

America First Meets the Great Game: Reassessing U.S. Policy in Central Asia

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Introduction

The steppes of Central Asia have long attracted the attention of powers seeking influence over this pivotal region. The nineteenth-century “Great Game” between the British and Russian empires demonstrated how control over these landlocked territories could shape global power dynamics, with explorers, diplomats, and spies maneuvering across harsh terrain to secure advantage for their distant capitals.¹ Today, as the United States recalibrates its approach to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan under the Trump administration’s second term, we witness another chapter in this enduring competition—though the players and their methods have evolved considerably.

The return of President Trump in 2025 has introduced a markedly different approach to Central Asian engagement, one defined by transactional diplomacy, skepticism toward multilateral institutions, and insistence that foreign partnerships yield concrete benefits for American interests. This shift coincides with an unsettled global order: escalating tensions with China, an unresolved conflict in Ukraine, and Beijing’s deepening economic grip through the Belt and Road Initiative. Moscow, despite economic sanctions and military setbacks, maintains its view of Central Asia as a strategic backyard deserving special influence.

The fundamental American interest remains preventing any single power from dominating this resource-rich region at the heart of Eurasia. Yet the means of pursuing this goal have shifted dramatically. Where previous administrations pursued comprehensive engagement through development aid, democracy promotion, and regional initiatives, President Trump favors discrete, commercially oriented partnerships that promise immediate returns. This recalibration raises critical questions about the sustainability and effectiveness of U.S. influence in a region where China offers massive infrastructure investments and Russia provides security guarantees rooted in decades of shared history.

This essay examines how the Trump administration’s second-term strategy is reshaping U.S. engagement with Central Asia. It first considers Washington’s selective support for sovereignty through bilateral partnerships, then analyzes evolving approaches to regional security and the fallout of America’s retrenchment from Afghanistan. It next explores commercial connectivity initiatives and economic engagement in critical sectors such as energy and rare earth minerals, before turning to how these policies intersect with great power competition involving Russia and China. Together, these sections assess how an “America First” doctrine can secure lasting influence in Eurasia’s strategic heartland.

¹ See generally Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (1990) (recounting and analyzing this history).

Supporting Sovereignty Through Selective Engagement

The Trump administration's approach to bolstering Central Asian independence filters traditional sovereignty support through a distinctly bilateral and transactional prism. Rather than convening multilateral forums that bring all five republics together, Washington has been shifting one-on-one dealings with individual states, reflecting a belief that direct negotiation yields better terms. The previous C5+1 framework—which in 2023 achieved its first presidential-level summit—has lost momentum under the new administration.² Early indications suggest actual engagement happens primarily through bilateral channels, with multilateral formats receiving less attention.

This bilateral tilt creates mixed outcomes for regional sovereignty. Direct high-level engagement can powerfully reassure these nations of Washington's commitment. When President Trump met with Kazakh and Uzbek leaders during his first term, it reinvigorated sclerotic relationships. Similarly now, Secretary of State Marco Rubio's acknowledgment that the Jackson-Vanik Amendment remains an "absurd relic" signals readiness to eliminate Cold War-era trade barriers that still technically deny normal trade relations to certain Central Asian states.³ Full integration into global markets on equal footing would reduce their dependence on any single trading partner—a clear sovereignty benefit.

Yet the administration's transactional approach contains some contradictions. The President's announcement of sweeping "reciprocal" tariffs in April 2025—including a general 10% levy on all imports with higher rates for specific countries—created immediate anxiety in Central Asian capitals. Kazakhstan faced a threatened 27% tariff on its exports to the United States, ostensibly over national security concerns related to metals.⁴ While diplomatic intervention secured a temporary pause, the episode revealed how quickly transactional diplomacy can destabilize relationships Washington ostensibly seeks to strengthen.

The administration has also floated prospects of new bilateral trade agreements designed to reward countries distancing themselves from rival powers. This carrot-and-stick approach aligns with the President's well-known tactic of using commercial leverage to achieve geopolitical goals. But Central Asian leaders find themselves walking an increasingly swaying tightrope between competing powers offering vastly different engagement models.

