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U.S. Policy in Central Asia: inertia and innovation

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The chaotic hasty withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 made many analysts speak if not about the US withdrawal from Central Asia but about a sharp weakening of their position in the region. Indeed, the activity of American diplomacy in the countries of Central Asia has decreased for some time. But already in 2022, with the start of the special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine, the US Central Asian policy entered a new phase of activation.

Doctrines and goals

The Biden administration did not formulate new program guidelines for Central Asia. The policy document "US Strategy for Central Asia for 2019-2025", adopted by the Trump administration in February 2020, remained in force, the C5 +1 format, multilateral meetings under the Trade and Investment Agreement, bilateral dialogue mechanisms were also preserved. The U.S. National Security Strategy, published in October 2022, speaks of continuing to "support the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity" of the Central Asian states, "resilience and democratic development" of the Central Asian countries, promoting their adaptation to climate change, promoting "integration in the region", its "connectivity with global markets", energy and food security.

However, the emphasis has changed. The visit of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in February 2020 was marked by predominantly anti-Chinese rhetoric: the Trump administration made it clear to its Central Asian partners that China was the main threat to their independence and sovereignty. Three years later, the visit of Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken to

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Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan on February 28 – March 1, 2023 was notable for the intensity of anti-Russian statements.

Significantly, the National Security Strategy published by the Trump administration at the end of 2017 included a separate section on "South and Central Asia" where little attention was paid to Central Asia itself. In George Biden's "Strategy", Central Asia appeared in the section "Deepening the Alliance with Europe", devoted mainly to the fight against the Russian threat; South Asia "moved" to the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" section. The inclusion of theses on Central Asia in the "European" section of the "Strategy" reflects the distribution of areas of responsibility in the apparatus of the U.S. National Security Council. The State Department still has a joint Office of South and Central Asian Affairs.

The main goal of the current stage of U.S. policy in Central Asia is to weaken Russia's position in the region, torpedo Russian integration projects in Central Asia, undermine Russia's bilateral relations with the countries of the region using the "stick" method (threats of imposing sanctions for cooperation with Russia) and "carrot" (provision of preferences designed to demonstrate the benefits of reorienting to cooperation with the United States and its allies). At the same time, however, the United States cannot lose sight of the active actions that China is taking in the Central Asian direction, recognized by Washington as the only rival that has both the intentions and the ability to "change the international order." Restricting China in the region is, in the medium term, no less important than reducing Russian influence. From Washington's point of view, it is also necessary to prevent the strengthening of Iran's regional position, the main threat to American interests in the Middle East.

The United States, forced to pursue an active foreign policy in all regions of the world, obviously does not have sufficient resources to pursue a policy of "double containment" of Russia and China in Central Asia. Washington cannot rely sufficiently on its allies in Central Asia: neither the EU, nor Japan, nor India, recognized as the "main defense partner" of the United States, have strong positions in the region. Tensions with Ankara make it impossible to count on Turkey either. Accordingly, the elites of the Central Asian countries themselves should become the main conductor of American policy in Central Asia, and the key tasks working for the geostrategic goals of Washington are:

1. Stimulating the countries of the region to "integration", but integration "within" Central Asia, without Russia and China. It is significant that while the 2017 National Security Strategy mentioned the need to promote the integration of Central and South Asia, the current document only deals with intra-regional integration. In fact, «integration» means creating a coalition of countries in the region, primarily the alliance of Astana and Tashkent, which would restrain Russian and Chinese influence.
2. Strengthening the positions of pro-American interest groups in the political, business, scientific, educational and cultural elites of the countries of the region, primarily Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Multilateral formats

Since 2015, the C5+1 multilateral format has been in effect. It is significantly that in the first year of the Biden administration, the level and intensity of meetings (partly due to the coronavirus pandemic) fell: in May 2021, an online ministerial meeting was held; in July 2021, the U.S. delegation to the ministerial meeting in Tashkent was led by the Deputy National Security Advisor, the meeting did not take place in the spring of 2022. In September 2022, at a ministerial meeting organized on the sidelines of the session of the UN General Assembly, it was decided to create a permanent forum secretariat. The Secretariat began to coordinate the activities of three working groups: on the economy, energy and environmental protection and security. The U.S. administration soon announced the launch of the «Economic Sustainability Initiative» for Central Asia, designed to promote "economic growth in Central Asia" in the face of the Ukrainian crisis. The main areas of implementation of the «Initiative» were the «expansion of trade routes» bypassing Russia, stimulating the private sector and developing cooperation in the field of education and training. Program allocations were \$25 million in 2022 and \$50 million in 2023.

