

## What Central Asia Means to the United States

From the Great Game to the final frontier, Central Asia takes on new importance in a rapidly shrinking world.

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One of the most important regions in the 21st century has also been the least acknowledged. Leaders converging at the United Nations General Assembly this week from across the world are finally waking up to the importance of Central Asia. From D.C. to Moscow, Beijing to Tel Aviv, New Delhi to Ankara, the heart of Eurasia is experiencing a wave of interest and engagement from those who have realized the magnitude of its potential. Central Asia has truly become Washington's final frontier at the furthest geographic reach between major regional powers competing across the world eager to strengthen ties with a pivotal region rich in energy, central in geography, and boundless in opportunity.

Last year, the diverse nations that comprise Central Asia — Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan — created for the first time a joint platform in partnership with the United States to come together and work on issues of mutual concern; the C5+1. The formation of this coalition was a critical moment for a region that is far from monolithic and in which cooperation has been a challenge given regional disparities. In 2015, the region's largest **estimated GDP** with purchasing power parity (Kazakhstan at \$429.1 billion) was approximately 21 times larger than the smallest (Kyrgyzstan, \$20.1 billion). Demographically, Central Asia is home to

dozens of **ethnicities** and a multitude of **religions**. These have rarely received attention, with Central Asian countries having only emerged from the Soviet Union as independent states 25 years ago. The region is still linked to Russia through this history and, increasingly, to China through investment.

Despite these differences, this August, as the Central Asian republics geared up to celebrate the 25th anniversary of their independence, the foreign ministers of each nation and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met for the second C5+1 ministerial in Washington D.C. The summit led to the announcement of a series of joint measures designed to tackle significant issues of shared concern. This progress reflects the extraordinary international role Central Asia has to play in the coming years. The participation of the United States in this historic gathering is encouraging. As Western military intervention in Afghanistan has waned, so too has the interest of the United States in Central Asia. This trend cannot continue if the United States hopes to capitalize on the unique opportunities the region has to offer. Specifically, Central Asian markets are very enticing for foreign investment as liberalization continues; the region's geography and demographics make it critical for the continued conflict against global terror; and energy opportunities in each of the five countries are significant.

The geographic position of Central Asia makes the region one of considerable value, both for security concerns and economic potential. To the north: Russia. The east: China. The south: Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Everywhere you turn, the region borders powers that are no strangers to international crises and are critical to American interests (three also happen to currently foster slight to serious animosity toward the United States). The direction in which the nations of the region are collectively or individually drawn will have significant influence on foreign policy issues of great interest to the United States. Central Asia's role in security will only continue to grow, as evidenced by **Kazakhstan's ascension to the UN Security Council** as a non-permanent member earlier this year. This historic recognition (the first time a Central Asian nation has joined the UN Security Council) only increases the importance of Central Asia at the General Assembly.

Externally, Central Asia's position makes the region an important partner for the United States in the fight against terrorism, particularly considering its proximity to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Internally, domestic terrorism is a growing threat to security, indicated by recent incidents in **Kazakhstan** and **Kyrgyzstan**. To address these rising concerns, the C5+1 summit announced the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) Regional Dialogue. The objective of the dialogue will be to "counter the challenges of foreign terrorist fighters and radicalization to violence in Central Asia." The discussion will include experts on terrorism and policy makers from both Central Asia and abroad to share their unique perspectives and best practices.

Economically, Central Asia's position makes the region a critical link that bridges East and West. As such, **Central Asia plays a pivotal part** in both the ambitious "One Belt, One Road" Chinese plan, aimed at integrating Central Asia into the broader vision of a new Silk Road between Europe and Asia, and the United States' New Silk Road Initiative (NSRI), which aspires to connect Central Asia with its southern neighbors of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. **Tens of billions** have been invested into each project, as China and the United States eye each other's initiatives in the region suspiciously.

The accessibility of this foreign investment is a reflection of the progress Central Asian markets have made in liberalizing sectors of their economies. Enhanced cooperation with the United States and Central Asia could benefit both parties economically: a flood of American investment would significantly expedite the growth of Central Asian nations, while American businesses would increase their access to and ease of doing business in a market of **almost 70 million people**. After the recent C5+1 meeting, there is hope that this growing access to the markets can continue. The Central Asia Business Competitiveness (CABC) project, one of the five projects announced at the summit, aims to raise the ease of doing business in Central Asia in order to increase exports and make the entry into new markets simpler. The meeting also resulted in the announcement of the Transport Corridor Development project, geared toward reducing the cost and time of transporting goods across Central Asian borders. In addition, the transportation project will strive to improve the actual quality of transport and the services used for logistics throughout Central Asia.

One of Central Asia's biggest strengths is its abundance of valuable natural resources. The region is rich in petroleum and natural gas, as well as uranium, coal, gold, aluminum, and silver. However, Central Asia has suffered from collapsing oil prices and is in desperate need of rapid energy diversification, particularly geared toward renewable energies. This shift was recognized by the C5+1 gathering, which announced two projects built specifically to tackle the issue: Power the Future (helping energy sector policymakers and their teams increase and implement renewable energy in Central Asia through collaboration with American experts) and the Supporting National and Regional Adaption Planning project (aimed at raising the capacity for Central Asian nations to plan for adaptations to combat climate change). While Central Asia isn't moving to abandon its production and trade of oil, a critical source of income, it is clearly interested in broadening its energy portfolio, reflected in the theme of the upcoming EXPO in Astana next year, "**Future Energy.**"

Despite all of the aforementioned progress, Central Asia as a region is far from perfect. Human rights abuses are rampant, such as the **incarcerations of peaceful protesters**, the **online harassment** of dissidents, and the **terrible treatment** of prisoners. **Corruption** festers in each of the five nations, crippling development and progress. Even within themselves, the Central Asian republics can be divisive and distrusting of one another, reflected in the **back-**

**and-forth border closures** between Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. However, refusing to engage with Central Asia won't solve these issues; it would only deepen them. Only through extensive collaboration and engagement can progress be made. When the Soviet Union collapsed and the nations that comprise Central Asia became independent, close cooperation between the region and the United States took a potentially catastrophic situation of fragile states, riddled with nuclear weapons, and created a stable, balanced environment that was nuclear-free. Washington needs to recapture that spirit of partnership in order to effect any real social change in Central Asia.

Central Asia will always have close ties to Russia and China. Russia represents the past, a valued cultural and historical connection, and China the future, one of substantial economic potential and opportunity. This does not mean the United States should consider the fate of Central Asia out of its hands. It isn't. As an enormous liberal economy with no geographic borders to the region, the United States can promote itself as a viable third option that includes alliances with other democracies of the liberal international order (such as the European Union, India, Japan, and Turkey) to Astana, Bishkek, Dushanbe, Ashgabat, and Tashkent. In other words, the United States can act as a counterbalance to the overwhelming presence of the region's massive neighbors.

Despite its firmly wedged position between China and Russia, the window of opportunity for the United States to further explore the possibilities and tap the massive potential of the region remains open. But it won't be forever. Whether or not the administration in the United States has the boldness and willingness to explore the opportunities of the truly last international strategic frontier will have profound implications on its influence across the entire continent for the next century. The progress made in the C5+1 summit can't be allowed to slow or stumble. America must either step up or be left behind in Eurasia.

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