



A Grand Strategy for the U.S. in Central Eurasia: Escaping Eastern Question 2.0 and Introducing a Three Seas Initiative for Central Eurasia

PÉTER PÁL KRÁNITZ

HIIA Perspective

Regular publication of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.

Publisher:

© Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 2025.

Author(s):

Péter Pál Kránitz

Copy editor(s): Lillian Aronson

For more publications, see the homepage of the Institute (www.hiia.hu).

Source of cover photo: Shutterstock

January 09, 2025

Péter Pál Kránitz, Senior Research Fellow, HIIA

A GRAND STRATEGY FOR THE U.S. IN CENTRAL EURASIA: ESCAPING EASTERN QUESTION 2.0 AND INTRODUCING A THREE SEAS INITIATIVE FOR CENTRAL EURASIA

The United States is crafting a new Eurasia strategy to secure access to critical minerals, counter China and Russia, and maintain access to the Caspian Basin. With Central Asia landlocked and encircled by adversaries, Türkiye and the South Caucasus form an essential transit corridor. Washington should back Turkic connectivity without fueling great-power confrontation and the emergence of an Eastern Question 2.0, stabilize Georgia's Western trajectory, support Armenia's balancing role, and frame new corridors like TRIPP as inclusive, multi-vectoral networks. A pragmatic, connectivity-focused approach is key to sustaining long-term U.S. influence in the region.

GEOPOLITICAL MANEUVERING IN THE LAND OF ADVERSARIES

Step by step, the outlines of an American foreign policy grand strategy are taking shape. Washington has returned to protectionism and cracked down on dissent in international financial and trade relations. It reinstated the Monroe Doctrine in the Americas and is pursuing the expansion of the Abraham Accords in the Middle East. The U.S. administration strives to reduce its heavy military burden in Europe and pursue a consolidation with Russia in their bilateral relations. All this, many argue, to free up resources and practice a more China-focused foreign policy.¹ The United States has also taken a more active role in regions traditionally absent from U.S. foreign policy priorities: the South Caucasus and Central Asia, or Central Eurasia. At first glance, this may seem contradictory to a China-focused mindset. In reality, however, it is central to such an approach.

¹ Ablin Aronsson and Björn Ottosson, "Drift or Abandonment? Exploring How US Domestic Politics and External Realities May Affect US Security Engagement in Europe 2025-2029," Swedish Defence Research Agency, September 9, 2025, <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--5777--SE>.

On November 6, U.S. President Donald Trump hosted the leaders of five Central Asian countries and pledged up to \$20 billion in deals for economic cooperation with the post-Soviet states.² A month later the new U.S. National Security Strategy highlighted secure access to critical supply chains and materials as a key pillar of economic security.³ The Central Eurasia region is particularly important for the United States in its mission to gain independence from the China-dominated market of critical raw materials—some 70 percent of global rare-earth mining operations and around 90 percent of the processing capability is controlled by China, which is viewed as a vulnerability for U.S. supply chains in its quest to secure global economic primacy. Recent discoveries of vast reserves in Central Asia, however, may prove to be a gamechanger. The largest country in the region, Kazakhstan, announced in April that it had discovered more than 20 million metric tons of metal deposits, which amounts to the third largest reserve of rare earth metals after those in China and Brazil. The Caspian region is also home to one of the largest fossil deposits in the world: Not including Russia and Iran, Caspian countries hold about two percent of proven oil reserves and nearly nine percent of natural gas globally.

The vast landmass of Central Asia, some 1.5 million square miles, however, is one of the least accessible regions for the United States worldwide. It is a landlocked region bordered by the largest Eurasian adversaries of the United States: Russia, China, Afghanistan, and Iran. Therefore, the region is only accessible for the Americans through the Caspian Sea—however, even along the long shores of the world’s largest lake, there is but one country that is open for Western geopolitical maneuvering: Azerbaijan. The port in Azerbaijan’s capital, Baku, is connected by railways, highways, and oil and gas pipelines to Europe and the Turkish ports on the Mediterranean Sea. The chokepoint of Baku and the transportation infrastructures in Türkiye are therefore of geostrategic significance for the United States to access Central Asia and the Trans-Caspian region.

Hence, if the United States pursues a grand foreign policy strategy for Central Asia, it needs a comprehensive and integrated geostrategy for Central Eurasia as a whole, including the South Caucasus, in close coordination with Türkiye, a NATO-member state and a more-or-less secular, democratic republic.

2 Muflih Hidayat, “Trump Pursues Central Asia with \$20 Billion Investment Strategy,” *Discovery Alert*, November 10, 2025, <https://discoveryalert.com.au/america-strategic-pivot-central-asia-resources-2025/>.