At the ministerial meeting of the format «C5+1» held on February 28, 2023 in Astana, the launch of a new initiative, the C5+1 Regional Program on Border Security, was announced. The final statement of the meeting emphasized the need for «collective work to mitigate the unintended consequences of sanctions on the economies» of the countries of Central Asia. The plans to hold a multilateral business forum were mentioned.

Another multilateral format of interaction is the Council of the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, signed in 2004. The Council includes an official authorized by the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative and heads of relevant ministries of the Central Asian countries. Under the auspices of the Council, there are working groups on digital trade, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, intellectual property rights, customs issues, economic empowerment of women. The real significance of the Council is small, since the Framework Agreement is declarative in nature, and its activities do not affect the real volumes of trade and investment. At the end of 2020, the American Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) expired for trade with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were not covered by the GSP). The GSP covered 14% of Kazakh exports to the US (lead, tantalum, silicon, ferrochrome), about 10% of Uzbek exports, and less than 1% of exports from Kyrgyzstan. The extension of the GSP – presumably with the inclusion of all countries in the region – is being discussed at the Council's annual meetings.

At the initiative of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), military exercises of the countries of the region "Regional Cooperation" are held annually. In August 2022, the exercises were held in Tajikistan with the participation of military personnel from the United States, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Mongolia and Pakistan.

A number of regional projects are being implemented by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and their number is growing. Thus, in 2022, USAID began active work as part of the project to create a single electric power market in Central Asia. In April 2022, USAID presented a roadmap and action plan for the implementation of the project, which provides for the establishment of an Intergovernmental Council for Market Coordination.

Nevertheless, American policy in Central Asia is absolutely dominated by the format of bilateral relations with the countries of the region. «C5+1» and the Framework Agreement Council are purely supportive.

Policy towards Kazakhstan

U.S. Central Asian policy is focused on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan, as a country bordering Russia and China, is of key importance for the strategy implementation of limiting Russian and Chinese influence in the region. Only in Kazakhstan does the United States have a powerful leverage on the country's leadership through significant investment and the widespread presence of American business in the economy. The country is going through a period of political reforms, which expands the possibilities of external influence on the Kazakhstani elites.

However, Kazakhstan is closely connected both with Russia – which, as the events of January 2022 showed, is ready to resolutely defend its interests in the country – and with China. In this regard, the United States is forced to act cautiously and progressively in the Kazakh direction, in view of the risks that too active interference in Astana's foreign and domestic policy may entail.

In the Kazakh direction, American diplomacy habitually combines the methods of "carrot" and "stick". On the one hand, it makes not unsuccessful pressure on Astana in order to prevent Russian enterprises from starting a new round of privatization of Kazakh state property. Threats of "secondary sanctions" encourage Kazakhstan to restrict the re-export of sanctioned goods to Russia. Threats to freeze Kazakhstan assets and property of Kazakhstan entrepreneurs in Western countries also come through unofficial channels from Washington and London: a precedent was set in 2017 by the temporary freezing of part of the assets of the Kazakhstan National Fund by the British branch of an American bank.

On the other hand, the United States loudly declares its support for the program of political transformations by President K.-J. K. Tokaeva. Annual consultations of foreign ministries are held, having had the name "Dialogue on an Enhanced Strategic Partnership" since 2018. The United States gives high marks to Kazakhstan's active position within the framework of the mechanism of Consultative Meetings of the Heads of the Central Asia States, declaring Astana's "leadership" in the region. Washington promises to create favorable opportunities for the export of a number of goods from Kazakhstan to the United States – mainly products of the metallurgical, chemical, and food

industries. The American side intends to increase the supply of civil aircraft to Kazakhstan and open direct flights between Kazakhstan and the United States. In March 2023, the United States and Kazakhstan signed an intergovernmental memorandum on cooperation in the field of geology. As noted in the message of the Ministry of Industry and Infrastructure Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "the memorandum is aimed at the practical application of advanced geological exploration technologies, the creation of geological databases and the introduction of the best international practices and modern technologies for geological mapping".

