

U.S. RELATIONS TO UZBEKISTAN
A Double Standard or Second Class Treatment?

Testimony Prepared For Delivery to
The House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Government Operations

June 14, 2007

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Washington

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Some Background to a Sad Story

The story of the U.S. relationship with Uzbekistan is really quite a sad one, characterized by misunderstandings and miscues on both sides.

The real losers in this story are the Uzbek people, who still lack a government that offers strong protections of their human rights and who have still not experienced the economic or political promise that they believed independence would bring them.

The U.S. relationship with Uzbekistan is really quite different from that of either Iran or Saudi Arabia, the other two states under discussion in today's hearings.

The U.S.-Uzbek relationship is all of 16 years in duration, and involves one Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, that nation's first and at least for now, only leader, who from the beginning has sought to get and then keep the attention of the U.S.

However, Karimov, a figure whose political consciousness dates from the years of the Cold War between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., sought to do this in a very "old-style" way, by offering the U.S. a strategic partnership that focused on shared foreign policy goals rather than on shared values in the domestic political agendas of the two countries.

Karimov seems to have thought that Uzbekistan could become a friend to the U.S. somewhat analogous to what Pakistan had been throughout much of the Cold War, with Tashkent sharing a foreign policy agenda with Washington but not feeling that this obliged the Uzbek regime to turn itself into a democratic political system.

Karimov, a communist boss-turned-president, seemingly believes that democracy is a dangerous ideology in an unstable state, and has introduced political reforms only when forced to do so.

Karimov gave lip service to democratic goals during the first year after independence, when the Uzbek leader sought popular support to legitimate his authority in the near anarchic conditions after the collapse of Soviet rule. Karimov participated in a contested (albeit not free and fair) election for the presidency against a serious political opponent, Muhammad Salih, head of the opposition Erk party, and was even sworn into office on a Qur'an as part of a pre-election promise made to Islamists in the Farghana Valley during the election campaign.

But the Civil War in Tajikistan quickly reinforced the communist-honed authoritarian tendencies of the Uzbek leader; for him, it served as a warning of what could occur in an unregulated political environment in Uzbekistan, and presented a possible source of "contagion" as elements (especially Islamic activists) from Tajikistan could aid opposition forces in Uzbekistan. Life began to bear out Karimov's conclusions

when small groups of radical Islamists (the forerunners of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan--IMU) went to Tajikistan to fight with their "brothers."

The IMU set up camps in remote parts of Tajikistan. A year or so after the various parties to the Tajik Civil War signed an Agreement of National Reconciliation, the IMU (and remaining armed Tajik Islamists) were forced into Afghanistan, where they remained in al-Qaeda supported camps until after the U.S. led bombing campaign in late 2001-2002.

Their presence of these terrorist groups within striking range of Uzbekistan made Karimov even more leery of democratic reforms. Instead the Uzbek government cracked down on religious and political groups that it deemed seditious or potentially seditious, and on individuals whom it saw as part or prey of such groups. As already detailed they did so in a way that frequently abused the human rights of those accused of these anti-state activities.

At the same time, though, it was in this very period that some key U.S. officials became convinced that they shared some important security goals with the Uzbek regime. Uzbekistan, long eager for increased security cooperation with the U.S., agreed to facilitate U.S. efforts to route out Osama bin Ladin from Afghanistan as well as some additional new forms of security cooperation..

The U.S. Department of Defense had long believed that Uzbekistan could and should play a greater role in U.S. strategy in the region. The Uzbeks were most eager to distance themselves from Russia and had inherited the most sophisticated military in Central Asia.

Ironically (and with hindsight quite sadly) the Bush administration decided to stop sending unmanned drones into Afghanistan from Uzbek territory. But U.S. military engagement with Uzbekistan continued to increase, both at the end of the Clinton Administration and during the first year of George W. Bush's administration as well (see US grants and loans to Uzbekistan, in the table attached, noting that the 2001 figures are "year corrected", so include post-September 11 supplementary assistance).

The Uzbeks were the first of any of the post-Soviet states to reorient themselves to the new opportunities for security cooperation with the U.S., offering Washington basing rights in the immediate aftermath of September 11.

A New Strategic Relationship

The U.S. bombing campaign in Afghanistan eliminated Uzbekistan's major security threat, and created new opportunities for cooperation with the U.S., and new opportunities for the U.S. to press the Uzbeks for much needed economic and political reforms.

The prospect of U.S. pressure for economic and political reform was something that was viewed with real enthusiasm by certain pro-reform elements within the political establishment of Uzbekistan. Moreover, it has been rumored that some of these people pressed for the Uzbek government to make firm promises that the electoral system and parliamentary rule would have specific reforms that were targeted to be achieved within a five year period. The pro-reform elements saw these targets as goals, rather than strict benchmarks upon which further U.S.-Uzbek relations would be based, and believed that by asking for more than they believed realistically possible, there was some hope of getting the Karimov regime to pick up the pace of political reform.

Was the U.S. Ever Serious about a Strategic partnership with Uzbekistan?

