



A Neighborhood Between Civilizations

by James Timbie and Adm. James O. Ellis Jr.

More than a thousand years of independent statehood . . . determine Russia's special position as a unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that brings together the Russian people and other peoples belonging to the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian world.

—*The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, approved by decree of Vladimir Putin, March 31, 2023*

So, again, speaking seriously, as a civilization, Russia has no borders.

—*Vladimir Putin at the Valdai Discussion Club, May 10, 2023*

The China-Central Asia relationship is steeped in history, driven by broad actual needs, and built on solid popular support. Our relations are brimming with vigor and vitality in the new era. Colleagues, transformations of the world unseen in a century are unfolding at a faster pace.

—*Xi Jinping at the Xi'an China-Central Asia Summit, May 19, 2023*

As the above epigraphs make clear, Russian President Vladimir Putin's imperial aspirations extend well beyond Ukraine to include Russia's "special position" as steward of a "civilization" he calls the "Russian world." Meanwhile, General Secretary Xi Jinping of the Chinese Communist Party offered the above remarks on China and Central Asia in a speech he titled a "shared future" of "everlasting friendship."

Today, as the United States seeks a negotiated end to the war in Ukraine and the European NATO member states devote additional resources to enhance their collective military capabilities to resist future encroachment by Russia, our project examines potential ways to enhance the resilience of the other former Soviet states of Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan), Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These are now positioned geographically and geopolitically between NATO, Russia, and increasingly China, and they are potential targets for both Russia's

imperial ambitions and China's aim of a broader sphere of influence. To borrow a well-known hockey analogy, we aim to skate to where the puck will be.

These nations would be overmatched in a military conflict with Russia, and neither Europe nor the United States would come to their defense. At the same time, it is in US interests that these countries have agency and independence, that they be able to resist coercion by Russia and China, and that they have the freedom to choose to enter into economic and political relationships with the United States, NATO, or the EU. The outcome of the war in Ukraine will affect security calculations in this region; as that outcome is fought and negotiated, we should also consider the resilience and security of the other countries in this neighborhood.

The purpose of our investigation is to evaluate the potential of various cooperative activities to serve these interests. Our research over 2023 and 2024 included dozens of interviews with current and former officials with practical experience in the security situation in Europe and Eurasia—from the United States, NATO, the EU, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and nongovernmental organizations—as well as officials and citizens in the region.

We find that NATO, the EU, and the OSCE are all active in this region pursuing security and economic partnerships to enhance the agency, security, and economic development of these countries and to attempt to reduce their dependence on Russia. It is not clear, however, what more these institutions can do, nor is it clear that these countries would be open to closer cooperation with NATO and the EU as they balance their relationships with Russia, China, and the West. Perhaps more promising are prospects for increased bilateral security cooperation, including bilateral security cooperation between these countries and the United States.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH NATO

All the former Soviet states in the South Caucasus, Moldova, and Central Asia outlined above have partnerships with NATO. Each signed a Partnership for Peace framework document with NATO in the 1990s, which provides a basis for practical bilateral cooperation between NATO and partner countries. Partnership activities include defense policy and planning, education and training, civil-military relations, military-to-military cooperation and exercises, and emergency response. The Partnership for Peace is designed to allow partners to build individual relationships with NATO and choose their own priorities for cooperation. The countries in this region see a need to balance their relationships with Russia, China, and the West, and this balancing approach places limits on their participation in partnerships with NATO.

These existing partnerships with NATO contribute to the agency, sovereignty, and resilience of the countries of the South Caucasus, Moldova, and Central Asia and merit continuing support. We do not, however, see prospects for substantial expansion of existing partnerships by NATO, nor are these countries prepared to visibly increase their cooperation with NATO as they navigate their relationships with Russia, China, and the West.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION

The EU has trade relationships with all the countries of the South Caucasus, Moldova, and Central Asia and increasingly considers itself a global security actor as well. The EU contributes to resilience by pursuing preferential trade relationships to promote economic development and prosperity, by assisting civil and military institutions, and by establishing missions to monitor contested borders.