Bilateral cooperation in higher education has made significant progress. An unprecedented project is being implemented in Petropavlovsk: on September 1, 2022, Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University (Kozybayev NKU) was transferred to the trust management of the University of Arizona for a period of ten years. According to the decree of the Kazakhstan government, educational activities will be carried out "in accordance with the requirements of the University of Arizona", "licensing and accreditation... will be carried out in accordance with the standards of the University of Arizona". As a result, foreign teachers should make up at least 30% of the teaching staff of Kozybayev NKU.

Policy towards Uzbekistan

The key importance of Uzbekistan for the US Central Asian policy is determined by the demographic and economic potential of the country, its political stability, and the fact that Uzbekistan has the most trained armed forces in Central Asia. Not being a member of the EAEU and the CSTO and not having a common border with China, Uzbekistan has a wider freedom of foreign policy maneuver than Kazakhstan. It was Uzbekistan that was the main military and political partner of the United States in the region in late 2001 - early 2005. A bilateral declaration on the framework of strategic partnership and cooperation signed in 2002, fixing that "The United States will consider any external threat to security and territorial integrity" for Uzbekistan "with grave concern", remains the backbone of U.S. - Uzbek relations.

Uzbekistan is viewed by the American political and academic community as the core of a future coalition of Central Asian states that is holding back Russia. It is significant that at the end of April 2022, the right-wing conservative Heritage Foundation published an analytical material on the development of U.S. - Uzbek relations, which directly spoke of the use of Uzbekistan as an "ally against Russia".

If American-Kazakh relations are based on thirty-year experience of continuous development, then relations with Uzbekistan developed unevenly, experiencing ups and downs. In 2022 – early 2023 The United States made unprecedented efforts to expand influence over the Uzbek political, business and cultural elite. U.S.-Uzbek relations have intensified in all major areas, such as political dialogue, military-technical cooperation, economic ties, USAID activities in Uzbekistan, and educational

cooperation. Washington tried to reduce the damage to the U.S. reputation in Uzbekistan caused by the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and unrealized (after a previous surge in activity in bilateral relations in 2018–2019) hopes for an influx of large-scale American investment in the Uzbek economy. It is significant that in March 2022, the American NGO Cotton Campaign canceled the so-called “cotton boycott” of Uzbekistan.

The lobbyist for the accelerated development of American-Uzbek relations is the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in Washington, which is closely associated with the U.S. Department of Defense. On the Uzbek side, prominent supporters of strengthening the American vector of foreign policy are former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Special Representative of the President for Foreign Policy A. Kamilov, First Deputy Chairman of the Senate, Rector of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED) S. Safoev, Minister for Information Development technologies and communications Sh. Shermatov.

The Uzbek Embassy in Washington also launched active lobbying activities. In April 2022, the law firm Arnold & Porter Kaye Scholer was hired to work with congressmen and representatives of the mass media, and in September 2022, two more large lobbying firms, BGR Government Affairs and Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, were hired. It was reported that the former head of the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, I. Ros-Lehtinen, is engaged in lobbying activities in favor of Uzbekistan.

High-level political contacts have noticeably intensified. In December 2022, the Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan V. Norov visited Washington to participate in a meeting of the bilateral strategic partnership dialogue. On March 1, 2023, the first visit to Tashkent by the U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken took place. In March 2023, the daughter of President of Uzbekistan S. Mirziyoyev, who works in the presidential administration, visited Washington; it can be assumed that preparations for the visit of the President of Uzbekistan to the United States are underway.

