

The United States' Renewed Engagement in Central Asia: Great-Power Competition after Russia's Attacks on Ukraine

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The research delves into the strategic, geopolitical, and economic motivations behind the shift in U.S policy towards Central Asia. It examines the new wave of U.S involvement in Central Asia after 2022 and assesses its implications for regional security, connectivity, and evolving great-power dynamics. The research is qualitative, and employs document analysis of primary and secondary sources published between 2014-2025. Primary sources include U.S Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025, the 2023 C5+1 Leaders' Joint Statement (New York Declaration), and the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic literature and policy reports. Thematic analysis is categorized into three interconnected subthemes of geostrategic competition, energy security, and counter-terrorism. Findings of the research identify four strategic drivers of U.S. re-engagement with the region: opening alternative trade routes (such as the Middle Corridor), enforcing and monitoring sanctions against Russia, diversifying access beyond Russia's sphere of influence, and securing access to critical mineral resources. Concurrently, Central Asian states have sought to pursue a 'multi-vector' foreign policy, which enables them to hedge among competing alliances while maintaining their sovereignty without displeasing neighbouring great powers. However, in Central Asia, where there is a multitude of overlapping interests, unilateral strategic prescriptions are unlikely to succeed. Rather, the most viable means of promoting regional stability are sustained multilateralism, economic engagement, and a policy of mutual accommodation within the context of a changing multiplex order.

Keywords: Central Asia, U.S. Foreign Policy, Great Power Competition, Regional Stability, Afghanistan.

The disintegration of the former Soviet Union in 1991 and the formation of five Central Asian independent republics Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as well as the new geopolitical landscape, have played important roles. For over one hundred years, the area was under Russian and subsequent Soviet domination. With the end of the Cold War, a power vacuum emerged, requiring renewed involvement by international powers. The U.S. was among the first states to recognise the Republic of Austria??? newly independent states as a new state? Sovereign and independent states and has since seen its relationship progress from diplomatic recognition to a strategic partnership. Though the initial U.S. interest was

very low, later concerns included aspects of sovereignty, economic transition, and regional security as the region near Afghanistan, with its enormous energy reserves, increasingly became a U.S. security focus.

Following the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and the resulting power vacuum, several regional and global actors sought to expand their influence in the strategically and economically significant region (Afridi et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2025; Rashid, 1994). The emergence of terrorist networks (Rashid, 1994) and the Taliban takeover in neighbouring Afghanistan created a centre of instability with severe implications for regional stability. The September 11, 2001 attack on the US by members of Al-Qaeda was transformative not just for international politics but also for the South and Central Asian region. Afghanistan became a sanctuary for terrorist hideouts, and the US was adamant about apprehending the culprits of the attacks on the US, leading to the 'War on Terror'. Central Asia served as the strategic pivot for the United States' security operations in Afghanistan in the post-9/11 world (Ryan, 2019).

But since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, the geopolitical environment has transformed, and America's strategic interests, outside of the Afghan context, have been reawakened. Recent literature has identified this change as a regional sovereignty push aimed at avoiding the circumvention of international sanctions (The White House, 2023). This new perspective is embodied in the U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 that prioritises promoting Central Asian economic prosperity and resilience (U.S. Department of State, 2020). The Middle Corridor remains one of the most crucial strategic routes through which the U.S. can diversify its routes away from Russia (Rossi, 2023). In addition, the launch of the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue underscores a new urgency and the need to ensure the supply chains for rare earth elements essential to the global energy transition (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This paper aims to examine how multifaceted and complex the motivations for the recent re-engagement of the U.S. may be, and to assess its implications for the region's security outlook, using official statements and recent academic analyses (Rizvi, 2024).

The security zone that had been forged in the last 20 years, which was centred on Afghanistan, was sent back to Russia with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The new round of engagement is evident in the key U.S. Strategy for Central Asia (2019-2025) and the 2023 C5+1 summit, which focused on regional sovereignty, economic resilience, and diversified partnerships (U.S. Department of State, 2020; The White House, 2023). One implication of such a study has not been to disaggregate issues of connectivity and resource security from the broader issue of NATO and great-power competition but rather to see these as “overlapping aspects of a larger U.S. effort to improve regional resiliency” and increase strategic options for governments in the region. This paper examines the key motivating factors behind the renewed U.S. involvement and their impact on the changing regional order. Central Asia emerged as a significant region in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse owing to its geostrategic importance, abundant natural resources, and critical position between major powers.

