

The Perspectives of the U.S. Foreign Policy in Central Asia

Zhanat Zakiyeva 

Al-Farabi University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Email: zakievazhanat52@gmail.com

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Abstract

The article challenges developments and perspectives of the U.S. strategy in Central Asia 2019-2025. The purpose of the study is to identify the theoretical foundations for the recent evolution of U.S. policy and to carry out a policy-focused analysis, based on three major prerequisites of a reconfiguration of U.S. strategy in Central Asia. The article is aimed at analyzing existing formats of cooperation, identifying practical possibilities of further extension of cooperation, and prioritizing the new ways of partnership. Results to be obtained: an evaluation of prerequisites of revising U.S. strategy for Central Asia; U.S. policy's analysis in the region; formulation of the priorities for partnership in the new political realities. The practical significance of this project is the elaboration of the key directions of regional connectivity of Central Asia with the U.S. in the contemporary geopolitical environment.

Keywords

Central Asia, U.S., Connectivity, Strategy, Middle Corridor

1. Introduction

This article is the result of theoretical and empirical work on the study of cooperation of the U.S. and Central Asian republics (CARs). The main objectives of this study: an analysis of the U.S. policy in Central Asia; an assessment of the level of cooperation of the countries of the region with the U.S.; an analysis of problems and perspectives of the partnership; elaboration of the priorities for partnership within the strategy in the new geopolitical realities. The author presents opportunities for extending the U.S. strategic partnership with Central Asia. It also gives an analysis of the cooperation of these states in the contest of the interests of Central Asian states themselves, the challenges in the region which put obstacles to the implementation of the U.S. strategy for Central Asia

2019-2025. Particular attention is paid to the ways of cooperation of Central Asian states with regard to the current political and economic situation. The author explores the implications of the war in Ukraine, the growth of China's presence in the light of the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt initiative, and the crisis in Afghanistan on the U.S. strategy. The United States's engagement in Central Asia is expressed in the existing constraints as well as potential opportunities to activate the U.S. strategy to promote regional connectivity in the region. There is an analysis of a number of promising formats and areas of cooperation that meet the interests of Central Asian states and the U.S. The article highlights the issues of economic interests and presence of the U.S. in the region. Special attention is paid to the consideration of positive factors and consequences of regional political and economic integration for the republics, including transport and transit cooperation.

The theoretical work includes studying foreign and domestic sources and methods for investigating the causes and consequences of regional cooperation. Based on the results of this work, the author developed three key findings grounded on a generalization of the literature review, an analysis of the regional cooperation of Central Asian states within the frames of the U.S. strategy. A review of international and domestic theoretical sources and practical experience showed that the recent developments in Central Asia are traditionally underrepresented in international scientific literature.

Central Asia is a region with a significant diversity of opportunities and challenges. Large reserves of natural resources, transit opportunities in the center of Eurasia are combined with the poorly diversified and high-risk economy, weakness of political institutions, high conflict potential, as well as a serious set of external and internal security challenges. The former include socio-economic problems, the threat of an increase in political instability, while the latter include proximity to the centers of crisis in Ukraine, and Afghanistan with an insufficient degree of border security. High level of economic and political dependence of the states of Central Asia from their close allies such as Russia and China pose additional risks. The identified opportunities make the region attractive to external players looking for additional opportunities to develop their own economies, resources or additional markets and transport corridors.

The study's finding is a policy-focused analysis of the recent evolution of U.S. strategy. The author explained the directions of the political its reconfiguration in Central Asia in the contemporary geopolitical environment, such as following: China's emergence as a global actor, that questioned the position of the United States as the world power and influential actor in Central Asia; Russia's expansionist policy toward neighboring post-Soviet republics and military aggression in Ukraine; the end of the major U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

The author shares the strategy's vision of Central Asia as a geo-strategically important region for the United States' interests. The U.S. policy in Central Asia is carried out as part of the implementation of the goals of the U.S. strategy for

Central Asia 2019-2025 in order to promote the sovereignty and economic prosperity of the countries of the region. The United States seeks to influence Central Asia for various reasons, which include geopolitical competition, security concerns, energy interests, promotion of democracy and human rights, economic opportunities, and counterterrorism efforts (Laruelle, 2018). A stable and secure Central Asia contributes directly to U.S. efforts to fight terrorism, promote regional stability, energy security, and economic prosperity in the region and beyond. The article focuses on the main directions of the U.S.-CARs' cooperation: protection of the sovereignty of the states; facilitation of investments; development of ties between Central Asia and Afghanistan (U.S. Department of State, 2020). These studies provide insights into the multifaceted motivations behind U.S. engagement in Central Asia and underscore the complexity of its foreign policy in the region.

