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The cover features a central blue diamond shape containing the title. Surrounding this are several smaller diamond-shaped images: a helicopter in flight, soldiers in silhouette, a river winding through a town with a large church, a modern city at night with a prominent tower, a close-up of rocks, an oil refinery at sunset, and solar panels.

A TRANS-CASPIAN TRAJECTORY: A NEW U. S. STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS

By: Dr. Eric Rudenshiold



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A Trans-Caspian Trajectory: A New U. S. Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus

BY DR. ERIC RUDENSHIOLD

Significant changes have occurred in Central Asia and the Caucasus since Donald Trump was last President: the COVID pandemic, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, and most importantly a recent period of intense inter-regional cooperation. While the 45th U.S. president was no stranger to Central Asia, to reprise the energy of those earlier engagements, a major renewed approach is now warranted to advance U.S. interests in the broader and rapidly evolving Trans-Caspian region that joins the Caucasus with Central Asia and links Asia, Europe, and the "Global South." In addition to its geostrategic location, the Caucasus and Central Asian countries possess massive traditional and next-generation energy resources and burgeoning economies that seek increased U.S. partnership and should be a target of interest for the incoming administration. In short, Trump (45) embraced active partnership with the region during his first term, but Trump (47) will see a different region with new and larger opportunities for U.S. policy.

The new leadership will need a coherent regional approach to build and extend current U.S. policies which were drafted and adopted under Trump (45) as the [2019-2025 U.S. National Security Strategy for Central Asia](#)¹ and which were extended by the Biden administration. Organic developments of the last four years led by countries in the region will require the United States to develop insightful follow-on political, economic, and security partnerships with Central Asia that include new efforts bridging the Caspian to engage similarly with the Caucasus countries.

¹Note this document was issued as a press release by the State Department and is not the text of the strategy which remains classified.

This new engagement will facilitate increased intra-regional and global connectivity and open this formerly remote region further to new vistas of trade, strategic energy, and business engagement for the United States.

Landlocked Central Asia has begun to break out of its infrastructure constraints and heirloom partnerships, reaching across the Caspian to work with Azerbaijan and Georgia to create a new and rapidly expanding trade corridor to the West. As a result, the nascent Trans-Caspian region is becoming a growing crossroads for geopolitical issues and interests of the United States, including an increasingly competitive China, an aggressive and less predictable Russia, a regional resurgence of Islamic terrorism, an unstable Afghanistan, a more cooperative Iran, and a renascent Türkiye seeking to be a gateway to Europe and the Middle East.

What are U.S. interests?

U.S. strategic priorities of developing alternatives to China as a source for refined strategic minerals and to assist Europe in reducing its dependence on Russian energy, parallel those of the resource-rich, Trans-Caspian countries that seek to develop economic sovereignty and global market alternatives to neighbors Russia and China. Moscow and Beijing both seek to retain their proximal advantages in the region, while Caucasus and Central capitals seek not just to counterbalance those interests, but to diversify regional investments and further connectivity to broader global markets through alternative and competitive partnerships.

New U.S. policymakers need to recognize the threat to the natural alliance of U.S. and Trans-Caspian interests posed by Moscow and Beijing's efforts to deepen influence and secure control of this increasingly important crossroads region that controls direct access between China, Europe, Russia, and the Global South. While needing to maintain some markets with their neighbors, the Caucasus and Central Asia do not regard engagements with Russia and China as zero-sum and are instead working to access global markets and commodity pricing on their own terms, not those dictated by their big neighbors. This emerging regional economic and energy hub would greatly benefit from a new, strategic, and inventive U.S. partnership, one that mirrors efforts undertaken by Trump (45) in his first administration. A new and effective Trump (47) U.S. policy will benefit Americans and the peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus by promoting a stable, prosperous, and free Trans-Caspian region.

