

The United States' role in Central Asia

Geographically distant and without historical ties to the region, the USA has never been a major player in Central Asia. However, both sides stand to gain from closer ties: for the USA, Central Asian countries are key partners in meeting security challenges; for Central Asia, benefits could include increased investment and reduced dependence on Russia and China, the two main regional powers.

United States security involvement in Central Asia

US security interests in Central Asia

United States interest in Central Asia is mainly driven by security concerns. The break-up of the Soviet Union left Kazakhstan with a large and inadequately secured [nuclear arsenal](#), which US funding helped to [dismantle](#) by 1995, alongside other nuclear, chemical and biological warfare facilities across the region.

Since the 1990s, Islamic terrorism has emerged as the dominant concern. Central Asian terrorists have carried out several deadly attacks, in [Central Asia](#) itself, Afghanistan, and other [neighbouring countries](#). The [Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan](#) terrorist group has fought against US-led troops in Afghanistan, and it has also pledged allegiance to Isil/Da'esh; there are an estimated [2 000](#) Central Asian foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria.

Security cooperation between the United States and Central Asian countries

To help Central Asian security forces combat terrorism and other threats such as drug trafficking ([one quarter](#) of the heroin produced in Afghanistan transits through the region), in 2016 the USA provided training to [876](#) members of Central Asian armed forces; it also holds joint [counter-terrorism exercises](#). In 2015, the USA donated [328 military vehicles](#) to Uzbekistan, but is not otherwise a major [arms supplier](#) to the region.

In return, since 2001 Central Asian states have [supported](#) US-led operations in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan both hosted US airbases; all five countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) allowed overflights by military planes for US-led operations in Afghanistan, and participated in the [Northern Distribution Network](#) of rail and road routes, enabling supplies to coalition troops to be brought in via Central Asia. They are all NATO [partner countries](#), and in 2006 Kazakhstan went a step further by adopting an [Individual Partnership Action Plan](#) envisaging closer cooperation with NATO, though not with a view to eventual membership. Annual NATO-Kazakh '[Steppe Eagle](#)' joint exercises are a key part of this cooperation.

The decline of the USA's security role in Central Asia since the early 2000s

US military presence in Central Asia has declined, partly due to a scaling down of operations in Afghanistan, but above all due to a return of Russian influence. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are military allies of Russia, which in 2014 persuaded Kyrgyzstan not to renew the US lease on [Manas airbase](#). In 2015, one year after its relations with the USA worsened in 2014, Russia also [closed down](#) the Northern Distribution Network.

Human rights issues are another major obstacle. Uzbekistan [expelled](#) the USA from its Karshi-Khanabad airbase in 2005 following US condemnation of a [massacre](#) in which hundreds of protestors died. Since then, relations have improved somewhat, with the USA deciding to resume military aid to Uzbekistan in 2011, and the above-mentioned donation of military vehicles in 2015; in return, Uzbekistan lets the USA use [vital supply routes](#) to Afghanistan through its territory. Military cooperation with Uzbekistan, and neutral Turkmenistan, is controversial due to abuses such as the continuing use of [forced labour](#) in the Uzbek cotton harvest.

United States economic involvement in Central Asia

Significant United States investment in Central Asia, but little trade

Kazakhstan, and in particular its [oil sector](#), is by far the biggest Central Asian destination for US investment. As of July 2017, US [direct investments](#) in the country were worth US\$25 billion, making it the second biggest



foreign investor; moreover, the pace of investment has accelerated, to a record US\$2.3 billion in the first half of 2017. The USA has [bilateral investment agreements](#) in force with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. There is considerable [potential](#) for increased US investment, which outside Kazakhstan remains negligible (as of 2015, a total of [US\\$150 million](#) in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – no data available for Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan).

By contrast, US-Central Asia trade is very limited. In 2016 it was just [US\\$2.4 billion](#) – a mere 0.07 % of total US foreign trade, and 2.4 % of Central Asia's. The EU, China and Russia were much more significant partners, accounting for 29 %, 21 % and 18 % respectively of Central Asian trade. Since 2014, Central Asian trade with the USA and the world in general has been hard hit by lower prices for commodity exports such as oil and uranium; in 2016 trade with the USA was 26 % down on 2014, and is only now slowly recovering.

The United States as an aid donor

According to OECD [figures](#), the USA provides around 6 % of overseas development aid to the region, making it the fifth largest donor. In 2016, US aid for Central Asia was US\$161 million, most of it going to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the two poorest countries. Among other things, US aid funds counter-narcotics and -terrorism training, as well as education and healthcare projects.

The 'New Silk Road'

In 2011, the United States [launched](#) its 'New Silk Road' initiative, which aims to promote regional integration, both between the Central Asian countries, and with their southern Asian neighbours. Two key energy projects which the initiative contributes to (alongside the EU) are the [CASA-1000](#) regional electricity grid, and the [TAPI gas pipeline](#) connecting Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. However, US funding is tiny compared to the billions committed by China to its much more ambitious [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (just [US\\$15 million](#) for CASA-1000), and the impact is [limited](#). Neither CASA-1000 nor TAPI have got off the ground yet, with a difficult security situation in Afghanistan preventing the construction of new energy supply routes across the country.

Framework for US involvement with Central Asia

Since 2009, the USA has held [annual bilateral consultations](#) with each of the five Central Asian countries, during which senior officials from both sides discuss issues of mutual interest such as counter-terrorism, human rights, trade, health and education. In 2012, the USA upgraded relations with Kazakhstan to a [strategic partnership](#), similar to those it has with Georgia and Ukraine; in practice however, the [format](#) of bilateral meetings has not changed much.

The two sides also meet in multilateral fora, such as the United States-Central Asian Council on Trade and Investment, which has met once a year since it was [established](#) in 2004. In November 2015, the first [C5+1 meeting](#) between then-Secretary of State, John Kerry, and Central Asia foreign ministers was held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. At a [second meeting](#) one year later in Washington DC, ministers agreed on five projects, aimed among other things at combatting terrorism, promoting alternative energy sources and reducing barriers to intra-regional trade. While at a far more modest level than [Russia](#) and [China's](#) regional cooperation initiatives, such projects help to keep the door open to US involvement in Central Asia.

Prospects for US-Central Asia relations under the Trump administration

As in other areas of US foreign policy, the priorities of the Trump administration in Central Asia remain unclear; adding to the confusion, many key State Department posts remain unfilled (including [two](#) of the five ambassadors' positions). One of the biggest likely changes is a severe reduction in US aid to the region; the administration's [budget request](#) for the 2018 fiscal year represents a 50 % cut (the Senate's counter-proposal is a more modest 25 % cut). In other respects, there appears to be [continuity](#): there have been no formal C5+1 ministerial meetings under the new administration, but in September 2017, Rex Tillerson, the Secretary of State, [met](#) his Central Asian counterparts informally on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly; meanwhile, US\$15 million funding for C5+1 projects has been approved. In May 2017, the US State Department [proposed](#) to revive another Obama-era initiative, the New Silk Road, but has not yet explained how this will happen.

Human rights have often been a bone of contention – even with relatively democratic Kyrgyzstan, which in 2015 [tore up](#) its cooperation agreement with the USA after the latter awarded a human rights prize to a Kyrgyz activist. A weaker emphasis on [human rights](#) under the Trump administration could therefore facilitate ties with Central Asia's authoritarian regimes.

European Parliament position: in its April 2016 [resolution](#) on the EU's Central Asia strategy, the Parliament criticises the EU and USA for failing to coordinate their actions, including development projects, in Central Asia.