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Cultural Convergence in Prism of Sufism Schools of Thought

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TRANSFORMATION OF THE "GREAT CENTRAL ASIA" CONCEPT IN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract: *The publication explores various periods of the policy of the United States towards Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 through gradual conceptualization of its strategy named "Greater Central Asia" by American expert community and ways and means of its implementation by the US administrations ever since. Based on his personal participation in some events in his foreign service career, as well as meetings with American officials and experts, releases and documents of US public agencies and media, the author analyses origins and causes of transformation of the "Greater Central Asia" strategy and its likely way ahead. The research does not intend to embrace the subject as a whole and is focusing mostly on role and place of his home country Uzbekistan in this process.*

Keywords: *International Relations, United States, "Greater Central Asia", GCA, Strategy, US Administration, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Think Tanks.*

Introduction

Central Asia has been a linkage zone among the different corners of Eurasia. With the notable exception of the 20th century - when Central Asia disappeared beneath the ideological and cartographic "monolith" of the Soviet Union - the region has played a critical role in global politics. It has served as the catalyst for empire, or the buffer zone among empires, shaping the distinct worldview of the region's oasis-based civil society.

Today, this region is the fulcrum of Eurasian security because it is the terrain that everyone shares. It is surrounded by nuclear powers, penetrated by their regional initiatives, rich in the world cultural heritage and permeated by transnational threats. If the region were to explode or implode, the effects would reverberate across Asia. Uzbekistan is the center of Central Asia, the fulcrum of Eurasian security.

The United States came to this region later than other Great Powers. At the beginning of the 20th century, that is, back in the days of Tsarist Russia, they opened several oil and trade enterprises in the Fergana Valley, acquired shares in the Kokand-Namangan and Tokmak railways and financial institutions, among which the largest was the Russian-Asian Bank, created in 1910 and associated with Vanderlip and Hoover Capital [1]. Washington took initial diplomatic steps toward the region after the 1917 revolution in Russia and the end of WWI. In its program for the post-war order of the world, the administration of US President Woodrow Wilson tended to, in relation to "Muslim Russia, i.e., Central Asia, tear it away from Moscow and give some power a limited mandate to govern on the basis of a protectorate." [2]

With the emergence of five newly independent states of the former USSR in 1991 in this region, the United States was among the first countries to recognize their independence. Since then, American policy towards Central Asia has undergone a certain evolution: from a geographically remote, unstable, and tedious region, it has turned into a zone of US national interests.

The growing influence of Russia in the region as a result of its doctrine of 'Near Abroad' coupled with the potential rise of Iranian and Chinese influence, and the rise of extremist Muslim ideology in the latter-half of the 1990s convinced many strategists that American interests lie in counter-influencing the rise of other external actors in the region and maintaining its status as an insulator. Former National Security Advisor, Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski during the Cold War promoted the idea of a "Zone of Instability" encompassing Trans-Caucasus and Central Asia in which the prudent chess player would manipulate tribal, ethnic, and religious differences to his advantage [3]. Consequently, the United States embarked on the policy of containment of external actors in the region.

The significance of the Central Asian states for the changing system of international relations, their fate as sovereign states in political, economic, and military-strategic relations - all this attracted the attention of political and expert circles in Europe and the United States. Appeal to the topic of developing a systematic approach to the Central Asian direction of the foreign

policy of the leading Western states revealed the dominant role of the US analytical community in this process as early as the 1990s [4].

To some extent, the development of the geospatial approach of the American political and expert community to the development of new spatial concepts was influenced by an objective factor in the development of American foreign policy thought in general. On the agenda, American political scientists debated the issue of conceptualizing the geospatial projection of the region conventionally named "Greater Central Asia" (GCA) [5].

The debatable nature of the recommendations on the most acceptable foreign policy of the United States in the Central Asian region and the assessments of the prospects for post-Soviet transit, expressed in the expert and analytical materials of American political scholars, did not indicate the final structuring of the GCA geospatial projection in the 1990s. Attempts to include it in various versions of yet another concept - the Greater Middle East (GME), did not touch upon the pertinent problem of verifying the "selfhood" of this region and lengthened the process of forming an idea of it as a real geopolitical and geostrategic core.

Overall, American policy in the region can be conventionally divided into several phases.

A. Phase One (1991 – 1995).

A. The initial phase took place from 1991 through 1996. Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to be recognized by the United States on December 16, 1991, for possessing nuclear weapons, a Soviet legacy, which was of primary concern to the United States. While the context was certainly understandable, the underlying message was that at the time other countries of the region were of less importance.

On December 25, 1991, the United States recognized Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Interestingly enough, it took the United States noticeably longer to recognize Uzbekistan. After all, on February 9, 1992, Uzbekistan was officially recognized by the United States. A few days later, President George H.W. Bush sent his Secretary of State, James Baker, to

Tashkent. The purpose of the visit was to meet President Islam Karimov and determine whether or not Uzbekistan would be willing and able to work toward common goals and values. Likewise, American politicians were somewhat worried about the strengthening of the positions of radical Islamist organizations in the region. At some point of the visit, Baker's delegation realized just how little they knew about Uzbekistan and its neighbors. Officials on the trip acknowledged that "the internal politics that will shape these republics remain a mystery" [6].

In May 1992, the Lisbon Protocol to the START-1 Treaty was signed, as a result of which Kazakhstan became one of the recipients of American funds under the Nunn - Lugar Program, aimed at assisting in the dismantling of launch silos for intercontinental ballistic missiles, as well as the export of Kazakh highly enriched uranium to the United States. That fall, President Bush signed the Freedom Support Act, enabling \$388.13 million dollars to be spent from 1992-2004 in support of the following sectors: democracy (\$98.6); economic and social reform (\$200.52); humanitarian (\$19.9); security/law enforcement (\$51.16); and cross-cutting initiatives (\$17.95). The formal recognition and funding of newly independent states such as those in Central Asia served an overarching purpose: "the non-restoration of the USSR."

The emerging bipartisan strategic interest for Uzbekistan as the centerpiece of Central Asia can be traced in a visit to Tashkent in June 1992, at the height of the US presidential election campaign, of a high-level delegation of the Democratic Party, led by one of the major sponsors of the Democrats, Pamela Harriman, an experienced diplomat Richard Holbrook and Director of the Center for Eurasian Studies at Columbia University Robert Legvold, who met with the leadership of Uzbekistan. The recommendations developed as a result of this visit were handed over to the team of Bill Clinton, who was soon elected President of the United States.

