

SAVING DEMOCRACY PROMOTION
FROM SHORT-TERM U.S. POLICY INTERESTS
IN CENTRAL ASIA

SEAN ROBERTS

A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

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This paper is part of The Century Foundation's Project on Democracy and U.S. Foreign Policy. The project—encompassing a book, a paper series, and public seminars—explores whether and in what manner the United States should continue to support individuals and groups working to establish democracy in non-democratic countries, and support governments as well as individuals and groups in countries that are on the path to democracy. Under the direction of Morton H. Halperin, the project and the book that issues from it will consider the case for including efforts to foster democracy around the world as a key component of U.S. foreign policy—both on America's own and multilaterally, in conjunction with allies, such as the European Union and its member states, as well as key democratic countries in the global south.

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INTRODUCTION

The countries of Central Asia that formerly were Soviet republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—continually rank among the lowest in the world on every index evaluating democracy and human rights. Freedom House has ranked all the Central Asia countries as “Not Free” for many years, and only placed Kyrgyzstan in the “Partly Free” category after the 2005 change of government in that country.¹ In 2007, Freedom House even gave Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan the dubious honor of being ranked among the world’s eight “Least Free” countries along with Burma, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Cuba, and Libya.² Reporters without Borders ranked press freedoms in Central Asia similarly, with the best being Kyrgyzstan at 110 out of 169 countries while Turkmenistan stood third from last, above only North Korea and Eritrea.³ The *Economist’s* Democracy Index also offers dismal rankings for democratic governance in the region, with the best being Kyrgyzstan at 111 out of 167 countries and the worst being Turkmenistan at number 162.⁴

While most of the countries ranked at the bottom of these indices—such as North Korea, Burma, and Cuba—are essentially closed off from engagement with foreign states seeking to assist them with reform, the Central Asian states have been open to foreign donors and have allowed at least modest U.S. government-funded democracy programs to operate in their countries for the past sixteen years. In this context, one cannot help but ask why U.S. government programs supporting democratic development in the region have been so unsuccessful. The easy answer is, of course, that the governments of the region are led by autocrats who have little interest in democracy, which they view as a threat to their substantial personal power. Despite paying

lip-service to the establishment of democracy, no leader in Central Asia has demonstrated an adherence to international standards for free and fair elections or for freedom of speech and assembly. The presidents of the region have proven adept at stifling opposition and have generally prevented the development of political parties beyond those they control. They also have maintained a tight grip on the media throughout the region, have prevented civil society organizations from becoming politically active, and have tended to view their states' constitutions as theoretical "works-in-progress" open to constant change rather than as the foundation for the rule of law.

Nonetheless, it would be imprudent to suggest that the region's political leaders are the only obstacle to the development of democracy in Central Asia. With few exceptions, the citizens of the Central Asian states also have expressed little demand for democracy. They rarely have shown resistance to the authoritarianism of their presidents, and they have generally expressed skepticism concerning the ability of democratic reform to make a difference in their lives. Even in Kyrgyzstan, where a popular revolution calling for democratic change led to the removal of President Askar Akayev from office in 2005, little positive change has taken place. Evidently, the obstacles to democratic development in Central Asia are far greater than power-hungry leaders who wish to retain authoritarian systems.

In fact, I would argue that the mindset of the people in the region poses a much more troubling barrier to the success of U.S. programs promoting democracy than do its authoritarian leaders' meager political will for change. Central Asians are suspicious of democracy at best, and few people in the region believe it is an ideal worth taking substantial personal risk to defend. In a November 2007 poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in Kyrgyzstan, which is widely seen as the country in the region most receptive to democratic evolution, roughly half of those polled—and only 24 percent of those asked in the capital city of Bishkek—answered that they had some degree of satisfaction with the development of democracy in the

country.⁵ Moreover, none of the respondents mentioned democratic reform as being among the two most important challenges facing the country or among the three most important issues on which the government should focus.⁶ Furthermore, in another IRI poll conducted in Kyrgyzstan using the same methodology a few months prior, only 2 percent of respondents reported being a member of a political party.⁷ To anybody who has worked extensively in the region, this data merely reaffirms the widespread anecdotal evidence of the extreme distrust of and disinterest in democracy and politics in general among the region's population.

