

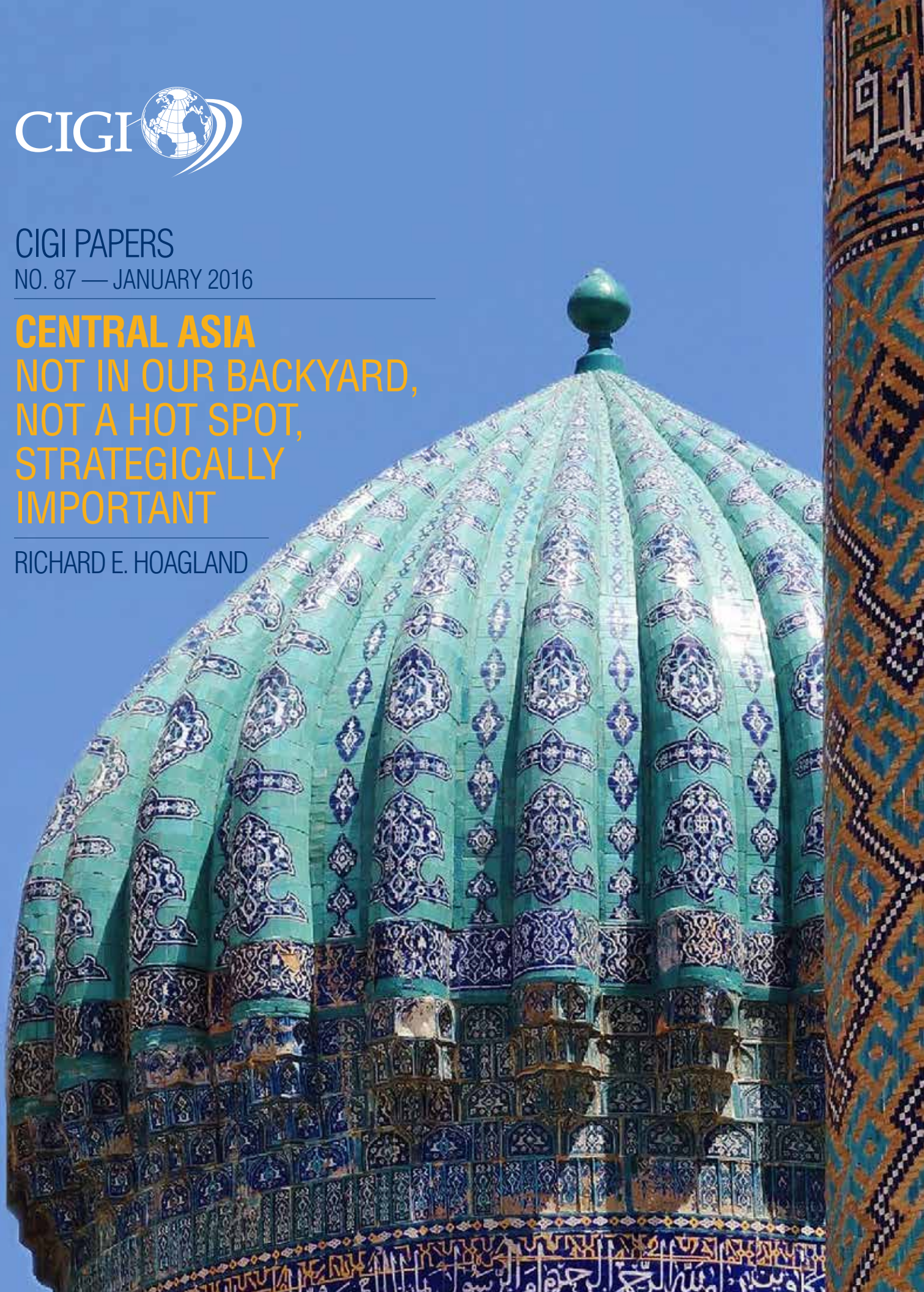


CIGI PAPERS

NO. 87 — JANUARY 2016

**CENTRAL ASIA**  
**NOT IN OUR BACKYARD,**  
**NOT A HOT SPOT,**  
**STRATEGICALLY**  
**IMPORTANT**

RICHARD E. HOAGLAND





**CENTRAL ASIA:  
NOT IN OUR BACKYARD, NOT A HOT SPOT, STRATEGICALLY IMPORTANT**

**Richard E. Hoagland**



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## ABOUT THE CENTRAL ASIA SECURITY INNOVATION PROJECT

Project Leader: **Margaret Skok**, a CIGI Senior Fellow and former Canadian ambassador to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Launched in spring 2015, this project explores regional security and governance in Central Asia, focusing on six major challenges: anti-terrorism, border management, human and narco-trafficking, energy and nuclear security, as well as transboundary water management. Employing a think-tank approach, a series of conferences, workshops, panels and supporting research papers will be used to explore ways to strengthen Central Asia's regional institutional and governance architecture in the security sphere. The project will be undertaken in close consultation with bilateral and multilateral partners, as well as with Canada's own security and defence experts and stakeholders — drawing on their legislative and policy expertise. This is a knowledge-sharing initiative that aims to examine how best to respond to the escalating security challenges in this region.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ambassador **Richard E. Hoagland** was US principal deputy assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian Affairs from October 2013 to August 2015. Before returning to Washington, DC, in September 2013, Richard spent a decade in South and Central Asia. He was US deputy ambassador to Pakistan (2011–2013), US ambassador to Kazakhstan (2008–2011) and US ambassador to Tajikistan (2003–2006). He also served as US charge d'affaires to Turkmenistan (2007–2008). Prior to his diplomatic assignments in Central Asia, he was director of the Office of Caucasus and Central Asian Affairs in the Bureau of Europe and Eurasian Affairs, Department of State (2001–2003). In that position, he wrote and negotiated four of the key bilateral documents defining the Central Asian states' enhanced relationship with the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. His earlier foreign assignments included Russia where he was press spokesman for the US embassy (1995–1998). During the course of his career, he has received multiple presidential performance awards, as well as State Department Meritorious and Superior Honor Awards and its Distinguished Honor Award.

Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Richard completed his graduate degrees at the University of Virginia and earned a certificate in French from the University of Grenoble, France. Before joining the Foreign Service in 1985, he taught English as a foreign language in the then Zaire (1974–1976) and African literature at the University of Virginia's Carter G. Woodson Institute for African-American and African Studies.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Is Central Asia a strategically important region for Western policy makers, and if so, why? Consider its immediate neighbours — Afghanistan, Russia, China and Iran. Afghanistan remains enormously fragile and conflict-affected but has no territorial claims against its northern neighbours. Nevertheless, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), having vowed to resurrect the ancient Kingdom of Khorasan in Afghanistan and beyond, deeply worries the Central Asian governments. Russia has sometimes declared Central Asia to be its exclusive sphere of influence. But each Central Asian state assiduously guards its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, ever more so since Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. China's presence in Central Asia generally has been politically benign because it has sought to gain access to the area's wealth of natural resources to fuel its own economic growth. However, Beijing's New Silk Road Economic Belt for Central Asia could have important economic, and perhaps geopolitical, implications for Central Asia. Iran, to date, has been constrained by the international sanctions that have crippled its economy. However, that situation inevitably will change as some of the sanctions are lifted and Iran's influence grows in the region.

Thus Central Asia is indeed strategically important to the West because of its neighbours, but not immediately, because it is not a "hot spot" on the world stage. Western governments are ambivalent about the region because of its poor record on human rights and governance. It presents the classic choice: ideology or *realpolitik*. But Western policy in Central Asia does not have to be one or the other — it can be *both*. Western nations can engage strongly to support humanist values in Central Asia through quiet and appropriate behind-the-scenes work with government officials who understand and have similar concerns — and they most certainly *do* exist and *can* produce results. Western governments need to engage in Central Asia precisely to ensure that it does *not* become a hot spot and instead becomes, over time, ever more firmly embedded in the community of responsible nations. Strategic engagement by the West is essential, and it will pay off.

