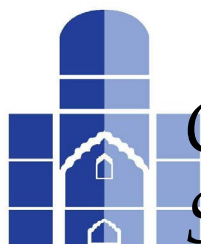


U.S. Policy in Central Asia through Central Asian Eyes

S. Frederick Starr

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Introduction

Over nearly three decades the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute has issued numerous books and monographs as well as scores of articles on America's relations with the states of Central Asia. In such works as *The Long Game on the Silk Road* (2018), we have always strived to represent the views of regional governments accurately and fairly.¹ However, the main focus has been on the making of American strategy, on identifying the main forces behind it, and on placing it in the context of U.S. strategy as a whole.

Today both the countries of Central Asia and the U.S. itself face unprecedented challenges at the global and national levels. The war in Ukraine, the shifting fates of major powers, and economic and social changes worldwide and across the region all challenge U.S. assumptions about Central Asia. America's foundational commitment, declared as the new states came into being, affirms Washington's support for the "independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity," of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. From 1992, when it was first pronounced, to the present all governments in the region have gratefully welcomed this formulation. But what does it actually mean today? And what *should* it mean?

Not until 2020 did Washington issue a widely disseminated formal document on its approach to the region: "U.S. Strategy for Central Asia,

¹ S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *The Long Game on the Silk Road: U.S. and EU Strategy in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13280>)

2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity.”² While of doubtless value at one level, such statements leave out the myriad tactical steps and interactions through which a strategy is, or is not, actually implemented. Amidst the present whirlwind of global change, such practical dimensions assume great importance. Far more than mere declarations, they define the reality of the relationship, for they are what the countries themselves must actually deal with, and in reference to which they shape their own actions.

This being the case, it is important for Washington to know how its positions and actions are perceived by the countries towards which they are directed. Official statements by Central Asian governments and on-the-record comments by their officials touch on this question but cannot answer it, for they often gloss over the officials’ real concerns or present them in such watered-down generalities as to render them unrecognizable. In an effort to gain a better understanding of how Central Asian governments perceive American policies we have therefore turned to the Central Asians themselves, including senior officials, diplomats, business people, local policy experts, journalists, and leaders of civil society organizations. In all, we have conducted some fifty interviews. All our subjects spoke on the condition of strict anonymity and “*not for attribution.*”

We have been impressed not only with the candor of our interviewees but also the positive spirit in which they made their comments. Many offered constructive suggestions. None made demands. Even those most critical of American positions saw the possibility of positive change and looked

² U.S. Department of State, “United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity (Overview)” February 5, 2020. (<https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>)

forward to improved and deepened relations with America in days to come. And all acknowledged that the need for change is on both sides, theirs as well as ours. In this spirit, several wanted their diplomats to do more to develop Caucus groups in the U.S. Congress. Others called for better coordination on the Central Asian side before meetings of the C5+1 group, while still others complained about the slow development of intra-regional consultative and coordinating bodies in Central Asia.

Views from the Region

Our contacts and interviewees expressed their views on scores of issues pertaining to U.S. policy and actions in Central Asia. In an effort to bring order to these notes and comments, we will focus only on their most significant concerns and on those issues that are most amenable to change. In this document we neither accept nor reject the views expressed by those whom we have interviewed. Our goal has been simply to report what we have been told, and to do so as faithfully as possible.

General Frustrations

Predictably, some of our interviewees gave voice to long-standing frustrations. High on this list is the continuing failure of Congress to remove the 1974 Jackson-Vannick Amendment, which was directed against the USSR's restrictions on Jewish emigration and democratic rights. They note that President Obama lifted it for Russia in 2012 following Congress's repeal of the bill, but that the U.S. still applies it to the Central Asian countries. One interviewee called it "a blatant symbol of U.S. fecklessness," while nearly all viewed the State Department's demand that they "take their case to Congress" to be a dodge.

Beyond this, in one voice Central Asian respondents faulted the State Department practice of publicly "naming and shaming" what its office of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor judges to be shortcomings in democratization and human rights. Amidst a climate of Russian revanchism and Chinese expansionism, does it help to brand Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as “not free”? Three words that recur most frequently in our interviews are “polarizing,” “divisive” and “self-defeating.”