There are historical and cultural reasons behind these ambivalent and suspicious attitudes toward democracy in Central Asia, but they are not irreversible sentiments. For reasons further described below, I believe that nurturing democratic governance and respect for human rights in the states of Central Asia is possible and should remain an important priority for the United States and for the peoples of the region, but helping bring about this change requires a dramatically different approach than the one that has been employed to date.

U.S. government democracy assistance strategies have failed in Central Asia, and in most of the former Soviet Union, largely because they have not recognized the importance that historical and cultural factors have regarding the region's engagement with democracy and the effect that such factors have on the pace of reform. Instead of recognizing the need for a long-term strategy focused on changing behavior and increasing citizen demand for democracy, U.S. government programs have tended to seek short-term results by building institutions, which often operate in practice quite differently than American democracy promoters had intended. At the same time, the United States has failed to counteract Russian efforts to exploit these same historical and cultural factors, especially those born of the Soviet experience, as a means of reinforcing local suspicions of democracy and American assistance more generally.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS AFFECTING CENTRAL ASIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEMOCRACY

The differences in the ways that Americans and Central Asians view democracy are essentially a product of divergent perspectives on governance and the state that grow out of very different personal experiences. Americans, for example, generally believe in the efficacy of “independent formal institutions” that objectively hold both citizens and government accountable for their actions. While many Americans view the state with suspicion and question the fairness of our judicial system in isolated cases, most trust the legal system generally to treat individuals justly and to help create a balance of powers within government by overseeing the actions of its other branches.⁸ Likewise, we trust the objectivity of our electoral system to empower people to choose our government officials, and most of us believe that our essentially two-party political system ensures a competition of ideas from which to choose. Finally, Americans expect the government to deliver services efficiently, in the way a business might. These assumptions by citizens about the objectivity of our rule of law, the state’s accountability to people and its obligation to provide public services, and the ability of individuals to influence how governance is run are all critical to making democracy work in the United States.

The Soviet experience, however, reinforced in the people of Central Asia a completely different set of assumptions about governance and the state. While Soviet citizens’ deference to the state may have rivaled that of Americans, this sentiment was mostly reinforced in the U.S.S.R. through fear, rather than through a belief in the state’s accountability. The Soviet state was viewed by most Central Asians as a paternalistic institution that would provide protection and some services for the people, but was not interactive with or accountable to the public. In Central Asia, and elsewhere in the Soviet Union, political activity was seen as a collective demonstration

of belief in the state's power rather than as an opportunity for individuals to influence governance. In fact, individual political behavior outside the Communist party was literally a criminal offense during the Soviet era, and the examples of Stalinism and its aftermath had shown that participating in such activities was a futile endeavor that only brought misery upon oneself and one's family. The formal government structures in the Soviet Union also were notoriously ineffective and bureaucracy-laden. Without a substantial balance of powers within state structures, the state not only lacked direct accountability to the public, but also it was not internally accountable. Overall, this system created a strong deference to the state and the Communist party as a unifying formal manifestation of power and authority, but it did not create an atmosphere of compliance with the rules governing the more mundane aspects of the wide-reaching institutions of the state, especially in the post-Stalin years.

As a result, despite Soviet citizens' strong respect for the formal institutions of the state as the source of ultimate power, they tended to circumvent the rules of the state by using informal institutions to "get things done." As a Moldovan intellectual recently told me, this created a "double life," in which formal institutions were respected but were mostly symbolic in nature and could only really operate when navigated through informal relationships.⁹ This system has been described extensively in the recent book, *How Russia Really Works*, by the Russian-born British sociologist Alena Ledeneva.¹⁰ Ledeneva describes a variety of informal strategies that were employed by Soviet citizens in order to make the ineffective Soviet system work, including the widespread system of favor-exchange known colloquially as *blat*; the use of blackmail, known in Russian as *kompromat*, which is short for "compromising material"; a generally accepted mutual-support system that allowed workers to help each other to "cheat the system"; and a variety of financial schemes ultimately based on purposely falsified bookkeeping. As Ledeneva notes in summing up this system:

The Soviet system was not a planned economy. It was meant to be, but those living within its borders found that they had to counteract its over-centralization and its ideological limitations through intricate schemes of informal exchange, regional and industrial lobbying, and a variety of practices for cheating the system.¹¹

In her book, Ledeneva also suggests that this system has continued to define daily life in post-Soviet Russia as well. The same could also be said about Central Asia.