## WHAT IS CENTRAL ASIA?

In any discussion about "Central Asia," the first problematic task is to define which countries this geopolitical moniker includes. For the purposes of this paper, Central Asia encompasses the five former Soviet republics of (in alphabetical order) Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (or the Kyrgyz Republic), Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Immediately, Kazakhstan would object, because it considers itself part of Eurasia, not Central Asia, and there are historic and contemporary reasons to say it

is correct. Others will define Central Asia as the secular, Muslim-majority former Soviet republics — but then why not include Azerbaijan, which is just a stone's throw across the Caspian Sea, although geographically it is part of the southern Caucasus? Further, what about Afghanistan, which shares ethnic groups (Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen, at a minimum) and two millennia of history with "the five" — except that historically, Afghanistan was never entirely Russian Empire fish nor British colonial fowl nor any other nation's long-term fiefdom. In fact, Afghanistan was at the heart of the nineteenth-century's so-called "Great Game" between the Russian and British Empires; despite waves of invasion, it has always remained radically independent. Some anthropologists would argue that the Central Asian ethos and culture actually start on the western bank of the Indus River — and anyone who has travelled from the Indus to Russia's southern border will likely agree.

Apart from the fact that a northwestern bit of Kazakhstan, across the Ural River, is technically on the European land mass, Kazakhstan, as it insists, *is* different from the other four — not because of geography but primarily because of decisions that President Nursultan Nazarbayev and his government made in the immediate months after independence. Two are especially important. First, soon after achieving independence, the government of Kazakhstan committed to macroeconomic reform away from the Soviet command-economy model (as did Kyrgyzstan, although it fell behind), so that today Kazakhstan's banking and other financial systems are on a par with Central Europe's. As a result, Kazakhstan is much more deeply embedded in the global economy than are the other four, which limp along in the tatters of an outmoded command economy. Second — and this is probably more important — President Nazarbayev decided that if Kazakhstan were to be an independent country that could play on the world stage, it would need a new generation of leaders who think differently. In 1993, he created the Bolashak Program (*bolashak* means "future" in Kazakh) that sent young Kazakhstani citizens abroad for full university educations and, for some, graduate degrees; he established this far-sighted policy before Kazakhstan began to realize the wealth from its Caspian oil deposits. Some 20 years later, Kazakhstan has a cohort of 10,000 alumni of the Bolashak Program, globalized young people (often speaking English and other world languages) who are rising in both the public and private sectors. At the other end of the spectrum, the first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, severely crippled the legacy Soviet educational system of his country by lopping off years of secondary and post-secondary education and by gutting curricula until it was little more than the study and memorization of his own magnum opus, the dubious *Rukhnama*. This damage will take generations to reverse.

The US State Department, since the early 2000s, has situated Central Asia (all five countries) in a geographic

bureau that also includes South Asia: the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. Although such a map, when pinned to the wall, looks reasonable, the two sub-regions are uneasy bedfellows, in part because of their radically different colonial histories. Most of South Asia was part of the British Empire for close to 300 years, whereas Central Asia experienced 70 years of Soviet domination and, before that — depending on the specific geographic parcel — several hundred years of the Russian Imperial experience, with a residual trace of medieval khanates and nomadic tribalism under the surface.

Why does colonial heritage matter? The countries of South Asia have inherited from the West, through the British Raj, the organization of their societies and structures and traditions of their governments — generally democratic and pluralistic. These Western traditions flow from the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment — the intellectual foundations of the modern West. But Central Asia has none of that. It did indeed have a brilliant medieval Islamic Renaissance centred in modern-day Uzbekistan, but that had petered out by the eighteenth century, and the West embedded the remnants and traditions of that Islamic Renaissance within its own Renaissance. The Soviet Communist and Russian Empires are the colonial heritage of Central Asia and follow a nearly straight line back to Byzantium (the modern adjective, “byzantine,” exists for good reason). As well, no one should underestimate the lingering influence of the Soviet system that structured governance in an unholy alliance of party and intelligence organs, and that tolerated and co-opted organized-crime structures for enforcement of authoritarian power and enrichment of the party elite. That unfortunate structure of governance is still very much alive, to varying degrees, in Central Asia to this day. And so, is it any wonder that Western capitals looking at Central Asia would like to keep some degree of careful distance?

And what do general populations in the West really know about Central Asia? Precious little. Even before social media anointed snarkiness as an acceptable (albeit intellectually shallow) means of analytical communication, Western journalists, when they occasionally wrote about Central Asia in popular publications, postured about the “Ickystans” or “Trashcanistan,” or sometimes worse.<sup>1</sup> And therein lies a fundamental problem: Central Asia has an “image issue” in the West; and that image problem defines how the West thinks about, and thus makes, strategic policy about Central Asia. The dirty little secret is that the West *can* come down hard on human rights and governance

issues because it doesn’t “need” Central Asia — not right now.