The sudden cuts of international aid programs represent another significant shift. Within days of taking office, President Trump ordered a 90-day freeze on foreign assistance to reassess alignment with U.S. interests. The resulting budget proposal slashed international affairs spending by 47%, eliminating numerous State Department and USAID projects that previously helped Central Asia build institutional

² See Readout of President Biden's Meeting with the C5+1 Leaders at UNGA, White House Briefing Room (Sept. 19, 2023), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/19/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-with-the-c51-leaders-at-unga/>.

³ Andrei Matveev, Jackson-Vanik: One Step Away from Repeal, *Times of Central Asia* (Jan. 21, 2025), <https://timesca.com/jackson-vanik-and-kazakhstan-one-step-away-from-repeal/>.

⁴ US Imposes 27% Reciprocal Duty on Kazakh Products, *Astana Times* (Apr. 3, 2025), <https://astanatimes.com/2025/04/us-imposes-27-reciprocal-duty-on-kazakh-products/>.

capacity and diversify its international partnerships.⁵ While this arguably eliminates wasteful spending, critics might contend such cuts create vacuums that Beijing and Moscow eagerly fill with their own financing and influence.

Indeed, China and Russia have proven adept at capitalizing on perceived American retrenchment. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Chinese officials loudly advertised their readiness to provide stability, pledging aid while suggesting America's decline was self-evident.⁶ Russia also signaled its intent to remain the region's primary security guarantor, leveraging historical ties and shared borders. For Central Asian states seeking to balance between powers, these competing narratives matter enormously.

Security Cooperation on Transactional Terms

The Trump administration's approach to regional security exemplifies its broader insistence on burden-sharing and concrete reciprocity. A revealing incident in April 2025 demonstrated this philosophy in action: the Department of Homeland Security orchestrated a joint operation with Uzbekistan to deport over 100 undocumented Central Asian migrants from the United States.⁷ Remarkably, Uzbekistan bore all logistical and financial costs, even chartering flights for nationals from neighboring countries. U.S. officials hailed this as a model for bilateral cooperation, illustrating how security partnerships now require regional states to demonstrate tangible commitments that directly benefit American priorities.

Traditional counterterrorism cooperation continues but within a transformed framework. Intelligence sharing proceeds, but the U.S. military maintains no permanent bases in the region (the last closed in 2014) and shows little interest in establishing new installations.⁸ Instead, anecdotal evidence suggests that Washington may be relying on over-the-horizon capabilities and exploring ad-hoc access agreements for specific contingencies. These may include arrangements for occasional use of facilities in Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan for counterterrorism missions—drone surveillance or rapid strikes against high-value targets—but the Administration has wisely kept such cooperation low-profile to avoid provoking Moscow or Beijing.

Central Asian governments recognize the value of U.S. counterterror expertise even as they navigate complex regional dynamics. Cooperation often takes the form of capacity-building initiatives: joint exercises on border interdiction, U.S.-funded equipment transfers like night-vision gear and communications systems, or short-term deployments of American advisors. However, under Trump's foreign aid recalibration, many programs face cuts unless they demonstrate immediate payoff for U.S. interests. Training previously embedded in long-term institution-building may be repackaged as short-

⁵ Adva Saldinger & Elissa Miolene, Trump Budget Proposes Unprecedented, 'Reckless' Cuts to Foreign Aid, *Devex* (May 3, 2025), <https://www.devex.com/news/trump-budget-proposes-unprecedented-reckless-cuts-to-foreign-aid-109988>.

⁶ Yun Sun, How China Views the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan, *War on the Rocks* (May 13, 2021), <https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/how-china-views-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>.

⁷ US deports 131 Central Asian migrants to Uzbekistan, *Reuters* (Apr. 30, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-deports-131-central-asian-migrants-uzbekistan-fox-news-reports-2025-04-30/>.

⁸ See Akhilesh Pillalamarri, The United States Just Closed Its Last Base in Central Asia, *The Diplomat* (June 10, 2014), <https://thediplomat.com/2014/06/the-united-states-just-closed-its-last-base-in-central-asia/>

term engagements on a cost-sharing basis, reflecting the administration's insistence that partners contribute substantially to mutual security.