2. Method

Despite the significant number of researches, books, and articles about Central Asia, as well as wide scientific heritage, published works on recent developments in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) are traditionally underrepresented in international scientific literature. A review of international and domestic theoretical sources and practical experience, demonstrates an importance of this matter (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2019). However, the current situation in the region in the new geopolitical realities is not fully represented in the researches. This gap highlights the need for increased scholarly attention to the region to provide a comprehensive understanding of its evolving dynamics and their implications for regional and global affairs.

The goal of this paper is to analyze issues related to new major development trends in Central Asian countries, and to explore the factors that contributed to the perspectives of regional and international cooperation. Special attention is given to exploring theoretical foundations and practical possibilities, defining priorities of further extension of cooperation within the framework of the U.S. strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 amid current geopolitical conditions.

Central Asia holds significant strategic importance due to its geographical location, natural resources, and geopolitical dynamics. Its location at the crossroad between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, gives it strategic significance for trade, transit, and transportation networks. Abundant energy reserves are vital for global energy security and economic development, with major powers competing for access and influence over energy routes and infrastructure projects. Central Asia's transportation networks, including railways, roads, and pipelines, are vital for connecting East Asia with Europe and the Middle East. Central Asia's proximity to Afghanistan adds to its significance, as stability is crucial for regional security, particularly in relation to countering terrorism, extremism, and illicit trafficking. The region's strategic importance is underscored by the

interests and actions of major powers seeking to assert influence and leverage its resources and connectivity for their geopolitical objectives.

The research design of the paper applies mixed methodological approaches such as qualitative and quantitative. Qualitatively, secondary sources such as books, journal articles, published research works and primary sources like national legislation (national strategies and programs), official statements, speeches, international and governmental publications have been utilized. In particular, resources of the Hutchins Digital Library services, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, The Ronald and Eileen Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia, University of Michigan, helped to make a literature review and methodological analysis. Quantitatively, in order to assess current state of cooperation, national strategies have been comparatively studied based on statistical data derived from a large panel dataset from the statistical committees. This article applies several approaches that consist of the following main research methods: 1) academic literature review, reports, and policy documents; 2) expert surveys; 3) outcomes of group discussions and workshops, including experts from domestic, regional, foreign policy circles. Additional research methods included participatory observation in several meetings and a study of significant initiatives and actors from research institutions. Finally, the article discusses the study's broader implications and provides some concluding remarks on general directions of the development of the regional diplomacy agenda.

Since 2011, when the United States has been implementing the New Silk Road Program (NSR) in the region, Starr has advocated this project, and wrote the new concept "Greater Central Asia" set Afghanistan in the understanding of this region and intended to pull Central Asia away from Russia. Starr negatively evaluates plans for the United States to withdraw from Afghanistan, which will narrow the American opportunities in this region and put an obstacle to the American project for the economic integration of Central and South Asia. In order to diminish the threats and increase the potential, the U.S. must adopt a new strategy different from the previous (Starr, 2005; 2017).

Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronsky analyzed the successes and faults of American diplomacy in Central Asian region and developed recommendations for the U.S. administration, which became a basis for the new strategy. A withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan to impact negatively all the other states of Central Asia putting Central Asian economies ever more dependent on Russia and China (Rumer, Sokolsky, & Stronsky, 2016). Laruelle stated that the position of the Central Asian states towards Afghanistan is less well-known in comparison to those of China and Russia. It is important to understand not only the risks, but also the opportunities presented by Central Asia's proximity to Afghanistan. Laruelle's position is right, however, recent developments in Afghanistan still are obstacles rather than opportunities (Laruelle, 2013).

