, especially the Xi Administration and its successors.

Like Beijing, Moscow has used multilateral structures as a tool to generate leverage and access in Central Asia. The Kremlin is also a member of CICA and the SCO; however, in comparison to China's significant influencing power, it is unclear how much sway Russia has in these organizations. For instance, while Moscow has used the SCO as a tool for economic and security integration in Central Asia, China has successfully pushed for investments in infrastructure and energy-related matters, issues that Russia has been reluctant to support.²⁰ What is clear is that although Russia is a member of the AIIB Board of Governors – as are all participants – it does not carry the same influence in this financial institution as China does. With that being said, there are three organizations the Kremlin has established through which it garners considerable influence in Central Asia. First, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was originally formed in 1991 by Russia and 11 other former Soviet republics, excluding the Baltic States (Georgia joined in 1993). It was a cultural and economic community which lacked the policy mechanisms to make it an advantageous effort. Since Georgia withdrew in 2009, the CIS has lost any effectiveness it might have once had.²¹ Second, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was formalized by treaty on May 15, 1992, and now includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.²² Although established as a traditional collective defense organization in the image of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it has since developed peacekeeping and other nontraditional security roles.²³ This security community has served as a vessel for Russia to base forces in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – something which has since served as a potential threat should these states drift away from Moscow. Third and most important is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Intended as Russia's answer to the European Union (EU), it is a Moscow-dominated entity with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan as the other members. Its economic policy-making authority has already had a negative impact in Kazakhstan and could serve to further isolate these former Soviet republics.²⁴ Taken collectively, CIS, CSTO, and EEU pose significant risks to the autonomy of the Central Asian states and jeopardize human security and welfare.

What makes the EEU disconcerting is the manner by which some of its members have been coerced into participation. Belarus needed to join because the Lukashenko administration largely remains a pariah in Europe. Questions surrounding national elections and human rights abuses in Belarus have meant an EU Association Agreement or any other

²⁰ Eleanor Albert. "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified Oct. 14, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/china/shanghai-cooperation-organization/p10883>.

²¹ "Commonwealth of Independent States," *Britannica*, date accessed Oct. 8, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Commonwealth-of-Independent-States>.

²² "Collective Security Treaty Organization," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus*, date accessed Oct. 8, 2016, <https://mfa.gov.by/en/organizations/membership/list/cddd96a3f70190b1.html>.

²³ "CSTO," *Eurasianet.org*, date accessed Oct. 8, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/taxonomy/term/1738>.

²⁴ "Blurring the Lines of Kazakhstan-Russia Relations," *Stratfor*, last modified April 15, 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/blurring-lines-kazakhstan-russia-relations>.

progress toward entering the continental community is problematic.²⁵ For Kazakhstan, as a landlocked state it is reliant on Russia to move its goods to European markets. As an example, from 2012 to 2015 imports from Ukraine to Kazakhstan dropped from \$3 to \$1 billion.²⁶ Moscow's control over Astana's market access could have similar impacts should the Central Asian state offend the Kremlin. However, one of the more troubling cases is Armenia. Moscow provides Baku 85 percent of its defense equipment, which is used against Yerevan. When Armenia explored an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, Russia threatened to curtail aid to Armenia – thereby bolstering its support to Azerbaijan – if Yerevan did not join the EEU instead.²⁷ This coercive strategy speaks to the lengths the Putin administration is prepared to go to reclaim its near-abroad. In the second case, Kyrgyzstan was faced with economic strangulation had it not joined with Russia. According to the World Bank, as a percentage of national gross domestic product (GDP), Kyrgyzstan receives the fourth highest amount of remittances globally (25.7 percent in 2015).²⁸ Given the overwhelming number of Kyrgyz migrant laborers who work in Russia, Bishkek's economy could have been broken by any significant disruption in remittances. Russia's ability to leverage Kyrgyzstan is particularly worrisome given its parallels with Tajikistan. Like Bishkek, Dushanbe is heavily reliant on remittances: Approximately 40 percent of adults work abroad. In 2014, remittances accounted for 42 percent of GDP. Admittedly, this number has likely declined since, largely due to Russia's economic downturn; however, the importance of remittances in bolstering the economy means that Dushanbe has often relented to pressure from Moscow.²⁹ Particularly in the case of Kyrgyzstan, but potentially just as important concerning Kazakhstan, Russia's ability to compel Central Asian states to join the EEU could have significant impacts on China's economy over the long term.

Although the EEU has been finding its way to date, the more intriguing question is how it might impact not only the movement of goods from but also, and more crucially, to China. Keeping the Central Asian states reliant on Russian transit systems for their goods and hindered by a customs union provide the best possible means to force policy decisions in the region. Specifically, because Moscow carries a plurality – if not a majority – of the weight in the EEU, there may come a time when the Kremlin attempts to increase tariffs on Central Asian goods exported to China. Of note, before the ruble's struggles in December 2014, Russia accounted for 87 percent of the EEU's GDP and 83 percent of its population.³⁰ While raising costs for Chinese trade in Central Asia may be a daunting proposition, if

²⁵ Dzmitry Halubnichy. "The Eastern Partnership: the View from Belarus," *The European Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified May 19, 2015, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_belarus3024.

²⁶ Catherine Putz. "Kazakhstan-Ukraine Trade Crashes," *The Diplomat*, last modified Aug. 2, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/kazakh-ukraine-trade-crashes/>.

²⁷ "Armenia and Russia: Stuck with Each Other," *The Economist*, last modified March 20, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21646947-russian-ally-rues-its-dependence-upon-moscow-stuck-each-other>.

²⁸ "Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)," *The World Bank*, date accessed Oct. 8, 2016, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?year_high_desc=true.

²⁹ Remittances in Central Asia: From Russia with Love," *The Economist*, last modified Jan. 16, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21688441-remittances-are-good-thing-except-when-they-stop-russia-love>.

³⁰ Anton Barbashin. "The Eurasian Illusion: The Myth of Russia's Economic Union," *Foreign Affairs*, last modified Jan. 15, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2015-01-15/eurasian-illusion>.

successful it would make Moscow's energy resources in the Russian Far East and Siberia more attractive to Beijing. Should Moscow use its security leverage, it could coerce the Central Asian states into appeasing the Kremlin.³¹

The energy economy in Central Asia provides a particular concern given Russia's historic domination of the region and how emerging markets in Beijing and New Delhi might be changing dynamics. Over the last twenty-five years, Moscow has developed a track record of actively attempting to monopolize regional energy resources. One of the most well-known instances, although occurring in the Caucasus, concerned the Baku-Tbilisi – Ceyhan pipeline. Russia actively attempted to meddle in Georgian politics, which helped to explain the Rose Revolution in 2003.³² In Central Asia, Russian control was less overt simply because during the immediate post-Cold War period less foreign attention was paid to the region. As a result, Moscow was able to retain control of the transit routes that brought Central Asian energy to market. However, with the emergence of China and India's economies, the region is now receiving considerable outside investments to build and utilize direct transit routes to East and South Asia, thereby circumventing Russia altogether. The EEU could be a tool to change the economic viability of this burgeoning energy market. Raising tariffs and other barriers to business in Central Asia might present a device to reconstitute Russia's energy market control in Eurasia.

From Washington's perspective, concerns associated with the EEU revolve around its broader development and what that may mean globally. Not just in Central Asia, but in the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, Russia is attempting to use the EEU as a vessel for influence peddling. Already there is speculation that Azerbaijan or even Syria might be enticed to join the EEU.³³ Moreover, a free trade agreement (FTA) has already been signed with Vietnam and additional FTAs with Egypt and India are being considered.³⁴ Even states in the EU might consider some manner of cooperation with the EEU, with Russia likely to push for EEU membership at the expense of the EU at some juncture. For instance, during the latest round of Greece's financial struggles, meetings between President Putin and Prime Minister Tsipras were held in St. Petersburg to explore options for Moscow to assist Athens.³⁵ Should these overtures bear fruit, they would represent a significant inflection point in the international environment to Washington's detriment.

