

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

THE UNITED STATES AND CENTRAL ASIA:  
AN ENDURING VISION FOR PARTNERSHIP AND  
CONNECTIVITY IN THE 21st CENTURY

AN ADDRESS BY  
DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN

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**Introduction:**

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. HILL: Ladies and gentlemen, it's my great pleasure to welcome all of you here today. I'm Fiona Hill, the director of the Center on the United States and Europe, and I'd like to extend a welcome on behalf of the Brookings Foreign Policy program and also the Global Economy and Development program here at Brookings for an address by our Deputy Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, who is going to be launching a new U.S. strategy for engagement with Central Asia.

I think most of you are already familiar with Tony Blinken, but, nonetheless, I would like to lay out some of the contours of his very distinguished career in government. He has been deputy secretary of state for the past several months, but also before that, he just served as the assistant to the President and deputy national security advisor. He's also been the national security advisor to the Vice President, and for many years was the Democratic staff director at the U.S. Senate's Foreign Relations Committee.

And that's just the most recent iteration of Tony's career in government because he also served in the National Security Council during the Clinton administration, from 1994 to 2001, in a variety of capacities, including as senior director for European Affairs. And he was also in the State Department in other capacities in the 1990s.

He didn't begin his career, as most people in Washington seem to do, as a lawyer, but we've forgiven him for that. And he was also a reporter for *The New Republic* with various stints writing for *The New York Times* and *Foreign Affairs*. And that provides a perfect segue into the format of today's event because it will also feature a discussion with another former deputy secretary of state who began his career in journalism, none other than our Brookings president, Strobe Talbott.

Now Strobe and Tony, their careers have intersected at various junctures. During the Clinton administration they worked together in their various capacities, but there's also a very interesting -- and many of you in the audience are probably aware of it -- a substantive link to today's event. Because in July 1997, just down the road, not here at Brookings, but just down the road at SAIS, at what was then the newly inaugurated Central Asia and Caucasus Institute at SAIS, Strobe gave his own address as deputy secretary announcing a U.S. strategy towards Central Asia, which was also at that point linked to the Caucasus region across the Caspian.

It was quite a famous address and many of you in the audience may remember it. It featured the title, "Farewell to Flashman," which I think Strobe will probably, basically, enumerate for us later, but Flashman was a famous character from one of those daring-do British novels of the great game in Central Asia. But Strobe's point was that we were getting beyond that great game and looking to a whole new future for the region.

At that point back in 1997, as I mentioned, the Caucasus in Central Asia were linked together around the Caspian Sea. The idea of energy resources which were just being opened to outside development, and there was a great deal of question about the future trajectory of all of these states and their relations with Russia, given the fact that they were only five or six years into their first decade of independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Now, in the intervening 18 years, a lot's happened on the ground in Central Asia, not just here in Washington, D.C. The trajectories of the Caucasus and Central Asian states have diverged and the states of Central Asia themselves have also found themselves on very different paths, individually. And though energy resources are still a focal point in the region, the decade since 9-11 -- actually it's more than a decade

since 9-11, of course -- has turned the focus of attention in Central Asia predominantly onto issues related to Afghanistan and counterterrorism.

Obviously, that's now shifting with the partial withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Afghanistan, but for a long time that emphasis tended to sidetrack attention on deepening relations with the Central Asian states. While Russia's relations with Central Asia continue to loom large, there's also been a lot of changes in the last decade-plus. Russia remains an important factor for historical reasons, economic reasons, the still large Russian diasporas in all of the Central Asian states, but China has become one of the most active players in the region, not something that Strobe could have predicted quite so effectively back in 1997 when things looked quite different.

Beijing's made major investments in energy and in infrastructure and in many places changed the trajectory of trade and politics in some of the Central Asian states in terms of the interactions. So, in short, Central Asia 2015 is not the Central Asia of 1997, and Deputy Secretary Blinken will tell us now how it fits into U.S. policy and strategy, how things look ahead, and then he and former Deputy Secretary Talbott will talk about how the region has changed and give us some insight into U.S. interests over this period.

We also have in the audience, as well as many distinguished members of the diplomatic service and colleagues from the State Department, including those that work very close on Central Asia, some of our own colleagues, like Johannes Linn, who's sitting here in the front row, who has spent many decades working on Central Asia at the World Bank and here at Brookings. And I know that with all so many of you here in the audience, we're in for a very good discussion.

So thank you very much to everyone for coming, and over to Deputy Secretary Blinken and then to the conversation with Strobe Talbott. Thank you very

much. (Applause)

MR. BLINKEN: Well, good afternoon, and Fiona, thank you very, very much for those very kind words of introduction. I think there are few people in Washington with a better feel for the sometimes Byzantine regional politics of Eurasia and Central Asia, not to mention the sometimes Byzantine policy-making process here in Washington. It's always great to be with you.

And it's especially good to be with a great friend and great colleague, Strobe Talbott. I have to say, in the last few months, as I've stepped into the shoes that Strobe once filled at the State Department, I've been struck again and again by how your diplomatic leadership and dexterity continues to exert a positive impact on so many of the tough issue that we contend with.

And I also have a great debt of thanks to pay to Strobe because back in the Clinton administration, when I moved from being a speech writer for the President to actually taking on a policy role as the senior director for Europe at the White House, Strobe took me under his wing and was truly a mentor, and it's something for which I've always been grateful. So it's a pleasure to be with you.