The author of the article considers the most important comments regarding the diplomatic dialogue in the format 5 + 1, that aimed to strengthen the U.S. presence in the region. Graham underlined that the C5 + 1 format is part of U.S.

measures aimed at developing regional cooperation in Central Asia. The U.S. should not leave the region, in spite of the fact the region is not among U.S. national security priorities (Graham, 2018).

From the author's point of view as Russia's attitude to the American policy in Central Asia, which is always negative, C5 + 1 project is aimed at weakening relations between Russia, China, from the one side, and the countries of Central Asia, from the other. To achieve this goal, the United States should invest significant effort. Russia is concerned about the desire of the United States to abuse this format and promote ideas that are relevant to the Greater Central Asia project, to involve the countries of Central Asia in projects without Moscow's participation. In fact, the U.S. is more afraid of Chinese activity in this region, which is much more dangerous than Russia's influence.

Russian experts prefer to underline declining interest of the U.S. in Central Asian region. Alekseenkova concluded that, if the new U.S. administration wants to further develop the C5 + 1 format, two main opportunities will obviously be used for this: building up economic contacts with the countries of the region, as well as developing cooperation in the fight against radicalism and extremism (Alekseenkova, 2017).

Dunn also pointed out that decreasing U.S. influence appears to have been accompanied by an increase in Russian and Chinese influence in the region. The United States needs to reevaluate its policy in Central Asia in order to put its strategic interests into appropriate balance (Dunn, 2009). Chinese expert, Zhou, considers, that the U.S. strategy based on the Indo-Pacific strategy, the policy of turning India into an ally capable of resisting China, is aimed to weaken China in the region which has become the main competitor of the United States (Zhou, 2021). Zimmerman underlined, the U.S. strategy aimed at hindering China's economic and military rise (Zimmerman, 2015). Discussions in Washington about the region usually occur not on its own terms, but in the context of broader issues about Russian and Chinese influence, or security concerns around terrorism and the war in Afghanistan. However, Central Asia is important to the U.S. in its own right. The Biden administration should capitalize on this with a high-level trip to a region that has never been paid for by an American president (Sanchez, 2021).

From the point of Afghanistan's issue, Kayani noted, Central Asian states follows independent foreign policy, and skeptically assesses the U.S. military involvement in the region. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan made the U.S. an unreliable friend, and they are moving closer to China and Russia and prefer to go for regional connectivity with peace in Afghanistan as pivotal to Central Asian development (Kayani, 2022).

The position of the Central Asian experts is based on a support of diplomatic dialogue. Tolipov wrote that Washington's strategy towards Central Asia has always had geopolitical overtones. Even if U.S. officials and experts have been inclined to reject any intention on the part of the U.S. to challenge Russian and Chinese interests in Central Asia, representatives of these two powers have al-

ways been ready to strengthen their influence (Tolipov, 2015). Cooperation 5 + 1 also is a key subject both for domestic and for Western studies. Roy and Jonson stated that United States' interests in Central Asia today remain centered around security, political and economic reform, and energy access, and must focused on C5 + 1 format (Roy & Jonson, 2001).

Thus, diplomatic dialogue should be based on infrastructure, transit, trade and economic cooperation. Growing populations, rising energy demand, rapid urbanization, and increasing productivity necessitate the build-out of 'hard infrastructure': transportation, telecommunications, and energy networks. This also leads to the need to prioritize the 'soft infrastructure: policies, governance to support the construction of these critical projects (Cohen & Grant, 2020).

In general, this literature review shows that the key issues of U.S. policy aimed at enhancing of regional cooperation of the states of Central Asia with the United States, need more detailed studies and definition of the main priorities in the light of the new geopolitical environment, with the focus to regional connectivity, including transit, transport, energy, trade, investment, and business partnership on the basis of the C5 + 1 Diplomatic platform.

3. Results

The article presents three key findings: 1) an evaluation of prerequisites of revising U.S. strategy for Central Asia; 2) U.S. policy's analysis in the region; 3) formulation of the priorities for partnership in the new political realities. The practical significance of this project is the elaboration of the key directions of regional cooperation and connectivity of Central Asian states within the frames of the U.S. strategy in the contemporary geopolitical environment.

