Cory Welt Remarks

U.S.
Strategic Dilemmas in Uzbekistan
and Turkmenistan
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Cory Welt: The United States does not need to avoid the pursuit of policies that could result in the termination of U.S. military operations in Uzbekistan. The U.S. military can carry out vital support functions elsewhere. Islamic extremists are not poised to capture the Uzbek state. The U.S. military presence does not provide leverage for reforming the government of Uzbekistan; it is not necessary for balancing the rising influence of Russia and China in Central Asia; and it undermines the U.S. strategy of democracy promotion.

These arguments are intended to encourage policy debate regarding the promotion of democratic stability in Central Asia, without imposing restrictions on the basis of unexamined assumptions regarding U.S. national security strategy in the region. They are not intended to support, specifically, the designation of Uzbekistan as a "country of particular concern" or passage of the Central Asia Democracy and Human Rights Act. With regards to the latter in particular, specifically legislating the closure of engagement with Uzbekistan will not necessarily achieve preferred policy goals.

At a minimum, U.S.-Uzbek relations can and should take the "natural" course they would take, if the United States were not dependent on Uzbekistan for military access.

1) The functions of the U.S. airfield in Uzbekistan may be vital for coalition operations in Afghanistan, but the location of the airfield is not.

The Defense Department has not made a persuasive case that the U.S. military presence at the Uzbek airfield in Karshi-Khanabad (or "K2"), originally set up to help coalition troops battle the Taliban in northern Afghanistan,

is indispensable for continued operations in Afghanistan. On the contrary, Pentagon officials have sought to downplay the importance of the base. While on June 4, the Washington Post quoted Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman as saying that "[a]ccess to this airfield is undeniably critical in supporting our combat operations," another spokesman, Laurence Di Rita, said in a press conference on July 14 that "none of [the installations in Central Asia] are so critical to our operations that we couldn't do fine and work around them if we weren't operating from those places any longer." En route to Kyrgyzstan on July 24, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld responded to a reporter's question regarding the possibility of losing access at K2, "We're always thinking ahead. We'll be fine."

The Pentagon's shift in position on K2 does not necessarily reflect a conviction that the airfield could be so easily dispensed with. The new position could be construed, rather, as a political-and, one could add, wholly appropriate-response to Russian and Chinese coordination, via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to which they and the states of Central Asia belong, to pressure the U.S. and coalition forces to wind down military operations in Central Asia. Affecting nonchalance in the face of these calls is eminently sensible: observers should not be led to construe that, if the U.S. military leaves Uzbekistan, it is due to pressure by these regional rivals.

Neither should the United States be seen as having to beg Uzbekistan for continued access to the airfield. Since the massacre in Andijan in May, and subsequent U.S. criticism, the government of Uzbekistan has stepped up pressure on the United States to maintain its military presence only on the government's terms (reasonable terms, one could add, from the perspective of the host state)-by paying rent and dampening political and human-rights criticism. To publicly beseech the Uzbek government to allow continued access to K2, without restrictions, would place the United States in the untenable position of seeking favors from a government that, if it were not for U.S. strategic concerns, would get a cold shoulder.

Moreover, even if there are reasons of power-prestige for the Pentagon to affect a lack of concern about access to K2, why not take the Defense Department at its word? While K2's logistics, humanitarian, and search-and-rescue missions may be vital to continued operations in Afghanistan, alternatives to K2 are available. After the Uzbek government banned landings by heavy cargo planes and nighttime flights in June, the Pentagon diverted airplanes carrying supplies and humanitarian assistance to the Manas base in Kyrgystan and airplanes used for search-and-rescue and tanker operations to Bagram airbase outside Kabul.

Existing facilities in Afghanistan could presumably be improved and expanded as needed. Moreover, Manas is far from "lost." Despite Kyrygyzstan's formal support for the SCO call for a deadline for coalition operations in Central Asia, several Kyrgyz officials, including a presidential spokesman and likely future prime minister Felix

Kulov, afterwards made clear that Kyrgyzstan had no intention to pressure the United States to withdraw its forces. After meeting with Defense Secretary Rumsfeld on July 25, Krygyz acting defense minister Ismail Isakov directly countered the SCO statement's assurances that the situation in Afghanistan had stabilized, noting that Afghanistan was "far from stable" and that coalition forces were welcome in Kyrgyzstan as long as they were needed.