Shortly after, Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Claiborne Pell and Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee Arlen Specter subsequently visited Uzbekistan. Later in 1992, a team of renowned American experts on Central Asia and the Middle East, such as Martha Olcott, Daniel

Pipes, and Graham Fuller, visited the region. In particular, Martha Olcott suggested that “the first-order challenge now facing the states of Central Asia is to emerge from political obscurity and economic isolation” [7].

1992 was an American election year that was about the economy at home. Bill Clinton’s 4200-word acceptance speech for the Democratic Party’s nomination used only 141 words to address foreign affairs [8]. Once president, he continued to focus on domestic affairs, leaving issues regarding Russia and the former Soviet Union to Strobe Talbott, the president’s longtime friend and Russophile. (Talbott served as Ambassador-at-Large and Special Adviser to the Secretary of State on the New Independent States from 1993-1994, before becoming the Deputy Secretary of State from 1994-2001). His general lack of interest in Central Asia would characterize U.S. engagement during the Clinton administration (except for the Department of Defense).

On 3 May 1994, Talbott laid out his vision for the region at the US - Central Asia Business Conference in Washington, D.C. In his speech, Talbott clearly put Russia first as he promoted abstract ideals of free markets and human rights with no contextual sense for how they might be realistically applied. “The theory here is simple: if reform succeeds in Russia, it is more likely to succeed among Russia’s neighbors” [9]. In other words, U.S. policy was to create Russia anew in an American image so Russia could, in turn, project its experience on the Central Asian republics, which, presumably, would be willing to borrow and apply. This approach was criticized by some Republican pundits, yet the most influential objection came from a Democrat and a former National Security Advisor Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski. Writing in 1994, he concluded that “seeing Russia as the primary focus of U.S. policy is wrong-headed, flawed in its assumptions and dangerous in its likely geopolitical consequences” [10].

B. Phase Two (1995 – 2001).

The visit of Secretary of Defense Dr. William Perry to Uzbekistan in 1995 revealed another attitude of the United States toward Central Asia with the Pentagon having a somewhat different approach to the region than that of

the Department of State. The Perry visit marked the beginning of a new period in the bilateral relationship. It signaled that the two countries could talk to each other about common interests, namely, security. Dr. Perry's visit was a watershed for Uzbek foreign policy elites as well. They could now pursue more independent foreign policy enabled by an ongoing US interest that balanced Russia.

Likewise, by 1997 the stance of Strobe Talbott on Central Asia had somewhat changed. He recognized the importance of the region to US security interests and stated that although Washington does not intend to "hoist its flag" here, it will not allow anyone else to do so. Central Asia was declared a neutral territory, and the United States promised to support democratic reforms in the region and help reduce the potential for conflict [11]. In fact, this meant that Washington stopped recognizing Moscow's "special interests" in the region.

In 1997 - 2001 the subject of hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian region came to the fore. It was then that the project to build the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, bypassing Russia and Iran, appeared, and in 1997 Central Asia and the Caspian region were declared a "zone of vital US interests" and included in the area of responsibility of US Central Command. The major American energy companies Chevron, Unocal, Exxon, Mobil, and others began to look for options for partnership with the Central Asian states in the production, development, and sale of hydrocarbons. Pipelines became a U.S. strategic tool rather than an aid to regional business [12].

In October 1997, Senator Sam Brownback announced the Silk Road Strategy Legislative Initiative. The main idea was that the United States should develop a common strategy in relation to Central Asian countries. This strategy should aim at creating a network of energy and transport corridors connecting Western Europe with Central Asia and capping the activity of both China and Russia. The bill passed the House, but was blocked in the Senate. Nevertheless, in future, the main provisions of this document were used by the administrations of Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

C. Phase Three (2001 - 2005).

The turning point in the formation of the US course towards the Central Asian states was the events of September 11, 2001. These events significantly increased the importance of the region in US foreign policy and gave rise to its new phase. One of Washington's main interests in the region has been related to the fight against international terrorism. The main objective of the American troops deployed into Central Asia was to defeat the Taliban regime, and since this region was directly adjacent to Afghanistan, it was considered by the Americans as a stronghold.

In addition to purely operational interests, in a strategic sense, the US military has passed the traditional sphere of influence of Russia and found itself in the “rear” of China. The new military bases gave the Americans the opportunity to observe the territories of China and Russia, confine the growth of influence of these states in the region, and prevent the creation of anti-American alliances by the Russian Federation and PRC. In addition, having established its military-strategic presence in Central Asia, the United States gained control over energy resources, as well as the opportunity to influence the foreign and domestic policies of the countries of the region. During this period, statesmen in Washington were declaring that stability in Central Asia is of paramount importance and of vital national interest.

United States - Uzbekistan relations peaked with the adoption of the Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework Agreement signed on March 12, 2002, by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov, which outlined a broad agenda [13].

The document affirmed a joint commitment to establishing stability and security in Central Asia and set forth practical goals for the two countries as they expand their relationship. As part of the agreement, the two countries agreed to cooperate not only in matters of military security, but also in the security that comes from an open market-based economy and an open, democratic system in five separate categories: political relations; security cooperation; economic relations; humanitarian and legal cooperation.

Meanwhile, after the overthrow of the Taliban regime, the formal need for an American military presence in the region disappeared. However, Washington was in need of consolidating its frontiers, and it gradually began to focus on its long-term stay in Central Asia. The first implicit sign of the alteration of the reasons for the US presence in the region was the appearance in August 2002 of an analytical publication by the prominent American expert Dr. Stephen Blank under the distinctive title: "Restructuring Inner Asia".

The author suggested that "the development of long-range transport projects, including energy pipelines, brings together markets and peoples and provides a major impetus to long-term economic growth. Similarly, a fundamental cause of Central Asia's backwardness was its remoteness from major shipping, trade, and transport lanes. Recent research reconfirms that isolation from major trade routes is a prime cause of economic backwardness. Therefore, a basic precondition of Central Asia's economic growth, political development, and stability is its linkage to such lanes and the completion of major infrastructural projects in energy, rail, air, sea, and land transport that connect it to foreign markets. Such investment and the trade that should then ensue are essential because they compensate for what is perhaps the most profound structural or natural obstacle to Eurasia's economic growth, i.e. its geographic endowment as a region that is entirely or largely landlocked and far from international waterways of any kind and from international trade routes. This aspect of the regional endowment may inherently make it prone to violence and economic backwardness" [14].

