

# **Loss of Uzbekistan: Implications for the U.S.**

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## **Introduction**

The May 2005 massacres in Andijan, Uzbekistan, unraveled the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> U.S.-Uzbek partnership. The U.S. urged an international inquiry into the Andijan massacres, causing Karimov displeasure, who promptly cut ties with the U.S. and demanded that the U.S. troops stationed in Karsi air base in Khanabad leave within 180 days. This paper will assess the implications of the loss of Uzbekistan for the U.S. It will first look at the significance of the Uzbek partnership for the U.S.; then, it will identify benefits and downsides of the loss of Uzbekistan, followed by U.S. policy options in Central Asia and recommendations.

## **Partnership with Uzbekistan and What It Meant to the U.S.**

Although Uzbekistan has pursued closer ties with the U.S. since it gained its independence in 1991, the U.S. largely perceived Uzbekistan as an insignificant and distant country still remaining in Russia's realm of influence with serious human rights problems. However, some have argued that Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states have more strategic value to the U.S. than thought. In the words of Dr. Jeffery Starr,<sup>1</sup> the U.S. Department of Defense "saw Central Asia [in 1990s] as a region surrounded by vital U.S. interests (China, Russia, South Asia and the Middle East) and, therefore, it made sense to view Central Asia as a vital interest also."<sup>2</sup> The U.S. relations with Uzbekistan in the 1990s were largely limited to development assistance aimed at promoting political and economic reforms. The U.S. also encouraged Uzbekistan's participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace, it trained Uzbek military officers and provided technical support to combat terrorism.<sup>3</sup> There have been reports that U.S. and Uzbek intelligence agencies have been secretly cooperating for several years prior to September 11, 2001.<sup>4</sup>

U.S.-Uzbek relations significantly improved and their collaboration took a more pragmatic form following September 11, 2001. A March 2002 Declaration of Strategic Partnership between the U.S. and Uzbekistan formalized their alliance against international terrorism, allowing the U.S. to set up a military base in Uzbekistan in Karsi-Khanabad to support its operations in Afghanistan in exchange for financial and technical awards. The

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Starr is currently with Goldman Sachs, on sabbatical from the Department of Defense. Previously served in the Directorate of Special Operations Low Intensity Conflict, Department of Defense, where his work included battle-of-ideas issues.

<sup>2</sup> "U.S.-Uzbek Relations: A New Paradigm for Engagement," A Russia and Eurasia Program Workshop, Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 15, 2002, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> <http://cfrterrorism.org/coalition/uzbekistan.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

rate of U.S. assistance to Uzbekistan rose significantly, going from \$47.33 million in 2001 to \$130.39 million in 2002.<sup>5</sup> An October 2001 U.S.-Uzbek agreement encouraged taking “proper measures immediately in case of a direct threat to the security and territorial integrity of the Republic of Uzbekistan.”<sup>6</sup> Uzbekistan saw the partnership as an opportunity to move away from perceived Russia’s neo-hegemonic aspirations by forging ties with the West, and in addition to unite against Islamist extremism in the region.

Although Uzbekistan’s human rights record has remained abysmal and there have been clear indications of ties between radicalization of Muslims in the country and Karimov’s repressions, the U.S. saw the war against terror as an underlying connection in its partnership with Uzbekistan after September 11, 2001. The U.S. partnerships with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan alarmed Russia and China since the U.S. has quickly established its influence in the region and proven to be the only power that is able to provide financial and technical support to fight terrorism in Uzbekistan. The significance of the Central Asian countries as fronts against the war on terrorism was on par with the U.S. goals to access energy sources of the region, although the remoteness of the region and a lack of proper infrastructure continued to remain a challenge. The U.S.-led Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is so far the only connecting energy pipeline between the West and Central Asia, which bypasses Russia. In America’s calculations, Uzbekistan, the most populous country in Central Asia, was seen as a so-called “anchor state” for its geostrategic importance.

