

Security and Human Rights in Central Asia

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IN SEPTEMBER 2011, THE UNITED States government reached a new agreement with the government of Uzbekistan: the United States would reverse a 2003 restriction on foreign aid to the abusive regime in Tashkent in exchange for concessions allowing increased transport of U.S. equipment and personnel through the country along the “Northern Distribution Network” (NDN) supply route into Afghanistan.¹ Despite concern about the growing challenge of corruption in Central Asia, the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee approved a waiver that had previously restricted equipment sales to Tashkent, clearing the way for deeper collaboration.² The decision to reengage with the government of Uzbekistan proved deeply controversial in the human rights community.

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A coalition of 20 human rights groups penned an open letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, urging her to oppose the passage of the waiver and to publicly condemn Uzbekistan’s human rights record.³ According to Human Rights Watch, in Uzbekistan “torture remains endemic ... [a]uthorities continue to target civil society activists, opposition members, and journalists, and to persecute religious believers who worship outside strict state controls. Freedom of expression remains severely limited. Government-sponsored forced child labor during the cotton harvest continues.”⁴ The U.S. State Department offered a similar assessment: both political and nonpolitical prisoners are routinely mistreated in prison, some severely; arbitrary arrest and detention is frequent; detainees are often denied fair trials; and the practice of child conscription into the cotton fields each year constitutes a grievous breach of international labor laws.⁵

The U.S. government, however, has a different view. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, U.S. policy toward Central Asia has generally been needs based and transactional—that is, offering concessions in exchange for

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cooperation with U.S. policy.⁶ Though political liberalization and human rights concerned diplomats and policy makers, the first major focus of U.S. policy toward Central Asia prioritized denuclearizing Kazakhstan through the Nunn–Lugar Nuclear Cooperative Threat Reduction Program.⁷ After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, U.S. policy shifted away from threat reduction and democratization and refocused on counterterrorism. Though Islamist terrorism in Central Asia—not just Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan but also groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—had concerned U.S. policy makers beforehand, countering Islamist terrorist groups had not dominated U.S. regional policy.⁸ The 9/11 attacks resulted in an immediate focus on Islamist terrorist groups in Central Asia, and U.S. policy makers prioritized securing the cooperation of Central Asian governments in regional counterterrorism efforts.⁹ Addressing terrorist threats in Central Asia required securing permission for over-flight rights and a local base of operations, especially as the United States prepared to go to war in Afghanistan.¹⁰ However, much like during the 1990s, U.S. engagement in the Central Asian region post-2001 is transactional—which also means that it is most likely limited in duration and predicated upon the completion of NATO’s exit from Afghanistan in 2014.¹¹

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Thus, U.S. engagement in Central Asia is best understood as a strategic policy, designed to achieve limited U.S. objectives rather than expansive social goals. As a result of this narrow policy, the United States has had to engage with governments widely acknowledged as horrific human rights abusers—particularly Uzbekistan, but also Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

American engagement with abusive Central Asian regimes has sparked concerns by human rights advocates who believe that the cooperation between the United States and Central Asian governments is morally equivalent to American complicity in human rights violations.¹²

Yet, despite arguing against the United States’ cooperation with Central Asia, the human rights community has been unable to produce a clear consensus on the exact state of human rights in Central Asia and, subsequently, articulate a viable alternative to U.S. policy. The human rights community is hampered by two major constraints: the extreme difficulty of collecting systemic information in inaccessible states and poor framing and contextualizing of human rights abuses into American foreign policy priorities. Human rights groups rightly highlight the moral compromises of working with undemocratic and abusive regimes, but do not frame these concerns properly within the American strategic calculus; nor do they develop alternatives for achieving U.S. policy goals without regime cooperation.¹³ Furthermore, the community is unable to contextualize its argu-

ments in the political and strategic realities facing Central Asia as NATO forces begin departing from Afghanistan.

The resulting discourse is incoherent and unpersuasive to policy makers. It also distracts from the central question of how the United States and NATO can most efficiently exit Afghanistan at a reasonable monetary cost. General William Fraser, the commander of the U.S. Transportation Command, which handles logistics for the war in Afghanistan, told a Senate panel in February 2012 that the NDN does not have the capacity to handle all of the material the U.S. will withdraw.¹⁴ And shipping that material northward would come at a cost more than 500 times that of shipping it south through Pakistan.¹⁵ The human rights community's discourse on the NDN conflates short-term strategic goals (developing a Central Asian alternative to Pakistan to force the southern routes open) with long-term policy and development goals (ending the war in Afghanistan and promoting regional democratization). It also highlights the need for human rights advocates to provide a constructive approach to addressing regional human rights concerns in a manner that is supportive of U.S. strategic objectives. Otherwise, human rights advocates risk further marginalizing human rights concerns from the top of the U.S. agenda in Central Asia.