As part of the nonproliferation and disarmament program funded by the U.S. Department of State, 225 infrared monoculars were transferred to the Uzbekistan Border Troops in January 2023. In November 2022, the U.S. Department of Defense transferred 50 Polaris MRZR light tactical combat vehicles to the Uzbekistan Special Operations Forces. Washington and Tashkent are discussing the transfer of military aircraft and helicopters to Uzbekistan, which were transported to the country from Afghanistan after the Taliban seized power. American specialists are involved in modernizing the educational process at the Academy of the Armed Forces of Uzbekistan; the possibility of establishing cooperation between the Academy and the U.S. National Defense University is being discussed.

Among the recent achievements in the field of investment interaction, one can note holding the so-called “first US-Uzbek pharmaceutical summit” in April 2022, during which American participants

promised a sharp increase in investment in the Uzbek pharmaceutical industry; agreement on the involvement of specialists from the U.S. Geological Survey in the exploration of shale gas fields and metals in the Jizzakh, Samarkand and Surkhandarya regions; investments by Imperial Jewerly company in the production of jewelry at the Zargarlik plant in Tashkent; creation of textile cluster in the Jizzakh region by Silverleaf Capital and BMP Trade companies. The contract signed in 2017 by the government of Uzbekistan with the Nukem company for the supply of uranium concentrate to the United States is being implemented. It was reported that Air Products and Uzbekneftegaz companies were negotiating the implementation of projects in the field of oil and gas processing.

USAID's activities in Uzbekistan have experienced an unprecedented rise in recent years. USAID is implementing a wide range of projects in the country aimed at supporting judicial reform, assisting the Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan in the development of the Entrepreneurial Code, supporting the work of the Commissioner for Entrepreneurs' Rights, supporting the work of public councils under government bodies, financing the training of specialists in the field of water use and agriculture (in particular, work with the Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers and the Tashkent State Agrarian University is underway), restoration of the Aral Sea ecosystem. USAID is expanding its presence in Karakalpakstan, where it is rolling out mass courses to teach Internet skills.

USAID actively interacts with the Ministry of Preschool and School Education of Uzbekistan. American specialists are involved in the development of textbooks in English, Uzbek, Mathematics and Computer Science, textbooks for teaching Economics and Entrepreneurship to high school students, and teacher training. USAID experts are involved in the development of a comprehensive program for reforming preschool and school education in Uzbekistan.

After a break caused by the pandemic, the number of Americans teaching English in higher education institutions and schools in Uzbekistan has again begun to rise sharply. Since 2018, the NGO "American Councils in Education" has been actively working in Uzbekistan. The issue of resuming the activities of the Peace Corps in Uzbekistan has been resolved.

In 2019, Webster University, the first American university, opened a branch in Uzbekistan. Admissions of students for undergraduate programs (business administration, international relations, economics, mass media, information management systems) is 500 people. The development of cooperation between UWED and American universities is being discussed, in particular, within the framework of creating a new faculty for retraining government employees.

Policy towards Kyrgyzstan

The United States is interested in Kyrgyzstan, first of all, due to the liberal regime of non-profit organizations and the media that exists in the country, compared to other countries in the region. The

Agency for International Development is active in the country, often in partnership with numerous NGOs. In cooperation with the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court and the Council of Judges of Kyrgyzstan, USAID is implementing projects to develop the judicial system and train students - future lawyers. USAID interacts with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Labor and Social Development, the State Migration Service, members of parliament, local governments, and political parties. Together with the Aga Khan Foundation and the University of Central Asia, sponsored by this organization, work to increase the political activity of young people is underway. Projects aimed at expanding the network of independent media in Kyrgyzstan are being implemented in partnership with the NGO Internews. USAID promotes the activities of a number of anti-Russian NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, including the International Republican Institute, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, and the National Democratic Institute. A separate area of USAID's work is support for the American University of Central Asia.

The bilateral political dialogue, while not generally characterized by high dynamics, intensified somewhat in 2022 – early 2023. The central problem is the conclusion of a new Cooperation Agreement to replace the 1993 document, terminated by Bishkek in 2015. The parties have repeatedly stated that a new Agreement is necessary and almost ready, but the timing of its signing remains unclear. The absence of a fundamental document affected the reduction of American aid to Kyrgyzstan (from \$51 million in 2014 to \$31 million in 2023).