I'd also like to recognize the many scholars and experts gathered here, as well as the Diplomatic Corps. Through many discussions, roundtables, papers, you've helped us better understand the dynamics of Central Asia as they've shifted and evolved through the years. And let me also recognize our extraordinarily dynamic Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Biswal, who's been leading our efforts in this area.

Fiona said it very, very well and indeed it was prescient because what I wanted to say at the outset was that you can literally plot the trajectory of the region by some of the remarks given here over the years on Think Tank Row. And, indeed, 15 years ago, had I been giving this speech then, I'd be discussing the emergence of new

independent states from the breakup of the Soviet Union. And, in fact, that's exactly what Strobe did when he gave that speech in the '90s across the street at SAIS, where he sketched a vision of free societies at peace with themselves and with each other.

And as Fiona alluded to, if I'd been giving this speech just five years ago, it would largely have been about Afghanistan, about maintaining our strategic presence in the region to secure supply routes for our troops and strengthen the capacity of Afghan institutions. Today there are those that look at the drawdown of our forces from Afghanistan and see through that a region of declining importance to the United States. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Since Strobe gave his speech in the '90, the lens through which we view Central Asia may have changed, but our commitment to enduring partnerships that advance our interest in the valleys of the region has not. And the reason for this is simple: Our security is tied to a stable Central Asia and, at the same time, we see a region of enormous potential, a region that could act as an economic bridge from Istanbul to Shanghai and provide opportunities for our own businesses, technologies, and innovations to take root; a region that could offer goods and energy to the booming economies of South and East Asia; and a region that could serve as a stabilizing force for Afghanistan's transition and an indispensable partner in the fight against narco-trafficking, terrorism, and extremism.

To help unleash this dynamic potential, the United States stands committed to investing in the region's people and its political and economic stability. So what I want to do today is lay out a little bit of the vision for our policy in Central Asia that's founded on two distinct ideas.

First, that our own security is enhanced by a more stable, secure Central Asia that contributes to global efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism. And

second, that stability can best be achieved if the nations of Central Asia are sovereign and independent countries, fully capable of securing their own borders, connected to each other and the emerging economies of Asia, and benefiting from governments that are accountable to their citizens.

The United States wants to broaden and deepen our bilateral relationships with each of the states of Central Asia. At the same time, we do not see these relationships in the region as exclusive or zero sum in any way. The nations of Central Asia need healthy, mutually beneficial relations with all of their neighbors, and it's their right as sovereign nations to develop those relations as they see fit, free from pressure or intimidation. It is their choice, not ours, not anyone else's.

Our engagement is animated by the vision that at a time of unique challenge and opportunity, Central Asia can reassert its historic role as a vital hub of global commerce, ideas, and culture. It can seize on a model for growth and governance that actually delivers for its citizens and connects them to the dividends of progress. It's a model that countries from Latin America to South Asia have chosen, putting them squarely on the path to long-term strength, stability, and prosperity.

Just over 23 years ago, we were among the first to recognize the independence, the sovereignty, and the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. And it is this commitment that still underpins our government-to-government and people-to-people engagement from Astana to Ashgabat.

Today we have three important objectives for our engagement with each of the Central Asian states: strengthening partnerships to advance mutual security, forging closer economic ties, and advancing and advocating for improved governance and human rights. So let me spend a few minutes talking about each one of those pillars.

First, with regard to strengthening our security partnerships, while each Central Asian country has its own distinctive history and will forge its own future, we know that they share a common concern for stability and regional security. Every year, through high-level bilateral consultations with each country, we address these concerns directly and, as need be, pointedly. Just last month, we signed a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty with Kazakhstan, one of 70 that the United States has around the world, which provides a solid basis for expanding our law enforcement cooperation while protecting the rights of citizens in both countries.

Kazakhstan has been and continues to be a leader in nonproliferation and global security. I remember very well, and Strobe knows this even better, one of the great successes of the Clinton administration with some of our European partners was helping to work with successor states of the former Soviet Union that inherited nuclear weapons. And Kazakhstan, along with Belarus and Ukraine, took the very brave and important step of relinquishing the weapons that it inherited when the Soviet Union dissolved. Kazakhstan has also fostered stability in its own region, contributing to Afghanistan's future by funding the Afghan National Security Forces and police and enabling 1,000 Afghan men and women to study at Kazakhstani universities.

In Tajikistan, we are focusing on improving border security, strengthening the capacity of law enforcement, and countering terrorism along the nation's long and porous border with Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan's contributions to our Afghanistan effort, including participation in the Northern Distribution Network, remain important, as does our work together to combat narco-trafficking and defend against transnational threats.

And we also remain grateful for the vital support Kyrgyzstan provided for the effort in Afghanistan. We respect the decision of our sovereign and independent



partner to close the transit center. Our relationship has moved forward as we continue to work together to address shared security challenges.

And in Turkmenistan, we've helped the government establish modern border control checkpoints with state-of-the-art technology to combat smuggling and to fight human trafficking.

By deepening these security partnerships, we are also investing in a stable foundation for Central Asia to unlock its great economic potential. The images of the old Silk Road, when Central Asia was truly at the crossroads of civilization, does not have to be just a memory. Past can become prologue.