A theoretical approach combining defensive neo-realism and hegemonic stability theory is used to analyse U.S. engagement. Through a defence-based neo-realist lens, U.S. strategy is seen as a structural one designed to maintain a regional balance of power, in this case between U.S. influence and that of China and Russia, with China's Belt and Road Initiative (Heydarian, 2019; U.S. Department of State, 2020). Moreover, an enlightenment of the hegemonic stability theory as a multipolar or 'multiplex' order helps to account for the U.S. contribution to the underpinning of regional security and trade norms, including the facilitation of the Middle Corridor, which must include the strategic interests of other regional actors (Monteiro, 2014; Rossi, 2023). There are theoretical implications as well that explain the 'multi-vector' foreign policy of Central Asian countries, which is a hedging strategy centred on protecting their autonomy and diversifying their economic relations (The White House, 2023; Economist Intelligence, 2023).

Problem Statement and Research Gap

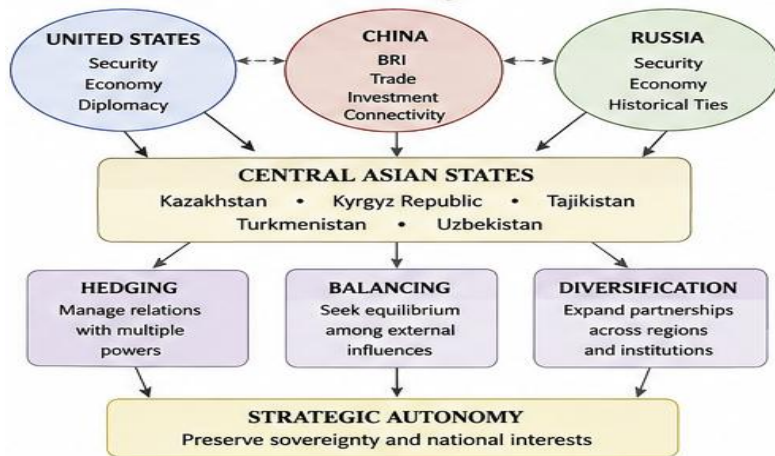
The post-2022 geopolitical situation has posed a dilemma between the U.S. unilateral, security-centric approach of the past and the present security- and development-oriented needs of Central Asian countries, which are unwilling to play zero-sum geopolitics. The main difficulty is that as the U.S. tries to enter the region, engage with it, build supply chains for critical minerals, monitor sanctions, and diversify trade routes, it is doing so against a backdrop of entrenched historical ties with Russia and rapidly growing Chinese economic investments. The external balancing aspirations of the United States and 'multi-vector' autonomy within the region have not been adequately synced in existing foreign policy efforts.

There is a body of literature describing the overall shift toward great-power competition in Eurasia, but it remains a neglected area of study. Often, the elements of connectivity, sanctions and resources are disjointed, and scholars do not view them within a comprehensive geopolitical paradigm. Moreover, orthodox theories of International Relations (IR), including hegemonic stability theory (Let's consistently capitalize or lowercase the initial letters of the theory names throughout the article. They shouldn't be capitalized in one place and lowercase in another; let's standardize them all), are misused in analyses of Central Asia, and their unipolar perspective oversimplifies the relationship with the U.S. as an unchallenged hegemon. This study attempts to fill this void by combining the defensive neo-realist approach with a modern, multifaceted explanation of Hegemonic Stability Theory (based on Monteiro's theory of unipolar politics). It does this in an integrated, multi-layered way, shining a spotlight on the strategic hedging and regional autonomy that Central Asian states have in mind, and addressing how U.S. security, diplomatic, and trade initiatives align with (or intersect with) them.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 discusses the theoretical framework applied to the study. Section 3 outlines the detailed research methodology. Section 4 traces the geo-strategic and geo-economic significance of Central Asia. Section 5 discusses the historical and contemporary evolution of U.S. engagement strategy in the region. Section 6 outlines strategic approaches and policy recommendations for strengthening U.S. engagement. Section 7 assesses the implications of U.S. involvement for regional security and key external stakeholders. Finally, Section 8 provides a brief conclusion and outlines the study's critical limitations.

Theoretical Framework

Existing theories of International Relations offer an analytical lens for viewing U.S.-Central Asia relations through a security framework, owing to the situation in the Afghanistan-centred phase (Hill, 2001) or to great power competition in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Rumer, 2016). This study draws on the complementary theoretical perspectives from realism and hegemonic stability theory. Realist theory argues that states are driven by the pursuit of the national interest to maximise their security or power. This can be explained through the defensive and offensive variants of realist theory. In the context of this study, the US presence in Central Asia is understood through the lens of defensive neo-realism, in which US actions aim to preserve influence relative to Russia and China (Malik & Mirza, 2019). The USA is using external balancing to maintain its presence in Central Asia and protect its geostrategic interests by strengthening regional partnerships. (Offensive hegemonic theory would make more sense for the US. It is appropriate to explain, in a single sentence, why the "defensive" label was chosen for the US superpower (sources on this subject are quite extensive). The term "defensive" as it appears on the official US website holds no academic significance.)

