

# Rethinking Greater Central Asia: American and Western Stakes in the Region and How to Advance Them

S. Frederick Starr

SILK ROAD PAPER  
June 2022



*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute  
Silk Road Studies Program*



# **Rethinking Greater Central Asia: American and Western Stakes in the Region and How to Advance Them**

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A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center  
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**“Rethinking Greater Central Asia: American and Western Stakes in the Region and How to Advance Them”** is a *Silk Road Paper* published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, Joint Center. The Silk Road Papers Series is the Occasional Paper series of the Joint Center, which addresses topical and timely subjects. The Joint Center is a transatlantic independent and non-profit research and policy center. It has offices in Washington and Stockholm and is affiliated with the American Foreign Policy Council and the Institute for Security and Development Policy. It is the first institution of its kind in Europe and North America, and is firmly established as a leading research and policy center, serving a large and diverse community of analysts, scholars, policy-watchers, business leaders, and journalists. The Joint Center is at the forefront of research on issues of conflict, security, and development in the region. Through its applied research, publications, research cooperation, public lectures, and seminars, it functions as a focal point for academic, policy, and public discussion regarding the region.

© **Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2022**

ISBN: 978-91-88551-32-0

Printed in Lithuania

Distributed in North America by:

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute

American Foreign Policy Council

509 C St NE, Washington DC 20002

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Distributed in Europe by:

The Silk Road Studies Program

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## Executive Summary

Greater Central Asia is reeling from the twin shocks of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The chaotic U.S. withdrawal risks postponing indefinitely Central Asian efforts to escape the region's key geography-induced challenge – its landlocked status – as the prospect of building direct links to the world seas through that country now seem bleak. Russia's aggressive behavior in Ukraine suggests it could be poised to assert itself in Central Asia as well, benefiting from Central Asia's inability to connect directly to the world economy. These events, to which China's growing role in the region should be added, suggest that U.S. and EU approaches to the region – governed through relatively recent strategy documents – must be rethought.

The Afghan government formed in 2002 had worked with international funders and partners to reopen the ancient corridors to the South and to transform them into modern roads and railroads supplemented with pipelines for the east-west shipment of gas and north-south power lines for transmitting electricity. A new era of connectivity seemed to be dawning across the region. These developments held great promise for Central Asian states, as their dependence on trade routes through Russia undergird Russia's geopolitical dominance in Central Asia. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover, however, seemed to dash hopes for such an opening to the south, turning Afghanistan from a potential hub of continental trade once again into a cork blocking the transport of goods, services, and energy in every direction. But this dire situation is neither immutable nor final. This paper explores the ongoing

efforts to open a Central Asian window across Afghanistan and towards unlocking the region's economic potential through the transport of goods and energy, as well as the impediments that have to be overcome, and signs of movement towards addressing them.

From 2002 to 2021, numerous projects to build transportation corridors were conceived, and many were completed or were in the process of being implemented. The U.S. focused on rebuilding infrastructure within Afghanistan itself, including routes connecting Kabul with Kandahar in the South and Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat in the North and West. The U.S. also constructed a new bridge over the Pyanj river to Tajikistan. The Asian Development Bank got involved in efforts to restore Afghanistan's railroads. Afghanistan also rebuilt old airports and constructed new ones, boasting 46 airports in 2020. While American interest waned over time, others became engaged. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran all entered into agreements with the new Afghan government to link their railroad networks. Joined by Azerbaijan and Afghanistan, Turkmenistan dubbed its new railroad line the "Lapis Lazuli Corridor," which would link Turkey, the Caucasus, Pakistan and India via Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the TAPI pipeline project connecting Turkmenistan with Pakistan and India was moving ahead slowly. Electricity projects were also proliferating, with Uzbekistan working to provide Kabul with electricity and the World Bank developing a large project to transmit electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan.

To sum up, it is clear that Afghanistan was making solid progress towards reemerging as a regional transit and logistical hub for fields as diverse as manufactured goods, agricultural produce, electricity, and natural gas. While this began as a top-down initiative of the U.S. Army and the government of Afghanistan, it soon diversified to the point that it included all of Afghanistan's neighbors in Central Asia, other governments

from Europe to Asia, major international financial institutions, private corporations, and entrepreneurs in many fields. The entire region was on track to gaining a sustainable “window to the sea,” with vast economic and geopolitical benefits.

But in parallel, others pursued their own projects, sometimes to the exclusion of both Afghanistan and Central Asia. Russia worked with Iran and India on a “North-South” transportation link focused on the Iranian port of Chabahar. Meanwhile, Beijing proposed extending its Karakorum highway to Pakistan clear to the Arabian sea, turning the fishing village of Gwadar into a major port. The heart of this extended route was to be a new railroad line that would extend from Urumqi and Kashgar in Xinjiang to Gwadar. Both projects – in which Central Asian states cooperated – sidestepped Afghanistan. While these initiatives were useful to Central Asians, they served mainly Russian and Chinese interests and did not advance the Central Asians’ core strategic goal of opening the most direct window to the south towards South and Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, the United States and Europe displayed a remarkable passivity regarding the development of rail and road links between the five Central Asian countries and the South via Afghanistan.

The unrest in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal at first seemed to validate and advance the routes being promoted by China and Pakistan to the east of Afghanistan and by Russia and India to its west. However, it turned out that both of these faced unanticipated problems and even today remain many years away from completion. This led the Central Asian countries to seek some kind of minimal accommodation with the Taliban that would at least advance the cause of trans-Afghan transport. This mirrored efforts by non-Western powers like China, Russia, Qatar and particularly Turkey to engage the Taliban government, and effectively extend quasi-recognition to it. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have been

particularly active in this regard, but the non-involvement of international financial institutions makes the prospects of success limited.

Going forward, Central Asians must reckon with three worrisome problems. First is the unresolved status of the new government in Afghanistan, whose political failure or economic collapse would end all their progress on transport. Second, they lack the degree of intraregional cooperation and coordination needed to make their combined efforts more than the sum of their individual projects. Third and most important, neither individually nor collectively do they command the requisite resources to accomplish their project, nor will they unless foreign friends and international financial institutions come to their aid. But unless their efforts move forward, all five of Central Asian states may be forced irrevocably into the orbits of Russia, China, or both.

