

From Wait-and-See to Competition: Evolution of US Perception and Policy toward the SCO

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The perception and policy of the United States toward the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has undergone four stages since 2001, changing from the “wait-and-see” policy to that of “precaution” and “modest cooperation,” and eventually to the policy of “competition.” Such changes originate from the evolution of the United States’ policy priorities and path preferences toward Central Asia. Although the US and the SCO share certain common interests on issues such as anti-terrorism, Afghanistan and promoting regional connectivity, they are unlikely to engage in substantive cooperation. Meanwhile, although the Trump administration has not yet specified its Central Asia policy, it is expected that, against the background of major-power strategic rivalry, the US will continue pursuing the policy of competing with the SCO, with an emerging attempt to divide its members.

Evolution of US Policy toward Central Asia and the SCO

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is the most influential regional cooperation organization in Central Asia as well as the most rapidly growing non-Western multilateral security mechanism. The SCO was founded in 2001 when the US gained military presence in Central Asia, hence the United States’ Central Asia policy has all along been an important external factor affecting the SCO’s development.

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The United States' Central Asia policy was initiated right after the end of the Cold War. The Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets Support Act of 1992, which categorized Washington's goals in Central Asia and the Caucasus into the "three baskets" of "security, development and democratization," served as the guideline for America's ensuing policies toward Central Asia.¹ On the other hand, balancing other major players such as Russia, China and Iran has always been a hidden goal of the policy.² Since the United States' direct engagement in Central Asia in 2001, both its policy priorities and the means to realizing its policy objectives have experienced several stages of change. In the process, the US perception and policy toward the SCO have also transformed in four stages from "wait-and-see" to the policies of "precaution," "modest cooperation" and "competition."

"Wait-and-see" during the war in Afghanistan (2001-2004)

Prior to the September 11 attacks, the United States' Central Asia policy was actually subordinate to its post-Cold War strategy of transforming the former Soviet Union's sphere of influence and there was no independent division in charge of Central Asian affairs in its decision-making organization. The US Central Asia policy centered on two tasks at this stage. One was to completely dismantle the Soviet's nuclear weapons left in Central Asia, manage the production and storage facilities of nuclear material, and prevent the smuggling of nuclear technology and proliferation of nuclear weapons. The other was to help consolidate those newly independent states, training their military and security staff while guiding their transformation toward Western liberal democracy and market economy. The September 11 attacks were a turning point for America's Central Asia policy, and the subsequent war in Afghanistan dramatically

1 Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *The Long Game on the Silk Road: US and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, pp.41-42.

2 Zeng Xianghong, "Containment, Integration and Shaping: the Strategic Goals of US' Central Asian Policy," *Russian Studies*, No.5, 2013, pp.120-162.

elevated the strategic importance of Central Asia to US decision-makers. The US and its allies must rely on Central Asian states' military and civilian infrastructure for combat, strategic airlift and logistics operations in Afghanistan. The US immediately rented the Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan and the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan through bilateral agreements. While the former facilitated the airlift and logistics operations to transport troops, equipment and logistical materials, the latter gave access to multiple missions like air refueling, escorting and combat air patrol. Other Central Asian countries also granted the US military limited access to their airports and military bases and the right of overflight,³ thus allowing the US to obtain military presence in Central Asia.

To guarantee its long-term access to those military bases and logistical facilities, the US developed close military cooperative relations with Central Asian states, providing various military aid mainly for the sake of combating smuggling and terrorism and ensuring border security. The US military aid was used for infrastructure construction such as building bridges, roads and border inspection stations, providing vehicles and communication devices, offering training to antiterrorism troops and civil defense units, purchasing counter-terrorism equipment, and conducting joint anti-terrorist exercises. For Central Asian states, bilateral military cooperation with the US not only brought much-needed funds and equipment but also enhanced the operational capabilities of their border defense and anti-terrorism authorities. For the US, the provision of military aid and cooperation were linked with its use of military bases in Central Asia.⁴

As for the development of the SCO, the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan and America's military presence in Central Asia brought about two major effects. On the one hand, they intensified the centrifugal tendency of SCO members and enlarged their internal divergence, thus creating more

3 Su Xiaoyu, *The Development and Prospect of US Military Strategy toward Central Asia*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2016, pp.93-95.