EU border monitors observe and report on the situation on the ground in conflict areas, and seek to build confidence and de-escalate tensions. In the South Caucasus the EU deployed an unarmed, civilian mission to Georgia in 2008 to monitor the agreement ending the war with Russia, and it sent a similar mission to Armenia in 2023 to monitor the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. The EU was in the midst of mediating a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh when Azerbaijan unilaterally took control of the breakaway region by force. The EU's demonstrated ability to put civilian boots on the ground to monitor sensitive situations might be drawn upon again to help implement future arrangements in the region.

ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE

The OSCE, the world's largest regional security organization, has substantial strengths: All the nations of Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia are members of the OSCE. In addition to this impressive geography, the OSCE has valuable tools, including considerable experience and expertise in ceasefire monitoring, border security, and election monitoring.

The OSCE also has serious weaknesses: Its fundamental commitments recorded in the Helsinki Final Act, to refrain from the threat or use of force, respect territorial integrity, and resolve disputes by peaceful means, as well as the transparency measures agreed to in the OSCE's Vienna Document, were violated by Russia when it invaded Ukraine. The requirement for consensus in decision making and budgeting poses a threat to any activities that Russia does not support. The two OSCE missions that were operating in Ukraine when Russia invaded in 2022 (one to monitor the situation in the Donbas, the other to support civil society) were both closed when Russia opposed their renewal. Russia has also been disrupting the OSCE budget process since 2021 and blocked Estonia as the OSCE chair for 2024.

But the OSCE has proven resilient. An Extra-budgetary Support Program for Ukraine has been established, funded by donors rather than the OSCE budget, to pursue a range of activities in support of civilians in Ukraine, including demining, environmental monitoring and remediation, and protection of displaced persons from human trafficking. The OSCE foreign ministers recently agreed that Finland would be the 2025 OSCE chair and appointed former Turkish foreign minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu to a three-year term as Secretary General. So the OSCE continues to function with its expanded diplomatic tool kit.

The OSCE has seen a shift in attitudes toward Russia in the South Caucasus and Central Asia since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with many nations seeking to rely less on Russia and being wary of China. With the requirement for consensus, Russia could block everything at the OSCE, but it has chosen not to, perhaps because it sees value in preserving a relationship with the regional security organization. Except for Ukraine, the other OSCE missions have continued. The OSCE's demonstrated ability to continue to function and to perform its traditional missions to support ceasefire monitoring, border security, and election monitoring suggests that the OSCE can play a significant role in regional security after the war in Ukraine.

A key question in considering security arrangements in Europe and Eurasia after the war in Ukraine is whether to pursue cooperative measures with Russia. Many prominent voices in Europe, including in the OSCE, argue against working with Russia. Some even call for pushing Russia out of the OSCE, although that is not the predominant view. Russia will remain, however, a large nearby state with substantial conventional and nuclear forces and long-standing economic and cultural ties. Measures for mutual restraint and transparency could potentially enhance stability in the region and reduce the risk of future conflict. If there are to be cooperative measures with Russia, the OSCE could be a place to negotiate them.

We see a continuing role for an appropriately resourced OSCE after the war in Ukraine to monitor sensitive borders and elections.

BILATERAL COOPERATION

In the course of our work, we have found that increased bilateral cooperation between individual countries is, in some cases, more promising than cooperation with international organizations such as NATO. In one significant illustrative example, while NATO, as an organization, does not provide lethal military equipment to Ukraine, individual NATO members support Ukraine with a broad range of offensive and defensive military systems (and NATO has played a coordinating role).

Following wide-ranging conversations with all involved, we have come to focus on the role of bilateral security cooperation with Moldova and the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. These countries do not have military forces as strong as Ukraine's and would be overmatched in any military conflict with Russia even with Western support. The objective of any potential increased bilateral security cooperation would therefore be to increase the agency, independence, and resilience of these countries, reduce their dependence on Russia and China, and support growing their economic and political ties to the United States.

Any reduction in existing bilateral security cooperation in this region could be expected to have the opposite effect—over time ceding the US seat at the table to our great power competitors. The United States already has some level of bilateral security cooperation with all of the countries considered in this project. Each has a long-standing partnership with the National Guard of a US state that features periodic exchanges of visits and exercises. These

existing bilateral relationships could be considered as part of the Trump administration's broader reassessment of relationships with security partners. The costs of increased security cooperation could be modest, given the small size of their military establishments, and justified by the potential for increased economic and trade opportunities in this resource-rich region, for increased military sales to this region, and for increased presence in a region where Russia has historically dominated and where China is increasingly active.