In February 2004, an extended report by the staff of the American Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis J. Davies and M. Sweeney "Central Asia in US Strategy and Operational Planning: Where Are We Heading?" was published. The essence of their geospatial projection was to put forward two interrelated theses:" In reconceptualizing our approach to Central Asia, the United States must adhere to two strategic imperatives. First, it must continue to delineate and separate Central Asia from the Caucasus. Forcing a tight linkage between the Caucasus and Central Asia is limiting in that it discourages more creative thought about how each of these areas of the world

relates to more natural neighboring connections - specifically, the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia in the case of Central Asia. For its part, the Caucasus itself is perhaps more aptly seen as a broader element of the Black Sea littoral zone and as the "end" of Europe, rather than as an adjunct of Asia or as a riparian of the Caspian Sea.

Second, and related, the United States must continue to move beyond the view of the Caspian as a focal point for security in Eurasia. The Caspian's hydrocarbon reserves are important to world energy markets, but they are not revolutionary, more to the point, they will not come even close to obviating continued reliance on the Persian Gulf as the primary oil and gas producing region of the world. The Caspian should thus not be considered the linchpin of U.S. strategy towards either the Caucasus or Central Asia. Indeed, to the extent that energy issues enter into debates over policy options, it should be in the context of discussions as to how energy wealth can be used to stabilize the weak states along the Caspian littoral and inhibit the declines in living standards that provide fertile recruiting grounds for radical Islam and other extremist ideologies" [15].

The leaders of the states of the region, on the contrary, increasingly began to raise the question of the timing of the withdrawal of American military bases. This was facilitated by a number of factors, such as a decrease in the threat of the Taliban invasion to Central Asian states; concern about the growing influence of the United States in the region causing *inter alia* influx of Western values; the threat of American interference in internal affairs; fear of the spread of "color revolutions", etc. Hence, President of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiyev said that the situation in Afghanistan had stabilized, and in this regard, it is necessary to discuss the question of the suitability of the US military presence in the republic.

Shortly after the Andijan events, Uzbekistan announced that the Americans had six months to leave the Karshi-Khanabad base, which had been used by the US Air Force since 2001 for air support of military operations in Afghanistan. In addition, Uzbekistan officially announced its withdrawal from the pro-Western GUUAM association, announced its intention to join the Russia-led CSTO, and concluded an alliance agreement

with Moscow. Furthermore, in July 2005, in the final statement of the Fifth Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), held in Astana, the temporary nature of the presence of military contingents of the countries of the anti-terrorist coalition on the territory of its members was emphasized, along with the determination of the SCO to take responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in the region.

The US reacted promptly. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Myers said that military bases are in Central Asia "not merely because of the operation in Afghanistan, but also because this region is important for the United States in many aspects." At the same time, he accused Moscow and Beijing of exerting pressure on the countries of the region within the framework of the SCO so that they demanded that the United States close military bases. The Americans insisted that the issue of deploying military bases was a subject of bilateral relations, and not the prerogative of the SCO.

The resolution of the House of Representatives of the US Congress adopted on July 19, 2005, expressing concern over the SCO statement, which was regarded as "a clear attempt by China and Russia to squeeze the United States out of this region", was also a response to the statement of the Fifth SCO Summit.

Washington's response was not long in coming: in the deliberations of the political and expert community, the idea of developing a new construct matured that would allow the United States to retain its influence in the region, maintain control over the interstate routes of transportation and prevent other countries (primarily Russia and China) from gaining influence on the states of the region. During this period, many publications appeared that emphasized the importance of Central Asia for Washington's foreign policy, and also raised the question of the future presence and role of the United States in the region. They argued that the problem with Washington's approach to Central Asia is that the focus is on bilateral relations, while the entire complex of relations between the Central Asian states, both within the region and with its closest neighbors, falls out of sight, while GCA region as a whole should be in the focus of American policy. This marked the formation

of new approaches, and, consequently, the beginning of a new phase in US policy in the region.

D. Phase Four (2006 - 2008).

The hierarchical conceptualization of the geographical space of Central Asia, which began in the American expert community, reached its pinnacle in the work of Dr. Frederick Starr, Director of the Institute for the Study of Central Asia and the Caucasus at Johns Hopkins University. In a special report, *The Greater Central Asia Partnership for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors* [16], Starr explicitly outlined the US objectives: a market economy, secular and relatively open systems of government that respect civil rights, and maintain positive relations with the US. The emergence of this zone, named "Greater Central Asia", should drive back the forces that contribute to the growth of extremism and strengthen continental security.

Dr. Starr believed that the geographical divisions adopted within some US departments prevented the emergence of a "Greater Central Asia" zone. In particular, in the structure of the Pentagon and the State Department, five states of Central Asia belong to the group of countries in the Eurasia Department, while Afghanistan is in the South Asia Department along with India and Pakistan. In light of his concept, Starr considered the optimization and harmonization of the structure of US government departments to be paramount.

The presentation of the Greater Central Asia project as an already working American strategy in the region was held in April 2006 in Kabul at a conference organized by the above-mentioned institute [17]. With the help of Washington, it was aimed at forming a new large region, linking the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and Afghanistan into a single military-strategic and political entity, and in the future to merge the GCA with the Greater Middle East (GME) [18].

According to Dr. Starr's plan, the United States was supposed to contribute to the transformation of Afghanistan and the region as a whole into a "safe zone of sovereign states" with a market economy, maintaining positive relations with Washington, for which it is necessary: to provide Afghanistan

and its neighbors with the opportunity to defend themselves from radical Islamism and drug traffickers; strengthen the regional economy and state institutions to the point where the region is able to serve as an economic and political bridge between the Middle East and South and East Asia; to strengthen regional trade relations and transport infrastructure. In this regard, the United States was interested in developing democratic political systems in the countries of the region that could serve as a model for other countries with a predominantly Muslim population.

The creation of the GCA was intended to allow Washington not only to wrest the Central Asian states from the "embrace of Russia and China" and finally gain a foothold in Central Asia, but also to turn the region into a sphere of predominant American influence. Along with this, Washington had to, in the words of Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, create the appearance of "geopolitical pluralism" in the region, that is, maintain the illusion of their importance in Central Asia in Moscow and Beijing by giving them the status of guarantors and donors of the modernization process [19].

Furthermore, Dr. Brzezinski suggests that "support for the new post-Soviet states has to be an integral part of a policy designed to induce Russia to exercise unambiguously its European option. Among these states, three are geopolitically especially important: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine" [20].

In the economic part, the GCA project intended to pay special attention to such areas as the earliest possible connection of the countries of the region to the world financial and economic institutions dominated by the West; development of trade and transport communications in the region and the transformation of the GCA into an efficient hub for the international transportation of goods and raw materials; assistance to the agricultural sector in the economies of the countries of the region as a priority over industrial development; using agricultural policy to fight drugs.