4 Joshua Kucera, "US Military Aid to Central Asia: Who Benefits?" Occasional Paper Series No.7, New York: Open Society Foundation, 2012, pp.13-15.

uncertainty for the SCO's future development. On the other hand, both events became the external force motivating the SCO's initial development. From June 2002 to November 2004, the SCO improved its organizational structure, creating its secretariat and the Regional Antiterrorism Structure (RATS), and started holding joint military exercises. At the SCO summit in June 2004, Mongolia became the SCO's first observer state. Meanwhile, the SCO member states signed an agreement for jointly combating drug trafficking and agreed to set up the SCO Development Fund, indicating that cooperation within the SCO had extended to areas like promoting economic development. Prior to 2005, the US Central Asia policy focused on supporting the war in Afghanistan, with ensuring its military bases and logistics corridors as the top priority. Other goals like promoting democratization and human rights reforms became secondary temporarily. Meanwhile, the US relied mainly on bilateral relations with Central Asian states. For the SCO, which emerged as a new non-Western multilateral security arrangement in the region, the US adopted a "wait-and-see" policy. While testifying before the House Committee on International Relations in 2004, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs B. Lynn Pascoe noted that the US obtained some kind of an "observer status" in the SCO upon its founding, hoping to work with the SCO on counter-terrorism issues.⁵

Between 2001 and 2004, there was little specialized research by US think tanks and academic circles on the newly formed SCO. Most were only brief comments in articles featuring great-power competition in Central Asia. American researchers were rather pessimistic about the effectiveness and prospects of the SCO, arguing that divergences among Central Asian states, between Central Asian countries and China/Russia, as well as between China and Russia had in fact undermined the organization's cohesion.⁶

5 B. Lynn Pascoe, "Testimony before the Subcommittee on Central Asia, House International Relations Committee," June 15, 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/33579.htm>.

6 Yom Sean L, "Power Politics in Central Asia: The Future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Vol.4, 2002, pp.48–54.

Precaution following the Andijan unrest (2005-2006)

After consolidating US military presence in Central Asia, the Bush administration became more determined to pursue neo-conservative doctrines in its foreign policy. Adhering to the creed of “democratic peace,” the neo-conservatives asserted that only Western-style democracy could bring domestic stability and regional peace to Central Asia. From 2003 to 2005, the US supported “color revolutions” and promoted regime changes successively in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. In the meantime, the US regarded the improvement of human rights situation and the implementation of democratization reforms as a prerequisite for continuing to provide economic and military assistance to Central Asian states.

In May 2005, anti-government riots launched by extremist armed groups broke out in the Uzbek city of Andijan. Western media and human rights organizations fomented the unrest while the US blamed the Uzbek government for cracking down on the protesters, leading to the rapid deterioration of US-Uzbek relations. Since the Andijan unrest, Central Asian nations became wary of the United States’ political intention behind its long-term military presence in the region, worrying that their sovereignty and regime security may be endangered. Uzbekistan kicked the US military out of the Khanabad Air Base while Kyrgyzstan raised rents of the Manas Air Base. The SCO, to the dismay of the US, also became a platform for Central Asian states to voice their common concerns and safeguard their sovereignty and independence. Two actions taken by the SCO at its Astana summit in July 2005 further aggravated US suspicion of the organization. One was the SCO’s statement calling for a deadline for the US to withdraw its troops from Central Asia. The other was to accept Iran, one of those “state sponsors of terrorism” designated by the US, as an observer state. The latter was viewed by the US as a threat against its strategic interests.

The SCO members’ resolute opposition against “color revolutions” frustrated the US policy of “regime change” in Central Asia. Marked by the Astana summit, the US decision-making circle began to regard the SCO

as a potential threat. On July 6, 2005, the State Department spokesman officially rejected the SCO's demand for the withdrawal of US troops from Central Asia. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard Myers further declared on July 14 that the Astana statement was a decision resulting from major powers coercing small ones.⁷ At the hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission) in September 2006, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher criticized the SCO publicly, saying that Russia and China were "using this organization for their own individual interests and domination of the region at the expense of smaller and external powers" and that the doctrine of "non-interference" was not helpful to the region as it obstructs security coordination between SCO member states and the United States. Meanwhile, hinting that the SCO did nothing in promoting regional economic cooperation, Boucher also suggested the organization "focus its energy on economic development, not on geopolitical statements." In addition, he called on the SCO, together with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community, to "be much more transparent in how they intend to achieve their stated goals." He also noted that the US did not want the SCO to be "a way of outside powers trying to exercise some control over what goes on in the region." Boucher further specified that the US had never sought to become an SCO observer state.⁸ In the State Department's foreign press briefing of April 2008, Boucher reiterated that Washington was "not pursuing any particular form of cooperation with Shanghai Cooperation Organization" and "not looking for any formal association with this organization."⁹

7 Cited from Yuqun Shao, "The US and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Perceptions, Relations and the Future," *The Chinese Journal of American Studies*, No.3 (2007), p.21.