Core Issues

- *Revivified Great Power Competition between the United States, China, and Russia magnifies the importance of the Trans-Caspian region in terms of policy and developmental priorities.*
 - *The Trans-Caspian region is becoming a vital geopolitical and economic crossroads important to U.S. interests that seek to counter Russia's restrictions on the region's gas, oil, and uranium supplies, as well as China's efforts to control next-generation energy.*
 - *The United States needs to maintain security agreements and build closer partnerships with the Trans-Caspian region due to shared concerns over renewed threats from terrorist organizations and ideologies, as well as for its geostrategic location bordering Russia, China, Afghanistan, and Iran.*
- *The normalization of the United States policy in Central Asia can be a model for integrating a similar, coherent, and foresighted approach to engaging with the three Caucasus countries.*

Context...

An updated U.S. strategy for engaging Central Asia will continue to work with the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—also known as the “C5”) to enhance their sovereignty, stability, self-reliance, and independence from malign actors. U.S. engagement will also continue to promote partnerships with the countries in the region bilaterally and as a group to develop political, economic, and security partnerships with the United States. However, a new administration strategy will be doomed to half-measures if it does not include the partner and gateway Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia).

A key development success for Central Asia since 2021 has been the opening of the new “Middle Corridor” that enables trade and connectivity to advance across the Caspian and the Caucasus to European markets. This enhanced routing has afforded the C5 countries with new trade partners and alternatives to Russia’s sanctions-laden Northern Corridor and distant sea lanes via China. Critical to the Middle Corridor’s success has been warming relations between Baku and the C5 countries; massive expansion of the Port of Baku (the only seaport on the western Caspian); and increased cooperation between Astana, Baku, and Tbilisi to facilitate energy connectivity, as well as rapid and cost-efficient cargo transit.

Growing policy connectivity, mutual investment, and complementarity of vision between the Caucasus and Central Asian capitals reinforces the merged region’s quest for greater strategic independence and economic autonomy, particularly as soft and hard infrastructure measures are integrating the eight countries into a Trans-Caspian regional economy. This rapid integration and reorientation parallels U.S. interests in seeing the region become more resilient and economically sovereign.

What are US policies?

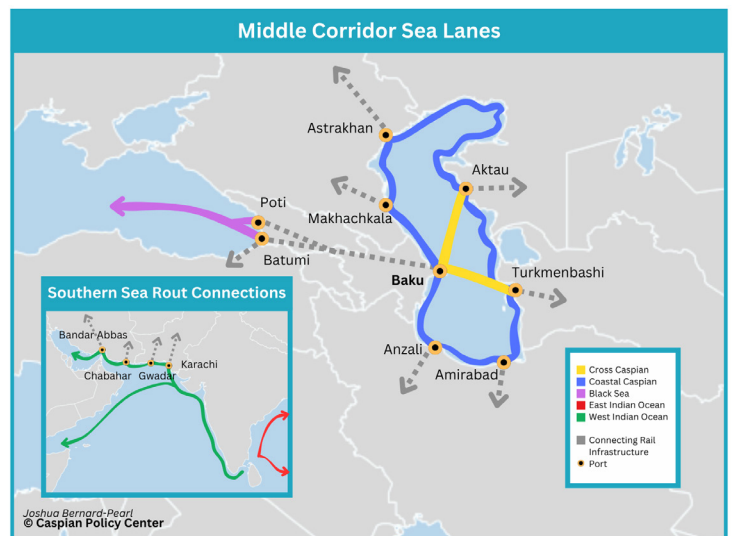
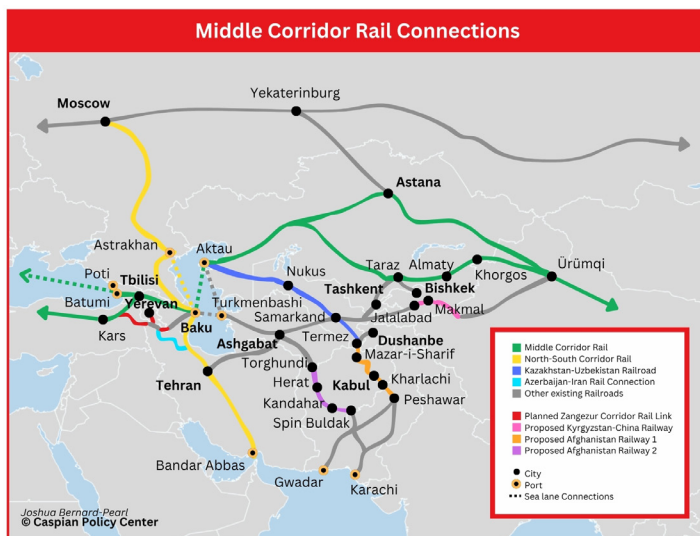
The Trump (45) administration adopted a novel and whole-of-government approach to Central Asia with its long-term, regional national security strategy. This innovative and inclusive plan of action for the region harnessed U.S. commercial, diplomatic, security, and development tools to ensure Central Asia became a regular component of U.S. foreign policy, instead of being addressed as an afterthought. The Biden administration embraced and continued the Trump strategy of elevating the region, including holding the first C5+1 Summit in 2023.

