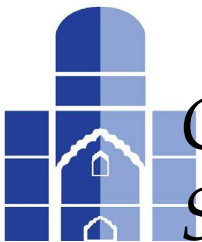


# Greater Central Asia as a Component of U.S. Global Strategy

S. Frederick Starr

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## Introduction

What should be the United States' strategy towards Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the region of Greater Central Asia (GCA) as a whole? Should it even have one? Unlike most other world regions, these lands did not figure in US policy until the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Though the new Baltic states entered Washington's field of vision in that year, in those cases the Department of State could recall and build upon America's relations with independent Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania during the inter-war decades. For the US Government after 1991, GCA was defined less as sovereign states than as a group of "former Soviet republics" that continued to be perceived mainly through a Russian lens, if at all.

Over the first generation after 1991 US policy focused on developing electoral systems, market economies, anti-narcotics programs, individual and minority rights, gender equality, and civil society institutions to support them. Congress itself defined these priorities and charged the Department of State to monitor progress in each area and to issue detailed country-by-country annual reports on progress or regression. The development of programs in each area and the compilation of data for the reports effectively preempted many other areas of potential US concern. Indeed, it led to the neglect of such significant issues as intra-regional relations, the place of these countries in global geopolitics, security in all its dimensions, and, above all, their relevance to America's core interests. On none of these issues did Congress demand annual written reports.

This is not to say that Washington completely neglected security issues in GCA. To its credit, it worked with the new governments to suppress the

narcotics trade. However, instead of addressing other US-GCA core security issues directly, it outsourced them to NATO and its Partnership for Peace Program (PfP). During the pre-9/11 years, PfP programs in the Caucasus and Central Asia produced substantial results, including officer training at the U.S. Army's program in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, and the Centrasbat, a combined battalion drawn from four Central Asian armies. But all these declined after 9/11 as America focused its attention on Afghanistan.

Today this picture has dramatically changed, and the changes all arise from developments outside the former Soviet states. First came America's precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, which brought important consequences. As the U.S. withdrew, new forces—above all China but also Russia and the Gulf States—moved in. Also, America's pullout undercut the region's champions of moderate Islam and reimposed a harsh Islamist regime in their midst. And, finally, because Central Asians have always considered Afghanistan as an essential part of their region and not just an inconvenient neighbor, they judged the abrupt U.S. pullout as a body blow to the region as a whole. Now the scene was dominated not by the U.S. but by China and Russia competing with each other. Both powers presented themselves as the new bulwarks of GCA security, and reduced the U.S. to a subordinate role.

While all this was going on, the expansion of China's navy and of both Chinese and European commercial shipping called into question the overriding importance of transcontinental railroad lines and hence of GCA countries.

Taken together, these developments marginalized the concerns and assumptions upon which earlier US strategy towards GCA had been based. With Afghanistan no longer a top priority, American officials refocused their attention on Beijing, Moscow, Ukraine, Israel, and Iran, in the process

increasing the psychological distance between Washington and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

It did not help that no U.S. president had ever visited Central Asia or the Caucasus. This left the initiative on most issues to the GCA leaders themselves. Thus, it was Kazakhstan and not the State Department that proposed to the U.S. government to establish the C5+1 meetings. It was also thanks to pressure from regional leaders that the White House arranged for a first-ever (but brief) meeting between Central Asian presidents and the President of the United States, which took place in September 2023 on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. By comparison, over the previous year Messrs. Putin and Xi Jinping had both met with the regional presidents half a dozen times. Hoping against hope, the Central Asian leaders hailed the C5+1 meeting as a fresh start in their relations with Washington. Washington has done little to validate this hope.



## American Perspectives

America needs to revise and activate its strategy towards GCA in light of changed circumstances. But movement towards that objective is thwarted by the growing polarization of American politics, which is on full display with respect to the fundamentals of U.S. foreign policy. At the risk of oversimplification, one may speak of at least three camps. First, there are those who favor a general pullback from overseas commitments of all sorts. Often termed “neo-isolationists” by their critics, champions of this view define security to include the urgent need to curtail Chinese imports to the United States. Needless to say, adherents of this view consider that Washington’s ties with GCA are unnecessary, fruitless, and a waste of money.