Strengthened bilateral security cooperation between the United States and Moldova and the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia could include agreements along the lines of the bilateral agreements that France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, and others have recently concluded with Ukraine, which include provisions to provide equipment, financing, training, intelligence, and cyber defense to help Ukraine defend itself, but not an Article 5–like commitment to come to the defense of Ukraine.

COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY ASSESSMENT

Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian countries that now find themselves, figuratively and literally, between NATO, Russia, and China have long and complex histories with Russia, including incorporation by force into the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century and a brief period of independence during the tumult of the Bolshevik revolution, followed by reincorporation by the Red Army into the Soviet Union, and again becoming independent countries upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In many cases, their international borders reflect arbitrary decisions of past Soviet officials.

MOLDOVA

After World War II, much of what is now Moldova was separated from Romania and combined with a strip of former Ukrainian territory on the east bank of the Dniester River to form the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, this former Soviet republic declared its independence and adopted the name Moldova. Since 1990, however, even before the breakup of the Soviet Union, that strip of territory east of the Dniester has been controlled by a breakaway government of Transnistria. A brief civil war between Moldovan forces and Transnistrian forces supported by Russia ended with a ceasefire monitored by Moldovan, Transnistrian, and Russian peacekeepers. The local Transnistrian government maintains de facto control of the breakaway territory; the international community recognizes this territory as part of Moldova.

Russia maintains approximately 1,500 troops in the breakaway Transnistrian region, many of whom are Transnistrian locals. Some are part of the peacekeeping force, while others guard a Soviet-era ammunition depot and train separatist forces. The relationship between the central government and the breakaway region is complex. Much of the country's industry is located in Transnistria, and most of its electric power is generated there, fueled by gas supplied by Russia.

Moldova's neutrality is written into its 1994 constitution, and the country did not have a substantial military establishment prior to the Russian 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Moldova joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1994, has contributed a small number of troops to NATO's Kosovo Force since 2014, and has hosted a NATO liaison office since 2017. The OSCE operates an election monitoring mission in Moldova.

Russia's war on Ukraine has caused Moldova, which considered itself a neutral country before the invasion, to shift its foreign and defense policy toward more cooperation with NATO and the EU. The government has moved to modernize and professionalize a national army, and has requested support from NATO and the EU. NATO supports this effort with a defense capacity-building initiative. Several NATO countries have provided defense equipment bilaterally, including Germany, Poland, and the United States. With Western assistance, Moldova is acquiring radar equipment to monitor its airspace in response to Russian missiles targeted at Ukraine overflying Moldova.

The EU provides defense equipment, has supported the effort to end reliance on Russian gas, and has initiated the lengthy process for Moldova to become a candidate for entry into the EU. With substantial assistance from the EU and the United States, Moldova is diversifying its energy suppliers, reducing Russia's leverage. Despite extensive Russian interference in the electoral process, in late 2024 Moldova's citizens reelected President Maia Sandu, who has promoted partnering with the EU and NATO, and narrowly approved a referendum establishing the goal of EU membership in Moldova's constitution. Parliamentary elections in 2025 will again test the durability of Moldova's turn to the West.

The future of Moldova depends in large part on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. As long as Ukraine remains in control of the Odesa region adjacent to Moldova (and Transnistria), Moldova may continue to look to build its economic and security ties with the West. Russia, however, can be expected to continue to use gray-zone non-kinetic activities along with its military presence to influence events in Moldova.

The United States could support increasing Moldova's resilience by entering into bilateral discussion of a defense cooperation agreement tailored to the needs of Moldova's nascent military establishment. In these discussions, the United States could offer appropriate offensive and defensive equipment, training, financing, intelligence, and education, and Moldovan officials could express their interests, concerns, and needs. Such bilateral defense cooperation could build on Moldova's existing partnership with the North Carolina National Guard to assist the development of a more modern military establishment.

GEORGIA

When the Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia declared its independence in 1991, secessionist movements in Abkhazia along the Black Sea coast in the west and in South Ossetia in the mountains in the north established local control with Russian support. Hostilities in 2008 between the government and the breakaway regions ended with Russian forces controlling Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Since Georgia became an independent country, the separatist

regions have never been controlled by the Georgian government; 20 percent of Georgia's territory is now occupied by Russia.