However, significant changes have taken place in the region over the four years since President Trump was in office, opening it up to greater U.S. engagement. The



combined Caucasus and Central Asian region's significant growth and transformation could work well with Trump (47)'s espoused interests and the likely transactional and business style of a new U.S. foreign policy. Many of the tools and approaches used in the Trump (45) administration could be reprised to yield significant benefits and a deeper U.S. and Trans-Caspian partnership.

President Trump (45) brought significant economic development attention to Central Asia, using his Commerce and State Department Secretaries as emissaries with the region on economic reform. Increased [energy pipeline connectivity](#) was promoted by Trump (45) to join Central Asian energy to Caucasus energy streams and pipelines that supply European markets. Funding for needed development work was allocated under Trump (45) to the U.S. Agency for International Development's economic development and WTO accession assistance programming. The U.S. Trade Representative and the United States-Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) Council stepped up their efforts to build trade normalization. President Trump's Development Finance Corporation in 2021 signed a [\\$1 billion Memorandum of Understanding](#) with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan that was not implemented by the Biden Administration. Reanimating these same efforts could produce immediate results for Trump (47), given the region's increasingly positive trade and development trajectory.



Context...

Absent Caucasus engagement and throughput, Central Asia would remain prisoner to legacy rail and road routes controlled by Russia and China, as well as hostage to trade policies and commodity pricing imposed by Moscow and Beijing. The multi-modal Middle Corridor is comprised of a network of road, rail, and sea lanes that expand Central Asia's trade options and move goods to, with, and through the Caucasus region, securing access to global markets. Inter-regional developments are spontaneously boosting cooperation between Central Asia and the Caucasus

countries, bolstered by significant mutual and foreign direct investments, as well as multilateral and multinational agreements.

The Middle Corridor is incorrectly seen by many as a transcontinental highway for Chinese goods to transit Central Asia to Europe, but actually only [five percent](#) of the passage's freight originates in China. Miscast as a product of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) program, the Middle Corridor is actually a network of more than two decades and a [variety of international development projects](#), including from the United States and NATO investments in the Northern Distribution Network, the Asian Development Bank's Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation corridors, the Global Gateway Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, the U.S. Development Finance Corporation, increasing bilateral and regional investment from the Middle East and Global South, as well as China's BRI. The advent of the new trade corridor has created a boom in inter-regional trade, creating opportunities for both Central Asia and the Caucasus to directly access European and global markets.