A second group shares the first’s concern over China but would emphasize that the threat from China is as much military as economic and would respond to that threat with major increases in expenditures on defense. Those who back this approach are activists in their willingness to confront China both economically and militarily. While they acknowledge Russia’s continuing role in the new Great Game, they tend to treat Moscow as a secondary player. Because of this, they view GCA countries as a minor factor in the approaching conflict between giants and one that can be safely ignored.

The third faction is indistinguishable from the second except for one important difference: its champions consider GCA to be inescapably a part of the emerging face-off between Washington and Beijing/Moscow and are prepared to develop a new activist strategy with respect to GCA that

strengthens America's hand in the larger contest. An important dimension of this approach is that it would actively exploit differences between Beijing and Moscow in the GCA region to the extent that it constrains China's grand strategy.

As of this writing it is impossible to evaluate with any confidence the relative strength of these three camps. The fact that each contains subgroups further confuses the task of weighing their relative importance. And it need hardly be said that all these positions contend within a rigid environment defined by Congress's past actions and by America's precedent- and agreement-bound foreign policy as a whole.

Before giving in to despair, it should be noted that Republicans and Democrats in Congress recently combined to support the arming of Taiwan, and from time to time have found common ground on other issues affecting national security. One might also note that by the present decade all sides had come to agree that the most serious challenge facing America in the coming era will come not from Russia but from China. But as we have noted, while some focus almost exclusively on economic issues, others underscore the centrality of military competition, or both together. And while some are concerned almost exclusively with China, others argue that even after the Ukraine war Moscow will continue to be a major factor, whether acting alone or in consort with Beijing, as will also be the case with Iran and North Korea.

For now, however, the scale of future inter-party cooperation remains unknown, the more so because the conflict is in the end a dispute over money, especially for the military, a debate that began in the early years of the American republic and continues unabated to this day.

## Can Greater Central Asia Play a Role in American Strategy?

Any analysis of the relevance of the GCA region to America's paramount concerns over China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea must begin with a sober assessment of the GCA region itself. One must ask if it is truly capable of playing a positive role in U.S. and Western strategy? Or is it impaired by built-in deficiencies that might rule out such a role for it?

More than any other world region, GCA faces major world powers on its doorstep. Its border with Russia is the second longest land-border on earth, while the border of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan with China is fully 3,326 kilometers. Yet in spite of the looming presence of great powers, GCA paradoxically suffers from geographical isolation. Tashkent is more than 4,000 kilometers from Beijing and 3,400 from Istanbul, while it is 2,800 kilometers distant from Moscow. By far the closest world capital is New Delhi, at 1,600 kilometers from Tashkent. However, due to the politics of Pakistan and Afghanistan, land transport between Central Asia and India remains closed and mutual contact, while, steadily growing, remains limited.

Further constraining GCA are the concessions to China made by three of its member states in order to join the Shanghai Cooperation Association. Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan all agreed to ban all political activity by their citizens or guests that is directed against China's Turkic province of Xinjiang and even to turn over to Chinese authorities persons accused of engaging in such subversion. Similar curtailments of GCA sovereignties exist with respect to Russia. Blunt statements by Russian

leaders against meddling in the affairs of Russia are addressed to all GCA states.

After gaining independence in 1991 GCA states showed little interest in working together, which invited external powers to employ “divide and conquer” tactics to control them as a group. Both Moscow and Beijing did so without apologies, but the United States also participated in this game, by calibrating American assistance on the basis of each country’s performance in human rights, democracy, civil society, etc., as measured by bureaucrats in the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human, Rights, and Labor. By dividing the region into winners and losers, Washington assured that its strategy towards GCA would not be regional in scope.

The differing pace of economic and social development among GCA countries has further limited their ability to act together and impeded outside efforts to get them to do so. In this regard, the widening economic gulf between Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan on the one hand, and all the region’s other countries on the other, now poses a challenge not only to outside powers that may seek to pursue a regional approach but also to those within GCA who believe the only sure path forward is through cooperation and institutionalization. This bifurcation not only limits the ability of American strategy to function on a truly regional basis but opens opportunities for mischief-making that China and Russia are quick to seize.