Yet all argued that progress in these area is possible, with tact and patience.

We were surprised that many respondents called for Washington to name more political appointees as ambassadors, for (it was argued) they would be less bound by State Department Protocols and could call the White House directly. In a peevish tone, several criticized the naming of “last-post-before-retirement” career diplomats to their countries.

On a more serious level, a common observation was that Washington does not adequately appreciate the extent to which all the Central Asian governments hesitate to cooperate with the U.S. in key areas because of fear of Moscow’s response. This note was sounded not only by Kazakhs, whose economy is most closely integrated with Russia’s, but representatives of all other states as well. It finds current expression in what many considered the “existential” problem of secondary sanctions,” discussed below.

Improving C5+1

The Department of State introduced the C5+1 format in 2015, following a direct suggestion from Kazakhstan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, and after CACI and others had long called for such a mechanism to be created.³ In

³ S. Frederick Starr et.al., *Looking Forward: Kazakhstan and the United States*, Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, 2014.

(http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2014_09_SRP_StarrAI_Kazakhstan-US.pdf)

an effort to strengthen regionalism in Central Asia, Japan, Korea, and the European Union had already instituted similar formats.

Since 2015, there have been yearly C5+1 summits involving the ministers of foreign affairs, alongside many working meetings. The U.S. typically sends an interagency team drawn from the departments of State, Commerce, Treasury, and Defense, with representation also from the White House. While many issues have been discussed, there is general agreement that among the most successful have concerned issues of water management and the environment, including the ill-fated Aral Sea.

Department of State's Management of C5+1

A recurring complaint concerns the State Department's management of the C5+1 process. Many of our interlocutors complained about the lack of preparation ahead of meetings, the absence of questions and discussion, a failure to prioritize issues, and "wooden" interactions. Others despairingly complain about the overproduction by C5+1 of webinars, trainings, and other "soft power" projects, while still others worry that the resulting joint statements are too general and vague. One diplomat even declared that "no serious practical steps have ever emerged from C5+1."

A C5+1 Secretariat?

Both officials and independent experts in Central Asia suggest that an essential step towards making C5+1 effective and appreciated would be to establish a permanent C5+1 secretariat. This could be done in the region itself on a rotating basis, or in Washington. They argue that the absence of a secretariat perpetuates C5+1's lackluster performance. Inevitably, they also seek more U.S. financial support for the institution, and compare Washington's support for C5+1 to European, Japanese, and Korean subvention of their consultative institutions.

However, several interlocutors acknowledged that the impact of better coordination and a secretariat by Washington will be limited until the Central Asians themselves broaden and institutionalize their own intra-regional consultative processes.

They therefore suggest that Washington indicate its willingness to back this umbrella project by funding a planning process involving other regional organizations worldwide, e.g. ASEAN, Nordic Council, etc.

Washington's Human Rights Agenda and its Costs

Complaints continue to be voiced over Washington's use of the C5+1 format to continue harping on issues on child labor, human rights, democratization, and, most recently, domestic partners and same-sex partners, for whom Washington demands the same rights as married partners. It is commonly asserted that the U.S. (and such EU countries as Germany) do not appreciate the price they pay for their stance in the form of growing distrust from their Central Asian counterparts. They note that Russia effectively exploits the issue to fan distrust of America. Since 2004, Moscow has with some effect been using the argument that Washington is actually seeking a change of government, i.e. , a "color revolution," in Central Asian states. In short, the outcome of the manner in which the U.S. expresses criticism is not to spur reform, but to create fear and suspicion.

Our contacts suggest three ways that Washington could address this issue. First, its present approach is "all sticks, no carrots." It could do better by opening a process of dialogue on these issues, designed so as to hold out the prospect of benefits linked to progress. Access to Millennium Challenge Grants is cited as a possibility, with the note that even "threshold grants" would have a positive impact. Second, Washington treats these as "gateway" issues, a test that must be passed before advancing to other (and more urgent) issues. This is perceived as blackmail, and in a

form that ultimately thwarts progress on America's other concerns.