Figure 1: Multiplex Order and Power Diffusion in Central Asia

Source: Author's conceptualisation based on Acharya's multiplex-world perspective and Monteiro's analysis of unipolar politics.

Complementary perspectives are offered by hegemonic stability theory, which explains international security in the presence of a dominant power, arguing that there is a greater likelihood of security and stability in the system when a single hegemonic power underwrites the rules and provides security guarantees (Gilpin, 1981). After the end of the Cold War, the US emerged as a sole hegemon in the international system; therefore, by extension, its presence portends regional tranquillity in Central Asia.

However, Classic Hegemonic Stability Theory (Gilpin, 1981) is more relevant to the immediate post-Cold War period. With the rise of multiple centres of Power (Zakaria, 2008), it may be argued that the 'unipolar moment' has passed and that the world is now moving towards a multiplex order, with power diffusing across multiple centres. In this respect, Nuno Monteiro's Theory of Unipolar Politics (2014) captures the essence of this transition by arguing that while the US remains the strongest power in the system, it does not command unchallenged primacy. In these circumstances, the stability of the international order rests on the dominant power accommodating the interests of other rising powers. Within Central Asia, where Russia's influence is entrenched and China's growing economic outreach is welcomed, the US approach to engaging with Central Asian states needs to rest on accommodation rather than the suppression of other stakeholders' interests.

(Although the term "Regional Security" is frequently used, let us briefly touch upon the theory of the "Regional Security Complex Theory, and its meaning in the context of a region." See: Barry Buzan, various sources)

Method

This work has a qualitative research design to examine the strategic interests, policy adjustments, and geopolitical consequences of U.S. reengagement in Central Asia. The methodology is designed to be systematic, transparent, academically rigorous, and empirically grounded for understanding a piece of text and the strategy learned from it.

Research Design and Approach

This research is qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive, adopting qualitative document analysis (QDA) as its primary method. QDA is a process in which documents (printed or electronic) are reviewed and/or evaluated in a systematic way. Through document analysis, as with other analytical approaches in qualitative research, documents must be examined and interpreted to reveal their meaning, understanding, and empirical knowledge. It fits particularly well with the study of foreign policy, which involves formal diplomatic language

and documents exchanged, government strategy papers, and peer-reviewed academic research on intentions, strategies, and regional responses.

Purposive Sampling and Data Collection

Purposive sampling technique was used to collect the data for this study. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling, in which the researcher chooses the elements to sample according to his knowledge and the research's purpose. Given that capturing this change in U.S. foreign policy is the objective, the temporal window of the sources used was narrowed to 2015-2025. Why 2015? 2014 is more significant due to the annexation of Crimea. Data collection was split into two streams:

- **Primary Sources:** Official policy documents, joint declarations, strategic announcements and declarations that represent the government's intentions. Sampled texts were the U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 (U.S. Department of State, 2020); the C5+1 Leaders' Joint Statement / New York Declaration (The White House, 2023); and official diplomatic statements on the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue (U.S. Department of State, 2023).
- **Secondary sources:** peer-reviewed journal articles, regional security papers, and thorough research studies by leading foreign policy think tanks around the world. This encompasses published Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) analysis (Rumer, 2016), the RAND Corporation (Stoll, 2023), Lowy Institute (Rossi, 2023) and regional security frames (CSAG Strategy Paper, 2024; Rizvi, 2024).

Procedure and Data Analysis

This process of data analysis was carried out in four progressive steps that follow each other:

- **Phase 1: Familiarisation and Preliminary Coding** is the first step in ACTS???. All the collected documents were read and used to gather a contextual view of the geopolitical transition. This resulted in an initial codebook on commonalities in sanctions, supply chains, regional self-governance, and bilateral partnerships.
- **Phase 2: (Qualitative Content Analysis).** Thematic coding was used systematically across the sampled texts. Content was divided into three broad theme areas to demonstrate the overlap of the U.S.-Central Asian interaction, which are: (a) Geostrategic Competition (Balancing Russian influence, Managing Chinese expansion, and Regional presence); (b) Energy and Resource Security (Critical mineral supply chains, Green infrastructure investments, and Transit routes including the Middle Corridor); and (c) Counter-terrorism and regional security (State Partnership Program, Troop rotations, and Afghan border stability).
- **Phase 3: Conceptual Integration.** All the thematic codes that were examined were correlated with the theoretical lenses: defensive neo-realism (systemic balancing) and Monteiro's multiplex order of hegemonic stability (strategic accommodation).
- **Phase 4: Synthesis.** Findings were coded and then organised into a logical narrative with clear interpretations of U.S. diplomatic actions, based directly on official statements and objective academic scholarship.