Any examination of Russian policy in Central Asia must consider the cultural component of Russia's influence. During the time of Russian imperialism and the Soviet

³¹ "The Eurasian Economic Union: Power, Politics, and Trade," *The International Crisis Group*, last modified July 20, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/eurasian-economic-union-power-politics-and-trade>.

³² Douglas W. Blum. "The Russian-Georgian Crisis and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan," *PONARS*, last modified Oct. 2002, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pm_0252.pdf.

³³ Jeffrey Mankoff. "Best of Enemies: The Russia-Turkey Confrontation Beyond Syria," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, last modified Jan. 6, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/best-enemies-russia-turkey-confrontation-beyond-syria>.

³⁴ Alexander Yakovenko. "Eurasian Economic Union Reaches out to South-East Asia," *The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, last modified June 8, 2015, <http://www.rusemb.org.uk/ambarticles/462>.

³⁵ George N. Tzogopoulos. "Greece: Perspectives on Eurasian Integration," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified June 8, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian_integration_greece.

Union, the Tsars and Bolsheviks pursued policies of social engineering on Russia's periphery. Millions of ethnic Russians, and other groups, were encouraged to relocate to these frontier lands as farmers or were forcibly relocated. Since the Soviet Union's dissolution, this population gerrymandering has had a number of interesting impacts; most important in this context are the significant numbers of ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics. As has been observed in Ukraine with its ethnic Russian separatist problems in Crimea and the Donbas, these enclaves are now opportunities for Russian influence and expansion. Risks of separatism and Russia's use of the "Responsibility to Protect" as a pretext for interventionism have likely been factors in Kazakhstan joining the EEU.³⁶ Smaller ethnic Russian minorities, of roughly five percent, exist in the other four Central Asian states today; these enclaves could present an opportunity much the same way the Abkhaz and Ossetians did in Georgia.³⁷ Indeed, without significant involvement from China, the US, or some other combination of interests, the perpetual threat of Moscow's meddling could paralyze reform and development in the former Soviet republics including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Where Russia significantly distances itself from China, and increasingly from the US, is in the security realm. The CSTO provides Moscow the capability it needs to give credibility to its Responsibility to protect rhetoric which serves as a means to coerce the Central Asian states. This has become a growing problem as the Kremlin pursues EEU expansion in the region. Moscow has used domestic instability and fundamentalist Islam as the two major justifications for its continued regional defense meddling. Today, 5,000 personnel, largely comprised of a high-readiness combat-brigade, are based in Lyaur, 25 km south of Dushanbe.³⁸ Interestingly, in 2015 Moscow announced it would boost its force level in Tajikistan to 9,000, yet one year later – without consulting its Tajik counterparts – announced it would keep the deployment at 5,000 personnel.³⁹ This unilateral approach is characteristic of the Kremlin's engagement strategy and speaks to its flaws and vulnerabilities. Russia has smaller air and army bases in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, it has been moving new and modified Su-25 fighter jets to the Kant air base while also promising \$1.2 billion in aid to Bishkek.⁴⁰ Much the same way as it has forces in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, ostensibly to deal with insecurity to the south in Afghanistan, Moscow has offered similar support to Ashgabat which has been rejected so far.⁴¹ In the case of Uzbekistan, a landmark deal was reached in late April in which Moscow forgave 95 percent of Tashkent's debt. The calculated move by the Putin Administration is an ideal means to broaden economic cooperation at a time when 3 million Uzbeks work in Russia, contributing 25 percent of the

³⁶ "Introducing the Eurasian Economic Union: Where Three is a Crowd," *The Economist*, last modified May 30, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2014/05/introducing-eurasian-economic-union>.

³⁷ *CIA World Factbook*, date accessed Oct. 9, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/>.

³⁸ Roger N. McDermott. "Russia Recalibrates 201st base in Tajikistan," *The Central Asia-Caucasus ANALYST*, last modified Feb. 25, 2016, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13335-russia-recalibrate-201st-base-in-tajikistan.html>.

³⁹ "Tajikistan: Russian Military Recalibrates its Mission," *Eurasianet.org*, last modified Feb. 5, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/77196>.

⁴⁰ Abdujalil Abdurasulov. "CIS Summit: Russia to Bolster Central Asia Military," *BBC*, last modified Oct. 16, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34538051>.

⁴¹ Arkady Dubnov. "A New Russian Turn to Turkmenistan?" *Carnegie Moscow Center*, last modified Feb. 18, 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=62814>.

state's GDP. Considering the potential stranglehold remittances present, Uzbekistan has begun opening opportunities for increased counterterrorism cooperation although it has resisted more thorough engagement to date, something not expected to change even with the death of Tashkent's President, Islam Karimov.⁴² Russia has regularly exercised counterterror activities in Tajikistan employing the CSTO's rapid response capability; while these exercises appear innocuous, they also provide a clear message that Russia retains influence in the region.⁴³⁴⁴ Whether Moscow has attained a military presence, or is pursuing one, in all four cases the Kremlin's constant efforts to advance its security interests play a negative role in retaining state autonomy throughout Central Asia. Consequently, although Russia has found some opportunities for further entrenchment in the region, its heavy-handed tactics have created a vulnerability that China and the US can exploit.

US Engagement Approach

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the focus of US interests in Central Asia has been on developing long-term opportunities for human and physical capital growth with an eye toward advancing human security and welfare. During the 1990s, the Clinton administration explored institution-building in the region, but struggled to make progress. Given the challenges with transitioning in the post-communist era, the difficulties of economic and governmental reform should not be surprising. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were thrust into the spotlight after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Early in the conflict, the George W. Bush administration relied on the former Soviet republics to provide basing options for US aircraft and to serve as a line of support for the anti-Taliban forces. Unfortunately, in the years since, as Washington's strategic priorities have shifted, Central Asia's importance has wavered. Consequently, the loss of US direction and focus has allowed Moscow to return to a position of prominence in the region as an important security and aid provider. Precisely because this trend of US rollback can be fundamentally reversed, there is prudence in examining Washington's current regional policy and the history that has informed it.

As was the case throughout the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states during the first decade in the post-communist period, Washington made autonomy and state sovereignty its primary policy focus. To achieve this end, a number of items were targeted. Under the Clinton administration, three significant objectives were accomplished, or furthered, that are noteworthy. First, assistance was provided in helping the Central Asian states fortify their autonomy so that Russia could not reestablish its traditional dominant place in the region. Advancing bilateral programs as well as multilateral programs such as

⁴² Samuel Ramani. "Crossroads Asia: The Implications of Tightening Russia-Uzbekistan Ties," *The Diplomat*, last modified May 11, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/the-implications-of-tightening-russia-uzbekistan-ties/>.

⁴³ Agence France-Presse. "Russia Flexes Central Asia Military Might," *Defense News*, last modified May 17, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/asia-pacific/2015/05/17/russia-flexes-central-asia-military-might-amid-afghan-fears/27494697/>.