To forestall such a scenario, Washington and its allies must recognize that if they allow transport corridors from Central Asia to the South to remain closed and undeveloped, they will effectively consign the region's five sovereign states to the tender mercies of Russia or China. There is a prevailing view in the West that poses a stark choice between recognition and non-recognition of the Taliban government. This excludes all intermediate positions, and thus denies to America and its allies a host of potentially productive steps along the path forward. Among these would be to discuss with Central Asian partners their emerging security concerns and to explore the many ways in which these coincide with America's larger strategic interests. At or near the top of any such list would be the transport of goods, electricity, and gas from Central Asia across Afghanistan to consumers or ports further afield.

Such initiatives do not necessarily amount to a back-door path to diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government. An embrace of Central Asia's trans-Afghan transport project should be seen as a way to test

Taliban intentions, their ability to evolve, their readiness to honor agreements, and their commitment to the welfare of the Afghan populace. The alternative is for America and its allies to be completely sidelined, while Moscow and Beijing move in with ever more influence.

New U.S. and European approaches must take into account the role of Turkey and Gulf States, who remain engaged in Afghanistan. Such a strategy offers Washington a second chance, both with respect to the five countries of Central Asia and, collaterally, to Afghanistan itself. With no commitment to present or future diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government in Kabul, it will create for the United States a constructive role throughout the region, thereby preventing a power vacuum in a vast territory which both Russia and China view with geopolitical avarice. This will signal to both Moscow and Beijing that the American “pivot to Asia” includes all five of the former Soviet states of Central Asia and does not necessarily exclude Afghanistan.

## Introduction

What will follow Putin's all-out campaign to conquer Ukraine? However the war ends, Russia may be tempted to repeat it against the five countries of Central Asia, all of which, like Ukraine, were once part of the USSR. Between them, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan possess resources that are important to the larger world, including oil, gas, electric energy, crucial minerals, and wheat. Both Russia and China look on these with avarice and have made efforts to control them. Should either succeed, it would marginalize free societies across Eurasia and shift the geopolitical landscape against them.

What assets can the region mobilize against such threats? Since gaining independence in 1991, several of them have made significant progress in developing their economies and institutions. But they all face an existential challenge posed by geography itself, namely, their landlocked (and in the case of Uzbekistan, double-landlocked) status. Access to the world's seas has proven to be a key to prosperity everywhere. Countries with coastal ports have a natural advantage, while those without such access are subject to the good will or caprice of their neighbors. Central Asia's most direct route to the sea is via Afghanistan. The rise of the Russian empire closed this ancient and heavily used route for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It began to reopen after September 11, 2001, but the U.S.'s calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan put an end to such initiatives. Today, in order to strengthen the economic viability and preserve the sovereignty of all five Central Asian states it is urgently necessary to open this window.

The new Afghanistan government formed after the defeat of the Taliban in 2001 began to work with international funders not only to reopen the ancient corridors to the South but to transform them into modern roads and railroads and to supplement them with pipelines for the east-west shipment of gas and north-south power lines for transmitting electricity. A new era of connectivity seemed to be dawning across the region.

The implications of such an opening for the Central Asian countries were stunning, as they were also for Afghanistan itself. Routes to the north that had long dominated the region's foreign trade and undergird Russia's geopolitical dominance in Central Asia, which would now have southward competitors. Meanwhile, newly opened routes both to China and the West further diluted Russia's monopoly and opened the prospect of Central Asia and Afghanistan becoming hubs of continental trade rather than inaccessible outliers. Together, these states would create a network at the core of Eurasia in which all – including China and Russia – would be free to participate, but on commercial rather than geopolitical terms.

The United States' ill-advised departure from Afghanistan in August 2021 completely upset these grand hopes and the concrete projects through which they were gradually being realized. U.S. General David Petraeus, who had long supported transport projects in Afghanistan, did not overstate the case when he called the abrupt withdrawal "heartbreaking, tragic, and disastrous." By handing power in Kabul to the Taliban without conditions, Washington not only abandoned its own investment of a trillion dollars but left it all in the hands of a new government to which few if any national governments or international financial institutions were prepared to extend diplomatic recognition.

The impact of this action extended far beyond the borders of Afghanistan. Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran all feared the possibility of a return to turmoil in Afghanistan. Yet Russia and China both saw in the American

departure an opening for advancing their plans to increase their own connectivity through schemes that largely skirted Central Asia and Afghanistan to the East and West. The Central Asians now fear that the American retreat and the closing of the window to the South will leave them at the mercy of their largest neighbors, Russia and China, and without even a partial balancing force from the West.

Afghan presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani shared a vision of their country as a future continental “roundabout” or traffic circle. America, Europe, and Turkey had all embraced this concept, as had the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, and Islamic Development Bank. Now all these dreams were suspended, if not dashed. Afghanistan, far from becoming a continental transport hub, had become a *cork*, blocking the transport of goods, services, and energy in every direction. However, history does not end, and this dire situation is neither immutable nor final. It is therefore worth asking if there are any fresh moves to open a Central Asian window across Afghanistan and towards unlocking the region’s economic potential through the transport of goods and energy. What are the main impediments that now have to be overcome, and are there any signs of movement towards addressing them?

## **Efforts to Revive the Transport Corridor, 2001-2020**

In spite of the brief passage of time, it is all too easy to forget the many initiatives to open Afghan transport corridors of various types between 2001 and 2021. Some did not move beyond the planning stage but many were actually constructed. These included roads, railroads, gas pipelines, lines for the transmission of electricity and data, and airports. Among their many sponsors and developers were an array of major countries and international financial institutions.

The United States moved swiftly to construct or rebuild roads and bridges. New construction included routes connecting Kabul with Kandahar in the South and Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat in the North and West. The Americans also constructed the major new bridge over the Pyanj river to Tajikistan, while the Aga Khan Development Network used U.S. funding to build smaller bridges further upstream along the route to Badakhshan. With varying success, it also worked to reduce road tariffs and shorten long delays at borders.