K2 may make coalition operations in Afghanistan easier-perhaps, for some tasks, much easier. But the United States and its coalition partners will find a way to do their job right in Afghanistan if they are no longer able to depend on K2.

2) Criticism of Uzbek authorities after Andijan does not "play into the hands" of Islamic extremists poised to establish neo-Taliban rule in Uzbekistan.

As a matter of policy, the United States should be committed to lend Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states full support for apprehending remnants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group of jihadists that allied with Al Qaeda and the Taliban and were pounded by coalition bombing during the war in Afghanistan. The government of Uzbekistan says that a handful of IMU members reemerged in the region last year and organized and trained domestic insurgents responsible for the suicide attacks of 2004. The government of Kazakhstan supports this thesis, announcing in November 2004 that it had broken up a local terrorist group, spearheaded by a former IMU fighter, that helped organize the attacks in Uzbekistan.

As well, the United States should not hesitate to condemn Hizb ut-Tahrir, the clandestine Islamist organization with branches in Central Asia, so long as it insists on adhering to an ideology of political (if allegedly nonviolent) jihad and virulent anti-Semitism.

That said, to blame what happened in Andijan on "neo-IMU" or Hizb ut-Tahrir elements-or, for that matter, other religious extremists-severely distorts the nature of the event, as recounted in virtually all eyewitness testimonies. In the days after Andijan, Central Asian and Russian leaders boldly pronounced that "neo-Taliban" elements based in Afghanistan spearheaded the jailbreak to free a network of local businessmen, nominally adherents to a religious tract penned by Andijan resident Akram Yuldashev. No evidence, direct or indirect, has been offered to bolster this claim. Any involvement from "outside forces" can plausibly be attributed to the involvement of Uzbeks from across the border in Kyrgyzstan, who could easily have had family or other, non-extremist, connections to locals who participated in the jailbreak.

Counter such unsupported assertions, what happened in Andijan appears-at worst-to have been an ill-conceived operation to compel local authorities to free the businessmen and allow them to continue their economic and social

activities in Andijan. We do not know whether organizers of the jailbreak had a clear political goal in mind. Given that one logical end of a successful operation would have been local political change, however, we can surmise that the jailbreakers may have even intended to force the removal of the authorities that had ordered the businessmen's imprisonment.

Why would they have believed such a strategy would be successful? A number of testimonies have hinted at the demonstration effect exerted by "revolutionary" Kyrgyzstan just across the border. As well, in recent months Uzbek authorities themselves had demonstrated a willingness to occasionally back down in the face of protests and even riots.

Hope for success, however, was fanciful. When faced with a serious attack on state facilities, Uzbek authorities could draw on much greater control over their armed forces, and had the political will to use it, than did Kyrgyz authorities. Moreover, once jailbreakers used lethal violence, killing a handful of policemen, soldiers, and guards who resisted the jailbreak, they practically signed their own death warrant.[i]

Indeed, the most plausible explanation for the state violence is that authorities believed they had to act firmly to avoid political tremors in Andijan and to prevent the jailbreak from inspiring copycat efforts of local political change in neighboring Fergana Valley locales. If authorities had believed the event were merely a self-contained criminal act, they could have cleared the square and then stormed the administrative building the jailbreakers had occupied.[ii] The outside
world would have expressed regret, but would also have acknowledged that the use of lethal violence, even as a response to government injustice, naturally invites reciprocation. The assault on the crowd, on the other hand, is condemnable precisely because the mass killing of unsuspecting innocents is never an acceptable method for fending off political change.