Today, Central Asia is not only bursting with resources, but brimming with youthful, entrepreneurial potential. A full half of its population is under the age of 30. And in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, around a third of the population is actually closer in age to 20. To deliver on the aspirations of this new generation, we want to help Central Asia build a solid basis for prosperity by integrating it into a global, rules-based system. That's why we've been supporting Kazakhstan's efforts to join Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as members of the World Trade Organization, and we expect this long-sought goal to be realized this year.

Our own nation's businesses, their talent, and technological leadership can play an essential role in helping the region develop its own culture of innovation and entrepreneurship and we will continue to build these connections on both sides of the world. The United States recently hosted a delegation from Turkmenistan's power sector. Kazakhstan will host an investment forum for U.S. companies this summer.

Now, despite these efforts, I think everyone recognizes that Central Asia still has a long way to go in building a more open, cooperative, and connected market that fosters true entrepreneurship and delivers benefits to ordinary people. The region

remains one of the least integrated in the world with only about 6 percent of its total trade occurring within Central Asia. And as a result, its own people are not benefiting from this enormous potential.

That's why, as part of the New Silk Road Initiative, the United States is helping develop the region's connectivity: improving trade and transport infrastructure, standardizing customs and border procedures, strengthening the links between energy producers and consumers. And it's why we're helping to build a regional energy market to connect Central Asia's tremendous supplies of natural gas and hydropower to 1.6 billion energy-hungry consumers in South Asia. Our support for the CASA-1000 electricity line will help bring surplus hydroelectricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where over 80 million people lack access to electricity.

It's notable that Afghanistan is also embracing the vision of Asian connectivity. Some of you may have heard just last week when President Ghani was in Washington, he addressed a joint session of Congress and extolled the importance of regional energy trade for Afghanistan's economic viability.

A lot of work is being done on the physical infrastructure to connect these countries. But just as important as that physical infrastructure are the policies that go with it, the soft infrastructure of laws, of regulations, of agreements between and among governments to facilitate the flow of people, of goods, and of financing. And we're helping in that area, too.

Ultimately, for Central Asia to fully reap the benefits of shared prosperity, it has some choices to make between the political and economic practices of the past that offered limited potential for long-term, diversified growth, and the possibilities of the future, the surge of innovation and energy that comes from building more open societies at home and joining a dynamic, just, and rules-based global marketplace. These rules

are not designed to assert the authority of one nation over another. They serve to protect and benefit us all; to give businesses the confidence they need to invest, drawing on skills of young, educated populations, and building a growing market for entrepreneurial talent.

Now, I know that destination may seem distant as we gather here today, but it promises what nothing else can: the opportunity for Central Asians themselves to enjoy in the fruits of their prosperity.

Finally, a critical aspect of our foreign policy is advancing the democratic values that we share with people all over the world, including in Central Asia. These values are at the very core of our engagement with the region and essential to the lasting stability that we seek. Across every bilateral relationship, we continue to advocate forcefully for greater respect for human rights, a stronger voice for civil society, and greater religious freedom. Progress has been halting, but I believe we are better able to address these difficult issues because we are present and engaged with these governments and their civil society.

We know that governments that are accountable to their citizens can more effectively sustain their own security, defend their own sovereignty, and contribute to regional stability. Upholding freedom of expression, the rule of law, and political pluralism gives citizens peaceful, legal outlets to raise their grievances and diminish the chance that they will be drawn to violent extremism.

These same freedoms are also vital to building innovative societies. In the past, when we thought about the wealth of a nation and what constituted that wealth, we would talk about the physical size of the country, its abundance in natural resources, the strength of its military, literally the size of its population. And all of these things, of course, are still relevant today, but in the 21st century, the true wealth of a nation lies in

its human resources and the potential of a country to maximize those resources, to let them be free, to let them be creative, to let them innovate. Those are the countries that we most want to engage with. That's what we're looking for as we seek to forge partnerships. It's something that President Obama, Vice President Biden, Secretary Kerry have all spoken to with great passion wherever they go, from Accra to Kiev to Delhi. As the President put it, "We are far more likely to invest our energy in those countries that want to work with us, that invest in their people, that embrace a vision of society where everyone can contribute -- men and women, Shia or Sunni, Muslim, Christian, or Jew -- because from Europe to Asia, from Africa to the Americas, nations that have persevered on a democratic path have emerged more prosperous, more peaceful, and more invested in upholding our common security and common humanity."

So in Central Asia, we will continue to support civil society and its ability to serve communities and speak up for peaceful change without government interference, consistent with the President's Stand with Civil Society Initiative. We'll continue to advocate for free media and more open political systems, and urge the release of people who are imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of their political views or religious faith. We will support greater economic transparency and efforts to combat corruption.

As Strobe knows very well, we've spoken about these issues for many years in Central Asia. They are arguably even more important as the region seeks our engagement and assistance in its own development and integration. In this respect, we're also focused, for example, on helping the Kyrgyz Republic nurture and develop its parliamentary democracy, the only one in the region. Our assistance and our exchange programs emphasize rule-of-law reforms, support a more open civil society, and create

new educational opportunities.

One of the things we're very proud of is having hosted nearly 80 percent of Kyrgyz parliamentarians here in the United States, where they discuss the responsibilities of public service with American officials and representatives of civil society. Time and again, we have seen the value of building these lifelong relationships, helping to expand the marketplace of ideas and foster greater democratic ethos. Today, we're supporting these educational exchange programs and English language programs across Central Asia.