This bilateral focus potentially misses opportunities for coordinated regional responses to transnational threats. Groups like ISIS-Khorasan recruit across borders, exploiting grievances and governance gaps throughout the region. Previously, initiatives like the C5+1 Security Working Group fostered collective approaches to common challenges. Now, with Washington less interested in convening multilateral efforts, Central Asian states increasingly turn to other frameworks. Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization continues joint exercises, while China has expanded security cooperation through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and bilateral arrangements. These alternative platforms may gradually displace American influence in shaping regional security architecture.

The administration's reduced emphasis on governance and human rights paradoxically simplifies certain aspects of security cooperation. Central Asian governments, often bristling at past U.S. criticism of their counterterrorism methods or treatment of religious groups, now find Washington focused purely on operational effectiveness. This pragmatism facilitates straightforward deals: regional states assist with U.S. priorities like immigration enforcement or intelligence gathering, receiving security hardware or trade incentives in return. Yet this narrow focus may overlook deeper drivers of radicalization—economic marginalization, corruption, lack of political voice—that sustained development assistance previously attempted to address.

Afghanistan: Managing Instability at Arm's Length

The Trump administration's Afghanistan policy reflects its broader strategic recalibration: acceptance of ground realities, minimal direct involvement, and reliance on regional actors to manage consequences. Having set in motion the U.S. military withdrawal through the 2020 Doha agreement with the Taliban, President Trump takes pride in ending America's longest war. By 2025, with the Taliban firmly in control, Washington maintains a stance of non-recognition while engaging in limited practical cooperation on narrow interests.

Direct U.S. support for Afghan stability has virtually disappeared. Humanitarian aid flowing under the previous administration faced immediate cuts as part of the foreign assistance freeze. New funding remains largely limited to counterterrorism monitoring and highly targeted assistance—quiet support for U.N. agencies conducting disease prevention, for instance, to prevent regional health crises. Development projects once justified as building peace are dismissed as costly investments unlikely to yield returns aligned with "America First" doctrine.

This retrenchment has created both opportunities and challenges for Central Asian states. On one hand, they appreciate Washington's non-prescriptive approach, which allows them to engage the Taliban regime on their own terms without U.S. pressure. Uzbekistan has emerged as a particularly active player, hosting international dialogues on Afghanistan's future and exploring railway connections through Afghan territory to Pakistani ports. Kazakhstan provides humanitarian assistance while carefully managing its border. Turkmenistan maintains its studied neutrality while quietly facilitating some cross-border trade.

On the other hand, reduced U.S. involvement potentially increases negative spillovers that could drive these states deeper into Russian or Chinese orbits. The power vacuum has indeed drawn in both rivals.

Beijing maintains open channels with the Taliban, proposing Belt and Road extensions into Afghanistan while eyeing vast mineral deposits. Chinese firms have begun exploratory work on copper and lithium extraction, potentially creating new economic dependencies. Moscow, despite officially designating the Taliban as terrorists, works pragmatically with Kabul on security arrangements and uses its military facilities in Tajikistan to monitor the border.

The administration has crafted creative, low-cost approaches to maintain some influence over Afghan developments. The \$3 billion “America First Opportunity Fund,” designed to support allies while countering China, could partially finance infrastructure at Central Asian border crossings with Afghanistan.⁹ Improved facilities would boost local economies through increased trade while ensuring Afghanistan doesn’t rely solely on Chinese-built routes. Another avenue involves diplomatic coordination: the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan works with Uzbekistan and Qatar to encourage Taliban movement toward more inclusive governance, using prospects of future recognition or investment as leverage.

Intelligence cooperation remains the most active element of U.S. engagement. American agencies work closely with Central Asian counterparts to monitor terrorist cells operating in Afghanistan’s ungoverned spaces. Given their proximity, linguistic capabilities, and networks developed over decades, Kazakh, Uzbek, and Tajik intelligence services often track individuals and groups that Western agencies cannot easily penetrate. The U.S. provides satellite imagery and signals intelligence in exchange for human intelligence—a mutually beneficial arrangement for both sides.