After conducting extensive surveys of Afghanistan's mineral resources, the U.S. government, working with Afghan and foreign partners, identified key transport corridors needed to ship copper and other minerals for processing abroad. In the energy sector the U.S. government also moved quickly to rebuild the important Kajaki dam on the Helmand River and to reconstruct power transmission lines linking that facility with Kandahar and other centers. The Government of Afghanistan supplemented these efforts with both national and local projects funded by international development banks.

Meanwhile, in 2006 the Asian Development Bank developed a transportation sector masterplan for Afghanistan, which it supplemented and updated in a second detailed study in 2016. Working with Kabul, the ADB included in this second study a detailed masterplan for the development of Afghan railroads.

With support from the U.S., Europe, Turkey, and international financial institutions, Afghanistan also rebuilt old airports and constructed new ones. By the year 2020 it boasted forty-six airports, many with connections to the Middle East, Turkey, Central Asia, and India.

The market was quick to respond to these initiatives. Private carriers soon supplemented the government's Ariana airline, while foreign carriers made strong inroads into Afghanistan's air transport sector. An even more dramatic growth took place in road transport. The Government of Afghanistan applied successfully to join the International Road Transit Union, an essential step towards participation in the huge and continent-wide trucking industry. By 2008 the city of Kabul alone had 700,000 registered vehicles, with similar growth in other cities. International shippers were quick to take notice. By 2010 truckers from all surrounding countries were thundering along Afghan routes, with Pakistani companies assuming a dominant position. The latter, often founded by retired military officers, used Afghan territory to ship goods to and from Iran, the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Russia.

In 2006 the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute held an international conference on Afghan transport, with participation from eight countries. The published volume that ensued, entitled *The New Silk Roads*, gave rise to a U.S. government initiative to relink India and Central Asia via

Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Dubbed “The New Silk Road,” this project was announced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in July 2011, but quickly foundered when it failed to gain support from President Obama and was left in the hands of unqualified bureaucrats. The Chinese took notice, however, and promptly launched their own “New Silk Road” project, later rebranded the Belt and Road Initiative, in 2013.

American interest in establishing Afghanistan as a transport hub had begun to flag. The growing private sector in Afghan transport seemed to justify this, but in reality that development was being used to justify a slower pace of development. In 2012 the present author and Adib Farhadi issued a paper entitled “Finish the Job: Jump-Starting the Afghan Economy,” which not only made the case for continuing the development of trans-Afghan transport but enumerated the specific projects involved and specified the cost of each.<sup>2</sup>

However, this lull by no means spelled an end to the development of trans-Afghanistan transport. Indeed, it was during these last years before the American withdrawal that interest in Afghan railroads and the transport of energy greatly gained in intensity, thanks to the initiatives of neighboring countries and international funders.

Three of Afghanistan’s neighbors were moving to open railroad links to Afghanistan. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran all entered into agreements with the new Afghan government to link their railroad

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<sup>1</sup> S. Frederick Starr, ed., *The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia*, Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2007. (<http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13125>)

<sup>2</sup> S. Frederick Starr and Adib Farhadi, *Finish the Job: Jump-Start Afghanistan’s Economy*, Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, November 2012. ([https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2012\\_11\\_SRP\\_StarrFarhadi\\_Afgghanistan-Economy.pdf](https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2012_11_SRP_StarrFarhadi_Afgghanistan-Economy.pdf))

networks. The Iranian line from Khaf to Herat was opened, while the Turkmen line by 2016 reached from the Caspian through Ashgabat to the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan border and beyond to Aqina and Andkhoy. Joined by Azerbaijan and Afghanistan, Turkmenistan dubbed this new railroad line the “Lapis Lazuli Corridor,” which would link Turkey, the Caucasus, Pakistan and India via Afghanistan.

The development of Afghan railroads had long been thwarted by the fact that railroad systems in neighboring states employed three different gauges. However, with help from the Asia Development Bank, which funded a National Railroad Authority in 2011; the European Commission, which funded a Railroad Construction Commission; and the U.S. Army, which formed a Railroad Advisory Team, this problem was resolved through the application of new gauge-changing technologies.

Epitomizing the increased tempo of Afghan railroad projects was a scheme to extend Uzbekistan’s line from Heiraton to Mazar-e-Sharif southwestward to Iran. Notwithstanding America’s boycott of Iran, the U.S. Army had made extensive use of Iran’s port of Chabahar to bring goods to Afghanistan from abroad. It therefore seemed reasonable to the Uzbeks to continue construction in that direction. However, a warming of relations with Pakistan caused Uzbekistan also to consider extending its Mazar-e-Sharif railroad eastward to Peshawar in Pakistan. Planning and construction of this project was going forward at the time of the American withdrawal.

Afghanistan’s first major transport project had been launched by the United States back in the 1950s with the decision to transmit electricity generated by the Kajaki dam to other parts of the country. This was followed in the 1970s by the Soviet government of Turkmenistan’s proposal for a pipeline to transmit Turkmen gas across Afghanistan to Pakistan and (eventually) India. Following the independence of

Turkmenistan, Ashgabat gained the Taliban's support for the project and together the Turkmen and Afghans approached the Argentine energy firm Bridas as well as the American oil company Unocal to construct it. However, joint trips to the United States failed to close the deal, nor did extended flirtations with ExxonMobil and Chevron that took place during the years 1996-2010.

Meanwhile, India joined the TAPI consortium and technical planning proceeded. Now the partners proposed to run both a road and electric lines alongside the gas pipeline, while the Afghan government proposed the addition of cables to extend high-speed internet across the country. To pay Afghanistan the transit fees owed to it, the government of Turkmenistan proposed to construct four plants along the route to transform natural gas into fertilizer, to be used by local farmers. The Asian Development Bank was persistent in its support for TAPI during these years but down to the American departure no major international funder emerged.

Even as TAPI was slowly moving forward, projects to transport electricity through Afghanistan were proliferating. Uzbekistan and Afghanistan arranged for new electric lines to transmit Uzbek electricity to Kabul. Meanwhile, the World Bank developed an even grander project proposed to transmit electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan. The project was long stalled by Uzbekistan's refusal to join, but construction finally began in May, 2016, and continued down to the American departure.

