Strategic Partnerships to Secure Critical Resources and Supply Chains

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you very much for the honor of being invited to speak at this hearing on critical supply chains. I am John Herbst, and I currently serve as the Senior Director of the Eurasia Center at the Atlantic Council.

While I am currently employed by the Atlantic Council, I am providing testimony in my personal capacity. The views I express today are my own and do not necessarily represent those of the Atlantic Council.

My testimony today draws from my 31 years of experience as a foreign service officer in the US State Department, where I retired at the rank of career minister. I served as Ambassador to Uzbekistan from 2000-2003, and Ambassador to Ukraine from 2003-2006. It also draws from my work as head of the Eurasia Center since 2014.

The United States has rediscovered Central Asia. Central Asia is the very heart of the great landmass that extends from the Bay of Biscay off France's west coast to the Sea of Okhotsk of Russia's east coast. The British geographer Halford Mackinder referred to this supercontinent as the "World Island." He famously said, "Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island: Who rules the World Island commands the world."

Russia conquered nearly all of Central Asia in the 19th century and held it fast when the Soviets came to power. The Soviet implosion in the early 1990s freed the region and five nations emerged: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Some geographers include Afghanistan and Mongolia in Central Asia, but the connections among the post-Soviet five remain tighter. Whether or not Afghanistan and Mongolia are included, the region is landlocked, which presents substantial political, and especially economic, challenges.

US INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

Washington first paid close policy attention to Central Asia when the Soviet Empire disappeared and the five new nations emerged. It promoted independence, stability, and reform in the region and Chevron negotiated a deal that made it the leading outside partner in developing Kazakhstan's substantial oil reserves. The September 2001 Al Qaeda attack on the U.S., masterminded by Osama Bin Laden operating from Afghanistan, also focused Washington's attention on the region as bases quickly set up in Uzbekistan and then Kyrgyzstan facilitated the US military response.

But as the war there continued without resolution, US interest in Central Asia slackened. When the U.S. decided to fully withdraw from Afghanistan in President Joe Biden's first year in office, the U.S. turned to Central Asia to deal with resulting issues, such as the presence of Afghan refugees, but its engagement eventually reached a low ebb. This did not make sense because, in addition to the region's abundant natural resources, Central Asia is of high strategic value since it borders the United States' principal adversaries: China, Russia, and Iran. It is not in our interests that any of these nations exert undue influence there. Mackinder was right.

THE REASONS FOR US INTEREST

And that brings us to the good news. Within nine months of returning to the White House, the Trump administration announced an initiative to heighten relations with the region, with a clear emphasis on economic opportunity. Such opportunity, focused on oil and gas, was of course a driver of US policy in the 90s. That remains true now, but the interest is wider.

In recent years, the development of the high-tech economy has placed an increasing importance on the mining and refining of critical and, in particular, rare earth minerals. They are essential components in computer chips, artificial intelligence, and high-grade weapons. For years, the US in desultory fashion sought access to such minerals abroad and at home. Meanwhile, China was energetically mining its abundant reserves, acquiring rights to these minerals abroad and establishing itself as the world leader in refining. Early in his second administration, President Trump decided that US national and economic security required a full court press to acquire and refine rare earth minerals. Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states have significant reserves of these minerals.

Kazakhstan is the world's largest uranium producer, accounting for 39 percent of global production, it ranks third globally in titanium production and has the second largest manganese reserves—essential for producing high-strength steel—and approximately 36 million tons of copper reserves, with copper being widely used for defense applications. Kazakhstan also has substantial reserves of lithium, important for batteries, and tungsten, used in semiconductors and military armaments.

Similarly, Uzbekistan has reserves of tungsten, lithium, manganese, and other critical minerals with its mineral resource potential estimated at $5.7 trillion. Tajikistan is the world's second-largest antimony producer, accounting for approximately 15% of global supply. Antimony has various defense applications, such as ammunition and alloy production and is used in electronics and semiconductors. Currently, the US imports 90% of its antimony from abroad, with China in particular dominating the global supply, posing a supply vulnerability to the US defense supply chain. Kyrgyzstan also has 20 rare earth mineral deposits and more than 16,000 active mines and mineral deposits.

Despite its critical mineral abundance, the US only constitutes 2.1% of mineral exports from Central Asia.

Central Asia also possesses significant hydrocarbon resources. Kazakhstan has approximately 30 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves, the largest proven oil reserves in the Caspian region and the 12th-largest globally. Turkmenistan is particularly rich in natural gas, with proven gas resources approximately 11.327 trillion cubic meters. Uzbekistan has 1.84 trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves, 594 million barrels of oil reserves, and 2 billion tons of coal reserves.

The Trump administration underscored its interest in the region by convening last November, for the first time in Washington, a presidential summit of the C5+1, a format that refers to the five Central Asian states and the U.S. This group was established in 2015 by the Obama administration. While this group has met yearly since then, the Washington summit gave the group new impetus.

