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Assessing the Past and Thinking Towards the Future

OLGA OLIKER

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May 2007

Testimony presented before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe on May 18, 2007

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**Statement of Olga Oliker¹
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***Two Years After Andijan
Assessing the Past and Thinking Towards the Future*²**

Before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

May 18, 2007

Two years after the events in Andijan province, in Uzbekistan, both the events themselves and their implications continue to be questioned and reassessed. This is appropriate, both because there has yet to be a credible independent investigation into the events themselves, and because the question of Andijan goes to the root of the U.S.-Uzbek relationship, and how it developed and declined over the last decade.

But perhaps more important than the question of Uzbekistan in particular is the question of U.S. policy more broadly: specifically, U.S. policy towards regimes that are oppressive of the rights of their populations, as Uzbekistan has been. What options does a country like the United States have if it wants to promote change in such countries, and what policies stand the best chance of success. In order to answer that question, however, it is worth relooking the question of U.S. reform efforts abroad more broadly.

A look at the historical record demonstrates two things. The first is that the United States is not particularly effective at promoting democratization abroad. The second is that it has been working to promote democratization abroad for a rather long time.

Aside from the efforts to rebuild Germany and Japan on democratic principles, the Cold war as a whole presented a paradigm of communism vs. democracy. The immediate post-Cold war period saw some spread of democracy to some former communist countries, which was very much welcomed by the United States, and the period since September 11, 2001 has seen an effort to spread democracy through even more proactive means.

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The reasons the U.S. has sought to promote reform abroad are twofold. One aspect of this is the basic notion that more freedom is better than less freedom, from a purely moral and ethical viewpoint. It makes people in these countries better off politically and economically, and that is a good thing. The second aspect of this is a security argument. Both Clinton and Bush administration national security strategies have made the case that democratization promotes security, particularly in the face of dangers from internal radical, especially religious radicals (a component of this that has gotten more attention more recently).³ Although not always thus laid out, one argument for why this would be the case is the four-pronged approach that follows:

- First, absent legally sanctioned means of political participation radical movements, religious or otherwise, become far more appealing.
- Second, in the absence of secular political alternatives, houses of worship and religious communities have often become the only means for people to gather and voice complaints, creating a religious aspect to political opposition where there might otherwise not be one.
- Third, without legal nonviolent opposition, the likelihood that political opposition will be violent increases—as does the likelihood of a violent government response (a model that the events of May 2005 in Andijan can be said to have followed).
- Fourth, by making opposition illegal, the likelihood that opposition activists will be further radicalized by arrest and imprisonment (their own or of those close to them) is increased.

This is a rational and a convincing argument, and one rooted in human nature and political science. But over the years that we have sought to foster reform for these reasons, and others, the record globally has been less than impressive. Although some democracies have emerged, other countries have reversed democratic processes. Moreover, in Central Asia, the record is particularly poor. Over the last few years, we have seen increased authoritarianism in every state in the region. Even Kyrgyzstan, which managed to have a color revolution in response to that rise in authoritarianism, has a long way to go before it looks like a democracy—or a stable state.

Why have U.S. democratization efforts, in Central Asia and elsewhere, had so much difficulty? The specific reasons vary from country to country, but there are three fundamental problems, or families of problems that have created particularly significant challenges.

The first of these is that local leaders often think that transition is dangerous. They do not accept any of the arguments made that transition will make their countries safer. First because they know

³ The Clinton Administration strategies were titled *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*. The White House: Washington, DC, The latest of these, published in February 1996 superseded the versions of February 1995 and July 1994. The Bush Administration strategies are *The National Security*

it will not make them safer—it almost definitionally means that they will lose their jobs. Second, because they think that transition is dangerous for their countries. And in this, they have the backing of a certain amount of analysis, as well. While there is good scholarly research that supports the argument that established democracies are less prone to conflict and domestic unrest (and terror attacks), there is a sizable body of literature that demonstrates, pretty conclusively, that transitions to democracy are a dangerous thing, more prone to conflict, unrest, and perhaps even terrorism than keeping an authoritarian system in place, or even transitioning to one. The forces that democratization unleashes, of political and economic discontent, in the absence of the institutions of a stable democracy, have led to violence in the past. Thus, even if one accepts that mature democracies are stable structures, it can seem, whether one reads the academic literature or simply looks at examples such as the former Yugoslavia, that transitions are volatile and dangerous (and, as Latin American examples show, reversible).⁴ So, some regional leaders believe that democratization in their countries will lead to chaos, and in the case of Central Asia (and not a few other places), possibly religious radicals coming to power.