Central Asia (on its own, Kazakhstan much less so) has an image problem in the West mostly because its authoritarian governments regularly, and sometimes egregiously, violate their citizens’ human rights, including freedom of assembly and speech, freedom of the mass media, and religious freedom. Every government is a signatory to the United Nations Charter and to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The final paragraph of the Preamble to that Declaration states:

**Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS** as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both *among the peoples of Member States themselves* [emphasis added] and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.<sup>2</sup>

In reality, as international watchdog organizations like Amnesty International, Freedom House and others regularly note, the governments of the Central Asian states do not always take their member-state UN commitments seriously. Further, no Central Asian state has ever conducted an election deemed entirely free and fair by Western observers such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the successor to the Helsinki Act of 1975, of which the Central Asian states are members. Not only has there never been an entirely free and fair election in Central Asia, but some of the leaders have found ways to creatively amend and even violate their own constitutions,<sup>3</sup> since their countries’ independence nearly a quarter of a century ago. True freedom of the mass media is a far-off dream for journalists in Central Asia who are subject to censorship (and who practise self-censorship) and where governments regularly block “offensive” Internet websites. And political opposition? Those few who dare to organize into movements, blocs or parties are too often hounded into exile or rounded up and thrown into prison. That’s the black-and-white view. In reality the great majority of the citizens of Central Asia go about their daily business and live quite normal lives, although the

1 For example, the United States’ National Public Radio program *All Things Considered* broadcasted an April Fool’s Day 1992 piece about an obscure landlocked Central Asian republic called “Trazhkanistan.” In April 2002, academic Stephen Kotkin brought the term into broader use through his *New Republic* article, “Trashcanistan: A Tour Through the Wreckage of the Soviet Empire” (<http://stephenkotkin.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Trashcanistan.pdf>).

2 See [www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/](http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/).

3 As an illustration, several presidents (for example, Nazarbayev and Uzbekistan’s Islam Karimov) have violated the two-term limit in their constitutions, or have amended it for themselves but not for future presidents.



endemic corruption of daily life exasperates them. At the same time, the ideological Western international spotlights and microscopes illuminate and magnify the problems; thus, the image of the “Ickystans.” The leaders of Central Asia will argue that they are maintaining stability; democracy ideologues will strenuously disagree.

## WHO ARE CENTRAL ASIA’S NEIGHBOURS?

Consider again Central Asia’s geographically contiguous neighbours — Afghanistan, Russia, China and Iran.

### Afghanistan

Afghanistan has no stated or covert territorial claims against its northern neighbours but, after three decades of war, the possibility remains that the current government could fail and the Taliban emerge as leaders. ISIS, having vowed to resurrect the ancient kingdom of Khorasan in Afghanistan and beyond, is a significant concern to the Central Asian governments, and rightfully so. According to a United Nations Security Council report issued on August 25, 2015, ISIS had a presence in 25 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces, including some of those provinces that border Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> The fear of ISIS, and of other radical organizations such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union, is partly responsible for the continued slap-down of *any* opposition groups or individuals in much of Central Asia. This reaction feeds the Western view of Central Asia, whether justified or not, as a land of harsh authoritarianism and egregious violations of human rights.

Further, the Central Asian states, especially those bordering on Afghanistan, worry about the Afghan Taliban, although the Taliban have never stated a policy of expansion into Central Asia. If the Taliban were to gain control in Afghanistan again, as they eventually did after the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from that unlucky country, might they not be next? The September 2015 Taliban takeover (albeit temporary) of the major northern city of Kunduz, not that far from the Afghan-Tajik border, only exacerbated that anxiety. Several states, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular, have indeed maintained discreet relations and communication with the Afghan Taliban; however, in day-to-day reality, the Taliban threat is no more than a Central Asian bad dream.