Yet this minimalist approach carries risks. Without significant economic or security investment in Afghanistan’s stability, Central Asia faces higher probability of crisis-driven spillovers. If narcotics trafficking surges due to Afghan economic collapse, Tajikistan may deepen reliance on Russian border forces. If extremist violence escalates, Beijing might justify expanded security presence in border regions, building on facilities it has already established in the region. The U.S. could inadvertently enable the very Chinese and Russian encroachment it seeks to prevent by creating vacuums others fill.

Connectivity Through Commercial Corridors

The administration’s approach to regional connectivity exemplifies its preference for commercially viable projects over grand strategic visions. Where previous U.S. policy supported ambitious multilateral initiatives to link Central Asia with South Asia and global markets, current efforts focus on specific opportunities promising measurable returns for American businesses while undercutting Chinese or Russian transport monopolies.

The Trans-Caspian “Middle Corridor” has emerged as a priority, offering an alternative route from Central Asia through the Caucasus to European markets that entirely bypasses Russian territory.¹⁰ The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation—one of few agencies spared budget cuts given its mission to advance American interests through investment rather than aid—actively explores financing

⁹ See Marco Rubio, *Statement Before the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs* (May 21, 2025), <https://www.congress.gov/119/meeting/house/118280/witnesses/HHRG-119-AP04-Wstate-RubioM-20250521.pdf>.

¹⁰ See John C.K. Daly, *Trade Along Trans-Caspian International Transport Route Surges*, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, <https://jamestown.org/program/trade-along-trans-caspian-international-transport-route-surges/>.

for port modernization, railway connections, and logistics facilities along this route. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, as the critical Caspian littoral states, have welcomed American interest in developing infrastructure that diversifies their export options.

The Trump administration could frame such support not as development assistance but as strategic investment serving mutual interests. Arguably, every ton of Kazakh grain or Uzbek cotton shipped west via the Middle Corridor rather than through Russia weakens Moscow's economic leverage. Similarly, providing alternatives to Chinese-controlled routes could preserve Central Asian states' freedom to choose trading partners based on commercial merit rather than political pressure.

The trans-Afghan railway linking Uzbekistan to Pakistani ocean ports represents another compelling opportunity complicated by ground realities. Uzbekistan has long championed this connection, which would provide Central Asia's most direct access to maritime trade. In July 2025, Tashkent announced a \$6 billion infrastructure development plan explicitly including improved transport links southward through Afghanistan.¹¹ While the Taliban government's control makes direct U.S. involvement politically fraught, Washington has found creative workarounds.

The administration could encourage partnerships whereby Uzbekistan leads construction on Afghan segments while American firms potentially finance portions within Uzbekistan or provide political risk insurance for investments. Secretary Rubio's engagement with Tashkent has explored how U.S. companies might participate in this ambitious project. For instance, the DFC could support modern logistics hub in Uzbekistan that could serve as a staging point for increased regional trade, built by an American consortium and designed to facilitate U.S. exports to Central Asian markets.

Energy infrastructure presents both continuity and change in U.S. approach. Washington can support projects that diversify Central Asian energy export routes away from Russian pipelines. The long-discussed Trans-Caspian gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan remains technically feasible but politically complex. The administration has signaled willingness to provide diplomatic support and potentially DFC financing for feasibility studies but expects regional states and commercial partners to drive implementation.

But the administration's lack of emphasis on climate concerns or renewable energy means initiatives in these areas will receive minimal attention compared to traditional hydrocarbon projects. This potentially represents a missed opportunity given Central Asia's vast solar and wind potential, which could position these states as clean energy suppliers for the future while reducing dependence on fossil fuel exports vulnerable to global price swings.

Economic Engagement Through Strategic Sectors

Critical minerals have emerged as the centerpiece of the Trump administration's economic engagement with Central Asia, reflecting urgent strategic imperatives to secure supply chains currently dominated by China. The region's vast reserves of rare earth elements, lithium, uranium, and other materials

¹¹ SpecialEurasia OSINT Team, Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan Railway Agreement: Strategic Assessment (July 23, 2025).

essential for high-tech manufacturing and clean energy transitions offer compelling opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships.