Since 24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, the challenge for the Central Asia and the United States was initially three-fold: how to adapt their economies, closely interconnected with Russia, to the current political crisis, how to engage with the Taliban and how to prevent a growing economic dependence from China. The analysis of prerequisites of revising U.S. strategy for Central Asia includes a number of factors which determined the U.S. policy towards Central Asia: energetic policy of the United States in the region; investment activities of the U.S. in CAR, especially, in Kazakhstan; the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan; the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan; China's strong economic presence in the region through the Belt and Road initiative; the war in Ukraine unleashed by Russia.

Analysis of the U.S. strategy in CAR focused on based on the multilateral format of cooperation with the five states of the region as C5 + 1, and on new grounds, as the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, allowed to determine main trends: the war in Ukraine has become the predominant regional and global issue, setting obstacles to transit and transport communications. At present, the outcomes of the war for the region are: Russia's declining influence; Chinese economic engagement remains predominant; managed transition from Russian to Chinese regional hegemony. The crisis in Afg-

hanistan has become far less important on the agenda. Existing forms of regional organization (EAEU, CSTO, SCO) are yet unable to manage new uncertainties.

Regional connectivity on the ascent. The new reality for Kazakhstan and the countries of Central Asia in the context of confrontation between the West and Russia requires increased cooperation with the countries of the South Caucasus in the field of traditional and new transport and logistics projects. There is a noticeable reduction in Russia's presence in the Central Asian transit and transport network. China is consistently filling Russia's positions through the Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by China in 2013, aims to enhance connectivity and cooperation among countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe. The BRI has a significant impact on the general situation in Central Asia, including infrastructure development, economic opportunities, energy cooperation, geopolitical dynamics, cultural exchanges, and challenges faced by the region. While the BRI offers opportunities, it also presents challenges and concerns for Central Asia, including debt sustainability, environmental impacts, social disruption, and potential for corruption.

In this regard, the United States seeks for a new counterbalance of power in the region. Kazakhstan is among the key partners for the configuration of the continental corridors. The countries of the South Caucasus are on the path of the 'Middle Corridor' through the Caspian Sea, bypassing 'frozen Russia'. The creation of a joint transport enterprise by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia to ensure the operation of the central transport route contributes to the implementation of this project. Therefore, the establishment of effective, safe, pragmatic and free transport arteries through the South Caucasus is in the interests of both CAR and the United States.

The perspectives of regional connectivity in Central Asia should be based on traditional and new mechanisms, that allow expanding political contacts with the U.S. on the basis of the new economic cooperation formats, such as Regional Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States, Central Asia Investment Partnership, and C + 5 Diplomatic platform, to revive and develop the Trans-Caspian international transport route (TITR) or Middle Corridor. The integrated framework for cooperation also needs to join the promising formats as United Nations SDG Hub in Kazakhstan; new global infrastructure initiative Build Back Better World (B3W), the EU Global Gateway.

4. Discussion

The evolution of the U.S. Strategy in Central Asia. Discussions at the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia (WCEE), University of Michigan, have clarified, that prerequisites for the recent evolution of U.S. strategy closely connected with the previous policies, beginning from the U.S. cooperation with Central Asia after the Soviet Union's disintegration in 1991. At the first stage, the United States' interests in Central Asia were aimed mainly to prevent the transition of the strategic nuclear forces of the former USSR to the disposal of the newly independent

states, to stop the transformation of divisions outside of Russia into new military bases. With the Freedom Support Act, adopted in 1992, supplemented with the Silk Road Strategy Act in 1999, Washington considered Central Asia as an important region located between Russia and China, as well as unstable Afghanistan.

The huge hydrocarbon reserves of Central Asia, the oil and natural gas deposits, concentrated mainly in the Caspian region, formulated the energetic policy of the U.S. in the region in 1990s. The active penetration of American capital into Kazakhstan began in 1993. At present, the U.S. is the second-largest investor for Kazakhstan. As for January 2023, the U.S. total direct investment inflows to Kazakhstan have exceeded 43.83 billion USD, making up nearly 15% of the total foreign direct investment, according to official central bank statistics. The National Bank of Kazakhstan indicates that U.S. investments in the hydrocarbons sector alone far exceed this official data. Almost 600 American companies are operating in the country (National Bank, 2023).