In Kazakhstan, nearly 400,000 children in first grade are starting to learn English, thanks to an impressive effort by the nation's Minister of Education and Science Aslan Sarinzhapov to introduce trilingual education in the entire school system. Well, that minister of education happens to be an alumnus of one of our exchange programs, the Edmund Muskie Graduate Fellowship Program.

In Kyrgyzstan, 40 members of parliament recently participated in more than 30 town hall meetings across the country, thanks to the organizational efforts of a young man who himself drew on his experiences as a legislative fellow in the United States, where he observed the 2012 presidential elections. Building these connections between our people not only nurtures shared understanding and values, it strengthens our ability to confront challenges together.

As we gather today, I know a lot of focus is on the talks in Switzerland regarding Iran's nuclear program, and Secretary Kerry and Wendy Sherman and other colleagues are there as we speak. And I know that no one is watching more closely than the countries of Central Asia.

Iran's historic and cultural ties to the region are deep and longstanding, and for countries that are increasingly focused on their connectivity to the rest of the

world, Iran stands as a potential gateway to Europe as well as a maritime route to Asia. But the region's unique complexities don't stop at its border with Iran. From its position at the heart of Asia, the region looks out to China and its growing economic influence, it supports Afghanistan's cautiously hopeful transition, and it hedges against Russia's renewed aggression, and it warily guards against the growing pull of extremist ideology among its youth.

China looms large in the region with its ambitious plans to advance Asian connectivity through overland and maritime routes. It's committed tens of billions of dollars to building roads and rails to better connect its factories and markets in Asia and Europe and we support these efforts to connect the region, but we also urge that they advance trade in all directions and adhere to international norms.

We don't see China's involvement in Central Asia in zero-sum terms. Its development of infrastructure in Central Asia can be fully complementary to our own efforts and, in particular, we see an important role for China in supporting the transition in Afghanistan and advancing its own integration into the broader Asia region.

On the other hand, Russia's actions on its periphery, including its violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, threaten the very foundation of international order, not only in the region, not only in Europe, but beyond and around the world. As Russia and the separatists that it backs continue to destabilize Eastern Ukraine, they're doing more than violating the borders of one country. They are threatening the fundamental principles that we all have a stake in defending in Europe and, indeed, around the world: the principle that the borders and territorial integrity of a democratic state cannot be changed by force; that it is the inherent right of citizens in a democracy to make their own decisions about their country's future; that linguistic nationalism, something we thought was confined to the dustbin of history, cannot be

allowed to be resurrected; and that all members of the international community, especially its leading members, are bound by common rules and should face costs if they don't live up to the solemn commitments that they make.

And I want to come back briefly to something I mentioned a minute ago, which is the successor states of the Soviet Union giving up the nuclear weapons they inherited when the Soviet Union dissolved. As I noted, besides Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine were the two other countries that inherited these weapons and gave them up. And in the case of Ukraine, it did so in exchange for assurances from three countries that its territorial integrity and sovereignty would be respected. Those three countries were the United Kingdom, the United States, and Russia.

What does it say not only to Ukraine but to countries around the world when those solemn assurances can be torn up and totally ignored? What does it say at this very moment when we are seeking to convince Iran to forego nuclear weapons in the future when it considers the commitments that big powers have made in the past and wonders about the enduring nature of those commitments into the future? So there is a lot at stake in Russia's actions in Ukraine that we need to continue to stand up for.

Now, there are obviously costs to the pressure that we're exerting on Russia for its actions in Ukraine, and we know these costs reverberate around the region. And while the nations of Central Asia understand the dangers posed by Russia better than most, they're also feeling the impact of Russia's economic weakness more than most. We understand that anxiety and we're committed to leveraging our own economic tools to help Central Asia diversify their economies and interlink their markets.

We do not ask any country to choose ties with the U.S. to the exclusion of anyone else. We reject the false choices imposed by anyone else. We fully support the aspirations of Central Asian states to pursue a multi-vector foreign and economic

policy. We know that the threat of violent extremism is yet another growing danger for the region. Earlier this year, the United States hosted the Countering Violent Extremism Summit to kick-start a global conversation on the most effective ways to disrupt and destroy ISIL's finance and recruitment efforts and the broader challenge of violent extremism.

Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan sent high-level delegations to the summit. Kazakhstan committed to host a regional CVE summit for South and Central Asian countries this summer. The summit that we held in Washington not only considered the challenge of countering extremism as it exists today, but also preventing it, reaching the large pool of alienated young men and women susceptible to the siren call of extremism by giving them more economic and political opportunities. It's a challenge that requires all of us to take stock to ensure that we're fostering societies in which all citizens feel that they have a stake.

In this atmosphere of uncertainty, it can be tempting to turn inward, to build high walls, to close borders, but the very geopolitics that give Central Asian states cause for anxiety also incentivize them to embrace a new and different kind of future. Our continued engagement and the long-term security and prosperity of the region depend ultimately on the choices that Central Asian states make today to try to seize this future and live up to the aspirations of their own citizens.

In this journey, our commitment to them and to their citizens is as strong today as it was 23 years ago, when the United States was among the very first to recognize their independence. It's a commitment not only between governments, but between people, between our universities as they share knowledge, exchange students, and foster a culture of innovation between our businesses as they create jobs, spur investment, and develop the region's frontier markets, and between our leaders as they



work together to advance essential reforms, to overcome common challenges, to unlock the potential of Central Asia for this generation and generations to come.