⁴⁴ Joshua Kucera. "Russia, Tajikistan Start Large-Scale Military Exercises on Afghan Border," *Eurasianet.org*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/77786>.

the NATO Partnership for Peace served to bolster independent development in the region.⁴⁵ Undoubtedly, security cooperation assisted in the ability to counter destabilizing actions by fundamentalist Islamic groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan when it conducted attacks in Kyrgyzstan in 1999 – which, incidentally, motivated security assistance from Russia, Turkey, and the US.⁴⁶ Second, to separate any potential control Russia might have on the region moving forward, the Clinton administration worked to establish economic transit routes that bypassed Moscow to the maximum extent possible. Although success in this arena was marginal during the 1990’s – perhaps largely due to negotiating and construction times – in addition to the Central Asia-China pipeline, the developing Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline and possible extension of the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline further diversified Central Asia’s market options.⁴⁷ Moreover, these developments reinforced the notion that regional progress could be achieved without Russian involvement. Third, the Clinton administration made progress on democratic reform and good governance a theme for advancement in Central Asia. Unfortunately, the leaders in many of these states created an environment that was not conducive to sufficient reform and has since harmed potential relationships. Ultimately, the legacy of early US efforts in Central Asia is mixed as it helped to mature independent states but did not achieve the more ambitious goals of democratizing and liberalizing the region.

To recognize fully the state of play in Central Asia today requires a comprehensive appreciation of the world immediately after the events of Sept. 11, 2001. The geographic isolation of Afghanistan, and of Central Asia more broadly, has presented logistical challenges to military planners for centuries. Moreover, modern considerations including state sovereignty necessitated a diplomatic engagement strategy. Bringing US capabilities to bear against a landlocked state in 2001 required assistance from Kabul’s neighbors. With Washington looking for help, and with the Taliban viewed as a problem for the former Soviet republics as well, leaders in Bishkek, Dushanbe, Ashgabat, and Tashkent were willing to provide assistance. However, as with all things, this assistance came at a price. The Bush administration set aside many of its qualms with regional governance issues in exchange for basing and overflight rights. In exchange for military aid, joint exercises, and other valuable cooperative measures, Uzbekistan granted the use of Karshi-Khanabad while Kyrgyzstan offered up Manas. Even Turkmenistan granted a lesser refueling facility at Ashqabad. While for a variety of reasons all of these agreements have come to an end, they represent a turning point in US regional engagement.⁴⁸ While Washington may have lost focus due to other priorities, this moment serves as testament to the gains that can be made without significant involvement from Moscow.

The shift from less readily noticeable assistance under President Clinton to the more military-centric cooperation under President Bush clearly had an impact on Russian

⁴⁵ “Partnership for Peace Programme,” *NATO*, last modified April 7, 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50349.htm.

⁴⁶ Olga Oliker and David A. Shlapak. “Project Air Force,” *RAND*, date accessed Oct. 10, 2016, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG338.pdf.

⁴⁷ Cristina Maza. “Central Asia’s Shifting Pipeline Politics,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, last modified Sept. 24, 2015, <http://projects.csmonitor.com/tapi>.

⁴⁸ Olga Oliker and David A. Shlapak. “Project Air Force,” *RAND*, date accessed Oct. 10, 2016, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG338.pdf.

engagement policies. During the latter portion of the Bush era, as the conflict in Iraq increasingly absorbed the administration's energies, an opening in the region was created for Moscow. The Kremlin took advantage of mitigating circumstances to begin reenergizing its Central Asian partnership strategy. Although other issues such as air facilities in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan's human rights violations played a part, Tashkent's termination of the US basing agreement and its sudden improvement in relations with Moscow were not coincidental.⁴⁹ Indeed, a similar story occurred in 2014 when Kyrgyzstan closed US access to the airbase at Manas. Adding to defense cooperation, Russia went further to solidify its new hold on the region when Vladimir Putin announced his desire to create a Eurasian customs union, now the EEU, in 2009.⁵⁰ Taken collectively, the US strategy to reinforce cooperation with the Central Asian states lacked the fortitude and long-term commitment necessary to prevent the all-too-likely Russian response. Yet, perhaps most important, events during the 21st century demonstrate that a focused approach by the US can be successful and that only if Washington is distracted can Moscow compete in Central Asia.

More recently, the Obama administration appeared to have lost some of its focus on Central Asia yet continued to pursue assistance opportunities in the realm of democratization, economic growth, and nontraditional security support. Through the US Agency for International Development (AID), Washington has supported the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation Program, a \$20 billion initiative to improve six trade routes that offer regional states access to markets in every direction.⁵¹ Unfortunately, as the US federal budget has decreased, so too has aid for Central Asia. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan – the one conceivable democracy – financial support to the region has shrunk under President Obama.⁵² Yet the establishment of the “U.S.-Central Asia (C5+1) Joint Projects” group, with its first ministerial meeting in November 2015, is an important step toward normalizing assistance. At the second ministerial meeting, held in Washington D.C. in August 2016 with \$15 million of US backing, the group agreed to a five-track development plan: a Global Counterterrorism Forum Regional Dialogue, Central Asia Business Competitiveness, Transport Corridor Development, Power the Future, and Supporting National and Regional Adaptation Planning.⁵³ However, it is important to realize from 1992 to 2014, US economic and military assistance to Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, totaled \$6.8 billion and peaked in 2010 at \$649 million during the Obama administration. At the same time, in 2014 US assistance

⁴⁹ Dmitri Trenin. “Russia Leaves the West,” *Foreign Affairs*, date accessed Oct. 10, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2006-07-01/russia-leaves-west>.

⁵⁰ Anders Aslund. “Putin Gets it Wrong Again: Eurasian Economic Union Hurts Russia,” *Atlantic Council*, last modified Feb. 1, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/putin-gets-it-wrong-again-eurasian-economic-union-hurts-russia>.

⁵¹ Robert O. Blake Jr. “U.S. Policy in Central Asia,” *U.S. Department of State*, last modified Jan. 25, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2012/182643.htm>.

⁵² “The United States in Central Asia: Going, Going...,” *The Economist*, last modified Dec. 7, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21591242-america-winding-down-its-presence-claims-it-wont-fade-away-going-going>.

⁵³ “U.S.-Central Asia (C5+1) Joint Projects,” *U.S. Department of State*, last modified Aug. 3, 2016, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/08/260805.htm>.

amounted to \$148 million.⁵⁴ In addition, in 2016 the administration requested \$130.90 million in development assistance and \$24.70 million in security assistance with a relatively even distribution in counterterror, counternarcotic, and stabilization operations support.⁵⁵ Added to this program is a recently announced Department of Defense aid package of \$50 million, largely focused on support to Tajikistan.⁵⁶ Collectively, the efforts of the Obama administration, although smaller in aggregate spending, amounted to a worthwhile approach to long-term development along economic, governmental, and security lines. While the US may have attempted to focus on affordability, its efforts have remained fixed on raising standards of living and improving conditions for domestic populations.

Perhaps the most important element of US and European assistance has been the work to integrate Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan into the international community. Promoting their collaboration in the NATO Partnership for Peace, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) has been instrumental. Cooperation with NATO serves as a potential lever to gain separation from Russia should Moscow continue to be impacted adversely by sanctions. By cooperating on issues of common concern, such as “border management, good governance, sustainable energy, and trafficking and freedom of media,” OSCE and its Central Asian partners are gradually improving Eurasian security and living standards.⁵⁷ As the community focuses on reducing barriers to trade – assuming Bishkek, Dushanbe, Ashgabat, and Tashkent are not encumbered by other powers – OSCE, the US, and Europe are assisting in streamlining the movement of goods and services.⁵⁸ Should the Central Asian states join the WTO, membership could represent an inflection point in their ability to automate trade regionally and around the world. The multilateral integration of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan offers a piece of the necessary program to safeguard the region’s sovereignty.

Why Might China Seek to Cooperate with the US?

Having examined the recent engagement strategies of Beijing, Moscow, and Washington, it is prudent to shift the focus to future opportunities for maturing partnership. While China has used soft power to enhance its position in Central Asia, Russia appears to be reasserting itself through modern-day imperialist-like techniques. Weaving through the potential frictions in the region will be difficult for Beijing as it seeks to maintain its present trajectory. More to the point, regional perceptions of Chinese activities are not necessarily favorable and might benefit from the additional legitimacy the US can offer. Also, given

⁵⁴ Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski. “U.S. Policy toward Central Asia 3.0,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, last modified Jan. 25, 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/25/u.s.-policy-toward-central-asia-3.0-pub-62556>.

