

## SECURITY COOPERATION: THE ROLE OF THE U.S. IN CENTRAL ASIA

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper analyzes the role of the United States in security cooperation in Central Asia, examines the motivations behind US involvement and its impact on regional security dynamics.*

### **Keywords**

*Historical context of U.S. involvement in Central Asia, Current security challenges in the region, Military assistance programs.*

### **Introduction**

Throughout history, security cooperation has played a crucial role in shaping international relations and ensuring stability in various regions. As globalization continues to connect nations around the world, the need for effective security cooperation has become increasingly apparent. In the context of Central Asia, a region characterized by complex geopolitical dynamics and strategic interests, the United States has emerged as a key player in promoting security and stability. By engaging in various forms of security cooperation, such as military assistance programs and counterterrorism initiatives, the U.S. has sought to address security challenges in Central Asia and strengthen partnerships with regional countries.

### **Background information on Central Asia**

Central Asia, comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, has long been a region of strategic importance due to its position at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Historically, Central Asia has been a hub for trade routes connecting East and West, leading to the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures. The region has also been shaped by the legacy of empires such as the Mongols, Timurids, and the Russian Empire, which have left

lasting influences on its political and social landscapes. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent Central Asian states have faced numerous challenges in nation-building, economic development, and security. Despite these challenges, Central Asia has seen increased attention from global powers seeking to enhance their influence in the region, leading to a complex web of geopolitical dynamics and security concerns. In this context, the role of the United States in promoting security cooperation in Central Asia becomes crucial for maintaining stability and prosperity in the region.

Central Asia experiences very dry climatic conditions, and inadequate precipitation has led to heavy dependence on the Syr Darya and Amu Darya for irrigation. The region as a whole experiences hot summers and cool winters, with much sunshine and very little precipitation. The scarcity of water has led to a very uneven population distribution, with most people living along the fertile banks of the rivers or in fertile mountain foothills in the southeast; comparatively few live in the vast arid expanses of central and western Kazakhstan and western Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The five largest ethnic groups in Central Asia are, in descending order of size, the Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz. All those groups speak languages related to Turkish except for the Tajik, who speak a language related to Persian. Islam is the dominant religion, with most adherents belonging to the Sunni branch. As a result of the region's historical incorporation into Russia and then the Soviet Union, large numbers of Russians and Ukrainians give it a distinctive multiethnic character. Population growth in Central Asia was quite rapid in the 20th century as a result of high birth rates and Soviet health measures that brought down mortality rates. The region experienced environmental problems in the late 20th century that were due to the effects of rapid agricultural development, overdependence on irrigation, and the effects of Soviet nuclear-weapons testing in some areas.

Central Asia's economic activity is centred on irrigated agriculture in the south and on heavy and light industry and mining in Kazakhstan. Under Soviet rule the area supplied most of the U.S.S.R.'s cotton and was a major supplier of coal and other minerals for industrial use. Irrigated cotton growing is dominant in the east and southeast, while there is some dry farming of wheat in the far northern provinces of Kazakhstan, where the Soviets' Virgin and Idle Lands program of the 1950s brought much steppe under the plow for the first time.

### **Importance of security cooperation in the region**

In the realm of regional security cooperation, particularly in Central Asia, the United States has strategically engaged with nations like Kazakhstan to bolster stability and strengthen diplomatic ties. Kazakhstan's pivotal position as a leading landlocked state with abundant oil and gas reserves has made it a key player in global politics and a valuable ally in American efforts to combat terrorism and promote democratic governance. The collaboration between the U.S. and Kazakhstan, dating back to the post-Cold War era, has not only focused on disarmament initiatives but also on enhancing the country's economic independence from Russia through oil and gas pipeline projects. This partnership underscores the critical importance of security cooperation in the region, as it not only advances mutual interests but also contributes to the broader goal of maintaining peace and stability in Central Asia. The United States' strategic alignment with Kazakhstan highlights the significance of fostering enduring relationships and partnerships to address shared security challenges effectively.

What distinguishes regional security cooperation projects from one another is that, some are task-specific regional security organisations, while others' security activities are part of a broader, general-purpose regional organisation (Haftel, 2012; Lenz et al., 2015). Additionally, not all regional security cooperation occurs in formalised intergovernmental organisations with established bureaucracies, treaties and institutionalised routines. The Shangri-La Dialogue, the Proliferation Security Initiative, the Club de Berne, the Human Security Network, or the Montreux Document Forum are all informal groupings of regional or regionalised actors, some of which are not states, sharing common concerns (Vabulas and Snidal, 2021). Regional security cooperation also happens on the less formal diplomatic track, in 1.5 or 2-track formations, and can include a host of private actors. In West Africa, for example, non-state actors have become important participants in regional frameworks, such as the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF), or the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) (Ebo, 2007).