Summarizing these developments, it is clear that Afghanistan began to reemerge as a regional transit and logistical hub for fields as diverse as manufactured goods, agricultural produce, electricity, and natural gas. While this began as a top-down initiative of the U.S. Army and the government of Afghanistan, it soon diversified to the point that it included

all of Afghanistan's neighbors in Central Asia, other governments from Europe to Asia, major international financial institutions, private corporations, and entrepreneurs in many fields. To be sure, it was a challenge to maintain the new facilities that resulted from this effort, and security in parts of the countryside posed a growing threat. Yet the steady increase and diversification of goods crossing the country's borders and the practical implementation of crucial projects in energy transmission and rail transport gave reason to believe that Afghanistan would cease to be the cork in the bottle of Central Asian transport, and that the entire region would gain a sustainable "window to the sea," with vast economic and geopolitical benefits.

## **Alternatives to Afghanistan as the Region's Transport Hub**

Even though we have reviewed these developments in Afghanistan as a separate subject, none of them took place in isolation. For at the same time that the U.S. and sympathetic powers in Europe and Asia were helping Afghanistan advance these initiatives, other major powers were pursuing their own projects, sometimes to the exclusion of both Afghanistan and Central Asia.

This parallel process went vigorously forward under the leadership of Russia and India. Russia, like the new Central Asian states, wanted a window to the South in order to break out of the isolation from the Arabian Sea and Southeast Asia that had been imposed on it by the hard southern border of the USSR. With this in mind, after 9/11 Russia cooperated with the United States in opening its rail connection from the Baltic states to Uzbekistan to the transit of military gear for Afghanistan. But once it was clear that the West was prevailing in Afghanistan, Russia abandoned this Northern Distribution Network and focused instead on an alternate route to the southern seas.

India, meanwhile, wanted to build a close relationship with post-Taliban Afghanistan and to gain access to the recently formed states of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The most direct routes, of course, were through Pakistan, but these were firmly closed to India by the armed hostility between the two countries. The next best route was through the new port the Iranians were proposing to build at Chabahar. Goods could be shipped there from Mumbai and other Indian ports and then sent northward by

train. The Russians and Indians engaged the Iranians in building or upgrading rail lines northward, and then gained the support of Azerbaijan to continue the new line along the western shore of the Caspian Sea to rail heads in southern Russia.

Blocked by Pakistan, India had to rely on Chabahar to send goods to Afghanistan. However, there existed no rail connection between southeastern Iran and Afghanistan. Uzbekistan, which had opened a short rail line to Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, therefore joined the effort to extend this line westward towards Herat and thence southward to Chabahar.

The ascendance of the U.S. in Afghanistan caused both Russia and China to refocus their transport programs on routes outside Afghanistan to the west and east. As we have seen, the rise of a direct route northward from Chabahar marginalized the country, not least because the two largest Afghan cities—Kabul and Kandahar—were far to the east and unreachable by railroad from Herat and the West. Meanwhile, Chinese initiatives had the same effect of marginalizing routes through Afghanistan. Beijing had long since proposed to extend the Karakorum Highway, which it had built across the Pamirs in the 1960s, southward towards Islamabad and from there to the Arabian Sea. Now in 2013 Xi Jinping, as part of his own “New Silk Road” project, proposed to extend this route directly to the Arabian Sea and expand the Pakistani fishing village of Gwadar into an international port. The heart of this extended route was to be a new railroad line that would extend from Urumqi and Kashgar in Xinjiang clear to Gwadar.

Like the India-Russia route through Chabahar, the railroad to Gwadar would sidestep Afghanistan. It would have been an easy matter to connect it by a spur to Kandahar in Afghanistan’s southeast, but neither China nor Pakistan wanted this. Instead, they held open the possibility of a future

railroad connection to eastern Afghanistan through the Pakistani city of Peshawar, but nothing was done to advance this. Also, much was written at the time about China building a railroad through the Wakhan Corridor to Kabul, but nothing came of this, either.

These, then, were the projects spearheaded by Russia and China to open links between the Arabian Sea and their own vast territories to the North. The fact that both were direct made them practical. At least as important, though, is that both of these trunk routes avoided Central Asia and thus deprived the region's five newly sovereign states access to the most direct and efficient route to South and Southeast Asia, i.e., the age-old transport corridor across Afghanistan to South and Southeast Asia. This was no accident: both Moscow and China were loath to do anything that might benefit the American project in Afghanistan.

To be sure, neither China nor Russia ignored Central Asia entirely. Russia joined with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to build a separate link between southern Russia to Iran along the eastern shore of the Caspian, while China constructed a new highway across the lofty Pamirs connecting western Xinjiang to Tajikistan and the new American-built bridge across the Pyanj. China also collaborated with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to plan a more southern railroad link, but its main purpose is to foster east-west continental transport, not an opening to the southern seas.

In other words, these Chinese and Russian projects, while useful to the Central Asians, served mainly their own interests and did not advance the Central Asians' core strategic goal of opening the most direct window to the south towards South and Southeast Asia.

In light of these ambitious initiatives by Russia, India, China, and Pakistan, the utter passivity of the United States, Europe, and the international banks regarding rail and road links between the five Central Asian countries and the South via Afghanistan is astonishing. True, the Asia

Development Bank promoted what it called “connectivity” to the south, but the clear focus of its activity was the Chinese projects described above and not routes that more directly addressed the needs of the Central Asians themselves. Its approach effectively consigned those countries to the status of minor players in a drama being planned and executed by China and Russia. The World Bank deserves high marks for the persistence with which it pursued the CASA-1000 power transmission project, but it left the equally urgent development of Central Asian railroads and roads to others.

Whether this neglect by the United States, Europe, and their partners was due to flawed strategic thinking or to bureaucracies that divided the region into compartments that did not communicate with each other is a problem that must be left to historians to solve. However, it can be clearly stated that a solution need not have given rise to conflict with Russia or China, since trunk lines from Central Asia through Afghanistan to the Arabian Sea would eventually end up either at China’s project at Gwadar or at the Russian-Indian project at Chabahar. But for whatever reasons, such possibilities were not even considered.