AN AD HOC ENGAGEMENT

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The United States has never had close relations with the regimes of Central Asia. The U.S. and Central Asian regimes have focused their cooperation on a few primary objectives, such as denuclearization; promoting democratization and supporting civil rights; eradicating government abuses, corruption, and disregard for human rights; and, most recently, counterterrorism.¹⁶ After the fall of the Soviet Union, the region has struggled to reconcile its history of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, with severe social, economic, and political rifts between its governments and component demographic groups, such as the 2010 socioethnic riots in Osh, Kyrgyzstan.¹⁷

The Soviet Union built the industry and infrastructure of Central Asia to service the economies of Eastern Europe and the USSR bloc; once the USSR dissolved, the region was thrown into economic chaos as it struggled to build a market economy. Two decades after political transitions to democracy, the political and economic frameworks of these nations have yet to fully eschew their Communist legacies—and many show worrying signs of “backsliding” toward autocracy.¹⁸ Such a fraught political and economic landscape has made U.S. policy making a challenge and has often resulted in distant relations and

limited political engagement with local regimes.

The United States established diplomatic relations with the Central Asian regimes very quickly after the fall of the Soviet Union. Congress passed legislation governing those relations in very short order, with the Nunn–Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Act of 1991, which offered foreign aid in exchange for denuclearization, and the FREEDOM Support Act in 1992, which conditioned U.S. assistance on regimes respecting human rights and consenting to democratization efforts.¹⁹ In 1999, Congress passed the Silk Road Strategy Act, another bill shaping U.S. relations with the region, which revised U.S. assistance and democracy promotion while seeking closer ties with the region.²⁰ The United States also engaged in bilateral engagement with individual regimes, focusing on specific trade issues helping to develop energy resources with each country.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 and the United States' subsequent forays into Afghanistan and Iraq reframed the issue of United States–Central Asia relations. The result was a new strategic focus on counterterrorism in the region. Almost overnight, Central Asia became a strategic access point for the U.S. war on terror, although U.S. interest in the region was initially characterized as a desire to prevent “harbors” for terrorist activity.²¹ The United States needed over-flight permissions and bases from which to stage military operations in Afghanistan. All five Central Asian regimes had struggled throughout the 1990s with terrorism and criminal activity bleeding northward from Afghanistan and quickly volunteered support for the U.S. operation.²² U.S. diplomats also took the increased engagement brought about by the war in Afghanistan to advance other regional goals in Central Asia, such as democracy and human rights improvement, economic integration, energy policy, counternarcotic operations, and nonproliferation.²³

Central Asian cooperation helped the United States strategically; in return, U.S. officials lavished the regimes of the region with subsidies and aid outlays, improved ties with and access to U.S. businesses, and relaxed standards concerning human rights despite a universal consensus that the five countries of Central Asia all limit their citizens' rights.²⁴ According to Freedom House, four of the five Central Asian states are “not free,” with the exception of “partly free” Kyrgyzstan.²⁵ The relative lack of attention given by U.S. officials to the oppressiveness of local regimes has rankled many human rights groups. Human Rights Watch, for example, repeatedly admonishes Central Asian governments for rampant human rights abuses, arbitrary justice, and restrictive social environments—conditions, they argue, the United States has accepted or ignored because of its focus on conducting operations in Afghanistan.²⁶ This complaint

rings hollow, however, when following the 2005 massacre in Andijan, Uzbekistan, the United States complained so forcefully about the Uzbek government's conduct that it lost access to the Karshi Khanabad airfield outside of Tashkent.²⁷

However, increased U.S. involvement during the war in Afghanistan was not limited to Central Asia. The bulk of U.S. supplies, equipment, and aircraft sorties come through Pakistan. In fact, the United States is so reliant on the Pakistani supply routes (also called "GLOCs" for "Ground Lines of Communication") that Army General William Fraser told a Senate Armed Services Committee, "We need the Pakistan GLOC open" to keep the war functioning and withdrawing on schedule.²⁸

This reliance comes at a cost, however, and the United States needs alternatives to Pakistan. The Northern Distribution Network (NDN) **Human Rights Watch repeatedly admonishes Central Asian governments for rampant human rights abuses, arbitrary justice, and restrictive social environments.**

grew out of a series of bilateral transit agreements with Central Asian states, notably Uzbekistan.²⁹ The NDN gradually took on more and more of the resupply duties for the war in Afghanistan, making the United States' posture toward Central Asia increasingly important to U.S. policy makers.