Thank very much. (Applause)

MR. TALBOTT: Tony, while you get mic'ed, thank you very much for that terrific opening. And let me also use the occasion to say to Nisha, all of us who have watched your stewardship of the bureau that you're in charge of, which has got to be one of the more diverse portfolios in the State Department -- namely Central Asia and South Asia -- extend our thanks and congratulations for the good work you've done, and thank you for being here today.

Tony, that was a terrific overview. I hear a little bit of a resonance from history that we were saying goodbye to all those years ago. Maybe at least one of the headlines here could be: "Welcome Back, Flashman." (Laughter)

And so let's stay, if we could for a moment, on one of the last points that you talked about, which, of course, is on the minds of all of us, and that is the role of Russia. And maybe you could zero in on Kazakhstan, in particular, not least because, of course, as you've said, President Nazarbayev and his government joined the Ukrainians and the Belarusians in getting rid of their nuclear weapons. They also have a very significant Russian population, a point that President Putin underscored in a meeting with Nazarbayev, and Nazarbayev took some umbrage from that when President Putin questioned whether Kazakhstan was even a state. Is that still resonating in the region, not just in Kazakhstan, but throughout the region?

MR. BLINKEN: Strobe, I think it is resonating in the region and, of course, what's going on, as we discussed a moment ago, in Ukraine is resonating in the region. What's gone on in Georgia and continues to go on in Georgia resonates in the region; Moldova, all these things resonate. But I think what's challenging is this.

First, we believe strongly that the countries of Central Asia should have peaceful, prosperous, beneficial relations with all their neighbors, including Russia, and Russia is going to have a critical role to play in Central Asia going forward. The trade relationship is very important, remittances have been quite significant and, of course, the downturn in the Russian economy poses a real challenge for the many Central Asians who are there and were sending money back home. But as we've tried to make clear again and again, we're not trying to pose some kind of zero-sum choice. And, indeed, even when it comes to, for example, the Russian economic union, the customs union, we're not telling countries that they shouldn't join. To the contrary, it would be totally inconsistent with exactly what we've been telling the Russians when it comes to Ukraine, which is that countries should be able to decide for themselves with whom they want to associate and what the basic decisions are about their future.

So I think the challenge is that we want to encourage positive relations, but it is Russia's actions themselves that are sending a very discordant message to countries in the region, and that is causing them to look more and more for alternatives and different choices. I think maximizing those choices, maximizing those opportunities is a good thing. We hope we get to the point where Russia changes its approach and provides the benefits that come with long and, in many ways, strong relations, especially in the trade area, but right now, I think my sense is that the anxiety level is extremely high.

MR. TALBOTT: And how does that translate into the attitude of the Central Asian states towards the prospects for a Eurasian Union, clearly as an alternative to the European Union?

MR. BLINKEN: Well, look, I think, again, we've been very clear. We have not said to anyone don't join, and, indeed, we have Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that

have, and we're working very closely right now with Kyrgyzstan on its WTO membership, something that we hope will be realized this year.

What we do want to see when it comes to that union is that countries uphold their broader international commitments and that it doesn't actually constrict trade, it advances it. And so, if the result, for example, of joining such a union is more tariffs or nontariff barriers, that's moving in the wrong direction and backwards, but there's nothing fundamentally inconsistent with doing that and participating in the larger international rules-based system, and we're encouraging countries to do that.

But I think what a number of countries in the region are seeing right now is Russia that has mismanaged its economy going back some time. Second, the sanctions as a result of its actions in Ukraine that have given it a significant setback, and then, of course, oil prices, which perhaps more than anything else have undermined it. Those three things taken together make the benefits of engagement with Russia economically a lot less than they were even a couple of years ago and, I think, again, that is causing countries to look to diversify their economic relationships.

MR. TALBOTT: You made a point of connecting American aspirations and concerns about political pluralism and you also in that context flagged the danger of extremism and terrorism. There's a neighboring region, the Caucasus, where that is particularly a phenomenon that seems to be growing -- I would say, in parentheses, not least perhaps because of the Russian policy of emphasizing ethnic Russian nationalism, which doesn't play very well in those parts of the Russian Federation or, for that matter, in the former Soviet Union, which are historically not Slavic and, indeed, are at least culturally Islamic in much of their legacy. Do you hear, and do your colleagues in our diplomatic posts in the region hear, much concern about the rise of Islamic extremism in the Caucasus bleeding over into other parts of the former Soviet space?

MR. BLINKEN: Yes, that's a real concern. It's something that we hear more and more. But it's not only the bleed-over, it's the potential in a number of these countries for that kind of extremism to emerge within them. And the question is and the challenge is, how do you handle that?

And here we face one of our very difficult dilemmas that we see in other parts of the world, because, on the one hand, we're working in the relative short term to help countries build their capacity to deal with security challenges, including the potential challenge of extremism. And there I think we've been working very effectively, and the expertise that we bring to the table is something that is very much sought by our partners. On the other hand, as I suggested a little while ago, none of this, in our judgment, is sustainable. That is, real security and stability are not sustainable absent more open and effective governance, absent more open and effective institutions, and absent a basic respect for human rights and democratic development.