But the central focus of the pro-reform elements in the Uzbek elite was to get the Karimov regime to jumpstart the process of economic reform, which was largely abandoned along with the World Bank and IMF structural reform package in 1996-1997. Their commitment to political reform was as an adjunct to economic reform, which they believed would not be sustainable without political protection offered to small and medium sized entrepreneurs. And this could not be done without opening the political system for everyone, which necessitated political and especially legal system reform.

I detail what occurred in my book “Central Asia’s Second Chance.” The World Bank and IMF did go to Uzbekistan and did offer a new economic reform package, whose benchmarks were not achieved, leaving these international financial institutions very frustrated with the Uzbek economic officials.

For their part the Uzbeks were angry at the World Bank and IMF officials, whom they believed, had never made a sufficiently attractive offer to beat back the criticisms of the “rent-seekers” who dominated the remnants of the old planned economy (and especially those tied to the sale and production of cotton) who would lose from economic reforms.

The reform package offered left the Uzbeks with a budget deficit of roughly a half billion dollars per year for a short transition period (likely no less than two or three years), which the anti-reformers were able to successfully argue posed an unacceptable social risk. The standards of living were sure to drop in the short run creating a greater risk of social upheaval led largely by pro-Islamic elements, who were becoming more visible in society.

Now, I am not going to justify this Uzbek viewpoint, and personally I do not believe that religious “extremists” like Hizb’ ut-Tahrir are capable of taking power in Uzbekistan. But the “carrots” were not large enough to “beat” the verbal sticks offered by the anti-reform elements in the Uzbek establishment, many of whom were from or interwoven with Uzbekistan’s internal security forces.

In this environment, it did not take long for the new U.S.-Uzbek “strategic” relationship to begin to sour, and for both sides to walk away unhappy. From the U.S.

point of view the Uzbek government has misled us. They have demonstrated little inclination to engage in either economic or political reforms. They did, however, deliver the promised security cooperation, including verbal support for the launching of an attack in Iraq—a real rarity among post-Soviet states.

For their part the Uzbeks were bitterly disappointed. They had thought that they were getting a strategic friendship with the U.S. akin to what had been on offer in earlier decades, and that the U.S. would support the full-blown reform of the country's security establishment, as well as provide massive economic and political assistance. The Uzbeks were versed in U.S. foreign aid allocations: they knew that most foreign aid packages were relatively small, but that “close friends” like Egypt and Israel (and Pakistan in earlier decades) were disproportionately rewarded, and they believed that they had taken a disproportionate risk (inviting the U.S. in with minimal or nonexistent consultation with Russia—depending upon which Uzbek rumors you believe).

Would massive assistance have created a suitably attractive atmosphere in Uzbekistan for reform?

Speculation on this question is much like the Robert Frost poem on “the road not taken.” The U.S. didn't provide massive assistance, and there wasn't reform in Uzbekistan.

Personally, I do believe that the government of Uzbekistan would have supported major economic reforms and moderate political reforms had there been a more attractive economic assistance package provided to the Uzbeks.

Moreover, an improved human rights environment was the “bitter-pill” that had to be swallowed, and I do believe that the Uzbeks would have swallowed that pill, had they received the kind of political assistance and money towards the reform of the internal security and judicial systems that they had hoped to receive.

After all you can't transform those working in security services in Uzbekistan from being physical abusers (where beating people to confess is unfortunately not an infrequent occurrence, not to mention the one tragic time when a detainee was actually boiled) to an organization which respects the human rights of the accused simply by issuing a new set of instructions.

Retraining programs, which are necessary throughout the former Soviet Union are very expensive to put together and run on a mass scale. And although there were some seemingly very good pilot projects introduced by the U.S. (and some held in Turkey with U.S. support), there was never any money extended to these, even when relations between the two countries were good.

What to Do with “Andijian”

This takes me to the problem of Andijian in May 2005 in which the Uzbek government used excessive force to quell civil disturbances. The crowds were overwhelmingly unarmed, but an armed opposition had seized a prison releasing its prisoners and seizing policemen and firemen as hostages in a building just off the square where the unarmed civilians were gathered.

Would the security forces have been more competent in their response had there been a much greater level of U.S. training from 2002 through 2004? Although some specialists feel otherwise, I do not believe that it was the first choice of the Uzbek government to incur high civilian casualties (even if the low figures of 250+ civilian losses are accurate they are unacceptably high). If that had been the Uzbek preference would Karimov have flown to a location just outside of Andijian to try to negotiate?

And if the U.S. had been in the middle of a multi-year retraining program for the Uzbek armed forces, and the horror of Andijian had nonetheless occurred, would Tashkent have then refused to have an international enquiry launched by the UN or the OSCE.

I cannot say whether more training would have prevented Andijian, but I do believe that had the U.S.-Uzbek relationship been healthier at the time of the disturbances in Andijian, Karimov would have decided in favor of salvaging the relationship by having an international enquiry that met U.S. and OSCE standards.