⁵⁵ “U.S. Security Assistance to Central Asia,” *Security Assistance Monitor*, last modified July 22, 2015, http://securityassistance.org/fact_sheet/us-security-assistance-central-asia.

⁵⁶ Joshua Kucera. “Pentagon Proposes \$50 Million Program to Help Tajikistan Fight Terrorists,” *Eurasianet.org*, last modified Feb. 16, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/77366>.

⁵⁷ “Central Asia plays important role as a bridge between Asia and Europe, says OSCE Chairperson-in-Office in regional visit,” *OSCE*, last modified Nov. 22, 2014, <http://www.osce.org/cio/127082>.

⁵⁸ “OSCE and World Customs Organization promote cross-border trade in Central Asia,” *OSCE*, last modified Sept. 27, 2016, <http://www.osce.org/astana/268731>.

Beijing's economic challenges domestically and political tensions abroad, being able to burden share in Central Asia may well prove enticing. Moreover, having learned from its strategies elsewhere, Chinese rapprochement with the US is likely to prove invaluable for four reasons. First, Washington has shown a willingness to provide counterterrorism and stability assistance without the heavy-handed approach of Moscow. China could use US efforts as a means to curtail the rise of fundamentalist Islam while avoiding foreign conflicts – a strategy the CCP seems to prefer. Second, cooperation with Washington to raise standards of living and pursue economic opportunities helps Beijing circumvent the charges of neocolonialism levelled against it in Africa and Southeast Asia. Third, given the broader tensions between Russia and the US, both Moscow and Washington are likely to gravitate toward confrontation with one another, thereby buying China time to advance its policies beyond any point of retreat. Fourth, a mutually-beneficial relationship in Central Asia will complicate Washington's policy options elsewhere at a time when it could seek negative reinforcement against China. This is particularly significant considering potential confrontation between China and the US under the Trump administration during which time a China-US cooperative relationship in Central Asia might prove useful in the same manner as recent Russia-US cooperation concerning Afghanistan. And, the Kremlin's reliance on Beijing – particularly in light of US and European sanctions – will help negate any backlash from the Putin administration. Collectively, a multitude of factors are encouraging Xi Jinping and his colleagues to cooperate with the US.

Recognizing one of Beijing's primary objectives in working with its Central Asian counterparts is to prevent the spread of fundamentalist Islam, cooperating with Washington to fight this threat is ideal. China can utilize the Trump administration's focus on combatting fundamentalism as a tool to justify engagement. Making a China-US partnership even more desirable are concerns over the permanence of Russian forces in the region. Moscow has shown a willingness to move forces to a region rather than providing development assistance to indigenous forces. As a result, a dependency relationship emerges which the Kremlin can use.⁵⁹ A second concern emanating from Russian counterterrorism tactics is the heavy-handed approach and its adverse impacts on progress. Moscow's use of extrajudicial activity in Chechnya has likely been likely one of the leading causes for the spread of Islamic unrest throughout the North Caucasus.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Chinese officials should appreciate that there is little appetite among the US domestic audience for a more pronounced role in Central Asia. Given the rhetoric Chinese officials have applied to recent acts of terrorism by Uighurs within their own borders, there is a clear emphasis on gaining international support for Beijing's response.⁶¹ Moreover, given the support fundamentalists in Central Asia might offer to Uighurs in China, a policy on the part of Beijing which takes initiative in the region may be prudent. In brief, Beijing can live with Washington's funding and technical expertise

⁵⁹ Roland Oliphant. "Vladimir Putin Announces Russia-led Central Asian Military Force," *The Telegraph*, last modified Oct. 16, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11937195/Vladimir-Putin-announces-Russia-led-Central-Asian-military-force.html>.

⁶⁰ Andrew E. Kramer. "Russia Shows What Happens When Terrorists' Families are Targeted," *New York Times*, last modified March 29, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/30/world/europe/russia-chechnya-caucasus-terrorists-families.html?_r=0.

⁶¹ Hannah Beech. "Deadly Terrorist Attack in Southwestern China Blamed on Separatist Muslim Uighurs," *Time*, last modified March 2, 2014, <http://time.com/11687/deadly-terror-attack-in-southwestern-china-blamed-on-separatist-muslim-uighurs/>.

without taking on the risk of a permanent presence that cooperation with Moscow would entail.

Equally importantly, China has begun to receive a negative backlash for the economic and political relationships it has formed in disenfranchised communities abroad. From Africa to Southeast Asia, Chinese firms are pursuing natural resource access in an exploitative manner and, in some cases, bringing in Chinese laborers. The Chinese government complicates matters by encouraging its public and private entities to “closely mix and combine foreign aid, direct investment, service contracts, labor cooperation, foreign trade, and export” in a manner that could be seen to blur ethical lines.⁶² As a result, Beijing is able to provide low-interest loans to states that otherwise would have trouble receiving financing and in turn receives lucrative access rights that, according to some, are granted under duress. Resistance from African states is increasing as Gabon demonstrated in 2013 when it withdrew an oil drilling permit from Sinopec over environmental irregularities.⁶³ To avoid the same criticisms in Central Asia, Beijing could support Washington’s efforts to improve quality of life issues. Supporting the C5+1 program, as an example, would be an affordable way to garner positive public relations while essentially outsourcing a substantial amount of the work and responsibility to the US. By working with Washington, Beijing can begin improving the mechanisms it uses to provide aid and how its assistance is viewed locally, regionally, and globally. Cooperation on this issue would be an ideal means to remold China’s image, particularly in a region so important to the PRC’s long term growth.

During the early 21st century, the Putin administration revealed its pathological fear of US activity in its near-abroad. The Kremlin’s aggressive actions in Georgia and Ukraine have demonstrated its intention to reassert its traditional sphere of influence.⁶⁴ Even the circumstances surrounding the US base closures in Kyrgyzstan (2014) and Uzbekistan (2005) likely further illustrate the intensity on the part of senior Russian officials to roll back US and broader NATO and European influence in the former Soviet republics.⁶⁵ Arguably most important to recognize is the adversarial relationship that emerged, even under friendlier auspices, in Washington during the George W. Bush administration – a portent of things to come. Many government officials and outside experts in Washington anticipate a renewed adversarial relationship with Moscow. Unfortunately, considering Russia’s apparent desire to reassert its regional sphere of influence, regardless of who it affects, China is confronted with prospect of the Kremlin meddling. In this environment, drawing the US back into Central Asia would distract Russia from China’s advances in the region. While Moscow and Washington would focus on countering one another, Beijing would be poised to continue its soft power approach to maturing partnership capacity. Enhancing its economic, security, and social activities with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and

⁶² Yun Sun. “China’s Aid to Africa: Monster or Messiah?,” *Brookings*, last modified Feb. 7, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/chinas-aid-to-africa-monster-or-messiah/>.

⁶³ Christopher Alessi and Beina Xu. “CFR Backgrounders: China in Africa,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified April 27, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-africa/p9557>.

⁶⁴ “Georgian and Ukrainian Officials Push for NATO Membership,” *The Telegraph*, last modified June 9, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/09/georgian-and-ukrainian-officials-push-for-nato-membership/>.

⁶⁵ Olga Dzyubenko. “U.S. Vacates Base in Central Asia as Russia’s Clout Rises,” *Reuters*, last modified June 3, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-usa-manas-idUSKBN0EE1LH20140603>.

Uzbekistan could bring an inflection point in China's integration in Central Asia. At some juncture, Beijing could be so integrated into Central Asian affairs that Russia would be unable to dislodge Beijing or otherwise engender significant policy changes in the region. Consequently, even though Moscow would likely attempt to increase its involvement in Central Asia in the short term, the Kremlin might not be able to prevent surging influence from Beijing and Washington.