8 Richard Boucher, "Testimony before the Hearing 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Is It Undermining US Interests In Central Asia?'" Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, September 24, 2006, <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/The%20Shanghai%20Cooperation%20Organization%20Is%20it%20Undermining%20U.S.%20Interests%20in%20Central%20Asia.pdf>.

9 Richard Boucher, "The Year Ahead in South and Central Asia," Foreign Press Center Briefing, Washington, D.C., April 23, 2008, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/2008/104042.htm>.

Views on the SCO by analysts in American think tanks and the academia exhibited two extremes at this stage. One side demonized the SCO by amplifying its threats, calling it the “sign and symbol of China’s penchant for authoritarianism, allied to its regional and international ambitions” which created military confrontation and security dilemma.¹⁰ They also labeled the “Shanghai Spirit” as “authoritarian norms” and the “league of autocracies.”¹¹ The other side exaggerated divergences among SCO member states, deeming they only had surface convergence without shared interests.¹² Generally speaking, the studies were largely ideologically driven and full of common-sense mistakes, reflecting the scholars’ lack of systematic understanding of the SCO’s basic structure and development history.

In short, the American government took a vigilant and non-cooperative attitude toward the SCO since the Andijan unrest, though non-official exchanges of personnel were not cut off. For instance, when visiting China in August 2006, Boucher visited the SCO secretariat to “exchange views.”¹³

Modest cooperation under New Afghanistan-Pakistan Strategy (2006-2011)

The US policy of promoting “regime changes” in Central Asia ended in failure. With the deterioration of its relations with Central Asian nations, it was difficult for the US to pursue its democratization and human rights goals, and also to continue the existing military presence and operations. The US had to reflect upon and readjust its Central Asia policy, turning to pragmatic cooperation with regional players. Under such circumstances, Professor S.

10 Christopher Hitchens, “Dear Mr. President ...” *World Affairs*, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/dear-mr-president>.

11 Thomas Ambrosio, “Catching the ‘Shanghai Spirit’: How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia,” *Europe Asia Studies*, October 2008, pp.1321-1344.

12 Ariel Cohen, “The Dragon Looks West: China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” Heritage Lectures No.961, 2006, pp.4-8, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/the-dragon-looks-west-china-and-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization>; David K. Schneider, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A League of Autocracies?” *Global Policy Forum*, September 16, 2008, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/154-general/25757.html>.

13 Richard Boucher, “The Year Ahead in South and Central Asia,” Foreign Press Center Briefing, Washington, D.C., April 23, 2008, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/2008/104042.htm>.

Frederick Starr, a renowned expert on Central Asian affairs and Chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University, proposed for the building of a “Greater Central Asia Partnership,” which became the blueprint of America’s new Central Asia policy.¹⁴

Analyzing from the evolution of cultural history, Starr suggested treating Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan as a complete economic zone. In his view, there was no “fast track to democracy” in the Central Asian region, and the priority should be rebuilding trade and economic ties cut off by the collapse of the Soviet Union and opening a window to the Indian Ocean for Central Asian nations and Afghanistan, which would help integrate them into the world economic system. Benefiting from the development of communications to the north, east and south, Central Asian nations would acquire substantive economic autonomy and alternatives for development. Starr also suggested that “trade and economic development must be the centerpiece of any pro-active US strategy for Afghanistan and its neighbors, but other components must be equally important.” Meanwhile, “security, institutional development, the expansion of elections, and cultural/educational programs must all be transformed from issues pursued on a purely national basis to region-wide concerns.” With regard to the SCO, Starr noted that the existence of a “Greater Central Asia Partnership” would not affect any existing arrangements for multilateral coordination in the region.¹⁵

In February 2006, the State Department re-structured its agencies responsible for formulating and implementing Central Asia policies, transferring the responsibility for Central Asia policy from the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs to the Bureau of South Asian Affairs, which was renamed Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. The new bureau was responsible for coordinating the policies and actions of relevant agencies

14 Pan Guang and Zhang Yifeng, “The Greater Central Asian Partnership: a Strategic Step of the United States to Break through Its Global Dilemma,” *Foreign Affairs Review*, April 2008, pp.85-96; Han Jun, “The Readjustment of America’s Central Asian Policy after the Andijan Incident and Its Implications,” *Xinjiang Social Sciences*, No.6, 2008, pp.50-55.