And so a big part of the conversation with our partners is, on the one hand, helping them develop security capacity, including to deal with extremism, but also to make the case consistently and with conviction that ultimately the path to sustainable stability has to go through more effective governance, institutions, and democracy.

MR. TALBOTT: Going back to the '90s again, back then there seemed to be some hope for the development of security ties between all of the former republics of the USSR. I'm thinking particularly of Partnership for Peace and the Euro-Asian Partnership Council. My sense, and correct me if I'm wrong, is that those are pretty much moribund or at least very quiescent. Can you imagine that there might be a resurgence of interest in that kind of security cooperation?

MR. BLINKEN: Well, I mean, first, I would say that certain aspects of that are actually alive and well, including various aspects of the Partnership for Peace.

And we've seen the engagement of partner countries, for example, in Afghanistan, that's been extremely effective. Some are formally in the partnership, others on the outside of it, but if you look, for example, at the contributions of a country like Georgia to what we've done in Afghanistan, it's quite extraordinary on a per-capita basis, truly amazing.

My own sense is that the big motivating factor right now is the potential for greater economic connectivity and interconnectivity, and the potential there is extraordinary. But I also agree -- at least with what I think was the implication of your question -- that given the incredibly and increasingly uncertain environment, there may be more and more of a driver for these kinds of security partnerships to take some greater life and energy and that's certainly something that we're looking at. But I think, ultimately, the more we're able to connect these countries, the more they're able to benefit from shared prosperity, the greater the foundation for stability we'll have going forward.

MR. TALBOTT: I'm going to go to the audience here in a minute, starting with Johannes if that's all right, but I do want to ask about one other fairly major regional player, and that's China. Would you say a little bit on that? And insofar as maybe not a great game, but a new game is underway, is China a major player in that?

MR. BLINKEN: China's very much a major player and as I tried to suggest we think that this is largely complementary to what we're trying to do and, indeed, we're looking at ways to more effectively coordinate with the Chinese. The investments that they're making in the physical infrastructure that ultimately can connect these countries are extraordinary and usually beneficial: beneficial to people in these countries in terms of giving them opportunity, potentially beneficial to our own businesses that are trying to work there, and there is no zero-sum choice here. These things can work together, our own engagement, China's engagement. But I would say this, the engagement and the investment are very important, but how they're done is also

important. And so I think countries will ask questions about the engagement and the investment.

Whose workers are being used to advance it? What kind of standards are being upheld when it comes to the rights of workers, when it comes to the environment? What about the quality of the projects? All of these things are also critical and I think there are, in effect, market forces that are driving the Chinese, hopefully, to raise their own game when it comes to that. The more they do that, I think the more we're able to work together in a complementary fashion to advance what we think would be in the interests of Central Asia, but also in our own interests and China's interests, but there is no doubt that they are a big and growing bigger player.

MR. TALBOTT: Would you say -- and this may sound like a leading question, but I know as a good lawyer you won't be led -- does the fear and concern in Central Asia about Russia play to China's advantage as it does perhaps to some degree to our own advantage?

MR. BLINKEN: Short answer is yes, but, again, I think the incentive for most of the countries in the region is to look for various outlets, various points of contact. It's us. It is Russia because, again, of a lot of history and strong trading relationships. It is China because of its extraordinary investments and the potential there. And depending on Iran's evolution over the next years or more, it could be Iran, as well, as a gateway to Europe, as a gateway to India. So if I'm sitting in any of the capitals in Central Asia, I'm looking at all of these possibilities.

Now, I personally think that the United States can bring to the table things that some of these other countries can't. Even if we're further away, we bring a certain way of doing business, certain values, certain standards that I think are even more beneficial to people. But it is not a zero-sum choice, and the more we can get other

countries to raise their own game and raise their own standards as they engage with Central Asia, the better off people in the region will be and the better off we'll be.

MR. TALBOTT: Which brings to mind one other country, and then we will go to Johannes. I remember Turgut Ozal, at the time that the USSR was disintegrating, making no secret of a Turkish dream, given the Turkic influences in the region that we're talking about. How is Turkey seen today, particularly given some of the tumult that's going on there?

MR. BLINKEN: It's a good question and, frankly, one that I'm almost more comfortable asking of our partners in the region. I don't want to necessarily suggest how they're seeing Turkey. I think you're right about Turkey's interest and ambition. It's also true that the Turks have a tremendous amount on their hands in their immediate environs right now, and that's challenging. But the bottom line -- at least from our perspective, again -- is this is not about creating false choices or imposing choices on our partners in Central Asia. One of the differences that we bring to the table is a profound and strong belief that our partners have a right to make their own decisions and make their own choices about the future. And if that involves us, so much the better. But if it involves other countries in the region, that is their decision.

MR. TALBOTT: Johannes?

MR. LINN: Thank you very much. Johannes Linn from Brookings. I thank you for this presentation. I think it's a very timely initiative to articulate the interests and the strategy of the U.S. in the region, not least because as you go around the region you hear a lot of questions asked, so what are the interests of the U.S. and how will the engagement shape the future?

Now, you talked, I think, very eloquently about the interests. To me, the question looking ahead is, so how will the engagement change? Looking back in relative

terms, I think relative to the engagement of the U.S. elsewhere in the world and relative to the engagement of other major partners in the region -- China and Russia, in particular -- I think it's fair to say the engagement of the U.S. in the region in the past has been relatively modest. So looking ahead, how is the engagement going to change and how are you going to translate and leverage modest -- likely continued modest engagement -- relative to these other engagements into an effective impact on the ground in terms of the interests and the objectives you have set, which from my perspective actually are very valid?