Despite all odds, if the jailbreakers had sparked a local revolution that subsequently spread, it is instructive to speculate as to what could have happened next. While the course of events is unpredictable, certainly the government of Uzbekistan would have come under further strain; it would have been tempted to use even greater firepower to suppress local rebellions; outright conflict between government and newly armed opposition forces may have broken out; and central control over Uzbekistan's peripheries may have weakened. To avoid sustained deadly conflict, which in retrospect could have made the Andijan massacre a preferable outcome, a new authority may have had to move quickly to take control and, for this, may have required some degree of external support. In this scenario-reminiscent of, but far more dangerous than, the regime changes in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia (less the more "rule-of-law" Ukrainian transition)-much could, admittedly, have gone wrong.

Still, a danger often highlighted in such a scenario to justify the U.S. military presence in Uzbekistan is exaggerated: the likelihood that Islamic fundamentalists would have swept to power amid political upheaval in Uzbekistan is slim. Uzbekistan-unlike, say, Afghanistan before the Taliban-is a state with

working institutions, regardless of the individuals that control it. Even now, Islamic fundamentalists do not have significant support among the population-something that could not be said about, say, Afghanistan before the Taliban, or the fundamentalists before them, came to power. Finally, it is likely that the power struggle at the center would be solved-and the armed forces taken under control-before Uzbek extremists could find each other, organize politically, and mount the kind of military operation they would need to seize power at the national level. Any hypothetical "Islamic people's councils" that might have been set up at a local level could be easily incorporated into the new government structure or disbanded to establish new local councils.

In any event, it must be kept in mind that, like countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, Uzbekistan is home to a significant minority of strict Muslims, and a much larger number of practicing Muslims. Political Islam may play a role in the politics of Uzbekistan in the future, together with secular alternatives, just as it plays a role in the political life of these countries. Planning for that possibility is a more helpful strategy than is a hard-nosed acceptance of the government's hard-line secularism.

In sum, drawing a line between the fall of the current government of Uzbekistan and the establishment of a "neo-Taliban" state excludes consideration of more plausible alternatives-scenarios for regime change in Uzbekistan that the United States should not shy away from but instead anticipate helping to manage in order to produce tolerable results.

3) The U.S. military presence does not provide leverage that can get the government of Uzbekistan to engage in necessary reforms.

If Uzbekistan were on the edge of collapse and extremist state capture, the United States would wish to be concerned not to create a vacuum of power by doing anything that is seen to weaken the government of Uzbekistan-such as withdrawing the U.S. military presence. Other than tacitly condoning repression, then, the only feasible policy option would be to prod the government to engage in gradual reforms that diminish, over time, the likelihood of state collapse and extremist takeover.

But what exactly does the U.S. military presence provide in this regard? If it lent the "leverage" needed to prevent massive abuses of state, then Andijan would not have happened in the first place. Counting on further interaction with the U.S. military to "professionalize" the Uzbek armed forces in a way that will prevent future abuses from occurring is misguided. Either the armed forces that are so professionalized will never be called upon to suppress revolts, or they will come under enormous pressure to do so regardless of their "Western" training.

If, that is, the situation is even allowed to get that far: in the current

atmosphere, allowing Western forces to help instill, directly or indirectly, an ethos of moral disobedience in Uzbekistan's armed and interior forces is akin to promoting treason-hardly something the government of Uzbekistan will permit.

Even more, it is difficult to see how the government of Uzbekistan will be willing to host U.S. military troops if the United States insists on pushing for real reforms-with sustained, widespread, visible improvements-in the spheres of police and judicial corruption and abuse, to say nothing of the political reforms the government is not likely to implement under any conditions. Keeping K2, while turning explicit and firm support for the people of Uzbekistan against police and judicial abuse into firm results would be the best of all worlds, but it is unrealistic.

In the fight against its opponents, real or imagined, the gloves have long been off in Uzbekistan. Conceivably, the US military presence-and corresponding international attention-has "restrained" the regime from engaging in worse excesses than it would engage in if no one were watching. But the actual violations have been, and can be expected to be, bad enough.

4) The U.S. military presence in Uzbekistan is not necessary to balance rising Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia.

Concerns about growing Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia are excessive. Uzbekistan, in particular, swung far away from Russia in its first years of independence. An Uzbek-Russian rapprochement, in and of itself, is hardly a source of much concern. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan strive to maintain close economic and security relations with Russia; why should Uzbekistan be any different?