The project also paid attention to the field of education. According to Dr. Starr, in the countries of Central Asia, a wide layer of teachers who received a Soviet education remained, which to a large extent influenced the formation of

pro-Russian sentiments in society. For the purpose of changing this paradigm, which is critical to the creation of the global perspective of future generations, the project proposed sizeable funds for retraining teachers and reforming curricula.

In institutional terms, the revised strategy envisaged the formation of a special body for partnership and cooperation within the GCA, where the US itself could coordinate and influence all regional policy on a permanent basis. In October 2005, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, during her visits to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, voiced the idea of creating a Greater Central Asia Partnership for Cooperation and Development as a regional forum for planning, coordinating, and implementing a series of US programs [21]. As part of this concept, the South Asian Division of the State Department was reorganized. It was renamed the Department for South and Central Asian Affairs, and issues relating to the five Central Asian states were transferred to its jurisdiction. This circumstance is often used as evidence of the final transition of American diplomacy to the position of the geospatial concept of "Greater Central Asia".

Summing up the policy of President G.W. Bush towards Central Asia, the GCA project was part of Washington's strategy aimed at transforming Asia into a large-scale geo-economic space that includes the Caspian region, Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. With the advent of this project, American policy in Central Asia became conceptualized. The GCA project appeared at that moment of historical development, which was characterized by the erosion of the Westphalian system based on the primacy of the sovereignty of national states. Under these conditions, American political science and legal thought proposed a concept that provides a legal justification for the ongoing changes.

E. Phase Five (2008 – 2015)

With the victory of the Democratic Party in the next presidential election and the advent of the Obama administration to the White House, US interest in Central Asia has not waned. Overall, the end of the presidency of President

G.W.Bush and the beginning of B.Obama's presidency can be characterized as a transitional period in the development of American strategy in Central Asia.

In 2009, President Obama launched his New Silk Road (NSR) project, which had more articulated goals and recommendations for the conduct of American policy in the countries of Central Asia. The influential US think tanks such as Rand Corporation and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) were involved in the development of this concept.

The main goal of the NSR project was echoing that of preceding administrations - to contain the increased activity in the region of the geopolitical opponents of the United States by political and economic means. A distinctive feature of this project was a special emphasis on the fact that the regional economic integration of Central and South Asia would make it possible to link Central Asia and Afghanistan into a single military-strategic and geopolitical domain, and then unite the GCA with the countries of the Middle East, which was supposed to be controlled by the West. In this sense, the NSR project was an addition and continuation of another geopolitical project of Washington - the "Greater Middle East" and was in fact subordinated to the same strategic goals: diversification of strategic interests and stabilization of space to ensure the prevailing influence of the United States.

Another significant development of the period under review is the launch in 2009 of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) project, aimed at sustaining the movement of equipment and supplies during Operation Enduring Freedom to the forces of the international military contingent in Afghanistan (ISAF). Prior to the NDN's establishment, the only means of resupplying to U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan was the Pakistan ground line of communication. The NDN was designed to provide redundancy to the Pakistan ground line of communication, or PAKGLOC, and to help handle the surge of supplies associated with an increase of 21,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, in 2009, and an additional 30,000 troops, in 2010 [22].

Already by 2011, this route provided about 40% of deliveries to Afghanistan [23]. Apart from the military dimension, the NDN has also

helped to cultivate U.S. foreign policies and strategic relationships with the Central Asian states. The project turned in the tool for reconciliation of all interested parties through their integration into mutually advantageous transport-transit project in Central Asia. The opening and operation of the NDN had short-term value, yet it supported strategic regional and bilateral implications for the future. The Central Asian states, by means of the NDN, formed relationships that, in some instances, brought closer cooperation. These relationships have affected the US Eurasia strategy and overall geopolitical landscape in the region. Although each Central Asian state had its own motives for accepting the NDN, the region had to cooperate to establish and maintain the route.

Washington's decision to end the military operation in Afghanistan and withdraw the military contingent from the country (2014), as well as the emergence of China's foreign economic expansion program "One Belt, One Road" (2013) and the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis (2014) made the White House face the need to adjust approaches to their policy in the region.

F. Phase Six (2015 - 2018)

In September 2015, following a meeting between Secretary of State John Kerry and the foreign ministers of the Central Asian states in New York, the launch of a new format of dialogue between the United States and Central Asia "C5 + 1" was announced, aimed at holding regular meetings and consultations between the countries of the region and the United States to discuss the most important issues on the agenda [24]. A feature of the new format is that for the first time Washington has developed an approach that affects the five Central Asian states only, without linking them to other countries and regions. No other regional association - CSTO, EAEU, SCO - has united all the states of the region in its ranks. Having become the only structure uniting the entire Central Asian five, this platform gave the US an alternative tool to restrain the integration mechanisms of the countries of the region with the PRC and the Russian Federation at the head.

Kerry's subsequent tour to the region was his first visit to Central Asia and the first visit by a US Secretary of State to all of the Central Asian

republics in one trip. On November 1, 2015, following the results of the first meeting in a new format in Samarkand, a Joint Declaration on Partnership and Cooperation was adopted.

According to this document, the following areas of interaction were identified: regional cooperation in the field of trade, transport, communications and energy resources; improving the business climate in the countries of the region; environmental protection and combating climate change; countering cross-border security threats; the stabilization of Afghanistan; combating the spread of nuclear weapons; expansion of cooperation in cultural and educational spheres; protection of human rights, strengthening of civil society and development of democratic institutions [25]. It is noteworthy that the set of human rights issues traditionally raised by the United States and painfully perceived by the ruling elites of the states of the region was the last in a list of areas of cooperation, and Kerry raised this issue with extreme caution during the visit.

Thus, the American side signaled its willingness to develop partnerships without exerting pressure on this controversial issue, which indicates a more pragmatic approach by Washington in building a new strategy and striving to provide itself with more room for maneuver.

Donald Trump, elected as the new President of the United States as the Republican Party nominee in 2016, despite the severe inter-party contradictions and his election promises to focus on domestic problems, by and large continued the line of his predecessors with regard to Central Asia. The Trump administration did not see the region as key to US global security, but viewed it through the prism of containing competitors, in particular, Trump's trade war with China. Washington sought to prevent the economic and logistical monopoly of Beijing or the military-political and energy monopoly of Moscow over the states of the region.

Trump's lackluster attention to human rights issues has amended mutual understanding with the states of the region. With regard to Uzbekistan, this was complemented by the fact that Tashkent's internal demand for reforms, the desire to strengthen its independent policy from other countries, coupled

with the US attitude to combat threats from Afghanistan and counter the expansion of the influence of China and Russia in Central Asia, created fertile ground for the intensification of US-Uzbek relations in the military-political and trade-economic spheres [26].