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Add Azerbaijan to C5+1 to form C6+1:

Throughout Soviet times the eastern and western shores of the Caspian occupied different worlds. For two decades after the collapse of the USSR their mutual isolation intensified. Now, however, powerful forces are driving them together. The increase of flights across the Caspian, heightened contact at the political and business level, and a common concern over Russian irredentism nudge them together. Above all, they are our partners in the east-west transport of both energy and goods, through a potential Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan pipeline and through the so-called Southern Corridor that could provide a link between Europe and China that skirts Russia territory.

Central Asians are keenly aware of these developments, and many have embraced the common interests uniting both shores of the Caspian. They also note that the U.S. used to be a leading champion of the East-West corridor, which was central to U.S. policy toward the region in the 1990s and early 2000s. The U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, however, led to a reorganization of the State Department that separated the South Caucasus and Central Asia into different bureaus. As a result, U.S. interest in the East-West corridor faded, replaced by increased North-South thinking. Connecting Central Asia with South Asia through Afghanistan was certainly a worthwhile initiative, our respondents argue, but should not have come at the expense of continuing to develop the East-West corridor. One senior Central Asian diplomat noted that following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the route through the Caucasus is now effectively the only lifeline connecting Central Asia with the world, aside from its border with China.

Central Asian governments have up to now spoken favorably of connections across the Caspian, but in vague terms, even as presidents fly back and forth. In the past year, however, such interaction has multiplied. On April 8, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan signed documents totaling \$55 million. In December 2022, it was announced that the Azerbaijani semi-submersible drilling rig, "Dede Gorgud," would be involved in exploring of the Kazakh offshore structure, "Zhenis."

Several of our interlocutors who occupy senior official posts strongly endorsed the addition of at least Azerbaijan into C5+1, with Georgia also a strong candidate because of its key location astride the east-west transport and energy corridor. Meanwhile, Armenia is reorienting itself away from Russia and more towards the region and, in the judgment of several of our interlocutors, should be included.

The consensus, then, is that Azerbaijan should be added immediately to C5+1, making it C6+1, with Georgia to be added if and when it emerges from its present control by oligarch Ivanishvili and his followers. Armenia's involvement can be considered as soon as its new orientation is confirmed by events. Such a move would help the U.S. Government once again begin to think in terms of the East-West corridor, something that has been missing in the past twenty years and which has become more urgent since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Security

Russia's war on Ukraine has exacerbated the already tense security situation in Central Asia. Moscow officials have explicitly threatened Kazakhstan and issued warnings to others in the region. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan continue to seek an accommodation with Russia. As one Central Asian official expressed it, the region remains 95% dependent on Russia for its security. NATO's once promising Partnership for Peace

Program has faded. Yet, as several of our interlocutors pointed out, the sole security issue considered in C5+1 has been the now diminished danger of Islamic extremism and the need to strengthen borders against it, not the existential threat from Russia and China.

We were told that Washington, in connection with C5+1, organized several undisclosed meetings on Central Asian security. However, the Central Asian officials who told us of these meetings viewed them with extreme skepticism because, as they assured us, Russia had infiltrated all the regional security apparatuses and hence anything taking place at America's undisclosed sessions would quickly be transmitted to Moscow.

What Happened to NATO?

The neglect of security matters suggests America's continuing irrelevance to Central Asia's main concern, thanks to which no country in the region today views Washington a viable security counterbalance to Russia or China. Those whom we interviewed agreed that post-WWII security structures had all become obsolete, with the possible exception of NATO. Central Asians told us of their disappointment that NATO's Partnership for Peace was now moribund, for it had once held great promise for the region. Moreover, several of them complained about the sharp division and poor interconnection between NATO in Brussels and their interlocutors in Washington, which not only sidelines security in the C5+1 process but fragments it between poorly coordinated entities.

In what struck as a pleading manner, Central Asians urged Washington to improve its coordination with NATO on Central Asian defense, to consider reviving PfP for Central Asia, and to open talks on the modernization of regional military infrastructures. They also called for training of regional officers at the U.S. army war colleges, with an emphasis on strategy, scenario planning, and net assessments. Finally, informants from several countries called for a program of intelligence

sharing and analysis with selective Central Asian states, to be carried out possibly at the Marshall Center at Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Germany.

A Strategic Forum

One suggestion that came from nearly all the Central Asians was to create under C5+1 a strategic forum for states of Central Asia and the Caucasus akin to the Munich Security Conference, where security and national defense experts and strategists can meet at least once per year—and more often in smaller groups—to learn how to cooperate on critical security issues, including regional strategy and intelligence sharing.