By drawing the US into a mutually-beneficial relationship in Central Asia, China will raise the stakes should Washington attempt to exert greater influence on the Korean Peninsula or in the East or South China Seas. Should the Trump administration attempt to put pressure on Beijing, one potential response from the Xi administration or its successor could be to slow down cooperation in Central Asia. At a time when China's neighbors in East and Southeast Asia are pressuring Washington to take firm stance vis-à-vis the Xi government, this diplomatic maneuver would be useful and put the CCP leadership in a stronger position to deter US action. Granted, current China-US trade and other engagements have already played a substantial role in shaping the negotiating space for both parties. However, a mutually-beneficial relationship in Central Asia would add one more factor to dissuade US action elsewhere.

Also working to China's advantage is the dependency Russia is beginning to develop with respect to Beijing. Moscow's confrontation with Europe and the US has led to sanctions against the Kremlin and a need to invigorate its own pivot to Asia as it searches for new markets. In recent years, capitalizing on its negotiating leverage, Beijing has forced Moscow to finalize gas and oil deals favorable to the PRC.⁶⁶ The \$400 billion natural gas deal agreed to in May 2014 is already being curtailed because (a) Turkmenistan is able to sell gas at a lower breakeven price than Russia, and (b) the weak Russian and Chinese economies make it less prudent to sell at the quantities (38 billion cubic meters of gas annually) that were once envisioned.⁶⁷ Although Russia appears to be trying to diversify its energy market – in March 2016 it reached a deal with India on both oil and natural gas – Beijing plays a key role in the Russian Far East and Siberian regional economies.⁶⁸ Without Chinese assistance, the Russian economy is likely to continue to be undercut by European and US sanctions as well as an aging infrastructure and labor force.

Why Might the US Seek to Cooperate with China?

Washington is confronted with multiple challenges: potential great power uncertainties in Eurasia, nuclear proliferation, and Islamic fundamentalism, to name a few. While the obstacles may change, the quantity and weight of the problems the US regularly faces will not. As a result, thinking proactively to neutralize budding issues has been, and

⁶⁶ "Russia Signs 30-year Gas Deal with China," *BBC*, last modified May 21, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-27503017>.

⁶⁷ Olesya Astakhova and Chen Aizhu. "Exclusive: Russia Likely to Scale Down China Gas Supply Plans," *Reuters*, last modified Jan. 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-china-gas-exclusive-idUSKCNOUT1LG>.

⁶⁸ Debjit Chakraborty. "Russia Deals Deepen India Hold in China Oil-Buying Backyard," *Bloomberg*, March 21, 2016, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-03-22/russian-deals-send-india-deeper-into-china-s-oil-buying-backyard>.

will continue to be, a central theme for Washington. The best interests of the US are served by cooperating with China in Central Asia. Although the broader bilateral relationship may be challenged by the Trump administration, Central Asia may be one area where cooperation remains mutually beneficial. Given that Russia has likely invested too much into Central Asia to retreat and the US cannot forfeit its influence, there is likely to be a confrontation on this issue. Five principle motivations will encourage Washington to seek out greater engagement with Beijing on cooperation with Bishkek, Dushanbe, Ashgabat, and Tashkent. China's AIIB program and its "One Belt, One Road" initiative are already reinforcing its investment foothold in the region which helps alleviate the spending burden on the US.⁶⁹ Similarly, China's market gives Central Asian firms a readily available export partner. From a political vantage point, the threat posed to both Chinese and US interests by Russia would motivate defense officials in Washington to partner with Beijing. Furthermore, as seen within a broader Russia strategy, Central Asia could serve as an important inflection point in denying Moscow the gains it has achieved in recent years. Successfully maturing China-US partnership capacity in Central Asia will fortify the broader bilateral relationship which has been and will continue to be sorely tested by events elsewhere. Collectively, the US has much to gain from working with China in Central Asia.

Rather than competing with China, leveraging Beijing's pre-existing investments in Central Asia is in Washington's best interests. In the summer of 2016, the AIIB held its inaugural meeting in Beijing at which it approved \$509 million in new projects.⁷⁰ A significant piece of this investment is going to Central Asia, including a road improvement plan in Tajikistan to aid in trade movement. Given budget uncertainties in the US, utilizing China's planned investments as part of a joint engagement strategy is prudent. Moreover, the long-term investments Beijing is likely to pursue offer the stability Washington officials need as they attempt to steer Central Asia away from Moscow's influence. By working with China, the US will be able to build on the momentum generated by Beijing's investment program.

Conversely, proximity to burgeoning Xinjiang Autonomous Region offers Central Asia's businesses a market for their goods and services. As Beijing attempts to develop the region, utilizing companies in Central Asia to provide goods makes sense. From Washington's perspective, a foreign consumer of regional products will help the former Soviet republics develop economically. Given the challenges of doing business in Afghanistan, Iran, and even Russia, China is perhaps the most stable and financially lucrative alternative. Market opportunities to the east stand in sharp contrast to what existed in the first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For perhaps the first time, Central Asia has viable foreign markets that are geographically proximate. US-sponsored development programs can emphasize producing goods and maturing service industries that can do business in western China. The US can help mature industries in Central Asia, these firms can move goods to Xinjiang, and the Chinese can obtain access to affordable products

⁶⁹ Junhua Zhang. "What's Driving China's One Belt, One Road Initiative?" *East Asia Forum*, last modified Sept. 2, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/09/02/whats-driving-chinas-one-belt-one-road-initiative/>.

⁷⁰ "The AIIB: The Infrastructure of Power." *The Economist*, last modified July 2, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21701494-reasons-be-enthusiastic-about-chinas-answer-world-bank-infrastructure>.

that might otherwise be cost prohibitive due to transport expenses. For perhaps the first time, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have a rising market for domestic companies.

By working with Beijing, Washington can complicate Moscow's ability to influence Central Asian political affairs. Drawing China deeper into the region's fortunes will make the potential drawbacks of the EEU all the more damaging to Beijing's interests. Beijing's role in Central Asia is growing as it pursues access to energy and investment projects. To some extent, Beijing's gains are coming at Moscow's expense, particularly as lower energy prices weaken the Russian economy.⁷¹ Considering the problems the EEU is producing in Kazakhstan, if similar effects take place further south along China's more vital transit routes, this could present a gap in Beijing and Moscow's regional interests. Working with China to raise the standing in the region, particularly at Russia's expense, would serve US interests because as the Kremlin continues to search for opportunities to exercise what opportunities it has in the former Soviet republics, its intentions will become increasingly clear. Moscow's use of the responsibility to protect and of multilateral organizations to influence its former partners is already beginning to undo the delicate balance between Chinese and Russian interests in Central Asia. As Beijing and Washington begin utilizing each other's natural strengths, particularly their investment latitude, they can strengthen the autonomy of regional actors even though bilateral cooperation will be a delicate process.

Within the broader strategic context, working with China to deny Russia the benefit of its recent gains in the region serves two purposes. First, Washington's global presence means that partners in one region follow what occurs elsewhere. Continuing to permit Moscow to advance its interests in Central Asia, at the US's expense, is to Washington's detriment. By pushing back against Russian advances in this region, the US can curtail potential progress for the Kremlin elsewhere. Moreover, while China is not necessarily the ideal partner, its record of non-interference fits US objectives in Central Asia. Both parties can work to improve human welfare in the region, which has been central to US foreign policy. Even though Central Asia may not play a pivotal role in Washington's foreign policy, by instituting a long-term strategy featuring cooperation with Beijing, the US can leverage animosity against Russia to erode Moscow's recent achievements in Central Asia.