In general, American diplomacy has become convinced that frequent changes of power in Bishkek do not lead to significant fluctuations in the country's foreign policy. Although American representatives visiting Bishkek sometimes say, out of habit or out of politeness, that the country brings a "bright light" to the region thanks to its relatively liberal political climate, Washington does not harbour hopes that Kyrgyzstan will become a conductor of American policy in Central Asia. It is significant that Donald Lu, who has headed the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs since 2021, while serving as an ambassador in Bishkek, in December 2020 publicly declared the existence of a "criminal empire" in Kyrgyzstan. It is also symbolic that the ministerial meeting of the C5+1 format took place on February 28, 2023, despite the openly expressed disappointment of the Kyrgyz side, not in Bishkek, as originally planned, but in Astana.

Policy towards Tajikistan

The traditionally low U.S. interest in Tajikistan, a state closely linked to Russia and China and developing cooperation with Iran, began to increase after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. As is known, Tajikistan has taken a "special position" on the Afghan issue, refusing to establish relations with the Taliban government and starting to provide support to the National Resistance Front (NRF) led by the leaders of the Tajik community of Afghanistan. This position, which increases the international "weight" of Tajikistan as an actor that has influence on the situation in Afghanistan

and has channels of interaction with the NRF, allowed Tajikistan to intensify relations with the United States.

Washington has expanded military and technical cooperation with Tajikistan and changed its rhetoric towards Dushanbe to a more favorable one. In June 2022, CENTCOM Commander Michael E. Kurilla, while touring the countries of the region, announced his intention to expand assistance to Tajikistan in equipping the Border Troops and even expressed “admiration” for the “leading role” of Tajikistan in Central Asia. In August 2022, Tajikistan hosted the multilateral exercises “Regional Cooperation 2022” organized by CENTCOM. Bilateral US-Tajik field exercises were also conducted.

Washington promises to consider the issue of transferring to Tajikistan all or part of the Afghan military aircrafts and helicopters transported by pilots of the Afghan National Army after the Taliban seized power into Tajik territory. It has been promised to build a new border post on the Tajik-Afghan border with the support of American funds. In November 2022, the U.S. Embassy transferred ten jeeps to the Tajikistan National Guard to patrol the border area.

U.S. economic and humanitarian interaction with Tajikistan is minimal. USAID is implementing a number of projects in the field of health and water use in Tajikistan, collaborating with the Aga Khan Foundation. In 2022, the United States began funding a school in Tajikistan for children of Afghan refugees with teaching in Dari.

Policy towards Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has long remained on the deep periphery of American policy in Central Asia. The country's closed nature, the reputation of its political regime in the West as an outright dictatorship, and Turkmenistan's foreign economic orientation toward the export of natural gas to China did not contribute to the development of American-Turkmen relations. However, in 2022 - early 2023 Washington's activity in the Turkmen direction increased significantly. This was stimulated by interests in undermining Russia's attempts to increase its influence in Turkmenistan and expand Russian-Turkmen cooperation in the field of gas export and transit, dissatisfaction of the Turkmen side with the conditions and results of gas supplies to China, Iran's attempts to establish Turkmen gas trading through its gas pipelines or using swap deals.

Internal political processes in Turkmenistan also had an impact. The frequent occurrence of conflict situations between the entourage of President S. Berdimuhamedov and the “inner circle” of his father, ex-president, head of parliament and “leader of the nation” G. Berdimuhamedov, the disorganization of the bureaucratic apparatus as a result of two power centers formation and constant personnel changes created favorable opportunities for the work of American diplomacy with the Turkmen political elite.

For its part, Ashgabat, meeting Washington halfway, is counting on provoking concern in China and Russia over American activity in Turkmenistan and receiving corresponding bonuses and preferences from Beijing and Moscow in the field of gas export and transit. Ashgabat hopes for the unfreezing of financing for the construction of the trans-Afghan gas pipeline by the Asian Development Bank, largely controlled by the United States, and for American investments and loans, especially necessary due to the country's leadership's intention to create free economic zones in each of the velayats of Turkmenistan by the end of 2023.