15 S. Frederick Starr, “A ‘Greater Central Asia Partnership’ for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,” *Silk Road Paper*, Washington D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2005, pp.14-15, http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2005_starr_a-greater-central-asia-partnership.pdf.

regarding South and Central Asia and formulating unified strategies for the region.¹⁶ In April the same year, the US held an international conference themed “Trade, Development and the Greater Central Asia Partnership” in Afghanistan, which was participated by the five nations in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia, China, Japan and the European Union. In the words of Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher, the new Central Asia strategy of the US should rest on three integrated pillars: the first was security cooperation, aimed to establish a US-led regional security mechanism; the second was advancing US commercial and energy interests through coordinating with relevant international financial institutions, improving transport and infrastructure, and boosting economic and trade integration in Central and South Asia; the third was to promote political and economic reforms in the “greater Central Asian area,” with Afghanistan as the test field.¹⁷

The new “Greater Central Asia Partnership” indicated that the priority of the United States’ policy toward Central Asia had switched from promoting democracy and human rights to advancing practical economic cooperation in the region. However, such a transition did not last long due to the deterioration of security situation in Afghanistan. Since President Obama assumed office in January 2009, maintaining regional security and stability in Central Asia again became the priority of America’s Central Asia policy.

In order to free the US from the war in Afghanistan, the Obama administration put forward the New Afghanistan-Pakistan Strategy, aiming to enhance the self-sustaining capacity of the Afghan government and its army, and improve the United States’ relations with Afghanistan’s neighboring states, in the hope of addressing the Afghan issue through cooperation with regional multilateral institutions. Compared to the Bush

16 According to the latest restructuring plan of the State Department, in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, under the Assistant Secretary of State, there is a Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian affairs, as well as several Deputy Assistant Secretaries respectively for Pakistan affairs, India/Bangladesh/Sri Lanka/Nepal affairs, Afghanistan and Central Asian affairs, transnational affairs and public diplomacy.

17 Richard Boucher, “US Policy in Central Asia: Balancing Priorities,” statement to the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, April 26, 2006, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rm/2006/65292.htm>.

administration, the Obama government adopted a milder policy toward Central Asian nations, although it never gave up promoting values like “democracy” or “human rights.” The US no longer pushed for “regime changes” in Central Asia and began to attach more importance to regional multilateral arrangements, even showing some enthusiasm in cooperating with the SCO.

In this context, Patrick Moon, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, attended an international conference on Afghanistan held by the SCO in March 2009, which represented the United States’ first official interaction with the SCO. A plan of action of the SCO and Afghanistan to combat terrorism, illicit drug trafficking and organized crime was adopted at the conference.¹⁸ In her remarks on Asian regional architecture delivered in Hawaii in January 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton openly declared the United States’ willingness to cooperate with the SCO.¹⁹ Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake met with SCO officials in March 2011, during which both sides exchanged views on the situation in Central Asia. During the Obama administration, interactions between the US and the SCO were more frequent and cooperation between the two was more constructive than the Bush era.

American think tanks and the academia started perceiving the SCO in a more pragmatic way at this stage, exploring common interests shared by the US and the SCO on issues like promoting stability, combating terrorism and drug trafficking, and looking for ways of cooperation in Central Asia and Afghanistan. In 2009, former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski suggested that the US build a bridge between NATO on one side and the SCO and the CSTO on the other by establishing “a joint NATO-Shanghai Cooperation Organization council.”²⁰ Researchers from the US

18 Wang Shida, “Reluctant Engagement: the US Attends SCO Special Conference on Afghanistan,” *World Affairs*, No.8, 2009, pp.34-35.

19 Hillary Clinton, “Remarks on Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities,” Department of State, January 12, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/01/135090.htm>.