NATO has a liaison office in Tbilisi, and until recently NATO had a strong relationship with Georgia. Partnership for Peace cooperation between NATO and Georgia included provision of equipment, training, exercises, and enhancement of interoperability. Georgia contributed troops to the Kosovo Force and to NATO missions in Afghanistan. At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO leaders announced that Georgia would become a NATO member, but there is no clear path or timeline for membership.

NATO is broadly popular in Georgia, and NATO has had a strong relationship with Georgia's military. However, the ruling Georgian Dream party, which has been in power since 2012, has reversed the trend toward integration with the West and has tilted instead toward Russia, for example, by enacting a law designating civil society groups receiving more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad as foreign agents. As a consequence, the declaration of the NATO leaders following their 2024 summit meeting in Washington made no mention of cooperation with Georgia and conspicuously did not reaffirm the 2008 statement that Georgia would become a NATO member.

The EU also had a promising relationship with Georgia that has sharply deteriorated. In addition to a preferential trade agreement, the EU initiated the process for Georgia to be a candidate for EU membership, has provided nonlethal equipment to the Georgian military, and has a mission in Georgia to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire along the border with the Russian-controlled territories. The EU has placed the membership process on hold, however, following backsliding by the Georgian Dream government, citing restrictions on civil society organizations and the media and problems in the conduct of the October 2024 elections. The Georgian government, for its part, subsequently announced that discussions with the EU on membership would be delayed until 2028, triggering widespread protests.

The United States and Georgia have had a close military-to-military relationship, intended to strengthen Georgia's military establishment with more capable leadership. With the support of the United States and NATO, Georgia's ability to defend itself is now better than it was in 2008, but Georgia is still no match for Russia.

In response to the antidemocratic backsliding of the Georgian Dream government, however, the United States has sharply curtailed economic and security cooperation with Georgia. The US indefinitely postponed the Noble Partner international military exercise hosted jointly by the United States and Georgia, citing false accusations by Georgia against the United States. The US-Georgia Strategic Partnership has been suspended, citing the suspension of the EU accession process, use of force against protesters, and antidemocratic actions that violate the core tenets of the partnership.

Georgia's military does not share the pro-Russia tendencies of the ruling Georgian Dream party and merits support, notwithstanding the suspension of the Strategic Partnership and

the sanctions that have been imposed by the United States on Georgian individuals for violent suppression of peaceful protests. The United States could seek to engage in military-to-military discussions with Georgian counterparts to consider the feasibility of bilateral defense cooperation tailored to Georgia's needs that could support Georgia's independence and sovereignty and be acceptable to Georgia's current government. The United States could also consider ways to strengthen the long-standing partnership between Georgia's military establishment and the National Guard of the US state of Georgia.

ARMENIA

Beginning in 1988, even before Armenia declared its independence in 1991 as the Soviet Union broke up, Armenia and Azerbaijan fought over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly ethnic Armenian enclave that was placed by Soviet authorities in predominantly Muslim Azerbaijan. Decades of conflict ended with a decisive military victory by Azerbaijan in September 2023, followed by an exodus of ethnic Armenians to Armenia.

Armenia has close cultural ties to Russia and a long tradition of relying on Russia as its primary security and economic partner, including a joint defense agreement, a Russian military base, Russian control of Armenia's energy infrastructure, and membership in the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military alliance and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) trade pact.

The failure of the Russian peacekeepers and Armenia's CSTO partners to oppose Azerbaijan's 2023 takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh has caused Armenia to reconsider its dependence on Russia. The Armenian government has arranged for the withdrawal of Russian border guards from some of its borders, has stated Armenia's intention to withdraw from the CSTO (at an unspecified future date), and has turned to the EU rather than Russia to monitor its border with Azerbaijan.

Armenia has a partnership with the EU in which the EU provides assistance in support of democracy, transparency, rule of law, and opposing corruption. Armenia and the EU have taken early steps that might eventually lead to Armenian membership, beginning with talks on visa-free travel, building on the existing preferential trade agreement with the EU (its second-largest trading partner, after Russia).