Next to variation along task-specificity, the degree of formality, and actor inclusivity, regional security organisations also vary with regard to their authority (Marks et al., 2015) and geographical reach. The AL is a good example of the latter, as the organisation reaches both into North Africa and the Middle East. Similarly, the OSCE has member states that stretch from North America to Russia (Barnett and Solingen, 2007). In Africa, the Community of Sahel Saharan States (CEN-SAD) has 25 member states covering Western, Northern, Central, and Eastern Africa. These regional organisations overlap with other regional organisations. This raises the question of how a region should be (re)defined and what a region is

(Katzenstein, 2005). Not only is the definition of a region contested, but so is the concept of security (Baldwin, 1997). The term ‘alliance’ is associated with a traditional understanding of security; these can be found in many parts of the world (Leeds and Anac, 2005). However, via securitisation processes and the creation of policy nexuses, for example the security-environment nexus (Maertens, 2015), the definition of security has broadened not just in academia but also within security cooperation projects (Buzan, de Wilde and Wæver, 1998). Bodies such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) work respectively on the climate-security and security-development nexuses. Even traditional alliances such as NATO have included what they call collective security and crisis management in their mandate and are discussing climate change, energy, and pandemics (Hofmann, 2013). Many regional economic organisations have spilled over into security activities (Haftel and Hofmann, 2017; Gnanguênon, 2020). Based on these observations we define regional security cooperation as any attempt to reduce armed violence, either within or at the borders of what multiple actors agree to be a region. There are at least four types of regional security cooperation that we can envisage (see Table 1.1): (i) task-specific regional security cooperation within a formalised regional security organisation; (ii) formalised security cooperation within a general purpose regional organisation; (iii) informal security cooperation; and (iv) informal security cooperation within general purpose regional informal cooperation.

Table 1.1 Types of regional security cooperation

	Formal	Informal
Task-specific	Regional security organisation	Security dialogues
General purpose	Regional organisation	Comprehensive informal approach

Source: compiled by the authors.

### **The U.S. Security Interests in Central Asia**

Amidst evolving geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia, the United States has strategically positioned itself to safeguard its security interests in the region. While facing challenges from competing global powers like Russia and China, the U.S. has recognized the significance of Central Asia in its broader security cooperation efforts. Western economic sanctions targeting Russia's energy sector have prompted Moscow to seek alternative energy markets in Central Asia, potentially altering the regional energy landscape (Jiwon Park, 2024). In contrast, China's assertive economic and security interests in Central Asia have led to a deepening

presence, particularly in the energy sector, challenging traditional power dynamics in the region and potentially shifting the geopolitical balance (Bohdan Holianych, 2023). As the U.S. aims to maintain a presence in Central Asia to ensure stability and secure its interests, understanding and engaging with these complex dynamics involving Russia's diversification efforts and China's growing influence becomes imperative for effective security cooperation strategies.

Conscious of Russia dominating bilateral relations in the region and the growing influence of China, the U.S. redefined its policy outlook towards the region in the recent past. In 2020, the Trump Administration released the United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity. The strategy improved upon the 2015 U.S. strategy towards the region stating that "...new leaders in the region have created new openings for reform-oriented development, intraregional connectivity and cooperation, and greater U.S. engagement." [ii] The policy outlined six policy objectives:

Support and strengthen the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian States, individually and as a region – the U.S. will increase its diplomatic engagement with the region and cooperation in economic, security, energy issues among other issues.

Reduce terrorist threats in Central Asia – by working with each other to build societies that are resilient to extremist ideologies and not become safe havens for terrorist organisations.

Expand and maintain support for stability in Afghanistan.

Encourage connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan will be an important step that will contribute to regional stability.

Promote rule of law, reform and respect for human rights, and

Promote United States investment in and development of Central Asia. [iii]

The third and the latest phase in the relations began with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Afghanistan has dominated U.S. approach towards Central Asia in the past decade, with two of the six priorities in the U.S. Strategy focused on this interlink. The U.S. continues to seek the support of the Central Asian nations in building a stable, secure and peaceful Afghanistan. The U.S. has an interest in ensuring that Central Asia does not become a sanctuary for radical Islamic militants. For Central Asia too, stability in Afghanistan remains a priority.

