

**The U.S. in Central Asia:
The Case for Long-Term, Value-Driven Engagement**

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Since 2007, American policy towards Central Asia has largely been an adjunct of Afghanistan policy. Central Asia was seen as an essential link in the logistics route supplying U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Policy initiatives toward Central Asia were largely judged on the basis of whether they would promote or potentially put at risk Central Asian commitment to the so-called Northern Distribution Network. This produced a U.S. policy that was decidedly risk-averse, and caused the U.S. to forego opportunities to use what leverage it did have to seek concessions or even to speak out strongly in public about regional countries' deficiencies in the areas of democracy, human rights, governance and economic development. Meanwhile, the Administration's declared policy of dealing with human rights issues through quiet diplomacy produced almost no positive results. In fact, human rights standards declined sharply in most of the region.

Seeing Central Asia through the Afghanistan lens also led to a mismatch between the United States' own threat assessment and its diplomatic and foreign assistance policies. The 2015 Worldwide Threat Assessment by the U.S. Intelligence community states, and I quote that: "Central Asian states remain concerned about regional instability in light of a reduced Coalition presence in Afghanistan.... On the whole, however, the Central Asian states will probably face more acute risks of instability in 2015 from internal issues such as unclear political succession plans, weak economies, ethnic tensions, and political repression—any of which could produce a crisis with little warning." And yet, despite this threat analysis, with which we concur, U.S. policy has always given pride of place to hard security issues and far greater resources have been devoted to border control, counter-narcotics and security assistance than to assistance designed to deal with shortcomings in the areas of democracy and governance.

Unfortunately, this problematic approach continues to this day. In his March 31 speech on the newly-revised U.S. policy in Central Asia, Deputy Secretary of State Blinken noted, correctly I believe, that U.S. security is tied to a stable Central Asia. In describing U.S. priorities, Mr. Blinken focused first off on Central Asia's role in combatting terrorism and violent extremism. He then stated that stability would be enhanced by the Central Asian states maintaining their sovereignty and independence, implying quite clearly that containing Russia would be the second plank of U.S. policy. As they have in similar policy speeches over the last several years, development, governance and democracy once again came last in Mr. Blinken's accounting of the Administration's priorities.

I do not wish to imply that radical forces outside the region and renewed Russian hegemonism do not pose a threat to stability in Central Asia. They do. This shows up in the number of Central Asians who have joined ISIS recently and the wave of repressive laws that are being introduced across the region modeled closely on Russian legislation designed to paint independent voices as traitors and enemies and to further close the already constricted space for civic activism in Central Asia.

As the U.S. intelligence community correctly concludes, most of the problems in Central Asia are homemade, not imported. We believe U.S. policymakers need to focus more on helping the Central Asians deal with these problems.

The first challenge before U.S. policymakers working on Central Asia is to ensure that the U.S. remains engaged in the region even as Afghanistan is fading in importance, budgets are declining and more immediate crises have erupted elsewhere in the world.

Their second challenge is to shift their strategic approach. The United States government needs to focus more on dealing with this fact -- that regional governments' repressive policies and failure to deal with human security challenges are sowing the seeds for long-term instability that could seriously threaten U.S. interests.

Such an approach will be less than welcome to the current governments of Central Asia. But the U.S. is not without leverage. Surrounded by larger, stronger and at times troublesome neighbors, it is in the Central Asians' interest to keep the U.S. engaged. Beyond the general leverage provided by engagement, the United States possesses specific points of leverage with each of the states of Central Asia, be it the potential for high-level visits, needed economic assistance, or a desire for security cooperation. The administration needs to use this leverage to extract progress on human security issues.

We believe that long-term, values-driven engagement remains the best approach for the United States. Specifically, we believe that:

- The United States should continue to engage with regional governments on issues of mutual interest while also pushing back harder in areas such as human rights, governance and democratization.
- The United States should internalize the fact that the peoples of Central Asia are an important and attentive audience for official U.S. statements and make clear to regional governments that in areas where the United States disagrees with their policies U.S. officials will speak out publicly.
- The United States should reconfigure its approach to security in Central Asia, focusing increasingly scarce assistance resources away from the security sector and into areas that affect broader human security, including support for democratization, and good governance, civil society and independent media development, education, health care and employment.
- The United States should comprehensively review security and law enforcement assistance policy. The United States should only provide such assistance where there is political will to undertake the kind of reforms necessary to ensure this assistance can be used effectively.

- The U.S. should condition cooperation in the areas of greatest interest to regional governments – mostly related to hard security – on concrete progress on key human rights, democracy and governance problems.

- Finally, the U.S. should lead an intensive effort by International Financial Institutions and other key donors to refocus and coordinate assistance programs to address the alarming decline in Central Asia's human capital and the socio-economic threats posed by the prospect of a deep and long-lasting recession in Russia that is, at least in some part, the product of U.S. policy choices.