The visit of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the United States in May 2018 marked a new pinnacle in bilateral relations. Uzbek President held talks with President Donald Trump. The two sides reaffirmed the importance of the US - Uzbekistan bilateral strategic partnership and discussed Uzbekistan's progress in implementing important reforms, enhancing trade and investment, and addressing the regional security situation, including developments in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Uzbek President also met with the Secretary of Defense, congressmen, and senators in the Capitol. As a result, a package of documents on joint programs and activities worth over \$5 billion was signed [27].

G. Phase Seven (2018 - 2021)

Continuing to adhere to the C5 + 1 mechanism, the Trump administration sent US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo to Tashkent, where a regular meeting in this format was held on February 3, 2020 [28]. Here, Secretary Pompeo announced the adoption of a new concept document "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity", designating Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as the most stable and multi-vector players with which it is first necessary to develop cooperation. The document underpin two core principles: 1) Central Asia is a geostrategic region important to United States national security interests, regardless of the level of United States involvement in Afghanistan; 2) the United States emphasizes cooperation in those areas where it has a comparative advantage, particularly to promote private-sector engagement and transparent government policies and regulations that foster adherence to international standards, including environmental safeguards. When progress on reform is uneven, the United States should, in coordination with like-minded partners, offer concrete assistance to overcome obstacles, while communicating the benefits of aligning with international norms and law [29].

Likewise, new American strategy outlined six main areas of US policy in the region: 1) support and strengthen the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian states, individually and within the entire region; 2) reduce terrorist threats; 3) expand and continue support for stability in Afghanistan; 4) encourage connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan; 5) promote the rule of law and respect for human rights; 6) promote American investment in and development of Central Asia.

In Trump's Strategy, the United States announced that it would guarantee the sovereignty of the countries of Central Asia, the formation of strong democratic institutions, and the promotion of prosperity and economic development of the countries of the region. To confirm its humanitarian mission, the United States announced the provision of \$9 billion in direct investment to the Central Asian countries to promote democratic reforms and economic growth. In addition, in order to attract foreign capital, especially in the areas of information technology and high technology industries, the United States expressed its readiness to lobby the interests of the countries of the region in the IMF, EBRD, ADB, and other IFIs, in which the United States is the major shareholder, for allocation of credits, loans and technical assistance to various organizations and government structures in countries of the region.

It is noteworthy that upon the announcement of the Strategy adopted in February 2020, in December of the same year, another significant document was adopted – USAID/Central Asia's 2020 – 2025 Regional Development Cooperation Strategy (RDCS) [30]. The goal of this program is a self-reliant Central Asia that is interconnected, independent, and resistant to malign influences.

The RDCS 2020-2025 is focused on accelerating development for the region and supporting key objectives in the US Strategy for Central Asia. The regional development objectives that support the RDCS goal align with the restructuring of USAID's presence in Central Asia, which reorients work around fostering Central Asia's ability to plan, finance, and implement solutions to its development challenges. To further the U.S. priorities in

Central Asia, this document identified five priority areas for regional support: energy, trade, transboundary water, and environmental management, countering violent extremism, and combating trafficking in persons. In its activities, USAID/Central Asia is guided by lessons learned from the previous strategy, assessments of regional platforms, the intersection of U.S. policy and USAID's value-add to U.S. policy, and how best to align regional activities with bilateral efforts. USAID/Central Asia's role will be to implement programming that addresses issues that are regional in nature, achieve shared goals and objectives, and uniquely complement bilateral efforts.

These two strategies are not only linked to each other but also support the goals of President Trump's main foreign policy document, the US National Security Strategy, which, in particular, referred to ensuring that "the Central Asian states are resistant to the domination of competing powers, do not become safe havens for jihadists and prioritize reforms" and "encouraging the economic integration of the countries of Central and South Asia to promote prosperity and economic ties that will enhance interaction and trade." Both strategies express concern that rising Chinese investment has led to increased leverage and overdependence of the region's countries on Beijing loans, while the US aims to raise environmental and social standards in developing its infrastructure to attract private investment.

The Strategy 2019 - 2025 reaffirms the importance of using the C5+1 platform for US purposes. A significant novelty was the fact that the implementation of American plans was proclaimed exclusively in partnership with like-minded partners, primarily the EU and partner countries such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Turkey. To this end, it is indicative that the relations of the American partners with the Central Asian countries are also framed in the "5 + 1" format, which obviously points to the synchronization of their approaches with the United States, some of which are focused on supporting the regional development of Central Asia without an overt or covert geopolitical intention. This format is also being promoted by India. In this context, it is noteworthy that despite the existence of Russian- and Sinocentric formats in the region, such as the SCO and the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing and Moscow in the 2020-2022 period also held high level

meetings with the Central Asian countries in the "5+1" format, which can be seen as a reflection of the American approach.

Another major development that occurred during President Trump's tenure was the creation of the Uzbekistan Caucus in Congress in August 2018, an idea originally put forward by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev [31]. By definition, it consists of representatives of the House, who in accordance with established practice, meet twice a year to discuss ways to further US - Uzbek cooperation. The first meeting of the members of this Caucus took place in November 2018 in Washington. In his statement Co-chair Trent Kelly (R-MS) announced about the interest in "transforming the Caucus into a reliable and effective platform for the comprehensive expansion of the US-Uzbek strategic partnership". The launch of this group entailed a significant intensification of visits by lawmakers from both countries. In particular, nearly 50 congressmen and staffers have visited Uzbekistan in recent years which points to the continued bipartisan support of Uzbekistan on the Hill.

On June 8, 2022, Washington hosted the second meeting of the Uzbekistan Caucus. The event was attended by a delegation of Uzbekistan headed by First Deputy Chairman of the Senate Sodyq Safoyev, representatives of the White House, the State Department, Pentagon, USAID, staffers of influential congressmen and senators, non-governmental organizations, international institutions, and leading US think tanks. The participants were informed about the essence and content of the large-scale reforms underway in Uzbekistan. In addition, detailed information was provided on the prospects for the development of comprehensive Uzbek-American cooperation, including the interaction between the republic and the US states. Congressman Vicente Gonzalez (D-TX) spoke about his intention to move forward on the issue of withdrawing Uzbekistan from the Jackson-Vanik amendment through the adoption of a special act aimed at ensuring a normal trade regime with Uzbekistan. It was emphasized that this bill will serve to further strengthen US-Uzbek trade, economic and investment cooperation.