The importance of the NDN became clear on 24 November 2011, when several U.S. attack aircrafts fired missiles and dropped bombs on a Pakistani border checkpoint during a chaotic firefight. They killed 24 Pakistani soldiers, though the United States maintains the deaths were accidental.³⁰ The government of Pakistan canceled U.S. access to the transport routes through the country's south, forcing the United States to rely on the NDN at an additional \$100 million per month.³¹ This event marked the lowest point in United States–Pakistan relations, which had already become tense due to contention over lethal U.S. drone strikes and counterterrorism operations in the region. The closure of Pakistani transit routes thus made the United States reliant on the NDN and by proxy the government of Uzbekistan in order to facilitate the evacuation of nonlethal equipment in advance of the 2014 NATO exit from Afghanistan. The recent reopening of the Pakistani routes, however, has lessened the United States' dependence on the NDN.

Maintaining access to the NDN, however, required the United States to make several diplomatic maneuvers to secure Uzbek cooperation, despite continued accusations from the human rights community.³² Among these controversial measures was a waiver in 2011 that temporarily and conditionally ended the ban on the provision of nonlethal defensive military equipment to the Uzbek

government.³³ The United States has acknowledged that there is a tradeoff between security needs and human rights, but maintains that Central Asia will not be granted a “free pass” on human rights simply because of its cooperation in the war with Afghanistan.³⁴

In order to achieve strategic objectives in Afghanistan, however, the United States requires cooperation from Central Asian governments. There is a difficult choice at the heart of U.S. policy in the region: should the United States cooperate more with Central Asia, ignoring the region’s poor human rights record, than with Pakistan, an inconsistent ally and known safe haven for international terrorism and nuclear proliferation? The United States cannot, both on principle and from a practical standpoint, reliably extract good behavior from Central Asian governments if it expects their cooperation in carrying out a military campaign in neighboring Afghanistan. The United States has been forced to tread lightly in human rights circles regarding its engagement with Central Asian nations and ensure that its focused, strategic interactions with these governments do not worsen human rights in the region. Because of this light treading, the United States argues that it is absolved of directly contributing to abuses; it fails, however, in its strategic approach to mitigate any further abuses, since these abuses are considered secondary to the war in Afghanistan.

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A POORLY FRAMED AND CONTRADICTIONARY DISCOURSE

Complicating the United States’ implicit stance on human rights in Central Asia is the failure of human rights advocates to adequately and appropriately articulate the human rights situation in the region, contextualize this articulation in political and strategic realities, and outline a realistic course of action. Addressing human rights in Central Asia is a twofold problem: current U.S. policy elevates strategic imperatives over human rights principles, but advocates have failed to provide the much-needed insight as to how the United States can effectively mitigate the regional plight of human rights abuses. Polemic and contradictory claims of human rights violations cannot be incorporated into U.S. strategy, even more so when they lack context and a roadmap for decisive action.

It is challenging to ascertain the breadth and depth of human rights abuses in Central Asia not only because of the challenges in information collection but also because of the manner in which the human rights community chooses to present its findings. Inappropriate framing and contradictory language distort the hard data that does corroborate claims of extensive human rights abuses at the hands of Central Asian governments, detracting credibility from the asser-

tions made by advocates. In one example of inappropriate framing, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report on human rights abuses in Uzbekistan, “No One Left to Witness,” states:

Uzbekistan has not kept its promises to stop torture in its criminal justice system, including electric shocks and asphyxiation ... Safeguards to halt the practice that were announced with fanfare have not been put into effect. Western governments seeking closer ties with the authoritarian Central Asian government for strategic reasons have all but ignored the abuses.³⁵

The problem with HRW’s report is not the data contained within, but the way in which HRW frames its analysis and interpretation of the facts. Using Western (primarily American) policies to frame a discussion of human rights in Central Asia distracts from HRW’s discussion of Uzbekistan itself. Uzbekistan’s abuses are horrific; framing abuse as the responsibility of Western governments removes the agency of the Uzbek regime itself, which actually perpetrates them. Documenting abuses in a manner that values Central Asian human rights on their own merits and leveraging this information into action is difficult when these groups obsess over U.S. policy.³⁶ As a result, the critique of U.S. engagement as negative overshadows concrete actions the United States could take to improve the plight of Uzbek citizens—without articulating how decreased U.S. engagement would actually improve rights.