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan can all boast of competent leaders whose core staffs are capable of defining strong positions and successfully applying them in practice. Analyses published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute were among the first anywhere to ascribe “agency” to these countries. States that have attained agency can to some extent be considered *subjects* or makers of strategy and not merely the *objects* of the strategies of others. Those that have not attained this stage include

Armenia, Georgia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. For now they have no choice but, as the Japanese say, to “stand in the shadow of a tall tree” or, alternatively, to generate intricate and constantly shifting tactics based on ambiguity and complex maneuvers.

It cannot be denied that the most decisive and stubbornly persistent impediment to any effort by Washington to adopt a GCA-wide strategy that advances US interests *vis a vis* America’s global adversaries has been the absence of cooperation, coordination, and institutionalization among the GCA states themselves. To some extent this was natural and inevitable among newly sovereign countries. Americans should recall their own country’s generation-long avoidance of what their ancestors called “foreign entanglements.” However, in the case of GCA, the reluctance to forge links with their regional neighbors traces directly to pressure from post-Soviet Moscow. Especially since the rise of Vladimir Putin, Russia has staunchly opposed all intra-regional links in GCA that it does not directly control.

It is important also to take note of the divisions within GCA with respect to the degree of “agency” the various governments can exercise. Any global strategy that the U.S. might adopt must acknowledge this reality. However, the distinction fades somewhat in inverse proportion to the size and power of the outside power each country confronts. In considering whether and how to engage the GCA region in its global strategy, Washington must accept that geography, economics, and size combine to limit even the combined agency of regional states.

## The Rise of Collective Agency

In light of all these considerations one might reasonably conclude that GCA countries, whether acting alone or together, lack the geopolitical firepower to resist moves by Russia or China or to advance the interests of the U.S. and its partners in their duel with those major powers.

However, whatever the validity of this assessment, it neglects several factors which, taken together, might lead to very different conclusions. First among these is the importance of agency based not on the individual GCA states but on the region as a whole, and recent increases in the capacity of the GCA region to exercise such "*collective agency*."

Whatever their individual strengths and weaknesses, it is clear that the effectiveness and agency of the GCA countries depends on their ability to act together. All are too small or too weak to act effectively on their own over the long term. Prudent or clever leadership has enabled several countries to have an outsized impact on broader events, but the GCA presidents themselves realize that this is nearly impossible to sustain. Yet with the kind of coordination that arises from understandings among presidents and senior officials, they have achieved at the regional level a degree of agency that was all but impossible for the individual countries acting alone. Even informed opinion in Washington and allied capitals has largely ignored this signal achievement.

The first manifestation of the new regionalism within GCA took place when five Central Asian states together declared their region a nuclear free zone and got the UN to confirm it. A second step towards regional coherence was taken when the Central Asian presidents began consulting with each

other and meeting privately. Another step occurred when Islam Karimov, the president of “go it alone” Uzbekistan, convened a major conference in Samarkand to celebrate and affirm the *regional* sources of Central Asia’s cultural achievements in the past and, by implication, in the future as well.

During America’s presence in Afghanistan leaders in both Central Asia and the Caucasus pursued transportation projects that required regional cooperation, while both China and Europe intensified their interest in region-wide transport corridors. On the American side it was General David Petraeus who led these efforts, and persuaded Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to announce a region-wide “New Silk Road.” Enthusiasm within the region was strong, but when President Obama failed to implement the proposal or even acknowledge its existence China took it over and claimed it as its own.

While the Caucasus were divided by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh, the presidents of Central Asian states met with growing regularity. An initiative that arose from those conclaves was Kazakhstan’s proposal in 2015 for the United States to establish a regular consultation with all five of the formerly Soviet states of Central Asia, which resulted in the C5+1 meetings. It should be underscored again that this was the fruit of a Central Asian initiative and not of the Department of State or Congress. Moreover, its creation in 2015 came long after Japan, Korea, and the European Union had all reorganized their own contact on a regional rather than solely bilateral basis.

