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U.S. Chases New Role in Central Asia Against Mounting Security Concerns

By Reid Standish

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Back in 2011, when U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he wrote that “the challenge for the United States is to strike a balance between its short-term, war-fighting needs and long-term interests in promoting a stable, prosperous, and democratic Central Asia.” But Kerry’s trip to all five Central Asian countries, which wrapped up this week, highlighted how the struggle since has grown even more tense — in large part due to poor security in Afghanistan and Washington’s fraying relations with Russia.

The leaders of all five Central Asian countries — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — are concerned about a resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the recruitment of their citizens into extremist groups, including the Islamic State. That’s played into the hands of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is casting Moscow as the region’s top fighter of terror to contrast with Washington’s diminishing military role in Afghanistan and restrained use of force against the Islamic State in Syria.

Dangling the opportunity of greater U.S. investment, expanded security cooperation, and a strategic counterweight to nearby Russia and China, Kerry used his visit to try to extend America’s toehold in the region beyond the narrow security goals of the past decade.

“What we want to see is not a struggle between China and Russia and the United States in a zero-sum game,” Kerry said Tuesday during remarks in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. “What we want to see is a Central Asia that claims its place as an engine of growth at the heart of a modern and dynamic Asia.”

But despite Kerry’s calls to avoid big powers politics, experts remain unconvinced Washington can translate its goals into a cohesive policy while succession questions for the region’s aging autocracies loom large. Russia and China, meanwhile, continue to cement their ties to Central Asia through economic and military blocs.

“Kerry’s visit is an attempt to signal that the U.S. is not withdrawing,” Luca Anceschi, a Central Asia expert at the University of Glasgow, told Foreign Policy. “But you can’t really consider America a real player anymore because of their lack of an updated and long term strategy.”

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Washington focused on promoting energy, security, aid, and human rights as the base for its strategy in Central Asia. That all changed in 2001, when U.S. policy was rewritten to serve the war effort in Afghanistan. The United States maintained a military base in Kyrgyzstan and another in Uzbekistan, but both have since been closed.

Now, as it draws its military out of Afghanistan, the United States more recently has talked about helping establish a so-called “New Silk Road” to boost trade and connectivity in the often isolated region. But critics maintain the initiative, which seeks to create renewed trade ties between Afghanistan and Central Asia, is a policy aimed at bolstering Afghanistan, rather than Central Asia itself.

“The United States is still approaching the region through the lens of Afghanistan and Russia,” Nargis Kassenova, director of the Central Asian Studies Center at KIMEP University in Almaty, Kazakhstan, told FP. “They don’t really have a Central Asia strategy that is primarily focused on Central Asia.”

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from Kerry’s four-day visit was a “Joint Declaration of Partnership” with the five Central Asian governments and the United States, ranging from trade to climate change to support for Afghanistan, and set the basis for regular discussions with Washington through a so-called “C5+1” format.

“The secretary advanced our bilateral relationships with each of the five countries and created unprecedented collaboration,” Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal told FP. “This clearly shows our broad and comprehensive efforts to advance our relationships with the countries of Central Asia.”

But the document is a far cry from what other world powers are doing in the region, said Joshua Walker, a fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

“This visit was more about showing that Washington is available, but the content of the visit also shows a lack of vision for Central Asia,” Walker told FP.

One week before Kerry's visit, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe completed a tour of Central Asia, sealing \$18 billion worth in deals with regional governments, from energy to manufacturing. Similarly, Beijing's "One Belt, One Road" economic plan in Central Asia, a massive infrastructure and trade strategy of roads, railways, and pipelines, has already funneled over \$50 billion into the region since it was launched in 2013. Meanwhile, Russia, a historical mainstay in the region, has continued to cement its financial influence through military aid, including \$1.2 billion pledged to Tajikistan. Moscow also established, and leads, the Eurasian Economic Union, a post-Soviet economic bloc of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.

Even so, Central Asian governments still may welcome a continued American presence in the region — especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Walker said.

"Crimea created lots of mistrust. It sent a strong signal about how Moscow views the sovereignty of former Soviet countries," Walker said.

How Washington can capitalize on that mistrust remains to be seen. But increased engagement with Central Asian governments also means treading a difficult path between serving as an offset to Russia without embracing regional leaders who are considered some of the world's worst human rights violators.

"It's a tricky region and difficult balance to strike," said Walker. "The Central Asian governments don't want to be completely dependent on Russia or China, but if Washington pushes too hard on human rights, they might just drive them further away."