STRENGTHENING U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

Wednesday, September 14, 2022

House of Representatives,
Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific,
Central Asia and Nonproliferation Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:12 a.m., in Room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Ami Bera [chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.
Mr. Bera. -- will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any point and all members will have five days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

To insert something into the record, please have your staff email the previously mentioned address or contact full committee staff.

Please keep your video functions on at all times, even when you're not recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves, and please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking.

Consistent with remote committee proceedings of H. Res. 8, staff will only meet members and witnesses as appropriate when they are not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

I see we have a quorum and will now recognize myself for opening remarks.

I want to thank the administration witnesses and members of the public for joining us at this hearing on Central Asia, the first Foreign Affairs Committee hearing focused on this region since July 2018, which featured nongovernment witnesses.

This is a historic region, if you look at world history.
Situated between Afghanistan, China, Iran, and Russia, the five states of Central Asia have long been at a crossroads of civilization.

The region is endowed with energy and mineral resources and has a young and ethnically diverse population. The United States was among the first countries to welcome the independence of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Since that time, the United States has developed wide-ranging relations with Central Asia and has repeatedly reiterated commitment to the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the five Central Asian states and the U.S. government has worked consistently since to support the security, development and prosperity of each country.

Over the past three decades, the United States has provided more than $9 billion in direct assistance to Central Asian countries to support security, democratic reform, and economic growth and to meet humanitarian needs.

The private sector has also invested over $31 billion in commercial ventures in the region. The United States has built strong people-to-people ties, including by directly funding over 40,000 students and professional exchanges, and the Obama administration established the C5+1 diplomatic platform in 2015.
for our countries to promote regional dialogue and cooperation to address common concerns.

Central Asia is an increasingly important strategic and economic region for the People's Republic of China as well. In 2013, President Xi Jinping first proposed building an economic belt along the Silk Road.

During his speech in Kazakhstan and since then, China has become the largest source of investment in the region and has demonstrated continuous interest in strengthening its economic security and people-to-people ties with Central Asia and, in fact, Xi Jinping himself arrived in Kazakhstan today in his first trip abroad since the global pandemic and is expected to travel onward to Uzbekistan to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organizing Annual Summit.

In addition, you know, the Pope is also in Kazakhstan today as well. So it does demonstrate the interest in the region and importance of the region.

Given this geostrategic importance and economic potential, as the region grows in importance for the United States and our competitors, so too must our engagement there.

Recent developments such as the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the unrest in Kazakhstan, and Russia's illegal unprovoked invasion of Ukraine have foisted Central Asian countries into the global spotlight.
But it behooves us to have a sustained comprehensive approach toward this dynamic region based on its own merits. As chairman of this subcommittee, I hope today's hearing serves as a catalyst to this end. The United States must work with the Central Asian nations to further the stability, prosperity, and independence of the region.

In particular, we can do more to advance economic prosperity for the people of Central Asia. Despite having a collective area of, roughly, 40 percent that of the United States, Central Asia remains one of the least economically integrated regions in the world, leaving Central Asian countries with limited ability to leverage their joint economic might.

External investment has also been slow to materialize as concerns of weak rule of law, human rights abuses, and regional stability have created hurdles for long-term investment.

More recently, close economic ties with Russia have also rendered landlocked Central Asian countries particularly vulnerable to the economic fallout from the war in Ukraine and the related sanctions and import controls imposed on Russia.

Central Asia must be free to pursue the economic security and political partners of their choosing. To that end, the United States must be present and, again, offer an affirmative agenda.

In today's hearing, I hope our witnesses will share how the
Biden administration is calibrating its approach toward the region and areas where Congress can play a role as we work with allies and partners to further integrate Central Asian countries into the global system during this tumultuous time.

With that, let me now yield five minutes to my good friend from Ohio, our ranking member, Representative Chabot, for his opening remarks.

Mr. Chabot. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses for appearing here this morning and the testimony that we'll soon be receiving concerning the administration's policy toward Central Asia.

Today's hearing is, as you said, an important one. This region often gets less attention than it deserves. Yet, the fact that Central Asia does not sit squarely within Europe or the Middle East or the Indo-Pacific but instead at the border of all three is one of the things that makes it so important.

Since ancient times, for example, this crossroads has linked East and West. Today, as the world becomes increasingly connected, its deserts and steppes will undoubtedly become busier than they've ever been before.

As the United States engages in great power competition with the People's Republic of China and its partners in despotism -- Iran and Russia -- Central Asia is poised to be of critical importance in the years ahead.
Our adversaries are determined to strengthen their influence in Central Asia. This very week the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization is meeting in Uzbekistan. Iran is set to become a member of the group during that summit, bringing together the world's new axis of, if not evil, true malevolence.

For his part, Vladimir Putin would like nothing better than to exert greater sway in the region, building on Russia's military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and maintain the region's reliance on Russian arms exports.

More importantly, the region is vital to the Chinese Communist Party's Belt and Road designs, as you mentioned, Mr. Chairman, with its pipelines and railroads running from Xinjiang to Europe, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean.

Indeed, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit will be General Secretary Xi's very first trip outside of the PRC since the outbreak of COVID, demonstrating the significance that Beijing places on the critical region.

Beyond strategic competition, Central Asia is a critical counterterrorism partner. President Biden's short-sighted decision to withdraw from Afghanistan ignored the advice of his top military advisors and handed the country back to the Taliban, reestablishing a safe haven for terrorism, a fact made obvious by the revelation that Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's top man, was living
in a Taliban villa in downtown Kabul and was, basically, brazenly out on the porch.

Resurgent terrorist groups in Afghanistan such as ISIS-K now threatened Afghanistan's northern neighbors in Central Asia. These unfortunate but entirely predictable outcomes make our counterterrorism partnerships with Central Asia even more critical.

I'm concerned, therefore, that the administration failed to negotiate meaningful basing options for so-called over the horizon intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance counterterrorism capabilities before we withdrew and has been unable to secure them since, despite saying that it was actively trying to do so.

This should have been a critical piece of any sound Afghanistan withdrawal. But it's clear that the administration's withdrawal was anything but sound and was, in fact, an utter disaster of epic proportions.

Fortunately, while the withdrawal from Afghanistan has made engagement with the region all the more difficult, we have partners in Central Asia.

As the co-chair of the Kazakhstan Caucus it's my opinion that Kazakhstan is sincere in its efforts and its desire to deepen ties with the United States, especially in the economic sphere.
While the unrest in January and its aftermath there have raised concerns, I hope that the reforms that that country is undertaking now will bring it closer to the West. Likewise, I have had the opportunity to meet with Uzbekistan's ambassador a number of times and they are eager for further U.S. engagement as well.

I note that Tajikistan has proven to be the most welcoming partner when it comes to counterterrorism in the region. We need to deepen and expand on that cooperation and extend it to the other countries in Central Asia.

As much as China, Russia, and now Iran would like to exert their influence in Central Asia, the countries in the region would like to be free to make their own choices.

They have no viable option besides working with their powerful neighbors and it's precisely for that reason that we should remain particularly engaged in the region.

So, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate you holding this hearing on an important region that often, as I mentioned before, gets too little attention in Washington but, certainly, gets attention in Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing.

As we embark on an extended competition with this new axis, we would do well to devote sustained attention to the crossroads that links them all together.

And I yield back.
Mr. Bera. Thank you, Ranking Member Chabot. Let me now introduce our witnesses.