As a result, Afghanistan, rather than becoming a major hub or “roundabout” for transport and trade from Central Asia to South and Southeast Asia, was assigned the role of a secondary player whose viability would henceforth depend on north-south routes running beyond its borders in Iran and Pakistan. Equally serious, while the Russian and Chinese initiatives might give the five new sovereignties in Central Asia access to the southern seas and Southeast Asia, it would do so indirectly, by avoiding the most direct and historically consequential route across Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, during the period 2018-21 significant developments in north-south transport were occurring in Central Asia itself. The five Central

Asian countries engaged in a new transport initiative organized by the United States Institute of Peace. Meanwhile, Shavkat Mirziyoyev had become president of Uzbekistan and in March 2018, organized a region-wide conference in Tashkent that opened a new era of intra-regional cooperation and coordination. This marked a radical shift in Uzbek policy, and signified that leaders in Tashkent and other Central Asian capitals were prepared to work together to advance their common interests. It acknowledged, as President Mirziyoyev put it, that Afghanistan, too, is an integral part of Central Asia.

This was followed by an even larger conference at Tashkent in July 2021, which addressed all forms of connectivity with the South and beyond, but with special emphasis on reopening the trunk route across Afghanistan. Significantly, the foreign ministers of both China and Russia were in attendance, but neither the United States nor any European country bothered to send representatives of similar rank.

Then in early 2020 the U.S. State Department issued a new Strategy for Central Asia that encouraged connectivity within the region, transport ties with Afghanistan and specifically endorsed both CASA-1000 and the crucial Lapis Lazuli route from the Caspian across Turkmenistan and Afghanistan to Pakistan. Though late in the day, these and other initiatives suggested that those who supported the opening of Central Asia's connectivity with the South and an Afghanistan corridor had found new commitment and energy.

## Impact of the US/NATO Withdrawal from Afghanistan

The abrupt and unprepared departure of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan on August 21, 2021, immediately threw all these arrangements into turmoil and put an end to practical activity to advance them. The new rulers promised that they would champion peace, protect the vulnerable, oversee a market economy, and forge positive links with their neighbors. Notwithstanding these assurances, the Taliban's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue renewed its crusade against women, security within the country collapsed, and all Afghanistan's neighbors assumed a defensive posture. Central Asian neighbors that had been pursuing joint projects with Afghanistan now refocused their attention on preventing Taliban militants and other radical movements from crossing their borders. The World Bank promptly suspended work on CASA-1000, of which 15 percent of construction had already been completed and the rest was under contract.

Pakistan, which had longstanding ties with the Taliban, was at first so optimistic over the new Taliban regime next door that its chief of intelligence reported from Kabul that "all will be well." But the Taliban's rejection of the existing border with Pakistan and its readiness to allow Pakistani extremists from the Tehrik-e Taleban Pakistan (TTP) organization to use their territory quickly soured the relationship, leading Pakistan to bomb several Afghan sites, causing the death of forty-five Pakistani citizens. Iran also drew back. When an Afghan citizen attempted

to bomb the Muslim holy site at Mashad, Tehran stationed heavily armed troops along its eastern border.

A powerful brake on contact was the mounting evidence that the Taliban could not control its own territory. Besides its inability to deal with regrouped elements of Al Qaeda, the Khorasan affiliate of the Islamic State, and a revived Tajik-led movement in the Panshir mountains led by the son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Taliban government proved unable to contain its own forces along the border with Pakistan. Meanwhile, the emigration of key members of the rising Afghan business class, along with their money, left the government and economy without human or capital resources.

This situation froze all activity directed towards the opening of corridors of trans-Afghan transport and trade.

## Afghanistan's Neighbors Pick Up the Pieces of Trans-Afghan Transport and Trade

These unexpected and unwelcome developments seemed at first to validate and advance the north-south route being promoted by China and Pakistan to the east of Afghanistan and by Russia and India to its west. However, it turned out that both of these faced unanticipated problems and even today remain many years away from completion. The Iranian railroad system is beset by many bottlenecks that affect the route from Chabahar to Azerbaijan, while separatists in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan pose a mounting threat to both the port of Gwadar and the railroad running northward from there. Worse, neither of these initiatives served the interests of the Central Asian countries and of Afghanistan itself as directly as routes from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan directly through Afghanistan would.

The acknowledgment of this fact led the Central Asian countries to seek some kind of minimal accommodation with the Taliban that would at least advance the cause of trans-Afghan transport. The Taliban's harsh treatment of women and failure to feed the population and suppress yet more radical groups meant that full diplomatic recognition was out of the question. However, this did not prevent these countries from receiving Taliban officials bearing the lesser title of *chargés d'affaires*.

In practice these diplomats were accorded most of the privileges of ambassadors, who responded by promptly entering into serious negotiations with their host countries on all the main bilateral issues. This adroit process made eventual recognition all but certain.

China, Russia, and Qatar were among the first to follow this path, but it was Turkey that proved to be most active in doing so. Besides being a leading provider of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, Turkey was quick to encourage Islamic countries to extend formal recognition to Kabul. At a March 2022 meeting of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, Turkey's foreign minister called directly for other countries to recognize the Taliban government. Moving beyond the exchange of mid-level diplomats, Turkey then opened the path for contact between religious figures, educators, and businessmen in the two countries and sealed the growing relationship with various initiatives, including the opening of a Turkish consular office in Mazar-e-Sharif. Following closely behind these arrangements have been negotiations to reopen Afghanistan to Turkish logistics firms. Qatar meanwhile negotiated to reopen all of Afghanistan's airports.

China and Russia have extended the same quasi-recognition to the Taliban government as Turkey and Qatar. Discussions have taken place on a number of areas but as of this writing there is no evidence that they have extended these sessions to cover transport. This is unlikely to happen soon, as the Central Asians themselves, led by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, have assumed an active and even leadership role in this area and have made known their intention to maintain and defend their status as stewards of the project. This is to be expected, as it is the Central Asians who have the far most at stake in opening a window through Afghanistan to the southern seas. Indeed, this project directly addresses their sovereignty, economic progress, and viability as self-governing countries.