Since 2001, the U.S. had been deeply involved in the affairs of the region in connection with the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan. In order to combat international terrorism, the United States deployed in Central Asia a whole network of military and logistics facilities, established the Northern Supply Network, air corridors for American aviation and ground supply channels. The U.S. cooperated quite closely with Uzbekistan on Khanabad airbase from 2001 to 2005; with Kyrgyzstan on the international airbase Manas in Bishkek, closed in 2014; and with Tajikistan, regarding the Ayni airbase.

Evolution of U.S. strategy also included the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO from Afghanistan, having commemorated a new period of U.S. policy towards Central Asia. In this stage, the U.S. tried to carry out a new policy for CARs and to demonstrate its obligation to them. However, the U.S. exit from Afghanistan led to diminishing the U.S. presence in the region and forced CARs to closer cooperation with China and Russia, within the format of the Cooperation and Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Euro-Asian Economic Union (EAEU), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

In general, studies of domestic and foreign experts showed, the evolution of the U.S. strategy was predetermined also by the successes and failures of American policy in the region. Successes include: strengthening the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of the countries of the region; ensuring the safety of the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan and the dismantling its nuclear infrastructure; the use of transit facilities in the region to support military operations in Afghanistan. Failures include the following: CARs did not make significant progress towards democratic, open societies based on market economies, the rule of law and respect for human rights. The U.S. project to link Central Asia with Afghanistan and Pakistan through the New Silk Road has not been implemented. Promotion of closer economic integration and security cooperation in the region has been modest. These factors predetermined revising of the strategy.

The U.S. policy in Central Asian region, prerequisites of the revision of the U.S. strategy, and the priorities for partnership have been discussed with the American ambassadors, worked in Central Asia and CIS states, and the academic staff of the International Policy Center & Weiser Diplomacy Center, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, and the American Academy of Diplomacy at Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, in October, 2022. The discussion focused on the challenges and perspectives of the U.S. strategy in Central Asia 2019-2025, as well as implications of the war in Ukraine for NATO, Europe, Russia, Central Asia and China. The discussion showed that, at present, the new strategy is viewed from the context of the changed political situation related to the Russian military aggression in Ukraine and the policy of China towards CAR. In the current conditions of increased rivalry between major powers, countries of Central Asia region expect the activation of U.S. involvement into this region.

Discussions at the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia (WCEE), University of Michigan, during the Distinguished Lecture, “Russia’s War on Ukraine and Its Global Impact”, by Lech Wałęsa, made an impact into definition of the additional political and economic risks, caused by the war in Ukraine, that not only increased their number, but also seriously and permanently reformatted the geopolitical and geoeconomic architecture throughout the post-Soviet space, including Central Asia. A protracted war in Ukraine and the subsequent long isolation of Russia will lead to a financial, economic and military-political weakening of the Russian Federation, which can create a power vacuum that other countries will try to fill.

Russian aggression against Ukraine and ensuing sanctions against Russia affect Russia’s reputation as a military and economic partner, including within the CSTO and the EAEU. And all its attempts to use the EAEU as a tool for parallel imports in the face of severe sanctions only pointed to the desperate attempts of the Russian economy not to drown.

Sanctions have affected trade routes passing Russia, increased demand for alternative shipping routes such as via the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR).

As for China, Russia is no longer an equal player, despite all the official statements of friendship and partnership. China is already demonstrating the strongest economic presence in the region through the Belt and Road initiative and has the potential to build comprehensive influence across economic, cultural, political, and security spheres.