20 Zbigniew Brzezinski, “An Agenda for NATO,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2009, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65240/zbigniew-brzezinski/an-agenda-for-nato>.

military indicated that instead of neglecting or disregarding the SCO, the US should form a “selective partnership” with the organization since it was the most important multilateral institution in Central Asia.²¹ Senior fellow from the Hudson Institute Richard Weitz suggested that NATO should establish formal institutional ties with the SCO and designate it as a “global partner” so as to secure NATO’s greater access to SCO activities.²² Julie Boland, an analyst from the Brookings Institution noted that relying solely on bilateral ties may limit the United States’ capacity in dealing with transnational and trans-regional issues. Hence the US should consider cooperating with regional security organizations in Central Asia. She proposed cooperating with the SCO on issues of common concern, such as counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics.²³

Heading for competition under New Silk Road Strategy (2011-2016)

In July 2011, Hillary Clinton delivered a speech in Chennai, India, formally declaring the New Silk Road Strategy. In October the same year, the US Department of State consolidated its Central Asia and South Asia policies into a unified New Silk Road Strategy which reordered US policy priorities and path preferences in both regions. The essence of the New Silk Road Strategy was to advance the regional integration process without the participation of China, Russia and Iran through the US-led regional connectivity initiative. In other words, it was the Central Asian version of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Borrowing the vision of Professor Starr,²⁴ the New Silk Road Strategy includes a comprehensive package, under which an infrastructure network of

21 Captain Scott Andrew McClellan, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Should the US Be Concerned?” United States Army War College, 2013, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a589436.pdf>.

22 Richard Weitz, “Building a NATO-SCO Dialogue,” *European Dialogue*, November 14, 2011, <http://eurodialogue.org/Building-a-NATO-SCO-dialogue>.

23 Julie Boland, “Ten Years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Lost Decade?” Brookings Foundation, pp.40-42, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/ten-years-of-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-a-lost-decade-a-partner-for-the-united-states>.

24 Pan Guang, “The Origin, Evolution and Development Prospects of the US New Silk Road Initiative - Dialogue with Professor Man Starr,” *Contemporary World*, No.4, 2015, pp.25- 27.

electricity, roads, oil and gas pipelines connecting Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia will be built in order to promote inter-regional trade and investment liberalization. Environmental protection, innovation and gender equality will also be incorporated in that strategy. The strategy aims to facilitate economic integration and complementarity of advantages in each region, in the hope of achieving a virtuous circle among Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia. To implement the New Silk Road Strategy, the State Department endorsed two flagship projects in high profile: the TAPI gas pipeline project, which starts from Turkmenistan, passing through Afghanistan, to Pakistan and India, and the Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000) from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, through Afghanistan, to South Asia. The US funded the establishment of a coordinating body for the countries concerned, and called on international financial institutions such as the World Bank to invest in the projects.

In November 2015, US Secretary of State John Kerry addressed the Nazarbayev University of Kazakhstan, claiming that the New Silk Road Initiative would help Central Asian countries integrate into the rules-based international economic system, establish high-standard and transparent trade and investment agreements following the TPP model, and realize regional economic connectivity and integration into the global system and international markets. The initiative was also touted by the US to address the transnational disputes over water resources, achieve sustainable energy production with new technologies, and strengthen environmental governance and protection in ecologically fragile areas.²⁵

Given this context, the United States decided to establish a new multilateral cooperation mechanism in Central Asia, which will serve as an important tool for implementing the New Silk Road Strategy on the one hand, and marginalize and divide non-Western multilateral mechanisms represented by the SCO on the other. In October to November 2015, John

25 John Kerry, "The United States and Central Asia: Partners for the 21st Century," speech at Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan, November 2, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/11/249107.htm>.

Kerry visited the five Central Asian countries, holding the first dialogue with foreign ministers of these five countries in Samarkand, thereby establishing the “C5+1” dialogue mechanism which aims to “strengthen cooperation in the areas of economic ties, investment environment, environmental protection, regional security, human rights and non-governmental exchanges.”²⁶ In August 2016, “C5+1” held its second meeting in Washington, announcing the launch of five joint projects: the Global Counterterrorism Forum Regional Dialogue supported by the US Institute of Peace, and the projects of Central Asia Business Competitiveness, Transport Corridor Development, Power the Future, and Supporting National and Regional Adaptation Planning promoted by the United States Agency for International Development.²⁷

Central Asia Policy under the Trump Administration

The SCO region has encountered more uncertainty since President Trump came to power. The Trump administration has defined China and Russia as major “strategic competitors,” scrapped the Iran nuclear deal, and reoriented US policy and posture on Afghanistan, all of which increased regional security risks. On the other hand, it seemed that Central Asia has not be put on Trump’s main agenda. The Trump administration has not yet formulated any specific policy on Central Asia. Its policy priority and path preference contain features of both continuity and uncertainty.