3 “National Security Strategy,” White House, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

It may, so to speak, outsource great power competition in the region to its only regional ally, Türkiye—but not without any constraints. Below are some key considerations the United States should take if it aims at a sustainable presence in Central Eurasia, with a special regard to a stable partnership with the sole Christian states in the region, Georgia and Armenia, which both strive for a broader Western engagement. The two buzzwords are pragmatism and connectivity.

EASTERN QUESTION 2.0 AND A TURKIC POLE OF MULTIPOLARITY

Central Eurasia is the region that Zbigniew Brzezinski called the Eurasian Balkans, a central stage of global geopolitical competition on the Eurasian chessboard, where the United States, however, has serious disadvantages as a contestant.⁴ One is its limited accessibility, as mentioned above, to the region encircled by its adversaries. It has very limited regional hard and soft power capabilities too—there is no regional state allied to Euro-Atlantic structures, and media consumption is still under heavy Russian and increasing Chinese influence, with the lingua franca still Russian, not English. There is but one Atlantic-aligned middle power that possesses both significant soft and hard power projection capabilities in the region, Türkiye, through what is called the Turkic cooperation and the Organization of Turkic States.

Five out of eight Central Eurasian states are, in fact, Turkic-speaking countries: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, all members or observers—together with Türkiye and Hungary—of the Organization of Turkic States. Their shared historic and cultural ties are solid foundations for an enhanced economic and political cooperation, one that might shape the future geopolitical landscape of Central Eurasia, and one that the United States will not be able to establish for itself in the foreseeable future. Some even argue that through Turkic cooperation a singular geopolitical pole might emerge that stretches from European Türkiye to the borders of China and Kazakhstan, which might be able to counterbalance heavy Russian, Chinese, and Iranian influence.⁵

4 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Basic Books, 1997), 122–149.

5 Svante E. Cornell, “The Rise of the Organization of Turkic States: Is Turkic Cooperation Filling a Geopolitical Vacuum?” Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, December 2025, <https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/2512Turkicmerged.pdf>.

Moreover, the so-called Turkic world, where Turkic-speaking peoples live and Turkic soft power is impactful, penetrates the state borders of Russia and China—the largest and Westernmost region of China, Xinjiang, and a number of Russia’s federal republics with geostrategic significance, such as Karachay-Cherkessia, Tatarstan, and the Altai Republic, are Turkic-majority regions. Moreover, the Ukrainian region of Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, is heavily populated by Tatars, a Turkic-speaking ethnic group that has historically faced persecution by Russia and traditionally sought alignment with Türkiye, and again finds itself in the spotlight of the divergence between Türkiye and Russia—every year, Ankara condemns Russian occupation of Crimea and commemorates the deportations and massacres of ethnic Tatars and Circassians in Russia.⁶

Turkic cooperation challenges traditional economic, political, and defense dependencies in Central Eurasia. The whole region—from Armenia to Tajikistan—was under Russian and Soviet imperial rule for centuries, and roads, railways, and pipelines have therefore traditionally been oriented toward the north, while decades of planned economy created a close economic interdependence between Central Eurasia and Russia. This North–South economic orientation, however, is now being slowly transformed into a multi-vectoral interregional network that integrates East–West connectivity into regional infrastructures and partnerships through what is called the Middle Corridor, linking the Far East, Central Eurasia, and the West through the Turkic world, bypassing Russia. Political and defense dependencies are also undergoing a significant realignment: Azerbaijan has overwhelmingly cut off its reliance on Russian weaponry with the help of Türkiye and Israel and forced all Russian peacekeepers out of its territory in 2023. Political cooperation has been reduced to mere symbolism. Uzbekistan is now on a similar path towards political and military realignment, investing substantial political capital into Turkic cooperation mechanisms.⁷ Azerbaijan’s president announced this October that starting in 2026, members of the Organization of Turkic States would hold joint military exercises annually.⁸

6 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, “No: 55, 16 March 2025, Regarding the Eleventh Anniversary of the Illegal Annexation of Crimea,” March 16, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-55_-kirim-in-yasa-disi-ilhakinin-on-birinci-yil-donumu-hk.en.mfa; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, “No: 106, 18 May 2025, Regarding the Anniversaries of the Crimean Tatar and Circassian Exiles,” May 18, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-106_-kirim-tatar-ve-cerkes-surgunlerinin-yil-donumleri-hk.en.mfa.

7 The Times of Central Asia, “Uzbekistan and Turkey to Develop Military and Technical Cooperation,” June 28, 2024, <https://timesca.com/uzbekistan-and-turkey-to-develop-military-and-technical-cooperation/>.