While the focus of this proposal is on Central Asia, US-China cooperation in this region could help develop standards for engagement elsewhere. Beijing and Washington's mutual interests in working with Ashgabat, Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Tashkent offer an ideal opportunity to improve bilateral relations between the two great powers. Once initial hesitation about cooperation is overcome, there are numerous areas where combined activities can take place. For instance, support for education, entrepreneurs, health care, and security presents lucrative opportunities for development without significant risks. These deliverables can begin to build momentum in Beijing and Washington for cooperation in other areas. By improving mechanisms for engagement and strengthening trust between China and the US, both parties are positioned to work together on more challenging problems such as Northeast Asia, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea.

⁷¹ Richard Weitz. "Russia, China, and Central Asia: Time for a Decision," *The Asan Forum*, last modified Dec. 23, 2015, <http://www.theasanforum.org/russia-china-and-central-asia-time-for-decision/>.

Framing Cooperation

The former Soviet republics in Central Asia need support in three broad areas. Because of their complex external and internal politics, one or two of these items alone will not deliver the results necessary to change the region's fortunes. More to the point, Russia's hard and soft power levers will continue to carry powerful weight if a comprehensive strategy is not applied to development. For this reason, China and the US have considerable incentive to cooperate in advancing the maturation of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. A strategy that provides assistance along defense, economic, and social lines will significantly bolster the region's outlook. The following discussion is a sample of a much broader range of options. Beijing and Washington have a unique opportunity to improve their bilateral relationship while also improving regional stability and blunting Moscow's advances.

Defense Assistance

Leaders throughout Central Asia invest in security assistance to counter domestic and regional threats. The challenge when examining instability in these former Soviet republics centers on distinguishing exogenous threats to the well-being of individual states or the group as a whole from concerns regarding regime preservation. One of the remaining vestiges of Soviet governance is the fear that losing power is a zero-sum game. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all have, at best, faulty democracies which have persecuted reformers and others not aligned with the government.⁷² Having recognized that Central Asian regimes have shown a willingness to suppress peaceful movements, defense cooperation should be focused on the more serious, regionally-based challenge. As a result, security assistance to combat Islamic fundamentalism must be the primary emphasis of both Beijing and Washington. Chinese and US interests throughout the region, most notably Beijing's concerns about Uighur separatism and Washington's fears of Afghan instability, can be further minimized by supporting the former Soviet republics. This program will enable indigenous leaders to rely less on Russian support, thereby marginalizing Moscow's role in the region. Albeit a delicate process, China and the US can advance mutual and individual interests by providing security assistance to the region.

The diplomatic effort to initiate a more robust defense relationship across the region will be central in positioning this option for long-term success. Three factors will aid Beijing and Washington in the negotiating process. First, and most important, the Islamic State's (IS) battlefield defeats in Iraq and Syria have begun to encourage members to return to their native lands.⁷³ This poses a grave threat to internal stability in Central Asia, and given ongoing unrest in Afghanistan, Islamic fundamentalism is a danger which leaders across the region can ill afford to take lightly. Second, even if Russia's defense budget would allow it to provide adequate support, its demonstrated efforts to reassert Moscow's sphere of

⁷² Arch Puddington and Tyler Roylance. "Freedom in the World: 2016." *Freedom House*, date accessed Dec. 2, 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016>.

⁷³ Uran Botobekov. "Is Central Asia Ready to Face ISIS?" *The Diplomat*, last modified July 8, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/is-central-asia-ready-to-face-isis/>.

influence is a worrying development for regional actors.⁷⁴ Given that these former Soviet republics and their leaders, who came of age in a state under Russian control, have expressed concerns over Russia's actions in Georgia and Ukraine, an alternative to Kremlin intervention may prove highly desirable. Third, the US has established a reputation for providing security assistance without a large military footprint or enduring presence. Washington's defense capabilities stand in sharp contrast to those of Moscow. Ultimately though, the fact that China and the US are setting aside their differences to bolster Central Asian security will carry a powerful diplomatic message and have considerable weight as regional actors mull the cost-benefit of pursuing such an ambitious option.

Once indigenous buy-in has been achieved, Chinese and US training staff, personnel skilled in counterterrorism operations, and supporting infrastructure will need to be positioned in Central Asia. These individuals will play a vitally important role in preventing the emergence of an insurgency in the former Soviet republics. By training and operating with domestic units, personnel from Beijing and Washington can bolster the development of local contingents. The trust and relationships built between Chinese and US personnel will have lasting impacts for both parties in other theaters as well. Returning to the matter at hand, a specialized task force designed to assist the Central Asian states in preventing the emergence of more robust fundamentalist influences can, over the course of time, pass on its knowledge and technology to domestic personnel. China and the US can develop local capabilities in a manner that makes them reliable partners in the fight against extremism. Thus, rather than being forced to maintain an enduring presence in the region, Beijing and Washington can demonstrate the differences between their individual approaches to supporting the former Soviet republics versus Moscow's strategy.

Gradually, the Central Asian states will establish a more self-sustainable defense footing. Taken in conjunction with other efforts to bolster the economic standing of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, these states will be in a better position to resist Russia's advances. Reinforced with Chinese and US support, the former Soviet republics will no longer be reliant on the Kremlin for survival. This shift in foreign policy should not be discounted. Given that Russian bases in the Crimea area offered an infrastructure network and an insurance mechanism for Moscow's non-attributional activities on the peninsula, allowing the basing of Russian forces in Central Asia has become all the more dangerous. Compounding matters, the CSTO's role in the region as a security provider engenders an environment whereby the Putin administration could justify regional intervention. Having confidence in domestic capabilities, supported by Chinese and US commitments and a demonstrated willingness to cooperate against fundamentalist extremism, substantially changes the calculus for the former Soviet republics. For the first time in centuries, the peoples of Central Asia may enjoy full sovereignty.

Within the broader context of trans-regional fundamentalism and the movement of insurgents across Eurasia, the transformation of Central Asian capabilities could have a notable effect. Improved regional security postures will make it more difficult for

⁷⁴ "Central Asia's Autocracies after Crimea." *The Economist*, last modified March 15, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21599048-events-ukraine-point-up-local-rulers-frailtiesand-they-know-it-russian-roulette>.

fundamentalists to traverse into Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Thus, Chinese internal security will benefit from supporting Central Asian counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. Similarly, insurgents in Afghanistan will no longer have sanctuary options across Kabul's northern borders. Increased Chinese and US assistance can help improve communication and transparency between Afghanistan and its northern neighbors. As a result, operations to counter fundamentalists can be coordinated such that activities can take place on both sides of the border simultaneously. More robust collaboration to counter insurgents will significantly improve regional stability and help remove one of the major obstacles to better relations for all involved. Albeit potentially less noticeable, reducing the threat of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia will also minimize the possibility of recruitment for other theaters. Other insurgent hotspots will have a harder time drawing from these former Soviet republics once China and the US have neutralized indigenous threats. While senior officials in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan should examine options to reform some of their domestic policies, improved counterinsurgency and counterterrorism forces will have a dramatic effect on overall regional stability.

Considering Russia's aggressive actions in other former Soviet republics, the effect that maturing elite units in Central Asia might have on the Putin administration's calculus should not be overlooked. Whether in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Syria, or Ukraine, the Kremlin has been able to take advantage of vulnerable indigenous security forces to advance its positions. Although specific factors in each scenario have been different, the underlying theme has been Moscow's ability to leverage its superior forces. In the case of the Central Asian republics, were it to attempt an intervention strategy similar to that undertaken in Georgia or Ukraine, a better trained and more experienced indigenous capability would present significant problems. If Russia utilized the same sorts of non-attributional forces, these former Soviet republics, having matured with Chinese and US help, would be in a better position to respond. Without fear of Russian intervention, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan would be better suited to pursue policies in their national interests while also opening to economic cooperation from abroad.