Representatives of the expert community who participated in the second meeting of the Uzbekistan Caucus underscored that democratic reforms in Uzbekistan set the tone for positive changes throughout the region. As a result of the event, the Minutes of the meeting signed by the co-chairs Vicente Gonzalez and Trent Kelly were adopted reaffirming the strategic importance of further deepening multifaceted cooperation with Uzbekistan and declaring their commitment to strengthening and expanding bilateral relations.

One of the last Trump administration foreign policy steps occurred on November 20, 2020, when Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Dean Thompson and Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov conducted a session of the US - Uzbekistan Annual Bilateral Consultations in Washington. During the meeting, the parties highlighted the deepening ties between the United States and Uzbekistan, built on the visit of Secretary of State Pompeo to Tashkent in February 2020. Reaffirming the US commitment to this partnership and support for the reforms being implemented in Uzbekistan, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Thompson noted US assistance to Uzbekistan grew to nearly \$100 million in 2019, a ten-fold increase from 2016.

The two sides announced the decision of their governments to elevate the annual US - Uzbekistan bilateral consultations held since 2009 to a Strategic Partnership Dialogue (SPD). Within this Dialogue, the United States and Uzbekistan intend to pursue closer cooperation across political, security, economic, and human dimensions. Thompson and Kamilov look forward to holding the inaugural Dialogue session in Tashkent in 2021.

H. Phase Eight (2021 -)

As the Biden administration took over the White House in 2021, the issue of Central Asia is remaining on the foreign policy agenda. On July 16, 2021, the State Department announced the creation of a new quadrilateral US-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Uzbekistan diplomatic platform focused on improving regional ties. The State Department said in a statement that the parties involved in the platform "consider long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan critical to regional interconnections and agree that peace and

regional interconnections are mutually reinforcing." The parties expressed their intention to cooperate in order to expand trade, build up transit ties, and strengthen business ties [32].

On December 13, 2021, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu led an inaugural meeting of the US - Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Dialogue in Tashkent.

The United States reaffirmed its unwavering support for Uzbekistan's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Mr. Lu welcomed Uzbekistan's ongoing program of reforms and highlighted increasing U.S. assistance to support these reforms. The parties reaffirmed the importance of, and support for, Uzbekistan's accession to the World Trade Organization and exchanged views on opportunities to increase US private sector trade and investment in Uzbekistan. The importance of strengthening security cooperation by deepening ties between defense departments, law enforcement agencies, and border and customs authorities was reiterated.

The delegations expressed their interest in further expanding cooperation in promoting academic and research exchanges and modernizing the Uzbek education system. Other areas at point were respect for freedom of religion, combating human trafficking, promoting women's rights, and supporting independent media and civil society. The US delegation recognized Uzbekistan's continuing progress in combatting forced labor and eradicating torture, reaffirmed its support for further institutionalization of reforms, and outlined the potential of further US programming to capitalize on progress.

Apart from the matters of Uzbek domestic policy, the Uzbek Foreign Minister and Assistant Secretary of State expressed the commitment to continue humanitarian support directly to the Afghan people. The United States expressed appreciation for the services made available to humanitarian actors at the Termez Cargo Center and welcomed Uzbekistan's initiative to create a regional logistics hub in Termez under the auspices of the United Nations to provide urgent relief assistance to the people of Afghanistan. Both

parties spoke in favor of further intensifying regional engagement through the C5+1 and the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) [33].

Furthermore, in May and November 2022, Assistant Secretary of State Lu visited countries in the region. Notably, Lu's second visit to the region came immediately after the Biden administration's October 2022 release of its National Security Strategy, which, in particular, reiterated that “we will continue to support the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Central Asia. We will foster efforts to enhance resilience and democratic development in the five countries in this region. We will continue to work through the C5+1 diplomatic platform to advance climate adaptation, improve regional energy and food security, enhance integration within the region, and build greater connectivity to global markets.” [34]

To this end, the main purpose of Lu's visits was the issue of cooperation in bilateral and regional formats, as well as the proposal of new economic support programs for the Central Asian countries aimed at developing trade routes, attracting international investment to the region and improving the food security of the Central Asian countries. According to Lu, the objectives of the programs include supporting the development of market relations in the countries of the region and helping to export local products to international markets. They also talked about a program to support teaching English to people in the Central Asian countries, which indicates the desire of the United States to more closely integrate the countries of Central Asia into the world and show that the countries of the region have other options than Russia and China. Lu's October visit should be seen as a detail of the statement on new support programs for the Central Asian countries, made by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the C5 + 1 meeting held in New York on September 26, 2022. These events testify the ongoing desire of the United States to increase its influence in Central Asia, including through building up elements of "soft power".

The next meeting of Assistant Secretary Lu and Uzbek Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov was held in Washington on December 13, 2022, within the SPD format [35]. The Assistant Secretary thanked Uzbekistan for its active role in the C5+1 framework and underscored the importance the format holds

in addressing challenges together and creating a more prosperous and secure Central Asia. The two governments also discussed Uzbekistan's announced reform agenda.

The Assistant Secretary reiterated support for the implementation of the ambitious agenda of Uzbek reforms and highlighted how the US government provides practical assistance to advance the reforms, including in the areas of the economy, education, and respect for human rights for all. The delegations emphasized their determination to foster trade and investment partnerships and maintain a favorable environment for business activities in both countries. The delegations discussed media freedom, the protection of journalists, and support for civil society. Additionally, the delegations discussed ongoing efforts regarding Afghanistan, to which the United States thanked Uzbekistan for its partnership in providing humanitarian assistance.

The delegations also discussed collaboration on key security issues such as strengthening border management and defense capabilities, as well as countering drug trafficking and terrorism.

Likewise, the United States welcomed Uzbekistan's willingness to establish new trade routes and diversify import and export markets, strengthen regional connectivity, its endorsement of the Global Methane Pledge and other efforts to combat the climate crisis, as well as its desire to advance its economic reforms including women's economic empowerment. The United States noted its eagerness to support these efforts.

Noting the People-to-People Working Group Meeting held in September, Assistant Secretary Lu thanked Foreign Minister Norov for Uzbekistan's support regarding ongoing English and education programs, which aim to invest in the professional development of the people of Uzbekistan. The Assistant Secretary also welcomed Uzbekistan's interest in reviving a Peace Corps program in Uzbekistan and strengthening its cultural heritage protection efforts. Additionally, the two governments highlighted their willingness to continue their successful partnership in combating the threat of serious diseases and ensuring quality health care.