Running as a silver thread through most interviews and conversations was the question, “who can we count upon if we are faced with a real crisis?” Lacking such arrangements as those enumerated here, we were told repeatedly, the states of Central Asia would be left with no alternative to cooperation with Russia and China. The oft-repeated charge was that “in its dealings with us, Washington seems not to appreciate the existential impact on us of the Ukraine war...or it chooses to ignore it. One of our informants declared that the United States in Central Asia is pursuing a “self-marginalizing” approach.

The Regional Economy

One important change in Central Asia is the importance that governments accord to economic relations in their foreign policy. While this was not the case a decade ago, today conversations with representatives of Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, begin with concerns about economic development and foreign direct investment. This reflects an acute concern about the economic downturn connected with sanctions on Russia and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Helping Central Asia to Live with Sanctions

The many-sided issue of the collateral damage caused by American sanctions on Russia is high on the list of concerns of most of our regional interviewees. While acknowledging Washington's stated intention to mitigate their secondary impact, the general feeling is that nothing has yet worked.

The Central Asians themselves propose a simple solution: give Central Asian economies a carve-out to the sanctions against the use of Iran's Chabahar port. This would give the landlocked region access to a port and begin to replace what they have lost with the sanctions on Russia. In behalf of their proposal, they all point to the fact that Washington granted such an exception to Afghanistan during the Afghan war, so it could transport materiel in and out of that landlocked country. Such a move would have the added benefit of boosting Central Asia's trade linkages with India.

A Mechanism to Foster American Investments

Uzbekistan recently joined other Central Asian countries in signing a framework agreement on trade and investment with the United States. Nearly all of our contacts who are involved with business or the economy plead for C5+1 to translate this agreement into a functioning and dynamic organization capable of creating mechanisms to foster American investment. Some acknowledge that the relatively small size of their economies and their isolation from each other reduces the region's attractiveness. They also realize that the American government cannot force businesses to invest in this or any other region. Yet they plead for some form of help, beyond the mere signing of framework agreement.

Earlier, Washington responded to these urgings by proposing to establish a joint investment company for C5+1 countries, patterned after its successful project with the Baltic countries. American planners responded

positively, but then set what was seen as a too high entrance fee: \$500 million each for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, \$250 million for the rest. Washington then cut the fee in half but by then the project had died. Our contacts acknowledge that today the U.S. has more urgent financial priorities but plead for officials in Washington at least to back their countries' proposals to the international financial institutions.

Business people and officials from the region's two largest economies – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – often complained about double taxation, an issue which they say has been handled with all the other market-based economies. They vented their frustration at being told that any such measure would have to be prepared first by U.S. businesses, a response that one called “stupid.”

A Region-Wide Joint Business Council

The one Washington initiative that seems to have gained widespread support is to create a special region-wide business council, which the locals have already dubbed “B5+1.” Based on the framework agreement and organized under the C5+1 umbrella, it could provide a balanced context for each side to advance U.S. investments and mutual trade and where they could iron out problems together.

East-West Corridor and Trans-Caspian Pipelines:

In a significant move, Washington has embraced proposals to span the Caspian Sea with a pipeline to send Central Asian gas to Europe and to advance a “Middle Transport Corridor” linking China and Central Asia with the West without crossing Russian territory. While everyone with whom we spoke supported these projects, many pointed out grave problems standing in the way of their completion. Russia and Iran still have the political and military will to thwart them, and Moscow's growing influence over the government of Georgia could block them. Moreover,

both projects require higher levels of U.S.-EU and U.S.-Turkey coordination than have recently been exhibited.

Engaging Turkmenistan

Not one person with whom we spoke was optimistic about Turkmenistan's participation in a Trans-Caspian pipeline. Skeptics noted that the project cannot build on prior successful initiatives, for no U.S. oil major has ever conducted a major project there. Comparing Washington's designation of their country as "not free" and multiple visits by Chinese leaders Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, they see scant reason for hope. Until the U.S. develops at least one major project with Turkmenistan, our interlocutors see little hope. Our contacts do not consider this likely. Several older persons noted that two decades ago the Department of State appointed ambassador-level officers to coordinate American developments in Caspian energy. No such officials have been named for a decade.