### Russia

Russia has long declared Central Asia to be its “near abroad” and its “special sphere of influence,” sometimes going so far as to proclaim Central Asia its “exclusive sphere of influence.” Because of history, economic ties,

a lingua franca, the Russified culture of the elite — and, since the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, a tsunami of propaganda on the Russian broadcast media that blanket Central Asia — Russian near-absolute dominance there might seem to be a foregone conclusion. But that assumption would be wrong. Each Central Asian state carefully guards its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, all the more so since Crimea’s annexation, which was a quiet game-changer, and a wake-up call, for each of the Central Asian governments (except maybe, these days, Kyrgyzstan’s, which has turned strongly toward Moscow and, pro forma, accepts its actions and positions without comment). There’s another factor that is seldom mentioned in polite conversation: the sometimes shocking racism prevalent in Russia, which reflexively looks down upon — to use the politest term in the Russian lexicon — the “lesser minorities.”

Further, Russia regularly whispers in Central Asian ears the — so-far exaggerated — threat of ISIS. While the threat does indeed exist because of the ISIS declaration of a sub-caliphate of Khorasan in Afghanistan and its neighbouring regions, the dire Russian admonitions purposely exaggerate the threat to impel the Central Asian states to turn more fully to Moscow for security. Russia already has a permanent military presence in Central Asia at the Kant Airfield outside Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and with its 201st Motorized Rifle Division at three locations in Tajikistan: Dushanbe, Qurghonteppa and Kulob. The 201st is Russia’s largest military base outside the borders of the Russian Federation. By contrast, while the United States did for a time have military facilities in Central Asia (Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan, 2001–2005, and the Manas Transit Center at the Manas International Airport in Bishkek, 2002–2014) to support Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Washington has repeatedly and accurately stated it has no desire for *permanent* military bases in Central Asia.

Central Asian leaders who already consider stability as a *sine qua non* for continued rule do not really need regular sermons from Moscow about the evil of the so-called colour revolutions — the unconstitutional changes of government in Georgia (the Rose Revolution of 2003), Ukraine (the Orange Revolution of 2004 and, more recently, the Maidan of 2013) and Kyrgyzstan (the Tulip Revolution of 2005) — but such warnings are part of the regular Russian litany in Central Asia. In short, Moscow demonizes democracy and trumpets authoritarian rule in the service of stability but also to try to herd the Central Asian “sheep” into its own, and exclusive, pastures.

Russia has created two multilateral structures for regional integration. The first is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) — or, as it is informally referred to, the “Commonwealth” Security Treaty Organization, arising from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) of the 1990s, which has now faded into desuetude. The CSTO’s

<sup>4</sup> See [www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2015\\_648.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_648.pdf) (page 9).

members (“permanently neutral” Turkmenistan maintains only observer status) pledge to support and defend each other’s mutual security. Despite annual summits and fairly regular military exercises, the CSTO is still not seen as an especially effective organization, either by its members or more broadly in the region. And whether it would truly be used in an emergency situation is open to question.

The other, and more recent, multilateral organization is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), comprising initially Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, and now including the poverty-stricken states of Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, with Moscow putting pressure on others, like Tajikistan, to join. Historically, Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed the EEU in the 1990s, but Moscow tended to pooh-pooh it until Putin’s third presidential term, when he apparently saw it as potentially an effective tool of Putinism, which seeks to reassert the authority of Moscow over the former Soviet Union while not recreating the Soviet Union. Many suspect that Moscow sees the EEU as a bloc structure — led by Moscow — that will inevitably take on a political dimension. So far, however, Kazakhstan has politely said *nyet* to any kind of political dimension for the EEU. Why Kazakhstan? Because it rigorously guards its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, especially because its population, unlike the populations of the four other Central Asia states, is still just under 25 percent Slavic, concentrated largely in the northern part of the country bordering Russia and around the former capital, Almaty. The north in particular concerns the government — which is why Nazarbayev moved the capital from Almaty, in the north, to Brezhnev’s “Virgin Lands” city of Tselinograd, eventually renamed Astana, on the steppe in the middle of nowhere. From the 1990s to this very day, influential voices in Russia (and not just that of the notorious Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, himself born in Almaty) continue to call for the annexation of the northern third of Kazakhstan, which some insist was always historically a part of Russia.

## China

China is another contiguous neighbour of Central Asia that bears watching closely. China’s presence in Central Asia has been for the most part politically benign as it has sought access to the region’s hydrocarbon and mineral wealth to fuel its own economic growth. Even as China increasingly bought into the oil sector of Kazakhstan and the natural-gas sector in Turkmenistan (where it is the only foreign nation allowed to operate its gas wells and pipelines directly on Turkmenistan’s sovereign soil), the West, including the United States, saw no problem, because there was no perceived political threat.