Economic Cooperation

Investing in the economies of the Central Asian states should be a paramount concern for China and the US. Alongside defense assistance, weening the former Soviet republics off their financial reliance on Russia is seminal in jettisoning their dependency relationship. Doing so will require significant investments in both human and physical capital. This will enable a healthy and viable long-term economic strategy in Central Asia. Moreover, with increased connectivity to both East and South Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan will be better positioned to leverage the assets they develop. This two-pronged approach of providing investments and opening trade opportunities presents the best means to lift the region from Moscow's shadow. Only by pursuing a balanced approach that promotes defense, economic, and social measures can these states develop the means to overcome Russia's hard and soft power entreaties. Returning to economic engagement, a strategy that emphasizes capital investments and trade opportunities in parallel is the best approach for altering dynamics in Central Asia.

Human capital development, especially investing in educational opportunities, is vitally important for a developing society. During the Soviet era, the republics enjoyed nearly universal education. However, with the collapse of communism and the ensuing economic crisis, Central Asian governments were forced to adopt austerity measures leading to significant cuts in education spending.⁷⁵ During the post-Cold War period, investments have already begun flowing to the region, yet they have been insufficient. In its recent Regional Strategy Paper, the European Union emphasized the need to invest in higher education and technical programs to diversify and strengthen regional economies, and internal and external efforts have led to significant improvements in regional education. According to the World Bank, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have nearly 100 percent primary and secondary education rates (Turkmenistan does not report).⁷⁶ Moreover, tertiary (higher) education opportunities have advanced appreciably in Kyrgyzstan along both aggregate and gender equality lines⁷⁷ although the same cannot be said of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. By investing in opportunities for Central Asians to attain higher education both domestically and abroad, Beijing and Washington can bolster regional economic vibrancy. Developing programs that facilitate learning in China and the US will help improve perceptions of both states. Future generations of Central Asia's best-educated will have come of age with exposure to these two states, a stark contrast to their ancestors who were educated in the former Soviet Union. The short- and long-term economic and political benefits of human capital development should not go unnoticed.

As Russia's infrastructure is demonstrating, failing to invest in physical capital projects severely hampers long-term growth. Given Central Asia's lack of prominence during Soviet planning and its struggles after the fall of communism, regional leaders had to set aside major investment programs necessary to elevate their countries' fortunes. However, as energy demand in Eurasia increases, particularly due to Chinese and Indian population growth, the former Soviet republics are well positioned to benefit from those new markets.⁷⁸ With the beginnings of significant economic development, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are developing trading relationships beyond their traditional reliance on Russia. In this environment, the utility of physical capital investments is increasing. China and the US, having moved to upgrade human capital in the region, would greatly benefit from advancing structural improvements. Both parties can assist regional states with the establishment of balanced and healthy domestic economies. This will reduce the reliance on Russia with its ever-present risk of domination and fickle energy sales. Moreover, fundamentalist Islamic teachings will have a less vulnerable audience as additional employment opportunities materialize. Finally, given Central Asia's favorable position, developing domestic industries, transit routes, and other structural assets will

⁷⁵ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. "Current Education Issues in Central Asia." *OSCE*, date accessed Dec. 4, 2016, <http://www.osce.org/cpc/39626?download=true>.

⁷⁶ World Bank. "Data Indicators." *World Bank*, date accessed November 29, 2016, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>.

⁷⁷ Emma Sabzalieva. "Gender Gaps in Higher Education Across Central Asia." *University World News*, last modified July 8, 2016, <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20160707140807406>.

⁷⁸ Han Wang. "Towards a Cooperative Framework for a China-Central Asia Energy Transit Community." *Energy Charter Secretariat Knowledge Centre*, date accessed Dec. 9, 2016, <http://www.energycharter.org/fileadmin/DocumentsMedia/Occasional/China-Central Asia Energy Transit Community.pdf>.

enable greater movement of goods and, concomitantly, promote economic prosperity across Eurasia. In light of instabilities across the wider region, fostering an environment conducive to growth should be considered prudent.

As human and physical capital are strengthened, increasing foreign direct investment (FDI) from private Chinese and US firms will help change regional outlook and, perhaps more importantly, alter the growth trajectory for Xinjiang Autonomous Region. According to the World Bank, as of 2015 Turkmenistan ranked 44th globally in FDI among developing economies such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Poland. Unfortunately, this ranking can largely be explained by its energy resources and the financial costs needed to develop the necessary infrastructure for extraction. Probably more representative of regional standing is that Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are all ranked between 88th and 118th globally: near the median alongside El Salvador, Pakistan, and Tunisia.⁷⁹ Without the energy resources of Ashgabat, the other three Central Asian states lack significant investments. In the same way as China has sought to improve conditions in Yunnan Province and elsewhere in the south by investing in Southeast Asia, FDI in Central Asia would benefit China's western territories, most notably Xinjiang Autonomous Region.

Addressing lackluster FDI in Central Asia is a key step to improving the economic and strategic outlook. While human capital investments will take time to implement, the relatively low initial labor costs combined with an increasingly competent work force gives the Central Asian workforce potential.⁸⁰ Physical capital investments in the form of overseas development assistance from the Chinese and US governments will significantly benefit public works. As a result, the labor composition and infrastructure outlay can support foreign firms. To further encourage private investment in the region, Beijing and Washington can offer tax incentives and other financial inducements to move business to the region. Over time these benefits may decrease, but encouraging initial investments is crucial to bringing businesses to the region. There are plenty of other economic incentives to locating operations in Central Asia. Most notably, as western China, Kazakhstan, the Caucasus, and other nearby areas develop further – for a multitude of reasons – firms with operations in Central Asia will be suited to bring goods to these disparate markets.

Although rarely discussed in the Washington mainstream, one of Moscow's greatest leverage points in dealing with many of its former Soviet clients is the continuing role Russia plays in offering jobs to migrant laborers. In recent 2013 data, Russia had the second largest number of migrant laborers in the world, behind only the US.⁸¹ It should come as little surprise that around the same time, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were ranked first and third for

⁷⁹ World Bank. "Data Indicators: FDI." *World Bank*, date accessed Dec. 8, 2016, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?view=chart>.

⁸⁰ "Creating More and Better Jobs in Europe and Central Asia." *The World Bank* last modified November 7, 2013, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/11/07/creating-more-and-better-jobs-in-europe-and-central-asia>.

⁸¹ Elena Holodny. "Russia's Migrant Workforce is Dwindling." *Business Insider*, last modified Jan. 8, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/migrants-to-russia-drops-by-70-percent-2015-1>.

percentage of national GDP stemming from remittances.⁸² Perhaps more than any other factor, Central Asian dependence on remittances from Russia has served as leverage for the Putin administration to compel membership in the EEU. While Moscow's economic outlook has hurt the migrant labor job market, the EEU has played an interesting role in shaping how opportunities have evolved. While Tajik and Uzbek workers in Russia declined by approximately 20 percent in 2014 and 2015, Kyrgyz laborers rose by 5 percent.⁸³ Notably, Kyrgyzstan is the only one of the three currently a member of the EEU. How Russia's economic struggles will impact the EEU is unknown, but there is a strong likelihood the downturn combined with Chinese and US assistance in Central Asia may reduce migrant labor. Should Beijing and Washington leverage this opportunity, it could permanently reduce Moscow's migrant workforce. Albeit less noticeable in the US, a shift in migrant labor across the former Soviet Union could improve the ultimate fortunes of the states involved and throughout Eurasia.