The multi-modal Middle Corridor rail, road, and sea lines connect China to Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan and Georgia), then through Türkiye or across the Black Sea before reaching the European Union. It is also working to create a thoroughfare for freight from the Global South and Middle East to Europe and burgeoning Central Asian markets. The surge in connectivity for the Caucasus and Central Asian regions has sparked major increases in intra-regional and EU trade. Moreover, the Trans-Caspian countries themselves are investing substantial funds aimed at building greater access to external markets. In the first nine months of 2024, cargo volume along the Middle Corridor grew by [70 percent](#), due in large measure to significant indigenous investments in expanding port facilities and upgrading railway systems.

Opening for business?

Middle Corridor trade expansion presents significant incentives for the countries in the region to further enhance their connectivity, conduct logistical improvements, and to open passageways to increase transit revenues and access to global markets. One such target can come through reconstructing a Soviet-era passageway from Azerbaijan through Armenia to Türkiye. This rail corridor could more than double the capacity of the Middle Corridor by directly reaching Türkiye and the Mediterranean Sea, transiting freight that currently only traverses Georgia to the Black Sea.

The long-standing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been a roadblock to a regional approach to U.S. engagement with the Caucasus states, but a nascent, homegrown peace process between Yerevan and Baku may change that prospect. Both the Armenian Prime Minister and Azerbaijani President have met on multiple occasions to develop an agreement on normalizing relations. Eschewing

assistance from Moscow, the two Caucasus leaders and relevant diplomats appear to have made progress, appear close to a resolution, though significant issues remain. Ankara and Yerevan have met and appear ready to normalize relations, once an agreement between Yerevan and Baku is finalized. Central Asian leaders have also met with their Caucasus counterparts, as a new freight rail line could greatly diversify regional connectivity and cargo throughput.

This indigenous peace process could enable the United States to support, incentivize, and reinforce positive relations and, thereby, promote a peace dividend between Baku and Yerevan. After more than three decades of conflict, post-conflict rehabilitation and confidence-building measures would be a powerful role for the United States to play, assisting the Caucasus countries to adopt a forward-leaning agenda. U.S. assistance to support continued improvements to such regional rail capacity, as well as to Georgia's ports and other infrastructure, would constitute a strategic and transformative set of engagements.



End-State Target

By 2030, Central Asia and the Caucasus are a self-reliant and secure bloc, deepening engagement with the United States and in which each country is implementing reforms that further open the region to international investment and strengthening democratic institutions. The countries of the region are increasingly better connected to Europe and global markets, in the heart of a neighborhood bounded by Russia, China, Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye. The eight Trans-Caspian countries strengthen their economic and political sovereignty, develop greater resilience, and improve their willingness and ability to cooperate with each other.

Successful United States engagement in the Trans-Caspian region will:

- Preserve the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the Caucasus and Central Asian countries;
- Protect the U.S. homeland, citizens, and U.S. interests abroad;
- Maintain long-term, U.S. engagement with all eight countries, as they engage with and seek alternatives to their neighbors;
 - Take advantage of increasing opportunities in the region for energy development, trade, and connectivity, while promoting United States values; and
 - Expand opportunities for U.S. business and the creation of U.S. jobs by ensuring that U.S. industry can compete successfully in the region's marketplace.

Great Power and Regional Re-alignment

Russia's second invasion of Ukraine sparked a number of changes in the Trans-Caspian region. Countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia have seen their traditional trade routes, banking and financial relations, as well as business partnerships disrupted by the war and international sanctions. While Russia maintains significant influence in the region, Moscow is playing less of a dominant role in the regions' economies, security, and political spheres, as the Trans-Caspian countries have sought alternative partners to the near-exclusive arrangements they once shared with Russia.

Taking advantage of Russia's declining influence, China has increased engagement and invested in infrastructure across the broader region as it seeks to develop more rapid access to European markets through the Middle Corridor, as well as to secure access to the region's natural resources. Both Moscow and Beijing prize energy as a strategic asset, and while Russia seeks to retain a sphere of influence in the region, competition with an aggressive China has reduced Moscow's traditional regional role. International sanctions on Russia also seriously disrupted traditional trade routing and the economies of Central Asia and the Caucasus. However, sanctions compliance became a justification for them to develop new trade partnerships and alliances instead of a reliance on Russia or China. Countries in the Trans-Caspian region do not seek to jump from a colonial master in Moscow for one in Beijing.

