
Envisioning Opportunities for U.S.-Russia Cooperation in and with Central Asia

MARLENE LARUELLE & ANDREY KORTUNOV

WORKING GROUP EXPERT PAPER

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WORKING GROUP ON THE FUTURE OF U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS

РАБОЧАЯ ГРУППА ПО БУДУЩЕМУ РОССИЙСКО-АМЕРИКАНСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations

The Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations convenes rising experts from leading American and Russian institutions to tackle the thorniest issues in the bilateral relationship. By engaging the latest generation of scholars in face-to-face discussion and debate, we aim to generate innovative analysis and policy recommendations that better reflect the common ground between the United States and Russia that is so often obscured by mistrust. We believe our unique, truly bilateral approach offers the best potential for breakthroughs in mutual understanding and reconciliation between our countries.

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Executive Summary

- Central Asia stands out as a comparatively “nontoxic” region where there are limited, but not insignificant, opportunities for U.S.-Russia collaboration both bilaterally and within multilateral frameworks.
- Obviously, the first step prior to many constructive proposals would be for each power to stop treating the other as an adversary in the Central Asian context: Undermining each other’s objectives in the region is a zero-sum game for Moscow, Washington, and Central Asia alike.
- Any proposal of U.S.-Russia cooperation in a concrete domain will have to be made in a tri- or multipartite way with the Central Asian state(s) concerned, under its/their supervision and leadership.
- The U.S.-Russia relationship is still important for Central Asia but cannot be considered crucial, as the region welcomes many other powerful actors (such as China) and a genuine diversity of regional powers.
- The United States and Russia do not wield the same level of influence in Central Asia. In security and economic terms, the United States is a second-tier country for the region, while Russia is still in the first tier, with China as both partner and competitor.
- Deep asymmetries in the attitudes that Russia and the United States take toward Central Asia—the region is much more strategic for Moscow than it is for Washington—hamper partnership on shared issues.
- The United States and Russia diverge in their perceptions of threats in Central Asia. That directly affects how their policies for the region are shaped, as well as the ways in which they might be able to cooperate with each other.
- Moscow and Washington oppose each other on several issues in Central Asia. Some are of a symbolic nature, with no direct, immediate impact on the ground. Others do have repercussions in terms of policymaking.

- One domain for potential cooperation is often said to stand out: counterterrorism. Yet genuine cooperation on terrorism implies sharing sensitive intelligence information, which is almost impossible in the current atmosphere of distrust, except if limited to expert discussions and sharing of experience. Any U.S.-Russia cooperation on counterterrorism would be further complicated by diverging views on the roots, nature, and driving forces behind international terrorism; both sides suspect the other of at least implicitly supporting select radical groups, which makes it hard to agree on any joint efforts beyond situational collaboration.
- Another potential area of cooperation in Central Asia is a fight against illicit transborder drug trafficking in the region; however, existing distrust and asymmetries in U.S. and Russian priorities in Afghanistan block many routes to a partnership in this area.
- Besides the high level of distrust and feeling of adversity on both the Russian and U.S. sides, there are still several domains where their respective soft powers complement each other: in the space industry, civil security, job-creation mechanisms and rural human capital, and knowledge sharing.
- Given the current sour state of U.S.-Russia relations, it would make sense to keep existing pockets of U.S.-Russia cooperation in Central Asia under the political radar. The more technical and the less political U.S.-Russia cooperation can be, the better it will be for the two sides and for the region. Small, symbolic joint projects targeted at enhancing security and promoting development in the region would already be a major accomplishment, demonstrating that U.S.-Russia interaction in the region is not doomed to be a zero-sum game.

Introduction

Central Asia is conventionally seen as a conflicting space for great powers. It was analyzed through this prism as early as the Russian-British “Great Game” at the end of the nineteenth century, and this perception was revived following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which brought the Central Asian republics onto the international scene as newly independent states. The critical lens of analysis continues to be that the region is a place for global and regional powers alike to demonstrate their “muscle.” Yet this perception has to be questioned, for two reasons. First, each global and regional power occupies specific niches on the ground, with the result that direct competition is not so confrontational. Second, Central Asian states, far from being passive actors, are themselves setting the rules of the game in many respects and have succeeded at playing one actor off against another.

Since the U.S. drawdown from Afghanistan in 2014, several commentators have called for a more ambitious and/or realistic U.S. foreign policy toward Central Asia,¹ but they have not addressed the critical issue of how U.S. policy on the region interacts, overlaps, or competes with that of Russia. Yet seen from Central Asia, the United States has never had enough weight in the region to be chosen against Russia. Gallup surveys conducted in Kazakhstan every year since 2006 show, for instance, that when Kazakhstanis are asked to make a choice between the United States and Russia, Russia is consistently favored, with hardly anyone preferring the United States.² This suggests that the United States is welcome as a key partner for Kazakhstan—and this can be expanded at least to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—only if its presence does not conflict with that of Russia. It is therefore in Washington’s interest to look for a way to develop a nonconfrontational relationship with Moscow on Central Asian affairs.

Obviously, addressing the U.S.-Russia relationship and the room for cooperation in Central Asia at a time when the bilateral relationship is extremely tense—with the U.S. investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election still ongoing at this writing—may appear to some to be paradoxical. The two countries treat each other as adversaries, and Central Asia is not immune to the general atmosphere of distrust. However, we think that Central Asia stands out as a comparatively “nontoxic” region where there are limited, but not insignificant, opportunities for U.S.-Russia collaboration both bilaterally and within multilateral frameworks. Moreover, it is worth recollecting that such cooperation once

¹ See Joshua Walker and Kevin Kearney, “What Central Asia Means to the United States,” *The Diplomat*, September 16, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/what-central-asia-means-to-the-united-states/>; Ariel Cohen, “America’s Next Security Competition Will Be in Central Asia,” *The National Interest*, July 30, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/americas-next-security-competition-will-be-central-asia-21710>; and Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski, “U.S. Policy Toward Central Asia 3.0,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Brief, January 25, 2016,

² See Marlene Laruelle and Dylan Royce, “Kazakhstani Public Opinion of the United States and Russia: Testing Variables of (Un)favorability,” *Central Asian Survey*, forthcoming.

existed: trilateral cooperation between the United States, Russia, and Kazakhstan on the nonproliferation issue; the Obama-Medvedev joint statement on Kyrgyzstan in 2010;³ the May 2017 cooperation that prevented the terrorist attack in Saint Petersburg.⁴

There are evident asymmetries in the attitudes that Russia and the United States take toward the region, and these in part explain the difficulty with partnering on shared issues. The most obvious is that Central Asia is much more important for Moscow than it is for Washington. Russian interests in the region remain multidimensional, substantial, and strategic, whereas American interests are mostly security-focused, peripheral, and situational. A lot of the U.S. involvement in the region over the past two decades was driven by the American military presence in Afghanistan. However, beyond these divergences, neither Russia nor the United States would like Central Asia to slide into deep economic, social, and political crises; neither is ready to see the region become a major global exporter of jihadists or drugs; and neither wants it to emerge as a source of illegal migration and transborder crime. In addition, neither Moscow nor Washington would be happy to witness the region's being incorporated exclusively into the security sphere of interest of a third power.