When President Biden ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, Washington officialdom and both parties in Congress diminished their attention to GCA countries. In spite of vigorous efforts to prevent it happening, the GCA region again receded into the background of American attention. This changed only when the Central Asian presidents themselves urgently promoted a meeting of the C5+1 with President Biden. They did this because the individual countries of Central Asia, Caucasus,

and even Mongolia had all come to see themselves as part of a broader and fast evolving region, which they define as the territory between Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey. Several national leaders began to talk about the creation of permanent consultative mechanisms, having in mind something akin to ASEAN. But they all hesitated to institutionalize their cooperation out of fear of reprisal from Moscow. It did not help their cause that their friends in Tokyo, Seoul, Brussels and Washington had not linked arms to coordinate their interaction with the emerging region as a whole.

Notwithstanding these retardants, important developments within the GCA countries are now strengthening their profile as a group, making them more of a choir rather than a band of soloists. Thus, region-wide meetings are being organized in many spheres ranging from law, transport, tourism, visa and border regimens, think tanks, medicine, and women's affairs. Meanwhile, regional ambassadors to the United Nations prompted the General Assembly to affirm that Central Asia is indeed a world region and should be treated as such by international organizations, financial agencies, and governments. Such initiatives have encouraged investors worldwide to look anew at Central Asia, while the end of the conflict in Karabakh is extending this same process to the Caucasus. The opening of direct flights between Ulan Baatar and Kazakhstan has already led to an increase of interaction and investments involving Mongolia.



## The Evolution of Surrounding Powers

In evaluating the desirability and feasibility of a U.S. strategy for China, Russia, and their allies that includes a significant role for GCA, it is important to take into account conditions in both of those major powers. What is their likely future evolution and what is its likely impact on the GCA region? Obviously, such an enquiry involves many significant unknowns. Thus, we can only speculate on the conclusion of Putin's war on Ukraine and Russia's future thereafter. Meanwhile, in the near term there remains the possibility of Russia attacking Kazakhstan or Georgia in an effort to reclaim at least some of the lands abandoned by the USSR in 1991. This could take place either under Putin's continuing rule or, more likely under immediate successors who, for at least a time, may try to advance selectively Putin's goals without Putin.

Whatever the outcome of the Ukraine war and its aftermath, we can be sure that Putin and his system will have lost far more than they gained in the Ukraine war. Support for Lukashenko in Belarus and Ivanishvili in Georgia Russia will sharply diminish or end, and both states will roll back their dependence on Moscow, as Armenia has already done. Russia itself will doubtless pass through several post-war phases shaped by fractures within the Russian economy and state institutions. As happened following Tsar Nicholas I's disastrous Crimean War of 1853-56, we can expect the eventual discrediting of those individuals and organizations deemed responsible for the conduct of the war in Ukraine and, after a brief transition, the emergence of new leadership at the top. Whether and how that post-Putin leadership addresses core issues remains unknown. However, it will be under great pressure to acknowledge and deal with the country's mounting centrifugal

pressures, to bring about the end of sanctions (especially on natural gas), to reopen Russia to international investment, and to reform the army itself.

The transition of Russian industry from a war economy to civilian production will take years, retarding the overall recovery. A further significant brake on Russia's renewal will be the severe reduction in the ranks of the technical intelligentsia resulting from emigration and the erosion of educational institutions during the war. A yet more important retardant on recovery will be the labor shortage arising from long term low birth rates, high mortality, the reduced numbers of workers from Central Asia, and war deaths in Ukraine. Efforts to address these issues will expose sharp disagreements within the ranks of educated Russians and policymakers.

These post-Ukraine changes in Russia are unavoidable and all but certain. The only unknown—and a very important one—is the length of time required for the Putin system to be fully discredited and break down. This could take place quickly, as occurred after the timely and convenient death of Nicholas I in 1855, or over the course of years. But come when they may, these changes will mark the end of the Russian empire that did not occur after 1917 and which took place only partially after 1991. Those chauvinists, Eurasianists, and Putinists who dreamed of reconquering territories lost in 1991 – including both Central Asia and the Caucasus – will remain discredited for at least a decade, during which time the resources their project would require will have vanished.