First, the National Security Strategy released in December 2017 set the tone for US policy toward Central Asia. The document clearly defined the US priority in Central Asia and South Asia: combating all forms of terrorism, enabling Central Asian states “that are resilient against domination by rival powers (China and Russia), are resistant to becoming jihadist safe havens,

26 “Joint Declaration of Partnership and Cooperation by the Five Countries of Central Asia and the United States of America, Samarkand, Uzbekistan,” US Department of State, November 1, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/11/249050.htm>.

27 “Joint Statement for C5+1 Ministerial of August 3,” US Department of State, August 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/08/260803.htm>.

and prioritize reforms,” and encouraging the economic integration of Central and South Asia in order to promote prosperity and economic linkages that will bolster connectivity and trade.²⁸ This formulation clearly recognized and further advanced the strategy of competition with China during the Obama administration and inherited the Central Asia-South Asia connectivity vision from the New Silk Road Strategy. Therefore, in the foreseeable future, a strategy of competition targeting China, Russia and Iran is expected to extend to Central Asia.

Second, vacancies in the State Department caused by the long absence of political appointees in senior positions contributed to a certain degree of policy continuity. With long absence of a full-fledged Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs has been headed by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Alice G. Wells, an experienced career Foreign Service Officer, in an acting capacity. This fact may explain the “inertia” in US Central Asia policy. Due to efforts of professional diplomats, the third US-Central Asia (C5+1) foreign ministerial meeting was held in New York in September 2017, and the fourth “C5+1” meeting was held in Almaty and Tashkent in July 2018. These meetings continued to focus the old agenda of economy, security, clean energy and environmental protection in the Obama era.²⁹ President Trump also met with visiting Kazakh and Uzbek leaders in January and May 2018 respectively, pledging support for the “C5+1” mechanism and for “incorporating the Afghanistan issue into a regional multilateral mechanism.”³⁰

On the other hand, however, with the launch of the new Afghanistan strategy and the Indo-Pacific strategy, Afghanistan and South Asia have

28 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p.50, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

29 It is worth noting that the fourth “C5+1” dialogue was held respectively in Almaty and Tashkent. Talks such as economy, energy and environmental protection were held in Almaty, while security and the Afghanistan issue were discussed in Tashkent.

30 “The United States and Uzbekistan: Launching a New Era of Strategic Partnership,” The White House, May 16, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-uzbekistan-launching-new-era-strategic-partnership>.

become the focus of US policy, while Central Asia has been marginalized, bringing much uncertainty to its Central Asia policy. One evidence of this was that the third “C5+1” dialogue in 2017 was hosted by then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, but the head of the US delegation attending the fourth “C5+1” dialogue in 2018 was only Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs Manisha Singh. This apparent “downgrade” has caused dissatisfaction among Central Asian countries. In addition, on December 12, 2018, Trump appointed Robert Williams, who had for a long time been responsible for military intelligence in Afghanistan and South Asia, as Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, rather than Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. The distinction in Robert William’s new title suggested that Central Asia is marginalized in US foreign policy.³¹

In general, several trends can be seen from the Trump administration’s Central Asia policy. First, the US will strengthen cooperation with other major external powers to achieve the strategic goal of balancing China, Russia and Iran as it gradually reduces direct investment and presence in Central Asia. India is expanding its political and economic presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan, and is establishing a “quasi-alliance” with the United States, which makes it a new strategic partner of the US in the geopolitical competition in Central Asia. In November 2018, the US announced that it would “exempt” India’s investment in the Chabahar Port project from its economic sanctions against Iran. The Chabahar Port is an important part of India’s “Connect Central Asia” policy. India’s vision is to connect the transportation networks of Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia, and provide Central Asian countries with an easy access to the Indian Ocean. This will serve to reduce the influence of the Belt and Road Initiative by setting up an alternative trade route for Central Asia.

Second, the United States is becoming more pragmatic in dealing with

31 “President Donald J. Trump Announces Intent to Nominate Personnel to Key Administration Posts,” The White House, December 12, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/president-donald-j-trump-announces-intent-nominate-personnel-key-administration-posts-70>.