Another factor potentially pushing Russia and the United States closer to each other in Central Asia is their growing mutual understanding of the limitations of the other side's influence and ambitions in the region. Washington can now be quite confident that the Central Asian states will never become obedient puppets in the capable hands of the Kremlin, while Moscow has no reason to believe that these states are likely to emerge as Western-type liberal democracies and/or strategic partners of the United States in any foreseeable future. The learning curve of Russian and U.S. leaders was not a steep one, but today we observe less anxiety and more realism on both sides than we did twenty years ago—a sharp contrast with many other domains of U.S.-Russia interaction.

This is not to say that U.S.-Russia interaction in Central Asia can easily be separated from the confrontational framework that characterizes the bilateral relationship today. Central Asia remains more complicated and divisive than, for instance, the Arctic region. Even under the best possible circumstances, U.S.-Russia interaction in Central Asia will be affected by the deficit of mutual trust and different approaches to neighboring states (China, Iran, and Afghanistan, to name a few). It may also be negatively influenced by other dimensions of the relationship, such as U.S. sanctions against Russia and Russia's countersanctions. Can the two powers work together efficiently in Central Asia while maintaining a generally adversarial relationship in most other regions? A related question is whether U.S.-Russia cooperation in Central Asia, if such cooperation takes place, might become a catalyst for more general positive changes in the currently adversarial relationship.

³ On June 24, 2010, the two presidents issued a joint statement affirming their common interest in supporting the people of Kyrgyzstan in their efforts to prevent further violence, address the current humanitarian crisis, and restore stability and democracy. See “U.S.-Russia Relations: ‘Reset’ Fact Sheet,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, June 24, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet> (accessed November 13, 2018).

⁴ “Telefonnyi razgovor s Prezidentom SShA Donal'dom Trampom,” Prezident Rossii, December 17, 2017, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56398> (accessed November 13, 2018).

Even if the answers to the two questions are negative, this does not necessarily mean that opportunities for limited regional collaboration should not be explored. While waiting for the bilateral relationship to improve, we can pave the way for future cooperation by maintaining expert-level discussions on emerging issues to keep track of ongoing changes and be ready to build new coalitions when political conditions permit. At the same time, both sides should be ready to confront an unexpected crisis in the region and do adequate planning to avoid such a crisis's escalating and turning into yet another complicating factor in an already uneasy bilateral relationship.⁵

⁵ We are very grateful to Samuel Charap, Keith Darden, and Nargis Kassenova for their comments on an early draft of this paper. All mistakes and interpretations are our own.

Contextualizing the Bilateral Relationship in Central Asia

Before discussing the state of the bilateral relationship in Central Asia, we need to address three issues.

For Russia, Central Asia constitutes a critical region: less than the contested neighborhood of Ukraine and Moldova but nevertheless a necessary piece to secure Moscow’s proclaimed role as the pivot of a larger Eurasian region.

Does the U.S.-Russia Relationship Still Matter for Central Asia?

The first critical question to ask is whether the U.S.-Russia relationship still matters for Central Asia. It may seem to be a Cold War legacy that conveniently ignores the new reality on the ground. Both Russia and the United States are seeing their global influence, as well as their influence in the Central Asian theater, decline. As such, is the U.S.-Russia relationship still central for the region?

Central Asia does not have equal weight in the foreign policies of Russia and the United States. For the United States, Central Asia remains peripheral. Whatever U.S. officials may declare diplomatically, the region is not central to U.S. national security interests. It remains important to Washington only for its relationship to other countries: Russia, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. A revealing example of this third-tier status is the activities of the Bureau for Central and South Asian Affairs within the U.S. State Department, which are much more focused on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India than on Central Asia. During the 2014 tensions with the United States over Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated, “[F]or us it [Ukraine] is of vital importance, while in America questions on Ukraine are managed at the technical level,”⁶ and the same is true—to a lesser extent—of Central Asia: Moscow’s interests in the region are more vital than are those of the United States.

For Russia, Central Asia constitutes a critical region: less than the contested neighborhood of Ukraine and Moldova but nevertheless a necessary piece to secure Moscow’s proclaimed role as the pivot of a larger Eurasian region. Central Asia is a natural gateway to vast territories to the East and South of Russia’s borders, and part of a—still potential—North–South Eurasian transportation corridor. Russia’s interaction with the region is unparalleled: In 2015, Putin and Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev met no fewer than thirteen times (in Moscow, Astana, and elsewhere), brought together by various international groupings to which the two belong. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan constitute the core of Russia-led multilateral institutions in the post-Soviet space, both

⁶ Putin: Situatsiia na Ukraine dlia Rossii zhiznennno vazhna, a dlia SShA eto tekhnicheskii vopros,” *Vzgliad*, May 23, 2014, <https://vz.ru/news/2014/5/23/688192.html>.

in security (Collective Security Treaty Organization) and, for the first two, in economic cooperation (Eurasian Economic Union). All the Central Asian states, with the exception of Turkmenistan, are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and two (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) are full-fledged participants of the “Caspian Five” group, the organization of Caspian littoral countries. Central Asian leaders are routinely invited to BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) summits. Russia counts on Central Asia’s votes at the UN General Assembly, albeit that it is sometimes disappointed with the positions taken by the latter.

Russian remains to a large extent the lingua franca of the region, and many Central Asian natives continue to be educated in Russian universities. Russian diasporas, while they have diminished throughout Central Asia, still play important economic, political, and cultural roles in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Central Asia also remains the main source of labor migrants to Russia; the Tajik, Uzbek, and Kyrgyz presence in large Russian cities is quite visible, with between 3 and 5 million labor workers.⁷ Finally, the rapidly growing Chinese presence in Central Asia increases incentives for regional economic and political elites to rely on Moscow—among other actors—as a counterweight to Beijing. As the leadership transition in Tashkent in September 2016 demonstrated, Russia’s relations with Central Asian countries are very resilient, and post-Karimov Uzbekistan has been moving closer to Moscow after two decades of a more zigzagging relationship.

Though all Central Asian leaders aim to diversify their foreign policy portfolios, today, almost three decades after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Moscow remains a critically important center of political gravity for the region. It lost hegemony over the region but maintains the status of “first among equals” in some crucial respects.

