

CASPIAN REGION FOREIGN-POLICY PRIORITIES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

By Ambassador (Ret.) Richard E. Hoagland

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ABOUT US

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Prior to his diplomatic assignments in Central Asia, Ambassador Hoagland was Director of the Office of Caucasus and Central Asian Affairs in the Bureau of Europe and Eurasian Affairs, Department of State (2001–2003). In that position, he wrote and negotiated four of the key bilateral documents defining the Central Asian states’ enhanced relationship with the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. His earlier foreign assignments included Russia where he was Press Spokesman for the U.S. Embassy (1995–1998).

During the course of his career, he received multiple Presidential Performance Awards, State Department Meritorious and Superior Honor Awards, as well as the Distinguished Honor Award.

Traditionally, U.S. foreign policy does not change radically when a new president enters the White House. Yes, the new political appointees at the top of the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, and the State Department, as well as at other departments and agencies that have a voice in setting and implementing foreign policy, will work with the senior career foreign-policy professionals to decide what, if anything, needs to be reviewed and updated; but, in the end, there is almost never a radical change in U.S. foreign policy. This has been true for U.S. policy in the Caspian region of the South Caucasus and Central Asia ever since the fall of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 when the former Soviet Socialist Republics became sovereign and independent nations, whether they were ready for that or not.

For the last three-plus decades, U.S. foreign policy for Central Asia has been remarkably stable. Every policy document from that entire period states this: "The United States supports the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the newly independent states." Early on, the emergence of these new nations was seen as important enough that the State Department created a separate, new office that reported directly to the secretary of state rather than work up the chain from an assistant secretary of a long-established geographic bureau. That new office was given the acronym S/NIS - NIS meaning a Newly Independent States office that reported directly to the Secretary, or S.

In a relatively short time, however, these newly independent states were folded into the Bureau for Europe and Eurasia that, pre-1991, had included the office for the USSR. But when former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wanted to bulk up the relatively new Bureau of South Asia, she moved the five Central Asian states out of the Europe and Eurasia Bureau and created the South and Central Asia Bureau. Over the years, that has caused some bureaucratic policy disjunctions, especially since the Department of Defense is organized differently. But in the end, the work gets done.



The first ever C5+1 Meeting Between Central Asian Foreign Ministers and Secretary of State John Kerry Source: U.S. Department of State

SECURITY AS A FUNDAMENTAL OF U.S. POLICY FOR THE CASPIAN REGION

Rather than fiddle with bureaucracy, the new Trump administration should focus on the Caspian region itself and ask what needs to be done. How can the United States work hand-in-glove with the individual countries to ensure the security of the region? What can the United States do to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the countries of the Caspian region that face daily news of the current conflicts not all that far from their own borders – Ukraine, Syria, and Israel’s ongoing battles in Gaza and Lebanon?

RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY

The new administration in Washington needs to look closely at the geography of the region. Who are its neighbors? Russia to the north, China to the East, Afghanistan to the south, and Iran to the west. To state the obvious, the United States is not close with any of these, and so we certainly cannot rely on Central Asia’s powerful neighbors to work closely with us behind the scenes to nudge them in what we would call the right direction. Early on in its independence, Kazakhstan understood this and developed what has come to be called multi-vector foreign policy (President Tokayev has more recently begun to use the term, strategic neutrality), meaning friends to all, whether one power or another dislikes that. We in far-away Washington need to remember to live comfortably and to work productively with that. The Caspian region nations most certainly do not mean for their multi-vector foreign policy to be confrontational; they see it as safely inclusive. There are two specific foreign-policy laws on the books in the United States that are, quite frankly, outdated and need attention.

The first is the **Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the Trade Act of 1974**. Originally enacted to encourage the Soviet Union to allow the emigration of its Jewish citizens, it denies countries, not just in the Caspian region, Permanent Normal Trade Relations status, unless the administration recommends, and Congress passes, an annual waiver. The U.S. government has “graduated” a number of countries from this act, including in the Caspian region Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, and – against all logic – even Russia. But the Jackson-Vanik Amendment is still on the legal books and especially annoys the economically and politically important country of Kazakhstan.

The reality is that some elements within Washington’s laudable human-rights community have insisted on retaining the Jackson-Vanik Amendment as a kind of symbolic cudgel to use against countries that annoy them. But because of the existence of the possibility of annual waiver, the amendment is purely symbolic and has not had real authority for decades. With the Caspian region and the emergence of the Middle Corridor having gained global attention, and because Russia and China play such significant roles in the region, it is well time for the United States to show that it is a reliable world-power partner for the region. One symbolic, but nevertheless important, way to do that would be to put to rest after 50 years the once laudable relic of the Cold War, the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. [See below for more suggestions how to promote human rights effectively in the Caspian region.]