Validity and Reliability (Data Triangulation)

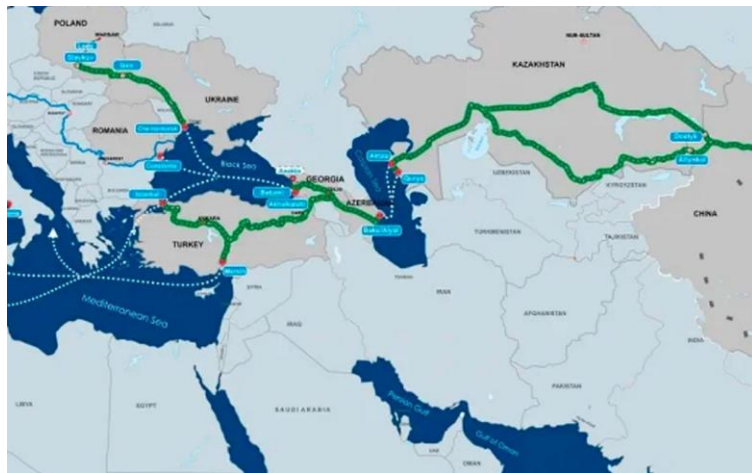
Data Triangulation in this qualitative study was conducted across three layers to enhance the study's trustworthiness, validity, and reliability. Triangulation is a practice used to check for consistency of data from several sources. For this research, official government statements containing claims about U.S. strategy, enforcement of sanctions, and the dynamics at play in this region were systematically compared with studies and analyses from a diverse set of independent, peer-reviewed academic literature as well as other independent international security and economic intelligence sources, such as the Economist Intelligence Unit (2023). Due attention was paid to careful reconciliation of any discrepancies in interpretation/reporting. To ensure the

reliability of the procedure, clear and standardised coding guidelines were established for the research team to facilitate thematic categorisation and reduce interpretive bias among individual members.

Geo-strategic and Geo-Economic Significance of Central Asia

The importance of Central Asia stems from its proximity to the Eurasian landmass. In the north, it borders Russia; to the east, China; and to the South, Iran and Afghanistan, while the Caspian Sea forms its Western boundary (Hiro, 2011). Its location places it at a central position where the interests of regional and global powers intersect. Although the region was widely known as Turkestan, the name was changed to Central Asia starting in the early 20th century, in line with the general strategies of Britain and Russia (Yalçinkaya, 1997, 434).

Figure 2: The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor)



Source: World Bank; author adaptation.
 Note. The route connects Central Asia with the South Caucasus, Türkiye and Europe while providing an alternative to the northern route through Russia.

Two key external actors influence Central Asia's strategic environment, namely the Russian Federation and China; their influence manifests in different ways. Russia still has deep political, security, and historical ties with the region, and China has expanded its economic footprint through investments, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), infrastructure, and trade (Afridi et al., 2017; Feifer, 2007; Heydarian, 2019; Mariani, 2013). This puts the United States in competition with other powers, while Central Asian governments have generally tried to steer clear of aligning exclusively with any major power. They value a variety of external partnerships, and it is in that context that renewed engagement with the United States has emerged. Washington thus has to contend with the not insignificant difficulties of providing alternatives to Russia and China, as well as sustaining the region's current security and economic ties (Khan et al., 2025; Rumer, 2016; The White House, 2023).

Central Asia is also geographically close to Afghanistan and Iran. Afghanistan's instability and unrest have also spilt over into Central Asia. Having invested over two decades in Afghanistan, maintaining a foothold in Central Asia supports US objectives in Afghanistan. At the same time, Iran-US ties have been strained due to Iran's nuclear programme and Israel's Middle Eastern policy. Maintaining a presence in Central Asia allows the US to exert leverage over Iranian nuclear developments alongside its military bases in the Middle East.

Kazakhstan is a good example of the new strategic role of Central Asia's geographic location and resource wealth. It has boosted the significance of the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), which links Kazakhstan via the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, and to European markets, as an alternative to routes passing through Russian territory (Rossi, 2023). Meanwhile, Kazakhstan's

stocks of rare earth elements and critical metals have made it a more important partner in the West's quest to diversify strategic supply chains. These developments indicate that the significance of Central Asia is not only related to traditional security factors, but also that connectivity and access to strategic resources are becoming intertwined parts of its geopolitical role (Rossi, 2023; Economist Intelligence, 2023). The multi-vector foreign policy approach in Kazakhstan also exemplifies how Central Asian states are seeking to capitalise on these opportunities to diversify their external partnerships while maintaining strategic autonomy (Economist Intelligence, 2023). Kazakhstan's 'multi-vector foreign policy' of maintaining balanced relationships with major global powers, including Russia, China, the EU, and the USA, a policy outlined by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, allows the nation to maintain ties with various powers. Kazakhstan has avoided explicitly supporting Russia in its aggression against Ukraine. However, it has simultaneously sought to avoid provoking the larger nation and to ensure that the West does not undermine Russian sanctions against the nation, with provisions requiring its financial and trade systems to monitor international sanctions (Economist Intelligence, 2023).