No such certainty can be ascribed to emerging developments in China. Xi Jinping wields more control than any Chinese ruler since Mao. Moreover, the Chinese economy is large and increasingly modern, and is buoyed by a large and talented technical elite and by a wealthy and nimble entrepreneurial class. Centrifugal forces remain ever-present in China, but for now are held under tight control by aggressive controls imposed from

the center. These and other factors weigh heavily against the possibility of deep erosion in the near-term and possibly beyond.

This said, China's evolution over the millennia has been marked by sharp and unanticipated discontinuities. What are the possible sources of discontinuity today? The three most widely discussed factors are financial pressures, the demographic crisis, and the spread of education and information among younger Chinese. However, for the time being Beijing seems to have all these under control. Modernization of the economy reduces its dependence on low- or semi-skilled laborers, and Beijing could, if necessary, draw on temporary workers from abroad, as Japan is doing. Entrepreneurial success and access to information are already causing young elites to think more independently, but for the foreseeable future modest economic growth and controls of all types are likely to keep centrifugal forces in check.

To summarize, US strategy towards the GCA countries must deal with China as it is today and is likely to remain for some time to come, while it must take practical cognizance of the powerful contrary forces that Putin's hyper-centralization and new governmentalism have already unleashed and which are all but certain to weaken the Russian polity.

What should be the elements of a fresh American of a strategy and how should it be evaluated? Besides the obvious question of its prospects for success, various other factors must also be taken into consideration, among them the potential costs, the capacity of U.S. governmental institutions to implement change and, of course, the likelihood and nature of responses by China and Russia.

## The Cost of Inaction

Before addressing these issues, however, it is important to gain a sober appreciation of the price to be paid for inaction. A prime goal of strategy, after all, is not just to chart a plan for success but, equally, to avoid negative developments that might otherwise arise and define reality.

First, inaction by the U.S. will mean that all or part of GCA will eventually come under the sway of China, Russia, and other encircling powers. It would give Russia unimpeded access to the GCA economies and expand China's economic zone through uninterrupted land-based trade extending to the borders of Europe and the Middle East. GCA countries would retain little control over transport across their territories, goods transported, or support facilities for those routes, including warehousing, service facilities, hotels, etc.

Second, inaction by Washington will greatly strengthen the reach and effectiveness of Beijing's Shanghai Cooperation Organization. That China sees this as a priority is evident from the fact that two long-serving heads of that organization were recruited from Central Asia, a Tajik and Uzbek respectively.

Third, at a time when Putin's Eurasian Economic Union is flagging, inaction will revitalize that institution, expand it into new areas, and could force Uzbekistan and other GCA non-member countries to join it. This will occur at the expense of trade and investment from the West.

Fourth, inaction by the U.S. will revive and expand Moscow's Collective Security Treaty Organization, forcing all GCA countries to join and harden it as an anti-NATO and anti-American entity.

Fifth, it will stimulate and vindicate retrograde and anti-American and anti-NATO aspirations in both Moscow and Beijing.

Sixth, inaction from Washington will bring about and legitimate authoritarian changes within the GCA region itself. Legal, juridical, and political institutions will gradually evolve along lines deemed compatible with the Chinese or Russian models of governance, thus creating a solid band of authoritarian states from China's border with North Korea to the Persian Gulf.

Seventh, it will strengthen Iran's engagement with both Moscow and Beijing, which will in turn marginalize the West and its allies with respect to Afghanistan, and negatively impact the entire Middle East and Turkey.

Eighth, it would cause India and Southeast Asia to weaken their growing ties with the U.S. and West and reach accommodations with the institutional and security institutions enumerated above.

Overall, if the U.S. government fails to act, it will lead to the transformation of the entire Eurasian landmass into a single camp. India, with no real alternative, would seek an accommodation with the new behemoth. The role of the U.S. would be reduced to the status of an inconsequential outsider, diminishing everywhere its ability to affect reality on behalf of its own interests.