Yet the way Moscow and Beijing negotiate their partnership and competition appears to be much more critical for deciding the future of the region and its room for maneuver than the way the United States and Russia manage theirs. In the medium term, Russia may find its leadership in the region questioned by China, not only economically—as has already happened—but also in terms of security orientations. Moscow still heavily grounds its legitimacy in the shared Soviet legacy, but it may find itself with residual influence over only certain groups and losing contacts with the rest of the population. So far, Beijing appears to be happy with “outsourcing” the regional security agenda to Moscow—it makes the Chinese advance in Central Asia look less suspicious and more benign.

However, the overall geopolitical logic might require China to broaden its activities beyond trade and investment. The quadrilateral security cooperation between China, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, although very modest, is symbolic of China’s potential security commitment in the region.⁸ Beijing might become concerned about Islamist ideologies’ infiltrating its Muslim-populated regions via Central Asia, and tensions around the Uyghur “concentration camps,” which also include some Central Asian diasporas in Xinjiang, could

⁷ United Nations, *International Migration Report 2017* (New York: United Nations, 2017), http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf.

⁸ “China Joins Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan in Security Alliance,” *Reuters*, August 4, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security-idUSKCN10F1A6>.

Many Central Asians are increasingly ambivalent about Western efforts to export democracy and liberal values.

deteriorate the partnership established with the region.⁹ On the other hand, China might be incentivized to play a more active role in protecting transportation routes running through Central Asia within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. One cannot rule out a future situation in which China might claim the role of the region’s main security provider, challenging Russia’s current position.

Moreover, deep societal transformations are under way in each Central Asian country, with the emergence of new generations that are, schematically speaking, compared to older generations, more nationalist and critical of Russia’s attitude toward them, more conservative and unfavorable toward what they identify as Western liberal values, and more prone to display a new Islamic identity, challenging the way both Moscow and Washington represent themselves in the region. Favorability toward the United States has been questioned by Central Asian public opinion: Many Central Asians are increasingly ambivalent about Western efforts to export democracy and liberal values. Favorability toward Russia is higher, yet there are signals that it, too, is becoming more and more contested by Central Asians in different social and age categories, despite the shared Soviet legacy and renewed proximity as a result of labor migration.¹⁰

It should be noted that in the eyes of Islamic fundamentalists, the differences between the U.S. “liberal order” and Russian “authoritarianism” are marginal at best. Both systems are regarded as secular, decadent, and profoundly anti-Islamist. Both the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and the Russian operation in Syria are interpreted as “crusades” by infidels against Islam. Central Asia’s secularized political leaders, meanwhile, may expect the future to be more a question of finding the right balance between the South Korean, Malaysian, and Emirati models than of choosing between the twentieth-century models offered by the United States and Russia, whose footprints in the region are declining.

Russia and the United States: Not in the Same League

Second, the two countries do not wield the same level of influence in Central Asia. Geopolitically and economically, the United States is a second-tier country for the region, while Russia is still in the first tier, with China as both partner and competitor. On trade and investment as well as development aid, the United States falls behind even European countries, whose combined forces are more substantial. The United States is never any higher than the Central Asian states’ fourth-most influential economic partner.

⁹ Catherine Putz, “Carefully, Kazakhstan Confronts China About Kazakhs in Xinjiang Re-Education Camps,” *The Diplomat*, June 14, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/carefully-kazakhstan-confronts-china-about-kazakhs-in-xinjiang-re-education-camps/>.

¹⁰ More in forthcoming work by Eric McGlinchey and Marlene Laruelle, *Russian, Chinese, Militant, and Ideologically Extremist Messaging Effects on United States Favorability Perceptions in Central Asia*, funded by the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Army Research Office/Army Research Laboratory under the Minerva Research Initiative, award W911-NF-17-1-0028.

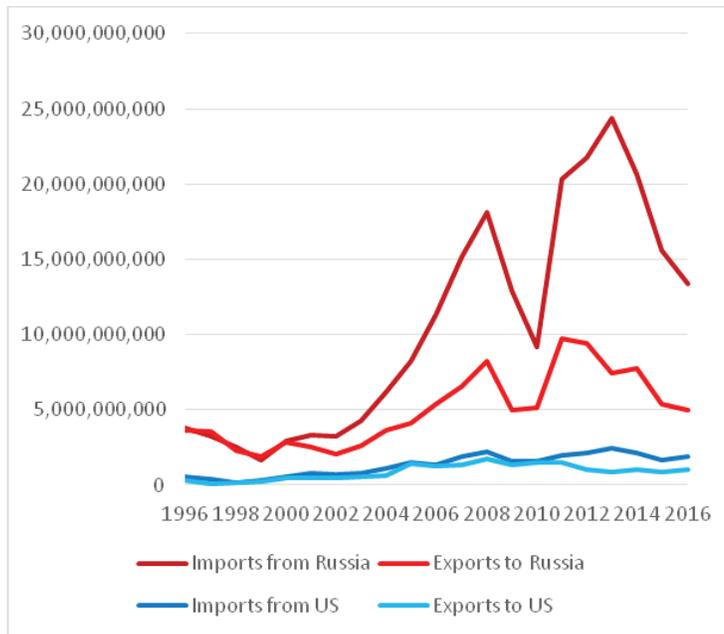


Table 1. Central Asia’s trade with Russia and the United States (current dollars)

Source: MIT Index of Economic Complexity

Although a small player economically and one with a declining security partnership in the region, the United States still matters. Even if Washington is a second-tier player on the ground, it remains a first-tier one symbolically thanks to its status as a world power and leader of the “West.” It therefore continues to play a crucial role in guaranteeing the autonomy of local governments and counterbalancing pressure from Russia and China. That is the message that has been sent by recent U.S. initiatives in the region, such as then-Secretary of State John Kerry’s tour of the five regional capitals in October 2015, the subsequent launching of the C5+1 initiative, and the visits of Presidents Nazarbayev and Mirziyoyev to Donald Trump in January and May 2018, respectively. Even without a military presence, a strong economic relationship, or massive diplomatic activism, the United States still counts—a message that Central Asian leaders have all agreed upon.

Any comparison between the Russian and U.S. presences in the region also has to take into account the differing natures of their respective influences. Russia’s is backed by century-long interaction, territorial contiguity and complementarity, and concrete and identifiable foreign policies, accompanied by engagement in regional institutions, bilateral and multilateral budget allocations (Russia claims a total of US\$18 billion invested in the region since the 1990s¹¹), intense diplomatic activities, and a combination of hard power and soft power tools. The United States has no such advantages, having to rely on more modest and more indirect means—including a \$15 million appropriation from the U.S. Congress for the C5+1 and an aid budget of about \$149 million for the five states in FY2017—the latter divided by almost two in 2018.

¹¹ <http://www.mid.ru/rossia-i-problemy-central-noj-azii>.

No Bilateralism without Trilateralism: What Do the Central Asian States Want?