In recognising the increasing importance of Central Asia, the United States has taken substantial steps to foster engagement in the region. In September, the C5+1 Summit was held, with the President of the United States, Joe Biden, inviting and hosting the leaders of Central Asian states in New York. This was the first time that a President of the United States participated in such a forum and addressed the key issues of regional security, economic cooperation, and sustainable development. The region also has immense natural resource potential. Many Western states, including the US, are striving to make their supply chains more flexible and reduce dependency on a single provider state. Opportunities for joint work on renewable energy could also help address global climate change challenges while securing future energy supplies. Alongside economic interests, cooperation has geopolitical significance for regional security and stability and could create opportunities to counter terrorism, combat illegal drugs, and address environmental challenges (Rizvi, 2024). Realising that a new geopolitical stage is emerging, it is in the interest of the US and its partners to deepen ties with Central Asian countries for greater prosperity, stability and regional influence.

Figure 3: *Central Asia's Location in the Eurasian Landmass*



Source: www.quora.com

Figure 4: Central Asia and its Neighbouring Powers

Source: www.nationsonline.org

The Evolution of U.S. Engagement amid Shifting Geopolitics

The US engagement towards the Central Asian region has passed through three distinct phases. The first phase comprised the US diplomatic recognition of the newly established states following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. During this phase, its relations remained largely nominal. The second phase of this engagement was in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001 and the US decision to engage in hot pursuit in Afghanistan to eliminate terrorist networks. Central Asia's importance as logical hubs during the war on terror reinvigorated the interest of the US in this region; however, after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan post-2021, US concerns with the region took a backseat as the US began to focus more on the Asia Pacific region in the context of an increasingly powerful China (Atlantic Council, 2021). The third phase of renewed interest in the Central Asian region arose after Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent occupation of border regions.

Figure 5: Evolution of U.S. Engagement with Central Asia, 1991–2025

Source: Author's compilation based on U.S. government documents and the present study.

(For Phase III, let's use a phrase like "attacks and the occupation of border regions" instead of "Russia's invasion of Ukraine." The entirety of Ukraine has not been occupied.)

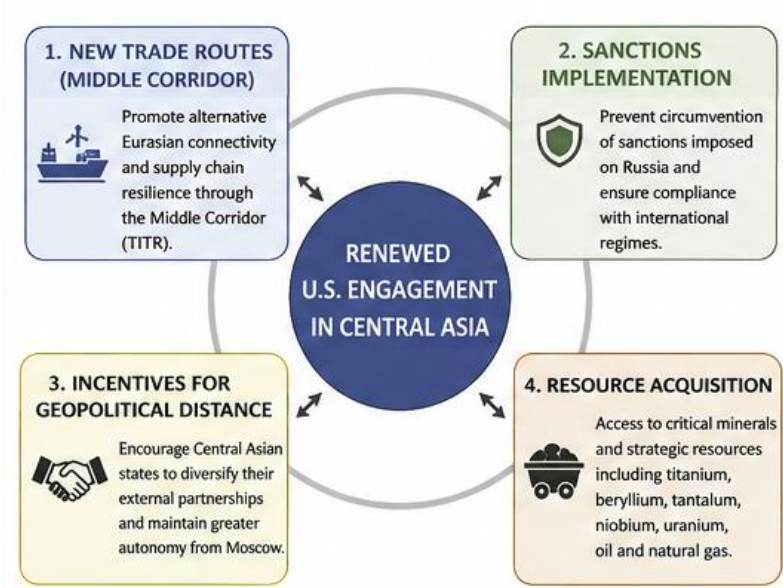
Central Asia's strategic importance to the United States has reached an unprecedented level as a direct result of the conflict in Ukraine. The latest phase of the US-Central Asia engagement is based on four distinct drivers:

- **New Trade Routes:** The US administration, as well as Western states, sees Central Asia as a strategic region for developing new global trade routes that circumvent Russian territory, particularly through the Middle Corridor, as part of an effort to reduce reliance on Russian infrastructure.
- **Implementation of Sanctions:** Washington has also worked hard with governments in Central Asia not to become centres for circumventing sanctions imposed on Russia in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War.
- **Incentives for Non-Geopolitical Distance:** The US wishes to give certain incentives to Central Asian leaders whose traditional political leanings have been in line with Moscow, to turn away from its geopolitical orbit, and to not provide any diplomatic support for the Russian military aggression.
- **Resource Acquisition:** Central Asia is considered an important resource base for access to various resources of oil, uranium, and other critical raw materials, in an effort to diversify their supply chains and reduce reliance on a single state.

The economic and strategic drivers are embedded in the logic of geopolitical contestation. The US continues to view itself as the dominant power of the 21st century. Friedman (2009) argues that a single power will shape the current century, as it did in the past. Owing to the pivotal location, resource endowments, and geostrategic importance of South Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, American policymakers view it as necessary to maintain an overarching presence to prevent Russian and Chinese control in the region.