Afghanistan

Several of our interviewees with governmental experience pointed out that the agendas for C5+1 meetings during the war in Afghanistan were dominated by issues pertaining solely to that country, as opposed to the five states of Central Asia. The common goal of the Central Asians, by contrast, was to reintegrate Afghanistan into their region, of which it had always been a part. We heard multiple comments that the U.S. missed a golden opportunity by ignoring this counsel. The Kyrgyz Republic in particular pushed for greater American attention to its region. Yet even when they had serious doubts, the Central Asians cooperated with America. Now the situation is reversed. While America ignores Afghanistan, all five Central Asian countries, in a coordinated move,

support its being considered by C5+1. So far Washington has ignored this counsel.

Our Central Asian contacts pleaded with us to report the importance of their common stance on Afghanistan. With America, they do not recognize the Taliban. Yet with the partial exception of Tajikistan, they are communicating with the Taliban on issues of common interest, notably transportation and water – transport, in order to open a window to the South in order to avoid monopolistic control by Russia; and water, because it is the region’s lifeline. Informants told us that Uzbekistan has organized a working group on Afghanistan and that several joint commissions with Kabul are now functioning.

C5+1 Countries and Afghanistan

Multiple interviewees from across the region urged the U.S. to put Afghanistan again on its own agenda and that of the C5+1. Far from being an inevitable step towards recognition, they argue, this would give Washington a practical way to gauge the Taliban’s evolution, for good or ill. This makes even more sense considering that both transport and water overlap with America’s concerns in Central Asia. We also heard multiple warnings that both China and Russia have redoubled their efforts in Afghanistan, which could further isolate Central Asia, make its countries subject to control from the North or East, and marginalize the United States.

Diverse Initiatives:

Over the course of scores of interviews, we received observations and comments on countless and diverse issues, only some of which are reported here. However, a number of them warrant the reader’s attention, because they point to possible U.S.-Central Asia joint initiatives in the future.

Air Transport

While connectivity between Central Asian capitals and world centers has greatly improved, transport within the region lags badly. With respect to cargo the problems are grave at both the intra-regional and global levels. This is a powerful brake on economic development and regional cooperation and integration. Both business and governmental figures across Central Asia urge Washington to work with the airline industry to develop a plan for intra-regional transport and cargo transport. And they are quick to point out that if the West does not do this, China will.

Media Platform

Our informants spoke in one voice to say that America has fallen far behind in the communication sphere, and that Russia and the Russian language continue to dominate the region's information space. Several urged the U.S. to build a media platform in Central Asia. To be sure, Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe (RFE) have considered such a project but they are slowed by bureaucratic lethargy. Worse, the VOA/RFE projects call for transmission in the five national languages *plus Russian*, which all our interviewees considered a deeply retrograde idea. Several asked why, when their educational systems are promoting English, the U.S. would champion the cause of Russian? In short, all consider the creation of a U.S.-based media platform a priority issue for C5+1.

English Language

Central Asian business people, leaders of civil society organizations, and analysts spoke with amazement at Washington's apparent disinterest in promoting the English language. They all point to "incredible demand" for the language, particularly among university students and young professionals. They therefore propose the expansion of scholarships for

brief periods at American universities, the raising of work visa quotas for those two categories, and the bringing of as many young Central Asians for internships in cutting-edge American businesses as possible. They also urge the “vast” expansion of the America House program at the Department of State, to the point that every city in the region – middle-sized and larger – has one. They also call for Washington to reinvigorate the Slow English programs at the Voice of America, and expand this kind of training into our “international broadcasters” digital universe. Finally, in a spirit of reciprocity, they call on the Department of State to expand its Critical Language program, which today provides training in no Central Asian language (though Azerbaijani is part of the program).

A Presidential Visit?

Many of our interviewees pointed to the fact that over more than three decades since the establishment of the new sovereignties not one U.S. president has visited the region. This makes Central Asia, together with Central Africa, the only major world region never to have received a presidential visit. This contrasts with the multiple visits to Central Asia by the leaders of all other major world powers, including the Presidents or Prime Ministers of Japan, India, South Korea, and the European Union. A Turkmen interlocutor noted that Turkmenistan’s new president has already received multiple visits from both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, but the highest ranking American to visit Ashgabat is an assistant Secretary of State. Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s recent visit to Kazakhstan for a C5+1 meeting was appreciated, but it was noted that he then rushed off to India without visiting over Central Asian capitals.