The third point to address results from the first two: In such a rapidly evolving context, would the Central Asian states welcome U.S.-Russia cooperation? Both Moscow and Washington continue to think, in many respects, in terms inherited from the Cold War, projecting their bilateral relationship onto third parties' issues sometimes without including those parties. Except on genuinely bilateral issues, such as nuclear parity, the two countries cannot deal exclusively with each other and must instead partner within a more multilateral framework with the countries concerned.

Where would the Central Asian states stand on such cooperation? Their stance is ambivalent. Central Asian authorities call for more great-power cooperation on development-related issues, as they are under the impression that they do not receive enough international support and investment. Yet in closed or more informal discussions, political authorities as well as policy experts seem to prefer to keep Russia and the United States in a kind of soft competition in order to get the best—the most—of both. As discussed by Alexander Cooley in his seminal *Great Games, Local Rules*, Central Asian authorities excel at manipulating external actors to secure their own gains, both geopolitical (increased autonomy and resistance to external pressures) and financial (receiving aid from all sides with little coordination between the main providers).¹²

Any proposal of U.S.-Russia cooperation in a concrete domain will therefore have to be made in a tripartite way with the Central Asian state concerned, under its supervision and leadership. In other cases, it might make sense to consider more complex formats, for instance those involving other external actors, such as the European Union or China. The existing institutional deficit in the region may be a challenge, but it is nevertheless possible to imagine a project-based approach that would construct “coalitions of the willing” on specific security- or development-related matters.

¹² Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Divergent Perceptions of Threats in Central Asia

The United States and Russia diverge in their perceptions of threats in Central Asia. That directly affects the way their policies for the region are shaped, as well as the ways in which they might be able to cooperate with each other. Moreover, regional institutions where Russia, the United States, and Central Asia could potentially discuss their threat perceptions are few: The main one, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), has been largely “frozen” by the geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West and cannot really fulfill its mission anymore.

United States

U.S. policy for the region aims to secure several goals. In terms of Central Asia’s international engagement, it targets reducing dependence on Russia, preventing Iran from becoming an influential actor at the same level as it is in Afghanistan or the Middle East, and bolstering the role of U.S. allies in the region, especially India. In terms of transformations within Central Asian states, it targets mostly transition to democracy or at least better governance (formulated as “we will support the establishment of accountable and transparent government that is responsible for and responsive to an informed civil society”¹³) and market economy (“facilitating private sector development of the internal Central Asian market,” mostly through the C5+1 and the US–Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement—TIFA), as well as regional cooperation (“we will use our convening power to break diplomatic logjams, provide technical assistance to create regional energy markets, and facilitate trade”¹⁴). The State Department’s Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, as well as USAID, also pushes for religious freedom, health reforms, reform of the judicial system, youth participation, and strengthening independent media and access to information.¹⁵

In a view dramatically opposed to that of Russia, the United States believes that the lack of political alternation and the authoritarian nature of the local regimes reduce the prospects for social stability and/or accentuate the risk of a regime’s violent overthrow. These theoretical assumptions are obviously based on the United States’ own political credo

¹³ “FY 2007–2012 Department of State and USAID Strategic Plan,” U.S. Department of State Bureau of Resource Management, May 2007, <https://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/rls/dosstrat/2007/html/82972.htm> (accessed November 13, 2018).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “South and Central Asia Programs: Kazakhstan,” U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/p/121319.htm#kz> (accessed November 13, 2018).

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seems obvious.

and its foreign policy tradition of democracy promotion. Many scholarly studies confirm that democratic structures resist political upheavals better than authoritarian ones.¹⁶ Yet in the case of Central Asia, regimes have so far been able to sustain themselves longer than expected by the U.S. policy community, with Kyrgyzstan as both an example and counter-example, because it is simultaneously the most democratic state—the one that has seen the most transfers of power—and the most chaotic. Uzbekistan, by contrast, has been able to show endogenous and gradual transformation since Islam Karimov’s death, demonstrating that authoritarianism can reform itself from the inside, at least to a certain point. While it remains to be seen how these regimes will evolve—especially Kazakhstan, the last Central Asian state not to have faced a presidential transition—the U.S. narrative on democracy promotion has not only failed to achieve tangible results but has also been shown to be largely mistaken in some of its assumptions.

The threat of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia constitutes another concern of U.S. policy for the region. It appeared on the U.S. radar at the end of the 1990s, with the rise of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. It became the backbone of the U.S. perception of the region after 2001, once Central Asia became intimately connected to policy on Afghanistan. Both the hype around the risk of Islamic violence—so far in fact very limited in the region—and the Afghanistano-centrism and security focus of U.S. policy have been widely criticized by scholars.¹⁷ Since 2014, with both the drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and the birth of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the U.S. narrative on the danger of radical Islamism has slightly shifted. It has turned from worrying about the risk of “spillovers” from Afghanistan to being concerned about “radicalization” among Central Asian migrant communities abroad and the phenomenon of foreign fighters, including their supposed return.¹⁸

Regarding China’s growing presence in the region, the U.S. positioning remains ambivalent. In 2011, Washington launched its “Silk Road” initiative (competing with the Chinese use of the term even before the official launch of the “One Belt, One Road” in 2013, now BRI—Belt and Road Initiative), which stresses connectivity issues. The C5+1 initiative on Transport Corridor Development works, for instance, to “increase the competitiveness of Central Asian economies by improving their transport and logistics sectors.”¹⁹ Even if unformulated, the opposition between the U.S. vision of linking Central Asia to South Asia and the Chinese vision of the BRI seems obvious. The United States tried—and failed—to stop the launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the participation of European allies in it, probably the most visible moment of conflict over

¹⁶ Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 4, provides one of the older statements of the democratic stability theory. A more recent and more evidence-based argument by Elena Slinko et al., “Regime Type and Political Destabilization in Cross-National Perspective: A Re-Analysis,” *Cross-Cultural Research* 51, no. 1 (2017): 26–50, shows that a U-curve, in which full democracies and full authoritarian regimes are the strongest, is becoming increasingly lopsided in favor of full democracies. The literature review, however, presents an overall rather unambiguous state of the field: democracies are the most persistent and adaptable, anocracies are the least. The difference is especially marked in Europe.