The main pillars of the Euro-Asian architecture have been discussed at a Symposium on “Russia and the Future of European Security,” along with Ambassador John Beyrle and former Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, Dr. Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, held on September, 2022, in the WCEE. Thus, reconfiguration of U.S. policy toward cooperation with its close allies, such as EU, India, Pakistan and Turkey, at the same time keeping cautious approach to China and isolation of Russia, acquires special significance for evolution American strategy

in Central Asia. Preservation of the geopolitical balance of power in the region in relation to the U.S., China and Russia is the basis of the foreign policy of Central Asian states. At the same time, one should take into account the imperial ambitions and expansionist statements of Russia with regard to the northern territories of Kazakhstan, as well as Chinese position to resolutely oppose interference into Kazakhstan by external forces, and any forces undermining Kazakhstan's stability and security (FMPRC, 2022).

It should be emphasized that the Afghan problem played an important role in changing U.S. policy in the region. Not coincidentally, the three priorities of the strategy are related to Afghanistan, strengthening ties between CARs and Afghanistan; extending support for stability; reducing terrorist threats. All the republics of Central Asia prefer to go for regional connectivity under peace in Afghanistan as pivotal to Central Asian development. Indeed, it is necessary to note the willingness of the other Central Asian republics to cooperate with the Taliban government, which is a decisive factor.

U.S. policy's analysis in the region: C5 + 1 dialogue. During the last years the United States' policy in Central Asian region mainly based on the multilateral format of cooperation with the five states of the region as C5 + 1, launched in 2015. Existing formats and the new environment in the context of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, growing China's presence in Central Asia, including the new high-level C + 5 format, makes prioritization of the U.S. strategy in the light of the previous flaws more urgent (Whitehouse, 2015).

The slow progress in the realization of the U.S. previous initiatives and programs is explained by the lack of any concrete projects in the sphere of regional cooperation, due to Washington was not ready to invest significantly in solving the problems of the region, leaving them to the most involved neighbors—Russia and China.

As the review of the foreign and domestic expert's discussions revealed, the United States to successfully engage Central Asia, needs to take a balanced approach. A long-term policy to the region will help the United States to achieve this balance. Short-sighted and ideological approaches to its Central Asian foreign policy will inevitably lead to its estrangement, allowing Russia and China to fill the gap. A dominant Russia and China in Central Asia would not be useful to U.S. interests in the region, nor to the interests of the Central Asian countries themselves.

In the current conditions, transport and logistics problems associated with Western sanctions against Russia, incidents in the work of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), initiated by Russia, closeness of transport routes to the West through Russia and Belarus, the balanced approach should be oriented towards intensifying regional connectivity and diversifying foreign trade, energy and transport corridors.

Further expansion of the C5 + 1 format seems to be primarily intended to show to five states that not only Russia or China can be an assistant in solving their regional problems, but also the United States. Indeed, a number of new

trends in the region, giving a new impetus to regional cooperation, reforms in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, allow to make some assumptions about a possible direction for the development of the U.S. strategy. The new format of regional cooperation, such as the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, held in 2018-2022, opens new perspectives for such cooperation (State.Gov., 2023).

The U.S., keeping in view the changed scenario, had reevaluated its commitment and foreign policy towards Central Asian states. Taking into account the major challenges such as lack of access to the sea, resource dependence and low level of finance, the U.S. deepens its assistance to the CARs in the field of economic and security-related infrastructure development. The United States has to pursue a long-term strategy of engagement in Central Asia to stay relevant globally and regionally, to focus on region's growth points, development of transit transport potential, creation of the Eurasian transport network, attraction of private investments, diversification of exports. Washington should boost economic and political involvement in the region, upgrade its New Silk Road initiative (NSR), advance cooperation with key partners, diminish China's global ascendancy and Russian military aggression by leveraging their positions in Central Asia. U.S. should consider joining multilateral institutions, or seek the creation of new ones to shape CARs regional activities.

Priorities for partnership in the new political realities: regional connectivity. The issue of strengthening regional connectivity within the U.S. strategy in current conditions acquires a pivotal importance. The World Bank study "Transport Connectivity in Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities" (2021) showed the insufficient effectiveness of infrastructure projects carried out in the region. The economies of the five countries in the region remain the least connected economies in the world. The region continues to stay behind other middle-income countries in terms of both infrastructure investment and efforts to maintain the operational infrastructure. Central Asia ranks low in terms of foreign trade. Thus, the connectivity indicator or transport access ratio in the region is less than 60% to global GDP, the lowest indicator. Indeed, there is a lack of necessary transport infrastructure and the high cost of transport services. The countries of Central Asia need an integrated approach to improve transport connectivity within and between the countries of the region, to realize the huge potential of domestic and foreign trade (World Bank, 2022).