Meanwhile, both Russia and China have persisted in their efforts to build transport corridors to the east and west of Afghanistan. Pakistan, concerned that China's attention might be diverted to the Pacific, is considering adding domestic sources of funding for the railroad from Gwadar to Chaman on the Afghan border. Russia, with its resources

heavily committed to its war against Ukraine, has left development of the routes to Chabahar mainly to Iran, which faces economic challenges of its own, and to India. While the India-EU Connectivity Partnership signed at Porto in 2021 embraces transportation, it as yet includes no mention of Chabahar. Acting on this latest initiative, Indian merchants in the spring of 2022 delivered one hundred tons of sugar from Mumbai to Uzbekistan. Noteworthy is the fact that they sent it by ship first to the Pakistani port of Karachi and thence by truck across Afghanistan to Uzbekistan. This marked the first instance of cooperation between India and Pakistan in the cause of connectivity.

Pakistan's formal relations with the Taliban have not improved since Islamabad accused the Afghan government of harboring members of the Pakistani Taliban and of rejecting the Durand Line demarking their border. This temporarily froze trans-Afghan trucking from Pakistan. However, even after Pakistani bombings along the Afghan border, under its new prime minister, Shahbaz Sharif, Pakistan continues to support the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Peshawar railroad project and Pakistani logistic firms are fully prepared to renew runs across Afghan territory as soon as possible. Taliban leaders in Kabul have indicated their support for this, on the obvious grounds that it will provide their flagging government with a fresh source of revenue.

In a similar spirit, the Shiite government of Iran vehemently opposes the Taliban government for its militant Sunni sectarianism and for its efforts to suppress Hazara Shiites in the north of the country. Nonetheless, it continues to develop its port at Chabahar, the railroad that will connect it to Herat in Afghanistan, and the further rail link northward to Azerbaijan and thence to Russia. Competition between Chabahar and the Chinese-sponsored port at Gwadar remains strong, but unacknowledged by either side.

With its 1,300 kilometer border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan has a keen interest in good relations with its southern neighbor, the more so since ethnic Tajiks and Badakhshanis live on both sides of the border and are linked by long-standing family ties. The new Chinese-built road from Xinjiang to the American-built bridge over the Pyanj further enhances the potential of this economic relationship. Moreover, the CASA-1000 Pipeline project will bring major economic benefits to Tajikistan, but is stalled until the World Bank and Taliban reach some sort of accommodation. Meanwhile, the revival of anti-Taliban resistance by Afghan Tajiks from the Panshir region has frozen relations between Tajikistan and the Taliban. For the time being, then, Tajikistan remains the only one of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors that has refused to allow Taliban officials to visit and reclaim authority over Afghan embassy properties in their country.

Having established itself as the regional leader in opening transport corridors across Afghanistan to the sea, Uzbekistan is particularly keen to reach a *modus vivendi* with the new Taliban government that will enable it to advance these limited but strategically important projects. Uzbekistan boasts such highly competent experts on Afghan affairs as Ismatulla Irgasahev, special representative of the Uzbek President Shafkat Mirziyoyev, and Deputy Prime Minister Sardor Umurzakov, who also heads the Investments and Foreign Trade Ministry. Together, they have mobilized to scope out future plans of action regarding transport. To this end Uzbekistan has reopened an Afghan consulate on its southern border at Termez and held extensive discussions in both Tashkent and Kabul with senior Taliban officials. According to Irgashev, the Taliban are "a reality that must be accepted."

Turkmenistan, too, has worked with the Taliban government to relaunch construction of the TAPI pipeline on the territory of Afghanistan, along with the electrical transmission lines, road and fertilizer plants associated

with that project. With funding from the Islamic Development Bank, Turkmenistan has completed construction of the TAPI pipeline and related facilities on its side of the Afghan border and is once again communicating with Kabul to confirm final plans for their extension across Afghanistan. Turkmenistan has meanwhile granted full authority over the negotiation of the electric transmission line to Pakistan to Ahmet Çalık, a Turkish businessman and trusted friend of Ashgabat.

However, with the possible exception of the Islamic Development Bank, international financial institutions are for the time being out of the question as funders. Ashgabat nonetheless continues to court the IDB and to approach other possible funding sources in the Middle East and is joined in this effort by the Taliban government. Pakistan, too, has reaffirmed its commitment to TAPI and is assisting in the effort to secure funding for the Afghan section of the project.

## **Is the Revival of Central Asia's Direct Transport Route Through Afghanistan Possible or Likely?**

This review confirms several important theses regarding transport corridors linking the heart of Eurasia to the Arabian Sea and Southeast Asia.

While both the two major powers – China and Russia – and the smaller and new states of Central Asia all consider connectivity to the Arabian Sea to be of major geopolitical and economic importance, they translate this affirmation into sharply different programs. These differences arise from both geography and politics, and directly shape their starkly different projects.

China's main objective is to connect the Xinjiang sector of its national transport network with the southern seas and to do so in a way that advances its influence and control over the Indian Ocean. Russia's objective, while similar, focuses on connecting the western regions of its vast territory to the southern seas by the politically most secure route.

The five Central Asian states, all of which stress the centrality of connectivity with South Asia to their security and national development, quite rationally demand access to the most direct route possible. Because Iran and Pakistan dominate the Arabian Sea's coastline, they fully acknowledge and cooperate with the Chinese and Russian projects. But all of them are strongly committed to opening routes for the transport of goods, gas, and electricity that head directly southward through Afghanistan. This arrangement would prevent these countries from being marginalized in continental trade, strengthen their collective viability as a

region, and contribute to the stabilization and development of Afghanistan, which they all view as an essential elements of their separate and regional interests.

All three of these centers – China, Russia and Central Asia – are working actively to advance their programs. Because neither the Chinese nor Russian projects depend in any way on Afghanistan, they are moving haltingly but steadily forward, the main impediment for China being its overriding focus on East Asia and for Russia being the deepening problems of its economy.