Both the United States and Uzbekistan underscored the value of the SPD in finding common ground on issues of deep mutual interest. Assistant Secretary Lu and Foreign Minister Norov agreed to reconvene the US - Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Dialogue in 2023.

In Lieu Of Conclusion:

1. The continuity of American interests in Central Asia has been evident for nearly 30 years, regardless of whether a Democratic or Republican administration is in the White House. This testifies to the region's special place in Washington's foreign policy. The priority for the US administration in the region is to strengthen the position of the US as part of efforts to maintain its leading position in the world. The US intends to increase its presence in Central Asia by positioning itself as an attractive economic and investment partner for Central Asian countries. The shift in emphasis from ideological principles to a pragmatic foreign policy in Central Asia is aimed at reorienting the economic and political contacts of the countries of the region from the Russian and Chinese vectors toward cooperation with the United States.

Washington's policy in the region has a number of unconditional advantages: a clear priority of its own national interests; the ability to mobilize allies to solve their problems; adaptation to the diplomatic work of modern social, communication, and digital technologies; clear ideological message. Among the weaknesses of the American course are some fluctuations in the degree of activity caused by inter-party and inter-agency competition in the United States and a simplified understanding of the cultural and political traditions of the countries of the region.

Uncertainty factors such as the future of Afghanistan, the election of a newly elected president in the United States, a generational change in the leadership of the Central Asian states, fluctuations in world energy prices, etc. will adjust the implementation and content of specific American programs in the region. For example, Dr. Starr opined in June 2022 that “Greater Central Asia is reeling from the twin shocks of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The chaotic U.S. withdrawal risks postponing indefinitely Central Asian efforts to escape the region’s key

geography-induced challenge – its landlocked status – as the prospect of building direct links to the world seas through that country now seem bleak. Russia's aggressive behavior in Ukraine suggests it could be poised to assert itself in Central Asia as well, benefiting from Central Asia's inability to connect directly to the world economy. These events, to which China's growing role in the region should be added, suggest that U.S. and EU approach to the region – governed through relatively recent strategy documents – must be rethought [36].”

However, with a high degree of probability, it can be argued that Washington will maintain a common strategic plan for Central Asia. By and large, the basic principles of American policy that Washington had adhered to up until now will remain unchanged for the foreseeable future, and efforts will focus on separating the region from Russia, stopping China's influence, isolating Iran, and developing routes for transferring exports from the region to the world market through Afghanistan and the Caspians.

2. Over the years of independence, the countries of Central Asia have become active participants in the global political process, diversifying their foreign policy ties. In the emerging new reality, the countries of Central Asia are striving to form such a model of relations with the leading centers of power in world politics, in which they position themselves as equal partners.

At the same time, the concept of "Greater Central Asia" introduced into circulation fulfilled its main task - it forged a favorable image of the region in the international arena and made the five states of the region discernible. The region is a geopolitical phenomenon in world politics where challenges and opportunities intertwine. In the context of the transformation of the world order, the countries of the region have a dichotomy in relations with non-regional states, where a subject-object model of cooperation can be traced. On the one hand, the countries of the region independently build their foreign policy based on the principles of equality and mutual benefit, strengthening their international subjectivity. On the other hand, geopolitical competition and the desire of non-regional states to include these countries in their orbit of influence make them objects of modern world politics.

3. In the context of the formation of a new paradigm of the political structure of the world and changes in the structure of global governance, the importance of the region in international politics has increased. The geopolitical projects promoted by the principal centers of power are aimed at strengthening their positions in Central Asia and creating effective mechanisms for ensuring economic and political interests. It is characteristic that if at first the leading countries of the West and East in the struggle for influence in the region promoted mainly transport and energy and military-political projects, now they are increasingly relying on the tools of "soft power", among which one can single out ideological and value mechanisms, cultural diplomacy, educational projects. However, these efforts are aimed not only at creating a loyal political lobby in the states of the region but they are also aimed at working with the population, especially young people, who may be relied upon to form the basis for a new generation of human resource potential for governing national states. Despite the growing role of "hard power" in world politics, the "soft power" policy of non-regional states has become one of the forms of projection of their geopolitical struggle in Central Asia.

In this context, the latest US strategy includes the goal of reducing Russian and Chinese influence in the countries of Central Asia and their greater integration into the world. This, in particular, is marked by the fact that with the aggravation of the Ukrainian crisis in 2022, when the strategic importance of the post-Soviet periphery increased, the United States openly declared the need for economic separation of Central Asia from Russia. It should be expected that, in accordance with this imperative, the US will intensify its progress in the Central Asian countries through the improvement of public administration and the expansion of economic ties with South Asia and the Caspian region. In this regard, the key projects for the United States are the construction and operation of infrastructure facilities linking Afghanistan with Central Asia, in particular, the TAPI gas pipeline; the high-voltage line CASA-1000 and the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, some of which are now suspended.

4. Uzbekistan's internal demand for reforms from Tashkent, along with economic projects promoted by the United States, against the backdrop of declining economic growth in China and Russia's involvement in military operations in Ukraine, objectively create favorable grounds for the intensification of US-Uzbek relations under President Biden's administration as well.

With a relatively small volume of trade, economic and investment relations between the countries of the region and the United States (between 2015 and 2020, the average annual volume of trade amounted to \$ 2.13 billion, of which 78% fell on Kazakhstan and 13.7% on Uzbekistan), in 2021 the volume of trade with the states of the region increased by 85% compared to 2020, primarily due to Kazakhstan - from \$1.4 billion in 2020 to \$2.5 billion in 2021. However, the parties are of low importance to each other in terms of the total volume of their foreign trade: the share of the United States in the foreign trade turnover of the Central Asian states in 2021 was only 2.1%, while for the United States, the countries of the Central Asian region accounted for less than 0.1% of its volume of foreign trade [37]. Despite the obvious marginality of these figures, they nevertheless indicate a significant potential for mutual cooperation.

5. One of the advantages of the C5 + 1 format may be its use by the leadership of the Central Asian countries as an impetus to expand regional dialogue, the convergence of positions on the most critical issues affecting common interests, minimize the negative impact of existing differences in bilateral relations and develop a strategy for solving common problems. Expanding the range of interaction between the states of the region within the framework of C5 + 1 contributes to the stability of the intra-regional dialogue format. A pattern that can be used by the Central Asian countries can be the model of cooperation between the "Visegrad Group" of the states of Central Europe, within the framework of which a number of projects were implemented with the participation of external partners that are beneficial for all countries of the association. The optimization of relations between the states of the region, the development of an adequate level of dialogue, as well

as flexibility in relation to external players can become the basis for strengthening the position of Central Asia in the international arena, increasing the effectiveness of ensuring security and countering common threats to stability.

