Martha Olcott Remarks

U.S.
Strategic Dilemmas in Uzbekistan
and Turkmenistan
Briefing at CSIS

July 27, 2005

Martha Olcott: Thank you for the opportunity to speak
to you today.

In many ways those of us studying and writing about Central
Asia have been pushed into sensory overload since early March.

First Kyrgyzstan's
"tulip" revolution and the ouster of Askar Akayev as president,

then the disturbing events in Andijian, where arms were taken up against the
Uzbek state, and then demonstrators (seemingly both the armed and the unarmed)
were suppressed with deadly fire by Uzbek security forces.

Then, on the eve of Kyrgyzstan's
presidential election, the leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization met
in Astana and pressed for the U.S.
military withdrawal for the region.

This call wound up effectively overshadowing the Kyrgyz elections, which
should have been an event which should have been heralded, as it marked popular
reaffirmation through competitive election of the transfer of power in Kyrgyzstan, a first in Central
Asia.

Moreover, this transfer of power has emboldened the opposition groups in
Kazakhstan who are based in that country, to press harder for democratic
elections when Nursultan Nazarbayev goes to the polls to reaffirm his mandate
(within the next year). It has also led the democratic opposition groups
outside of Uzbekistan
to try and work more closely together.

Finally, and certainly not least, these events have led to an attempt by U.S, policy-makers and experts to reconsider what our foreign policy priorities for this region should be as well as how best to implement them.

And obviously this meeting is a noteworthy effort in this regard.

The Diminishing Role of the US

One thing that I feel strongly that we need to be mindful of, as we talk about how best for the U.S. to engage with this region, to advance the goals of the second administration of George W. Bush, and those of U.S. national interests more broadly defined, is that the U.S. does not enjoy the same opportunity for influence in the region that it did in the months following the terror attacks of September 11.

While the goals of the War on Terror have certainly not been fully met, nor even

the situation in Afghanistan
fully stabilized ,the nature of the U.S. partnership with these states is pretty well established. The maximum levels of security cooperation that is on offer are pretty clear, and there is a sense of what the new priorities of both U.S. and multilateral international financial assistance are, and how much assistance (or little) can be expected by meeting new international guidelines.

While policy-makers may talk about doubling, tripling, or even quadrupling particular line items in the foreign assistance budget of a specific Central Asian country,

there is no question of democracy building or economic and social reconstruction of any of these countries becoming a U.S. priority. Policy-makers in Washington will, under virtually no foreseeable circumstances, give "state-building" questions in this part of the world the kind of priority (or per-capita expenditures) that are being applied in Afghanistan (not to mention Iraq) or in a state like Egypt, which would be more analogous to the situation in Central Asia, for it is not a place where the U.S. openly redefined the political landscape through the use of force, as they did in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Furthermore, the leaders of all the countries in this region (and I would even include newly elected Kurmanbek Bakiev in their number) do believe that they could

become the targets of U.S. supported efforts at regime change, if developments in their country do not go in directions that are to Washington's liking.

Even the most repressive of them----and I firmly believe that Niyazov deserves that "honor"---believes that he is a legitimate ruler, and ruling with the support of the majority of the population (leaving aside the fact that none of them---not even Bakiev---would want to test this through a contest that pitted him against genuine opposition.

But at the same time all of them also realize that they do not meet U.S. (and OSCE) criteria for having come to power or retained their office through genuinely transparent political processes.

And if one needs an explanation for what happened during the Astana Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, there is no reason to look any further.

It is a mistake to view the resolutions of that meeting as being forced down the throats of the Central Asian states by Russia and China. China has long wanted the U.S. military presence in Central Asia to disappear----that the U.S. troops should roll up their bases and go home.

But Russia's position is more complicated, they don't want the U.S. military presence to be in perpetuity and they certainly don't want it expanded, but decision makers in the Kremlin are aware of how the U.S. military presence made it much easier to sell their own expanded military presence in Central Asia. And their entry is more important to them than the U.S. withdrawal.

Much like the Central Asian leaders though, the Kremlin does not like the U.S. policies of democracy-building, which they see as synonymous with the ouster of their allies (and possibly their own removal from office).

The drafting of the SCO resolution was quite probably prepared during Islam Karimov's trip to China, taken right after the Andijian events, and when he had already decided that the relationship with the U.S. was permanently soured.

As has been so characteristic of the U.S.-Uzbek relationship since September 11, in the aftermath of the violence in Andijian neither side could make the other understand what was bothering them.

The U.S. (with the O.S.C.E and E.U. oftentimes taking the lead) couldn't get Karimov to understand why an independent internationally organized inquiry into the events in Andijian was non-negotiable if he wanted to remain in the outer circle of the community of Western nations.