While similar types of survival strategies were widespread throughout the Soviet Union, in Central Asia they were especially pronounced given the region's unique combination of local traditions, distance from the center of governance, and relatively weak penetration of state-proscribed "Soviet values" encouraging compliance with state plans. Local traditions of self-governance, which have often been described exotically as *clanism*, led Central Asians to rely much more heavily in their daily affairs upon local communal structures than upon state institutions. Among the formerly nomadic people of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, who had long lived in kin-based communal units, familial ties tended to present an alternative to the state, offering an insular means of making the Soviet system work. Among the long-settled populations in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, traditional community structures in neighborhoods and villages provided a similar hidden modus operandi for navigating Soviet life. While the Soviet state ran periodic campaigns to obliterate these familial and communal ties, scholars have recently suggested that in reality Moscow largely allowed such traditional social organizations to remain in place in the region to ensure stability while minimizing the responsibilities of state officials in Moscow.¹² This was particularly true under Brezhnev, when local party leaders, such as Dinmukhamed Kunayev in Kazakhstan and Sharof Rashidov in Uzbekistan, ran popular republican governments that often deferred to local traditions of authority and favored informal networks over party discipline.¹³ Having remained critical to daily life behind the scenes in Soviet times, it is not surprising that these structures have continued to operate in Central Asia during its post-Soviet independence.

While these informal structures in many ways facilitated the operation of the Soviet system by being relegated to the background of public life, which was dominated by a respect for the often meaningless formal institutions of Soviet power, they have proven antithetical to the effective implementation of western-style democracy. Most Central Asians, and I would argue most post-Soviet peoples outside the Baltic states, have engaged the concept of democracy much like they had embraced communism before—as a mostly empty ideological framework to facilitate deference to the authority and power of the state, not as a system of formal institutions that could represent people’s interests and make governance more effective in serving the people.

This attitude toward democracy was further bolstered by the fact that most Soviet citizens met the end of the Cold War more with exhaustion than enthusiasm. Instead of viewing the fall of communism as the “end of history,” as famously described by Francis Fukuyama when he suggested that it would mark “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government,” former Soviet citizens tended to view it as the “end of ideology,” or a sign that grand ideals were essentially incompatible with the realities of life.¹⁴ This sentiment was exacerbated in the periphery of the U.S.S.R., such as in Central Asia, where externally driven “reform” has been a constant reality that began during Russian colonialism, continued during Sovietization, and has re-emerged in the post-Soviet era of democratization.¹⁵ During colonialism and the Soviet period, Central Asians generally paid lip service to the goals of such externally driven reform, but they did not allow these goals to interfere with the ways they had previously operated. In many ways, the same holds true today in the context of democratization.

This attitude among former Soviet citizens has been manipulated by the Russian state in recent years through its characterization of American democracy promotion. Playing on the cynicism reflected in this “end of ideology” sentiment, Russian media and even the state’s official statements have painted U.S. government efforts to promote democracy in the former Soviet Union as a smokescreen

for pushing forward America's own interests in the region. Such anti-American propaganda has intensified since the Color Revolutions of 2004 and 2005, the mass protests that toppled incumbent governments in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Viewing these events as indications that U.S. influence was beginning to compete successfully with Russia in the former Soviet arena, Russia has expended substantial energy discrediting these revolutions and seeking to prevent them from spreading elsewhere. Among Central Asians, who continue to receive the majority of their information about the world from Russian television stations, these propaganda efforts have been extremely successful in raising further suspicion about democracy.