Concurrently, leaders of Central Asian states are keen to diversify their relationships in order to reduce their dependence on Russia (politically, economically and security-wise), while they want to maintain good relations with Russia in order to continue trade and investment relationships; an overreliance on Russia is considered both undesirable and dangerous; therefore, Central Asian states are trying to diversify their relations without provoking Moscow’s ire. Central Asian States have historically perceived the United States as a temporary player with short-term interests in the region. With Central Asian states' apprehensions towards Russia, along with growing scepticism towards Chinese influence, there is an opportunity for the United States to enhance its standing through increased long-term engagement in the region. Given that the U.S. cannot match China's or Russia's level of investment, its strategy should be carefully targeted to maximise returns. The Sino-Russian cooperation which is, in a sense, necessitated by the post-Soviet US unipolarity also limits Washington's effectiveness (Khan et al., 2023; Yalçınkaya & Hatipoğlu, 2020, 2013).

Figure 6. *Strategic Drivers of Renewed U.S. Engagement*



Source: Author's conceptualisation based on the present study and cited literature.

Central Asian countries have observed Russia's military interventions and support for separatist movements in former Soviet states since the 1990s. However, Russia's role is viewed with scepticism since the onset of the war in Ukraine. Kazakhstan seems the most prepared to distance itself from Russia. Despite seeking CSTO assistance during violent unrest in January 2022, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev challenged Russian President Vladimir Putin on several fronts. Tokayev affirmed that Kazakhstan will not assist Russia in evading Western sanctions and has refused to acknowledge Russian-backed entities like Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (CSAG Strategy Paper, 2024). Moreover, Tokayev refused to accept the Order of Alexander Nevsky from Russia and, soon after the Wagner Group mutiny, called the situation Russia's "domestic problem". As with most leaders in Central Asia, Tokayev's policy is geared toward maintaining Kazakhstan's sovereignty and not over-relying on any one power. While some of the current officialdom, most of whom are products of the Soviet era, remains very influential within Central Asian political circles, the younger, rapidly growing population under 30, much less concerned with ties to the Soviet past, shows declining allegiance to Russia. In this changing landscape, the United States aims to establish a positive and enduring role in the region by strategically focusing its efforts on fostering strong and positive relationships with the younger generation in Central Asia.

Strategic Approaches for Strengthening U.S. Engagement

For the US to reengage in Central Asia, a country-by-country approach must be developed to serve each country's interests and politics. This may involve measures such as economic support, expanding private-sector opportunities, encouraging language courses, and increasing counter-terrorism support. (Are you presenting your recommendations to the US administration, or are you analyzing current policies? Let's use more appropriate wording..) The U.S. needs to revive economic interaction in Central Asia. In early 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the first visit of any sitting U.S. Secretary of State in three years. While in these two Central Asian states, Secretary Blinken reaffirmed American commitment to their sovereignty and territorial integrity. He announced that the U.S. would add \$20 million to the \$30 million already pledged for the Economic Resilience Initiative in Central Asia (ERICEN) since September 2022. ERICEN works toward three areas of enhancement in Central Asia: trade routes, the private sector, and human capital (training, education, etc.). In this area, feedback on ERICEN has been divided; some believe its limited scope is beneficial for Central Asia and the U.S., and that it can utilise its comparative advantages to achieve long-term gains based on American international standards (Khasanov, 2021). Others point out that it is quite small compared to what other powers, such as China, are investing; on May 18-19 of 2023, China unveiled a \$4 billion investment plan for Central Asia (which highlights the expanding scale of Chinese involvement). American interaction does not have to involve government alone; the private sector can also play a huge role. Private sector investment in Central Asia exceeds \$31 billion, according to the U.S. State Department; a much larger private sector presence could help increase energy exports as Europe seeks an alternative to Russian fuel. It also helps Central Asian countries achieve greater energy security through increased investment in renewables and the construction of green energy infrastructure, so that Central Asia has the fuel to power its growth and can contribute surplus to neighbouring states.

Another effective means for the U.S. to advance its profile within Central Asia is through English-language programs. Organisations such as the American Councils for International Education have put forth what they call the 'C5+ONE' initiative, which seeks to improve the English skills of mid-level professionals in the government, non-governmental, and private sectors of Central Asia. It can help foster closer ties between the people of Central Asia and the US and promote greater integration worldwide.