The second law on the books in the United States that is a relic of the past is **Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act of 1992**. That act was passed immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 to provide U.S. assistance to the former Soviet Socialist Republics that had awakened one morning to find themselves as independent nations. Because of the strong political influence in Washington at that time of the more conservative element of the Armenian diaspora, Section 907 was enacted to prevent any U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan. It wasn’t until October 2001, immediately following 9/11, that the U.S. Congress passed an amendment allowing the U.S. president to waive Section 907 each fiscal year and to provide assistance to Azerbaijan that was being of significant help to the United States in its military action at that time in Afghanistan.

The September 2023 Azerbaijan-Armenia war that resulted in the resumption of Azerbaijani sovereignty over its district of Karabakh and the surrounding districts, and the determination of both Baku and Yerevan to reach an historic final peace agreement, has now made Section 907 little more than an historic artifact. It’s time to update U.S. law to accurately reflect current reality.

ESTABLISH HIGH-LEVEL VISITS

Another step that the new administration in Washington should take that the Caspian region would welcome would be for President Trump himself to visit the region and also to line up regular cabinet-level visits to the region. Likewise, the United States should invite top leaders from the region to visit Washington for official White House visits. A U.S. president has never visited the Caspian region, whereas the leaders of Russia and China are quite regular visitors, especially in Central Asia. The highest-level U.S. official ever to visit Central Asia was Vice President Al Gore early in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, hope springs eternal and the U.S. creation of the C5+1 in 2015 during the administration of President Barak Obama was a very positive step forward, as was President Joe Biden’s meeting with the C5 leaders in New York City on the margins of the 2024 UN General Assembly. These kinds of group meetings are certainly welcome and

should continue; however, individual meetings send a stronger signal about U.S. interest in, and commitment to, the region.

President Joe Biden's Meeting with C5 Leaders at UNGA Source: The White House

SUPPORT INSTITUTIONALIZING THE C5+1, AND GO FURTHER

Related to the U.S.-Central Asia C5+1, the new Trump administration should strongly encourage the governments in the five countries of Central Asia as official U.S. policy to begin to think of ways to institutionalize the C5. They themselves have already begun summits in this format to which they usually invite the president of Azerbaijan, so that the C5 has become, for all intents and purposes, the C6. The leaders in the region have long toyed with the idea of forming a regional organization on the model of ASEAN or the Baltic Council. Finding ways to encourage this should be one of Washington's key policy points for the Caspian region. One positive step further would be for Washington to evolve the C5+1 into a C8+1, to involve all the countries of the Caspian region and then to support the institutionalization of a C8. The time has come for such a regional organization to emerge officially on the world stage.



Leaders of the C5 and Azerbaijan at the 6th Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian States in Astana

Source: President of the Republic of Tajikistan

SUPPORT THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR

Here's another key point for the foreign-policy leaders in the new administration. Central Asia as a region is land-locked. More recently, however, the governments of the countries themselves have begun to say that they are land-linked. What that refers to is the emergence of the Middle Corridor because of Russia's criminal war in Ukraine. China was paying attention to that long before the international sanctions against Russia all but closed off the so-called Northern Corridor for China's overland trade with Europe. On