Kazakhstan alone possesses significant deposits of 19 of the 34 minerals deemed critical by the European Union, while Uzbekistan has announced discoveries of lithium reserves potentially ranking among the world's largest.¹² A 2018 U.S. Geological Survey identified 384 sites of rare earth and rare metal deposits across Central Asia, suggesting enormous untapped potential.¹³ In 2025, what began as academic geological interest has transformed into urgent strategic priority as Washington seeks to reduce dependence on Chinese-controlled supply chains.

“Minerals diplomacy” now drives high-level engagement. Secretary Rubio and other senior officials actively court Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan with proposals for American investment in extraction and, crucially, processing facilities. The distinction matters enormously: while many countries possess rare earth deposits, China's near monopoly on processing capacity gives Beijing leverage throughout global supply chains. U.S. companies exploring joint ventures in Kazakhstan for rare earth processing could break this stranglehold while providing Central Asian partners with value-added industrial development rather than mere resource extraction.

Uzbekistan's March 2025 announcement of a \$2.6 billion strategy to develop its mining sector explicitly welcomed American investment.¹⁴ Negotiations involving the DFC, major U.S. mining companies, and Uzbek authorities have progressed rapidly toward financing new projects targeting lithium, tungsten, and vanadium—materials critical for battery production and advanced manufacturing. The administration has indicated portions of the America First Opportunity Fund could underwrite these ventures, framing them as strategic investments countering Chinese dominance while creating American jobs through secure supply chains.

The DFC's enhanced role illustrates how the administration pursues development objectives married to commercial interests. With \$3 billion in fresh capital authorization, the agency prioritizes projects advancing supply chain resilience or trade connectivity favorable to U.S. interests.¹⁵ Beyond mining, this includes modernizing regional logistics networks, financing telecommunications infrastructure using non-Chinese equipment, and supporting financial sector development that integrates Central Asian economies with Western rather than Chinese standards.

Traditional energy investments continue but through a distinctly competitive lens. Washington applauds Kazakhstan's efforts to increase oil exports via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and other routes circumventing Russia. The administration has encouraged Turkmenistan to consider liquefied natural gas exports that could reach global markets independently of pipeline routes controlled by Russia or China. U.S. energy majors maintain longstanding interests in Kazakh oil fields and explore new

¹² Aiman Nakispekova, Kazakhstan Produces Over Half of Raw Materials Critical for EU Economy, *Astana Times* (Feb. 7, 2024), <https://astanatimes.com/2024/02/kazakhstan-produces-over-half-of-raw-materials-critical-for-eu-economy/>.

¹³ USGS, *Rare Earth Element and Rare Metal Inventory of Central Asia* (2018).

¹⁴ Uzbekistan Launches \$2.6B Initiative to Bolster Minerals Sector, *Mining.com* (Mar. 18, 2025).

¹⁵ DFC Approves 22 Transactions Totaling Nearly \$3 Billion in Q1 of FY2025, U.S. Development Finance Corporation (Jan. 2, 2025), <https://www.dfc.gov/media/press-releases/dfc-approves-22-transactions-totaling-nearly-3-billion-q1-fy2025>.

opportunities as these countries seek Western technology and investment to maximize production from mature fields.

Yet the administration's aggressive global trade policies create complications for the very economic relationships it seeks to build. The spring 2025 tariff threats demonstrated how quickly Central Asian partners can become collateral damage in broader trade disputes. Kazakhstan's experience—facing punishing tariffs on metal exports before receiving a waiver—left regional governments wary of deeper economic integration that might expose them to unpredictable U.S. trade actions.

Navigating Great Power Competition

The Trump administration's approach to Russia adds layers of complexity to Central Asian strategy. While maintaining sanctions related to Ukraine, signals of possible rapprochement have emerged, including discussions of selective sanctions relief and potential negotiations. For Central Asian states maintaining extensive economic ties with Russia—from labor migration to energy trade—any U.S.-Russia accommodation could provide welcome relief from secondary sanctions pressure.