6. The continuation of hostilities in Ukraine and the harsh sanctions policy of the leading countries of the world are already negatively affecting the foreign policy and economy of Russia. This in turn affects the interests of Central Asian countries. This entails a decline in the integration appeal of Russia and calls into question the future of its projects in the region, both within the framework of bilateral relations and within the framework of regional organizations (CIS, CSTO, EAEU, CU).

The further decrease of Russia's role in Central Asia and the Sinophobia caused by the high debt burden of the countries of the region set favorable conditions for Washington to achieve the main goal indicated in the US Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025, namely, to oust Russia and create an alternative to China's influence, depriving both of its competitors of the opportunity to establish an economic dependence of the Central Asian countries on them. All this, in general, is in the interests of the countries of the region. These countries are gradually reforming their public administration systems, liberalizing their markets, developing logistics and energy projects, and attracting foreign capital. With the United States having the largest economy (24.4% of world GDP), China the second (17.9% of world GDP), and the EU as the third (16,7% of world GDP), Central Asian countries have a large potential for economic, trade, and investment cooperation with those economic giants. As a matter of synergy, the US has the opportunity to use the competitive advantages of its allies Japan (5.4% of world GDP) and the Republic of Korea (1.9% of world GDP), which both have an impeccable image in the Central Asian states, as well as of the growing process of cooperation within the framework of the Organization of Turkic states led by their other ally - Turkey.

7. Speaking of economic cooperation, the activities of the American-Uzbekistan Chamber of Commerce (AUCC) should be noted. The organization was incorporated in Washington, D.C. on August 9, 1993. It is

the oldest trade association in the US and CIS, representing exclusively American companies with business interests in Uzbekistan, among the trade associations active in Eurasia. While not a lobbying organization, the AUCC promotes trade, commerce, and cultural understanding between the United States and Uzbekistan. Its advocacy efforts aim to inform the American public and governing institutions about why better bilateral relations with Uzbekistan matter to US geopolitical and business interests. If the AUCC decides to expand its activities to lobbying, it would need the approval of the Board of Directors. It would also need to follow due process to comply with IRS rules and regulations.

The AUCC's long-term goal is to continue in its role as a business advisory board that provides assistance to its members and the governments of the United States and Uzbekistan regarding issues of mutual concern in the bilateral economic relationship as well as stronger consolidation of bilateral efforts to spur economic growth, create more jobs and achieve greater economic prosperity for the people of our two countries. The AUCC has extensive experience of organizing a series of annual conferences that focus on trade, investments, capacity-building, and sector-specific opportunities. It worked successfully to help bring about such landmark events in US-Uzbekistan relations as the meetings between American and Uzbek Presidents; contributed to the early signing of a Bilateral Trade Agreement; supported cultural exchanges and continues to advocate vigorously for the interests of US business in Uzbekistan and the US, building upon the effective ties between the US and Uzbek governments. The AUCC capacity and experience may be applied wider for the benefits of the whole region.

8. With regard to the future of US – Central Asia cooperation, Dr. Starr suggested that "the impact of the Taliban government on the region and the Russian war on Ukraine affects are closely entwined. The Central Asian states have good reason to worry that Moscow, whatever the outcome in Ukraine, might view them as easy next targets for any grand effort to reconstruct the old Soviet borders. Any new American strategy must seriously consider this possibility, not as a matter of purely regional concern in a remote region, but

as an important element of much larger and more global geopolitical calculations. To do so it must accord a far more prominent place to Central Asia's security in any future strategy. Connectivity to the South must be at the core of such a new approach, and not simply one goal among many. Washington and its allies must recognize that if they allow transport corridors from Central Asia to the South to remain closed and undeveloped, they will effectively consign the region's five sovereign states to the tender mercies of Russia or China." [38]

Furthermore, Dr. Starr suggests that the reluctance of Washington to diplomatically recognize Taliban Government offer no path for the present. Since this stance can be withheld indefinitely, depending on Taliban actions with respect to human rights, religious extremism, and general governance, "Americans and their European partners should act through the Central Asians, notably Uzbekistan, rather than as solo actor, and their involvement can be terminated at any time, depending on Kabul's actions. Lacking such engagement with the Central Asians, Washington and Europe will be dependent on their own intelligence agencies, which have largely proven to be inadequate in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and on accounts from the thirty-four countries that are already interacting with the Taliban." [39]

Dr. Starr holds that "the proposed strategy offers Washington a second chance, both with respect to the five countries of Central Asia and, collaterally, to Afghanistan itself. With no commitment to present or future diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government in Kabul, it will create for the United States a constructive role throughout the region, thereby preventing a power vacuum in a vast territory that both Russia and China view with geopolitical avarice. They will signal to both Moscow and Beijing that the American "pivot to Asia" includes all five of the former Soviet states of Central Asia and does not necessarily exclude Afghanistan. While indicating that neither Russia nor China has a free hand in the region, it will also signify that Washington is open to collaborating with them, so far as such joint actions advance America's core commitment to the sovereignty and self-determination of the regional states of Central Asia. In this case, the interests of the United States and regional states coincide, which should make it

possible for Washington to work *with* the Central Asians rather than *on* them. In this, as in all other dimensions of the proposed strategy, America's role will be to help support sovereignty and self-determination." [40]

9. Obviously, in order to ensure the success of cooperation with the United States, the steadfastness and resilience of Central Asian states in pursuing the agenda are especially critical. To this end, the position of Uzbekistan in the subject matter was reaffirmed as recently as November 24, 2022, by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev during the ceremony of acceptance of credentials from newly appointed United States Ambassador Jonathan Hanick: "In the changing conditions of strategic partnership, Uzbekistan is interested in expanding bilateral cooperation in the areas of trade and investment, agriculture and textiles, energy, education, innovation, and healthcare". Mirziyoyev also called the United States one of the most trusted and reliable global partners of Uzbekistan. In his opinion, multilateral cooperation with the American side in the C5 + 1 format and the continuation of the dialogue on Afghanistan will serve to ensure stability and prosperity throughout Central Asia.

On American side, as recently as February 17, 2023, President Joe Biden send a letter to Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in appreciation of his contribution to deepening bilateral relations and highlighting the economy and energy as priority areas of cooperation with Uzbekistan. President Biden recognized the commitment of the Uzbek President to developing relations with neighboring countries through the process of expanding regional cooperation between the five countries of Central Asia. The American President assured his counterpart of his commitment to the key principles of the UN Charter, such as respect for the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all countries and willingness for long-term bilateral collaboration with Uzbekistan based on these values.

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