Rising Chinese influence in Central Asia-while new in the modern world-is also not extraordinary. Economics, energy, and security concerns all dictate increased Chinese involvement in Central Asia.

The specter of a new Russian-Chinese axis that uses Central Asia as the arena to balance U.S. power is, instead, the product of a skewed realist logic. An "ideology" of authoritarianism, and a shared interest in combating U.S. power, can only take the alliance so far. Russian and Chinese interests in Central Asia are concrete and long-lasting. Russia and China can be expected to compete for influence and resources in the region in a far more sustained fashion than they will ally against the United States for putative "ideological" reasons of authoritarianism or exaggerated fears of an intrusive "non-regional" power.

Moreover, Central Asian states themselves have consistently sought to develop a more balanced foreign policy, regardless of temporary shifts by leaders seeking to shore up political support. Regional governments not only anticipate balancing Russia and China against each other, but wish to maintain U.S. interest in an effort to balance these two. Significantly, this relatively pro-U.S. orientation is not something Central Asian populations generally oppose. The United States can and should weather the rise of the putative "Russian-China axis" in Central Asia.

5) A tradeoff between geopolitics and democracy promotion, at least in the short-term, is unavoidable.

Make no mistake: it would be extremely useful for the United States to maintain a long-term military presence in Central Asia, Uzbekistan included. Aside from the prospects for instability within the region, as well as U.S. energy interests, the region borders several areas of U.S. strategic concern: Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, China, Russia.

But to sustain this projection of power by lending support to the government of Uzbekistan means subduing the most basic elements of the U.S. democracy promotion agenda in the name of other national interests.

This might be a price the United States would have to pay if these other national interests required it, but the above suggests they do not. Instead, the United States is left backing a government that has killed its own people-in the name of, at best, an illusory, unneeded stability. This permits others to draw the conclusion that the United States' response to the fear of Islamic extremism is not its much vaunted democracy promotion strategy, but classical strongman rule.

Even worse, if U.S. interest in maintaining a military presence in Uzbekistan is prompted by traditional geopolitics, then this runs the global democracy promotion strategy straight into the ground. U.S. support for "democratic revolutions" in Eurasia and the Middle East is exposed as nothing more, nothing less than an instrumental means to strengthen the U.S. position in regions where its influence has in the past been tenuous or nonexistent.

Some may fear that a military withdrawal from Uzbekistan would be a sign of weakness, damaging U.S. credibility as a regional power to be bargained with. This, they may fear, would be problematic not only in the face of Russia and China, but also Al Qaeda and its supporters, who will take withdrawal to signify a lack of U.S. resolve-as well as a clue for how to achieve their objectives. By forcing authoritarian leaders allied with the United States to take brutal actions against their own people, extremists may hope to undermine their support internally and remove the external prop of U.S. support. The governments of Pakistan,

Egypt, Saudi Arabia-all could fall, by this line of thinking, if the United States backs down in Uzbekistan.

The fear of such a "domino effect" sits on one scale of the anti-terrorist war. Justice, truth, and democracy promotion lie on the other. The decisions the United States faces with regards to Uzbekistan frame the broader challenges it faces in confronting extremism in the Islamic world.

[i] The most extreme account of the jailbreakers' violence-that they killed 54 prison guards in cold blood- stems from a single, unverified account in a British newspaper that does not indicate the source for this allegation. The government of Uzbekistan itself claims that 20 "law-enforcement personnel" were killed (in addition to 11 soldiers). The newspaper's claim is that during the actual storming of the prison, the jailbreakers killed 54 men and women, "most of them prison guards...many of whose weapons were actually unloaded, a government-ordered precaution to prevent them from falling into inmates' hands." The Independent on Sunday, May 22, 2005.

[ii] All eyewitness accounts which address this subject state that government forces issued no warnings to the crowd to clear the square. The sole account to the contrary is offered by Shiren Akiner, who does not indicate which of her anonymous respondents told her this and whose collected testimonies, gathered as they were while escorted by local authorities, must generally be seen as suspect. Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005 (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute/Silk Road Studies Program).