However, improved U.S.-Russia relations might paradoxically undermine efforts to strengthen Central Asian sovereignty if Washington tacitly accepts Russian spheres of influence. Some analysts speculate the administration might tolerate greater Russian sway in Central Asia as the lesser evil compared to unchecked Chinese expansion. Such calculations, while perhaps strategically logical from Washington's perspective, would disturb regional states that have worked carefully to avoid becoming pawns in great power competition.

China's economic presence continues expanding regardless of U.S. efforts. Beijing's advantages—geographic proximity, massive capital reserves, willingness to fund projects Western investors consider too risky, and absence of political conditions—prove difficult to counter. While Washington highlights BRI's debt risks and opacity, Central Asian governments often see Chinese investment as their most realistic option for needed infrastructure development.

The administration's transactional approach may yield mixed results in this complex environment. When aligned with Central Asian states' own commercial interests—as with critical minerals development or trade corridor diversification—U.S. initiatives gain traction. Regional governments appreciate Washington's newfound focus on business rather than lectures about governance. They have responded entrepreneurially, crafting proposals designed to appeal to Trump's deal-making instincts while advancing their own development goals.

But the absence of sustained, patient institution-building creates vulnerabilities. By dramatically cutting support for civil society, independent media, and governance programs, the U.S. cedes soft power space to rivals. China and Russia never pressed these states on democratic reforms; their state-centric development models may now appear more attractive absent Western alternatives. The very corruption and opacity U.S. programs once combated often facilitate the kinds of deals that allow Chinese and Russian firms to dominate key sectors.

Conclusion

The old is new again. Central Asia's strategic importance endures even as great powers adjust their methods of competition. The original Great Game concluded not through decisive victory but through

mutual exhaustion and the recognition that neither empire could fully dominate the region without unsustainable costs. Today's rivalry unfolds through infrastructure finance, energy deals, and rare earth partnerships rather than military expeditions, yet the fundamental dynamics persist. The Trump administration's transactional approach represents a significant evolution in American strategy—prioritizing immediate commercial returns over patient institution-building, bilateral deals over multilateral frameworks, and sovereignty rhetoric over democratization. But this shift risks may be the result of strategic myopia, trading long-term influence for short-term wins. Without consistent investment in relationships, norms, and capacity-building, Washington may find itself outmaneuvered by rivals whose strategies are slower but more deliberate. In a region where strategic patience is currency, America's rush for deals may yield few lasting assets.

To be sure, this recalibration offers both opportunities and risks. Central Asian leaders have proven remarkably adept at engaging Washington's new priorities, proposing minerals partnerships and connectivity projects that appeal to "America First" sensibilities while advancing their own interests. The focus on commercial viability could create more sustainable partnerships than aid-dependent relationships. If the U.S. delivers on investment promises—helping develop rare earth processing, enabling new trade routes, providing security cooperation without political conditions—it may establish enduring presence based on mutual benefit rather than patron-client dynamics.

Yet success requires sustained engagement transcending any single administration's tenure. Central Asian states, accustomed to thinking in decades given their complex geopolitical position, need confidence that American commitments will outlast political cycles. The dramatic swings in U.S. approach—from democracy promotion to commercial focus—create uncertainty that Moscow and Beijing exploit by emphasizing their own consistency.

It remains uncertain whether an "America First" doctrine can rise to meet the long game demanded by Central Asia's geopolitical reality. The region's leaders, schooled in the art of balancing empires, are extending a hand—offering pragmatic, mutually beneficial partnerships tailored to Washington's current preferences. But goodwill alone cannot substitute for consistency, resources, or a coherent vision. Central Asia sits at the crossroads of strategic fault lines, where great powers compete not just for resources but for rules of engagement in a multipolar world. If the United States falters—if its engagement remains episodic, transactional, or overly tied to electoral whims—it risks ceding the field to rivals whose strategic patience and state-directed influence machinery are already reshaping the regional order. The moment demands more than opportunistic deals; it calls for a durable American presence that understands that influence, once lost, is rarely regained. Geography still shapes destiny in Eurasia's heartland—and only those powers prepared to play a long game will define it.