Central Asian countries.³² As early as the 2016 presidential election, Trump's campaign adviser Carter Page had systematically criticized the "emotional thrust" of the United States' existing Central Asia policy, believing that its alleged "concern" about democratization of the Central Asian regimes and their "de-coupling" from Russia had weakened US competitiveness in the region. On the contrary, China and Russia have increased their influence in Central Asia by virtue of "mutual trust, equality and mutual benefits," evidenced, among other things, by the robust development of the SCO.³³ In contrast to his predecessor, Trump has retained an unprecedentedly low profile on human rights issues, and the "liberal" flavor has largely subsided in his policy. The Trump administration is more focused on consolidating relations with key countries in the region. Trump and US diplomats have praised the internal and external reforms of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev numerous times, hoping to strengthen security and economic ties with the country and shape it into a strategic pivot for resolving the Afghanistan issue.³⁴

Third, while the major projects of the New Silk Road Strategy are stagnant with shrinking US economic assistance to Central Asia, the security assistance will increase in order to relieve the US military of some pressure in countering terrorism. According to the 2016-17 Foreign Military Training Report jointly released by the Department of State and the Department of Defense, the United States will substantially increase its assistance to Tajikistan's counter-terrorism capabilities, and will invest \$12.5 million in training the military's special forces and the Ministry of Internal Affairs' counter-terrorism units. This will be the largest anti-terrorist military training aid ever received by Central Asian countries since 2009. In addition, the US

32 Chen Yazhou and Zeng Xianghong, "The Central Asian Policy of the Trump Administration: Inheritance and Adjustment," *International Studies*, No.4, 2018.

33 Joshua Kucera, "Adviser Offers Glimpse of a Trump Administration's Central Asia Policy," *Eurasianet*, June 9, 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/adviser-offers-glimpse-trump-administrations-central-asia-policy>.

34 Navbahor Imamova, "What's new in US policy towards Central Asia?" *VOA Uzbek*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.amerikaovozi.com/a/pdas-alice-wells-central-asia-us-uzbekistan/4268676.html>.

plans to add Kyrgyzstan in the special forces training program.³⁵ As Trump may plan a significant withdrawal from Afghanistan, US security assistance to Central Asian countries is likely to continue increasing in the future.

The above characteristics and trends have shown that although the Trump administration has not yet formulated its Central Asia policy, balancing the influence of China, Russia and Iran in Central Asia remains the US core policy priority in this region. On the other hand, what specific path the US will choose to pursue for this policy objective remains uncertain. The prospect for the original “C5+1” mechanism is still unclear. It should not be ruled out that the US may utilize other methods to promote its regional initiatives and connectivity programs to divide and compete with the SCO.

US-SCO Relations under New Regional Situation

The regional identity of Central Asian countries has been enhanced since the beginning of 2017, and the integration of Central Asia is expected to regain momentum. Driven by the good-neighbor diplomacy of President Mirziyoyev, relations between Central Asian countries have improved substantially.³⁶ In March 2018, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed at the Central Asia summit that Central Asian countries should “independently address the problems facing the region.”³⁷ The five countries also decided to establish a cooperation mechanism at the vice prime ministerial level to promote Central Asian identity, consciousness, and common cultural heritage. The advancing integration of Central Asian countries and the development of their independent and balanced diplomacy will provide an important opportunity for the SCO’s future development,

35 “Foreign Military Training Report, Fiscal Years 2016 and 2017,” Joint Report to Congress, Volume II, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/275296.pdf>.

36 Li Zigu, “The Trend of Uzbekistan Reform from the First State of the Union Address of the President of Uzbekistan,” China Institute of International Studies, February 13, 2018, http://www.ciis.org.cn/chinese/2018-02/13/content_40227461.htm.

37 Назарбаев о новом формате в Центральной Азии: «третий - лишний», Turantoday, 15 марта 2018, <https://www.turantoday.com/2018/03/centran-asia-integration-usa-russia.html>.

but it will also provide an opportunity for countries outside the region to divide the SCO.

In addition, Afghanistan, as an observer state of the SCO, has suffered from its severe domestic security situation and the failure in political reconciliation, which provided the Islamic State extremist group with an opportunity to take root and spread and seriously threatened the security of surrounding areas. Taking into account the potential change in US policy toward Afghanistan, the development of the Afghan situation will have a great impact on the regional security environment and become an important issue confronting the SCO in the future.