We, first, have the Honorable Donald Lu, who became Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian affairs on September 15th, 2021. He is a Foreign Service officer with more than 30 years of U.S. government service, including as U.S. Ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic from 2018 to 2021 and the Republic of Albania from 2015 to 2018.

Our second witness is Ms. Anjali Kaur, the Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Bureau of Asia. Before joining USAID, Ms. Kaur was the senior program officer at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, leading the general global policy and advocacy strategies for the HIV and TB programs.

Our third witness is Mr. David De Falco, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Europe and Eurasia. He has held numerous positions across his 20 years of civil service in the Department of Commerce, including as Acting Executive Director for Europe and Eurasia and the Director for the Office of the European Union.

I want to thank all our witnesses for being here today and will now recognize each witness for five minutes.

Without objection, your prepared written statements will be made part of the record.

Let me invite, first, Assistant Secretary Lu to give your
235 testimony.
STATEMENTS OF THE HONORABLE DONALD LU, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF
STATE, BUREAU OF SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT
OF STATE; ANJALI KAUR, DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR, BUREAU
OF ASIA, U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT; DAVID DE
FALCO, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR EUROPE AND EURASIA, U.S.
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

STATEMENT OF DONALD LU

Mr. Lu. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Chabot.

This is a defining moment for the people of Central Asia. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has created concerns about sovereignty, territorial integrity in this neighboring region.

Rising energy prices and food prices have plunged millions into poverty and uncertainty. Unfair PRC loan payments are about to come due and countries in this region do not have the capacity to repay this crushing debt.

Our top priority is to support the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of Central Asian states. Russia has made territorial claims in Central Asia and has said that it would take action if it felt the rights of ethnic Russians were threatened.

This sounds hauntingly similar to a pretext used for Russian aggression against Ukraine and its actions against Georgia and
Moldova. Millions of Central Asian migrant workers live and work in Russia. Central Asia's main trade routes to overseas markets run through Russia, and Russia is not afraid to use this leverage over these countries.

Recently, Russia forced a terminal of the CPC oil pipeline to suspend operations, depriving the Kazakh people of hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues, and the objective was clear -- to pressure and to punish the Kazakh people for not supporting Putin's illegal and unprovoked war in Ukraine.

Despite considerable pressure from Moscow, the countries of Central Asia have refused to send troops to support Russia's war. Leaders in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have repeatedly made public statements supporting Ukrainian sovereignty, and Central Asian leaders have consistently said they will not recognize the so-called People's Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk.

Second, we are focused on countering PRC aggression in the region. When I served as ambassador in Kyrgyzstan, I witnessed firsthand local resentment of PRC pressure, which was often seen as exploitive, corrupt, and nontransparent.

There exists a genuine fear of the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative loans, that they are creating unsustainable debt. There is a fear that Chinese workers are displacing jobs for Central Asian workers and there is a fear that the PRC's ambitions are not contained to commercial domination. Fighting corrupt
PRC business deals is sensitive and dangerous work.

Our embassy in Kyrgyzstan has spent years working to shine a light on PRC organized crime activity in league with former Kyrgyz corrupt officials that robs the people of Central Asia of billions of dollars in customs revenue each year.

Third, we are supporting economic stabilization as the region recovers from COVID-19 and faces the economic consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine. As Russia and the PRC restrict trade in the region, we are working to support finding alternative routes through the Caspian Sea.

We are cooperating with leaders in the region to ensure that our sanctions targeting Russia do not further isolate Central Asia, and through our proposed economic resilience initiative we will boost trade, secure corridors for energy export, and train returned migrant workers.

And the State Department also supports terminating the applicability of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan and the establishment of permanent normal trade relations.

Fourth, we are working with our Central Asian partners on counterterrorism and security -- ISIS-K has fired rockets into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan from Afghanistan -- and we are committed to assisting our partners in the region who are under threat from terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan.
We have increased our border security efforts in our current counterterrorism capacity building programming throughout the region.

Finally, we are supporting human rights and democracy. We are clear eyed about serious human rights concerns in the region. Four of the five Central Asian countries have seen violent unrest in the past two years and repression of individuals for their religion, gender, political activities, or sexual orientation is widespread.

We engage often with authorities to address these concerns and are seeing some incremental progress. For example, over the past year, the ILO has announced the elimination of systematic forced labor in Uzbekistan's cotton harvests.

We are increasing our engagement in the region to demonstrate that we are a reliable partner and an alternative to Russia and to the PRC.

I visited Central Asia in December and again in May with interagency delegations to engage directly with senior leaders. Our CENTCOM commander, General Kurilla, recently visited the region to reinforce the positive momentum in our security cooperation.

We have had three visits by members of Congress to Central Asia this past year and Secretary Blinken will be meeting with his counterparts from the region in the C5+1 format later this
We look forward to working with the Congress to strengthen our ties and advance U.S. interests in this high stakes region.

Thank you.

[The statement of Mr. Lu follows:]

**********COMMITTEE INSERT**********
Mr. Bera. Thank you, Assistant Secretary Lu.

I will now invite Deputy Assistant Administrator Kaur to give her testimony.
STATEMENT OF ANJALI KAUR

Ms. Kaur. Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, distinguished subcommittee members, thank you for inviting me to testify on USAID's partnership with Central Asia.

For 30 years, USAID has supported the development progress of five Central Asian countries -- Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan -- promoting regional prosperity and stability.

This past May, Assistant Secretary Lu and I traveled to the region and we saw how USAID development programs are transforming people's lives. We met artisans tackling gender inequities and climate and health experts countering disinformation attacks. We met with farmers and women entrepreneurs eager to gain skills in livelihoods to nourish their communities.

Historically, Central Asia has relied on Russia for trade and economic resources. However, Putin's unprovoked and unjust war in Ukraine is threatening food security and economic stability.

Today, Central Asia is coping with economic challenges such as soaring inflation and commodity shortages. Many vulnerable families have less to spend on food and struggle to meet their basic nutrition needs.

In Tajikistan, the situation is quite heartbreaking. Only
40 percent of children under two have enough food for healthy growth. The World Food Programme expects 800,000 more Tajiks to face severe food insecurity in the coming months if Putin continues his blockade on Ukrainian wheat.

In line with the U.S.-Central Asia strategy and the Biden administration priorities, USAID is mobilizing assistance in multiple areas.

First, we'll continue to provide food and nutrition assistance. USAID is responding to urgent food needs and supporting agricultural productivity. We're helping vulnerable households grow nutritious food and we're providing cash in exchange for work so people can earn a livable income.

We're also supporting Uzbek fertilizer producers so they can increase exports to Central Asian neighbors.

Second, we're supporting and spurring economic growth through diversification. USAID helps partners diversify trade routes, bolster regional connectivity, and boost competitiveness with access to new markets. This creates new jobs and improves incomes.

We're helping Uzbekistan modernize their tax systems and business models, elevating their World Trade Organization candidacy. Further, USAID helped launch Namba Market, which is the Kyrgyz Republic's first online grocery store. This will revolutionize the way people shop and help increase access to
We're also bolstering health systems. As the region emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic our programs are helping communities prepare for future crises. We donated nearly 11 million adult COVID-19 vaccine doses with pediatric doses on the way.

We're also saving lives by combating tuberculosis, as Central Asia makes up a substantial portion of the world's TB cases.

We will also continue to build on climate resilience. Central Asia holds enormous clean energy potential. With our support, Tajikistan opened its first solar power plant, connecting thousands of Tajiks with clean renewable energy, and in Kazakhstan our support has helped the government leverage nearly $2 billion in private sector investment for renewable energy projects.