All of these factors from Central Asia's past affect the ways in which the people of the region have received American attempts to promote democratic governance and human rights. As was the case with Russian colonial reform and Sovietization previously, Central Asians do not overtly refute democracy, but they do tend to ignore it when possible, continuing to operate through the informal networks with which they are more comfortable. U.S. policymakers trying to implement democratic reforms in the region have been slow to understand these dynamics, and when they have, appropriate policy has been displaced by the needs of *realpolitik*. In order to understand better how and why this has happened, it is useful to examine the history of U.S. democracy assistance in the region.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF U.S. DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL ASIA

FIRST ENCOUNTERS: QUICK-START

Given the divergences in worldviews between Americans offering democracy assistance and Central Asian recipients of this assistance, it is understandable why the initial U.S. strategy for promoting democracy in Central Asia

was unsuccessful. The first U.S.-funded democracy projects in Central Asia starting in the early 1990s aimed to establish formal institutions defined by democratically informed laws, which could be adopted quickly by the local populations to help replace Soviet Communism's centralized governance with a decentralized balance of powers that was accountable to citizens. When U.S. democracy assistance initially arrived in Central Asia, however, those implementing it on the ground were almost immediately aware that such a plan would bear little fruit. In short, it had become apparent that the "transition" to democracy from the Soviet system, particularly in Central Asia, would require more than providing new models to be adopted; it would require a significant change in the way that people thought about their role in political life and the role of the state in their personal lives. Furthermore, changing the ways that people thought about politics would inevitably take time, given that Central Asians had long viewed political activity as a display of power more than as a means of governance.

As a result, many of the first contractors and grantees working in Central Asia for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) during the early 1990s openly reported to the agency that the tasks that they were assigned were simply unrealistic. Indicative of these sentiments is a 1997 final report from a four-year Chemonics International project contracted by the USAID Mission in Central Asia and focused on building civil society and the rule of law in all five of the Central Asian states. The report is extremely critical of USAID's unrealistic expectations of the project. In particular, the contractor notes that U.S. government demands for short-term results prevented the project from making important initial in-roads into what would be a long-term endeavor of cultivating democratic culture in the region:

There was . . . a tendency to ignore the necessary balance between the client's acknowledged need to demonstrate early, high-profile progress and the fact that the democratic transition in Central Asia will take decades of sustained effort and false starts. USAID or the relevant U.S. embassies

in the region often sought high-profile interaction with local counterparts (often as a means of demonstrating “results” to various Washington audiences), which frequently resulted in ad hoc interventions that did not necessarily even meet short-term U.S. expectations and interfered with building longer-term relationships.¹⁶

A 1996 report from the University of Maryland’s Center for Institutional Reform and the Informal Sector (IRIS), which was given the task of helping Kyrgyz lawmakers draft a new civil code, went even further, emphasizing that USAID needed to take more account of the historical and cultural context in which it had found itself in Central Asia. As the author of the report notes:

For legal reformers who work “downstream” a bit, for instance training lawyers or judges or businessmen who have to implement these new free market laws, issues of local disposition, understanding, historical inheritance, mind set, openness and perception of things and the way they work (i.e., culture) are inescapable. Free market legal transactions do not happen simply because laws are in place; there must be a cultivated spirit to make use of them. For this kind of downstream legal work, then, the cultural obstacles to implementing free market legal rules must be identified and urged away, and all cultural proclivities which can be positively used must be fostered. In addition, new legal norms and rules must be reduced to practical, as opposed to abstract understanding, which is an exercise that demands intimate knowledge of the way things are and the way people think in the culture in which one is operating.¹⁷

While this account may be somewhat optimistic about the ability to see results immediately once an approach to behavioral change, instead of institution building, is adopted, at least the author attempted to communicate to U.S. government strategists that they should seek a greater knowledge of the context in which they are working before designing their projects.

During the first years of USAID’s presence in Central Asia, the failures created by the adoption of an unrealistic and misplaced strategy for promoting democracy in the region were compounded by low funding levels for

democracy projects. While the USAID mission provided modest funding for a handful of democracy promotion efforts, like those of Chemonics and IRIS discussed above, much more significant resources were allotted to helping the region's countries quickly transition to a market economy. Large contracts were awarded to firms that helped facilitate "shock therapy" approaches to privatization, commercial law development, and even the establishment of capital markets, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan where the governments showed interest in quickly shedding Soviet economic practices. Furthermore, these macroeconomic projects often stressed expediency and did more damage than good to democratic processes by pushing legislation through ministries instead of through parliaments, adopting an almost Leninist attitude that "the ends would justify the means."