The West, however, perked up its ears when China’s President Xi Jinping announced at Nazarbayev University in Astana in September 2013 its New Silk Road Economic Belt running from east to west across Central Asia and on

to northern Europe. Initially, the United States, with its own New Silk Road Initiative, paid little attention, because the US version focused on forging north-south links, whereas China’s stated goal was to facilitate transport of its industrial production, especially from Western China, overland to Europe. China, as is now clear, was making it up as it went, and by 2014 had mostly formulated and finally announced its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, which reached far beyond Central Asia to include elements in Pakistan (from the Karakorum Range to the warm-water port of Gwadar), Southeast Asia, and maritime lanes through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to all the littoral ports, including those of East Africa.

The initial US view of China’s New Silk Road Economic Belt was rather lackadaisical — “They do hardware; we do software,” as the diplomats say — meaning that Beijing would probably focus on upgrading the east-west highways and rail lines in Central Asia, while Washington focused on building technical capacity for things such as customs modernization and border security. As China’s OBOR policy emerged, however, it became apparent that China was actually creating more of an industrial investment scheme, in part to stimulate economic growth among its nearest western neighbours. Near the end of 2014, the US State Department met for the first time with appropriate contacts in Beijing to compare notes on each other’s New Silk Road policies. Those initial meetings were friendly and, to some participants and observers, surprisingly open and informative, but they only scratched the surface. Follow-up came in May 2015, again in Beijing, where the United States offered a short list of possibilities for concrete cooperation in Central Asia. So far not much has come of this because it seems China is not yet sure of US intentions, and, probably more important, because China has nominally allied its New Silk Road Economic Belt with Russia’s EEU. Nonetheless, the potential does exist for Sino-American cooperation in Central Asia.

More broadly, the China-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) plays a role in Central Asia, certainly more so than the Russia-dominated CSTO. For many years, SCO was seen by outsiders (and even by some participants) as simply one more “talk shop.” While it still does not play a particularly concrete role in the Central Asian states’ policy-making process, SCO is slowly emerging as a respectable multilateral organization. However, at its most recent summit in the summer of 2015 in Ufa, Russia, to the surprise of several observers, Chinese and American, SCO announced it would begin the accession process for both India and Pakistan. For an international organization that operates, thus far, on the full consensus of its member states, this development has left some scratching their heads and wondering whether this is far-sighted or over-reaching, because it is hard to picture Pakistan and India in agreement on much at all. In fact, the historic India-Pakistan standoff, defined at its

core by the issue of Kashmir, is one of the roadblocks to the US version of the New Silk Road that seeks to link Central Asia to the vast markets of India.

## Iran

Iran is still a bit of a wild card in Central Asia. Tehran has long been interested in its Central Asian neighbours but constrained by the international sanctions that have crippled its economy. That situation might change as some of the international sanctions are lifted. Still, Iran will have an uphill slog to gain any significant influence in Central Asia. The most natural affinities should exist between Dushanbe and Tehran, because, unlike the other Central Asian states that are Mongol-culture and Turkic-speaking by heritage, Tajikistan is a Persian-culture nation, having been an outpost of the ancient Persian Empire; Tajik and Farsi are mutually intelligible. But even Dushanbe is more than a little leery of Tehran because Tajikistan's population is majority Sunni, except for the large but remote Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast where Ismaili Shi'ites predominate. Iran has had a certain degree of friendliness toward, if not significant influence on, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan — the only religious-political party in the entire region — which the government of Tajikistan has now determined to quash as a supposed terrorist organization. The other Central Asian states, too, cast a wary eye toward Iran because it is a self-proclaimed Islamic revolutionary state, a fact that alarms the determinedly secular and autocratic leaders in Central Asia. Still, Iran can expect to gain incrementally more influence in Central Asia in the coming years, especially economically, as its trade and other energy linkages increase with the Caspian-littoral states of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

## HOW DOES CENTRAL ASIA SEE THE WORLD?

To one degree or another, all five states of Central Asia practise what they call a “multivector foreign policy,” meaning that they seek generally to balance their relations with Russia, China, the United States and the European Union (EU). But sometimes they also seek to play one off against the other, especially Kyrgyzstan, which in recent years has lurched between Moscow and Washington, attempting to instigate a bidding war for Bishkek's love. Some Central Asian officials will readily admit that Russia and China are immediate neighbours; Europe and the United States are rather far away. The European Union, as an entity that is a grouping of 28 nations and must make policy by consensus, is not as big a player in Central Asia as are some of its individual members, like the United Kingdom, Germany, occasionally some of the Scandinavian countries and even little Latvia. All the same, the European Union has within the past year updated its Central Asian policy and significantly increased its

development assistance within the region. So, clearly, the European Union sees Central Asia as a region that deserves a certain degree of attention. And the United States shares this view.