¹⁷ On the broader discussion, see Marlene Laruelle, “The US Silk Road: Geopolitical Imaginary or the Repackaging of Strategic Interests?” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56, no. 4 (2015): 360–375.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Thomas F. Lynch et al., “The Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism Policy,” *INSS Strategic Perspectives* 21 (2016),

¹⁹ “C5+1 Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State, September 22, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/09/274386.htm> (accessed November 13, 2018).

the BRI. Both the Obama and Trump administrations have expressed their doubts about China's motivations. The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission's 2015 Annual Report, while supporting the idea of China-sponsored investments, criticized Beijing's lack of transparency, heavy-handed approach, and lack of respect for governance and human rights issues. More explicitly, the 2017 National Security Strategy warned that "China's infrastructure-investment and trade strategies reinforce its geopolitical aspirations."²⁰

Yet concerns about the risk of Chinese hegemony in Central Asia remain largely unexpressed, for several reasons. The first is that the U.S. expert community is divided by areas of expertise: U.S. experts on China are focused on the tense situation in the North Pacific region, China's maritime expansion, and the United State's current trade war with China, devoting relatively little attention to Beijing's continental policies, while experts on Central Asia tend to stress Russia's role and the Islamism threat narrative, leaving little room for discussing China's impact. The second is that the U.S. policy community is often short-sighted and busy with immediate issues, with little time or human and financial resources devoted to long-term perspectives and prospective analysis. The third is that U.S. official newspeak tends to follow the international financial institutions in insisting on the region's need for infrastructure connectivity, thereby advancing a positive reading of China's BRI. It takes little critical distance in addressing key issues such as the fact that improving connectivity does not automatically bring development: Without working on the fight against corruption, the state rentier (i.e. which derives a substantial portion of its national revenues from the rent of resources) logic, and the need for the region to strengthen its human capital, more transport infrastructure will not change the present reality.

Russia

The Russian Foreign Policy Concept, approved in 2013, lists a number of threats and challenges that are perceived as common for Moscow and its Central Asian partners. The list includes international terrorism, political extremism, drug trafficking, transborder crime, and illegal migration.²¹ The Concept also links many of these threats and challenges to the instability in neighboring Afghanistan. The National Security Strategy 2020 adds to this list a number of other concerns whose terminology remains vague, including radical nationalism, xenophobia, separatism, and religious fundamentalism.²² In more recent

²⁰ Joel Wuthnow, "From Friend to Foe-ish: Washington's Negative Turn on the Belt and Road Initiative," *The ASAN Forum*, May 21, 2018, <http://www.theasanforum.org/from-friend-to-foe-ish-washingtons-negative-turn-on-the-belt-and-road-initiative/#1>.

²¹ "Kontseptsiia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (12 fevralia 2013 g.)," *Garant.ru*, February 20, 2013, <http://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/70218094/#review>.

²² "Strategiia natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii do 2020 g.," <https://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>

statements, Russian officials have put more emphasis on potentially disruptive influences coming from the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East region as well as from unpredictable fluctuations in U.S. policy.²³

In sum, Russia's concerns for Central Asia mostly boil down to three negative scenarios, each of which would shatter the current status quo and lead to multiple complications for the Kremlin.

1. Chaotic regime change generating instability—especially in Kazakhstan. Anything similar to the “Arab Spring” in one or a number of Central Asian countries would be regarded as a direct threat to Russia's security. Such a development could jeopardize Russian and Russian-speaking diasporas, call into question the integrity of Moscow-led multilateral institutions in the region, fan the flames of regional nationalisms, and even provoke interstate military conflicts over unresolved territorial disputes.
2. The spread of Islamic radicalism and terrorism—from Afghanistan if the current leadership in Kabul falls, or based on Central Asian homegrown trends, facilitated by mounting social and economic problems, development inequality, high corruption, and abuse of power by local leaders. Growing demographic pressures (particularly in Uzbekistan), environmental problems, and what Moscow interprets, rightfully or not, as a deficit of sound long-term development strategies by local leaders are also being kept in mind by Russian experts and policymakers.
3. An overall decline in Russian influence, with China taking over the region not only economically but also in terms of security, culture, language, and the like. The new generations of Central Asians—except for labor migrants—feel much less connected to Russia than their predecessors. For some members of the new generations, it is China, not Russia, that is regarded as the developmental model to follow. True, there is also a growing fear of China's “taking over” the region, which forces regional elites to look at maintaining closer links to Moscow, but this fear will not necessarily be shared by new generations of local leaders.

Moscow has reasons to be concerned about the status of Russian-speaking minorities in the region and the use of the Russian language. The situation is uneven across countries, but the overall trend is that the Russian “cultural space” is gradually shrinking. Complaints about explicit and implicit discrimination against ethnic Russians continue, as does the exodus of Russian-speaking groups (not only Russians, but also Russia-oriented local intelligentsia and businessmen).

The continuous transit of drugs from Afghanistan to Russia through Central Asia is another critically important challenge for Moscow. Russia remains the largest market for Afghan heroin and the main transit route to Europe. So far, the fight against drug traffic from Afghanistan has not been particularly successful; the use of heavy drugs in Russia continues to grow at alarming rates. To wit, in the past few years, there have been between 7.3 and 8.5 million injecting drug users in Russia, making it the largest population of such users in the

²³ <https://riss.ru/analytics/30426/>.

world.²⁴ Many Russian experts accuse the United States of taking a benevolent stance on heroin production in Afghanistan; this “benevolence” is regarded as part of the price that Washington has to pay to keep local warlords at peace with Kabul.

Moscow’s most recent concern relates to Central Asian jihadists fighting in Syrian and in other Middle Eastern conflicts. According to various estimates, there are at least 2,000 to 3,000 Central Asian citizens fighting in Syria alone.²⁵ It is worth noting that some of them were recruited not in their native countries but in Russia, where they were living as guest workers. Whether these fighters return to their countries of origin after ISIS is defeated, try to infiltrate the territory of the Russian Federation, or seek to move to Europe, they present a formidable challenge to Russia’s security, in particular in relation to the North Caucasus.

Moscow considers the most recent shift in the U.S. policy toward Iran to be an additional instability factor that can have a detrimental impact on the entire surrounding region. So far, Tehran has pursued a conservative and responsible policy in Central Asia, resisting the temptation to promote its religious and political influence. However, a changing balance of domestic political powers in Iran caused by hardening U.S. pressure might have a negative impact on Iranian foreign policy in general and its stance on Central Asia in particular. This potential political and social instability in Iran might also pose additional security challenges to Russia and its Central Asian neighbors.

Except on the risk of Islamic radicalism—and even here with some major nuances—Russia and the United States do not share the same threat perceptions of Central Asia, making any genuine strategic alignment difficult. Both may be concerned with China’s “overpower” in the region, but neither seems ready to challenge Beijing over it. They are both worried about the risk of violent regime overthrow and subsequent instability but advance diametrically opposed solutions: The United States wants to secure a space for civil society, while Russia sees the latter as a threat. Even on Islamic radicalism, the two countries’ perceptions of what constitutes fertile soil for radicalism are quite different, and they have incompatible views of how to combat violent extremism. It is worth mentioning that the two countries’ fear of spillovers from Afghanistan has never materialized. Among the many trends of Islamic radicalism identified and documented by scholars, two directly concern Russia: the “spillover” of North Caucasian radicalism to Central Asia and especially Kazakhstan, and the risk of radicalism within the Central Asian migrant community. The Central Asian regimes, concerned with their own stability and security, are closer to the Russian threat perception than the U.S. one, which of course helps Moscow consolidate channels of communication with the Central Asian capitals.

