
THE LIMITS OF WASHINGTON'S STAYING POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington has extended over \$14.3 billion in aid to Central Asia.¹ The vast majority of this support has targeted government, civil society, and economic assistance. To contextualize US foreign assistance, consider the amount of aid Washington has extended to Kyrgyzstan and Nicaragua, two countries with similarly-sized populations and economies. Between 1992 and 2018 Kyrgyzstan received \$3.25 billion in US aid. Nicaragua received \$3.56 billion. This near parity in support is striking. Relations with geographically proximate Nicaragua have proven an enduring foreign policy concern for US administrations since the early 20th century. Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, is geographically distant from the US and, prior to 1991, was unknown to most Washington policy makers. After nearly three decades of attention Washington's interest in Kyrgyzstan and in Central Asia is waning, a development, I argue, that may be a good thing.

To attribute the US retreat from the region to President Trump's inward focus would be a mistake. Washington had lost its way in Central Asia long before Trump was elected to office. Whereas in the 1990s Clinton pursued democratization and in the 2000s Bush emphasized security, the Obama administration's well-intentioned policy of promoting human rights alienated as much as it attracted Central Asian support. This policy failure was not the product of Central Asian antipathy for political and civil freedoms, but rather, as I illustrate in the case of Kyrgyzstan, the result of US messaging that failed to consider political and cultural sensitivities at the local level. This brief reflects on 30 years of US foreign policy toward Central Asia. In so doing I find that Trump's isolationism, paradoxically, may be a boon for US diplomats and aid workers who, in contrast to their America-focused counterparts in the presidential administration, are well-positioned to craft contextually-sensitive assistance programs in Central Asia.

¹ <https://explorer.usaid.gov/>. Amounts in constant USD.

The End of History

Francis Fukuyama's 1989 article captured the growing optimism with which American and European rulers viewed Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* reforms: "The triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism."² Fukuyama was prescient in his anticipation of the Soviet collapse but he, along with the US foreign policy establishment, were misguided in concluding there were no systematic alternatives to Western liberalism. Washington was excessively optimistic in the early 1990s in seeing in Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, the inevitable march of Western-style democracy. Kyrgyzstan, Vice President Al Gore explained during his December 1993 visit to Bishkek, was a "as a bulwark and guarantee for democratic change in the Central Asian region."³

By President Clinton's second term, the certainty with which the US viewed the march of democracy in Central Asia had lessened. Strobe Talbott, the Deputy Secretary of State, acknowledged the potential disconnect between Central Asian reality and Washington's vision for the region:

The consolidation of free societies, at peace with themselves and with each other, stretching from the Black Sea to the Pamir mountains, will open up a valuable trade and transport corridor along the old Silk Road between Europe with Asia.

The ominous converse is also true. If economic and political reform in the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia does not succeed -- if internal and cross-border conflicts simmer and flare -- the region could become a breeding ground of terrorism, a hotbed of religious and political extremism, and a battleground for outright war.⁴

The final years of the Clinton administration coincided with terrorist bombings in Tashkent, Islamist Uzbek militants taking hostages in Kyrgyzstan, and the encampment of these same militants along Tajikistan's mountainous border with Afghanistan. In the summer of 2000 the Clinton administration began flying drones out of Uzbekistan in a stepped-up effort to monitor Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. Central Asia, for the Clinton administration, had gone from bulwark for democracy to bulwark against terrorism. While Talbott linked the two, suggesting political reform was the best defense against terror, Washington's perceived security concerns were such that its ambassadors were forced into the untenable position of publicly championing Central Asian liberalization while privately understanding America's growing military presence in the region was providing cover, both economic and political, for Central Asian authoritarianism.

Bankrolling Authoritarianism, Bankrupting Liberalism

The 9-11 attacks were devastating for America on many levels. The human toll, both in the attacks and in the now nearly two decades of US military engagement in Eurasia, is immeasurable. Equally difficult to quantify is the toll Washington's response to 9-11 has exacted on US foreign policy in Central Asia. Washington sought from Central Asia

² Fukuyama, "The End of History?," 3.

³ "US Vice-President Describes Visit As 'Expression of Active Support' for Akayev."

⁴ Talbott, "Farewell to Flashman: U.S. Policy in Central Asia and Caucasus."

airbases, flyover rights, and safe land corridors to supply and support the US military effort in Afghanistan. The Bush administration paid dearly for this access, not so much in dollars, but rather in the cost to Washington's reputation in the region.