And we also support education reform. Central Asia has made great strides in education, adapting during the pandemic so children can continue learning online and in their native language.

Tajikistan reached a milestone last year when children's literacy improved by 80 percent in USAID supported schools. And, lastly, we will continue to strengthen democratic institutions and make them more inclusive. In Uzbekistan, USAID introduced innovative ways to enable underserved and remote populations to
access legal services. And we also support independent media
who counter dangerous myths and disinformation.

USAID recognizes the unparalleled interest from Central
Asian governments in partnering with us right now and will
continue to respond to urgent needs in Central Asia like the
current food and economic crises.

We'll make the best use of every assistance dollar to improve
lives, and as Putin's war continues, regional cooperation will
be crucial to helping the region increase economic
diversification, prosperity, and stability.

We look forward to deepening ties with our Central Asian
partners as they chart their own path forward to fill their
potential.

Thank you.

[The statement of Ms. Kaur follows:]
Mr. Bera. Thank you, Deputy Assistant Administrator Kaur.

Let me now invite Deputy Assistant Secretary De Falco to give his testimony.
STATEMENT OF DAVID DE FALCO

Mr. De Falco. Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak at this timely hearing.

The International Trade Administration is committed to building a more prosperous economy by strengthening the competitiveness of U.S. industry and workers, promoting trade and investment, encouraging high standards for safety, health, labor, and the environment, respecting human rights, and enforcing fair trade rules and practices.

Our work is grounded in the conviction that economic security is national security. Between the economic disruptions of COVID-19 and that consequences of Russia's unlawful war in Ukraine, the importance of economic security is clearer today than ever before.

At the same time, our security depends on our competitiveness, which means ensuring fair and open markets, expanding export opportunities, especially for small and medium sized enterprises, and doubling down on investments into the United States.

Eurasia is the front line of our competing Europe and Eurasia strategy, which aims to help U.S. companies compete successfully and counter growing nonmarket economic activity in the region.
The region represents an opportunity for U.S. companies to offer superior technology without the types of geopolitical strings we see attached to the People's Republic of China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's regional economic initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to new economic challenges for the Central Asian countries. But even in this context, underlying U.S. competitive advantages remain, largely, unchanged.

U.S. companies are finding more receptive audiences as countries seek to avoid secondary effects of international sanctions and export controls and look for alternative trade routes to diversify trading partners and engage dependable Western supply chains.

The Department of Commerce began a commercial dialogue with Uzbekistan's Ministry of Investments in Foreign Trade to discuss opportunities and address market access challenges. We recently launched a similar dialogue with Kazakhstan's Ministry of Trade and Integration and we expanded our presence in Kazakhstan by adding a second commercial officer in Almaty.

As a means of increasing engagement with host governments and raise U.S. company awareness, we rolled out a series of multi-market virtual events. As a result of this activity, we
assisted an increasing number of companies enter or expand in the region.

Our Special American Business Internship Training program, or SABIT, leverages relationships with the U.S. business community to spur contacts with business managers throughout Eurasia to help give them tools that they can employ in their own enterprises.

Additionally, the Commerce Department continues regional technical assistance through its Commercial Law Development Program, or CLDP. CLDP works closely with Central Asian governments on subjects critical to trade, such as anti-corruption, customs facilitation, digital trade, cybersecurity, women's economic empowerment, and intellectual property rights protection and enforcement.

Through our work with the private sector -- with private sector partners and our network of domestic offices, we maintain a dialogue with U.S. companies to inform them of market opportunities for exports.

Our work supports U.S. government priorities including alternative routes for transit of goods and commodities, resiliency of global supply chains and human rights due diligence, better environmental stewardship, and adoption of renewable energy options.

We are taking a proactive approach to strengthen our
relationships and support American businesses. We will hold training sessions focused on U.S. trade policies and best practices for counterparts posted to Eurasian country embassies in Washington, D.C.

This fall, Undersecretary for International Trade Marisa Lago will conduct a weeklong visit to Central Asia, visiting Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This will be the first high-level visit by a Commerce official to the region in several years.

In addition, Central Asia is integral to the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment Initiative launched in collaboration with our G-7 partners last summer. This initiative aims to tackle immense unmet infrastructure needs in a way that promotes high standards and creates jobs at home.

While we are cognizant of the challenges U.S. businesses face in a region that has long been influenced by Russia and is seeing increased PRC economic activity, we believe that American companies are second to none when it comes to quality, value, customer service, and technological advancement.

My thanks, once again, for the opportunity to share with you some of the work we are doing to support U.S. companies in Central Asia, and I look forward to our discussion.

Thank you.

[The statement of Mr. De Falco follows:]
531 **********COMMITTEE INSERT**********
Mr. Bera. Thank you for your testimony.

I will now recognize members for five minutes each, and pursuant to House rules, all time yielded is for the purposes of questioning our witnesses.

Because of the virtual format of this hearing, I will recognize members by committee seniority, alternating between Democrats and Republicans. If you miss your turn, please let our staff know and we will circle back to you. If you seek recognition, you must unmute your microphone and address the chair verbally.

I will start by recognizing myself.

Deputy Secretary Lu, you touched on it a little bit in your opening statement. U.S. trade with four of the five Central Asian countries is still governed by the Jackson-Vanik amendment which denies normal trade relations status to some current and former nonmarket economies unless they adhere to certain freedom of immigration requirements.

I was in Uzbekistan last year and two of my -- our colleagues, Congressmen Panetta and Suozzi, were recently in the region as well I was chatting with them, and they've submitted a letter of support of repeal of Jackson-Vanik, and without objection, I'd like to enter that letter for the record.

[The information follows:]
Mr. Bera.  But in that light, let me ask a couple of questions.

What would the significance be of repealing Jackson-Vanik for Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan?  What kind of impact might it have on trade and diplomatic relations and are there any reasons not to grant permanent normal trade relations status to these countries?

Mr. Lu.  Chairman Bera, thank you for this important question.  The administration believes that Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have met the requirements within the amendment so that those countries should be able to graduate from Jackson-Vanik.  They do not restrict the immigration of their citizens abroad.

What these countries complain to us about is that this law continues to view them through the lens of the Soviet Union, and they would like to be acknowledged as independent states consistent with our policies in the region.

To your latter question about what would be the result, I firmly believe that were we to exclude them from applicability under this amendment that there would be a boost to both trade with these three countries as well as business climate and investment opportunities for American investors.

Mr. Bera.  Mr. De Falco, would you like to add anything or -- from the Commerce perspective?
Mr. De Falco. No, we obviously support the State Department in this activity.

I would just add that I think the steps taken would provide the certainty that the business community would like just it reinforces the points made by my colleagues at the State Department.

Mr. Bera. Let me go ahead and ask a second question.

Secretary Lu, you alluded to some of the potential coming debt obligations within the region to the PRC, and we have seen, you know, some of the debt financing, you know, most recently the challenges that Sri Lanka is facing.

And, you know, without asking you to quantify the amount of debt, you know, as we think about that coming debt -- some of the economic coercion that the PRC often will use in these scenarios -- could you maybe expand a little bit on that and then, perhaps, some strategies that, you know, we can do, you know, either through USAID, GFC, and others to help address some of these concerns?

Mr. De Falco. I'll speak about the Kyrgyz Republic where I left there just over a year ago.

The Kyrgyz Republic now owes almost half of its external debt to one country, to the EXIM Bank of China. That debt was accumulated -- $1.8 billion -- over the term of a single corrupt president of Kyrgyzstan.
Coming -- the peak of those debt payments will start in 2024, just two years from now, and if not rescheduled those debt payments will represent 40 percent of the government's budget, completely unsustainable for a country that has just enough money to get by every year.

What are we going to do to assist? Well, the government of the Kyrgyz Republic is aware it has a problem. They haven't taken any new debt since 2017 because they can see the tsunami of debt repayment that they're facing.

For the development of the Kyrgyz Republic, we, the United States, the Europeans, the Japanese, the Republic of Korea, other partners, need to stand forward to provide development assistance.

We have already in the case the Kyrgyz Republic provided $2.2 billion in development assistance, largely, through USAID. That's in opposition to the Chinese that have loaned, roughly, an equivalent amount of money that they expect to be repaid.

Mr. Bera. Ms. Kaur, would you like to expand?

Ms. Kaur. Yes, thank you.

Just building on what Assistant Secretary mentioned, our focus in USAID is to make sure that we provide alternative financing options -- we build out the investment climate in the region specifically -- and there's a great example in the Kyrgyz Republic which we helped the Bakai Bank, which is a local Kyrgyz
bank to obtain an international credit rating from Moody's Investor Services, and so by doing that -- it's the only local bank to have that international rating -- they were able to get $6 million from an investment firm in Germany.

That's helping small and medium enterprises. So we continue to work on the investment climate across all five countries and hope to be able to provide alternatives and build out the industry sectors that are in those countries to be more independent.

Mr. Bera. Thank you for that, and we'll continue to look forward to working with State as -- you know, to make sure that some of these countries don't end up in the situation that Sri Lanka finds itself in today.

Let me now recognize the ranking member, Mr. Chabot, for five minutes of questioning.

Mr. Chabot. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Assistant Secretary Lu, back in 2021, senior Biden administration officials repeatedly said that they were in talks with Central Asian nations about hosting or providing access to bases for U.S. military personnel to conduct intelligence gathering and counterterrorism missions in Afghanistan as part of the so-called over the horizon strategy.

Do we have any such basing agreements, and if not, why did the administration's negotiations efforts fail?

Mr. Lu. Mr. Chabot, we have no basing agreements in Central
Mr. Chabot. And so if I could follow up, so when we do send drones or planes or anything else from vast distances, the fact that you have to go such a length of time there's a limited fuel that you can have within that aerial vehicle makes it less effective. You can't loiter over a target.

Doesn't mean we can't do anything. Obviously, we have got Zawahiri who was, again, as I said, brazenly out on his balcony in the middle of the day, which essentially showed that the president's remarks about al-Qaeda not being in Afghanistan and the fact that it wouldn't be a haven for terrorists anymore, clearly, al-Qaeda is there. The leader of al Qaeda was on his own porch.

Yes, we got him and I commend the administration for getting him so, yes, we're not completely ineffective, but these vast distances and no agreements with the countries in the region that makes us and our allies more vulnerable, doesn't it?

Mr. Lu. Mr. Chabot, I, certainly, agree that it takes longer for these aircraft to reach Afghanistan and their loiter time is not as long. I would say that the U.S. military has resources to compensate for that. They fly more missions as a result. But it is, as you suggest, not as efficient as --

Mr. Chabot. We do, but it just makes it a heck of a lot harder for them to do their jobs, and the fact that most of the
president's military -- top military people, despite what the
president said, that he couldn't remember -- you know, that nobody
suggested that we ought to leave 2,500 or 4,500 or something there
to secure the progress that we had made, you know, when you pull
everybody out and they're not there we don't have the resources
there.

And the women of that country -- I mean, Afghanistan has
about 40 billion people. More than half of those are women or
girls. I mean, they're living in something approaching a seventh
century form of slavery at this point and that's, to me, the most
discouraging, disconcerting, depressing thing of all is those
people who relied upon us. You know, we literally just pulled
out and left them hanging and that never should have happened.

Well, I'm going to move on to another question, if I can.
Let me just follow up, Mr. Lu, if I can. I'm particularly
concerned about how Beijing is using the Belt and Road Initiative
to bind the so-called Eurasian heartland to themselves.

So I'd like to know how much money are they investing in
Central Asia in critical infrastructure and what kind of projects
are receiving that investment currently?

Mr. Lu. Mr. Chabot, there -- the bulk of the Belt and Road
Initiative money that's been invested in Central Asia has been
invested in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two of the poorest
countries in the region.

What the Chinese have built are a lot of roads to nowhere, right. The Chinese aren't worried about market forces. They're not worried about profitability. They're not worried about bottom lines. They're worried about the coercive pressure that they can exert over these countries.

So they offer nontransparent loans for huge infrastructure projects that often come in way over budget and use, largely, Chinese labor. What I saw was a lot of push back from the people of Central Asia. There were violent protests. There were looting of Chinese businesses. There was violence against Chinese workers.

All that to say I think the Central Asians can see what's going on here and that they can see the exploitative tactics of the People's Republic.

Mr. Chabot. Thank you. And then I've got limited time.

So as I mentioned earlier, I'm the -- one of the co-chairs of the bipartisan Kazakhstan Caucus and a key pillar of our ties is the economic engagement, and I would just encourage the administration to continue to deepen those ties in -- as well as with Uzbekistan, all the countries in the region.

I mean, we really do need to have an important presence there. It's a very critical part of the world and gets too little
attention, really. Deserves a lot more, and it's in our interest
to do that -- the United States' interest.

And I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Bera. I wholeheartedly agree with you on that.

Mr. Chabot. Thank you.

Mr. Bera. Let me now recognize the gentleman from
Pennsylvania, Mr. Perry, for five minutes of questioning.

Mr. Perry. Thank you very much, Chairman Bera.

Secretary Lu, thank you for attending, especially on this
topical moment with Xi Jinping visiting the region in his first
trip abroad since the start of the pandemic.

I think it's impossible to discuss fentanyl without
mentioning China at this point. Though Mexico clearly plays a
role in producing and smuggling fentanyl -- laced pills and other
forms through the currently wide open southern border, China
remains the source of fentanyl -- related substances, precursors,
et cetera, traffic into the United States, and that's according
to the DEA.

The PRC has not so tacitly acknowledged the deadliness of
this export by officially, and I'll put this in quotes,
"controlling" all forms of fentanyl in 2019.

Tragically, however, everybody on this dais of this Congress
likely knows firsthand the scourge of fentanyl and fentanyl --
related substances on communities around our nation. I think
it's probably impacted every single one of us and every single one of us can cite some family or someone we personally know or knew of that's no longer here because of fentanyl. To me, it should be in all of our best interests to ensure that we're doing the most we can to stop the threat wherever it rears its ugly head.

And, Mr. Lu, I sincerely hope you and your staff are treating this issue with the grave seriousness it deserves, and if you are I hate to inform you that you're fighting an uphill battle against the parts of this administration that thought handing out crack pipes and putting a welcome banner at the southern border were smart policy decisions.

They're not smart and the effect is obvious. That all being said, Secretary, what steps are you -- are you taking to counter Chinese production of fentanyl and fentanyl -- related substances in Central Asia?

My constituents -- my bosses -- who have been cruelly affected by this menace would love to know that somebody, that anybody, in this administration is addressing this threat.

Sir?

Mr. Lu. Representative Perry, thank you.

Central Asia is a major drug corridor. It has been for decades. Many U.S. administrations, Republican and Democrat, have worked on this problem. The USDA has a presence in
Kazakhstan covering the broader region. I have personally been involved with the declaration of war against drug kingpins working in Central Asia when I was serving as ambassador.

We upped the reward for Kamchy Kolbayev, one of the top drug traffickers in the world. He is on our Rewards for Justice program. He's part of the Russian organized crime group called the Brothers' Circle and he readily transships drugs from Afghanistan, from China, through Central Asia, through then Russia into European markets.

It is a horrific problem on a scale that, I think, we do not comprehend. We are putting lots of resources to this fight. I wish I could say we were winning it.

I agree with your assessment that drug trade continues unimpeded, in large part, because of corruption within the region.

Mr. Perry. What -- if I might be so bold, what metrics are you using to determine the effectiveness of your actions? I mean, I think we all get it, but getting it is immaterial if there aren't successful results.

The American people demand results. We want this to end, and so we need to see if -- we appreciate your sincerity and your efforts. But if they're for naught, then we got to try something else. We must do something else. We must have an impact. How are you measuring what you're doing and the effectiveness of it?
Mr. Lu. The main metric used by the U.S. government is looking at seizures of drugs. But, of course, seizures of drugs can tell you one of two things. Either you're getting more of the drugs or there's a greater quantity flowing and then you're getting either the same amount or even a smaller amount of those drugs being intercepted.

As I suggested to you, the main corridor through Central Asia goes right through Russia, facilitated by our friends in the FSB all the way into European markets. Some of that will end up in the United States but the majority hits European Union economies.

And so we have fairly reliable information from our EU partners about what they're picking up on the border --

Mr. Perry. Look, with all due respect, I mean, yeah, we're concerned about the European Union, but we're representatives of the United States of America and our citizens and I'm concerned about what's coming across our southern border.

And, of course, seizures is up -- seizures are up, and by my count 70,000 Americans died last year from fentanyl poisoning. I mean, it might be considered chemical warfare that the Chinese are using against America and we need your robust consideration and attention to this issue.

That's 70,000 funerals that families of Americans had to attend and, quite honestly, this administration is asleep. You
might not be. But they're either asleep or they're aiding and abetting the mass murder of Americans.

I yield. Thank you.

Mr. Bera. Let me now recognize the gentlelady from Nevada, Ms. Titus, for five minutes of questioning.

Ms. Titus. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to talk a little bit about what USAID is doing to parallel some of the economic growth and development efforts in some of these countries in Central Asia.

We know that as economic development has steadily risen human rights protections, unfortunately, have remained flat or even lagged. You can just look at some of the examples.

Uzbekistan, homosexuality is criminalized and LGBTQI communities are targeted and harassed and tortured or brutalized in some way.

Tajikistan, the government routine targets minority groups and independent media sources, and across the region there are peaceful protests often met by government aggression and prison and violence.

So I wonder, Administrator Kaur, as you looked at USAID efforts economically what are you doing to parallel that to help support civil society and protection of minority rights and kind of democratic principles?

Ms. Kaur. Thank you for your question, Representative
We work with both our interagency and our host governments specifically to advocate for the rights, freedoms, and protections where possible, and a lot of our work is imposing on greater accountability for the governments to defend human rights.

And so, therefore, we invest in civil society organizations. We invest in media outlets. We invest in lawyers to make sure that they can defend outlets and journalists who are threatened who are speaking out about human rights violations.

And we're working currently with President Tokayev of Kazakhstan, specifically, on his reform agenda, which is working towards political modernization and human rights reform.

We're working on investing and promoting democracy and making sure that we're elevating human rights across all of our programming. We invest in counter trafficking, increasing women's political empowerment, specifically.

We have been helping specific organizations like in Kyrgyz Republic for Women's Democracy Network, which is identifying female candidates that they can run for elections and be able to represent the needs of that population that's not often represented.

We're combating gender-based violence. We're countering corruption through increased transparency and accountability.
Those are a number of the things that we're doing to make sure that there's increased space for both civil society and for independent media across the region.

Ms. Titus. I know that's the case and I like to hear you lay it all out there because I find that you do so much with so little and that it makes such a great difference. I'm on the House Democracy Partnership.

In some of these countries where we visited, we see your work on the ground, especially, like, where you empower women to be candidates and be engaged in the political process because we know in a lot of these countries women are the agents of change, and so thank you for those efforts.

You mentioned Kazakhstan. I'm the co-chair of that caucus with Mr. Chabot. He mentioned it a little bit. But would you kind of elaborate maybe on how the current administration seems to maybe have weathered the storm and they're moving forward with their agenda?

Ms. Kaur. I'm going to defer to Assistant Secretary Lu, who's closely working on that.

Ms. Titus. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Lu. You mentioned the storm. In January, there were -- there was violent protests that began with a reaction to a fuel price increase but spiraled very quickly into elite infighting within Kazakhstan trying to seek power.
Over 200 people killed, 12,000 people arrested. What's interesting is that President Tokayev has tried at the same time as this is all going on to institute political and economic reforms, and what we have seen is the release of virtually every one of those 12,000 detainees.

A handful of people now are still in prison and they're facing criminal charges, and we have called on the government to make sure that they are transparent and observed open court processes.

What we have seen, interestingly, too, is not only criminal charges against violent protesters, we have now also seen criminal charges against some of the police and other security forces that were involved in abuses in January.

So actually quite impressive for this region. We don't normally see such an impressive response and listening to the human rights community. But we can see some real progress here.

Ms. Titus. Well, that's good. I'm glad to hear that.

And I know that some of the NGOs supported by USAID often work on constitutional reform and I suspect that's the case here, too.

Mr. Lu. I know that NGOs supported by the U.S. government, including USAID, have worked on constitutional reform throughout the region.

Ms. Titus. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.
Mr. Bera. Thank you. Let me now recognize the gentlelady from Missouri, Mrs. Wagner, for five minutes of questioning.

Mrs. Wagner. I thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I, certainly, thank our witnesses for their time and their service.

For too many years U.S. engagement in Central Asia has been kind of narrowly focused on Afghanistan and its related security challenges.

Today, after the Biden administration's disastrous withdrawal and the fall of Afghanistan, the United States badly needs to revamp its strategy towards Central Asia and adopt a more, I think, proactive and targeted posture.

Central Asia, as we know, is rich in natural resources and critical minerals and strategically situated, as we have discussed, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia.

If U.S. policymakers treat Central Asia like an afterthought, I fear that China and Russia will be quick to further solidify their influence in the region. This would be a colossal missed opportunity, especially given recent signs of growing skepticism among Central Asian countries towards Russia and China.

The United States must engage more seriously with Central Asian governments and demonstrate that America should be the region's partner of choice. Gas prices remain sky high across the U.S., and Europe is also facing down and impending energy
disaster this winter.

We need to be thinking seriously today about long-term solutions for Europe's energy supply problems or we will all continue to suffer shortages and high prices.

While I wish we could be sending American LNG to Europe, that's not the case under this administration. There are many in Europe and America that have pointed to Central Asia as a possible alternate source of energy for Europe as it seeks to end its dependence on Russian oil and gas.

Central Asia, for its part, appears interested in expanding energy trade with Europe.

Deputy Assistant De Falco -- Secretary De Falco, what are the key barriers to expanded oil and gas trade between Europe and Central Asia and how is the U.S. working to reduce those barriers?

Mr. De Falco. Ma'am, I'll defer to Assistant Secretary Lu on the energy issue but I will touch on the economic reform efforts.

We could not agree with you more at the Department of Commerce that we need to be more active in Central Asia, and we have recently launched direct dialogues with our counterpart ministries in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and we recognize that we need -- they recognize they need partners.

And the ranking member had it right. I think freedom of
choice, freedom to make those decisions, the alternative that
our companies offer is there as a counter to China and a counter
to Russia.

So we are definitely focused on those activities in the
region from an economic perspective, bringing more companies in,
but in partnership with those governments and building stronger,
newer ties to make sure that that infrastructure that's necessary
exists.

But on the energy issue, Mr. Assistant Secretary?

Mrs. Wagner. Thank you. Secretary?

Mr. Lu. The Kazakh president, President Tokayev, has issued
an order to his ministers to find alternative routes to get Kazakh
energy out of the country, given Russia's throttling of export
of energy through the CPC pipeline.

So Kazakhstan is looking at the possibility of transshipping
oil across the Caspian through Azerbaijan and Georgia out to
markets around the world. It could also go to China, but China,
of course, is a single market for energy. If you send it to China,
they just consume all of it at whatever price they determine.
It's not a world price.

So the smart money is on getting it out through the Caspian.
We are actively involved in that discussion. There's also a
parallel discussion about Turkmengaz. Turkmengaz have long
talked about putting their natural gas through a pipe, getting
it into the southern corridor and to feed markets in Europe.

Mrs. Wagner. Good. Well, I'm glad that the U.S. is working to reduce those barriers. I think it's a great alternative.

China's appalling persecution of ethnic minority groups including Uighurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, informs its policy towards Central Asian countries.

Assistant Secretary Lu, how does Central Asia view the horrifying Chinese campaign to eradicate the Uighurs and how do Central Asian countries plan to respond to China's multiple human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and are there opportunities for closer collaboration between the U.S. and the region on this issue?

Mr. Lu. We are working closely with all of the governments in the region about the issues in Xinjiang, both to encourage them to condemn the genocide going on with respect to Uighurs but also providing safe haven to ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs who are fleeing that part of the world.

Mrs. Wagner. Thank you. I'm out of time.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Bera. Thank you. Let me now recognize the gentlelady from North Carolina, Ms. Manning, for five minutes of questioning.

Ms. Manning. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses. We appreciate your being here with us today.

Assistant Secretary Lu, can you talk a little bit more about
the current regional perception of Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the impact that war is having on this region?

Mr. Lu. I do think there was an expectation in Moscow that with the CSTO response to violence in Kazakhstan in January that he was owed support by Central Asians to support his illegal war in Ukraine, and I think Mr. Putin was quite surprised to find Central Asians are not lining up to send their troops to join this fight.

I think the Central Asians see what we all see, which is body bags of young Russian soldiers returning home, and they do not want to be part of a war that is both illegitimate but also would result in tremendous domestic pressure at home.

All these countries have excellent relations with Ukraine. None of them want to see this war continue. I think they're caught between a rock and a hard place because they have strong economic interests with Russia.

One of the interesting things now that's going on is a discussion between the United States, Europe, Japan, Australia, other partners, with respect to sanctions. These countries are very keen to avoid being the target of secondary sanctions, and this is, certainly, not our intention either.

These sanctions are geared to stop Putin's war by targeting Russians and Russian institutions and we are working day and night with Central Asians to make sure that they understand the
sanctions, that they are able to live within them, and they are
not being made victim to them.

Ms. Manning. So you mentioned the lifting of the
Jackson-Vanik and also normalizing trade relations with
Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan to help stabilize the region.

Is that something that is being contemplated, particularly
in light of what's going on with Russia and Ukraine and how do
you think that those steps will be viewed by Russia?

Mr. Lu. Russians are very worried every time we engage
Central Asia. They view this part of the world as their backyard
and believe that no other countries have a right to have relations
with this part of the world.

I think they would feel very threatened by us normalizing
our trade relationship with Central Asia. We already do
tremendous business with a couple of the major economies in
Central Asia.

We're the number two investor in Kazakhstan. We do lots
of trade of goods and services with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

We could do more. Lifting Jackson-Vanik restrictions would
almost instantaneously boost the competitiveness of American
businesses in this part of the world.

Ms. Manning. And you mentioned -- well, we all know about
the significant Russian disinformation that is being spread
throughout the region. What steps are we taking to counter the impact of disinformation in these countries?

Mr. Lu. What we know is it's very hard to disprove falsehoods, and so what we have focused on with our resources is telling a positive story about our engagement.

Every time the Russians go after us with some false story we put in the media stories about what we're doing to support the people of the region, supporting local culture, local language, as opposed to Russian language and Russian culture, what we're doing to support education of young people, promotion of small and medium sized businesses.

We are doing so much with our USAID colleagues, our Department of Commerce colleagues, to promote the welfare of people in the region and we can continue to do a better job telling that story.

Ms. Manning. Thanks so much.

Ms. Kaur. Can I add to that really quickly, just from USAID?

Ms. Manning. Yes.

Ms. Kaur. Because misinformation and disinformation is a really important aspect for us and we strengthen independent media. We strengthen access to unbiased information. We strengthen media and information literacy across the population as a whole because that's a really important component.

In Kyrgyz Republic specifically, we supported 13 media
outlets to be able to generate their own local content. That's 65 percent more content -- local content. That is less content that they would be consuming from Kremlin-sponsored TV and radio.

These are the important steps that we feel like we need to take to be able to create a larger space for local media and local languages.

Thank you.

Ms. Manning. Thank you so much. I was going to ask you next, Ms. Kaur, whether you could give us specific examples of success of the work that you are -- that USAID is doing in that area and how are they evaluating impact.

I think my time is about to expire, and you gave me some good information without my having to ask. So I yield back.

Mr. Bera. Great. Thank you.

Let me now recognize the gentleman from Kentucky, Mr. Barr, for five minutes of questioning.

Mr. Barr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the hearing and thank you to our witnesses.

Secretary Lu, let me start with you. I just returned from a congressional delegation -- bipartisan congressional delegation trip to Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia, and as you well know, they have a policy -- a third neighbor policy and they want the United States to be that third neighbor.
Do any of these other Central Asian countries view the United States in a similar vein? Are they interested in a third neighbor approach to serve as a counterweight to the influence of China and Russia?

Mr. Lu. So I've spent almost a decade of my life working on this region and six years living there. Boy, do they wish they could move.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Lu. It's a tough neighborhood.

Mr. Barr. It is a tough neighborhood.

Mr. Lu. You got Iran. You got Russia. You got China. And they also often have disagreements amongst themselves.

What I always say as an American diplomat is we're a great partner because we're not anywhere close to you. We don't have territorial claims on your lands. We don't want some trade access because we want to illegally move commodities through your borders.

What we really want is for your economies to work with our businesses to create prosperity for our people and for their people. We want them to have democratic growth in their systems so they will be a long-term partner for the United States and provide stability and security.

So I think all five of them wants closer relations with the United States. Secretary Blinken will be meeting with the five
foreign ministers of these countries next week on the margins of the U.N. General Assembly. They will be recommitting to that desire to have closer relations with the U.S.

Mr. Barr. How do these Central Asian states view the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Xi and Putin's efforts to transform the group into an anti-Western alliance? How do you assess Central Asian states' attitude toward Putin and Xi's attendance at this week's gathering of the SCO?

Mr. Lu. What I find so interesting as an American is watching the interplay at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization between the Russians and the Chinese. You know, they are purportedly these great partners, allies now. But they're not really when it comes down to working with the Central Asians. This is a place where they compete, and the SCO has Russia, has China, and the five Central Asian partners and they're all competing for the attention and influence of these five.

And so Russia is busy undercutting the Chinese in terms of commercial interest and the Chinese are trying to get into the door doing a little security and political work in Central Asia, much to the chagrin of our Russian friends. So it is an interesting dance.

Mr. Barr. Assistant Secretary, are any of these countries
more out front than others in terms of enabling sanctions evasion -- the sanctions on Russian banks or --

Mr. Lu. I would maybe say the opposite. What I can see today is the Kazakhs are really good at using our sanctions -- when I say ours I mean EU, Japanese, Australia, and Korea -- all of the partner country sanctions to get economic benefit for Kazakh people.

Two major Russian banks, the biggest banks in Kazakhstan, are now Kazakh banks and the Kazakh new owners got them at rock bottom prices thanks to our sanctions.

Mr. Lu. Sir, two other quick questions because I'm running out of time.

On natural gas, obviously, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all produce significant volumes of natural gas. Are these countries viable alternatives to Russian gas for the European market?

Mr. Lu. We, certainly, believe that more Turkmengaz could be put into the pipe that goes through Europe and help to solve part of Europe's energy problems.

Europe needs to figure that out for itself, however. The European Union has not yet said they want the gas. I think the Turkmen are interested in selling it. We are working with the EU to send a clear message.

Mr. Barr. And maybe State and Commerce and, perhaps, even
DFC could work in ways to bolster that potential relationship to decrease Western Europe's dependence on Russia.

A final question, just to follow-up. Ranking Member Chabot's question about our ISR capabilities on the over the horizon strategy post withdrawal from Afghanistan, why did the Biden administration, at least to date, fail to get basing agreements with some of the Central Asian countries?

I know we don't have those agreements yet. But we have this over horizon strategy. What needs to be done?

Mr. Lu. I worked in Kyrgyzstan, a place where we had an American base for 13 years. I would say, as an American diplomat, we have different needs today, and the Biden administration has made a commitment that we will continue to have this capability over Afghanistan and that capability is continuing today.

Mr. Barr. Yield. Thank you.

Mr. Bera. Okay. Let me now recognize the gentleman from California, Mr. Sherman, for five minutes of questioning.

Mr. Sherman. Thank you.

My first question is about who we're focusing on in Afghanistan -- people who want to come here to the United States. There are, literally, millions of Afghans who either served in the military or are families of the military who were actively engaged in trying to shoot people in the Taliban for many years, and most of them don't speak English and most of them don't apply.
And then there are Afghans who have worked with us directly, often who do speak English, who have American friends.

Is there a reason to think that the Taliban is more likely to oppress those who may have helped in, say, a foreign aid project as opposed to those who don't speak English, perhaps don't have any American friends, can't really make an appeal to us but we're engaged in trying to kill their soldiers?

Ambassador Lu?

Mr. Lu. Representative Sherman, we are very concerned about the safety of Afghan partners who have worked with us over these 20 years Afghanistan. What we can see right now --

Mr. Sherman. Does that include the many -- well over a million who served at one time or another in the Afghan military together with their families? Or is it focused more on those who played important bureaucratic and translation roles?

Mr. Lu. So the current prioritization is for American citizens, legal permanent residents, and those who work directly with U.S. government, with the military --

Mr. Sherman. That's really what I'm questioning.

Mr. Lu. -- worked with the embassy.

Mr. Sherman. Is the Taliban more likely to kill or oppress somebody because they worked with the U.S. government or because they worked with an organization dedicated to killing Taliban
soldiers, namely, the Afghan military?

Mr. Lu. Representative Sherman, absolutely. What we have seen in terms of retaliatory killings has been targeting of former government of Afghanistan security forces and senior officials in the government.

We have seen relatively much fewer targeting of people who formerly worked for the U.S. government.

Mr. Sherman. So they're -- so the targeting is mostly those who worked in the Afghan military rather than those who worked, say, with a U.S. NGO?

Mr. Lu. Military intelligence and government officials.

Mr. Sherman. Gotcha. Kind of unfair because I know you're here to talk about Central Asia, but I've got a Pakistan question.

Mr. Lu. We love your Pakistan questions.

Mr. Sherman. Oh, well, you'll love this one. Okay.

The Pakistani people will choose a new leader or have elections in the, you know, well less than a year. Can we get along with either a Kahn-led government or a Sharif-led government? Or do we -- would we have difficulty if the Pakistanis chose one over the other?

Mr. Lu. Representative Sherman, we have said publicly and I will repeat that the United States government will work with whatever government in Pakistan is elected by the people of Pakistan.
Mr. Sherman. Thank you.

Picking up on the natural gas question raised by a colleague, does Russia have the political power to press Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan to not to sell natural gas to Europe?

Mr. Lu. That remains to be seen, Representative Sherman.

I think the Russians are working very hard to prevent these independent states from making decisions that are in their economic and political best interests. So we are ourselves trying to balance against that --

Mr. Sherman. And the Kazakh gas would have to flow through pipelines that actually pass through Russia, but Turkmenistan gas would not? Is that the physical layout of the pipelines?

Mr. Lu. Pipelines are complicated things, Representative Sherman. In theory, there could be a Kazakh pipe across the Caspian. It would be much longer --

Mr. Sherman. Well, the pipelines that currently exist. Hopefully, the war will be over before we build any new pipelines from scratch. But go --

Mr. Lu. There are no existing pipelines that do not transit Russian territory that go from Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan to Europe. There are pipes that go to China from that region.

Mr. Sherman. Gotcha. I yield back.

Mr. Bera. Great. Let me now recognize the gentlelady from California, Mrs. Kim, for five minutes of questioning.
Mrs. Kim of California. Thank you very much, Chairman and Ranking Member Chabot, for holding this very, very important hearing, and I want to thank all of our witnesses for joining us today.

With the -- following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and as we continue to discuss various ways to counter PRC's malign influence using the Belt and Road Initiative that they have, it's become much more clear than ever how we must engage more with the Central Asian countries.

And, Secretary Lu, you mentioned, the C5+1 framework that was launched during the previous administration, and our Secretary Blinken has also hosted a meeting just recently, you know, with those C5+1 to discuss the Afghanistan withdrawal and COVID-19 relief, among others.

So I wanted to ask you has the United States built on that framework since the invasion of Ukraine, and are you finding that Central Asian countries are more willing to engage as they feel the economic repercussions from the invasion?

Mr. Lu. Thank you very much for the question. Excellent question.

So I've been in my job for just about a year, and the meeting that will occur next week will be the third ministerial level meeting of the C5+1 -- first one focused on the Taliban takeover of Kabul, second one focused on Russia's illegal and unjust
invasion of Ukraine, and the next one, interestingly, that will happen next week will be about how can we work together to mitigate some of the economic effects of that war.

I was in Central Asia with Anjali and other colleagues from the interagency and it's devastating. In Tajikistan this year, World Food Programme believes over 70 percent of population will experience food insecurity.

Seventy percent of people at some point this year will go hungry. The economies are shattered in many of these countries because of high fuel prices, high food prices, restricted ability for them to export their products.

Next week Secretary Blinken will talk to his counterparts about what are we doing -- what are we investing in order to help them through this really difficult time?

Anjali, I don't know if you want to add to that.

Ms. Kaur. I do. Just briefly here, what we have seen the greatest impacts have been it's affected trade routes, financial systems, remittances, which is a really important point for us to highlight -- remittances for millions of migrants that were previously living in Russia.

And so what we have seen is increase in consumer prices, increase -- decrease in household income, shortages in commodities across the region. So beyond food security, we're also seeing trade and the economy suffer and the economic
instability.

And so what we're trying to do in efforts then is to promote regional connectivity, strengthen the democratic institutions, advance the rule of law, respect for human rights, as always -- you know, develop human capital, which I think is really critical, foster economic growth, and stimulate joint climate action.

All of these priorities we find to be critical to eventually decouple Central Asia from the Russian economy, which should be our goal.

Mrs. Kim of California. Thank you very much for all of your efforts in that regard.

On that note, I wanted to talk to you about the status of the democracy promotion in Central Asia. That's where, I think, our focus also needs to be.

So could you tell us if there has been any meaningful progress on Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan's increased democratization?

Many years ago, I think, in the early or late -- mid-'90s and early 2000s, I traveled to that area and I still see the democracy that's taking place but it's not to where we would like to see it happen. So what is the status of that?

Ms. Kaur. Right. The status is that there's gradual movement and we continue to increase civic space and increase media space, both which are really critical to improve democratic norms and institution building as well.
So we would say, on Kazakhstan's front we are continuously working with the team to make sure President Tokayev's reform agenda is actually moving forward, that the political tenets are there for civil society to be able to have the space and civil liberties to enact the way forward and hold the government accountable and make sure his movements are transparent. So that's what we're doing there.

In Uzbekistan as well we're making movements and there's gradual progress. I won't say that there's amazing improvement, but we're hoping that we continue to work with our organizations on the ground at the local levels as much as the national levels to create change.

Thank you.

Mrs. Kim of California. I know we have very little time left but I do want to ask a question and maybe if we run out of time could you please provide the written response to my question regarding Afghanistan?

The status of Afghan nationals that have successfully left to our neighboring Central Asian states and remain there what are the -- you know, are there any Afghans seeking to transit to the United States? Because my office has helped several Afghan nationals that have successfully went to Canada.

If there are any Afghan nationals who want to come to United States what are you doing and how many of them are there? And,
you know, for others who are not seeking to transit to the United States, how are they being treated in those countries that have been successfully able to stay there, like in Pakistan, Uzbekistan?

Mr. Lu. We'll get you an answer.

Mrs. Kim of California. Thank you.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. Bera. Great. Thank you.

I'm going to use the chairman's prerogative. If the witnesses wouldn't all, just to ask a follow-up question, and I'll obviously allow the other members and the ranking member should you have any additional questions.

We touched a little bit on, you know, what's happening with Russia, Ukraine, energy needs in Europe, and, obviously, in the geopolitical strategy of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, getting Europe through this coming winter but also as Europe sees how Russia is using energy as, of course, of tool of war and Europe won't just be able to go to renewables and, you know, others on which we do have to look for other sources that are transition sources of energy.

That brings in Central Asia and, you know, Secretary Lu, you've alluded to some of the buildings there. I just have a quick question.

Does Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan from -- we have talked about
pipelines and, yeah, there would -- are there capacities that we could do in terms of LNG, helping them build capacities of LNG that -- you know, again, I don't know if that would be easy to move -- not my area of expertise -- but other mechanisms other than building a pipeline through the Caspian Sea to get some of this energy there and do we have the tools of aid and development, whether it's the DFC, EXIM Bank, to work with American companies to help build other energy capacities to get that energy to --

Mr. Lu. It's a great question.

ExxonMobil, Chevron, other American energy companies, are very actively involved in this discussion. The tricky part of it, as we have talked about, is pipelines. They don't exist across the Caspian.

So for the short term, at least in the case of Kazakhstan, we're talking about barges and tankers to transport oil and there's a limited number of ships in the Caspian Sea. You can't create those overnight. You have to build them in the Caspian Sea.

So a lot of the discussion now is where's the capacity, who owns those ships, how quickly can they be employed and how quickly can the Kazakhs come up with agreements with the Azeris to then once that oil reaches the port in Baku get it on rail cars or in pipelines or on tanker trucks across two markets.

We are involved carefully in these discussions. But I will
assure you American companies are involved very deeply.

Can we leverage GFC or other government resources? I would argue these are very profitable enterprises. I'm not sure you need government money to do this because it's only common sense that you would undertake this sort of export.

The real question is, politically, are these countries able to withstand Russian pressure to prevent export at routes that don't go through Russia.

Mr. Bera. And I guess that leads to a great follow-up question. What's your sense in terms of the current pressure Russia is exerting on these countries to limit their capacity to support Europe's energy needs and, you know, are there things we should be thinking about as Congress to continue to bolster support for these countries to be able to push back on Russian exertion but also to make sure this is done in the benefit of the Central Asian nations?

Mr. Lu. Well, every time I see an American delegation go to this part of the world, a week later a Russian delegation goes there, and then we send another American delegation. I think we're all tracking each other's movements very closely.

What I think would give comfort to the governments of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is the sense that we're in it for the long haul, that we're not a fair weather friend but that we, including our companies, are prepared to make a long-term
investment in their energy future.

So the more interaction by members of Congress with the governments of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in the near term that is possible, I think that would be an enormous contribution.

Mr. Bera. Great. Thank you for that.

Let me go ahead and recognize the ranking member, Mr. Chabot, if he's got any additional questions.

Mr. Chabot. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding what I think was a very important to hearing because as we said, this region -- and I think we agree on this region -- really has gotten too little attention in the past and, hopefully, we can remedy that in the future and I find it encouraging that our witnesses today agree that we should do that and it's of critical importance both to our security, the security of the people in the region and so many things.

So and then, finally, you know, not so much a question as, I guess, just a point that I'd like to make is just what a major blunder it was for the administration to be in such a rush to exit in Afghanistan that it didn't secure agreements with at least one or a couple of countries in the region to be able to conduct intelligence and surveillance and reconnaissance in the region to keep us safe and our allies safe and be able to project our power.

That was a huge blunder, as was leaving so much military
equipment and weaponry and vehicles in the country. Billions of dollars worth were left there with the Taliban to at some point, potentially, be used against us but more realistically probably against allies in the region, and then, finally, to be so much in a rush to get out that the president didn't keep his word to the women and girls of Afghanistan, almost 20 million human beings whose lives are now pretty much completely at the mercy of the Taliban, who -- some people bought the line that they were a new Taliban and they had been reformed, you know, and that they were going to be able to stay in school.

And maybe for a short period of time the Taliban didn't show their true face, but we knew who they were and this administration knew who they were, and the women and girls knew who they were and they warned us about this. And it's just a tragedy what has happened, again, especially with the women and girls of that country.

But, again, thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding the hearing. Appreciate it. Yield back.

Mr. Bera. So thank you to our members for their questions and to the witnesses for their responses. With member questions now concluded, let me just, again, thank the witnesses and share what I think about the ranking member and I feel about the region, that, you know, its own centrality, not as a pawn between, you know, other countries in the region, whether that's Russia or
I think, you know, I applaud the administration and I think in a bipartisan way Congress also supports increased engagement in Central Asia and the importance of that.

So we look forward to working with the administration, USAID, Commerce, and State as well as the others to continue to promote U.S. engagement, investment, and cooperation and diplomacy in the region.

And with that, I want to thank the ranking member and, again, thank our witnesses and the members who participated in this important hearing.

With that, the hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:37 a.m., the committee was adjourned.]