## A Workable Strategy

What, then, should be the elements of a workable strategy? Above all, the United States must embrace GCA as such, and do so both as a desirable end in itself and as a means of strengthening America's ability to counterbalance and therefore constrain China, Russia, and Iran, singly or in any combination.

To do this the U.S. must abandon the Soviet definition of Central Asia as including only the five republics that Lenin and Stalin created in the 1920s. The presidents of all five of these states have already done so, and now include the president of Azerbaijan in all their regularly scheduled meetings. The U.S. should deepen its security dialogue with GCA as a region and not just with separate countries, with the purpose of strengthening locally-owned security and coordinating it on a regional basis.

The U.S. must use GCA to polarize Russian and Chinese perceptions and interests, and to intensify unacknowledged tensions between them. In this context, it should be noted that beyond the Arctic, the GCA region is the scene of powerful but unacknowledged competition between Moscow and Beijing. When the U.S. gains a closer and more strategic engagement with the GCA countries as a group, it will enable Washington to play those powerful neighbors against each other.

The main task of the proposed strategy is to strengthen region-wide interaction, coordination and institutionalization among the countries of GCA in such a way as to build a zone of autonomy on the doorsteps of Moscow and Beijing. By enabling GCA governments themselves to deal

more effectively with the two major powers on their doorsteps it will also reduce China's ability to focus single-mindedly on the South China Sea and Southeast Asia and overall complicate its strategic calculations.

A broader and strategically focused approach to the three countries of the Caucasus and the five states of Central Asia will inevitably resonate positively in adjacent countries elsewhere in the region that are in fact part of Greater Central Asia. First among these will be Mongolia, which for the past decade has steadily but quietly strengthened its connectivity and overall relations with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. By looking westward to GCA, it not only adds an important element to its toolkit for balancing pressure from Moscow and Beijing, but it also affirms strong if complex cultural relations that have existed for nearly a millennium.

Whatever the Taliban's fate, any future government in Kabul will seek to prevent the country from becoming a satrap of Beijing. Better coordination among the present states of Central Asia and the Caucasus will exert a positive influence on Kabul, and gradually open it once more to its developing northern neighbors, a relationship that thrived for millennia before it was destroyed by the tsarist and Soviet empires. Washington will benefit from access to the in-country insights on Afghan developments gained by GCA officials, business leaders, and cultural observers.

Mongolia and Afghanistan are not the only lands that will be positively impacted by America's support for the emergence of GCA as a region. The peoples of the North Caucasus have long been under Russian and then Soviet rule. Brutal policies from Moscow, including wars extending over two centuries and mass deportations, have failed to turn them into docile puppets. Today many Chechens and Ingush are in open revolt against Russian rule, with some of them fighting Moscow alongside Ukrainian forces. But they are limited by the fact that they can interact with the outside world only through Moscow and by the closed borders between them and

Georgia and Azerbaijan. To be sure, their prospects for gaining independence are slim at present, but the presence of a better coordinated group of neighbors in the South Caucasus and beyond could open their eyes to possibilities that today may seem all but nonexistent.

A final issue that will be positively affected by a region-based and strategically coherent strategy by the United States has to do with trust. It is no secret that the abrupt and chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was seen throughout the GCA region as a profoundly disturbing event. Less appreciated is the extent to which other countries much further afield have been similarly affected by President Biden's decision, with many in Africa, Asia, and South America citing it as proof of America's caprice, inconsistency, and cynical disregard even for its friends. A fresh, integrated, region-wide and sustained global strategy, in which GCA plays a significant part, would, over time, begin to correct this judgment.

What, then, are the objections to the proposed strategy? Faced with the challenges posed by China, Russia, Iran and North Korea, many Americans, including key politicians, question whether the U.S. should accept the formidable financial costs involved. These potential expenditures have already become a major focus of debates in Congress.