Evidence of the real "unfreezing" of bilateral relations was the visit to Turkmenistan by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu in November 2022. The American diplomat said that the United States intends to help Ashgabat benefit from anti-Russian sanctions and continues to support the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project, called Turkmenistan an "island of stability" in the region and spoke out in support of the country's sovereignty. The U.S. intention to promote the development of ties between American and Turkmen higher education institutions was announced. In February 2023, as part of the C5+1 ministerial meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken held a bilateral meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, during which he spoke about Turkmenistan in an extremely positive manner.

A number of concrete steps have already been taken. In September 2022, the commander of the Montana National Guard visited Ashgabat; during the visit, it was announced that the cooperation between the State National Guard and the Ministry of Defense of Turkmenistan, which was interrupted more than ten years ago, had been resumed, and that CENTCOM took part in that process. In November 2022, the first intergovernmental agreement in a long time was signed – a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the fields of health and medical sciences, and in April 2023 – a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of education. In December 2022, meeting of the long-dormant U.S.-Turkmen Business Council was held online. The meeting was attended by representatives of the companies: John Deere, General Electric, Caterpillar, Exxon Mobil, Case, Boeing, and Coca Cola. The head of the Business Council, E. Stewart, a former senior official of the U.S. Department of Commerce, visited Ashgabat in person and was welcomed by both the president and his father. The American side proposed to Turkmenistan a project for the construction of a gas interconnector between the Turkmen Caspian Magtymguly field and the Azerbaijani Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli (a kind of "mini" trans-Caspian gas pipeline with a length of 80 km); Ashgabat, however, did not show interest, emphasizing that it needed full-fledged export routes.

In turn, Turkmenistan agreed to launch the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program in the country, under which Turkmen high school students will have the opportunity to study in the United States. The work of USAID in Turkmenistan has intensified, primarily in the areas of meteorology and the fight against climate change, environmental protection, international certification of agricultural products, and development of the stock market. In Turkmenistan, the formation of a network of NGOs, positioning themselves as environmental or aimed at the development of farming and

handicrafts, under the patronage of the USAID, has begun. The USAID program “Enriching Youth for Tomorrow” is noteworthy, which forms groups of youth activists, startup managers, and bloggers in Turkmenistan.

Investments and trade

Among the countries in the region, only Kazakhstan, which began actively attracting Western investors in the early 1990s, has a significant American investments concentration. In October 2021, the volume of accumulated American direct investments in the economy of Kazakhstan was estimated at \$40.4 billion, or 24% of the total volume of foreign direct investments accumulated by Kazakhstan. According to this indicator, the United States is consistently the second investor in the Kazakh economy after the Netherlands. It was reported that in 2022, the influx of American investments into Kazakhstan was \$5.1 billion. The main investors are Chevron, ExxonMobil, Fluor, Baker Hughes, General Electric, and the main area of investment is oil production, refining and transportation.

Accumulated American direct investments in Uzbekistan are modest and estimated at \$100 million; small and medium scale projects are implemented. The Uzbek side’s plans to attract up to \$2.5 billion of American investments in the country, announced in October 2018 following the results of the Uzbek-American business forum, are far from materializing. Reliable estimates of accumulated American direct investments in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are \$29 and \$38 million, respectively; there are virtually no American investments in Turkmenistan.

Data on U.S. trade with Central Asian countries in 2020 – 2022. are given in the table.

U.S. trade turnover with Central Asian countries in 2020-2022 (millions of dollars)

Country	2020	2021	2022
Kazakhstan	1636	2272	3100
Uzbekistan	277	426	437
Kyrgyzstan	123	105	71
Tajikistan	39	45	124,5
Turkmenistan	48	104	98

For Kazakhstan, the United States was the ninth foreign trade partner in terms of trade turnover in 2022 (2.3% of the country’s foreign trade turnover). In terms of import volumes to Kazakhstan, the United States occupied the fourth position. At the same time, there was a positive balance in mutual trade in favor of the United States in the amount of \$700 million. Among Uzbekistan’s foreign trade partners, the United States occupied the sixteenth place (0.9% of Uzbekistan’s foreign trade turnover). For Tajikistan, in 2022 the United States became the fifth partner in terms of import volumes (1.7% of foreign trade turnover), but Tajik exports to the United States did not reach \$1 million. In

2022 in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, the U.S. share in foreign trade turnover was 0.6% and 0.7%, respectively.