A SECOND ROUND: LESSONS NOT LEARNED

Despite the fact that several USAID contractors highlighted the lack of attention to long-term behavioral change in the agency's initial strategy for promoting democracy in Central Asia, the second round of democracy projects in Central Asia did not reflect a significant change in strategy. Part of the reason for this situation was that USAID project design in Central Asia throughout much of the 1990s continued to be dictated from Washington, by a regional team focused on the entire former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with little attention to what was happening in the region. If anything changed after initial projects had been completed, it was that the urgency of implementation slowed down. This, however, did not reflect a long-term strategy as much as it did a lowering of expectations. The types of projects implemented in the region changed very little. USAID continued to push specific legislation and to attempt to build formal democratic institutions, and implementation approaches lacked innovation based in an understanding of the local context.

During this period, the USAID democracy program was built on standard models being utilized throughout the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

While these models had limited success in the former U.S.S.R., they were more successful in Eastern Europe. Objectives included establishing formal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and legislation to support them, establishing private television stations and the legislation to support them, promoting political party development and the legislation to support them, training election officials and establishing better electoral legislation, and building the capacity of judges and parliamentarians to assert their independence vis-à-vis the executive branch.

While these approaches made sense when considering the structure of American democracy, they obviously were problematic in the context of Central Asia, where formal institutions and the rule of law were subverted by informal systems used to navigate daily life. While host governments would often humor USAID and the local U.S. embassies by passing appropriate laws, these acts could easily remain nothing more than words as long as the systems of enforcement and implementation were circumvented by informal relationships. This was particularly evident in the area of elections. Decent electoral legislation could be passed, local poll workers could be trained, and, still, the government could easily manipulate results using pressure exerted through informal channels. Thus, in 1999, the region's election cycle proved to be a great disappointment to U.S. democracy promoters, whose efforts had failed to influence the transparency and fairness of electoral processes.

As was the case with the assistance that preceded them, therefore, the second generation of U.S.-funded democracy projects did not produce the impact envisioned in their designs. Also, as was the case previously, the projects suffered from underfunding in contrast to macroeconomic projects in the region, further hampering their ability to influence change. By the late 1990s, the ineffectiveness of projects in Central Asia also helped to discourage any Central Asians who had initially shown curiosity about democracy as potentially a system to be emulated. This was compounded by the Russian financial crisis of 1998, which in the post-Soviet world was generally portrayed as an

unfortunate product of Yeltsin's flirtation with democracy. This widespread belief further reinforced existing cynicism about democracy as just another hollow ideological framework.

ACT THREE: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE

As the 1990s came to a close, however, USAID began rethinking its approach to democratic development in Central Asia. The failure of the Russian economy, largely due to a lack of transparency and the presence of widespread corruption, led USAID to provide a more balanced allocation of resources between democracy and economic programs. Policymakers at USAID evidently had understood that quick privatization and the creation of capitalist economic relations could not be entirely successful without a modicum of democratic governance and increased state accountability to its citizens. In addition, USAID had empowered its local missions to undertake more project design and strategic planning based on local conditions. As a result, the USAID Mission in Central Asia started to heed some of the advice of its contractors in the early 1990s, albeit several years later, by designing a long-term democracy strategy that focused on changing behavior and increasing citizen demand for and trust of democratic processes.

In 1999, the USAID Mission in Central Asia designed a new regional strategy that was slated to cover the years 2001–05. Given that economic reforms also had been slow to take hold in many of the Central Asian states, especially in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the mission generally adopted a more gradual approach in this new strategy. In the introduction to its regional strategy statement, the mission noted:

A modified, longer-term approach is needed, which builds popular knowledge, demand and political will for pluralistic economic and political change within government, business and professional sectors, and among the citizenry. Thus, USAID's new strategy, while continuing to support and provide assistance for key macro-level reforms—where the political will

exists—must also concentrate assistance on selected institutions, organizations and people at local levels to grow pluralism, the non-governmental sector, and partnership. It must educate and demonstrate the benefits of reform, thereby building pressure for and facilitating necessary change. It must be a strategy with a human face to complement the harder U.S. security and commercial interests.¹⁸

The democracy and governance section of this strategy was particularly focused on gradual change and adopted a strategic objective of “strengthened democratic culture,” which was a substantial departure from the agency’s standard democracy objective in the 1990s of “increased citizen participation in political and economic decision-making.”¹⁹ As the democracy section of the strategy noted:

The long-term establishment of democracy in the region requires first and foremost more fundamental changes. Assistance must make people aware of the possibilities available to them and increase the popular demand for change by fostering political will and commitment for reform among both citizens and governing elites. In other words, the situation does not call for assistance facilitating *political transition*; it calls for assistance *strengthening democratic culture*.²⁰

To accomplish this goal, the mission planned to do more work with youth through civic education, to broaden civil society promotion to include local community-based organizations, and to encourage local NGOs to build constituents among a wider population through grassroots activities.