The region is also in the midst of a geopolitical shift. The gradual acceptance of Iran in international politics and the progress toward normalizing and expanding relations with Iran unlocks a number of important economic, political, and strategic opportunities for Central Asia. Apart from Moscow, which remains a vital political,

economic and security partner, China has emerged as the region's most significant geopolitical and economic actor. Trade has been the principal driver of this new relationship. Both President Putin and President Xi have visited the region in the recent past. President Putin's visit to all the Republics of Central Asia in 2022, in the midst of the conflict in Ukraine, aimed to deepen economic engagements in the face of western sanctions on Russia and strengthen bilateral relations. President Xi's first overseas visit since the pandemic to Central Asia for the SCO Summit in Samarkand is reflective of the importance of Central Asia to Chinese strategic thinking. The visit was to strengthen the BRI initiative, energy cooperation and expand economic relations. Close relations with the region are also linked to China's aim to ensure stability in the Xinjiang province. The crisis in Ukraine has further brought attention to Central Asia from both the U.S. and Russia. While Central Asian nations have not supported Russian military action they have continued to strengthen their economic ties with Russia.

### **Historical context of U.S. involvement in Central Asia**

The historical context of U.S. involvement in Central Asia can be traced back to the Cold War era, when the region became a battleground for superpower competition. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. sought to exert influence in the newly independent states of Central Asia to counter Russian dominance in the region. The U.S. has been keen on establishing security cooperation with Central Asian countries to secure vital energy resources and combat terrorism and extremism in the aftermath of 9/11. Furthermore, the U.S. has used its presence in Central Asia to promote democracy and human rights, albeit with varying degrees of success. However, critics argue that U.S. involvement in the region is driven by geopolitical interests rather than genuine concern for the well-being of Central Asian nations. Overall, the historical backdrop of U.S. engagement in Central Asia reflects a complex interplay of geopolitical motivations and security imperatives.

The five states of Central Asia present special challenges and paradoxes in the international arena. While possessing great natural resources, they ranked among the poorest and least-developed of the former Soviet republics at the time of independence. Despite its heritage and position at a historic crossroad of European and Asian civilizations, the region was the most isolated in the USSR at the time that empire broke apart. Proud founders of great Islamic centers of faith and scholarship whose ranks included the great physician and philosopher, Ibn Sina<sup>3</sup>, and the astronomer Ulu Beg, the Central Asians are today challenged to define anew the relationship between religion and the state after more than 70 years of

enforced atheism. In engaging these new nations, the United States' challenge has been to promote modern, tolerant states and societies which can work productively with the country in support of shared interests. For the U.S. what is needed in the Central Asia is a policy that allows the country to continue to diversify its energy supplies, station its military forces close to the most immediate threats, and create a lasting and deep impact by promoting democratic and free-market values in an area that is still undergoing political and economic development. James Collins, a noted Congressman has defined in a speech the following U.S. objectives in the New Independent States (NIS) which the country has tailored to meet the specific needs of the rich and complex region of Central Asia:

Support for the independence, sovereignty and security of each of the Central Asian States;

Assistance in the establishment of free-market economies and democratic governments committed to equal opportunity and human rights for their citizens;

c. Integration of these states into the world community of political and financial institutions, as well as their participation in the Euro-Atlantic security dialogue and cooperative programs;

d. Encouragement of these states to pursue peaceful relations among themselves and with their neighbors, to seek new avenues for regional cooperation and to resolve local conflicts with international mediation;

e. Prevention of any trafficking in weapons of mass destruction or their elements across this region or its borders. The departure of the last nuclear warhead from Kazakhstan in 1995 was a significant achievement in support of non-proliferation;

f. Enhancement of the U.S. commercial interests and the expansion and diversification of global energy supplies. This agenda is complex and demanding, but the message is that the U.S.A. is making progress throughout Central Asia in advancing it. The essence of this newly regenerated geopolitical game in Central Asia is twofold: first, control of production of the oil and gas, and second, control of the pipelines which will transfer the oil to the western markets.

### **Current security challenges in the region**

The current security challenges in the Central Asia region are multifaceted and complex, requiring strategic cooperation and collaboration among nations. China's assertive conduct in South Asia, driven by its economic expansion and pursuit of energy resources, poses a challenge to regional stability, particularly with its involvement in trade routes like the proposed Kunming-Chittagong corridor (Umbreen Javaid, 2016, p. 65). Furthermore, the evolving strategic terrain in Asia-

Pacific calls for multilateral responses to shared threats, such as natural disasters, terrorism, and maritime disputes, emphasizing the importance of mechanisms like the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in fostering military engagement and civil-military cooperation (Kurt Leffler, 2016, p. 123-129). As the U.S. seeks to enhance security cooperation in Central Asia, addressing these challenges requires a nuanced approach that integrates regional dynamics and global strategies to promote peace and stability in the region.