MR. BLINKEN: I think it's an excellent question and I think a few things suggest themselves. One is that, as we all know, 90 percent of life is showing up, and so the consistent and hopefully high-level engagement that we have makes a difference, certainly, on an official level. And I think we actually have to do more than that now. The assistant secretary has been a regular visitor and very deeply engaged, as have a lot of officials across the board, but it's something that we're looking at over the next couple of years to elevate even that game.

We have, as you know, a lot of very regular structured dialogues on a whole host of issues that are going forward and are really doing the day-in/day-out, month-in/month-out business of building these relationships. And then, what's really important, at least to me, is that even as we have these critical government-to-government relations, and even as, hopefully, we do even better in building that engagement and being there, that the other aspects of our connectivity and engagement are what really are going to sustain and build these relationships, the people-to-people aspect and especially the economic trade aspect. And the more we're able to build the connectivity that I was talking about, the more we're able to engage people in both countries with each other, the stronger that foundation is going to be.



And again, it may be a bias, but even though we have the disadvantage of being geographically far away, because we have interests, because we see potential, and because we bring something to the table, as I suggested, that maybe some of the more close in proximity neighbors don't. My sense is that the Central Asian countries are very much looking to us for that engagement and we now just have to deliver on it.

MR. TALBOTT: Thank you. The lady right here? Please wait for the mic and identify yourself and ask a short question.

MS. McKELVEY: Hi, my name's Tara McKelvey. I work for the BBC. You talked about countering violent extremism and some of the expertise that Americans bring. If you could tell us more about that, that would be interesting.

MR. BLINKEN: Thank you. Well, let me say this, it's not just the expertise that we bring. It's, hopefully, the expertise that many, many members of the international community bring. One of the most interesting aspects of the summit meeting that we held a little over a month ago here in Washington was that we brought not only countries, not only governments, but also NGOs, technologists, academics to the table from around the world. And what we found is that different aspects of the problem have often been tackled somewhere, someplace, by someone in a relatively effective way and it's actually sharing that information and bringing it to scale that makes the big difference.

For example, one of the big problems in terms of fostering radicalism and extremism is radicalization in prisons. Two of the three attackers in the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris had been petty criminals who went to jail and were radicalized in jail. Some countries have actually had great experience with this and have developed very interesting programs to deal with it. So it's sharing that knowledge and expertise that's critical, and that's one of the things as a convening authority, in a sense, that we can

bring to the table. And the fact that Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were active participants in the summit, hopefully, will make a difference to them. But there's a very long discussion one could have about what are the motivating factors that cause people to turn to extremism. What do you do about that? And that was a lot of what was discussed

But I think, to me, the other thing that stands out and that we want to try and advance is that it's obviously critical to counter the violent extremism that we confront today. And sometimes that means, when it comes to people who are beyond the reach of reason, using military. And counterterrorism means to deal with it, but preventing it in the first place is obviously even more beneficial.

And there I come back to what I talked about earlier. Ultimately, countries have an obligation, if they really want to prevent it, to try to build more open societies. Because the more closed off you are, the more people can't find outlets for their frustrations and their fears that are productive outlets, you can almost guarantee that they'll find negative outlets for that, and, ultimately, that undermines the stability that you seek.

So I think carrying that message and working in a productive way with countries to help develop those outlets is one of the most important things we can bring to the table.

MR. TALBOTT: The lady there.

MS. WANG: Thank you, Secretary Blinken. My name is Bingru Wang with Hong Kong Phoenix TV. Could you please talk about the U.S. stance on one of the very important Chinese initiatives to engage Central Asia, which is "One Belt, One Road?" Is this also complementary to the New Silk Road strategy you talked about?

And also, today is the deadline of the AIIB. Are you surprised to see 47

members to join AIIB, and are you embarrassed? Thank you. (Laughter)

MR. BLINKEN: Yeah, thank you for that question, maybe, except for the last couple of words. (Laughter)

So, two things. Again, just to come back to the basic proposition. I strongly believe that many of the efforts that China is making, including through its engagement and its very significant investment, are very complementary with what we're trying to do and will be very beneficial to people in the region, but this does tie in, in a sense, nicely to the Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Our concern with the bank is this. We don't oppose it. To the contrary, the more investment you can bring in infrastructure in the region, in Asia more broadly, we think, the better. It's desperately needed. It's a foundation for economic progress. But as I suggested earlier, how it happens is vitally important, and so the concerns that we've had about the Infrastructure Investment Bank really go to its own standards. What are the governance rules of the bank? What role does the board of directors play? What are the standards that it would advance in terms of worker rights, environmental protections, intellectual property, capital requirements, things of that nature?

We've spent 70 years building international institutions to support financing and developing around the world, and in doing that, we have tried throughout to raise the standards of these institutions in a way that benefits the people that they're working with. What we don't want to see happen is some kind of race to the bottom where the standards are diluted, and that's been our only concern. So my sense is that the -- and indeed, it's not just our concern. Even the countries that have decided to join have been very clear about their own concerns. And, indeed, I think one of the reasons that the number of countries has joined is the hope that they can help shape that governance and those standards.