Unfortunately, as the mission was poised to undertake this strategy, U.S. policy objectives in the region changed dramatically with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Suddenly, U.S. assistance budgets rose exponentially as the Central Asian states played an important role in facilitating U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. In turn, to justify our increased engagement with the autocratic states of the region, U.S. democracy promotion policy became more aggressive to avoid accusations that we were propping up anti-democratic

regimes. Election assistance once again became increasingly important as did work with political parties and human rights activists.

Bringing these more aggressive approaches toward democracy promotion to the forefront of USAID's activities backfired in many ways, serving to close the governments of the region more tightly and to increase Russian efforts to discredit American democracy promotion. These negative outcomes also were compounded by geopolitical events. President Bush's freedom agenda, which linked the military campaign in Iraq to a global effort to spread democracy, struck fear in Central Asians when contemplating democracy programs in their own country, a sentiment that was aided adeptly by Russia's interpretation of events on the nightly news. When the Color Revolutions transpired in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, for example, the Russian interpretation was quick to suggest that America's campaign to promote democracy in the former Soviet Union was just a softer version of its regime-change policy in Iraq. With little alternative explanations available, this analysis of the Color Revolutions was all too convincing to Central Asians.

Eventually, these increased suspicions of U.S. democracy projects led Uzbekistan to kick most of the international NGOs doing democracy work out of the country in 2005, prompted Kazakhstan to prohibit USAID projects from working with political parties in 2006, and fostered consistent pressure on democracy projects elsewhere in the region. Unfortunately, all of these events served only to alienate Central Asians from embracing democracy when USAID had just proposed undertaking a more appropriate long-term approach to increasing local understanding of and demand for democracy.

LEARNING FROM PAST MISTAKES: A PATH TO FUTURE U.S. ASSISTANCE

Despite the difficulties that the U.S. government has encountered in promoting democracy in Central Asia, I would argue that the continuation of such

work remains vital to U.S. interests. While it does not often receive the attention it deserves, Central Asia is a critical geopolitical region for the United States in the post-Cold War era. It is a region that presently does not pose a threat to the United States, but it is surrounded by states that do pose threats in different ways. To the north, it is bordered by Russia, which is increasingly hostile toward the United States; to the south, it is flanked by Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, all of which have substantial populations of anti-American extremists; and to the east, it borders on China, which continues to have a tenuous geopolitical relationship with the United States.

In this context, Central Asia is a contentious region that remains vulnerable to geopolitical manipulations. Manipulation of its reserves of oil and natural gas can threaten global energy security, and political manipulation of its population can result in the spread of anti-American extremism, anti-American authoritarianism, or both. Furthermore, instability in the region could create a dangerous power vacuum opening the area to all sorts of risks from extremism to arms trafficking. The Central Asian states are aware of these pitfalls and largely engage the United States as a counterbalance to their larger neighbors, of whom they have a healthy distrust. While this policy of engagement is most pronounced in Kazakhstan under President Nursultan Nazarbayev's "multi-vector" foreign policy, it is also apparent in all of the region's states, which worry that they could be too easily bullied by Russia and China if the United States and the European Union are not involved in the region. For all of these reasons, the United States should engage the Central Asian states and seek to retain a presence in the region.

In doing so, however, the United States also must continue to promote democracy. The lessons of the Cold War have shown us that supporting autocratic regimes, regardless of how important they may be to our national security, can backfire if we do not also encourage such states to liberalize. Popular movements against autocratic regimes quickly become anti-American in

character if they perceive the United States as uncritically propping up the source of their misery, and successor regimes that grow out of such movements inevitably become hostile toward the United States. Furthermore, without the ideological compass of human rights and democracy, our foreign policy merely becomes based on self-interest, fostering increased distrust of American intentions and a general decrease in our international credibility. Finally, while we do not always agree with our fellow democracies on all issues, we have found that we do not engage in violent conflicts with other liberal democracies and that democratic states are generally more stable and able to weather transitions in leadership more effectively.