The United States wants to secure a space for civil society, while Russia sees the latter as a threat.

²⁴ United States Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, Volume 1: Drug and Chemical Control (Washington, DC: INCSR, 2018), <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/278759.pdf>.

²⁵ International Crisis Group, “Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia,” *Europe and Central Asia Briefing 72* (2015): 1, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/syria-calling-radicalisation-central-asia>; The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (New York: The Soufan Group, 2015), http://www.soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate_FINAL.pdf.

Points of Friction

Moscow and Washington oppose each other on several issues in Central Asia. Some are of a symbolic nature, with no direct, immediate impact on the ground. Others have more repercussions in terms of policymaking.

Sovereignty Threatened vs. Sphere of Responsibility

Seen from the U.S. side, securing Central Asian states' sovereignty is the main goal: The U.S. perception of the post-Soviet space has been built on a narrative of having to protect small and new nations from the imperial, colonial, and aggressive Russian hegemon. This narrative about Central Asia's sovereignty was pivotal in the early 1990s before becoming overshadowed by questions of economic development and regional integration, but it reemerged in 2014 with the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea and involvement in the Donbas insurgency. Moscow's decision reopened the symbolic battlefield over post-Soviet states' sovereignty. In many respects, the C5+1 initiative—the only platform where the five Central Asian countries meet with the United States—embodies the United States' support for the region's autonomy from Moscow and Washington's hope for more intra-regional cooperation to secure distance from Russia. Since the 2014 turning point, U.S. policymaking circles, the military, and think tanks have, for instance, been evoking the risk of a “Crimea scenario” for northern Kazakhstan. To this should be added a new topic of concern on the U.S. side, that of Russian media influence in the region. This has resulted in several U.S. “counter-” initiatives of funding new media products, the only sizeable one being the online channel “Nastoiashchee vremia” (Current Time) by RFE/RL.

The Russian side routinely denies any neo-imperial ambitions in the region but underscores its “special responsibility” to keep the region stable and secure. The Kremlin often refers to the United States' opposition to closer ties between Russia and Central Asian states as a manifestation of the latter's highly irresponsible and counterproductive approach to the region. According to the standard Russian narrative, by trying to drive a wedge between Moscow and Central Asian capitals and having no intention of investing heavily in the region's security and development, Washington willingly or unwillingly promotes instability and chaos that will eventually backfire on important U.S. interests in Central Asia and beyond. It is common in Moscow to refer to the United States' support of anti-Soviet militants in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which eventually gave birth to the Taliban and Al Qaeda, which became a major challenge to U.S. security interests.

Plausible and Sustainable Democratic Transitions?

Resulting from the U.S. perception of a sovereignty threat to Central Asia coming from Russia are several related issues that the United States considers problematic. Russia is accused of supporting local regimes in their authoritarianism and encouraging them to copy Russian legislation. Moscow is also denounced for protecting Central Asian states from Western pressures over their lack of respect for human rights and poor governance records. In the United States, many still believe that democratic transition is a realistic option for the region, even if the naïve optimism of the early 1990s and narratives about the obvious and unavoidable path from authoritarianism to Western-style parliamentary democracy have been replaced by more nuanced statements about the time needed to “transition” from one system to another. The diversity of actors who shape U.S. policy contributes to a certain cacophony on democracy promotion: Advocacy groups lobby for it in Congress, the White House, and the State Department, while the Department of Defense remains more circumspect.

In Russia, the Kremlin has put its faith in “responsible authoritarianism” and supports the political status quo, although the sustainability of this status quo is an open question. The efficiency of the “authoritarian modernization” model for Russia itself is broadly disputed among Russian experts, and it has not produced tangible results in Central Asia, with the exception of Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, this model de facto remains the cornerstone of Russia’s economic, social, and political strategies, for itself as for Central Asia. The grim outcomes of the “Arab Spring” in most of the Middle Eastern countries that embarked on the road of political transition from authoritarianism to democracy in 2011–12 further solidified the Russian preference for authoritarian “order” over liberal “chaos.” Many, if not all, ruling Central Asian leaders share this preference. The widespread admiration for successful authoritarian modernization projects in east and southeast Asia also contributes to a profound skepticism about any Western-style liberal reforms, especially those extending to the political domain.

From Iran to Energy: Other Potential Friction Points

One can easily identify several other potential points of friction, yet they remain less relevant than the two main ones mentioned above.

The issue of energy competition, high on the agendas of both Russia and the United States in the early 2000s, has now faded: The United States no longer needs Caspian oil and gas since becoming an exporter itself and limits itself to offering geopolitical support to energy projects that bypass Russia, such as the BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) and the Transcaspian transit hub on the shores of Kazakhstan. Russia, too, is no longer thirsty for Central Asian energy, as it has been able to develop new fields in the Arctic and subarctic regions as well as in the Sakhalin Sea, although it remains concerned not to lose its transit control over—

and thus revenues from—Kazakh oil on its way to European markets. Except in the case of Kazakh oil’s having to choose between Russian pipelines and Caspian transit, Russia and the United States are no longer in competition over energy in Central Asia.

On Iran, the two countries face a large range of disagreements. The major difference between Washington and Moscow on Iran is that while the former has the luxury of looking at Tehran primarily through the Israeli and nonproliferation lenses, the latter has a much broader agenda with Iranians. For Russia, Tehran is critically important on such sensitive matters as Afghanistan, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and, of course, Central Asia. If many in the United States consider Iran to be a spoiler in places like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, the Gulf, and so on, from the Russian viewpoint Iran has on many occasions acted as a rational and responsible, albeit difficult, partner. For instance, Moscow appreciated Iran’s balanced and prudent position during the civil war in Tajikistan in the early 1990s. Iran is also an indispensable partner in many North–South transportation corridor projects in Eurasia considered by Moscow.

Counterterrorism as an Opportunity for Cooperation?

In this bleak picture, one domain for potential cooperation stands out: counterterrorism. The topic has been under the policy spotlight for two decades now. Moscow has been a vibrant advocate of cooperation in the field of counterterrorism, while the United States has been more divided or hesitant, but both policy circles tend to see counterterrorism as a consensual theme that could generate good will among all international actors present in Central Asia.

