



U.S. INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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This article analyzes the transformation of United States policy toward Central Asia in 2021–2026 within the broader context of global strategic competition. It argues that shifts in the international system, driven by the Afghanistan withdrawal, the Ukraine war, and US–China rivalry, have redefined the region’s significance. The study highlights the emergence of Greater Central Asia as a geopolitical concept and emphasizes the region’s role as a structural component of great power competition, rather than an independent priority in American foreign policy.

Key words: great power competition, Central Asia, US foreign policy, post-liberal order, geopolitics, strategic competition, greater Central Asia, regional security, Afghanistan, Eurasian connectivity.

At the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, the global political system is undergoing a fundamental reshaping. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Russia’s large-scale military intervention in Ukraine in 2022, and the intensification of US-China strategic competition have transformed the international system into a “post-liberal” and “competitive order.” Against the backdrop of these changes, Central Asia — a region long considered a “peripheral region” — is gradually becoming a “front of great power competition.” In particular, its geographical location (at the crossroads of Russia, China, South Asia, and the Middle East), transit potential (the Trans-Caspian Corridor, “Middle Corridor”), and energy resources make it an important link in the new geopolitical configuration.



In this context, US policy towards Central Asia has entered a qualitatively new stage in 2021–2026. If in the post-Cold War period the US approach to the region was more normative (democracy, market reforms) and instrumental (logistics for Afghan operations), at the current stage it has been reshaped to be more complex, multi-layered and aligned with the logic of strategic competition. In other words, the US no longer views Central Asia as an independent priority, but as a structural element of the global architecture of “Great Power Competition” [1].

To properly understand the US policy towards Central Asia in 2021–2026, it is necessary to consider it in a broader — global strategic context. The documents that most clearly express this context are the National Security Strategy published by the White House (White House, 2022) and the National Defense Strategy developed by the Department of Defense (Department of Defense, 2022). These documents define the priorities of US foreign policy, the hierarchy of threats, and the allocation of resources. The main emphasis in the 2022 National Security Strategy is on the “era of strategic competition”, in which China is identified as the greatest challenge to US global leadership. The document describes China as “the only state with the intention of reshaping the international order” [2].

At the same time, Russia is assessed as an “immediate and acute threat”, especially against the background of its aggression against Ukraine. The opposing strategic approach to these two states — long-term systemic competition (against China) and short-term security resistance (against Russia) — constitutes the main axis of US global policy.

The National Defense Strategy concretizes this conceptual approach at the military-strategic level. It identifies China as a “pacing challenge,” that is, the main adversary shaping US defense planning, and lists Russia as an “acute threat” [3].



This hierarchy means that US resources, military presence, and strategic attention are directed primarily to the Indo-Pacific and European theaters. These documents do not identify Central Asia as a separate strategic direction. This indicates that the region's place in US global strategy is not independent, but rather dependent on other major strategic directions.

Since the collapse of the USSR the United States has adopted a series of strategic documents pertaining to Central Asia. While these contain important affirmations, they are less true strategies than lists of unrelated projects deemed worthy at the time. Still less did they relate the region to the United States' global strategy as a whole.

Thus, US strategy to date has accepted the Soviet definition of Central Asia, i.e., Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Three decades later this is no longer valid. The group of core Central Asian states must now include Azerbaijan, as the Central Asian states themselves and Azerbaijan see themselves as a distinct political-economic region. This understanding warrants the use of "Greater Central Asia" as the term denoting the geopolitical focus of U.S. strategy. But the "Greater" strategy must also include proximate and bordering states on whom the success of the core depends [4]. These include Georgia, Armenia, and Mongolia, which comprise the flanks of the economic region and provide existential support via facilities (transport, ports), economic self-interest, and long-standing geopolitical comity [5].

Afghanistan, too, must be included in any Greater Central Asia strategy, at first as an outlier but eventually as part of the organic whole. A core without its extensions can never be larger than the sum of its parts. Afghanistan fits naturally into this strategic pathway. America currently approaches that country as a problem to be



contained, and with scant reference to the larger geopolitical environment [6]. While affirming its historical justification, that approach must now be reevaluated, and in such a way as to promote Afghanistan's long-term evolution from an unremitting problem to a more manageable contributor to the region's stability and prosperity.

In fact, over the millennia Afghanistan has been an integral and at times even dominant part of Greater Central Asia. Leaders and populations in all core states and in Afghanistan itself acknowledge shared strategic interests and the necessity of pragmatic regional partnerships, based on bonds with the rest of Greater Central Asia that are organic and permanent. Moreover, the increasing tempo of security and economic dynamics involving Afghanistan and its bordering or nearby states (e.g., China, Pakistan, Iran and India), poses challenges and opportunities for U.S. strategic engagement that until now remain unacknowledged and undefined.

Finally, it is the fate of the six states of Greater Central Asia to be surrounded by major powers, four of which—China, India, Russia and Pakistan—have nuclear arms; a fifth, Iran, actively aspires to that status, while a sixth, Turkey, has the potential to become a nuclear power. Conflict in this region thus carries formidable global risks, which the United States has a fundamental interest in preventing [7].

Many outside powers, beginning with Japan and now including South Korea, the EU, Russia, China, Turkey, and the U.S., have created consultative mechanisms with the Central Asians. While largely beneficial, such arrangements exert a powerful centrifugal force on Greater Central Asia; importantly the region also needs strong centripetal forces. It should be the mission of the U.S. and friendly powers to encourage and strengthen the collective agency of the states as an emerging regional entity on the global stage that can serve as a stabilizing force across its neighborhood [8].



The states of Greater Central Asia themselves are actively working to expand their formal collective structures by drawing selectively on the experience of ASIAN, the Nordic Council, and other multinational bodies. The presidents of the states of Greater Central Asia will welcome America's support for that process, provided those structures remain exclusively for Greater Central Asians. Such regional structures began to emerge with the creation of a Central Asia Economic Union in the 1990s, which was abolished when Russia's president first sought to join, then replacing it with his Eurasian Economic Union. The U.S. must help to assure that such a takeover does not occur a second time [9].

The stability of Greater Central Asia, and hence the success of any American strategy, must be grounded in the recognition that the regions' states themselves are the best instruments through which effective strategy must be channeled [10]. The United States must therefore work with, rather than on, the region's governments. This can be done in the confidence that prosperity in Greater Central Asia will over time lead to greater political freedom, free markets, and openness to the world. The advancement of democratic norms and human rights concerns may follow, as they have in other societies, but the U.S. must not make their achievement a condition for engagement or a test to be passed beforehand.

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