The discussion with the Ambassador Susan Elliott, Ambassador Robert Ceku-ta, Ambassador Richard Boucher, and Ambassador Ronald Neumann, in the WCEE, helped to outline the priorities for the U.S.—CAR's partnership, particularly, regional connectivity.

The Southern Energy Corridor, a pipeline system for the export of Caspian oil and gas to Europe, bypassing Russia through the Caucasus and Turkey, elaborated by the U.S. National Security Council in 1990's, was supported by the EU and Turkey. At present, the central Caucasian segment and the western Turkish section of the corridor were partially implemented. However, the major part of

the Trans-Caspian section had been frozen for many years, as a result of Moscow's blocking of any attempts to implement the New Silk Road (NSR) and energy and transport routes in other directions, bypassing Russia.

In the current conditions, transport and logistics problems associated with Western sanctions against Russia are forcing Kazakhstan and the countries of the region to look for other transit routes, including Trans-Caspian. Kazakhstan intends to expand alternative transport capacity, after a series of incidents in the work of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), of which Russia is the largest stakeholder. These incidents showed that Russia is using the CPC as an instrument of pressure on the EU, which announced an oil embargo, and introduced a price cap for Russian oil, which provoked a sharp fluctuation in prices. Russia demonstrates that, despite EU sanctions, it controls Kazakhstan's oil exports. The position of Kazakhstan is extremely vulnerable. Kazakhstan exports 80% of its oil through CPC. For the past decades, the republic has followed Russia's interests in the CSTO and the EAEU and has not been able to ensure its economic security through alternative supply channels.

For Central Asian countries, the issue of diversifying foreign trade and transport corridors had received more impetus than ever before. These countries intend to make more active efforts to develop transport and overall connectivity projects with the South Caucasus and South Asia. These efforts will challenge Russian geopolitical interests in an area that Moscow considers its sphere of exclusive dominance and control.

The new agreements on the implementation of the Trans-Caspian transport route, concluded by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia in 2022, can become an important part for the New Silk Road. The NSR aiming to strengthen regional integration of CAR requires further steps as overcoming barriers to regional cooperation, including the lack of financial support from the United States, its allies, and multilateral development banks, the lack of private investors, as well as political, legal, organizational problems and lack of security guarantees for transit and business in Afghanistan. The republics believe that New Silk Road initiative must be revived with regard to the current political and economic trends. The countries of the region initiated favorable changes towards regional integration over the past five years.

Since 2018, CAR actively use a mechanism for regional consultations of the heads of the five states of Central Asia to accelerate transport connectivity. There are projects under-way such as transport project to connect the region with Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, Termez-Mazari-Sharif-Kabul-Peshavar railroad, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) and CASA-1000. These changes are largely related to the implementation of political and economic reforms in Uzbekistan, that has been pursuing a more open foreign policy since 2018. Political and economic reforms launched in Kazakhstan in the beginning 2022 also open new opportunities for regional partnership. The outcomes of the last high-level C5 + 1 meeting (2021) confirmed the importance of continuing work on attracting U.S. investment and technology to Central Asia, ensuring

peace and stability in Afghanistan and solving problems of border security. In May 2022, the Interagency delegation of representatives of the U.S. diplomatic, defense and financial sectors and the officials from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have achieved successful results. The parties stressed the importance of cooperation within the C5 + 1 format to achieve concrete results in the areas of infrastructure, energy, transport, environmental protection and combating climate change. Also, the U.S. Congress expressed its strong support for the reforms of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, noting that their implementation will contribute to the political modernization of the countries ([The Diplomat, 2016](#); [KZ.USEmbassy.gov., 2022](#)).

