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Why Is Central Asia Buying Trump's Attention?

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Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov. **Ramil Sitdikov / TASS**

For a region located far from the current major global crises, Central Asia has attracted an unusual amount of attention from the great powers in recent years. While the active presence of China and Russia is nothing new, the attention from the United States is not so standard.

With the United States having withdrawn its troops from Afghanistan and stopped supporting democratic reforms around the world, it might seem that Central Asia should have dropped to the bottom of Washington's list of priorities. Yet President Donald Trump does not just praise the region's leaders on camera and write posts about them on Truth Social, he also calls them, meets with them in person, and promises to visit. Nor is the rapprochement limited to diplomatic gestures: the two sides have boasted of deals worth hundreds of billions of dollars. The real challenge, however, is transforming this attention into something tangible.

The circumstances have changed since Trump's first term, meaning Central Asia's leaders need a new approach. First, in 2021, President Joe Biden withdrew U.S. troops from Afghanistan, ending their twenty-year presence in the region. Second, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 created new opportunities for Washington to engage with Central Asia.

After 2022, the United States held its first-ever presidential-level C5+1 summit (a format that comprises all five Central Asian countries plus the United States), and Central Asia began receiving regular delegations from various federal departments, as well as U.S. investors, for whom the B5+1 business forum format was launched. Particular emphasis was placed on cooperation over rare earth metals.

With Trump's return to the White House, this activity died down for several months, notwithstanding occasional news of new tariffs and immigration restrictions. As the Trump administration set about dismantling Biden's legacy in virtually every way possible, it became clear that radical changes were needed in the approach to Washington. Central Asia quickly found a way in with the new administration.

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Previously, Central Asian leaders would boast to Washington about their domestic political reforms. Now they have switched to simply supporting any initiatives by the new U.S. president — especially those that play into their own hands. Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov set the tone, praising Trump for his decision to close the media corporations Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America.

Similarly, Central Asian presidents previously welcomed cooperation with American agencies like USAID and met with their representatives, but under Trump they have begun criticizing their activities. "For decades, so-called democratic moral values, including LGBT rights, have been imposed on many countries, and under this guise international nongovernmental foundations and organizations have grossly interfered in their internal affairs," Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said of Trump's decision to disband USAID.

Tokayev has also had a drastic change of heart on climate change: while he previously called on all countries to combat global warming, he now quotes Trump and considers it all a "massive con."

The most effective approach to the current U.S. administration, however, is talk of money. Trump makes no secret of his mercantilist approach to foreign policy, he even boasts of it. During a brief meeting with Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Trump responded to his Uzbek counterpart's remark about potential U.S. investment worth $105 billion by saying, "That's not bad, that's worth a five-minute meeting, right?"

Tashkent was able to effectively buy this five-minute meeting with Trump thanks to an agreement the U.S. president boasted about on social media, under which Uzbekistan will purchase 22 Boeing aircraft for $8 billion. However, an agreement with Kazakhstan to

purchase 300 locomotives from the U.S. company Wabtec for $4.2 billion was apparently deemed insufficiently ambitious for Trump to agree to a meeting with the Kazakh president.

Both the Uzbek and Kazakh agreements appear impressive at first glance, but in reality are very modest. In the 27 years of its operations, Wabtec's Kazakhstan plant has produced 675 locomotives: an average of 25 per year. Under the new agreement, Wabtec will build 300 locomotives over the next 10 years. An increase in production by five locomotives per year is hardly extraordinary, and simply corresponds to the expansion of rail links from Central Asia to China and Europe.

Similarly, a significant portion of the $8 billion contract between Uzbekistan and Boeing consists of options, which merely give the client the right to order aircraft in the future — but do not obligate them to purchase.

The talk of $105 billion in investment in Uzbekistan is even less grounded in reality. It is hard to imagine how a country with an annual GDP of roughly the same amount could absorb that volume of investment.

None of this is particularly important, however, because the main purpose of such figures is to attract attention. Central Asian countries sign multibillion-dollar agreements at almost every meeting with partner countries: $15 billion with China here, $20 billion with Russia there. The United States is no exception; on the contrary, it is a particularly desirable partner.

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It might seem that Central Asia could simply resign itself to its geographical fate and stick to maneuvering between China and Russia — especially since the United States is now abdicating its responsibilities as the world's leading power. But the current U.S. administration is the easiest one so far for Central Asia to work with. Business interests can be used to attract Washington's attention, and there is no longer any need for demonstrative distancing from Russia or commitment to democratic reforms.

Still, for the countries of Central Asia, new business connections are merely a bonus. The main goal is to strengthen their multi-vector foreign policy. Ever since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, the region's countries have sought to diversify their international contacts through interaction with the West, especially the United States. Without U.S. involvement, the multi-vector policy becomes meaningless: after all, only Washington can serve as a sufficient counterweight to both Moscow and Beijing.

The increased U.S. attention is strengthening Central Asia's negotiating position with regard to China and Russia. Those two powers are certainly not going anywhere from Central Asia — it would be neither desirable nor indeed possible to replace or displace them — but it is a realistic goal to improve attitudes to the region's countries by demonstrating that they are in demand.

Strengthening the multi-vector approach is especially important at a time when Russian-Chinese cooperation is breaking records. Central Asia is overall not opposed to their rapprochement, but being caught between the two powers is not a comfortable position,

especially when they coordinate their actions in the region without involving the countries located there.

It will become clear how successful Central Asia's diplomacy and lobbying efforts have been at the end of this year, which marks the 10th anniversary of the C5+1 format. Tashkent and Astana are both trying to persuade Washington to select them as the venue for the anniversary celebrations — and at the highest level. If Trump accepts the invitation, he will become the first sitting U.S. president to visit Central Asia.

Even if no such historic visit ultimately takes place, the region has at least made a good enough impression on Trump for him to refrain from raising tariffs on its countries. And Russia and China have seen that Central Asia is not locked in a geopolitical impasse where they alone monopolize influence.

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