



U.S. POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA IN THE PRISM OF AFGHANISTAN

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Received: 8 th May 2024 Accepted: 6 th June 2024	<p>This article discusses the policy and strategies of the United States towards the Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and how recent developments in Afghanistan have impacted this policy.</p> <p>The US aims to promote stability, prosperity, and democratic institutions in Central Asia. It also seeks to counter terrorism, secure energy supplies, and expand economic opportunities. Moreover, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 has created new challenges and opportunities for US policy in Central Asia. The US is concerned about the potential resurgence of terrorist groups and the rollback of human rights gains in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's control of Afghanistan also presents an opportunity for regional stability if they cooperate with the international community. The article concludes by suggesting that the U.S. policy towards Afghanistan has a two-sided impact on security in Central Asia..</p>

Keywords: C5+1, Central Asia, US Congress, Strategy, Taliban, terrorism, regional security.

THE COMMON POLICY AND STRATEGIES OF U.S. FOR CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

The United States was among the first countries to welcome the independence of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan and has worked consistently over the last three decades to support the security, development, and prosperity of each of these countries. Central Asia has always been the strategic and commercial crossroad of civilizations between Europe and Asia. The United States' primary strategic interest in this region is to build a more stable and prosperous Central Asia that is free to pursue political, economic, and security interests with a variety of partners on its own terms; is connected to global markets and open to international investment; and has strong, democratic institutions, rule of law, and respect for human rights. A stable and secure Central Asia contributes directly to U.S. efforts to counter terrorism, support regional stability, promote energy security, and enhance economic prosperity in the region and beyond.

Since the previous United States Strategy for Central Asia was approved in 2015, new leaders in the region have created new openings for reform-oriented development, intraregional connectivity and cooperation, and greater U.S. engagement. Specifically, new governments in the region have

indicated a deeper commitment to pursue political and economic reform, including through bilateral cooperation with the United States. In addition, improvements in interregional relationships and a growing appreciation of the value of working together as a regional group have expanded the potential for U.S. engagement through the C5+1 platform. Central Asian states' efforts to increase foreign investment and attract United States business is increasing the willingness of Central Asian leaders to implement rule of law reforms and comply with international norms.¹

The new Central Asia Strategy assumes some constants from the previous strategy about key developments in the region: domestic and cross-border terrorism will remain a primary security concern, and Central Asian states will continue to face threats to stability, such as from radical extremism, illicit drugs, and misinformation.

The United States has six overarching and mutually reinforcing objectives. These objectives are:

- 1. Support and strengthen the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian States, individually and as a region.** With consistent U.S. engagement on economic, energy, security, democracy, and governance issues, the Central Asian states will function as a region

¹ 2015 – 2019 Strategy for Central Asia. February, 2015. The White House



of cooperative partners, increasing their ability to maintain individual sovereignty and make clear choices to achieve and preserve economic independence.

2. Reduce terrorist threats in Central Asia. Central Asian societies will develop resilience to extremist ideology and not become safe havens for terrorist organizations.

3. Expand and maintain support for stability in Afghanistan. The Central Asian nations will become stable, secure, and engaged partners of the United States and continue support for international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.

4. Encourage connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan. The Central Asian states will develop closer ties with Afghanistan across energy, economic, cultural, trade, and security lines that directly contribute to regional stability.

5. Promote rule of law reform and respect for human rights. The Central Asian states will increase their stability by providing for meaningful citizen input, inclusive political systems through elections, transparent policy formulation, rule of law, and respect for human rights.