## US POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA

US policy immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of 16 new independent states was coloured by a bit of irrational exuberance that assumed that the peoples of the former Soviet Union were naturally yearning to breathe free and, with the appropriate assistance, would quickly become free-market democrats. Using the authorities of the FREEDOM Support Act of 1992 — in which “FREEDOM” is one of those quirky Congressional acronyms that stands for “Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets” — Washington dedicated considerable resources to support the former Soviet states as they transitioned — over a relatively short time, as at least the ideologues expected — from communism and central planning to the Western ideals of democracy and free markets. As time has shown, it did not turn out to be as simple as transitioning from one ideology to another.

Of course, there were other reasons to pay attention to the new Central Asian states. Perhaps most important is Kazakhstan's historic commitment to nuclear non-proliferation. And the region is awash in natural resources. Turkmenistan has the fourth-largest natural-gas reserves in the world. Kazakhstan has the second-largest oil reserves of the former Soviet Union, second only to Russia, and in the early years of its independence, US and European international oil companies made major investments there, which continue to this day. Uzbekistan is a major producer of uranium, as is Kazakhstan, and has large natural-gas reserves, as does, quite likely, Tajikistan. Both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan hold significant gold deposits. And Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have world-class hydropower potential, as demonstrated by the current CASA-1000 project<sup>5</sup> to deliver their summer-excess hydroelectricity across Afghanistan to electricity-starved Pakistan.

The economies of Central Asia are more than the sum of their natural resources and energy-generating potential. Kazakhstan's early commitment to macro-economic reform has made it, 20 years later, a financial-services hub for the region. Uzbekistan's educated population of 30 million has a real potential to provide entrepreneurial and innovative economic growth. Kyrgyzstan, from the beginning, made a fundamental commitment to democratic structures of government and is an ongoing test case for democracy in Central Asia. And Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's stunning natural beauty could well attract throngs of tourists from Boise to Beijing, powering a thriving tourism sector, as

<sup>5</sup> See [www.casa-1000.org/](http://www.casa-1000.org/).



could Uzbekistan's great Silk Road cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva.

To focus a bit more tightly, US core policy interests in Central Asia are to support independent, sovereign states that uphold regional security, increase their economic integration with regional and global markets, and demonstrate respect for human rights and democratic governance, while not becoming sources of transnational threats to the United States or to any other nation. To implement these policy goals, Washington has four critical areas of cooperation and concentration in Central Asia: security cooperation, economic ties, promotion of human rights and good governance, and efforts to bolster each country's sovereignty and independence.

Over time, Washington has learned to take each country as it is. The early days of talking about "the 'stans" is long past. Policy makers in Washington recognize that the countries of Central Asia have differentiated their own paths and sometimes jostle each other along the way. The interests of one sometimes conflict with the interests of another: Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have mostly been at loggerheads since the Tajikistan civil war of the mid-1990s. Upstream and downstream countries are still working to sort out what they see as nearly existential water rights.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of independence, borders were ill defined, especially with the unusual system of enclaves and exclaves in the sensitive Ferghana Valley, which the Soviets carved up among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in a classic "divide and conquer" cartographic and ethnographic exercise in the 1920s and 1930s. Independence also meant that supply chains for essentials such as food and electricity were suddenly split among separate sovereign entities that had no desire to cooperate, at least at first. Nevertheless, the passage of time and a healthy dose of strategic patience suggest that regional cooperation in Central Asia might possibly be more than a schematic and idealistic gleam in Western eyes. During the most recent UN General Assembly in New York City, US Secretary of State John Kerry met in a collective setting with the foreign ministers of all five Central Asian states — an historic first — in a format called the "C5+1." To the surprise of many, and without any sharp elbows, the five foreign ministers discussed with Kerry potentials for regional cooperation and wider responsibilities, including countering violent extremism in responsible ways.