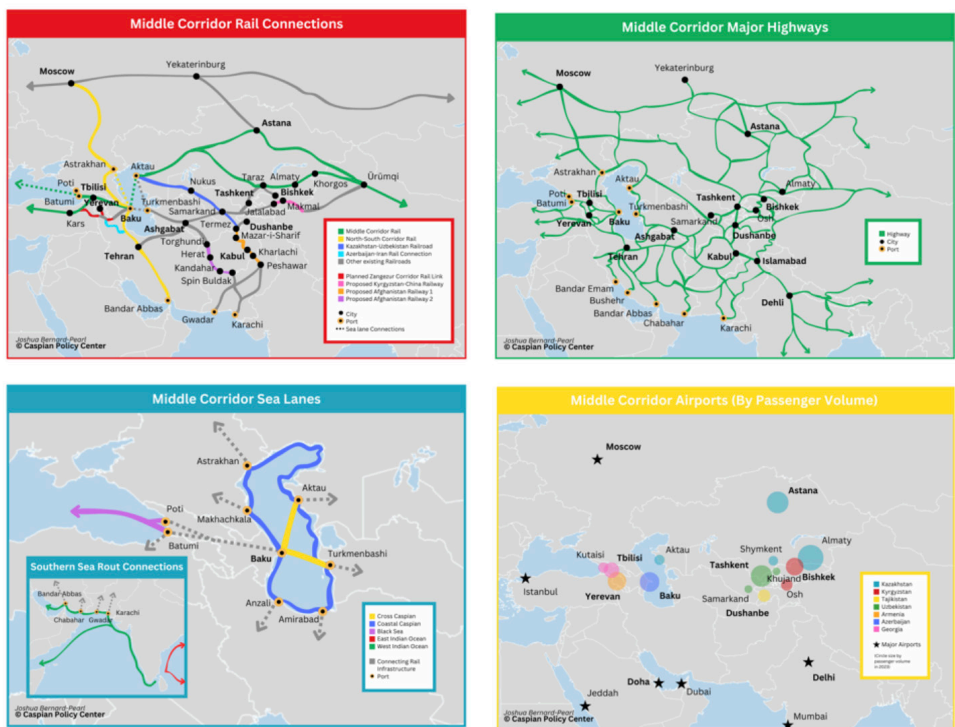


September 7, 2013, at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, China announced what it has now come to call the Belt and Road Initiative, which is simply another term for what is now commonly known as the Middle Corridor from China through Central Asia, across the Caspian Sea into the South Caucasus, and onward into Central and Western Europe.

And so that suggests another concrete policy recommendation for the Trump administration. Create an expert-level study group to determine how the United States can encourage and support the growth of the Middle Corridor. Needless to say, in our foreign assistance we almost never become involved in building and expanding hard infrastructure. But what we do, and what we generally do well, is to encourage soft infrastructure, i.e., in this case helping the countries of the region to simplify and to coordinate their tariffs and customs procedures. In fact, this is something that we have long been working on throughout the region, but it should now gain priority and move to near the top of the agenda.

PROMOTE HUMAN RIGHTS EFFECTIVELY

There's yet one more very important policy point that the new Trump administration should pay close attention to in the Caspian region, and that involves human rights. Traditionally, both Democratic and Republican administrations have often moved human rights up their foreign-policy agendas for most, if not all, countries, at least until they sort out which ones will gain informal exemptions. And that is most certainly true in Central Asia. Ironically, however, Washington has sometimes offended and even turned off its Central Asian interlocutors on this issue that is of such fundamental importance to us as a people and as a nation because U.S. officials have tended to lecture and insist on change, rather than find ways to effect that change. To add insult to injury, our diplomats then tend to name and shame through press releases their host governments and even individual officials. Oddly enough, on this essentially important issue, our moralism kicks in and, most ironically, hinders us from achieving our goals. Needless to say, this doesn't get much done in the way of improving the human rights of governments in the post-Soviet world.



Middle Corridor: Rail Connections, Major Highways, Sea Lanes, and Passenger Volume by Airports
 Author: Joshua Bernard-Pearl, CPC

But I can tell you from my own diplomatic experience on the ground in the Caspian region that there is, indeed, a way to move the human-rights needle in the right direction. The first step is a fundamental part of all diplomacy: create a relationship of trust with a host-country senior official who has the power and authority to change policy. Then, rather than lecture that official with our generic human-rights position, choose a current, specific situation that has made the international news - e.g., perhaps a local NGO human-rights official who has been arrested and imprisoned, for no other reason other than simply having gained a degree of international stature as a human-rights promoter. Explain to your interlocutor two things: one, that releasing that official from prison will almost certainly not lead to the downfall of the current government, and, two, that such a move on this individual case, will most certainly improve the host-country's standing in Washington. And then stay in that conversation long enough until the official agrees to act and the action is taken. I personally have seen this make a real difference on the ground in the Caspian region.

REINSTATE S/NIS AS S/TCR

Here is a strong bureaucratic recommendation for the Trump administration as it considers what should be U.S. policy in the Caspian region. Return to the past and recreate in the State Department what was once called the S/NIS office that reports directly to the Secretary of State. This time, that means, specifically, create a special office for the eight countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Maybe this time such an office could be called S/TCR - the Trans-Caspian Region reporting directly to the Secretary of State. Given the complexities in foreign relations involving great powers and troublesome countries, which happen to be the four surrounding Central Asia and, more broadly, the trans-Caspian region - Russia, China, Afghanistan, and Iran - this would be a clear signal, to each of those countries, and to our own foreign-policy permanent bureaucracy, that

Washington's new presidential administration has moved these countries far up the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

Finally, it's essential to note that these foreign policy recommendations are not crafted to oppose Russia and China. Their purpose is to strengthen the countries of the Caspian region and ensure that they understand that Washington is indeed standing with them shoulder-to-shoulder. There is absolutely no question that the eight governments in the region would welcome and value this new Washington focus on their region.

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