On the U.S. side, the policy community is quite divided on the question of counterterrorism’s being the main framework for U.S.-Russia cooperation in the region. Several Track 1.5 or Track 2 initiatives have been developed around it, such as the East-West Institute’s Joint U.S.-Russia Working Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan, which states that “political disagreements between the US and Russia over Ukraine should not hamper their cooperation in search of strategic solutions to the issue of Afghan drug production and trafficking.”²⁶ Other circles, on the contrary, criticize this approach: PRIO’s Pavel Baev, for instance, considers that “the prospects for cooperation [between the two countries] in counterterrorism are poor and artificially amplified.”²⁷ What is certain is that if U.S.-Russia initiatives on counterterrorism in Afghanistan constitute a well-established framework for cooperation, nothing consistent has to date been done in and with Central Asia within this framework. While Russia was long enthusiastic about cooperation over

²⁶ “Afghan Narcotrafficking: Bringing U.S.-Russia Cooperation Back on Track,” East-West Institute, July 9, 2014, <https://www.eastwest.ngo/idea/afghan-narcotrafficking-bringing-us-russia-cooperation-back-track> (accessed November 13, 2018).

²⁷ Pavel Baev, “Why Russia Is Failing the ‘Syria Test’ for Counterterrorism Cooperation with the West,” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 528, May 2018, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/why-russia-failing-syria-test-counterterrorism-cooperation-west>.

Afghanistan, it was always less interested in developing joint projects with the United States on Central Asia, seeing Washington as an illegitimate intruder into its sphere of influence/responsibility.

Several points have to be addressed here. The first, broad one is that to fight against terrorism means comprehending the roots and paths of violence and not “othering” terrorists as abnormal individuals. This approach rarely makes inroads into the U.S. and Russian policymaking communities. What predominates is a traditional, securitizing approach of identifying radical groups and targeting them before they commit violence—with very limited success, or even failure, in the case of Afghanistan. But today’s transformations of terrorism—multiplying fertile soils all over the world, mutating forms of violence, volatile forms of individual engagement—make the conventional U.S. and Russian approach even less relevant and further limit its efficacy.

Even if we gloss over this general doubt about the conventional idea of “countering” terrorism, another challenge to take into account is that what happened in Afghanistan has not—fortunately—been replicated in Central Asia. Unlike its southern neighbor, Central Asia does not face a well-organized insurgency with state-building implications, but rather sporadic, very limited, and minor terrorist acts, mostly in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, in two very different socioeconomic and cultural contexts.²⁸

The Russian experience of counterterrorism in Central Asia, both in bilateral and multilateral (CSTO and SCO) frameworks, has demonstrated mixed results. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the SCO (RATS) compiles each member’s list of extremist people and organizations, allowing member states to cooperate in arresting and extraditing suspects. The opacity and lack of accountability of the RATS is an issue for all Western countries. Still, one should give some credit to various formats—more bilateral than multilateral—of anti-terrorist cooperation across the region, which may have minimized the number of successful large-scale terrorist attacks in Central Asia.

The United States has no experience in dealing with terrorism in the region: It has primarily been involved with broader projects in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, such as border control and training police officers and border guards. Like many other initiatives of its kind, the Central Asia Counter-Narcotics Initiative (CACI), designed to provide training and equipment to set up counternarcotics task forces for the whole region,²⁹ which established training facilities in Batken and near Dushanbe to combat drug trafficking and terrorism, largely failed. The newly launched C5+1 Counter-Terrorism project, led by the U.S. Institute of Peace, will convene policymakers and experts to promote best practices and regional approaches to countering violent extremism and radicalization, as well as countermessaging. Yet it remains to be seen what will result from it.

²⁸ See Mariya Y. Omelicheva and Lawrence Markowitz, “Does Drug Trafficking Impact Terrorism? Afghan Opioids and Terrorist Violence in Central Asia,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, published online February 20, 2018, doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1434039.

²⁹ “The Central Asia Counternarcotics Initiative (CACI): Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, February 21, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/fs/184295.htm> (accessed December 28, 2013).

Can Russia and the United States—in partnership with their Central Asian counterparts—join forces on countering terrorism? With some exceptions, such as preventing the May 2017 St. Petersburg terrorist attacks, the room for cooperation between the two countries appears limited. As they have different definitions of “extremism,” with the Russian classification being broader and including several groups that the United States does not consider as such, developing joint activities would require a lot of adjustments and compromises. What SCO and CSTO regard as terrorism, the United States may consider a legitimate fight of oppressed ethnic minorities for their rights, as in the case of the Uyghurs, for instance. Moreover, a number of Central Asian leaders have used a “perceived terrorist threat” as an excuse to go after political opponents, dissidents, and human rights activists, which limits U.S. ability to partner with them.

The third, critical challenge to U.S.-Russia cooperation in counterterrorism relates to intelligence issues. Genuine cooperation on terrorism implies sharing sensitive intelligence information, including ways each security service gets access to information and infiltrates and dismantles networks. It necessitates a degree of mutual trust that is usually possible only with close allies and certainly does not exist between the Russian and U.S. intelligence agencies today. This means that either this domain can be protected from the broad atmosphere of distrust, which does not look plausible at the moment, or else cooperation on counterterrorism will be limited to expert discussions and sharing of experience—which seems more realistic in the current context—and some exceptional cases such as the above-mentioned one in 2017.

What Are Potential Niches for Cooperation?

Besides the high level of distrust and feeling of competition on both the Russian and U.S. sides, there are still several domains where their respective soft powers complement each other. It is in this breach that new ideas for cooperation may emerge even in a very deteriorated context.

Space and Related Sectors

There are several sectors where U.S.-Russia cooperation has not been affected by the deterioration of the relationship. Chief among them is space, with joint projects around the ISS continuing at full speed. Given that Russia plans to leave Baikonur by around 2040 to concentrate on its own two cosmodromes (Plevesk and Komsomol-on-Amur), Kazakhstan now aims to achieve the status of a full actor in space, taking advantage of Baikonur's location on its soil to develop new cooperation with other actors. In launching Baiterek, its own space program, which clearly targets the commercial side of the space market (communication satellites), Kazakhstan positions itself as a great place to implement new, triangular, Russia-U.S.-Kazakhstani space-based projects. Astana also envisions Baiterek as a unique place to develop IT and new industrial technologies and applied sciences that the country is desperately lacking. Here, too, the combination of U.S. and Russian know-how in science and technology could be used to develop cooperation in “soft” sectors—avoiding domains with dual technologies that are too sensitive in a time of renewed military competition. Joint training of a new generation of Kazakhstani engineers looks like a possible first step.

Civil Security

To varying degrees, all the Central Asian countries are vulnerable to natural catastrophes, especially earthquakes, landslides, and floods. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the most mountainous, are also at risk of avalanches and mudslides. Whereas in Russia the Ministry of Emergency Situations (EMERCOM) underwent a genuine modernization, its Central Asian counterparts remain poorly prepared in theoretical, human, and technical terms, and this domain receives scant attention from the authorities. In this context, both Russia and the United States could share their “best practices” to be replicated in the Central Asian region. The two countries share a long tradition of joint activities in the civil security sector, and cooperation between the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations and U.S. agencies has been productive, for instance in ratifying the 2011 Arctic Council's Agreement on

Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue. Addressing environmental issues requires both scientific exchanges, for instance on the impact of climate change, and logistical skills and know-how for disaster preparedness. It could therefore strengthen U.S.-Russia cooperation on nonconventional security without having to touch “hard” security issues.