6. Promote U.S. investment in and development of Central Asia. The enabling environment for business in Central Asia will be transparent, open, fair, attractive to U.S. businesses, and supportive of broader development goals.²

Moreover, U.S. participation in the C5+1 supports regional connectivity and Central Asian sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. C5+1 projects are being implemented across Central Asia with over \$34 million from the United States Government in the areas of security, economic connectivity, and environment. Through the C5+1, participating countries have affirmed their commitment to:

- ❖ work together to address common security challenges;
- ❖ bolster regional counterterrorism efforts and border security cooperation;

- ❖ counter violent extremism in the region;
- ❖ support the 2018 UN General Assembly Resolution to strengthen regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability and sustainable development in Central Asia;
- ❖ explore ways to strengthen cooperation in the promotion of a stable, peaceful, and economically prosperous Afghanistan;
- ❖ explore additional areas of cooperation, such as information sharing.³

U.S. policy for Afghanistan under Taliban administration

Renewed Taliban rule in Afghanistan has implications for a number of U.S. policy interests. It has created opportunities and challenges for the various terrorist groups that have a presence in Afghanistan, and has forced the United States to pursue an “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism approach that lacks a local partner. Advancing protection of women’s and other human rights has been another major U.S. policy goal in Afghanistan since 2001; the Taliban have taken numerous actions to roll back those rights since retaking power. U.S. policymakers, including many Members of Congress, have also focused on securing the relocation of remaining U.S. citizens and Afghans who previously worked for the U.S. government, a halting effort that remains ongoing.

Counterterrorism

Islamist extremist terrorist groups have for decades operated in Afghanistan, and the Taliban have related to them in varying ways. ISKP and Al Qaeda (AQ) are two of the most significant of these terrorist groups, and the Taliban’s takeover has affected them differently.

Long a significant U.S. counterterrorism concern, ISKP has clashed with the Taliban, as mentioned above. Under the former U.S.-backed Afghan government, the United States launched airstrikes in support of Taliban offensives against ISKP, a rare area of prior U.S.-Taliban cooperation. In February 2022, the U.S. State Department announced rewards of up to \$10 million for information related to ISKP leader Sanaullah Ghafari as well as those responsible for the August 26, 2021, ISKP attack at Kabul airport that killed and injured hundreds of people, including over 30 U.S. servicemembers. In April 2023,

² United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025. <https://uz.usembassy.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>

³ C5+1 Leaders’ Joint Statement. SEPTEMBER 21, 2023, The White House



the White House announced that the Taliban had killed the leader of the ISKP cell responsible for the airport attack.⁴

According to various assessments, ISKP strategy is changing in light of Taliban pressure. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General Eric Kurilla estimated in March 2023 congressional testimony that ISKP could be capable of conducting "an external operation against U.S. or Western interests abroad in under six months." According to one expert, while ISKP has been weakened in Afghanistan by Taliban pressure, the group is "expanding its external operations capacity," as evidenced by its growing media presence and planned or actual attacks in neighboring countries and further afield (including in Pakistan, India, Turkey, and Germany). That aligns with the reported assessment of one unnamed U.S. official, who said in September 2023 that ISKP members "are increasingly moving to neighboring countries to evade the Taliban." ISKP attempts to "become a truly regional organization" could pose considerable challenges to U.S. partners and interests.⁵

From the outset of the U.S. withdrawal, U.S. officials said that the United States would maintain the ability to combat terrorist threats in Afghanistan such as ISKP and Al Qaeda without a military presence on the ground there by utilizing assets based outside of Afghanistan, in what U.S. officials have described as an "over-the-horizon" approach.⁶ With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan, the United States has had to alter any plans that had been predicated on the continued existence of the former Afghan government and its security forces.

The Biden Administration has cited the Zawahiri strike as a demonstration of U.S. over-the horizon capabilities. Some Members of Congress have criticized the approach, with one calling it a "farce."⁷

Ongoing Relocations of U.S. Citizens and Certain Afghans

The Taliban's entry into Kabul on August 15, 2021, triggered the mass evacuation of tens of thousands of U.S. citizens (including all diplomatic

personnel), partner country citizens, and Afghans who worked for international efforts and/or the former Afghan government. U.S. officials say that U.S. military forces facilitated the evacuation of 124,000 individuals, including 5,300 U.S. citizens, as part of Operation Allies Refuge, "the largest air evacuation in U.S. history." Since that operation ended on August 30, 2021, the Biden Administration has said that it has assisted in the departure of 13,000 Afghans from the country, in addition to 950 U.S. citizens (as of April 2023) and 600 lawful permanent residents (as of August 2022).⁸

U.S. officials have characterized their efforts to secure the relocation of remaining U.S. citizens and eligible Afghan partners who seek to leave the country as an "enduring mission." According to the State Department, the number of U.S. citizens it has identified in Afghanistan has fluctuated amid continued relocations, U.S. citizens who have returned to Afghanistan, and because of cases in which additional U.S. citizens come forward to ask for assistance to leave. On March 23, 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said there were "about 175" U.S. citizens in Afghanistan, of which 44 were "ready to leave, and we are working to effectuate their departure." Additionally, the State Department reported that as of March 2023, over 150,000 Afghan SIV applicants whose applications were undergoing processing remained in Afghanistan.