US diplomatic and aid missions had spent the decade following the Soviet collapse partnering with Central Asian civil society activists and political reformers. After 9-11 these partnerships continued while, at the same time, US strategic interests forced Washington into ever closer ties with autocratic elites and entrenched opponents of political reform. In Kyrgyzstan, where Washington's democracy and governance efforts were the most advanced in the region, the American military presence slowly began to erode the credibility of US support for continued political reform. How effective, Kyrgyz observers wondered, could USAID efforts at fighting corruption and promoting good governance be when the US Department of Defense was paying upwards of \$40 million annually to airport logistics and fuel companies controlled by President Akayev's son and son-in-law?⁵

The spring 2005 overthrow of President Akayev encapsulates the unenviable and untenable position the US mission in Bishkek found itself in for much of the 2000s. Strategic interests locked the US government into ties of corruption with the Kyrgyz government. At the same time USAID, through organizations like Freedom House, pressed to expand media freedoms, political rights, and civil liberties. The US government, in short, simultaneously enriched Kyrgyzstan's corrupt ruling elite while supporting Kyrgyz press efforts to expose this elite's lavish lifestyle. Thus, when Akayev cut electricity in February 2005 to the printing house following an expose on the construction of the Akayev family's new "villa," the US embassy loaned its own generators so the press could continue working.⁶

Press exposés of the corruption surrounding US military contracts precipitated the March 2005 uprising as well as the putsch five years later that saw Akayev's replacement, Kurmanbek Bakiev, similarly ousted from power. That Washington would both engage and expose this corruption might appear strange. Importantly, the US government, like all governments, is not a unitary actor. The US Department of Defense's objective in Kyrgyzstan was to support the mission in Afghanistan. USAID's objective was to deepen the democratization support begun in the 1990s. This logic, though not lost among Kyrgyz, nevertheless did little to improve local perceptions of the US government. Kyrgyz approval of the Bush and Obama presidencies has never topped 35 percent and crashed to 21 percent in 2014.⁷

Human Rights, Policy Wrongs

If President Bush's willingness in the 2000s to sacrifice democracy promotion in pursuit of geostrategic interests eroded Central Asian perceptions of Western liberalism, President Obama's well-intentioned yet tone-deaf push for ethnic minority as well as LGBTQ rights in the 2010s only further soured the region's view of Washington. In 2015 the Obama administration extended Azimjan Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek activist imprisoned in Kyrgyzstan, the State Department's annual Human Rights Defender Award. The State Department explained the award, noting Askarov brought "together

⁵ Cloud, "Pentagon's Fuel Deal Is Lesson in Risks of Graft-Prone Regions."

⁶ Spencer, "Quiet American Behind Tulip Revolution."

⁷ "Gallup World Poll." Retrieved from: <https://analyticcampus-gallup-com.mutex.gmu.edu/>.

people of all ethnicities and backgrounds to urge the government of Kyrgyzstan to take effective action towards creating a sustainable peace between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.”⁸ The Kyrgyz leadership countered that Askarov was not a human rights defender, but rather, an instigator of the 2010 violence between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.

Washington’s efforts to promote LGBT rights, articulated in President Obama’s December 2011 “International Initiatives to Advance the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons,” did not target Central Asia specifically. US embassies in Central Asia did, however, use social media platforms like Twitter to promote LGBT rights in the region. The US embassy in Bishkek, for example, tweeted in February 2014, “Note to protestors outside: #LGBT rights ARE #humanrights, as is your right to peaceful freedom of expression.” One year later the @USEmbassyKG twitter account urged Kyrgyz MPs “to stand on the side of justice” and reject an anti-LGBT draft law being debated in parliament. Here again was the Bishkek embassy responding as best it could to initiatives crafted in Washington and made with little eye to how these initiatives might resonate among the local population.

Kto vinovat?

It is now common in the US to blame Russia for all that ails Washington. To a degree this inclination is understandable. Moscow is adept at manipulating the media in ways that advance Russia’s interest and undermine the US efforts at soft power abroad. In the case of Central Asia, however, America’s wounds are self-inflicted. Moscow has accentuated the hurt by salting the regional press with stories accentuating Washington’s missteps. These missteps, nevertheless, are Washington’s own.

Washington’s championing of Western liberalism, at least in the case of Central Asia, has proven incompatible with the pursuit of American realist objectives in the post 9-11 world. If we are at the end of history, it is not the end Fukuyama imagined in 1989 nor the Central Asian bulwark of democracy Vice President Gore invoked during his 1993 visit to Bishkek. Rather, it is an end where ideologies of all stripes must adapt to a world no longer ordered by Cold War balance of power or American hegemony. Russia, China, and most of all, Central Asia countries have adapted to this new order. Washington must now too if the US is to have any chance at advancing modest political reform in the region.

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⁸ “2014 Human Rights Defender Award Ceremony for Azimjon Askarov and Foro Penal.”

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