Autocratic leaders do have a point when they fear for their future in office in the case of a democratic transition. However, their concerns about coming chaos may be somewhat misplaced. First, that transitions are more prone to conflict does not mean that they are guaranteed to fail spectacularly. While there have been some impressive failures, there have also been a number of successes which have made the lives of the local population better, and states more secure. Moreover, some of the same problems that affect nascent democracies also affect autocracies that have no established institutions for succession—the case for most of the Central Asian states. If transition is inevitable, is it not better, for the state, the region and the world that it go towards a more stable, less conflict-prone, more equitable system than one that is less of all of these things? But, clearly, these arguments have not been sufficiently convincing to bring authoritarian leaders around.

Strategy of the United States of America, The White House: Washington, DC, September 2002 and *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House: Washington, DC, March 2006.

⁴ See Edward D. Mansfield and Jack L. Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005). Mansfield and Snyder trace their argument to Samuel Huntington, who argued in *Political Order in Changing Societies* that given weak political institutions, increased political participation (as a component of general social and economic modernization) can lead to unrest. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). See also Quan Li, “Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorist Incidents,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, April 2005; Alberto Abadie, “Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism,” Working Paper 10859, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, October 2004; and Charles Tilly, “Inequality, Democratization, and De-Democratization,” *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 2003) pp. 37-43.

The second reason the United States has had difficulty promoting democracy abroad is that not everyone in the United States agrees that more political participation in these foreign countries will be better than less, or that working towards better systems in the long-term is the right thing to do now, particularly given scarce resources. The appeal of systems that clamp down on radical opposition is clear, at home and abroad, when there is real fear of radicalism, at home and abroad. Moreover, in many specific cases, analysts and policymakers will argue that getting a given country's cooperation against near-term threats is more important than it is to secure them and us against long-term threats that are a product of their political systems. This is an argument that we heard in Uzbekistan, and it's an argument that has very much been a factor in U.S. policy in Pakistan, among other places.⁵ Insofar as this is accepted, policies based on this premise weaken reform efforts both because they can take the pressure to reform off in the interest of gaining cooperation on other issues. Even if one seeks to advance both sets of goals simultaneously, the reform effort can be hampered because of the appearance of hypocrisy thus engendered. Moreover, even the "security before reform" approach has implications beyond the country in question, because states in which reform remains the focus perceive a double standard. Finally, evidence that suggests that the United States itself is complicit in abuses and violations of democratic principles in support of security also damages its capacity to effectively preach from the bully pulpit.

The third reason the United States has been less effective than it might wish in fostering democracy abroad is that we've gone from working in more permissive environments to less permissive environments. Reform has been most successful when the international community was united with local leadership, and where international institutions were able to offer appealing incentives. Brave local government officials, who were willing to risk personal political failure (and perhaps more) for the sake of their countries' futures, have also been critical in successful change. When these things are absent, however, the mechanisms are less clear. But often, US programs that were developed, and which were effective, in situations where the cards were stacked in favor of reform are then attempted in places where the circumstances are very different. An effort to train judges according to global standards of human rights can yield fantastic results when the judges are keen on applying them when they get home, and work in a system that welcomes such changes. The same training program is unlikely to be effective in and of itself when the judges trained face every disincentive to continue to convict everyone who comes before their courts on their return to work. But because programs have not been developed with difficult countries in mind, neither the approaches nor the metrics (which too often are about how many people have

⁵ This approach is discussed in Seth G. Jones, Olga Oliker, Peter Chalk, C. Christine Fair, Rollie Lal, and James Dobbins, *Securing Tyrants or Fostering Reform: U.S. Security Assistance to Repressive and Transitioning Regimes*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 2006).

been trained, rather than about whether the training has changed behavior) are appropriate to where we're working.