Job-Creation Mechanisms and Rural Human Capital

Creating employment in rural regions and avoiding the current weakening of human capital remains the central question for the long-term economic sustainability of the Central Asian region. The latter has suffered from a massive loss of technical knowledge, hard and applied sciences mastery, and engineering capabilities. This situation directly hampers the region’s autonomy in terms of economic development. Only Uzbekistan has been able to develop a dense network of vocational schools and generate a new generation of technical specialists. Among foreign initiatives, only Turkish lyceums play an important role in training new generations outside the traditional elite circles, and in provincial places, but they are also contested on account of some of their ideological underpinnings. Moreover, massive labor migrations, mostly to Russia, undermine the future of rural development, with young people of working age leaving for and/or coming back from migration without investing in sustaining their locality. One reason for this is the lack of opportunities to transform the many skills learned in migration into usable human capital.

On these two issues, Russia and the United States offer complementary soft powers. Both the Russian and U.S. education models are seen by Central Asians as “higher” than their own and therefore valued. Russian agriculture has been able to largely reform in the past decade, with stunning successes recently, and its vocational schools are more developed than in Central Asia, while the United States has a long tradition of training in applied sciences and technologies, as well as professional training for adults. Together, they could launch a pilot U.S.-Russia vocational school in a Central Asian country that would focus on meeting the professional needs of the rural population—around agriculture and water use, for instance.

Both countries could also exchange their experience of migration, Russia as the main receiving country for Central Asian labor and the United States’ long experience with migrants resettling at home and starting small businesses that draw on the skills they acquired during their stay in the United States. For Central Asian migrants, the two domains with the highest potential to catalyze this kind of upward mobility include the construction sector (skills acquired in migration could be valued by Chinese, Turkish, and Russian firms present in their home countries) and retail trade. In the latter sector, the United States could offer support through the provision of short professional trainings to help returned migrants launch home-based businesses. The negative context around migration coming from the current White House does not impede American civil society from remaining extremely active in that sector.

Knowledge Sharing

Currently, no specific platform would allow Russian and American scholars and experts on Central Asia to meet and discuss their assessments of the Central Asian region and interact in a triangular way with their Central Asian counterparts. Not knowing the assessment of the other country's experts and where it overlaps with or contradicts their own hampers Russian and American experts' ability to discuss meaningful policy options for the medium and long term. Creating a U.S.-Russia-Central Asia expert group on Central Asia would fill this gap. One of the first topics to be assessed could be both countries' migration and integration policies, with "best practices" exchanges, as well as a discussion on preventing radicalization; both the United States and Russia have long traditions, never compared, of using neighborhood communities to deal with integration issues.

Joining Eurasian Infrastructure Projects?

Given that very few projects make sense in the trilateral framework of Russia, the United States, and a Central Asian state, the two countries could discuss the possibility of the United States' joining Eurasian infrastructure projects. It seems obvious that Russia has no interest in inviting the United States to be associated with or even an observer of the SCO, the EEU, or the Eurasian Development Bank; only the China-led BRI initiative is even a potential option. Yet it remains to be seen if Beijing would support such a proposal and if the United States would consider it, especially given the current round of tensions around bilateral trade.

Multilateral Cooperation with the EU, China, or India?

The Central Asian region welcomes both bilateral relationships and large multilateral fora that allow for flexible and nonbinding engagements. Are there possibilities for new multilateral cooperation in the region that would involve both the United States and Russia, as well as other actors? The EU, India, and China appear to be the most plausible: They themselves support multilateral structures and can have a dialogue with both Moscow and Washington. This would allow for a first—outside UN and OSCE structures—"socialization" of Russian and American policymakers over Central Asian issues.

The Central Asian region welcomes both bilateral relationships and large multilateral fora that allow for flexible and nonbinding engagements.

Conclusion

Undermining each other's objectives in the region is a zero-sum game for Moscow, Washington, and Central Asia alike.

Obviously, the first step prior to many constructive proposals would be for each power to stop treating the other as an adversary in the Central Asian context: Undermining each other's objectives in the region is a zero-sum game for Moscow, Washington, and Central Asia alike. Given the current sour state of U.S.-Russia relations, it would make sense to keep existing pockets of U.S.-Russia cooperation in Central Asia under the political radar. That approach would help protect this cooperation from becoming another bargaining chip in the ongoing game of sanctions and countersanctions. Difficult though it may be, an effort should be made to de-link interactions between Moscow and Washington in the region from U.S.-Russia disagreements on Iran or Syria as far as possible.

No "Grand Bargain" between Russia and the United States looks possible or even desirable at this point. It makes little sense to discuss any general "code of conduct" of the two powers in Central Asia or for them to fight each other on such general issues as definitions of "democracy," "stability," and so on. A top-down approach is not likely to work anytime soon, which suggests that emphasis should be placed on the bottom-up approach. Small, symbolic, joint projects targeted at enhancing security and promoting development in the region would already be a major accomplishment, demonstrating that U.S.-Russia interaction in the region is not doomed to be a zero-sum game.

It thus makes more sense to focus on relatively noncontroversial, nontoxic areas of potential cooperation, such as the environment, public health, human capital development, and the like. The more technical and the less political U.S.-Russia cooperation can be, the better it will be for the two sides and for the region. After their ability to work together is tested in these areas, it would be possible to approach more sensitive and politically loaded areas like education, community, and urban development.

Both Russia and the United States should also put more emphasis on multilateral cooperation projects. In many cases, it would be easier and more efficient to go beyond bilateral cooperation by engaging with third parties (the European Union, China, international and regional development institutions). Such a multilateral framework may be complicated to put together and to operate, but similar initiatives have been shown to bring stability to cooperation (a positive example being the Arctic Council).

In the current challenging environment, with many official communication lines frozen or downgraded, it is particularly important to make full use of second-track mechanisms, above all expert-level communications. In recent years, many Russian think tanks have preferred not to engage their U.S. colleagues in projects related to Central Asia; for its part, the U.S. side has tried to avoid looking at the region through "Russian eyes." It seems that the time has come for the two sides to recognize that comparative U.S.-Russia assessments of the situation in the region might be fruitful and intellectually rewarding.

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The Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations convenes rising experts from leading American and Russian institutions to tackle the thorniest issues in the bilateral relationship. By engaging the latest generation of scholars in face-to-face discussion and debate, we aim to generate innovative analysis and policy recommendations that better reflect the common ground between the United States and Russia that is so often obscured by mistrust. We believe our unique, truly bilateral approach offers the best potential for breakthroughs in mutual understanding and reconciliation between our countries.



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