While proximity to Russia and China means that Trans-Caspian countries will trade with their large neighbors, Moscow still maintains pressure on the region through other means: an evolving energy strategy that further integrates Russian infrastructure and industries into the Trans-Caspian region, dominance of the region's broadcast and media markets provides both an additional lever for Russian pressure and popular influence, competing with and undercutting regional agricultural and energy exports in global markets, as well as continued efforts to mold and control regional security. But the countries of the region are developing a greater sense of agency and ability to engage more broadly in relationships beyond their immediate neighborhood. Whether it is counterbalancing the influence of their large neighbors, or outright looking for alternative partnerships, the door is open for greater U.S. engagement and cooperation, if Washington steps up.

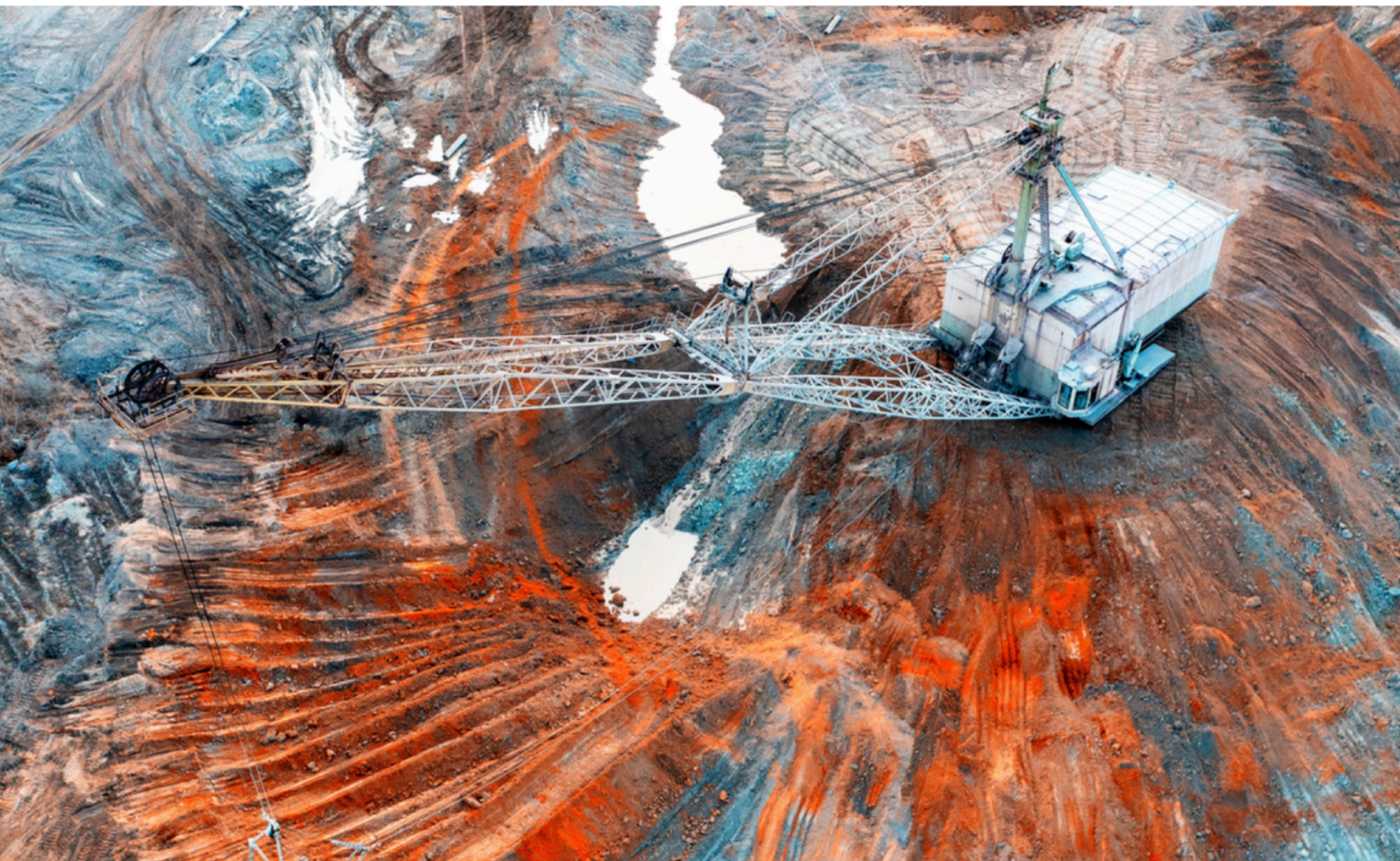
Towards a New Strategy

The United States has important strategic interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus, including supporting the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the Trans-Caspian countries; preventing security threats to the United States homeland and interests globally, whether from homegrown violent extremists or actors transiting through the region; taking advantage of increasing opportunities

for United States business and industry to develop trade in this re-emergent, cross-roads region; and, encouraging U.S. investment in, development of, and access to the region's energy and mining sector as part of global energy markets.

A significant number of changes to the strategic landscape of the Trans-Caspian region have occurred since the adoption of the 2019 U.S. Central Asia strategy, including: (1) Russia's second invasion of Ukraine and associated international sanctions which both disrupted traditional regional trade and also created opportunities for countries of the region to diversify their economic partnerships; (2) increased resistance to Russia as a default partner along with significantly increased cooperation between and among the Trans-Caspian countries; (3) renewed threats from extremist ideologies and terrorist organizations in the region; (4) the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the region; (5) an emerging peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan; as well as (6) the organic development of a Middle Corridor for trade and energy supply, including substantial indigenous and global investment.