Intermediate results and forecast

In general, American positions in the region, especially economic, remain weak and do not correspond to the scale of the tasks set. Elites in the region are not inclined to trust Washington: the collapse of the U.S.-supervised Afghan government is a striking example of the U.S. willingness to get rid of too onerous obligations. The United States cannot provide significant security assistance to the countries of the region and is not ready for significant financial investments in the economy of Central Asia. American experts and diplomats are trying to convince the leadership of the countries in the region that any outcome of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine will be unfavorable for the Central Asian states, prompting Russia to increase pressure on its southern neighbors, and trying to prove the harmfulness of economic dependence on China. But the United States cannot offer the countries of Central Asia even a fraction of what Russia and China provide.

However, cooperation with the United States is necessary for the countries of the region. Interaction with the United States strengthens their position in relations with Russia and China, as well as in the international system as a whole, increases the chances of containing the destructive potential of the United States, known for its ability to exert a destabilizing influence on the domestic politics of countries acting contrary to American interests, and to cause damage to the entire complex of their foreign policy and foreign economic relations. American investments and imports of high-tech equipment from the United States are important for Kazakhstan. The funds allocated by Washington for projects in the field of health, education, and water use are significant for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The main intermediate results of American policy in the region are the creation of mechanisms for the infiltration of political, business, scientific, educational and cultural elites of the countries of the region with personnel loyal to Washington, ensuring the sustainable activities of American NGOs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and, increasingly, in Uzbekistan, a sharp increase in the number of American teachers in Uzbek universities and schools, opening branches of American universities in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the formation of a media network that replicates the American perception of Russia and China as the main threats to the Central Asian states.

The main scenario for the evolution of US policy in the region is a cautious, step-by-step expansion of influence. Washington will focus on the medium term, avoiding sudden steps that could “scare off” the Central Asian elites. “Secondary sanctions” against the countries of the region will remain symbolic, affecting individual, far from the most significant companies (as in the case of two Uzbek enterprises already included in the sanctions lists). In the short term, one can expect political support for the formation of a Kazakh-Uzbek tandem in the region as a future “bastion” against Russian and Chinese influence, organizing visits to the United States by the presidents of Kazakhstan and

Uzbekistan, the signing of an American-Kyrgyz cooperation agreement, and the resumption of funding by the Asian Development Bank for the trans-Afghan gas pipeline project.

It should also be expected a further increase in the scale and directions of projecting American “soft power” into Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, with an eye toward forming a significant and active segment of personnel loyal to the United States in the elites of these states within three to five years. The American side is likely to offer mediation services in resolving Tajik-Kyrgyz contradictions. Washington will strive to actively involve Japan in Central Asian policy as a conductor of American interests and a sponsor of US-supervised assistance projects to countries in the region. If a cohort of Turkish politicians loyal to the United States comes to power in Ankara, Washington may try to use the extensive infrastructure of influence created in Central Asia by Turkey to achieve its own goals.

The second, less likely scenario is Washington’s attempt to create a large-scale source of instability in Central Asia, in fact opening a “second front” against Russia. For this purpose, American agents may be activated in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The danger of this option for the United States lies in the likely joint response of Russia and China and the sharp weakening of elite groups oriented toward the United States in the countries of Central Asia. Accordingly, the United States can proceed to the implementation of this scenario either if a “fundamental turning point” in Russia’s favor approaches during the SMO, or if the SMO is delayed until the moment that Washington considers the point of maximum weakening of Russia.

Finally, the third and least likely scenario is the U.S. “withdrawal” from Central Asia, reducing American activity in the region to a minimum. A change of administration in Washington could provoke a rethink of the current realities in the world and recognition by the American political class of the need to focus efforts on maintaining positions in the Asia-Pacific region and Latin America, leaving remote parts of Eurasia to their own fate. The logic and ideology of geostrategic confrontation leave this scenario with minimal chances of implementation.

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