The Central Asians must reckon with three worrisome problems. First, of course, is the unresolved status of the new government in Afghanistan. Its political failure or economic collapse would end all their progress on transport. Second, they lack the degree of intraregional cooperation and coordination needed to make their combined efforts more than the sum of their individual projects. Indeed, Central Asia remains the least coordinated and collaborative of all world regions, from South Asia to Scandinavia to the Caribbean. Third and most important, neither individually nor collectively do they command the requisite resources to accomplish their project, nor will they unless foreign friends and international financial institutions come to their aid.

Both Russia and China have invested in Central Asian transport, but their projects serve most directly their own needs, not the strategic objectives of the Central Asians themselves. Between 2001 and 2021 both of these powers also followed closely the development of trans-Afghanistan transport routes and presumably would now be prepared to do so again if the prospect presented itself.

**Such a development would fundamentally shift Afghanistan into the orbit of China's Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union. Of even greater moment, it would leave all**

**five of the Central Asian states with no alternative but to move irrevocably into the orbits of Russia, China, or both.**

Is there an alternative to this scenario? It is at this point that the future roles of the United States, European Union, Turkey, and Gulf states come into play. Individually and together, these four are the only powers with the economic might and organizational skills to affect the present situation.

To varying degrees, all of them will be closely watching the actions of the Taliban government itself. As we have seen, both Qatar and Turkey have already engaged deeply with the Taliban. However, the threshold for engagement is far lower for the Gulf states and Turkey than for the US and EU. Bluntly, any western actions that could be perceived as helping the Taliban would be quickly rejected by America and Europe.

Qatar's role in the Afghan-US negotiations in 2019-2021 positioned it to take an active role in assisting Kabul's new government. Turkey's President Erdoğan called early for recognition. Quick action by the Turkish Red Crescent, Disaster and Emergency Management Authority, as well as by several NGOs such as the Besir Association, Hayrat Yardim, and the Maarif Foundation, have established Turkey as the leading provider of humanitarian assistance and positioned it well for a future role in Afghanistan and, by inference, all Central Asia.

Even before the Taliban's rise to power Ankara had been working assiduously to broaden its outreach to all Central Asia, as well as Azerbaijan. To now the dream of a union of Turkic nations remains a chimera, but the strength of Turkish business ties with the region augurs well for the country's future voice in affairs of the region, including Afghanistan.

## **A Collaborative Role for the United States and Europe and a Strategy to Support It**

This brings us to the future role of United States and Europe in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Both have affirmed that diplomatic recognition will depend on the Taliban's posture regarding human rights and especially the rights of women and on its ability to suppress radical Islamist currents on its territory and within its own ranks. However, until these standards have been met, are there no other forms of engagement on Central Asia-Afghan issues that should be considered, as so many other countries have done?

We have seen that America's existing strategy for Central Asia – which dates to 2019, although it was published in 2020 – calls for supporting the CASA-1000 electric lines, connectivity within the region, and transport ties with Afghanistan, including the Lapis Lazuli route from the Caspian across Afghanistan to Pakistan. The withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and President Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 effectively terminated this strategy, and no new strategy has taken its place.

The impact of this on the countries of Central Asia (and the Caucasus as well) has been to deny them American support for one of their top strategic priorities, namely, to open corridors to the South that would provide them with a strategic alternative to domination by Moscow, China, or both. Whether due to neglect or design, no new strategy has as yet been advanced in Washington. To be sure, American diplomatic and commercial activity in the region continues as before, with some notable successes, such as increased American investment in Uzbekistan. A visit to

Central Asian capitals by high-ranking Washington officials is also being planned. However, on the strategic level Washington remains conflicted, lacking clarity both on the impact of the Taliban government on the region and on how the Russian war on Ukraine affects it.

In fact, the two issues are closely entwined. The Central Asian states have good reason to worry that Moscow, whatever the outcome in Ukraine, might view them as easy next targets for any grand effort to reconstruct the old Soviet borders. Any new American strategy must seriously consider this possibility, not as a matter of purely regional concern in a remote region but as of an important element of much larger and more global geopolitical calculations.

To do so it must accord a far more prominent place to Central Asia's security in any future strategy. Connectivity to the South must be at the core of such a new approach, and not simply one goal among many. Bluntly, Washington and its allies must recognize that if they allow transport corridors from Central Asia to the South to remain closed and undeveloped, they will effectively consign the region's five sovereign states to the tender mercies of Russia or China.

A fresh strategy for Central Asia poses many challenges, not the least of which is the likely opposition of many retired American generals and diplomats who toiled for years in the region, and a bevy of respected experts who believe that America's top concern must be to transform or bring down the Taliban government.

As a long-term goal such concerns warrant respect, but they offer no path for the present. By posing a stark choice between recognition and non-recognition they exclude all intermediate positions, and thus denies to America and its allies a host of potentially productive steps along the path forward.

Among these would be to discuss with Central Asian partners their emerging security concerns and to explore the many ways in which these coincide with America's larger strategic interests. At or near the top of any such list would be the transport of goods, electricity, and gas from Central Asia across Afghanistan to consumers or ports further afield. Rather than viewing these merely as technical projects, as has been done in the past, they must be evaluated in terms of the core strategic interests of both parties. Because the views on this of both the U.S. and Central Asians largely coincide, such an exchange would be productive for both parties.

Important voices in Washington may well object that for the U.S. to embrace international transport as a core element of its strategy for Central Asia is bound to arouse concerns in Moscow or Beijing. But it should be noted that major road or railroad routes from Central Asia through Afghanistan would lead either to the Chinese-built port at Gwadar in Pakistan or to the Indian-Russian port project at Chabahar in Iran. Since the American army had no problem with using Chabahar during its campaign in Afghanistan and depended heavily on Pakistani ports as well, this concern can be set aside. To do otherwise would be to qualify America's professed support for the sovereignty of Central Asian states.

Far the most serious objection to this approach is the charge that it is a back-door path to diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government and support for its actions. Indeed, many of the countries that have received *chargés d'affaires* from Kabul may view their actions this way, making recognition a *fait accompli*. Maria Zakharova, speaking for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, admitted as much when she stated that "We regard this as a step towards the resumption of full-fledged diplomatic contacts."