In order to continue promoting democracy in Central Asia with any success, however, U.S. democracy assistance policy must learn from its past mistakes. In reviewing the last sixteen some years of U.S. democracy assistance in Central Asia, two important lessons should be learned. The first is that promoting democracy in Central Asia is unlikely to succeed by adopting a short-term approach to establishing institutions that have little meaning to people in their daily lives. A second, and related lesson, is that linking the amount and substance of democracy assistance too directly to foreign policy objectives is counterproductive. While this first lesson may be understood by many U.S. policymakers today, the second lesson has definitely not been learned. To the contrary, recent efforts to coordinate foreign assistance through the State Department are serving to link development policy in all sectors more closely to immediate foreign policy objectives. While this is counterintuitive for most development, given the time required for projects to have impact, it is especially problematic for the promotion of democracy in Central Asia, which is inevitably a long-term endeavor in need of a consistent strategy.

If U.S. policy has yet to internalize these “lessons learned” from the past, the change in the U.S. administration in Washington in 2009 offers an important opportunity to reverse past policies and to forge a better-informed, long-term

approach to promoting democracy in Central Asia. In light of this opportunity, there are five recommended policy shifts that the new administration might make to ensure that U.S. democracy assistance has a positive impact in the region and that it ultimately reinforces U.S. long-term interests in the region more effectively:

- focus on long-term behavioral change informed by local conditions rather than short-term institution building;
- reclaim democracy promotion as positive foreign policy;
- establish a real regional strategy;
- increase and consolidate support for diverse sources of news, information, and political analysis; and
- engage the emerging middle class.

FOCUS ON LONG-TERM BEHAVIORAL CHANGE INFORMED BY LOCAL CONDITIONS RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM INSTITUTION BUILDING

U.S.-funded democracy promotion in Central Asia has been plagued from the beginning by demands for short-term and quantitative results. Such demands make it difficult for projects to focus on the type of behavioral modification needed in the region and logically encourage projects to build institutions that, regardless of their actual effectiveness, can at least be counted in quantitative reporting. While it should be expected that projects produce results, more flexibility is needed for documenting whether they have a more gradual impact on behavioral change.

Furthermore, projects focused on behavioral change need to be informed by local knowledge. They should not seek to make Central Asians into the image of Americans. Central Asian traditions of collectivism are not inherently incompatible with democracy just as American rugged individualism is not a prerequisite for democracy. Approaches to behavioral change need not

seek to weaken traditional networks based on familial and regional ties, but should focus more on ways to ingrain a culture of accountability, where citizens expect the state to provide services fairly and transparently. Presently, such developments are likely most possible at the local level, where governance matters most to people's daily lives and where such citizen demands are not necessarily viewed as a threat to the region's leaders.

Behavioral change projects also should seek to stress critical thinking as a means of ultimately building a culture of pluralism where the presence of multiple political parties are not seen as a threat to the power of the state, but as an asset for creative problem solving established through a competitive market of ideas. Such work, obviously, is especially important among youth, who would be expected to be the generation of change in the region. This should not only entail establishing traditional means of promoting critical thinking in schools, but also require raising public discourse outside educational institutions about politics and policy.

In undertaking efforts to alter political behavior in the region, however, the U.S. government must understand that it will take years of intensive engagement to make a difference. In order to account for such long-term developmental work, the U.S. government must restructure foreign assistance so that it separates its development strategies from more immediate foreign policy objectives such as national security, natural resource access, and U.S. business interests. In my opinion, this necessitates further separating the State Department and the Defense Department from foreign assistance policy decisions rather than further integrating them into these processes as was done in the previous administration. Whether this requires creating more independence for USAID or establishing an alternative institution is a larger subject of discussion debated elsewhere, but the result should be to allow democracy assistance to operate independent of short-term diplomatic goals. It must be recognized that promoting democracy in Central Asia inevitably is in the national interest of the United States, but for such a policy to be

successful, the United States must allow for a longer-term strategy that is unfettered by other short-term national interests.