Nowadays, Kazakhstan has the most developed and attractive multi-vector transport system in Central Asia and is ready to connect its transit routes with TEN-T (Trans-European Transport Network) to integrate land trade between East and West. Kazakhstan has stepped up work to create transit hubs that could become part of the regional connectivity of Central Asia. By 2025, Kazakhstan will invest up to 20 billion USD to create new land corridors across the country. The priority direction for the development of Kazakh oil exports should be the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR, Middle Corridor)—a transport system passing through China, Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Europe ([The Diplomat, 2018](#)).

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route can be linked to the U.S. global infrastructure plan for developing countries. The Build Back Better World (B3W), a global infrastructure development initiative for developing countries worth more than 40 trillion USD, launched in 2021, by the United States and other G7 leaders, offers new perspectives for Central Asia ([The Atlantic Council, 2019](#)).

The First Presidential Summit with participation of the US President Joe Biden and the presidents of five Central Asian states in New York, (September 19, 2023), as well as a Ministerial meeting held at the initiative of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Samarkand, (September 25, 2023), contributed to the development of concrete actions to achieve regional connectivity in the C5 + 1 format.

These efforts are part of U.S. support to attract investment and develop the Trans-Caspian Trade Route through the Global Infrastructure and Investment Partnership, developing a more favorable business environment for trade and investment, and creating a private sector business platform that will complement the C5 + 1 diplomatic platform. The regional connectivity of Central Asian states was enhanced at the institutional level with the establishment of a number of important institutions. The Central Asia Investment Partnership organized in 2021 by the governments of the United States, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, is promising to become a key factor in the implementation of the U.S. strategy under support of the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) ([Whitehouse, 2019](#)). Investment partnership is also developing through the work of the joint American Chamber of Commerce with all five states, and Afghanis-

tan. Besides, the U.S. government plans to establish the common U.S.-Central Asian Council (USAID, 2020).

Another platform for economic cooperation with the United States is the high-level commission on economic cooperation between Kazakhstan and the United States, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation—OPIC, which has been operating in Kazakhstan since 1994 (OPIC, 2021).

The above-mentioned initiatives promote to develop closer ties between CARs and Afghanistan across energy, economic, cultural, trade, and security lines that directly contribute to regional stability, the peaceful post-conflict political and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. This partnership can contribute to the implementation of strategic projects such as CASA-1000 project, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, the Lazurite Corridor to improve trade between Central Asia and Afghanistan (The American Interest, 2015).

5. Conclusion

The study's three key findings, an evaluation of prerequisites of revising U.S. strategy for Central Asia, the U.S. policy's analysis in the region, and formulation of the priorities for partnership in the new political realities, will contribute to the elaboration of the key directions of regional connectivity of Central Asian states in the contemporary geopolitical environment. The presented implications of the war in Ukraine, the growth of China's presence, and the crisis in Afghanistan, must remove the existing constraints as well as activate the U.S. strategy to promote regional cooperation in the region.

The U.S.'s main critical priorities in Central Asia are geopolitics, security, connectivity, which meet the CAR's national priorities. However, if the U.S. aims to enhance its status in the region, it needs to step up its efforts and balance and prioritize its strategy's directions in addressing the regional connectivity. Under these conditions, the U.S. called for concentrating on major six objectives and specific projects in which concrete results can be achieved. The United States intends to develop a dialogue with the help of traditional and new mechanisms that allow expanding political contacts.

The U.S. needs to invest more resources in making the TITR or Middle Corridor a viable route. That means providing financial investment, working with partners who can be averse to cooperation, and acknowledging that Central Asian regional ambitions are greater than merely serving as a consumer for Chinese goods. The U.S. needs to persuade private companies to invest and go beyond feasibility studies, regulatory powers, and the attractiveness of the Central Asian market.

Much depends on how long the war in Ukraine lasts, how it ends, and what the consequences of the conflict will be for relations between Russia, China and the West. An infrastructure policy has to be for the long term rather than driven by current politics, while the Middle Corridor will become a cost-efficient alternative to other routes. In the future, diversification of transit routes will help the

region to overcome its isolation, improve its bargaining power, and strengthen its ties with the U.S. Finally, the implementation of the U.S. strategy must prevent the emergence of “fragile” states in the region, which usually serve as a fertile ground for the formation of “terrorist enclaves”.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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