A special awareness is caused by the fact, that facilities for extraction and reprocessing of radioactive raw materials on the territories of Central Asian republics (except Turkmenistan) along with the amount of toxic wastes burials and transboundary rivers present a serious threat for people and territories in the region if being used by extremists, terrorists or clan gangs. According to estimations of experts, full devastation of uranium tail storages № 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 18 in Mailu Suu will bring to Fergana valley the amount of radioactive materials, close to 1 million m<sup>3</sup>, and the total radioactivity of nuclides, spread in valley (Kyrgyzstan) and river alluvial fan (Uzbekistan) will reach 10000 curies. The area of radioactive contamination will be make 300 km<sup>2</sup>, and the total population on contaminated grounds in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan will reach 100-120 thousands of people (Torgoev I.A., 2001). A fresh example is the latest scandal, connected with opposition of politic elites, so-called "Yuppi-gate", that has not been finally justified yet. According to special services, it was planned to poison Naryn river with cyanide and blame the "Kumtor" and governmental authorities for that (Omuraliev E., 2013). Also, it is more than possible, that withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan will contribute to its transformation back again to regional center of radical Islamism, whose extremist and terroristic cells will try to get access to dual-use technologies in the countries of the region for the production of WMD, as well as for manufacturing of the so-called "dirty bombs" with the purpose of blackmailing the world community. According to some experts, the worst scenario can occur if the whole Central Asian region will be taken by Islamic extremists and they will get access to industrial capacities for production of radioactive materials in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Remembering that, we should pay special attention to possible risks, connected with the national system of export controls of Kyrgyzstan, which can be defined as a set of measures to ensure the order established by the legislation of the Republic of foreign economic activity in relation to a specific group of controlled goods and technologies (raw materials, equipment, scientific and technical information, services, and intellectual property). Export control is one of the most important elements of the system of non-



proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Effective export control system helps to reduce the risk of obtaining of certain items, materials and technologies by countries interested in developing nuclear, chemical, biological and other weapons of mass destruction, which is prohibited by international agreements on non-proliferation of WMD and related technologies. If we look at the location of Kyrgyzstan on the world map, we can point out again strong political instability in neighboring Afghanistan which shares border with the Islamic republic of Iran – the state, which causes certain concern of the world community because of its nuclear project. Also we can point out a neighboring of Afghanistan with Pakistan – the state possessing nuclear weapon but without participating in the Nuclear non-proliferation treaty (Data on Pakistan nuclear project). It is clear that the national system of export control is a vital component of the national security policy of any state.

### **Security Cooperation Initiatives in Central Asia**

Central Asia has become a focal point for security cooperation initiatives involving various external powers, including Japan and China. The Central Asia and Japan Dialogue (CAJ), established in 2004, serves as a platform for fostering intraregional integration and advancing Japan's foreign policy goals in the region (Olga Dobrinskaya, 2024). While CAJ has facilitated discussions on a wide range of issues, including political agenda and development assistance, its impact on full-scale economic integration remains limited. In contrast, China's presence in Central Asia, driven by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), emphasizes equal cooperation for regional stability and economic development (Boyu Xu, 2023). Despite perceptions of competition for dominance in the region, China's interests in Central Asia align more with cooperation, indicating that the security landscape in Central Asia is shaped by a complex interplay of power dynamics and regional interests.

U.S. security cooperation programs in Central Asia work to counter transnational threats such as terrorism and narcotics trafficking, provide secure borders, promote professionalization of security forces, and advance respect for rule of law and human rights. Central Asian states support stabilization efforts in Afghanistan and are key contributors to future peace and prosperity in Afghanistan and the region.

The United States has \$79 million in open government-to-government sales cases with the Central Asian states under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system. Uzbekistan is purchasing equipment, valued at \$40 million, for its armed

forces through a combination of national funds and Foreign Military Financing (FMF).

Central Asia FMF historically has ranged from between \$3-5 million per year, though Congress appropriated \$10 million in FY 2021. The United States, under the FMF program, has supported border security and counterterrorism capabilities of partner security forces in Central Asia, including through the provision of vehicles, communications equipment, training, and sustainment. Over the past five years the United States provided approximately \$2 million annually in International Military Education and Training (IMET) funding to the five Central Asian states, supporting the attendance of foreign military personnel at U.S. military education and training programs.

The Central Asian states also purchase defense items and services through Direct Commercial Sales (DCS). In fiscal year 2019, the authorized DCS value was \$5,473,009 for Kazakhstan, \$2,562,694 for the Kyrgyz Republic, and \$1,337,794 for Uzbekistan.