There was a constituency within the Uzbek elite that supported Uzbek participation in some form of international enquiry, but as the Uzbek president’s position hardened, they lost any room for maneuvering within the Uzbek political establishment.

What to Do Now?

Two years after Andijian U.S. authorities are still stuck between a rock and a hard place with regard to Uzbekistan. While the Uzbek regime does not enjoy its relative isolation, under E. U. sanctions and at risk of sanctions from the U.S as a “nation of particular concern,” the Karimov regime seems more securely rooted now than two years ago, in large part because of the consolidation of its security forces in favor of the State Committee on National Security (that previously competed with the Ministry of Internal Affairs).

President Karimov’s term ends in December (according to some readings of the Uzbek constitution it ended in January, but there is no reading that will allow him to stay beyond December, only constitutional change will facilitate this). If the recent constitutional change in Kazakhstan is at all indicative, and I think that it is, Karimov will also seek the amendment of his country’s constitution to facilitate his remaining in power for the rest of his life. The relative acquiescence of U.S. officials to the constitutional

modification in Kazakhstan suggests that there will be little opportunity to mount any sort of potentially effective diplomatic protest in the Uzbek case, without appearing wholly hypocritical. The same will be true of European authorities.

Should the expected constitutional change be introduced the U.S. and its OSCE allies in the EU will confront a stark choice. The continual isolation of Karimov and his regime will effectively mean the continued isolation of the Uzbek people.

It is impossible to predict how long Karimov will remain in power. It seems more likely to depend upon his health and the Uzbek medical care establishment than upon his popularity with the Uzbek people. Moreover, given the strong position of the Uzbek security establishment (and its more classic bureaucratic organization) the transitional period in Turkmenistan is likely to be even more orchestrated, and possibly even more opaque than that in Turkmenistan, and could well last several years before there is any real likelihood of pro-reform elements receiving any autonomy of decision-making (and it is not pre-ordained that they will achieve this even then).

While the political arena in Uzbekistan is more complex than in Turkmenistan, and political power is more dispersed, there is not a well-developed alternative political elite living inside the country, and those outside the country with political ambitions are relatively few in number and almost all are entirely lacking in political or administrative experience.

The majority of the Uzbek population and especially those living in rural areas are less educated today than they were 16 years ago, and they are less committed to secular values than the like-aged population was at the time of independence. The continued isolation of the Karimov regime means that in the next five to ten years the rural population will be even less exposed to secular ideas, and more removed from the technology-based forces of globalization. The Uzbek population is paying for the sanctions that have been levied against their top leaders.

If a half dozen top government officials can't go to Europe, or visit their children studying there, then in their minds at least, it is logical that all Uzbeks should have more difficulty getting to Europe (or the U.S.) to study. Fortunately some of the restrictions against study in the U.S. (which were indirectly applied, such as banning the administration of the TOEFL test) have been lessened, but those seeking independent study opportunities in the U.S. are still at a disadvantage when they return home.

So, who in the end is paying a bigger price for our limited engagement with the Uzbek government, the top elite or the ordinary population?

One of the big problems with our current application of the "stick" and promise of the carrot is that even in the best of times the "carrot" was far smaller and less tasty than the one the government in Tashkent expected to be offered. So its withdrawal is of less consequence than we would like, and the prospects for applying a larger stick are highly unlikely.

There are no realistic alternatives to the Karimov government, either within the country or beyond its borders, and no guarantees that the group that will come after him will be more to our liking.

While U.S. leaders may want to pretend that Uzbekistan does not really exist, that is not really an option for Tashkent's Central Asian neighbors, as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan all abut Uzbekistan (as does Afghanistan), and in many cases transit across Uzbekistan is the most geographically friendly way to open ports.

We may try to isolate Uzbekistan, but neither Russia nor China will make the same choice, further diminishing the range of our options.

Program Name	1996	1997	1998	1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
2) Narcotics Control	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.0
3) Migration and Refugee Assistance	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
4) Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining & Related	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	4.3	1.9	0.0	4.7
5) Other State Assistance	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.0
<i>D. Other Economic Assistance, Total</i>	1.1	7.2	1.9	2.8	1.7	5.7	4.5	11.7	10.6	5.6
1) Millennium Challenge Corporation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
2) Peace Corps	1.1	1.3	1.3	1.8	1.7	1.8	0.8	1.9	2.1	1.1
3) Department of Defense Security Assistance	0.0	5.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.9	0.2	6.7	1.5	0.0
4) Other Active Grant Programs	0.0	0.0	0.6	1.0	0.0	1.0	3.5	3.1	7.0	4.5
5) Inactive Programs	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
II. Total Military Assistance	0.3	1.3	2.0	2.2	2.3	3.1	37.9	9.7	0.5	0.0
III. Total Economic & Military Assistance	11.3	11.6	15.8	39.4	34.0	218.5	240.9	167.5	49.6	44.3
IV. Total Non-Concessional U.S. Loans	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.1	0.0
A. Export-Import Bank Loans	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
B. OPIC & Other Non-Concessional U.S. Loans	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.1	0.0