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‘NEW’ U.S. STRATEGY IN CENTRAL ASIA LACKS ORIGINALITY, REALITY

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In early February, the U.S. unveiled its five-year [strategy for Central Asia](#), a brief document that is a continuation of its previous strategies focusing on political stability, counter-terrorism and energy security. Most key policy objectives—promoting reform of the rule of law and respect for human rights, reducing terrorist threats, and supporting the stabilisation of Afghanistan—have previously appeared over the past two decades. The declared aspiration to boost connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan along the [Lapis Lazuli corridor](#) reflects the [New Silk Road initiative](#) unveiled by Hillary Clinton in 2011. The biggest change is the recognition of the threat to Central Asian states from misinformation, a veiled reference to the challenge posed by Russia, although there is no detail of how to counter it.

The strategy seeks to address a vast and varied area (Kazakhstan alone is nearly four times the size of Texas) in six pages. It treats Central Asia as a unified bloc, overlooking the realities of regional diversity and the significant political and economic changes of recent years. Uzbekistan has undergone a period of transformation since the death of former president Islam Karimov in 2016. His successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has initiated a series of reforms, including attempts to improve the country’s relations with its neighbours, prompting growth in inter-regional trade. Neighbouring Kazakhstan has also undergone a recent change in leadership following the resignation of Nursultan Nazarbayev last year, after 27 years in office. These changes are not reflected in the static U.S. strategy.

U.S. interest in Central Asia has tended to wax and wane. The significance of the region increased greatly in the wake of 11 September 2001 and the U.S.-led operation in Afghanistan. Already on the map thanks to its substantial hydrocarbon reserves, the region’s role as a staging post for coalition forces has propelled it further into the spotlight. With the drawdown of troops from Afghanistan in 2014, U.S. interest declined, and in April 2017 NATO’s liaison office in Central Asia shut its doors, reflecting a reduction in wider Western engagement. The recent signing of a [deal with the Taliban](#) has laid the groundwork for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan, which stands to diminish U.S. interest in Central Asia.

Renewed interest in the region seems to stem from a desire to counterbalance the growing influence of both China and Russia, labelled ‘strategic competitors’ by the U.S. China is the



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largest trading partner of a number of Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, which has described it as the country's 'closest and most reliable neighbour and partner'. One of the principal instruments that the U.S. has used in Central Asia is the [C5+1 initiative](#), which is intended to provide a platform for dialogue and cooperation between the five Central Asian states and the U.S. However, like the strategy itself, this platform is too focused on Central Asia as a unified region and is entirely dependent upon the involvement of the U.S to make any significant progress.

OUTLOOK

This document may carry the title of 'strategy', but it contains more rhetoric than concrete action and lacks ambition, reflective of the U.S. approach to the region more broadly. While Washington is keen to counter the rise of China (and return of Russia), it has failed to identify proactive steps to achieve this. The U.S. is on the back foot in the region, left behind by massive Chinese investment and engagement, primarily at the bilateral level, in contrast to the American 'region-wide' approach. There are significant opportunities as Central Asian states seek foreign partners willing to invest, but distance, combined with competition from Russia and China, mean that the U.S. presence and role in the region will remain limited over the coming years.