But for the United States and Europe this would be wrong conclusion on several counts. First, such engagement falls far short of diplomatic

recognition, which can be withheld indefinitely, depending on Taliban actions with respect to human rights, religious extremism, and governance generally. Second, to the extent Washington deems it necessary, Americans and their European friends would be able to act *through* the Central Asians, notably Uzbekistan, rather than as solo actor, and their involvement can be terminated at any time, depending on Kabul's actions. Third, to the extent that such transport and trade helps the Afghan economy, it will mainly benefit the country's small remaining business class and small enterprises along the main routes; it will also help alleviate the grinding poverty into which thirty-seven million Afghans were plunged as a result of America's abrupt withdrawal.

Addressing such concerns, America and Europe can insist that the Central Asian negotiators seek Taliban agreement to use money from tariffs to alleviate the hardship of extreme poverty on the local level, rather than for funding the military or central institutions in Kabul. This would not be simple, but if the West is not involved one can be sure that all the funds will go directly to Taliban's central treasury in Kabul. And to repeat, what is proposed here is a non-committal act that does not lower America's standard for extending diplomatic recognition, and which is reversible at any time if necessary.

**Rather than view the embrace of Central Asia's trans-Afghan transport project as a back-door path to help the Taliban or extend diplomatic recognition to their government, it should be seen as a way to test Taliban intentions, their ability to evolve, their readiness to honor agreements, and their commitment to the welfare of the Afghan populace.**

Lacking such engagement with the Central Asians, America and its values will be completely sidelined. Washington and Europe will be dependent on their own intelligence agencies, which have largely proven to be

inadequate in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and on accounts from the thirty-four countries that are already interacting with the Taliban. And to repeat, in nearly all of the relevant projects affecting trans-Afghan connectivity to the Arabian Sea, America would be working with and through partner governments of Central Asia, rather than as a solo agent.

Most important, the strategies and actions proposed here directly strengthen the economic viability of all countries of Central Asia and by doing so, undergird their sovereignty at a time when it is under existential threat from large neighbors. In a notably practical spirit and with limitations to be defined by Washington and Europe themselves, it advances the priorities of all Central Asian countries and with Azerbaijan as well. Above all, it promotes the strategic interests of the entire West in a post-Ukraine world, however the current war there turns out.

Stated differently, the proposed strategy offers Washington a second chance, both with respect to the five countries of Central Asia and, collaterally, to Afghanistan itself. With no commitment to present or future diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government in Kabul, it will create for the United States a constructive role throughout the region, thereby preventing a power vacuum in a vast territory which both Russia and China view with geopolitical avarice. They will signal to both Moscow and Beijing that the American “pivot to Asia” includes all five of the former Soviet states of Central Asia and does not necessarily exclude Afghanistan. While indicating that neither Russia nor China has a free hand in the region, it will also signify that Washington is open to collaborate with them, so far as such joint actions advance America’s core commitment to the sovereignty and self-determination of the regional states of Central Asia.

In taking the steps proposed here the United States would not be acting alone. Both the United Kingdom and the European Union are in urgent

need for a new strategy towards Central Asia and Afghanistan. It should not be difficult to come up with a unified or coordinated approach along the lines discussed above. Indeed, Boris Johnson, the British Prime Minister, has explicitly called for such a common approach.

In forging such a common approach, particular importance must be assigned to Turkey. With its deepening involvement with both Central Asia and the new government in Afghanistan, Ankara should be considered among America's chief collaborators on the region as a whole. That Turkey is also a NATO member is especially relevant, for it has shown a consistent interest not only in economic and educational relations with Central Asia but with security as well, which both the U.S. and Europe have tended to put on a back burner.

A final note to the new approach to transport proposed here concerns the means through which America, Great Britain, and Europeans might advance it. All too often in the past the United States has worked *on* regional partners, evaluating and grading each of them and parceling out its largesse on that basis. In this case, however, the interests of the United States and regional states coincide, which should make it possible for Washington to work *with* the Central Asians rather than *on* them. In this, as in all other dimensions of the proposed strategy, America's role will be to help support sovereignty and self-determination.

## The Likely Effects of Inaction

When evaluating a prospective strategy, it is important to pinpoint the objectives it is intended to advance and also the likelihood of it actually doing so. The program proposed above is designed to deepen the sovereignties of the five Central Asian states as a group by supplementing their collective strength with strategic support from America and Europe. It identifies enhanced transport and trade through Afghanistan to the southern seas as the key to this process.

By opening the most direct window to the South it will enhance the ability of these countries to balance future pressures from Russia and China with links with the countries of South and Southeast Asia. Backed by the U.S. and Europe, the countries will be able to maintain productive relations with all the major powers without being dominated by any one of them or by a grouping thereof. This strategy embraces Central Asian efforts to construct transport routes through Afghanistan for the international transport of goods, electricity, and gas, but would staunchly oppose diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government until it meets accepted standards in the area of human rights and freedoms.

No less central to the evaluation of a prospective strategy is to gauge the outcome if that strategy is *not* adopted. In the present case the results would be numerous and self-evident. The Central Asian economies would grow at a slower pace, if at all. Denied the most direct transit routes to South and Southeast Asia, they would suffer from a universal “distance tariff” on their entire trade with both regions. The Central Asian states would continue to court investments from the West but their economic,

political and strategic dependence on China, Russia, or both countries would steadily increase. Meanwhile, the world would be denied an important gauge by which the intentions of the Taliban government could be evaluated. Moreover, failure in this international project would deepen the desperation of millions of Afghans and relegate their country to the status of a very minor outlier of nearby major powers.

On a global scale, if the U.S. and Europe shy away from the type of engagement proposed here they would hand control of inner Asia to Moscow and Beijing, with Pakistan, Iran, and India in secondary and fractious roles. It would undermine the sovereignty and self-determination not only of the Central Asian countries themselves but of Azerbaijan and Georgia in the Caucasus.

Meanwhile, countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America would not be blind to these developments and would adjust their relations with the West accordingly. Finally, and of special urgency today, is that such a turn of events would provide Vladimir Putin or a successor with tempting new targets for Moscow's revanchist aspirations that have been so tragically on display in Ukraine.

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