THE PILLARS OF ADMINISTRATION POLICY

The Trump administration speaks of cooperation within the C5+1 based on three pillars: economics, energy, and security. The economics pillar looks to increase trade and investment. To further this goal, the November 2025 summit's Joint Statement of Intent on Economic Cooperation designated the B5+1 as a business counterpart to the C5+1 designed to improve the business environment in Central Asia. A major business conference was held alongside the C5+1 summit and then a B5+1 Forum was held in

Bishkek last February. I should note that Ambassador Sergio Gor, President Trump's Ambassador to India and Special Envoy for South and Central Asia, has been instrumental in advancing these important initiatives. That political-level focus on these issues is key to advancing strong, smart US policies in Central Asia.

The energy pillar was also a major focus at the November DC summit. Key topics included developing Central Asia's abundant mineral wealth and enhancing energy connectivity between the region and the U.S. Sizable trade and investment deals were concluded at the business conference—in a "Deal Zone" hosted by Commerce Secretary Lutnick—alongside the C5+1 summit. Commercial deals with Kazakhstan worth up to $17 billion were inked, and Uzbekistan undertook to buy from and invest in the US over ten years as much as $100 billion.

The security pillar includes cooperation to counter terrorism, bolster law enforcement and border security, and enhance cyber security.

The Trump administration's approach toward Central Asia has been enhanced by its work in the South Caucasus. Trump's hosting of President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia in August of 2025 strengthened the nearly complete peace deal they have been negotiating for years. They also reached agreement on establishing the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) in the South Caucasus. This initiative offers economic incentives for peace and normalized relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Armenia and Turkey. It would also team up with Kazakhstan's idea of a Middle Corridor connecting Central Asia with Europe. Opening the Middle Corridor and strengthening it with TRIPP would supercharge the region's trade with the US and its allies.

This is smart geopolitics and geoeconomics.

The need is obvious. To strengthen Central Asia against its neighbors, it is important to facilitate integration of their economies and their trade and investment with the outside world.

A 2025 research paper from the Central Asian think tank CAPS Unlock estimates intra-regional trade in Central Asia at $9.6 billion in 2023. In 2006—the earliest year for which we have reliable trade data within Central Asia—intraregional trade was just $1.6 billion. Adjusted for inflation, that's an approximately 300 percent increase in regional trade in less than a generation. Central Asia is getting richer, in part because of trade between its constituent countries.

Trade with the United States is growing, too. Per the US Census Bureau, US-Central Asia trade has grown in nominal terms from $2.2 billion in 2006 to $6.5 billion in 2025; that's an inflation-adjusted 85 percent increase. Clearly, there is more headroom for the United

States to engage economically with the Central Asian states, particularly in minerals, transport, energy, and technology.

The five Central Asian countries decided late last year to add Azerbaijan to their group, turning their highest-level meetings into the C6. This raises the question of whether the C5+1 will become a C6+1. The Trump administration has not taken a view on this yet, but if its Central Asian initiative yields fruit, and the TRIPP becomes viable, that would be a natural next step.

JACKSON-VANIK: REMOVING A RELIC BLOCKING U.S. COOPERATION WITH CENTRAL ASIA

As the Trump administration pursues closer ties with Central Asia, a 50-year-old legislative relic stands in the way: the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. Passed at the height of the Cold War as an amendment to the Trade Act of 1974, it placed substantial trade restrictions on the Soviet Union and other Communist states. In the case of this Soviet Union, it was designed to encourage it to remove emigration restrictions on Soviet Jews and other repressed groups. When the USSR disappeared, and the emigration problem with it, the legislation remained in force for all the new nations that emerged.

Removing these trade restrictions permanently requires legislative action. Without that, these nations require yearly US waivers of the Jackson-Vanik penalties. Hardly a factor promoting closer economic cooperation. While Jackson-Vanik has been lifted for Russia and a number of other countries, including Kyrgyzstan, it still applies to Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan, too. Given US economic interests in these countries—especially Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan—it is high time to remove this obstacle to growing US cooperation with the region.

There is interest in Congress to move on the repeal of Jackson-Vanik, a step that Secretary of State Marco Rubio has likewise endorsed. Secretary Rubio has promised to visit all the countries of the region this year, a welcome signal that Washington understands Central Asia's growing importance. There is also speculation that this year's C5+1 will take place this year in Uzbekistan this fall with Rubio in attendance. Congress can provide momentum for this meeting by passing legislation to repeal Jackson-Vanik prior to that meeting. This would provide an excellent example of Congress working with the Trump administration to promote US interests. And the states of Central Asia would welcome it.

It would provide additional momentum for a well-conceived and executed initiative that will redound to our advantage for years to come.