The US can also strengthen its position in Central Asia by supporting counterterrorism efforts. Stationing a large number of troops in Central Asia could spark outrage from Russia or China. (Is this a suggestion or an analysis? If you are quoting as part of an analysis, please specify "according to whom.") A more measured approach would serve it best in terms of creating positive relations; the U.S. State Partnership Program has helped to create ties between the U.S. National Guard and Central Asian states since 2002 (Virginia NG with Tajikistan since 2002, Arizona & Montana NG with Kazakhstan & Kyrgyzstan respectively,

Mississippi NG with Uzbekistan since 2012, and the Nevada NG partnered with Turkmenistan until 2011). In addition, it has hosted many Steppe Eagle exercises that include American, British, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Kazakh troops (Somzhurek, 2018). Building on existing relationships, the US can rotate forces through the region to participate in counterterrorism operations while keeping its footprint small; this aligns with the US goal of operating through an 'over the horizon' approach. For such operations, the 3rd Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) is an appropriate tool to utilise, as it falls under the jurisdiction of CENTCOM and is involved in 'advising and assisting allied and partner nations' as opposed to occupation (as the presence of forces would have to be kept small to avoid Russian and Chinese opposition).

Figure 7. *U.S. National Guard State Partnership Program in Central Asia*



Source: U.S. National Guard; Congressional Research Service.

Implications for Regional Security and Key Stakeholders

The US presence in Central Asia creates implications across different domains.

The security of the region has been vitiated due to the rise of extremism, separatism and terrorism. The presence of the US in Central Asia has the potential to enhance the region's security apparatus. On the regional security front, the US may play a pivotal role in containing the rise of transnational terrorism, including but not limited to the growing presence of the ISIL and its regional affiliates. In the post-2014 context, terrorist networks had expanded into Afghanistan with offshoots in neighbouring regions including Central Asia (Wilson Centre, n.d). Central Asia, after the 9/11 attacks, has been used as a sanctuary by terrorist networks. Sharing a porous border with Afghanistan, there has been repeated infiltration of militant groups to create instability in neighbouring Afghanistan (Bahman, 2019; Kayani, 2015). For this reason, the US sought the support of the Central Asian states for the effective war on terror to be executed (Bahman, 2019). The presence of the USA in Central Asia and its cooperation with other regional stakeholders can play an important role in the fight against terrorism. Given that this is a shared interest for Russia, which fears the spillover of militancy across its southern borders and China (The sensitivity regarding China in Pakistan is well known. However, no terrorist movement targeting China has been scientifically identified in East Turkestan. Yet, Chinese state terror targeting the Muslim Turkic population is an undeniable fact. Naturally, there is no need for you to write about this) cooperation between international and regional stakeholders would be beneficial for regional security and stability. This creates a common space for competing powers to work towards shared interests and avoid zero-sum competition (Rizvi, 2024).

The Afghan imbroglio has been a persistent cause of instability and economic disruption for regional states. For a long time, there has been an internecine civil war in Afghanistan where different factions have been vying to attain power in the state. At the same time, a recapitulation of Afghanistan's history reveals that a large part of Afghanistan's problems is attributable to the role of regional states, which have turned Afghanistan into a battleground for competing interests. On the contrary, if regional states play a responsible role in stabilising regional peace, the same can be extended to Afghanistan. After the peace accord was signed on 29th February 2020, it became important to consolidate the gains which ought to be made through the

agreement. Hence, the USA can utilise the geographical location of Central Asia as a bulwark against an unstable and downward spiralling Afghanistan and safeguard the legacy of its over two decades' involvement in the country.

Active collaboration among stakeholders may help mitigate the region's internal ethnic and political fragility. The demarcation of Central Asia's administrative borders in the post-Soviet era led to the creation of contested ethnic enclaves, fuelling local unrest and violence. Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan and Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan are examples of contested political control over ethnically tense regions. As a result of recurring incidents of unrest, development in the region has remained unsatisfactory. It would be a shared incentive for stakeholders to resolve these issues and promote developments such as CASA-1000 and TAPI, thereby fostering stability and regional development for all parties involved.

The region stands to benefit from US engagement, particularly through the diversification of investment opportunities. Western states led by the US are seeking access to the region's rich mineral resources and deposits. France, for instance, has already inked an agreement for the supply of Titanium and Beryllium (Economist Intelligence, 2023), while other agreements are at different stages of approval. For the actualisation of these contracts, the Middle Corridor plays an instrumental role by bypassing the Russian-dominated routes (Rossi, 2023). However, the Baku-based TRACECA route, launched under EU leadership prior to the Middle Corridor, offers more suitable conditions for such investments than the Chinese-controlled route (Baku Initiative, 1998). While this offers a genuine opportunity, expert opinion remains divided on whether US companies' investment can match that of their Chinese counterparts (Khasanov, 2021).