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This same HRW report also illustrates the contradictory messages emanating from the human rights community. In characterizing the United States’ relationship with Uzbekistan as transactional, the report argues that “[T]his policy of ‘engagement without strings’ is a short-term strategy that has compounded Uzbekistan’s deepening human rights crisis.”³⁷ Yet, just one month prior to the release of this report, the Washington Director for HRW wrote that it was in the best interests of the United States to forge only transactional relationships with Uzbekistan and similar governments in light of their undemocratic behaviors, and only with consistent admonishment of their human rights abuses.³⁸

Such contradictory language highlights a lack of consensus in the human rights community, sometimes even within a single organization, on both the actual situation in Central Asia and a strategic approach for modifying U.S. policies to accommodate the rights of Central Asian citizens. There is a dearth of strategizing on what to do about Central Asia’s worsening human rights. A blog post by Susan Corke for Freedom House calls into question the United States’ strategic engagement with Uzbekistan in light of profligate abuse: “Why is the United States wooing one of the world’s most repressive regimes?”³⁹ Corke

answers her own question (“Afghanistan”) but continues to object to the use of the NDN as a means of applying pressure on Pakistan while still facilitating strategic objectives. Corke then attacks the U.S. government for failing to consult with the human rights community on its direct engagement with Uzbek leader Islom Karimov and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

This stance is both confusing and troubling, considering that the U.S. government has, since 2004 and up until recently, acted on the recommendation of human rights advocates in disengaging with the government of Uzbekistan following the 2005 violence in the city of Andijan.⁴⁰ It communicates a lack of vision and any sense of what steps the human rights community would prefer the United States take to address the human rights issues in Uzbekistan, and Central Asia as a whole. Such conflicting language also reflects advocates’ inability to contextualize their findings and arguments in the political and strategic realities of Central Asia, which must account for the United States’ continuing presence in Afghanistan and troubled relationship with Pakistan.

Basic statecraft requires working with unsavory regimes, their representatives, and their maligned practices. Looking beyond the 2014 conclusion of the military conflict in Afghanistan, the United States has been open about how it will remain engaged in operations to secure, stabilize, and develop the country through training the Afghan security forces.⁴¹ These operations are foundational to state-building in Afghanistan and could potentially benefit Central Asian nations in the long term by promoting regional security and economic opportunity. It may be unfortunate that the United States must interact with unsavory regimes in Central Asia to withdraw its military equipment and further its objective of a stable Afghanistan, but it is a political and strategic reality that supersedes all others from the U.S. perspective.

On a more fundamental level, the human rights community does not often recognize that human rights abuses are only symptoms of the structural deficiencies and systemic failures plaguing the governments of Central Asia. The region is among the most undemocratic in the world, guided by “popularly elected” leaders with nearly unchecked power and security services.⁴² Yet, human rights advocates ignore the means of oppression and instead focus on the end results of undemocratic governance in Central Asia. A recent analysis of Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev’s 2011 reelection argued that Central Asian regimes are essentially reviving the ruling methods of the late Soviet period.⁴³ In this analysis, the abuses of the regime are not just overt acts of coercion and abuse, but a system of fear that institutionalizes cooperation. Because people know the cost of stepping out of line, most choose not to—a pattern replicated across the

region (with the possible exception of Kyrgyzstan, where politics are more open).

The shortsighted focus on abuses by the human rights community is only capable of producing similar results that treat the symptoms of human rights abuses—individual cases of abuse or specific policies—but fail to cure their cause, which remains firmly rooted in the governments of these nations. There is

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do. Thus, U.S. policy makers are not able to act decisively on concerns about human rights in the region. As long as the human rights community persists in advocating strategies from this perspective, it risks advancing strategies that fail to meet its own expectations in improving human rights in Central Asia while marginalizing its influence within U.S. policy making circles.

FINDING A WAY FORWARD?