So if those standards are at the same level and maybe even greater than the standards that have already been established in other international institutions, that's a very good thing. If they're not, then, unfortunately, I think the institution could actually undermine the very goals it's seeking to achieve.

MR. TALBOTT: By the way, the prime minister of Sweden, here this morning, made very much the same cautionary point.

Yes, the lady right here and then we'll come to you, sir.

MS. NGUYEN: Secretary, my name is Genie Nguyen with *Voice of Vietnamese Americans*. I learned that Central Asia is very much similar to Southeast Asia, and thank you for a very comprehensive program you've put forth, including human rights and everything. And I know that last week, on the 19th, you met with the Vietnamese minister of the Public Security, General Tran Dai Quang. And I would like to ask, essentially, we come into the 20th years of the normalized relationship, and you've seen a lot of positive achievements between the two countries. So are there positive lessons that we can learn and apply to Central Asia? And is there a negative lesson that we can also learn and apply and avoid? And are you proud?

MR. BLINKEN: Thank you. I have to say, one of the great success stories, I think, of recent years has been the deeper and deeper relationship that the United States and Vietnam have developed and we're seeing that emerge more and more in recent years, in recent weeks, and, indeed, I've had the opportunity to meet with several senior officials from Vietnam. I hope to go there in the not too distant future. And I think it's motivated by a number of things.

First, and foremost, I think it's motivated by an increasingly open view among the Vietnamese leadership of what the best future for the country is in terms of its own progress, in terms of its own standards, in terms of its own integration with the

region. And that's been very important and something that we're very, very pleased with.

Second, I have to tell you it's also motivated by some of China's actions in the region. And we talked a little bit about Russia before. We've talked about the tremendously positive role China can and, indeed, in many ways, is playing, particularly through its investment in infrastructure and industry. But there's also a nervousness in the region, as well, about some of China's actions in the South China Seas and other areas. And that is actually causing countries to look to us as a potential foundation of stability.

This digresses a little bit, but it still goes to the point. I was in China about, oh, two months ago -- almost two months ago -- actually, the first trip I took in this new job, and we had very interesting conversations. And one of the great things that's happened in recent years is we are constantly expanding our base of cooperation with China and working together in more and more areas. Just last year, obviously, the leadership that the United States and China showed on climate change, hopefully, will have a real impact on other countries as we head to the Paris negotiations at the end of the year.

The work that China did on Ebola was very, very significant, and even in our military-to-military relationship we've seen great progress building confidence. But some of the actions that China takes in its own area, in its own region, are causing other countries to raise real questions and have real concerns. And so in some of the conversations that we had, one of the things I suggested to our Chinese partners and friends is that even though our systems and countries are obviously very different, and very different histories, very different stages of development, in some ways China today is a little bit like where the United States was after World War II.

And then we were emerging as a great power, and our leaders had to

decide how we would use that power. And what they decided was to write rules, develop norms, and build institutions that in many ways constrained our power, but that gave other countries a voice and a vote and a sense that they, too, could decide the future. And that disincentivized those countries from getting together to check our power, and it has benefited us tremendously in these 50, 60, 70 years since. And it's something I suggested that our Chinese friends might find a useful historical analogy.

MR. TALBOTT: Can we give the last question to Rich Kauzlarich, a stalwart of the Foreign Service and, as you know, a former ambassador to Baku?

MR. KAUZLARICH: Deputy Secretary, excellent remarks. I'd like to come to the promotion of democratic values issue. Over the last two decades, we've developed a series of programs and tools for our ambassadors and embassies to use to promote civil society, democratic elections, freedom of expression, and yet, in a lot of these societies now, we're facing an environment where civil society is being shut down. The leaders that we trained are arrested. Journalists who are part of RFE/RL are arrested. My question is, are the tools and programs today adequate to address an environment that is far less friendly than it was two decades ago when we had such great hope for these programs?

MR. BLINKEN: I would say that they're necessary, but not adequate, and that we constantly have to reevaluate whether there are better and more effective ways of advancing that mission, for exactly the reasons that you cite. So, my own sense is that we have to keep at it with even more determination, but we also have to think much more creatively about whether there are different ways, additional ways of engaging.

How do we better use new media and new technology? How can we think about working with partner countries that may have more easy access than we do,

but want to advance this discussion? And then I think that, hopefully, the more we can build and strengthen the relationships even with governments and their confidence level increases in us and in the sustainability of our own engagement, we may create some ability to get them to think more broadly and progressively about the way they approach these issues.

But it's also being clear and forthright in holding people accountable for their actions. We, as you know, publish annual reports on human rights, on religious freedom, on trafficking in persons, and others. Those are important documents and even if they don't sometimes get the attention here that we think, as you know very well, they get a lot of attention in the countries that they talk about. And, of course, we have to hold ourselves to our own standards because otherwise it rings a little bit hollow and the effort to build a more perfect union at home is actually never more important than it is now.

So, bottom line is I think your question is very well placed and it's -- we need to do more, we need to do different, even as we sustain and push what we're already doing.

MR. TALBOTT: Tony, you've been mighty clear and forthright yourself. And I know that you've got a long day ahead of you still, if memory serves, and I hope all of you will join me in thanking Tony for his cogency, his candor, and for being with us.

MR. BLINKEN: Thanks. Thank you. (Applause

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