Social Opportunities

Advancing Central Asian societies along a range of metrics is a necessity to develop stable political environments. Despite historical resistance to political reform, once local governments have been associated with economic success and political autonomy, they can attain lasting popularity. With political legitimacy rooted in progress, in contrast with authoritarianism, the pressures against freedoms – faith, media, ethnic minority, or otherwise – can be reduced. Such changes will improve local stability, leading to reduced tensions and violence. China and the US will be in a unique position to encourage indigenous political leaders to pursue such ambitious reform programs given their successful involvement in the region. As the regional transformation continues, foreign interest in Central Asia will likely increase. As globalization comes to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, opportunities – across all social classes – will begin to improve. With advancements in Central Asia China, in particular, can go to other regions and tout its more holistic engagement strategy. In doing so, Beijing will be in a stronger position to counter local backlash to its investments internationally, which has become an increasingly difficult hurdle in certain locations. As societal development advances, political reforms and other changes can be implemented, thereby clearing the path for more impactful change.

Partnering with Central Asian governments will require a comprehensive effort to reform each state's domestic institutions. Even as defense and economic improvements are made, solidifying these gains will require changes across societies. Perhaps the greatest challenge for Washington will be obtaining Beijing's acknowledgement that reforms are both necessary and possible. Although Beijing may be reluctant to accept such an approach initially, the Trump administration must be able to link social modernizations with a

⁸² "Remittance Man: Central Asia and its Russian Dependence." *The Economist*, last modified Sept. 7, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21584999-russia-attempts-draw-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan-back-its-orbit-remittance-man>.

⁸³ "Russian Crisis Continues to Bite for Labour Migrants." *IWPR Central Asia*, last modified March 10, 2016, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/russian-crisis-continues-bite-labour-migrants>.

reduction in fundamentalist Islam's potential recruitment opportunities.⁸⁴ More prosperous regional communities – due in no small measure to Beijing's patronage – will view China more favorably. Taken together, support for Uighur separatism and, more importantly, the ability to funnel people and materiel through the former Soviet republics will become more difficult. As a result, Chinese officials are more likely to impress upon regional governments the need to reform.

Addressing reform in Central Asia will be difficult because many of the region's leaders came of age in the Soviet system. However, developing a healthy and innovative society requires greater openness and transparency. By leading the way through reform and modernizations, the incumbent regimes have the opportunity to rebrand themselves in a positive light. Regrettably, all four states are routinely identified for human-rights abuses, ranging from the rigging of elections in Tajikistan to assist the incumbent president, Emomali Rahmon; to severe restrictions on media and the freedom of movement in Turkmenistan; to incidents of torture in Uzbekistan. Although Kyrgyzstan is perhaps the least problematic, even Bishkek has a discouraging record in areas such as gender inequality and religion-based oppression.⁸⁵ Individually, each issue poses significant concern, and the totality of repression in Central Asia has substantially limited societal growth. The restrictions placed on domestic populations limit educational opportunities, financing for entrepreneurial activities, and employment opportunities. Implementing reforms will be crucial to transforming the region.

Emphasizing openness and transparency in the media and election processes will promote the flow of information and innovation. Beijing and Washington must take great pains to link progress in Central Asia with the current regimes. Throughout the various programs and leadership meetings, acknowledging the beneficial role of the incumbent actors in each state is important. This will provide officials in Ashgabat, Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Tashkent with the credibility, legitimacy, and security to pursue reform measures. Although election modifications will need to be negotiated, inviting foreign monitors, allowing for representation of a wider range of political viewpoints, offering equal time in the media for challengers, more evenly distributing power among the branches of government, and establishing term limits for elected officials are among the best techniques for improving the election processes and increasing government transparency. Tailoring reform efforts in each state will be necessary to maximize the likelihood that measures will be adopted. For instance, repealing a recent amendment to Tajikistan's constitution that removes presidential term limits would be a useful tool to moderate the executive's power.⁸⁶ Likewise, across all four countries, work must be done to encourage press freedom. As Freedom House's 2016 Freedom of the Press report highlights, the Central Asian states are

⁸⁴ Abdul Aziz. "Central Asia Between 'Extremists' and 'Moderates': Fundamentalism on the Rise." *Stratfor*, last modified Feb. 22, 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/the-hub/central-asia-between-%E2%80%98extremists%E2%80%99-and-%E2%80%98moderates%E2%80%99-fundamentalism-rise>.

⁸⁵ "World Report 2016: Events of 2015." *Human Rights Watch*, date accessed Dec. 13, 2016, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/wr2016_web.pdf.

⁸⁶ "Tajikistan Votes to Allow President to Rule Indefinitely." *The Guardian*, last modified May 23, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/23/tajikistan-votes-to-allow-president-emomali-rahmon-to-rule-indefinitely>.

among some of the most repressive.⁸⁷ While initial boundaries, similar to what exists in China today where there are limits on reporting about the government, may be prudent to allow regional governments to ease into a freer media, this opening up is an important step. Pursuing this measure enables a more open dialogue among domestic audiences. Regardless, addressing government and media reform is a crucial issue for Central Asia.

Just as important, the often-connected issues of foreign aid and religious freedom must be resolved. Across the board, much of the resistance to external organizations and religious groups, domestic and foreign, is based in concerns over regime stability. Organizations not strictly under government control are seen as potential usurpers of authority and risks to inciting regime opposition. Some of these same tendencies can be seen in China as well. In Central Asia, the US State Department's Religious Freedom Report for 2015 articulated the challenges to foreign organizations and religious minorities seeking to acquire government sanction. In many cases, the procedures for gaining official approval to conduct activities are exceedingly onerous. Even when permission is granted, restrictions and government oversight routinely hamper the ability to conduct day-to-day activities.⁸⁸ To reduce official concern over outside entities, China and the US can help identify those with proven records of responsible and beneficial activities. When it comes to religious issues, the Central Asian governments have regularly cited concerns over Islamic fundamentalism as the overreaching justification for official oversight and restrictions. To some extent, there is some truth to these claims. Allowing Beijing and Washington to be involved in the screening process, while also permitting greater openness and transparency, can help alleviate these concerns. Certainly, such an approach will reveal some groups are restricted for other reasons. In these cases, it would be prudent to weigh the government decision cycle and determine an appropriate course of action. Permitting some groups greater operational freedoms will help legitimize restrictions on others because due process will be more likely to have been observed by the government. Achieving this vision will be a long process that Beijing will likely approach with some resistance. Yet, Washington as well can be expected to proceed cautiously in its support of organizations that might generate regime instability. The goal, therefore, should be to identify entities that can improve standards of living without creating political instability. If non-governmental organizations can be effectively screened to ensure they are not circumventing government control, then these entities will work in the interest of all parties involved. China and the US can initiate positive change by offering prestige and legitimizing credibility for these entities.

Conclusion

The US and China share many common interests that would benefit from improved independence, prosperity, and security for Central Asian states. Their approaches for regional engagement are similar and in stark contrast to Russia's interests and approach. While the Kremlin seeks to reestablish its dominance over the near abroad, Washington and Beijing have numerous opportunities to utilize collective defense, economic, and social

⁸⁷ Jennifer Dunham. "Freedom of the Press: 2016." *Freedom House*, date accessed Dec. 15, 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2016>.

⁸⁸ "International Religious Freedom Report for 2015." *Department of State*, last modified Aug. 10, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm>.

strengths to benefit the region and counter Moscow's heavy-handed approach. In recent years, Beijing has demonstrated its soft power weight in the region, a blueprint Washington could build upon. While there will be challenges for leaders in Washington, Beijing, and regional capitals, the immediate and long-term benefits both within the region and globally are significant and worth the effort. Certainly, there are potential drawbacks to such a proposal. Given concerns over authoritarian policies in the region at present, there is always a risk that the regimes in the region might retain their current practices. However, to do nothing would most likely leave the Central Asian states between choosing support from China or Russia, making authoritarianism more likely. By increasing regional involvement and working with Beijing, Washington has a greater opportunity to shape the trajectory of these four states. The US, China, and Central Asian states will all benefit while simultaneously reducing the influence of Russia trying to reestablish dominance over the region.

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