8 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan İlham Aliyev, “Speech by İlham Aliyev at the 12th Summit of the Council of Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States held in Gabala,” October 7, 2025, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/70315>.

Russia and China therefore perceive Turkic cooperation as a major challenge to their economic and political influence in Central Eurasia, as well as a threat to their stability, internal cohesion, and, in the long run, their status as great powers. It is possible that Turkic cooperation and the ideology of Pan-Turkism could result in an all-out confrontation, especially between Russia and Türkiye, as both vie for economic, political, and military primacy in Central Eurasia, effectively resurrecting the historic dynamics of the Eastern Question.

As developed as Turkish military technology and industry might be, Türkiye is not able to compete with the military might of nuclear powers like Russia and China. Nor can it compete with them as an economic or financial powerhouse. The Turkish economy is constrained by severe crises, and the flow of Chinese capital to Central Asia has been tremendous—almost half of all Chinese foreign direct investment in Eurasia is directed at the neighboring landlocked region.⁹ The Turkic states, however, have agency in the development of the region and are indeed interested in diversifying their foreign economic and political portfolio, with Turkic cooperation and Trans-Caspian connectivity at the core of this effort. If the United States seeks to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence in the region and keep the flow of raw materials from Central Eurasia to the West running smoothly, a pragmatic engagement in fostering Turkic connectivity is the way ahead. There are, however, some grave concerns that must be addressed if it aims to maintain a substantial presence in the region, and this will require pragmatism and strategic insight.

A NEW ECUMENE AND A THREE SEAS INITIATIVE FOR CENTRAL EURASIA

Pan-Turkism, like other pan-national ideologies such as Pan-Slavism or Pan-Germanism, is incompatible with the dynamics of international relations in the multipolarity of our times. Not only does it generate uncontrollable tension among regional great powers, but it is also perceived as an attempted imperialistic power grab by some even within the Turkic world itself. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are still members of the Russia-centered Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and all Central Asian states are active members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). They have no intention of souring their ties with either Russia or China. Turkic cooperation must therefore remain

⁹ News Central Asia, “EDB: Central Asia Accounts for 47% of Total Chinese Investments to Eurasian Region,” February 21, 2025, <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2025/02/21/edb-central-asia-accounts-for-47-of-total-chinese-investments-to-eurasian-region/>.

what it is at this moment: an alternative platform for interregional economic and political cooperation, a tool for diversification of foreign relations and a space for political maneuvering. Pragmatism should guide U.S. engagement in the Turkic world not just because of the threat of assertive Russian or Chinese countermeasures, but also the threat of internal regional destabilization.

The Turkic world is not physically united. Not only does the great Caspian Sea stretch between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, but there are also two small Christian states with a long history of cultural and political engagement with the Euro-Atlantic world, which stand between Türkiye and the rest of the Turkic world: Georgia and Armenia. Their ancient kingdoms have been integral parts of the Ecumene, the known world in Hellenic times, and later that of the Christian ecumene under Roman rule. The two countries occupy not more than 40,000 square miles, the size of Indiana, but their location is of paramount significance for geostrategists globally. A comprehensive and integrated U.S. geostrategy for Central Eurasia will require the reintegration of Georgia and Armenia into the Ecumene—this time, an ecumene of democracies—without pushing regional balance of power to the limits and risking the outbreak or reescalation of regional military conflicts.

Georgia, a southern neighbor and longtime foe of Russia along the coast of the Black Sea, is the passage between Türkiye and the Caspian, a gateway for the West to Central Eurasia. Georgia has, for decades, been the most loyal regional partner of the United States and the European Union. Its place in the Euro-Atlantic world, however, is under existential threat. The Biden administration and the EU have made a grave strategic mistake by allowing their ties to the Georgian government sour on ideological grounds rooted in the doctrines of liberal foreign policy: Washington canceled its bilateral strategic partnership and postponed joint military exercises indefinitely, while the EU froze Georgia's EU accession and attempted to delegitimize the democratically elected Georgian government. This pushed Georgia away from Western orbit and is forcing it to establish deeper cooperation with China. This process must be halted, and Georgia's Western orientation must be reinforced.