US policy-makers and experts are contemplating a new regional strategy to deal with the new changes in Central Asia. In June 2018, Alice G. Wells, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, regarded the Afghanistan issue as the core of future Central and South Asia policy at a hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee. She aimed at expanding the United States' regional engagement and "utilizing every diplomatic mechanism – from the "C5+1" process with the Central Asian Republics to the Heart of Asia process – to encourage additional concrete support for Afghan-led peace process."³⁸

In March 2018, Starr and Svante E. Cornell published *The Long Game on the Silk Road: US and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus*, in which they put forward several recommendations for the US and the EU. In July 2018, they read out the recommendations at a House hearing: actively supporting the integration of Central Asia, and considering Afghanistan as an integral part of the Central Asian region, transforming Washington's existing "C5+1" initiative into a "C6+1," and actively taking part in a new regional entity that may be formed in Central Asia. On the occasion, they also called for transparent investment and trade and avoiding unilateral promotion of sensitive human rights issues, and urged the US to take the

38 "Statement for the Record by Ambassador Alice G. Wells, Senior Bureau Official for South and Central Asian Affairs, Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee," June 20, 2018, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20180620/108448/HHRG-115-FA00-Wstate-WellsA-20180620.pdf>.

lead in signing together with other major powers such as China, Russia, the EU, Japan and India a legal document assuring their respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of Central Asian countries. They also suggested enhancing coordination among the various government departments dealing with Central Asian affairs.³⁹

From a political realist perspective, Starr and Cornell's policy recommendations have abandoned the ideological lens that focused on human rights issues, and brought the balance of power theory back by emphasizing the role of other external powers in balancing China and Russia. Inspired by the growing independence and accelerating integration of Central Asia, Starr and Cornell proposed fostering new regional multilateral mechanisms while expanding the "C5+1" mechanism. This will impose new challenges to the SCO's internal cohesion.

Since 2001, the US Central Asia policy has undergone several important transformations. Its policy priorities have shifted from serving the military and logistical needs of the war in Afghanistan to promoting democratization and regime change in Central Asia; from meeting the economic and security needs derived from troop withdrawal and post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan to leading an exclusive regional process of political and economic integration. Its policy path preferences have also changed from bilateral cooperation, imposing unilateral solutions, cooperating with existing regional multilateral mechanisms, to establishing new such mechanisms.

The relationship with the SCO is just like a microcosm of the United States' Central Asia policy. The change in policy priorities and path preferences is the main factor that has shaped and restrained the relationship. When the US pushed forward military and security cooperation through bilateral channels, it adopted a wait-and-see attitude toward the SCO and neither cooperated with nor opposed the organization. When the US

39 S. Frederick Starr, "The Emergence of Central Asia, 2018, and US Strategy: Hearing before House Committee on Foreign Affairs," July 18, 2017, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA14/20180718/108568/HHRG-115-FA14-Wstate-StarrS-20180718.pdf>.

attempted to promote democratization and regime change in Central Asia through “color revolutions,” it saw the SCO as a threat that needed watching out against. When the US sought multilateral security and economic cooperation, its policy toward and perception of the SCO turned more pragmatic, opening a brief window of opportunity for cooperation between the two sides. When the US began to push exclusive multilateral regional connectivity initiatives and a regional integration strategy in Central Asia, it adopted a policy of competition and division toward the SCO (see Table 1).

Table 1 Changes in US Central Asia Policy and Its Perceptions of and Policies toward the SCO

Policy Priority	Policy Path Preference	Policy toward the SCO
Meeting military needs	Bilateral cooperation	Wait-and-see (2001-2005)
Promoting democratization	Unilateral promotion	Precaution (2005-2006)
Economics, Security and Afghan Reconstruction	Emphasis on existing multilateral mechanisms	Modest cooperation (2006-2011)
Regional integration	Establishment of new multilateral mechanisms	Competition (2011-2016)

Although the US and the SCO share some common interests in areas of counter-terrorism, Afghanistan and regional connectivity, there are very few formal interactions between them, and the willingness to cooperate is also limited on both sides. As long as the US does not change its cold-war and ideological way of thinking, the functional and pragmatic cooperation between the US and the SCO will always be bottlenecked. This is the fundamental factor restraining the development of US-SCO relations. The Trump administration’s attitude toward regional multilateral mechanisms like “C5+1” remains unclear. Against the background of major-power strategic rivalry, the US will still adopt a position of competition and division against the SCO, with the specific policy measures remaining to be seen. 🇺🇸