### **Gains and Losses of Uzbekistan’s Disengagement with the U.S.**

The U.S. pressure to investigate the Andijan massacre led to the severing of ties between the U.S. and Uzbekistan. According to eyewitnesses, the attack resulted in the deaths of 500 people, although the “official” government estimate was not higher than 187 armed terrorists. Unwilling to comply with the Western pressure, in July 2005 President Islam Karimov requested the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Karsi-Khanabad air base within six months. In October, the European Union imposed an arms embargo on Uzbekistan and cut aid and all cooperation agreements. The EU foreign ministers also barred Uzbek officials implicated in the massacres from traveling to Western Europe. As a result, assistance to Uzbekistan for 2006, \$13.6 million in total, will be cut to \$11.2 million.<sup>7</sup> Greeting the EU’s move, the U.S. Senate slashed \$23 million to Uzbekistan for past use of the Karsi-Khanabad air base following Uzbekistan’s unilateral ending of an agreement with the U.S.<sup>8</sup> Senator John McCain noted that “actions of Uzbek President Islam Karimov were so alarming that the Senate should be considering sanctions against him.”<sup>9</sup> President Karimov is also facing legal proceedings by the International Criminal Court.

The severing of ties between the U.S. and Uzbekistan was a sudden loss for Washington, and will affect some of the U.S. goals in the region; but the U.S. will continue

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, FY 2001 and 2002 U.S. Assistance to Eurasia. URL: [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)

<sup>6</sup> <http://cfrterrorism.org/coalition/uzbekistan.html>

<sup>7</sup> EU Imposes Sanctions on Uzbekistan for Failure to Probe Andijan Massacre, Moscow News, October 4, 2005. URL: [www.mosnews.com/news/2005/10/04/uzbekistan.shtml](http://www.mosnews.com/news/2005/10/04/uzbekistan.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Senate blocks Uzbek payment, October 6, 2005. URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4314432.stm>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

to pursue many of those goals through other Central Asian countries. The immediate impact of the withdrawal of the 1,500-manned Karsi-Kanabad U.S. base will not seriously affect the war on terror because the troops would be partially relocated to Kyrgyzstan, a cooperative agreement with which has been reassured during Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit there in October 2005. The U.S. will continue to use Kyrgyzstan as a forwarding site for supplies to U.S. troops fighting in Afghanistan.

The clearer impact on the U.S. strategic goals in Central Asia caused by the loss of Uzbekistan will be the latter's reinvigoration of relations with Russia, which is actively defending President Karimov. Uzbekistan and Russia held weeklong joint military exercises for the first time this September, the significance of which was more political than anything, but it clearly indicated to Washington the strategic shift of Karimov's foreign policy. This shift is hugely beneficial for Russia as well since it has been seeking the ejection of U.S. forces from Central Asia since they arrived in the region in 2001. A Russian defense official declared on November 27, 2005, that the Karsi-Khanabad air base would be given to the Russian military next year after Uzbekistan joins the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Reassertion of Russia's influence in Uzbekistan, however, is not and should not be seen as a zero-sum game for the U.S. because maintaining good relations with Russia is more important than struggling to keep the U.S. presence in Uzbekistan. Despite Uzbekistan's geostrategic significance to the U.S. in terms of helping the U.S. conduct military operations in Afghanistan and serving as a launching pad to act on other instabilities across the region, association with the oppressive regime and Russia's resentment of the U.S. expansion in Central Asia would have been bigger problems for the U.S. At least in Kyrgyzstan both Russia and the U.S. maintain air bases.

An unnamed U.S. official recently noted with bitterness that the ending of U.S.-Uzbek military relations would also lead to the end of counterterrorism cooperation, thus upsetting the ability of both countries to "deal with al Qaeda and its allies in Central Asia and neighboring Afghanistan."<sup>10</sup> Islamist extremism and militancy remain serious concerns for regional governments; however, such threats are limited at best due to the Islamists' weak presence and a lack of popularity in the region. Since the 2001 defeat of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, an Islamist group supportive of al Qaeda and based in the Ferghana Valley, there is no organized Islamist group in the region at this juncture. Regional law enforcement authorities increasingly grapple with foreign Islamist missionaries, who are seen as a potential danger, and groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, Muslim Brotherhood, People's Congress of Kurdistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Party of East Turkestan have been banned in most Central Asian countries.