Together, these changes are generating a desire among the Caucasus and Central Asian states for increased United States engagement in the broader region. While the United States, Russia, and China share interests in seeing this region develop economically, United States views on how best to facilitate growth and support the region's independence differ starkly from those of Russia and China.



Strategic Objectives

Support and strengthen the sovereignty, independence, and economic resilience of the Caucasus and Central Asian States, individually and collectively as the Trans-Caspian region.

- Assist and develop regional security capabilities to address terrorist and external threats.
- Champion connectivity and bolster cooperation within and between the Caucasus and Central Asian countries.
- Foster rule of law reform and respect for human rights.
- Support the development of Trans-Caspian energy sources.
- Promote United States investment in and development of Trans-Caspian trade and transit corridors.

Context

The geopolitical landscape in Central Asia and the Caucasus has evolved significantly over the past four years. The new Trump administration will encounter a different Trans-Caspian region—one where there are unprecedented opportunities for collaboration with like-minded partners from Central Asia and the Caucasus seeking alternatives to the influence of neighboring Russia and China.

This changed and cooperative region seeks greater business and trade connectivity with the United States, which is creating important openings, particularly in traditional and next-generation energy fields, as well as manufacturing. To meet this historic demand and outreach, the United States should expand on regional efforts in Central Asia undertaken in the first Trump administration to now engage with the broader Trans-Caspian region, through a whole-of-government approach.

Policy Recommendations

With Trans-Caspian governments prioritizing economic and trade connectivity with the United States, there are notable openings in sectors such as traditional and next-generation energy, as well as other potential targets for U.S. engagement. To capitalize on this momentum, the United States should implement a whole-of-government approach that builds on the previous Trump administration's Central Asia strategy to strengthen engagement with this strategic and dynamic region.