Some Afghans who seek to relocate reportedly remain in hiding, fearing Taliban retribution. The Taliban issued a general amnesty after coming to power, but, according to UNAMA, have carried out reprisals against figures aligned with the former government, including hundreds of killings.⁹

The Taliban have at times reportedly interfered with relocation flights, including by demanding seats for Taliban-selected individuals to work abroad and remit money, but in general appear to have not significantly impeded the departure of Afghans. The United States has reportedly paid, through Qatar, for tickets on some Afghan airlines that fly to Qatar for individuals to leave Afghanistan.¹⁰

⁴ Karoun Demirjian and Eric Schmitt, "Taliban kill head of ISIS cell that bombed Kabul airport," New York Times, April 25, 2023.

⁵ Amira Jadoon, "The enduring duel: Islamic State Khorasan's survival under Afghanistan's new rulers," August 2023.

⁶ White House, Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, April 14, 2021

⁷ White House, National Security Strategy, October 2022.

⁸ Statement of General Mark A. Milley, 20th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in U.S. Congress, Senate

Committee on Armed Services, To Receive Testimony on the Conclusion of Military Operations in Afghanistan and Plans for Future Counterterrorism Operations, hearing, 117th Cong., 1st sess.

⁹ U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General, "Relocation and resettlement outcomes of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa holders," June 2023

¹⁰ Dan De Luce and Cortney Kube, "Biden admin relies on Taliban-controlled airline to help Afghans flee Afghanistan," NBC News, June 8, 2022.



Sanctions and Afghan Central Bank Reserves

Two U.S. policy areas that have relevance to the economic and humanitarian situation are sanctions and the ongoing U.S. hold on Afghanistan's central bank reserves. U.S. sanctions on the Taliban (in place in various forms since 1999) remain, but it is unclear to what extent they are affecting humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's takeover, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has issued several general licenses stating that U.S. sanctions on the Taliban do not prohibit the provision of assistance to Afghanistan and authorizing various humanitarian and commercial transactions. Still, the continued existence of sanctions might lead financial institutions, private sector firms, or other actors to "de-risk" Afghanistan by not engaging in the country rather than risk violation of U.S. sanctions.¹¹

The Biden Administration's hold on the U.S.-based assets of the Afghan central bank (DAB) has also drawn scrutiny. Imposed days after the Taliban entered Kabul to prevent the Taliban from accessing the funds, the Taliban and some foreign leaders have urged the United States to release the hold on those assets, which total around \$7 billion.¹¹⁹ On February 11, 2022, the Biden Administration announced that it would "seek to facilitate access of \$3.5 billion of the assets for the benefit of the Afghan people," pending ongoing litigation related to the September 11, 2001, attacks. In September 2022, the Administration announced the establishment of an "Afghan Fund" (based in Switzerland) to "make targeted disbursements of that \$3.5 billion to help provide greater stability to the Afghan economy."¹²¹ The fund's four members Board of Trustees met for the first time in November 2022. It has not, as of November 2023, made any disbursements.¹²

Action and Outlook of U.S. Congress on Afghanistan

In the 118th Congress, two House committees have sought further information from the Administration related to the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and related contingency plans. One of them, the House

Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC), said in its February 2023 Authorization and Oversight Plan that it will "comprehensively review policy, decision-making, planning, and execution related to the August 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan," as well as "examine U.S. policy toward Afghanistan." Several House panels have held Afghanistan-focused hearings in the 118th Congress.¹³

In shaping U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, Congress considers various options.