But the US strategy for GCA proposed here is notable for its modest financial cost, especially as compared with the staggering outlays involved in confronting Russia and China alone. The initial expenditure for the proposal outlined above will be mainly administrative, i.e., to pay for diplomatic initiatives, planning meetings, and the specialized studies needed to turn what are now separate groupings of states into a new Greater Central Asia region. To be sure, there will be new investments needed to realize the new region in many spheres, but these can be covered in part by the private sector, in part by international financial institutions, and in part



by the countries themselves. Thus, the chief challenge to moving forward with this proposal is more bureaucratic than financial.

Washington bureaucrats, like their counterparts everywhere, loath change and resist it to the extent possible. The chief challenge for those championing these proposals will be to persuade senior officials in the State Department, National Security Council and other agencies that they offer a practical, low cost, and achievable path forward. This must then be translated into a reorganization of the State Department's bureaus to bring all GCA countries under a single roof. Bureaucrats will object that their agencies lack the requisite "bandwidth" to implement such changes. For them to agree, they must come to see that their present formulas for Central Asia and the Caucasus contribute little or nothing to the broader competition involving China and Russia and are not working.

Skeptics will argue that these proposals are out of step with the times. However, it is precisely their objections that are out of step with emerging realities, for the changes within the GCA region enumerated above are directly supportive of the new strategy and institutional arrangements proposed here. All these developments support an approach to the GCA region that is not only fully integrated with America's ever-more urgent global concerns with China, Russia, and their allies but directly advances them.

The governments of GCA countries have themselves taken the lead in shifting from solo sovereignties towards region-wide collaboration. As we have seen, it was they who first called for periodic meetings between the five Central Asian presidents as a group and the American president. Though they were established in 2015, Washington did not actually convene such a meeting until 2023. By that time the Central Asian presidents had already "crossed the Caspian" by inviting the Ilham Aliyev, president of Azerbaijan, to join their regularly scheduled meetings, an important shift that has yet to be reflected in an expanded G5+1 and in U.S. policy.

Meanwhile, Aliyev was in active contact with the leaders of both Georgia and Armenia, as were senior officials from the Central Asian states.

At this point a skeptic might argue that whatever the merits of the strategic shift proposed here, this is not the time to do it. After all, the C5+1 is only now beginning to function, and it needs more time for its potential to be realized. Why change horses at such a time, a skeptic might argue, when the attention of Washington officialdom is focused on urgent developments in Gaza, Iran, and Taiwan and on many other issues that many consider to be of far greater moment than Central Asia and the Caucasus.

However, it is precisely such conditions that call not for the automatic continuation of current policies and structures but for fresh and effective leadership in Washington, which can then make the case for change with the American public, with Congress, and with the various executive agencies, beginning with State and NSC. The core of this new message must be that U.S. strategy in Central Asia and the Caucasus, far from being peripheral to America's core concerns, can play a positive role in America's larger concerns, and to do so in a way that governments in the region will welcome, which is unlikely to provoke frontal or armed major-power confrontation, and which costs little. Current organizational structures in State, NSC, the Pentagon, and other agencies must be modified to accord with the recognition of a single GCA.

A further reason for prompt action is that fundamental shifts are already taking place in the region. Thanks to hostile actions by Mr. Putin, Armenia is struggling to assert its sovereignty and is hoping against hope that America or the European Union will extend a helping hand. Meanwhile, large segments of the population of Georgia are in open rebellion against the increasingly Moscow-centric policies of their oligarch-leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili. Disappointed in the EU's tepid response to their fate and frustrated over Washington's endless ambiguity, they have no one to whom

to turn. China has offered its good offices, but for now Ivanishvili, under pressure from Moscow, has not responded. By putting forward a positive overall strategy in which American relations with Georgia and Armenia are imbedded, Washington will send a signal that the new government in Yerevan will welcome, that most Georgians will hail, and which will put Ivanishvili on the defensive. Again, for it to be real, this shift must be translated into restructured Washington bureaus and offices.