The implementation of US policy in Central Asia, as in other parts of the world, is not always readily visible and is almost never front-page news. Moreover, it is based on a long-term commitment. Attention, Central Asian leaders:

No, the United States is *not* going to cut and run after Afghanistan! It has often been said before to them but it bears repeating.

Russia is still the primary security partner for the Central Asian states. But where it is welcome, the United States works with Central Asian militaries and other security structures, especially the border guards, to modernize militaries and to ensure that border guards are increasingly capable of preventing the flow across borders of contraband, including narcotics and the components of weapons of mass destruction, while facilitating the passage of legitimate travellers and enhancing trade and commerce. In Kazakhstan, especially, Washington has been working with its Kazakhstani partners to build a battalion that can serve with United Nations peacekeepers, further embedding that country in the family of responsible and outward-looking world nations.

To implement its broadest policy goals in Central Asia, Washington focuses its assistance, as it does elsewhere in the world, on improving and modernizing health care and education and on alleviating the worst forms of poverty. Further, Washington supports human-rights organizations, rule-of-law reforms, civil society and the mass media, including, increasingly, social media. Through a variety of long-running and well-established educational and cultural exchange programs, US foreign policy also directly supports the people of Central Asia. Note to Moscow: this kind of "soft diplomacy" does *not* aim to foment colour revolutions or covertly support political opposition, as the autocrats/kleptocrats fear; rather, it is to support the people of Central Asia in creating better lives for their children and grandchildren, a universal pursuit.

In sum, the goal of US assistance in Central Asia is to expand understanding of Washington's policies, values and principles — which are congruent with the Western Renaissance, consonant with the Islamic Renaissance and largely in the humanist tradition of individual responsibility and toleration. Is this too soft to matter? Time will tell. But it is interesting to note that over the last 23 years, more than 24,000 citizens of Central Asia have visited the United States on exchange programs funded by the State Department. Many have gone on to become high-ranking government officials, effective and creative community leaders, and successful business pioneers, including female entrepreneurs. *That* matters.

## CONCLUSION

Central Asia is indeed of strategic importance to the West — because of its neighbours, its natural resources and, most recently, the designs of ISIS to gain a foothold in this secular Muslim-majority region. Although Central Asia is not of *immediate* strategic importance because it is not a hot spot on the world stage — a good thing — it nonetheless makes Western governments' policy makers

6 These efforts are mainly coordinated by the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, and to a degree by the World Bank, especially in its exhaustive studies of the feasibility and advisability of the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan.



watchful because of its flawed record on human rights and democratic governance. It presents the classic conundrum: choose ideology, or *realpolitik*.

But Western policy in Central Asia does not have to choose: it can be *both*. Western nations can encourage and support humanist values in Central Asia without resorting to shrill naming and shaming about human rights or public finger-wagging. Instead, it can bring strong engagement to quiet and appropriate behind-the-scenes work with government officials who understand and share these aims — and these individuals most certainly *do* exist and *can* produce results. Western governments need to engage in Central Asia precisely to ensure that it does *not* become a trouble zone and to ensure that, over time, it becomes more firmly embedded in the community of responsible nations. Some Central Asian states, such as Kazakhstan, are already moving in that direction. Others, like Turkmenistan, will need more time and more strategic patience. In the end, however, strategic engagement by the West is essential, and it will pay off.

*The views expressed herein are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the US government.*

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The Centre for International Governance Innovation is an independent, non-partisan think tank on international governance. Led by experienced practitioners and distinguished academics, CIGI supports research, forms networks, advances policy debate and generates ideas for multilateral governance improvements. Conducting an active agenda of research, events and publications, CIGI's interdisciplinary work includes collaboration with policy, business and academic communities around the world.

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CIGI was founded in 2001 by Jim Balsillie, then co-CEO of Research In Motion (BlackBerry), and collaborates with and gratefully acknowledges support from a number of strategic partners, in particular the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario.

Le CIGI a été fondé en 2001 par Jim Balsillie, qui était alors co-chef de la direction de Research In Motion (BlackBerry). Il collabore avec de nombreux partenaires stratégiques et exprime sa reconnaissance du soutien reçu de ceux-ci, notamment de l'appui reçu du gouvernement du Canada et de celui du gouvernement de l'Ontario.

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