Pakistan's unique strategic position as a bridge between South Asia and Central Asia makes it an important player in regional security and economic dynamics (Dawar, 2025). The US's latest interest in Central Asia does not include Pakistan as a primary stakeholder; however, it carries both opportunities and risks for Pakistan. On one hand, Pakistan risks the possibility of exclusion from economic and connectivity opportunities, as Pakistan is absent from the C5+1 summit despite possessing its own critical minerals reserves; on the other hand, Pakistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an important fulcrum of the BRI, and the Middle Corridor, which ostensibly is an alternative to the Chinese initiative. However, Pakistan may stand to gain from US engagement in Central Asia, which may also serve to bring about stability in the region and pave the way for the success of CASA-1000 and TAPI, which could in turn alleviate Pakistan's energy problems, though this outcome depends to a great extent on the situation in Afghanistan.

While Russia continues to be the successor to the Soviet Union the predecessor of the five Central Asian states and enjoys deep historical, political, economic and security ties with regional states, the war in Ukraine has limited its capacity to exert influence in the region at a time when the US and its partner states are offering incentives for cooperation. Regional states are also choosing to leverage the interests of the major powers to their benefit. However, this does not indicate a clean exit from Russian influence; rather, it reflects a gradual erosion of Russia's exclusive hold on the region. In this context, the effectiveness of organizations such as the CIS, the EAEU, and the CSTO—in which Russia is the dominant actor is relevant. (References to the websites of these organizations may be included). However, if the diversification is seen as going too far, Russia may utilise its tools of coercion, such as energy supplies and migrant-labour dependency, as a means of punitive action to discourage further drift towards the US (Gusev, n.d.).

China will likely remain a key economic player in Central Asia despite increased U.S. involvement (Khan et al., 2023). So the importance of such projects as the Middle Corridor and the Critical Minerals Dialogue lies not only in diversifying away from Chinese economic cooperation but also in expanding their options (Mariani, 2013; U.S. Department of State, 2023). As China has a long-term investment stance and is interested in safeguarding the BRI connectivity, it has a strong interest in maintaining regional stability. It should be noted that the SCO, established under China's leadership, is an organization that holds significant

influence in the region (About Shangai, 2017; Khan & Sultana, 2019). As a result, greater U.S. involvement does not automatically create a zero-sum rivalry with China but can help establish a more diversified economic landscape for Central Asian countries in which they can cultivate a variety of partnerships and the great powers have continued reason to cooperate.

Conclusion

The confluence of counterterrorism cooperation, Afghanistan stability drives, access to critical minerals, connectivity projects, and great-power competition with Russia and China underpins the current profile of US interest in Central Asia, which has been heightened following the Russia-Ukraine War. The paper has suggested that, although the US presence is structurally driven, it runs counter to Russia's historical ties and China's financial interests in the region. With these conditions prevailing, the US cannot act alone, but its new efforts could hold real promise for Central Asian countries to diversify and be more strategic. The regional states have replied with cautious optimism, opting for a multi-vector foreign policy that buffers them and balances between the two big powers rather than aligning with one. The paper's analysis recursively builds on neo-realist and hegemonic stability theory, yet is informed by Monteiro's analysis of the unipolar-to-multipolar shift (2014), arguing that, despite the emergence of multipolarity, the US state remains dominant in the international system. However, it can't remain the sole hegemonic state. Russia and China are emerging as contenders in the system, and a successful engagement strategy by the United States needs to be based on cooperation (not exclusion) with all regional and international stakeholders. In addition, persistent regional peace and security has been key to the success of regional initiatives like CASA-1000 and TAPI, highlighting that the future of Central Asia and much of the associated region as a result will depend to an even greater extent on the willingness of all major regional stakeholders to accommodate each other's core interests.

Limitations of the Study

Several key limitations should be noted, both in terms of theory, methods and arguments, to contextualise this research's findings:

Defensive neo-realism and an updated version of Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) are used in conducting this study. These systemic-level approaches are powerful at the macro level for analysing balancing and diffusion of power between the USA, Russia and China, but are structurally limited. These factors, by nature, downplay the role of sub-state politics (competition between factions within the five Central Asian republics, regime change, local corruption, and internal socio-economic tensions), which are key to determining foreign policy choices.

The research is limited by the nature of the data, which employs qualitative document analysis of official strategy documents, joint documents, and public academic analyses. In frontline policy statements, which are presented to the public, there is frequently a degree of uniformity and duplicate language that obscures assumed and generalised diplomatic goals and reflects the difficulty of behind-the-scenes negotiations and on-the-ground implementation. There is also an empirical constraint on this research: no primary fieldwork was undertaken with Central Asian diplomats, policymakers, or local citizens, which means it has been restricted to object and Force Ethics, thereby reducing the analysis to interpretive levels.

Argumentative and Scope Limitations: The central argument about strategic accommodation within a multiplex order will be highly dependent on the constantly shifting geopolitical landscape from 2014 to 2025. The viability of 'multi-vector' hedging, and the potential application of the long-term conclusions suggested here, might change quickly if the dynamic processes in Ukraine and/or China and/or the U.S. leadership's focus on them were to escalate rapidly.

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