The United States is caught between its strategic imperatives and an ineffective human rights discourse. In an effort to integrate strategic needs with human rights initiatives, the United States has posited the New Silk Road as a grand strategy for the region.⁴⁴ Seeking to bridge the rift between U.S. strategy and principle, the New Silk Road is centered on the development of Afghanistan as the preeminent transit and trading hub for the region—an “Asian Roundabout.”

Recognizing Central Asia as a historic crossroads of global trade, the New Silk Road seeks to reclaim this heritage within the context of modern challenges facing the region. The foundation of this strategy is “firmly embedded in the economic life of the region,” and would seek to benefit, on a local economic scale, not only Afghanistan, but all its neighbors.⁴⁵ If following standard development ideology, increased economic development will generate improved democratic governance, which in turn will inspire greater respect for human rights, and the whole region will somehow suddenly become stable, democratic, and “developed.”

The New Silk Road, like many grand strategies, is conceptually brilliant but practically unworkable. The strategy relies heavily on the political will of Central Asian governments to cooperate with one another as well as to adopt a pro-market stance. Central Asia remains one of the most challenging environments

in which to establish and conduct business. While Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have semi-free markets, they remain far from open to significant regional and global integration. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remain among the most restrictive business environments in the world.⁴⁶ Central Asia's business environments are crippled by restrictive regulations, frequent enterprise nationalizations, and poor rule of law. Hence, corruption is one of the few reliable means of doing business in Central Asia, and while such behavior may generally achieve some business objectives, it has deleterious social and political effects. Transparency International ranks every country on the planet according to a composite index of surveys of corruption. Ranked 120th out of 183 nations surveyed, Kazakhstan is the least corrupt nation in Central Asia; by comparison, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, tied at 177th, remain two of the most corrupt states on Earth.⁴⁷

Additionally, the idea that Central Asian leaders will cooperate to better both Afghanistan and their own nations, while reasonable, is unlikely to come to fruition. Historically, the nations of Central Asia have held antagonistic stances toward one another founded upon the personal rivalries of their respective leaders.⁴⁸ Differing comparative advantages in domestic and local economies could potentially exacerbate these conflicts, and instead of boosting economic integration, cause a retrenchment of isolationist stances amongst Central Asian nations.⁴⁹

Thus, for all its efforts, the United States is again stuck with a vision unlikely to achieve the endgame of a secure Afghanistan and a democratic, capitalist Central Asian region. If an approach such as the New Silk Road fails to strike a balance between strategy and principle, what approach has a chance of succeeding?

Germany has grappled with this question in establishing business ties with Kazakhstan. Fearing a German dependence on China for a rare earth mineral, Chancellor Angela Merkel met with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev in February 2012 to sign a €3 billion (about \$3.8 billion as of mid-2012) partnership in rare earth metals. In agreeing to the partnership, Merkel acknowledged that human rights and democratic principles must be addressed alongside economic interests, an assertion backed by her calls for improved human rights in Russia and China and a meeting with Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, in 2007.⁵⁰ However, human rights leaders in Europe suggest that as China's power increases and resulting pressures are felt in global markets, European leadership, like that of the United States, is failing to balance national interests with the human rights issues in the nations with whom they conduct business.⁵¹

It is reasonable to believe that at some point the political and social land-

scapes of Central Asian nations will change: heads of states will die, populations will become increasingly worldly as technology gradually seeps into society, and geopolitical shifts external to the region will affect political shifts within it. Any forward-looking U.S. policy for Central Asia must take into consideration what could change alongside what it would like to see change. The governments of Central Asia have aging leaderships that have repeatedly and consistently demonstrated that they are far removed from the political and economic realities of a post–Cold War era. If there is anything to be learned from the Arab Spring, it is that a people can be repressed only for so long in the face of technological proliferation and information democratization. Central Asia still remains fairly isolated from global trends—internet penetration is still low, in part due to official pressure—but this is gradually changing.⁵² While it is unlikely for several reasons that Central Asia will experience its own version of the Arab Spring, change will eventually come. It is a matter of smart policy making to anticipate its effects.

A smart U.S. policy for Central Asia would honor strategic objectives in Afghanistan, build upon coherent and constructive input from the human rights community, and incorporate long-term thinking to accommodate the region's future prospects. However, questions remain as to whether Afghanistan will survive the 2014 NATO exit and what shape the human rights discourse should take. Until the human rights community is able to articulate and contextualize its arguments about Central Asian human rights abuses, the United States will be unable to incorporate such considerations into its Central Asia strategy. 

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NOTES

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