

U.S. Policy in Central Asia

Ambassador Ross Wilson
Director, Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center
Atlantic Council

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to be part of today's hearing on U.S. policy in Central Asia. In testifying a year ago on Eurasian energy before this committee, I urged that members of Congress travel to the region, get to know its people, and become familiar with its issues. I commend you for doing just that and believe it will contribute significantly to advancing American interests and values in a vulnerable, but important part of the world.

Just over twenty years ago, the five countries of Soviet Central Asia achieved independence for the first time in modern history. It was not expected. It did not follow any preparation or even much of a genuine popular struggle. It produced great hardship and social upheaval. But what happened opened the door to a positive new future for the region and for U.S. interests there.

Twenty years on, the states of Central Asia have created new countries where nationhood was weak, established new governing institutions, dismantled Soviet central planning and developed new economies, and eliminated nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction capabilities and technologies on their territories. Their citizens are more connected with the world than ever before.

But substantial problems remain. Internally, these include governance that is often of low quality, but also highly authoritarian. The rule of law is more often rule than law. The cultures of freedom and public responsibility are weak. Economic opportunity is certainly greater than it was, but poverty remains widespread. Inter-ethnic conflict, especially in the Fergana Valley, drug trafficking, and terrorism are all serious issues.

Externally, the region faces Afghanistan, Russia, and China, and it fears U.S. neglect. Three Central Asian countries border Afghanistan, and the other two lie less than 300 miles away. If Afghanistan's terrorists, drug trafficking, Taliban and other extremist ideologies, and civil and ethnic strife seem worrying to us, they sit on Central Asia's doorstep. Nowhere in the

world is what we euphemistically call the upcoming “transition” in Afghanistan viewed with more concern and alarm. Russia casts a long shadow, and Vladimir Putin’s return to the Kremlin probably makes most Central Asians more apprehensive. Chinese investment and trade are increasingly drivers of economic development – and of local concerns about being overwhelmed.

Upon achieving independence and since, the Central Asian countries have wanted a robust and consistent American presence. They see the United States as a balancer vis-à-vis Russia and China and as a source of options in foreign policy, security, and economic development. Throughout the 1990s, U.S. policymakers worked on many levels to help these new countries consolidate their independence based in part on the premise that doing so would help ensure that never again would a threat to our way of life come from this part of the world. This effort included frequent presidential and vice presidential meetings with regional leaders and travel to Central Asia by our secretaries of State and Defense and their lieutenants. Congress generously supported this work through FREEDOM Support Act appropriations and strong oversight of Executive Branch activities in the region.

A 2010 Atlantic Council Task Force of which I was part found that after 9/11 our policy and activities in Central Asia changed. A backwater no more, the region’s support for U.S. and Coalition operations in Afghanistan became *the* overriding priority. This was natural given that we had a war to fight, but military-based and transactional diplomacy skewed American policy away from more comprehensive support for long-term development based on democratization, market reform, trade, energy, and regional cooperation that is essential if Central Asia is to succeed – and to avoid becoming another Afghanistan itself.

The Council’s Task Force made a number of recommendations. Whether because of that or for other reasons, U.S. diplomacy ably led by Assistant Secretary Blake has addressed many of the issues we identified. The annual bilateral consultations (ABCs) he leads with each of the region’s governments and a more serious effort at consultations on Afghanistan have gone a long way toward repositioning the United States in Central Asia and enabling our presence there to more effectively advance American interests.

Looking ahead, further additions to our agenda in and with Central Asia are needed that I hope you and others in Congress will encourage and support.

First, the United States should continue and further strengthen its engagement in the region. Dialogue with the countries’ leaders and civil societies should be supported as an end in itself, to advance our agenda and values for the long-term, not something to be extended or withheld as a reward or punishment for good or bad behavior. For the foreseeable future, Afghanistan should remain a frequent topic of conversation. The ABCs should be continued and brought at least occasionally to the ministerial or head of state level, and a civil society component of these consultations should be developed. No U.S. president has ever visited the region. Now is the time to do so.

Second, we need to further rebalance and better coordinate our diplomacy in Central Asia. Our ambassadors need to be more strongly supported by all agencies as the U.S. government coordinators on the ground. In Washington, the president should appoint a senior

director for Central Asia at the National Security Council (NSC) to more effectively coordinate U.S. policy and its execution. It is still the case that Central Asia management at the NSC belongs to the senior director for Russia. Leaving aside the optics of this, such a mixing of responsibilities will not produce the results our country needs.

Third, we should buttress continued advocacy on issues of democracy, human rights and the rule of law by giving greater priority to trade. The U.S. Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with the Central Asian states and Afghanistan is taken seriously neither here nor in the region. We should transition this into a World Trade Organization (WTO) accession strategy worked in tandem and at senior levels with the international financial institutions (IFIs), the European Union, and others. WTO membership will not only facilitate trade and investment. It will also strengthen over time the domestic constituencies interested in fair and consistent application of the law, respect for property and other rights, more open borders and societies, and more credible mechanisms for sharing decision making that will help engender the political pluralism these countries need.

Fourth, we should get more serious about the Silk Road, which can help transform the region and make use of its geographic comparative advantage where the Far East, South Asia, and Europe come together. The president should appoint a senior-level special envoy to lead U.S. work on the physical and policy infrastructure required for the Silk Road to become a 21st century reality. Our diplomacy on it should include Russia, China, the European Union and the IFIs, especially the Asian Development Bank, which has shown real leadership in this area.

Fifth, we should strengthen the Central Asian dimension of the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE should do in Central Asia what it has done in the Balkans. It should expand its regional presence and on-the-ground work on inter-ethnic issues, crisis management, trade and economic development, counternarcotics, and in other areas. Such OSCE efforts will help improve cooperation among the Central Asians themselves.

My remarks have focused on how we organize ourselves to shape the future of Central Asia and help it to succeed in a troubled region. Better organization and more effective advocacy will be good for US policy, but our programs also require resources to be successful. In FY-2002, the United States budgeted some \$328 million to support our policy goals in Central Asia, but I understand that the Administration's request for FY-2013 amounts to only \$96 million. I don't know what the right sum is, but am certain that we should not short-change our interest in security, prosperity and democracy-promotion efforts in Central Asia, especially in light of the drawdown in Afghanistan. Congress faces difficult choices as it confronts the budget deficit, of course. I urge the members of this committee to work with the appropriators and the Administration to ensure that the resources made available to advance U.S. interests and values in this part of the world are sufficient for the task.