And Karimov could not get these same Western leaders to at least greater public recognition to the fact that his troops were reacting to an armed incursion, which definitely did occur. The incursion----leaving aside the question of who made it---does not excuse the use of deadly violence on civilians, which also seems to have been established without a credible doubt.

For all the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the incursion was far more important than overreaction of Uzbek security forces. And what many Westerners viewed as a massacre, SCO members were not always convinced was even an overreaction.

So the SCO resolution clearly met Uzbek national interests (as well as Russian and Chinese ones), and it also went part way toward meeting Kazakh goals, as Astana would like there to be no foreign military presences in the region. And the Kyrgyz and Tajiks had little choice but to go along, but even they must have had mixed feelings about the resolution and not been totally against it.

But, I think that it is very important to understand the context of the SCO decision, for it has direct bearing on the subject of this hearing. It should be seen as a declaration by the SCO states of their disapproval of current U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Central Asian region, and not just the more narrow issue of the U.S. military bases, which it directly addressed.

The Complexity of Freedom of Religion Issues

The Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz very much wanted U.S. bases introduced in their countries. And for now at least government in Bishkek still would like the base to stay, partly because of the role it serves in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan (which all the SCO members want to see stabilized) and mostly because of the hope for substantial increases in international assistance that the government in Kyrgyzstan has to attract if it has any hope in meeting raised public expectations.

By contrast, freedom of conscience issues (more so than most other questions of

civil society building) was something that the Central Asian states tolerated as part of the price of a closer relationship with the U.S. This is true in states in which the U.S. enjoyed reasonably good leverage (like Kyrgyzstan or even Kazakhstan) and states in which the U.S. enjoyed no leverage (Turkmenistan). And in the case of Uzbekistan, I think that those policy-makers charged with supervising the country's religious sector

understood the importance of the issue to the U.S. and tried to use their discretionary powers to broaden the range of officially tolerated religious activities. They however have lacked the authority to change the legal environment in which they themselves operate.

At the same time, I have yet to meet anyone in the political world of these countries who shows any understanding of why the U.S, puts a priority on these issues.

This includes many people who are deeply devoted to the cause of opening up the political processes of their native country---who are strongly for open media, an independent judiciary, rights of political parties, free and fair elections, power for representative institutions, etc.

For them questions of religion, and freedom of religion, is part of a much more complex agenda, of long suppressed national and religious communities finding their way to open expression, and doing so in a way that does not risk national security.

The first half of their concerns---the return of religion to public life---affects their attitude toward non-Orthodox (and in the case of the Kazakhs non-Orthodox and non-Catholic groups) carrying out missionary activities in their countries, and especially those groups which do so with foreign support.

The Central Asian governments are all against creating a level playing field for the world's faiths to try and reach their populations. And the more democratically elected regimes are only slightly more tolerant, as they realize how widespread is public support for limiting the missionary activities of "non-traditional" religious groups.

Normal rational people grow hysterical on discussions of these questions, so deeply do emotions run on this question.

Similarly, over time, each of these states has become more deeply committed to limiting and if at all possible eliminating foreign funding of all religious activities, because of the perception that foreign funding increases the likelihood of links to global terrorist organizations.

Here too, emotion is often more powerful than logic, and the end result is that totally transparent religious groups are prohibited from funding co-religionists activities in Central Asia.
But the bar is being raised everywhere with regard to Islamic philanthropies, and this is certainly true in the U.S. as well, where traditional ideas of due process have been redefined in the face of changing ideas of national threat.

The same can be said about the criterion that is used to decide whether or not to register religious groups or social organizations with a religious mission. While I refuse to put myself in the position of defending the criterion used anywhere in Central Asia, for it is without doubt too restrictive, and is often in conflict with widely accepted international norms, nonetheless the Central Asians are well aware of changing European standards, and they must be viewing with great interest the debate in the United Kingdom over whether Hizb ut-Tahrir should be banned.

Conclusion

Freedom of religion and freedom of conscience are at the forefront of American values, and it is impossible to imagine any U.S. administration that would not put them at the center of official thinking in foreign policy.

We must understand them as an inexorable part of a very complex democracy building agenda. Wading through the oftentimes complicated balance between individual rights and common national security interests is much easier in

which basic human rights are respected, and in which ordinary individuals had broad and widely accepted rights of political participation in their countries.

This is not yet true anywhere in Central Asia,
but until it is the question of how best to try to insure the religious freedom of the people of this region will remain one of constant debate.

But we should not minimize the challenge of attempting to build democratic societies in this part of the world, and to try and do so on a "shoestring" budget. However, meetings like this are an important part of the process, for without

in depth study of the processes going on in these countries it is impossible to assess how best to advance U.S. long-term security interests.