Policy Recommendations

Executive Branch:



The White House

- Appoint a Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia region: A dedicated envoy would focus on advancing U.S. national interests while fostering partnerships with regional governments, international financial institutions, and the American private sector. Specific initiatives could include:
 - Promoting energy cooperation, particularly traditional and next-generation energy, including strategic minerals and rare earths.

- Strengthening counterterrorism partnerships.
- Encouraging policy reforms to attract foreign direct investment and improve market access.
- Work with U.S. and international stakeholders to open export markets, mobilize foreign direct investment, and further catalyze economic development.
- Deepen engagement through C5+1 and expanded Caucasus cooperation:
 - Build on the C5+1 dialogue framework by including Caucasus countries to foster multilateral cooperation on trade, energy, and security.
 - Engage through correspondence, calls, and meetings with regional leaders individually and through the C5+1 process expanded to include Caucasus members, including at the United Nations General Assembly.
 - Host a Trans-Caspian summit or ministerial visit to Washington as part of a business and energy development initiative, culminating in agreements that confirm U.S. partnerships on strategic issues.
 - Conduct a historic Summit in the region, a first for a sitting U.S. President, to highlight U.S. commitment to engagement with the developing region.



The National Security Council

- Develop a new Trans-Caspian Regional Security Strategy that integrates Central Asia and the Caucasus together and:
 - Promotes interagency policy discussions on the new regional approach;
 - Advances policies to develop U.S. interests in the broader region, beginning with energy, trade, and security;
 - Directs interagency actions supporting the on-going Armenia-Azerbaijan peace-building process, and
 - Prioritizes U.S. Middle Corridor support and investment efforts.

- Shift Central Asia policy and associated budget resources back to the Europe and Eurasia divisions across U.S. Departments and agencies for greater alignment with geopolitical realities.
- Facilitate inter-agency planning and coordination to support United States-Trans-Caspian energy, economic, and security development.
- Promote Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI) and Development Finance Corporation (DFC) efforts to mobilize financing and develop projects in the region, as well as to encourage U.S. private sector involvement that fosters resilience against external influence.



State Department

- Appoint senior and experienced Ambassadors and staff to the region, ensuring that posts are filled and not left to long gaps with temporary postings.
- Promote diplomatic efforts that strengthen regional diplomacy and reinforce the development of connectivity between the Caucasus and Central Asia, emphasizing trade, infrastructure, and energy cooperation.
- Transfer Central Asia oversight from the South and Central Asia (SCA) Bureau to the Europe Bureau (EUR), facilitating an approach that more accurately reflects development in the region and enables deeper U.S. engagement.
- Simplify, augment, and coordinate development assistance funding and related decisions to permit more rapid, pro-active efforts to work with the broader region.
- Facilitate international donor coordination for the region, in support of common objectives and practices.



USAID

- Move Central Asia responsibilities from the ASIA to the Europe and

Eurasia (E&E) Bureau for better synergy in programming and regional development efforts.

- Prioritize programming that supports the development of economic sovereignty, energy independence, and next-generation technology adoption across the region. Programming should reinforce bilateral and regional agency.



Department of Defense

- Transition Central Asia from CENTCOM to EUCOM to better appropriately reflect regional development and thereby facilitate more appropriate engagement.
- Develop and implement targeted security cooperation and partnership initiatives to bolster individual and regional resilience against external threats.



Commerce Department

- Prepare trade delegations to the region, supporting US business interests and engagement.
- Expand programs that facilitate the development of a business environment conducive to U.S. investment and private sector engagement.
- Provide tools and resources for U.S. companies to navigate regulatory and market challenges in the region.



Department of Energy

- Develop and negotiate a policy framework with the region that formalizes engagement with the United States for strategic mineral and

rare earth cooperation.

- Discuss and promote cooperation on the adoption of U.S. technology related to small modular nuclear reactors and other innovative energy solutions to meet growing energy demands sustainably.

