

# Central Asia's Encouraging Development

## Why the Region Is Embracing Greater Cooperation and Coordination

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*Originally published in Foreign Affairs, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2017*

Something is stirring across the vast expanse encompassing the [Caucasus](#) and [Central Asia](#), an area of [nearly 1.6 million square miles](#) and [more than 86 million people](#). Throughout the region, political momentum is gathering for deeper cooperation, engagement, and coordination.

This is a decidedly new development. A millennium ago, the broad area that is today known as Central Asia was a global hub for commerce, science, and innovation, before it was gradually eclipsed by the rise of competing empires and intellectual stagnation. More recently, the region's potential has been stifled by decades of Soviet control and by post-Soviet political fragmentation. Over the past quarter century, territorial disputes (like the one between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh), resource squabbles (such as those surrounding Caspian energy and Central Asian water sharing), and sundry other divisions have dominated regional discourse, shaping how local states have seen one another—and how the outside world has viewed the area as a whole.

Now, however, the region is exhibiting new signs of life. In the last year, Georgia's government has begun to implement an ambitious [a reform plan](#) aimed at improving the country's investment climate, and Kazakhstan has made [major strides](#) in education reform. The government of Ilham Aliyev in Azerbaijan [has launched](#) expedited visa procedures designed to boost tourism and commerce, and that of Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan has [abolished them altogether](#) for at least 45 nations. Uzbekistan, meanwhile, has established new transport links with Kazakhstan's central cities, Astana and Almaty, as well as with Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe. These developments and others suggest a degree of political consolidation and innovation that was unthinkable even ten years ago.

### DRIVERS OF DYNAMISM

The causes of the newfound energy now palpable around Central Asia and the Caucasus are practical and political.

First and foremost is the degree of internal development that has taken place throughout the region. A quarter century after their separation from Moscow, [a great deal remains to be done](#) in the former Soviet republics in terms of economic development, civil society, and infrastructure building. Nonetheless, the steady accretion of institutions, significant (if uneven) economic growth, and the liberalizing

impact of generational change have all created a greater basis for cooperation among the area's countries.

So, too, has a renewed fear of Russia. For many in the United States and Europe, the Russian government's 2014 offensive against Ukraine (and its ongoing efforts to destabilize the country) constitute an anomaly in the largely peaceful post-Cold War order in Europe. For the countries of the so-called post-Soviet space, however, the Ukraine crisis is a reminder of the Kremlin's ongoing desire to subvert the security and sovereignty of its former holdings—and a cautionary tale about the need to safeguard their own hard-fought independence. That is why the Kremlin's adventurism has prompted renewed discussions on Russia's periphery about the necessity of greater interaction, cooperation, and coordination on a range of issues, and the building of independent structures surrounding these topics, rather than simply relying on those that have been erected to date by Moscow.

The unfolding changing of the guard now taking place in Uzbekistan is likewise driving much of the current change. The death of the country's long-serving strongman, Islam Karimov, last September touched off a major policy rethink in Tashkent, with Karimov's successor, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, pledging to undertake meaningful reforms to the country's civil society and vowing to recalibrate its foreign policy. Even before he was elected president in December 2016, Mirziyoyev—who served as premier under Karimov—[was signaling](#) his readiness to take a different tack toward regional issues, telling the country's parliament of his commitment to “an open, friendly, and pragmatic position” toward the other Central Asian states, with whom relations had languished under Karimov.

Since then, Mirziyoyev has made good on his word, launching a “[normalization process](#)” with neighboring Kyrgyzstan, [traveling to Turkmenistan](#) on his maiden foreign outing in an overture to traditionally neutral Ashgabat, and initiating a [diplomatic warming](#) with the government of Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, whose relations with Tashkent had remained frosty for much of the Karimov era. Most notably, ties between Uzbekistan and neighboring Tajikistan—long moribund as a result of tensions between Karimov and Tajik president Emomali Rahmon—are now improving noticeably, as evidenced by [new transport links](#) and [ballooning bilateral trade](#). Nearby states are taking notice, and there is growing approval in capitals around the region of this new good-neighbor policy.

## A QUIET NETWORK

Underpinning these regional developments is something that has been strikingly absent in the region so far: a young, sophisticated, and networked elite. Taken together, the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus are [among the youngest in the world](#), with a median age of just 28.6, significantly lower than either Europe (median age 39.9) or North America (median age 38.4). But for much of the past quarter century, the preservation of ossified Soviet-era political structures—together with pervasive corruption throughout the region—had thwarted the emergence of a fresh group of interconnected and reform-minded leaders.

Not so now. Increasingly, a confluence of factors—from improvements in regional [access to education](#) to the [expansion of Internet connectivity](#) across both Central Asia and the Caucasus—has aided the rise of a vibrant new and increasingly

collaborative cadre. So, too, have initiatives like the Rumsfeld Fellowship, administered jointly by the Rumsfeld Foundation and the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. (Full disclosure: the latter is now part of the American Foreign Policy Council, where I am senior vice president.) Over the past decade, the fellowship has worked to acquaint some of the best and brightest from Central Asia, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, and Mongolia with policy circles in Washington and helped them to build a community of trust in their home region.

The results are striking. The fellowship's accomplished alumni network now numbers nearly 200. One alumnus is a senior adviser to Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili. Another is the deputy mayor of Afghanistan's capital city, Kabul. A third is the CEO of Mongolia's largest private news network. Others are leading bankers, entrepreneurs, and oil traders from places like Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

#### MORE TO COME

It's still too early to tell whether the newfound dynamism visible in the Caucasus and Central Asia will prove a lasting phenomenon or a passing phase. Formidable barriers to real, lasting regional integration—from the lack of key transport links and deep-seated problems with corruption to conflicts over resources, territory, and historical grievances—persist, and could well result in a return to the previous status quo over time. So could the protracted economic malaise gripping the region, which has been [documented](#) by the International Monetary Fund. However, at least for the moment, and in spite of these obstacles, the region's strategic players are clearly invested in advancing a new, more cooperative, and dynamic political vision.

All of this should matter a great deal to Washington. Historically, the United States has tended to view Central Asia as a buffer zone for transnational security threats (like narcotrafficking and Islamic fundamentalism), a bargaining chip in relations with Russia, or an arena of competition with both Moscow and Beijing over energy resources. The developments now taking place in the region, however, suggest that it's not too early for the United States to begin thinking about the post-Soviet space as a geopolitical center in its own right, and to begin exploring what kind of relationship America might want to have with it in the not-too-distant future.