Armenia joined the Partnership for Peace with NATO in 1994 and contributed troops to NATO operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Armenian cooperation with NATO includes measures to promote democratic control of its armed forces and to develop interoperability with NATO forces. NATO remained neutral during the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia's reconsideration of its security relationship with Russia presents an opportunity for the West. In a shift away from its traditional reliance on Russia as its primary military supplier, Armenia has begun to acquire weapons systems from India and France and nonlethal military equipment from the EU. Units of the Kansas National Guard, the regular US Army, and Armenian forces conduct annual exercises in Armenia to train for peacekeeping operations.

To take advantage of this opportunity, US civilian and military officials could use the US-Armenia Bilateral Defense Consultations called for in the June 2024 Joint Statement on US-Armenia Dialogue to develop a common understanding on equipment, financing, training, and education tailored to Armenia's needs, which the United States could supply through bilateral defense cooperation.

A peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan that would reopen borders and trade with Turkey and Azerbaijan would benefit all countries of the region and further reduce Russia's influence. Azerbaijan has raised complex issues involving transport links and language in Armenia's constitution that may not be resolved soon, however, and initial phases of bilateral defense cooperation with the United States need not wait for conclusion of such a peace agreement.

AZERBAIJAN

Azerbaijan lies between Russia and Iran and became part of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century as a result of settlement of conflicts between Russia and Iran. Azerbaijan is a major producer of oil and gas, much of which is exported to Europe.

Conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh began in 1988, while Azerbaijan and Armenia were still republics of the Soviet Union. At the outset, ethnic Armenian separatist forces in Nagorno-Karabakh gained de facto control over the enclave and other parts of Azerbaijan surrounding it. Azerbaijan over time used its growing oil revenues to build up its military capacity and gain superiority over the separatist forces. While Russian peacekeeping forces were preoccupied with supporting the war in Ukraine, and with Turkey's support, Azerbaijan took control of the separatist enclave by force in 2023, and ethnic Armenians fled to Armenia.

Despite European anger over Azerbaijan's use of force against Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, imposing a military resolution on a conflict that the EU was actively working to resolve by peaceful means, the EU and Azerbaijan have a strong mutual dependence based on energy and trade. Europe does not have alternatives to Azerbaijan as a supplier of natural gas, and Azerbaijan does not have alternative buyers for its gas. Both also have strong economic interests in a transport corridor being developed between Europe and China through Azerbaijan (bypassing Russia).

Azerbaijan joined the NATO Partnership for Peace in 1994 and cooperates with NATO on the development, training, and interoperability of Azerbaijani forces for future peace support missions with NATO.

Bilateral defense cooperation between the United States and Azerbaijan is complicated by the prohibition on US assistance to the government of Azerbaijan in the 1992 Freedom Support Act, enacted by Congress with the strong support of the Armenian American community. There is a provision for a waiver of this restriction under certain conditions, and assistance was provided to Azerbaijan from 2002 through 2022 pursuant to such a waiver.

The waiver was not extended, however, following Azerbaijan's taking of Nagorno-Karabakh by force in 2023.

Notwithstanding Azerbaijan's military action in Nagorno-Karabakh, its autocratic regime, and its close ties with Russia, a military-to-military relationship between the United States and Azerbaijan could serve our mutual interest in supporting Azerbaijan's independence and freedom of action. A peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia would open the way to bilateral defense cooperation as well as substantial regional economic benefits. The governments of Azerbaijan and Turkey are hesitant to conclude such an agreement, however, and are calling on Armenia to take difficult steps, including amending its constitution to delete any reference to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Rather than wait for a peace agreement, it would serve our interests to work with Azerbaijan on possibilities for mutually beneficial low-level, military-to-military cooperation that could proceed pursuant to a waiver.

CENTRAL ASIA

The five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—have been dominated by Russia culturally and economically since the nineteenth century. The Russian language predominates in the media and in government, the prevailing government structures are authoritarian, their economies depend on remittances from migrants working in Russia, and their military doctrines and equipment reflect their Soviet origins. The security and economic policies of many of the Central Asian countries are integrated with Russia through the CSTO and EAEU.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), led by China and Russia and including the Central Asian states except for Turkmenistan, could potentially encourage regional coordination favoring the economic and security interests of China and Russia rather than the West. The original purpose of the SCO was to manage boundary issues, and it has had some success in resolving boundary disputes and fighting terrorism. However, as the SCO has grown to include India, Pakistan, and Iran, as well as other observers and guests, the organization has proved to be too politically disparate and financially weak to foster regional cooperation in other areas or pursue an anti-Western agenda.