Our informants expressed doubts whether a presidential visit during the waning days of the present administration would be possible or desirable, but expressed the hope that the next administration might correct this three-decade long oversight by the U.S. president’s attendance at a C5+1

(or C6) meeting. In the meanwhile, there was agreement that region-wide visits by respected department heads could even now begin to rectify the situation. As one put it, "Like it or not, Washington has been sending us a very clear and negative signal."

Conclusions

Reviewing the above summary of views from the region, one may wonder if Central Asians, with respect to America, have become mere complainers. This is definitely not the case. Without exceptions, the opinions were expressed in a very positive and constructive spirit, and with deep gratitude for what the United States has done in their region since 1991. Even the sharpest criticisms were expressed in a positive tone of sincere friendship.

Nonetheless, a thread of frustration wound through all the interviews, a perception of Washington's deepening disinterest in their region, and of good intentions gone awry. Does this signify a failure of U.S. diplomacy? We think not, because the interviewees themselves took pains to underscore the successes of U.S. actions and to build on them wherever possible.

Among all the interviews, a dominant concern was that Washington fails to acknowledge and appreciate the region's centrality to America's own interests. Instead of embracing Central Asia as a serious economic and geopolitical partner, Washington's diplomats continue to treat Central Asians as often clueless clients and to lavish them with well-intended suggestions and initiatives, while avoiding issues that the region itself considers most urgent. What they are asking for is not money so much as a serious, well-planned and sustained diplomatic effort. Several of our informants, mentioning South America and Africa, noted that that Central Asia is not the only world region seeking this kind of professional and focused treatment from Foggy Bottom, the Pentagon, and the National Security Council.

Central Asians from many spheres of endeavor argue that Washington severely underestimates the continuing ambitions and actions of Russia and China in their region. They claim, further, that Washington has failed to adapt its policies in Central Asia to the realities of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its possible outcomes. Central Asian officials, diplomats, and analysts all pointed out to us that if present trends continue, China, with a weakened Russia, will build an unbroken zone of control embracing the entire region between the South China Sea, Iran, and the Middle East. Several of our informants expressed amazement that Washington could be so blind to the implications of this development for its own core interests. By giving China and Russia a free hand and backing out of the entire region, including Afghanistan and the Caucasus, America is also creating a situation in which the states whose sovereignty and self-determination it professes to defend will be left without a security or economic alternative.

The price of such a development will be high. It will convince China that the United States cannot manage multiple priorities at once; close off the possibility of sending Central Asia's energy to Europe; force India into unwelcome arrangements; and empower Iran. And, as one of our more insightful interviewees cautioned, "Rest assured, that if important changes are not made, China will create its own 'C5' and will develop a serious strategic plan to suppress America's presence across the expanse of Central Asia." Indeed, this is already happening. As analyst John Daly notes,

On February 16, 2023, Xi Jinping sent a message to the participants at the First China–Central Asia Forum of Industrial and Investment Cooperation, convening for three days in Tsingtao, in which he reaffirmed China's readiness to expand economic ties as well as industrial and investment cooperation with the countries in the region. The largest economic enticement offered by Xi was not only access to China's massive market but also its highly developed

industrial system and advanced technologies to deepen business cooperation in achieving mutually beneficial results and promote the qualitative development of the Central Asian economies.⁴

⁴ John C.K. Daly, "China Unveils 'Grandiose Plan' for Central Asia," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 10, 2023. (<https://jamestown.org/program/china-unveils-grandiose-plan-for-central-asia/>)

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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 is a former President of Oberlin College and Provost at Tulane University, and is a member of the Board of Trustees of Nazarbayev University in Nursultan and of ADA University in Baku. His research on the countries of Greater Central Asia, their history, development, internal dynamics, as well as on U.S. policy towards the region, has resulted in twenty-two books and 200 published articles. He is the author of *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Ara*, published by Princeton University Press in 2013, and translated into over 20 languages.