The Uzbek leadership's fear of Islamists has often been inflated for political purposes and, in many cases, has been a source of their radicalization because of President Karimov's tough methods. The continuation of the U.S.-Uzbek counterterrorism cooperation would have proven ineffective since the authoritarian regime has reportedly provided inaccurate and often false intelligence on terrorists and Islamist groups. Some of the intelligence on terrorism that Uzbekistan supplied to the U.S. and British intelligence agencies was obtained from Uzbekistan's notorious torture chambers, thus raising questions about accuracy and truthfulness of such intelligence. Uzbek authorities are said

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<sup>10</sup> Robin Wright, "Uzbekistan Cuts Off Ties to U.S. on Fighting Terror," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2005.

to have linked the jailed Uzbek opposition members with Islamist terrorism and al-Qaida.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, the loss of Uzbekistan's contribution to the war on terror is minimal at best.

The souring of relations between the U.S. and Uzbekistan may continue for some time; however, the former seems to be ready to discuss bilateral relations with the latter. The U.S. maintains other options in Central Asia. As noted, with Kyrgyzstan's guarantee to use the Ganci air base in Bishkek as long as it is needed to complete the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, the U.S. will not suffer a setback by Uzbekistan's eviction. The U.S. also recognizes the importance of Kazakhstan as an emerging economic power, which was acknowledged by Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs, who recently toured Central Asia. The U.S., which has already made huge investments in Kazakhstan's energy sector, will continue collaborating with Kazakhstan. In her recent tour of the region, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice commended Kazakhstan's economic modernization and Tajikistan's cooperation in the war on terrorism but stressed the importance of human rights and democratic principles.<sup>12</sup> These actions suggest a multivector engagement of Central Asian countries, which will help the U.S. pursue its security and economic goals in the region. However, Washington lacks a longer-term comprehensive strategy to Central Asia in the face of surges of instability in the region, impoverishment tied with increasing criminalization and the authoritarian rule of regional governments.

### **Recommendations to the U.S.**

If anything, the unhappy end, or halt, of the U.S. relations with Uzbekistan showed one thing – cooperation with an odiously repressive regime can embolden it, lead to instability and even backfire. The U.S. has selectively criticized human rights violations in Uzbekistan, which did not prevent the U.S. from pouring economic and technical aid if President Karimov satisfied U.S. requests. The U.S. pressure to conduct an international inquiry of the Andijan killings frustrated Uzbek leaders all the more. To prevent any more of Andijan type events, the U.S. should pursue a more consistent line of policy to the Central Asian states.

The U.S. should not underestimate potential instabilities in the region given the unpredictability of conditions such as the March uprising in Kyrgyzstan, which toppled the 15-year rule of President Akaev. Now that the U.S. relies increasingly on its air base in Kyrgyzstan for its operations in Afghanistan, it should carefully watch and prevent Kyrgyzstan from descending to instability, seeds of which seem to be growing. Learning from the experience in Uzbekistan, the U.S. should take a moral high ground on human rights issues, democratization and the rule of law, which must apply to upcoming presidential elections in Kazakhstan. In general, there should be a right combination of sticks and carrots, coupled with efforts to bolster civil society, rather than nonchalant, often inadvertent, yielding into carrots in pursuit of military and economic goals of the U.S. The U.S. should now look more closely to the developments in the region and take proper action because of the growing unpredictability of the situation and the potential for things to get worse.

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<sup>11</sup> Craig Murray, "Oil and gas ensure that the US backs the Uzbek dictator to the hilt," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Gearan, "Rice Pushes for Democracy in Central Asia," *Associated Press*, October 13, 2005.