Even as Russia and China aspire to a global partnership without limits and share a common interest in resisting Western influence, they are rivals in Central Asia. Russia's historical dominance is challenged by China's growing economic and political presence in the region, including infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative and cooperation on domestic security to resist separatist ethnic minorities. Central Asia's trade with China now surpasses its trade with Russia.

The countries of Central Asia have responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine by increasing coordination among themselves; by strengthening ties with China, Turkey, the EU, and the United States; and by cooperating to develop the Central Corridor trade route linking China

and Europe through Central Asia without passing through Russia. None of the Central Asian countries has supported Russia on Ukraine resolutions in the UN (they have abstained or did not vote), and the five Central Asian leaders (the C5) had unprecedented meetings with Xi Jinping in China in May 2023 and with President Joe Biden four months later in New York.

Each of the Central Asian countries has signed a Partnership for Peace framework document, which enables bilateral cooperation with NATO. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have the most active relationships with NATO. Kazakhstan hosts and participates in exercises and training with NATO partners. Uzbekistan cooperates with NATO in educational and training activities, supported NATO operations in neighboring Afghanistan during the conflict there, and hosted a NATO liaison office from 2013 to 2017, when it was shortsightedly closed by NATO for financial reasons. NATO's partnerships with Central Asia are much less active than those with Armenia and Moldova, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan has increased the skepticism of some Central Asians of the value of NATO partnerships.

Each of the Central Asian countries has a preferential trade arrangement with the EU, and they have strengthened their relationships with the EU since the invasion of Ukraine. Kazakhstan has partnerships with the EU, its largest trading partner and foreign investor, to improve the regulatory environment for Kazakhstan's companies, secure supplies of critical materials, and implement sanctions on Russia. Uzbekistan also is cooperating with the EU to implement international sanctions on Russia, and it has launched a strategic partnership on critical minerals. Central Asian states also cooperate with the EU on energy, regulatory regimes, rule of law, education, health, agriculture, and rural development.

While the partnerships between NATO and the EU and the states of Central Asia are mutually beneficial, and serve to increase the agency, resilience, and economic development of these countries, it is not clear that NATO or the EU has more to offer the Central Asian countries beyond the partnerships now in place, nor do the Central Asian countries seek closer ties with NATO and the EU.

Bilateral security cooperation between the United States and the countries of Central Asia is a potentially more promising way to increase the agency of these countries and their ability to resist Russia and China. In addition to bolstering the independence of the countries of Central Asia and reducing their dependence on Russia and China, the interests of the United States in Central Asia include energy security, counterterrorism, and access to critical materials. Increased bilateral security cooperation between the United States and the countries of Central Asia could potentially support all these objectives.

The United States Central Command oversees bilateral security cooperation activities with Central Asian states designed to counter terrorism and narcotics trafficking, secure borders, promote professional security forces, advance respect for rule of law and human rights, and build capacity to participate in international peacekeeping operations. The State Partnership Program pairs National Guard units in the United States with each country—the Arizona National Guard with Kazakhstan, the Mississippi National Guard with Uzbekistan, the Montana National

Guard with Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, and the Virginia National Guard with Tajikistan. The Guard units regularly exercise with their Central Asian counterparts to develop mutual understanding and interoperability, establish people-to-people relationships, and develop capacity for disaster relief, crisis management, border security, and officer development. The United States has also provided small amounts of equipment, financing, and education and training to Central Asian states.

The Joint Statement following the September 2023 meeting of President Biden with the five Central Asian leaders in New York includes a commitment by the United States to prioritize security assistance and other resources to sustain and enhance Central Asian security partnerships. Following up on this opening, an initiative to increase the agency and resilience of the Central Asian states could begin with a series of bilateral meetings to hear the views of Central Asian officials on how best to implement this commitment to increase security cooperation. Central Asian officials could provide recommendations that in their judgment would increase their security and independence without unduly provoking their neighbors. US officials could similarly outline their regional interests and concerns amidst geopolitical and economic shifts, for example, the ongoing issue of goods transshipments that circumvent US sanctions or tariffs. These combined views could inform the development of affordable and mutually beneficial security and economic cooperation.