Other Departments and Agencies

- Implement initiatives to assist in combatting and countering foreign disinformation campaigns that target the region.
- Utilize and expand existing Central Asian policy approaches to promote stability and partnership with the Caucasus countries in order to facilitate broader inter- and intra-regional connectivity.

Congress:



Senate and House

- Repeal Jackson-Vanyk legislation for the Caucasus and Central Asian countries and authorize the President to extend Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with the countries of the region.
- Prioritize Senate confirmations of Ambassadors to the region, avoiding long delays and gaps that inhibit U.S. engagement.
- Promote Congressional fact-finding/familiarization/exchanges and CODEL travel to the countries of the region.
- Boost development resources in support of regional trade, energy, democracy, and security issues.
- Review the peace process relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan, repealing outdated Section 907 provisions that prohibit security cooperation.
- Support the administrative move to merge Central Asia with the Caucasus and European countries, include authorities for resources.
- Conduct an annual review of U.S. efforts to promote the Trans-Caspian region's connectivity, security and energy development.

- Increase foreign assistance funding to this region, reducing the earmarking process that reduces programming flexibility and prioritization.
- Boost membership in the bicameral, regional Central Asia Caucus to also geographically include Caucasus countries.

Conclusion

The Trans-Caspian region, encompassing Central Asia and the Caucasus, has undergone significant transformations in recent years, creating new opportunities for U.S. engagement and collaboration. Key developments, including the establishment and expansion of the Middle Corridor trade route and increasing inter-regional cooperation, have turned this crossroads region into a dynamic hub of economic connectivity and geopolitical significance. With massive traditional and next-generation energy resources, as well as a growing desire for partnerships that provide alternatives to Russia and China, the region aligns with U.S. strategic interests to partner on diversifying energy supplies and securing access to critical minerals. These factors underscore the need for a renewed and coherent U.S. approach that builds upon prior successes while addressing the evolving dynamics of the region.

A new U.S. administration strategy should leverage the lessons and initiatives from prior administrations, particularly those of President Trump (45), to foster deeper political, economic, and security partnerships. The growing cooperation between Central Asia and the Caucasus presents an opportunity to strengthen regional resilience and autonomy through targeted investments in infrastructure, trade, and energy connectivity. By supporting indigenous efforts, such as the development of the Middle Corridor and an emerging peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the U.S. can contribute to stability and prosperity for the entire region while opening new and larger avenues for American political, economic, and security collaboration.

Ultimately, a well-crafted U.S. policy in the Trans-Caspian region has the potential to secure long-term benefits for both the United States and its regional partners. By promoting sovereignty, resilience, and needed economic reforms, the U.S. can help transform Central Asia and the Caucasus into a self-reliant and globally integrated bloc. This partnership would not only enhance U.S. influence and economic opportunities but also support a vision of a stable and prosperous region capable of balancing the influence of powerful neighbors like Russia and China.

Dr. Eric Rudenshiold is a Senior Fellow for Caspian Affairs at the Caspian Policy Center, a former National Security Council Director for Central Asia under the Trump and Biden Administrations, and an adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies.

ABOUT US

The Caspian Policy Center (CPC) is an independent, nonprofit research think tank based in Washington D.C. Economic, political, energy, and security issues of the Caspian region constitute the central research focus of the Center.

CPC aims at becoming a primary research and debate platform in the Caspian region with relevant publications, events, projects, and media productions to nurture a comprehensive understanding of the intertwined affairs of the Caspian region.

With an inclusive, scholarly, and innovative approach, the Caspian Policy Center presents a platform where diverse voices from academia, business, and policy world from both the region and the nation's capital interact to produce distinct ideas and insights to the outstanding issues of the Caspian region.



1015 15th ST NW, SUITE 380
WASHINGTON, DC 20005
202-997-4082
INFO@CASPIANPOLICY.ORG