The regionalist approach to Central Asia and the Caucasus proposed here is solidly grounded in what is fast becoming an economic reality. No issue affecting the entire Central Asia/Caucasus region is being more vigorously pursued today than the “bridging” of the Caspian for the transport of oil gas, and continent-spanning trade. Without such “bridges” spanning the Caspian, mutually beneficial trade between Europe and China will slow. The financing of trans-Caspian projects is being actively promoted by entrepreneurs in many countries, including China, and by international financial institutions. Unfortunately, the Department of State assigns countries to the East and West of the Caspian to different bureaus, which interact only with difficulty. If Washington were to embrace the GCA as a region and organize itself accordingly, it would move the U.S. from the status of regional laggard to that of a leader.

A factor strongly supportive of the proposals offered here is the fact that, after years of stagnation or slow growth, and with the exception of Tajikistan, Georgia, and Afghanistan, the economies of the CAMCA region are growing stronger. This, along with adroit diplomacy, has enabled three regional states—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan—to become “Middle Powers” with the capacity to act positively in the international arena and not be defined solely by the actions of others.

As we have noted, GCA governments have already begun to embrace the larger definition of their region that is proposed here. It is true that bilateral relations with states as varied as China, Japan, the EU, and U.S. are still held

on the basis of the five former Soviet states of Central Asia. However, the emphasis in all cases has shifted from an exclusive focus on bilateral relations to region-based consultations. As of this writing, several countries are considering expanding participation in their consultations to include Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, nearly all international banks and financial institutions, including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank and China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank already function on a regional basis, which they define in terms of the GCA countries, minus Mongolia.

While much remains to be done, region-wide cooperation among the GCA governments has expanded rapidly, with advances in regional transport, intra-regional commercial ties, information, and, most recently, security. Central Asian presidents meeting two years ago at Cholpan-Ata in the Kyrgyz Republic adopted a resolution to expand consultation and institutionalization to include twenty-two areas. Practical results are already advancing rapidly in transportation, law, tariffs, border relations, visas, and in recent months, security.

Finally, it is important to recognize that with the sole exceptions of Afghanistan, all GCA countries seek positive relations with the U.S. in a wide range of areas. This fact, which coexists with their inevitable and ongoing relations with Russia, China, and Iran, reflects their own strong desire to counterbalance these neighboring great powers with the United States and its European and Asian partners. In other words, in spite of powerful contrary pressures from Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran, they are already pursuing a strategy akin to what is proposed here.

Reflecting their urgent need for closer ties with Washington, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia all boast caucuses of sympathizers in Congress. And with the obvious exception of Afghanistan, American businesses and investors have funded permanent organizations in

Washington dedicated to expanding American investment in countries of the GCA region. These groups increasingly collaborate with each other on a regional basis and seek to advance the kind of regional approach proposed in this paper. If the State Department were to create a Greater Central Asia Bureau, it would align the U.S. government with those American businesses and the region itself. More important, it would enable Washington to enhance its strategy towards Russia, China, and their allies by integrating it with a coordinated approach to the countries of Greater Central Asia.

The US has refused to use the term “containment” as a long-term goal with respect to its strategy in China or Russia, or even the clumsy synonym “constrainment.” In order to relate GCA to an enhanced strategy towards malign powers it does not need to employ either of these terms, for America’s goal in this newly sovereign region is positive: simply to strengthen and protect the sovereignties of friendly states that are now under severe pressure from many sides, and which themselves look for the U.S. to play a more deliberate role in their own balancing diplomacy.

It is past time for Washington to support efforts by the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus to link arms with each other, to bring this regional development into a constructive relation with its own global strategy for China, Russia, Tehran, and North Korea, and to do so in a manner that strengthens both America’s strategy and the sovereignties of all countries of Greater Central Asia.

## Author's Bio

S. Frederick Starr, Ph.D., is the founding chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, and a Distinguished Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council. He co-founded the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies and served as Vice-President of Tulane University and President of Oberlin College and of the Aspen Institute. He is a member of the Board of Trustees of Nazarbayev University in Astana and of ADA University in Baku. His research on the countries of Greater Central Asia and Russia has resulted in twenty-two books and 200 published articles. He is the author of *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age*, translated into twenty languages, and *The Genius of Their Age: Ibn Sina, Biruni, and the Lost Enlightenment*, published by Oxford University Press in 2023.