Conventional Weapons Destruction priorities for Central Asia are to prevent the illicit transfer of small arms, light weapons, and conventional ammunition; mitigate and prevent unplanned explosions at munitions sites; and clear legacy landmine contamination, unexploded ordnance, abandoned ordnance, and other explosive remnants of war. After thirty years, these explosive hazards still cause injury and deaths and prevent the safe and productive use of scarce agricultural land and resources. Since 2011, the United States has invested over \$4 million to prevent proliferation, support regional security, and to build national capacity through a military stockpile reduction initiative in Kyrgyzstan. Since 2006, the United States has invested over \$22 million to build national capacity, clear legacy landmine contamination, reduce national stockpiles of excess and obsolete conventional ammunition, and to educate at-risk populations of explosive hazards within 1,000 meters of villages, towns, and high-traffic areas.

### **Military assistance programs**

The concept of military geoscience, as elucidated in the literature, embodies a multidisciplinary approach that leverages geology and geography to enhance military strategies and operations. The historical analysis of military geoscience up to the present day underscores its evolution as a crucial instrument in understanding past conflicts and fortifications. For instance, studies examining the geographical advantages of battlefields like the Battle of Marathon or the coastal fortification system along the English Channel reveal how terrain and geological features shaped military tactics and outcomes. Moreover, insights from the

activities of military engineers during the World Wars illustrate the innovative use of geospatial technologies in underground warfare and tactical mapping. This interdisciplinary field not only illuminates past military endeavors but also offers valuable lessons for contemporary military assistance programs, emphasizing the significance of terrain analysis, geographical considerations, and technological innovations in shaping effective military strategies within the realm of security cooperation in regions like Central Asia.

### **Counterterrorism efforts in the region**

The evolving landscape of counterterrorism efforts in the Central Asian region following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2014 presents a complex challenge. While the U.S. has played a significant role in bolstering security measures in Afghanistan, concerns arise regarding the ability of regional actors to sustain these efforts. As highlighted in (Timothy A. Krambs, 2012, p. 1-26), Central Asian states have varying levels of security force capacities and political will to engage effectively in Afghanistan post-withdrawal. This disparity, coupled with limited regional cooperation, may impede comprehensive counterterrorism strategies. Moreover, the shifting global dynamics post-9/11, as discussed in (B. Glaser, 2002, p. 223-229), have further implications for regional security as China navigates its own concerns about U.S. military presence and strategic interests. Consequently, future counterterrorism initiatives in the region will require a cohesive and collaborative approach among all stakeholders to mitigate threats and ensure lasting stability.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the United States plays a crucial role in security cooperation in Central Asia through various mechanisms and partnerships. The U.S. has been actively involved in promoting stability and security in the region by providing military aid, training, and conducting joint military exercises with Central Asian countries. This has helped build the capacity of regional security forces and enhance their ability to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and other transnational threats. However, the U.S. must be cautious in its approach to avoid exacerbating political tensions or escalating conflicts in the region. Additionally, it is important for the U.S. to collaborate closely with other international actors, such as NATO and the United Nations, to ensure a coordinated and effective approach to security cooperation in Central Asia. Overall, the U.S. must continue to prioritize engagement with Central Asian countries to promote peace and stability in the region[Cite17].

Furthermore, the U.S. has played a crucial role in enhancing security cooperation in Central Asia by providing military assistance and conducting joint exercises with countries in the region. Through programs such as the International Military Education and Training (IMET) initiative and the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, the U.S. has been able to strengthen the capabilities of Central Asian security forces and foster closer partnerships. For example, the U.S. has worked with countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to improve border security and combat transnational threats such as terrorism and organized crime. Additionally, the U.S. has encouraged regional cooperation through multilateral platforms like the C5+1 format, which brings together the five Central Asian states and the U.S. to address common security challenges. By engaging with countries in Central Asia on multiple levels, the U.S. has been able to promote stability and enhance security in the region (Elizabeth Wishnick, 2002).

Taking into account the complex geopolitical landscape in Central Asia, it is imperative for the United States to strategically navigate its future involvement in the region. As the region continues to be a focal point for competition among major powers, including Russia and China, the U.S. must carefully balance its security cooperation efforts to maintain its influence and interests. Additionally, the U.S. faces challenges such as potential backlash from local populations due to perceived interference in internal affairs, as well as the risk of increased tensions with regional powers. Despite these obstacles, the U.S. can capitalize on its long-standing relationships and expertise in the region to promote stability, security, and economic development. Moving forward, the U.S. must employ a nuanced approach that addresses the diverse needs and priorities of Central Asian countries while safeguarding its own interests to ensure a sustainable and mutually beneficial future in the region.

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