- Congress examines how U.S. assistance, and conditions thereon, may affect Taliban actions, including with regard to women's rights more broadly and the ability of Afghan girls to attend school in particular, to inform congressional consideration of the Administration's budget request and action on FY2024 appropriations;¹⁴

- Congress may request or mandate additional information from the Administration about the number and status of U.S. citizens and Afghan partners who remain in Afghanistan and about the status of U.S. efforts to secure their relocation, including resources devoted to those efforts, obstacles to further relocations, and Administration plans to overcome those obstacles;

- Congress examines the impact of U.S. sanctions on the designated entities/individuals, the Afghan economy, and Afghan society more broadly, including by requiring reporting thereon from the Administration and/or the Government Accountability Office, to assess whether they are achieving their intended objectives;¹⁵

- Congress may examine the impact and efficacy of oversight of previous U.S. efforts in Afghanistan to shape future U.S. policy efforts, congressional authorizing and appropriations measures, and oversight mechanisms (including those intended to oversee U.S. assistance to other foreign partners, such as Ukraine). Relevant reports from the AWC and the Department of Defense are due to be submitted within approximately one and two years, respectively.¹⁶

¹¹ David Ainsworth, "Sanctions and banks make it a struggle to get money into Afghanistan," Devex, January 17, 2022

¹² U.S. Department of State, "The United States and Partners Announce Establishment of Fund for the People of Afghanistan," September 14, 2022.

¹³ House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Authorization and Oversight Plan, 118th Congress, adopted February 8, 2023.

¹⁴ U.S. Congress, House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence, on The Homeland Security Cost of the Biden Administration's

Catastrophic Withdrawal from Afghanistan, hearing, 118th Cong., 1st sess., April 18, 2023

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Oversight and Accountability, on The Biden Administration's Disastrous Withdrawal from Afghanistan, Part I: Review by the Inspectors General, hearing, 118th Cong., 1st sess., April 19, 2023

¹⁶ U.S. Congress, House Foreign Affairs Committee, Examining the Biden Administration's Afghanistan Policy



CONCLUSION

From the point of view of security in the Central Asian region, we are witnessing that the US policy towards Afghanistan is two-sided.

In particular, the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in 2021 allowed the Afghan nation to determine its own destiny, it made it possible to solve the internal problems of various political, religious and ethnic groups in the country without external interference, as well as, allowing the formation of the Taliban as the only force in the country allows the MO countries to enter into trade-economic, transport and cultural relations with their southern neighbors.

On the other hand, the USA's still hostile policy towards the Taliban and its lack of recognition as a state prevents Central Asian countries, as well as the rest of the world, from entering into relations with Afghanistan.

Perhaps more fundamental is the challenge of how to pursue U.S. policy priorities that may be difficult to reconcile: stabilizing Afghanistan and providing support to Afghans while avoiding actions that might benefit the Taliban. While providing humanitarian aid may be sufficient to stave off mass casualties, it is unlikely to sustainably improve economic conditions. Financial assistance could improve the Afghan economy, ameliorating the humanitarian situation, but comes with the risk of diversion of some funds or broader benefits to the Taliban. In considering Administration budget requests, Members of Congress may weigh these and other options, including conditions on U.S. assistance.

The Taliban have called for international recognition, assistance, and sanctions relief, but since returning to power they have not shown a willingness to make compromises on important issues to obtain them. Nearly every country, U.S. partners and adversaries alike, has urged the Taliban to form a more inclusive government, and many countries have joined the United States in calling for the group to lift restrictions on women and girls and break ties with terrorist groups. In response, the Taliban have stalled, equivocated, and ultimately either ignored or rejected outright these calls. Foreign policy tools that the United States has traditionally used as leverage may not be as effective in Afghanistan as in some other contexts.

Going forward, U.S. policy, including congressional action, could be influenced or constrained by a number of factors, including

- a dearth of information about dynamics in Afghanistan, given the lack of U.S. diplomats and other on the ground observers and Taliban-imposed limitations on journalists; and

- the historical legacy of U.S. conflict with the Taliban, which may make cooperation with the group, even to advance U.S. policy priorities, politically difficult, possibly on both sides.

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