What are the implications of this assessment? First, I believe that the United States policy community is ripe for some fundamental discussions and debates to help it to reach a better understanding of how reform promotes security and what short-term trade-offs do and do not make sense. Second, if the United States, other governments, NGOs, IOs are to try to promote reform, they should all take a critical look at their programs, particularly their programs in countries where reform has been a challenge. This means relooking the political reform agendas and doing a better job of defining programs that make sense. There are interesting lessons for both what to do and what not to do that can be taken from the historical experience of economic and development reform efforts. A great deal of this is a question of incentives and conditionality. Conditionality can work, when conditionality makes sense. Threatening to end programs that the donor wants more than does the recipient will not be particularly effective. Holding things that the recipient truly wants hostage, however, can be—but the question must still be asked what harm this does to the donor.

The other thing to reexamine is how success is measured. This comes down to what reform programs are expected to accomplish. The answer is not to train any given number of police officers, lawyers, or bureaucrats. The answer is to increase transparency, rule of law, respect for human rights, and good governance. These, too, can be measured, although not as directly. Such things as conviction rates, cases that come to trial, freedom in media, representation in government bodies (and whether laws passed reflect that representation) can all provide useful ways of assessing progress. Once one has a better way of assessing progress, the next step is to be willing to end programs that do not work. Also crucial, in this context, is to avoid supporting programs that can help foster repression. Finally, it is critical that evaluation be consistent, effective, and at a distance from the reform effort itself. The people implementing the program should not be the ones evaluating it. Congress has a significant role in improving oversight over government programs to help improve this process.

None of this, however, responds to the question of what to do in the case of countries that are really not interested in change. One aspect of responding to such countries is looking for leverage points, another is trying to find ways to communicate with the population, but the third is simply to wait. In the case of Uzbekistan, Karimov turned away from the US because he feared for his regime, and because he feared transition. When he leaves, which he most likely will do only because of ill health or death, two things are possible. One is a succession crisis which leads to unrest. Russia may try to help manage it, but one can see any number of ways it goes badly. Eventually, someone may emerge from this to lead the country. Another possibility is a succession

that is reasonably well-managed. In which case the new Uzbek leader has a certain confidence in his power, and is able to define a new foreign policy. In which case the US may be courted again, and then it may have some leverage. It is even possible that the new leader may have an interest in reform.

In the meantime, in the effort to seek leverage, the United States could also try to convince Uzbekistan's other partners that they should be concerned about the status quo. The prospects for an unstable transition, especially, can be played up, as this would affect a variety of interests. This approach may not have great prospects for success, given the partners in question, but beginning a dialogue cannot hurt.

Sanctions and visa restrictions are another issue. What do EU sanctions and their renewal do? Well, they put Uzbekistan on notice, but most analysts agree that sanctioning a closed economy has little real impact. Thus, the EU sanctions, recently renewed, are unlikely to spur change. They do, however draw a line in the sand, which the Uzbek government does respond to, if only with written statements. Moreover, this signaling does two more things: it keeps the dialogue going, and it keeps the issue alive.

Keeping the dialogue going is important, both through signaling and through direct communications. These can include efforts to broaden the media space in a closed society like Uzbekistan's, with things like Voice of America and Radio Liberty. It also includes government-to-government communications. It is not an effective "punishment" of Uzbekistan to refuse communications with it. Rather, the absence of communication precludes some means of protecting dissidents, and it precludes any capacity to cooperate in support of shared interests. The U.S. would be wrong to assume that its security threat perception is shared by Uzbekistan—it is not. But as with a variety of countries with which the bulk of our goals differ, there are also areas of overlap. Without talking to identify those, we not only cannot pursue them, we also cannot build on them to identify new means of leverage. This does not mean we should resume training Uzbek security forces. It does mean that we should talk.

The most important thing for U.S. policy, however, is to learn from the experience with Uzbekistan. If the U.S. truly seeks democratic reform as a component of its own security (as well as for moral and ethical reasons), it needs to improve its implementation and evaluation of reform efforts abroad. Long and short term goals need to be squared, and approaches that mitigate the short-term effects of long-term policies need to be developed. Accusations of inconsistency must be treated seriously and responded to, as well. Transparency is always a good idea, no matter how advanced the democracy.