Another way the Central Asian nations can increase their ability to resist encroachment by Russia and China is for these countries to work more closely together as a region. They are already moving in this direction by increasing coordination among themselves, working together with the OSCE to coordinate on border security issues and peaceful resolution of border conflicts, and establishing the C5 group of the leaders of the Central Asian countries. The C5 leaders meet regularly to consider security, economic, and environmental challenges, and they recently invited as a guest the leader of Azerbaijan, which shares many of the same interests and concerns as the C5 but was not included in the Soviet definition of Central Asia. The C5 leaders have since 2022 met as a group with the leaders of India, Russia, Turkey, China, the European Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the United States. The United States could support regional cooperation by dealing with the five Central Asian countries together as a group. Azerbaijan could participate in such regional meetings with Greater Central Asia as well, as it shares many of the same interests as the C5.

CONCLUSION

After the fighting ends in Ukraine, new security arrangements will be needed to prevent Russia from threatening other former Soviet states and to prevent China from taking advantage of the situation. These arrangements must consider how best to support the legitimate security needs of vulnerable nations positioned geopolitically and geographically between NATO, Russia, and China.

NATO, the EU, and the OSCE are all actively engaged in the South Caucasus, Moldova, and Central Asia with the objective of supporting their independence, sovereignty, agency,

and resilience. These efforts merit support. It is not evident, however, what more these institutions could do, nor is it clear that these countries are prepared for closer cooperation with these institutions as they seek to balance their own economic and security relationships among great powers.

A more promising approach would be to encourage increased bilateral defense cooperation with the United States tailored to the needs of each country, including equipment, financing—including from other Western partners—training, exercises, and intelligence. The objective would be to support the agency, independence, and resilience of these countries and strengthen economic and security ties with the United States without unduly provoking their neighbors.

The first step would be to engage in government-to-government bilateral discussions among civilian and military officials to identify the needs and desires of each country and explore how they could be matched with capabilities the United States could provide. In considering what bilateral defense cooperation would be appropriate for each country, we could learn from the views and suggestions their officials offer, as they have long experience in maintaining a balance in their relationships with Russia, China, and the West. For its part, the United States could offer drone, counter-drone, surveillance, and communications technologies that have proved effective in Ukraine, as well as more traditional systems. US officials would make clear what we are prepared to do to support their ability to resist Russia and China, without implying that we would come to their defense.

The Trump administration, in assessing the value of relationships with partner nations, emphasizes the potential benefits to the United States. In such a weighing of costs and benefits of tailored bilateral defense cooperation, the costs could be low and the benefits could include trade and investment opportunities, access to energy and critical materials resources, sales of military equipment, cooperation on counterterrorism, and increased US presence and influence in a region traditionally dominated by Russia and receiving growing attention from China.

Other countries have an interest in peace, stability, and economic development in this region and could also pursue bilateral defense cooperation with the countries between NATO and Russia. In particular, the twenty-five NATO countries other than the United States that have signed bilateral defense cooperation agreements with Ukraine could be encouraged to pursue bilateral defense cooperation with the South Caucasus, Moldova, and Central Asia as well. The resilience and self-determination of this region benefits other NATO countries as much it does us. A group could be set up at NATO to coordinate the activities of the Western providers of assistance, matching resources and capabilities of providers with the needs of the states in the region.

Finally, the West could encourage the Central Asian countries, far from Europe and the United States and close to Russia and China, to increase their collective strength and agency by working more closely together. They have already taken an important step by forming the

C5 group of leaders of the five Central Asian nations, which meets regularly to coordinate on security, economic, and environmental challenges and has met collectively with the leaders of the United States, Russia, China, India, Turkey, the EU, and the GCC. The United States and other Western nations could encourage as a further step the formal creation of a regional organization of the C5 plus Azerbaijan, comparable to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to foster political and economic cooperation at all levels of the member governments and increase their collective ability to resist pressure from Russia and China.

As minds become focused on a resolution to the war in Ukraine, modest attention from the West could have outsized payoffs as insurance against future conflict in this neighborhood between civilizations.



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About the Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) Initiative

The United States faces a different threat landscape in this century than it did in the last. Strategies for meeting the international security challenges we face today need to address the many attributes of national power. Military strength is necessary but no longer sufficient. Effectively managing our national security problems will require cooperation with allies and partners, and recognition of the importance of diplomacy, economic strength, and science and technology. The GPS Initiative offers a fresh look, through a broad lens, to help navigate this emerging security landscape.

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