A sustainable Western engagement in Central Eurasia will require a stable regional balance of power. Russia, the traditional hegemon of the South Caucasus, has lost most of its leverage in the region. Russian troops were forced out of Georgia after 2003 and Azerbaijan in 2023, and they are slowly withdrawing from

the borders and airports in Armenia. Iran, a traditional middle power with strong influence in the South Caucasus, has been severely weakened in the aftermath of the October 7 terrorist attacks on Israel and its room for maneuver in its northern neighborhood has narrowed significantly. Other players are taking substantial steps to fill in the power vacuum left behind Russia and Iran: China, for example, has signed strategic partnerships with all three South Caucasian states since 2023 and taken a leading role in investment and infrastructural development. It is time for the United States and the European Union to do the same, taking serious measures to create a new balance of power in the region, consolidate its local advocacy, and keep its channels to the Caspian open.

Under the second administration of President Donald Trump, the United States has taken some crucial steps in this direction. On August 8, it proposed overseeing the development of the Armenian section of the Middle Corridor, called the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), through not only investments and counseling but also security guarantees through private security contractors. It is a bold step to assert American influence in a region with paramount geostrategic significance, but there is a catch. Russia and Iran may perceive an armed American presence, even one involving private companies, as a threat similar to the offer of NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine in 2008, which could trigger a domino-effect like the one in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The United States must avoid a situation where other regional actors perceive TRIPP as a trap, a one-way route exclusive to NATO members and their partners. It should be the backbone of an intraregional connectivity network between Türkiye, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, where the circulation of goods interconnect. This could provide an economic foundation for a political and economic region historically torn apart by wars and conflicts. TRIPP should not be projected as a strictly East–West route that would disrupt existing North–South connections. It should become both an intra- and interregional connectivity project that links regional infrastructures to both the Trans-Caspian maritime corridor and North–South corridors between the Black Sea and the Indian Ocean. Only this way can Western engagement with the Caspian region and Central Asia be sustainable. Otherwise, Russia and Iran will take assertive steps to reestablish the previous status quo and hinder Western engagement in Central Eurasia.

TRIPP will be integral to a larger interregional connectivity network that connects the Mediterranean, Black, and Caspian Seas—a Three Seas Initiative (3SI) for Central Eurasia. Like the 3SI in Eastern and Central Europe, the initiative should foster transportation infrastructure connecting ports and straits, through which the West could connect to the heartland of Eurasia. The United States must work together with not only Türkiye, the other Turkic states, Georgia, and Armenia but also the European Union to jointly allocate investments like the commitments made within the C5+1 format in Washington or Europe’s Global Gateway program and establish policy coordination mechanisms necessary for stable and secure geoeconomic investment. This could be achieved in a 5+3+2 format including the five Central Asian countries, the three countries in the South Caucasus, the United States, and the European Union. Hungary, as an observer member of the Organization of Turkic States, a strategic partner of Türkiye and Azerbaijan, and a member of both NATO and the EU, could host such an ambitious summit.

Armenia will soon emerge as a keystone state in the Eurasian balance of power—a geopolitical pivot, so to speak—where regional middle powers and global players converge. This is a hazardous situation, like walking in a minefield, where one wrong step could spark a crisis. There is no peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and an escalation of the Israel–Iran war could engulf the South Caucasus in conflict. Georgia’s unsettled foreign relations pose another serious threat to regional stability. The smallest provocation along the administrative boundary lines of Georgia and the two separatist regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali risks the reescalation of the Russo-Georgian war. The United States, however, could stabilize the situation in Georgia overnight. It will take a lot more time and strategic vision to make TRIPP work, but if it is made mutually beneficial to most of the regional stakeholders, a long-term American presence in the region could also be secured.

CONCLUSIONS

The emerging U.S. approach to Central Eurasia underscores a central reality: Long-term competition with China requires diversified supply chains, reliable access to critical raw materials, and stable transit routes across one of the world’s most geopolitically constrained regions. Geography dictates that any meaningful American presence in Central Asia must pass through the South

Caucasus, making Türkiye, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan indispensable pillars of a sustainable strategy. The United States cannot replicate Russia's historical dominance or China's infrastructural and financial reach, but it can shape a favorable regional balance by reinforcing pragmatic connectivity rather than ideological alignment. This means supporting Turkic-led corridors without enabling exclusionary, pan-nationalist projects, stabilizing Georgia's Western trajectory, and encouraging Armenia's emergence as a balanced, neutral keystone state. Projects like TRIPP should be designed as inclusive, multi-vector networks that integrate East–West and North–South routes, reducing incentives for Russia or Iran to respond coercively. Ultimately, success in Central Eurasia will depend on calibrated engagement, respect for regional agency, and sustained coordination with Türkiye. A connectivity-centered geostrategy that is flexible, realistic, and rooted in local dynamics and strategic culture offers the most viable path for securing U.S. interests while promoting long-term stability across the Caspian and beyond.



**HUNGARIAN
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS**