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The Asia-Pacific and the United States 2004–2005

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Central Asia and the United States 2004–2005: Moving Beyond Counter-Terrorism?

R O U B E N A Z I Z I A N

K E Y F I N D I N G S

- After September 11, the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have been cooperating with U.S.-led anti-terrorist efforts in Afghanistan by offering overflight or basing facilities to coalition forces. These states saw cooperation with the U.S., particularly its military presence, as the best way to eradicate their own Islamic extremists.
- Although the relationship that has developed between the Central Asian republics and the United States is mutually beneficial, it is also increasingly vulnerable as the ruling elites in Central Asia are more and more openly using the rhetoric of the war on terrorism to silence broader political opposition, delay or slowdown democratic reforms and prolong their corrupt practices.
- The Central Asian states have tried their best to ensure that the anti-terrorist agenda overshadows democratization and human rights in their discourse with the West. At the same time, any Western attempt to apply pressure on human rights issues causes serious resentment and pushes Central Asian governments towards closer ties with Russia and China.
- The insecure Central Asian governments are clearly alarmed by the wave of liberal reform unfolding in the post-Soviet space, particularly in Georgia and Ukraine, where they suspect Western—particularly U.S.—complicity. To prevent a similar scenario in their countries, they have lately taken a variety of calculated steps to discourage the United States and other Western nations from supporting the democratic opposition.
- U.S. diplomacy faces a serious dilemma in Central Asia. It continues to be a strategically important region in the campaign to halt the spread of radical Islamic ideology, in implementing America's plans for a global realignment of armed forces, and in monitoring the visibly more assertive Russian and Chinese presence. A serious destabilization of the region could have far-reaching geopolitical consequences and lead to possible great-power confrontation. At the same time, the potential for useful counter-terrorism cooperation between the United States and Central Asian states may be reaching its limits with the current authoritarian leadership, which considers its survival as the main priority to be protected at almost any price.

INTRODUCTION

The independence in 1991 of Central Asian states—here defined as the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—raised serious hope in the West that after decades of authoritarianism the countries of the region would lean toward a process of democratization. This expectation was based on several assumptions. Firstly, the impressive liberal beginning of Boris Yeltsin’s Russia suggested that other former Soviet republics might follow its example. Secondly, the appeal of religion and religious extremism were underestimated in view of the highly secular history of post-Soviet Central Asia. Thirdly, immediately after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre China seemed to be unattractive to Central Asia leaders as an alternative political model or strategic partner. However, these factors were seriously challenged by subsequent events. Russia soon revealed that it lacked the internal consensus and tradition of pluralism that would allow it to emulate the Western model of liberal democracy, and it started to examine more closely the Chinese and other Asian approaches to reform. So did the Central Asian states under their increasingly authoritarian and corrupt governments. A rising China, meanwhile, emerged as an attractive economic powerhouse for the Central Asian states and further enhanced their ability to balance the great powers and their political ideologies.

Alarmed by the “rose” and “orange” revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, which are perceived in Russia as Western conspiracies to undermine Russia’s preeminence in the post-Soviet space, Moscow is offering more political and military assistance to increasingly troubled Central Asian leaders in order to protect them from similar radical internal developments. Beijing’s policy has been equally encouraging for the Central Asian states—China is investing in their energy sectors and increasing its oil imports from the region and has offered a generous \$900 million aid package to support various economic projects. As a result, Moscow and Beijing have successfully drawn the Central Asian states more firmly into the orbit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The Bush administration’s emphasis on promoting liberty in the world as the centerpiece of America’s foreign policy has caused concern among Central Asian governments, who fear that the United States might require prompt action from them, despite close counter-terrorism cooperation, to advance pluralism and democratic reform in their countries. They continue to deny that liberal change is the best remedy against extremism and terrorism.

DEMOCRATIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: MIXED RESULTS

The Central Asian elite belonged to the most conservative and hard-line part of the Soviet political establishment and strongly resisted Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of *glasnost* and democratization. Even during the *perestroika* period, Central Asian leaders perceived the appearance of opposition parties and groups in their republics as a direct challenge to their position in power. They were preoccupied with the idea of preventing “unproductive and damaging reforms” and consolidating their power without democratization and radical changes in political and state institutions. This, however, did not stop the discussion of possible “models of development” for the Central Asian republics, which dominated the intellectual discourse in the region throughout the 1990s. A number of developmental models were floated—the Turkish secular political model

versus the Iranian theocratic model, the Chinese model of gradual economic reform versus Russia's shock-therapy approach, etc. The search for an adequate model was complicated by the fact that throughout the Soviet era the Central Asian elites were persistently told by Moscow that they belonged to a special world (which was neither part of the West nor the Third World). They strongly believed that they were a part of the Eurasian superpower, which belonged to Asia geographically, but culturally, politically and economically was a part of Eastern Europe. The Central Asian elites and public were not ready yet to "return to Asia" and accept their "Asianess." Apparently, they would have liked to preserve their special status of being neither East nor West.

In each of the five countries of Central Asia, democratic political institutions and market-oriented economies were adopted soon after these nations attained independence. As these countries began the first stages of transition, the leaders of each of the Central Asian countries spoke out, at least on a rhetorical level, in favor of the establishment of democratic institutions and secular government. Following independence, each of them adopted a constitutionally limited, representative form of government with a separation of powers and a legal and regulatory framework in accordance with international standards. For a brief period during the first stages of national consolidation, there was a widespread assumption in these countries and in the outside world that if the right democratic institutions could be transplanted to the fertile soils of post-communist reorganization, the processes of true democracy could be expected to follow. The most auspicious democratic reforms took place in the small, remote, and mountainous country of Kyrgyzstan. Largely thanks to the efforts of its president, Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan initially became the *wunderkind* of the international donor community, attracting a disproportionately large share of humanitarian and technical assistance. It was also the first post-Soviet state to adopt a Western style civil code, a modern legal and regulatory framework, to liberalize prices, privatize industry, and to adopt at least the superficial trappings of an open and competitive political system. Kyrgyzstan was the first country of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to join the World Trade Organization (WTO).

However, as Gregory Gleason, a prominent American expert on Central Asia points out, the Central Asian states have not succeeded in the more significant transition to the spirit and processes of true democracy. All of them have established legislatures, yet none has succeeded in establishing a deliberative legislature with powers of the purse. All of them have adopted judicial systems for adjudication and dispute resolution, yet none has succeeded in creating the conditions for true judicial independence. All of them have adopted constitutional and legal statutes that purport to safeguard the rights of individuals, minorities, and due process of law, yet none has actually succeeded in providing functioning protections for fundamental civil and human rights, including such basic freedoms as the right to due process, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religious belief. In short, none of the countries, including Kyrgyzstan, can be said to have truly succeeded in making the transition from democratic structure to functioning democracy. As a consequence, many of the formal institutions of government have acquired a showcase quality. The formal institutions exist but it is the informal institutions that actually guide the processes of policy decision-making.

In fact, the situation appears to grow worse with every passing year. Initially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan seemed to be making steady progress toward the development of democratic or quasi-democratic polities, but in the past two to three years the regimes

in each country have become more autocratic. Prominent leaders of the political opposition have been put into jail after questionable trials and criminal charges. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have had strongman rulers since the outset. The one bright spot is Tajikistan, where part of the opposition, most importantly the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, has been brought into government and the role of non-governmental groups has expanded in recent years. However, the government in Dushanbe is not yet in control of this war-torn country, and leaders in neighboring states see the “victory” of democracy in Tajikistan as further destabilizing the situation in their own countries. The last few years have seen deeply flawed elections in each of the states in the region, documented in each case in Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reports that include detailed recommendations. In each country, those recommendations have been ignored and conditions have continued to deteriorate.

Governments across the region cite legitimate threats to regional security as pretexts for repressing dissident individuals and groups, whether religiously or politically defined. This tendency is most pronounced in Uzbekistan, where thousands of religious believers have been arrested. But it has also emerged in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, where the governments have all followed Uzbekistan’s lead in criminalizing the peaceful expression of religious belief and jailing alleged “religious extremists,” notably members of the group Hizbut-Tahrir. Such repression may well drive otherwise peaceful dissenters to abandon non-violent forms of protest. The region’s rulers portray their populations as unready for democracy, politically immature and capable of being swayed by extreme ideologies. In addition, they say that their people respect strong rulers like them and that as traditional Asians they are ill-disposed to democracy. Most importantly, they argue that their neighborhood is too dangerous to take the risk of empowering the people. The latter explanation has become more popular over time, given the obviously deteriorating security situation in the countries in and around the region. The region’s leaders all argue that security concerns are paramount, and that the first challenge before the state is to maintain stability and social order. According to Kyrgyzstan President Askar Akaev, Central Asia’s socio-economic stability, social structure and civil society structure are not ready for a Western level of democracy and multi-party system.

ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

As a result of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan became integral participants in the U.S.-led military campaign against *Taliban* and *al-Qaeda* in Afghanistan. All the Central Asian states offered overflight and other support to coalition anti-terrorist efforts in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have hosted coalition troops and provided access to airbases. The United States has boosted its security assistance throughout the region for anti-terrorism, counter-narcotics, non-proliferation, border and customs, and defense cooperation programs. Uzbekistan became a key ally in the U.S. war on terrorism and the first neighbor of Afghanistan to host U.S. troops. U.S. aid to Uzbekistan tripled in 2002. On July 1, 2004, then U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs B. Lynn Pascoe told the U.S. Congress that “it is necessary to further boost and strengthen U.S.-Uzbek bilateral relations” because of Uzbekistan’s strategic importance in maintaining regional security.

Although the relationship that has developed between the Central Asian republics and the U.S.-led coalition is mutually beneficial as far as Afghanistan is concerned, there is real concern among Central Asia's political opposition leaders and analysts that security in Central Asia itself remains problematic. Since September 11 there have been signs that radical Islamic groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir are becoming increasingly popular in Central Asia. When the U.S. rushed into Central Asia, many in the region hoped that the accompanying international exposure would push the region's leaders to carry out long-needed political and economic changes. Instead, the five Central Asian governments have used the threat of Islamic fundamentalism as a pretext for increased crackdowns on dissent, hoping that Washington would register only mild criticism.

Some analysts and non-governmental agencies in the United States also are complaining that Western policy toward the region has failed to address the democratization problems effectively, largely because the message conveyed to these governments has been inconsistent. Rhetorical assertions of the importance of human rights and democratization as the key to developing full relations with the U.S. have been coupled with an assistance policy that conferred benefits on those states without regard for their human rights performance. The February 2004 report by the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, a nonpartisan U.S. research organization, titled *Central Asia in US Strategy and Operational Planning: Where do we go from here?*, characterizes U.S. policy towards Central Asia and the Caucasus as "more ad hoc than well reasoned in terms of future implications for US strategic interests." It suggests that the partnership with authoritarian regimes diminishes local perceptions of the United States as a liberal-minded and benevolent superpower, potentially lending credence to Islamic extremist characterizations of the United States as a cynical, self-serving power. Although the United States has pumped significant economic and security assistance into Central Asia, everyday Central Asians are more likely to perceive these funds as pay-offs, propping up regional autocrats in exchange for military access. The report argues that a better way to promote stability in Central Asia would be for the Bush administration to urge civil society development.

The U.S. government has been emphasizing that the overarching and the long-term goal of its policy in Central Asia is to see these states develop into stable, free-market democracies which can serve as bulwarks against the spread of instability and conflict in the region. This broader goal serves three core strategies or interests of the United States: regional stability, political and economic reform and energy development. According to then U.S. Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Elizabeth Jones, "Because we have so much more contact, we have an easier time discussing each of these issues with the governments of the region, particularly Uzbekistan and particularly Kyrgyzstan."

U.S. democratization support has been provided for political parties, voter education, and electoral laws, legal and constitutional reform, the media, structuring the division and balance of government powers, and parliamentary and educational exchanges.

The State Department's recent Country Reports on Human Rights Practices are critical of Central Asian governments for having lost ground in democratization. On 14 July 2004, Washington canceled US\$18 million in non-military aid to Tashkent because Secretary of State Colin Powell refused to approve the Karimov regime's human-rights record. The aid freeze was a signal to Tashkent of the U.S. Government's displeasure at the failure of President Islam Karimov to achieve stability through its repressive tactics.

CENTRAL ASIAN "BLACKMAIL"

The Central Asian regimes are clearly alarmed by a wave of liberal reform unfolding in the post-Soviet space, particularly in Georgia and Ukraine, where they suspect the complicity of the West. To prevent a similar scenario in their countries, they have lately taken a variety of calculated steps to discourage the United States and other Western nations from supporting the democratic opposition. They openly warn that a mass social protest could turn into a civil or ethnic war or be exploited by radical Islamic groups. They threaten to end the U.S. military's presence in Central Asia on the grounds that U.S. troops were invited to deal with the Afghanistan situation, which is stabilizing and thus eliminates the need for U.S. bases in the region. And finally they have been actively courting Russia and China. For example, Moscow was recently invited to join the fragile and inefficient Central Asian Cooperation Organization, probably diminishing even further the Central Asian states' chances for home-driven genuine integration.

While Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have publicly called for the U.S. military withdrawal from the region on completion of the Afghanistan mission, they praise the Russian military presence as strategically important and necessary to "ensure Central Asian regional security," which in reality means they perceive it as a safeguard against regime change. Equally, China has been praised for its pragmatic and non-ideological involvement in Central Asian affairs, epitomized by its growing interest in investing in and importing Central Asian energy products.

At a news conference after his address to parliament on 28 January 2005, President Karimov of Uzbekistan said that his country may pull out of the U.S.-backed GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) organization. President Karimov explained: "The tendencies that are taking place now in Ukraine and Georgia, and also in Moldova, all of them members of GUUAM, make us reconsider our relations again and again: whether or not we should continue participating in GUUAM in the future."

Central Asian leaders have been urging the United States to better understand the specifics of local culture and tradition. Kazakh Foreign Minister Qasymzhomart Toqayev, when pressed on the need for human rights, press freedoms, and election reforms during a meeting in Washington with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, said that his country was committed to go forward, but "to go forward probably slowly.... We cannot do things overnight while the democratic build-up in some countries took more than 200 years. It's not so easy." Uzbek President Karimov has stated that his country cannot accept the Western model of democracy in its entirety. Karimov was quoted as saying that "Big Brother Moscow" used to lecture the Uzbeks and, since the disintegration of the USSR, others have been doing the same, dictating the path to democracy, liberalization, and economic reform and seeking to teach Uzbekistan about freedom of speech, political freedoms, and civil rights as if the country were "a desert in a distant corner of the world." Karimov asserted that Uzbekistan has made certain progress toward democratization and is developing the type of society that corresponds with Uzbek traditions and values. He complained that the country is being criticized for not complying with "this or that standard," but no one has asked the Uzbeks whether they approved of these standards.

Karimov also warned Western ambassadors against helping his opposition and said he could stamp out any upheaval. “Some are dying to see that the way the elites in Georgia and Ukraine changed becomes a model to be emulated by other countries,” Karimov told the Uzbek parliament on 28 January 2005. “To those who still have not understood me, I want to issue a warning that everything should be on the basis of law and we will rein in those who move outside the framework of law,” he said. “We have the necessary force for that.” Looking directly at Western ambassadors, whose countries he had accused of financing the opposition, Karimov said: “Those sitting up there in the balcony should understand that better.” Kyrgyz President Akaev, whose country holds parliamentary elections in February–March 2005 and presidential polls in October 2005, has said that a relatively free political environment exposed Kyrgyzstan to the dangers of a street revolution. “These revolutionary technologies work in countries where the soil is ready to take democracy,” Akaev said in an interview with the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. “In Kyrgyzstan, they may work because we have the basics of democracy in place.” Akaev, whose aides have accused the West of encouraging the opposition, said however there was little chance for a peaceful revolution in Central Asia. “Such schemes of seizing power would simply lead to civil war here,” he said.

CONCLUSION

Central Asian states are reevaluating their relations with the United States. Regional leaders are trying to test the extent of Washington’s dependence on them in the anti-terrorist and geopolitical contexts. They also seem to be confused about what they see as mixed messages from the U.S. government, one from the Defense Department and another from the State Department.

The Bush Administration’s military transformation plan envisages working in Central Asia to establish a network of sites to provide training opportunities and contingency access both for conventional and special forces. According to Stephen Blank from the Army War College, the U.S. strategic priorities are shifting in Central Asia, raising the likelihood that the United States will establish a long-term presence in the region. Under the Bush administration’s still-developing plans, U.S. military forces hope to maintain small-scale outposts in Uzbekistan, and possibly Kyrgyzstan. A change of government in those states could jeopardize, at least in the short term, the realization of the U.S. Defense Department’s designs, particularly if the change destabilizes the domestic situation. At the same time, the State Department has been increasing the pressure on human rights and democratization issues in the region.

Central Asian governments have been trying to exploit what they perceive as a divergence of interests within the U.S. government. They are, however, becoming more and more worried that the U.S. will not sacrifice its support for democracy and freedom in Central Asia for the sake of maintaining counterterrorism cooperation, particularly if U.S. success in stabilizing and democratizing Afghanistan enables the American government to depend less on Central Asian security support in the Afghanistan operation.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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