RECLAIM DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AS POSITIVE FOREIGN POLICY

While programmatically, democracy projects should be less influenced by State Department goals, diplomatically, the State Department must take a lead in pushing for change in the countries of Central Asia. To do so today, however, it must re-craft how it presents democracy. The last eight years of American foreign policy has significantly tainted the global perception of American democracy promotion. Democracy promotion has been linked to aggressive military actions abroad, and U.S. democracy at home has been discredited by security measures that stand outside our own accepted norms of human rights. In Central Asia, this has not gone unnoticed, and it has served to weaken any moral authority that the United States once had in the region for pursuing democracy promotion.

American diplomats and U.S. democracy promoters alike, therefore, must employ strategies that stress the positive nature of democratic processes rather than merely criticize their present lack in the region. In short, the United States needs to develop a new strategy for demonstrating the benefits of democratic governance to Central Asians; one that dispels their fears of change, does not appear condescending, and piques their interest in the potential benefits of transparency, the rule of law, and accountable governance. Along these lines, U.S. diplomatic efforts to promote democracy might benefit from completely abandoning the term *democracy*, stressing instead the establishment of universal principles of human rights as well as good and inclusive governance.

Likewise, the United States must demonstrate to the Central Asian states that its intent in promoting democracy does not reflect a desire for regime change. This might be done by more explicitly including host governments in the development of a concrete strategy for reform, including benchmarks that the host government pledges to achieve over the course of

a longer period, such as five years. This is not to suggest that all democracy work should be done in conjunction with host governments. Civil society development and support for free media should obviously remain mostly outside governmental structures, but engaging governments on strategies for governance reform may create a more constructive relationship. While efforts of this kind have been undertaken with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in recent years, they have always reflected a short time frame and have focused on controversial events or issues, such as an election or political party registration, and have, thus, proven ineffective. If such a joint strategy were to focus on less overtly political—yet equally critical—issues, such as access to information, state budget transparency, and civic education, host governments might be more responsive.

Finally, the United States must adopt a more multilateral approach for promoting democracy in the region. In part, this can be accomplished by increased engagement in the democracy and human rights efforts of the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). A U.N. Democracy Fund with diverse funding from various member states already exists to promote reform around the world, and the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights can support local activists seeking to investigate rights violations.²¹ Likewise the OSCE has various democracy and human rights programs in its human dimension section and plays a particularly important role in electoral reform and election observation through its Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. As an influential member-state in these organizations, the United States should support these efforts to the fullest extent possible, helping to ensure that they focus on long-term approaches to building local constituencies for change.

Democracy and human rights promotion through the U.N. and the OSCE, however, is limited to activities that are approved by host governments. In Central Asia, this means that these mechanisms are unlikely to be able to fund the bravest human rights and democracy activists, who often put themselves

at risk by criticizing government actions and human rights abuses. While any strategy for encouraging democratic reform in Central Asia will inevitably require long-term interventions, those human rights activists, investigative journalists, and pro-democracy advocates who continue to risk their lives for higher principles in the region cannot be ignored. Historically, the United States has been about the only nation to support these activists, often opening them up to accusations of being American agents. During the early 1990s, channeling funding for support to such activists through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) initially helped to distance the U.S. government from direct implication in their activities, but today most states in the region have recognized NED as a proxy for the American state, often suggesting that it has direct links to the CIA. Fostering shared funding of the bravest defenders of human rights in Central Asia with other governments or establishing an international fund for democracy with diverse funding, yet not beholden to host-government involvement (something akin to an internationally funded NED), could go a long way to separating the U.S. government from these activists while still ensuring continued support.²² This would bolster the credibility of such activists, and it would make a much stronger case to the Central Asian states that, if they want to be full contributors to the international community, they must listen to their own internal critics.

ESTABLISH A REAL REGIONAL STRATEGY

While USAID's mission in Central Asia has been regional in nature since its inception, it has rarely thought about democracy promotion regionally in the sense of how developments in one state may serve to positively, or negatively, influence developments in a neighboring state. To some degree, the recent placement of Central Asia in sections of the State Department and USAID focused on South and Central Asia represents an attempt to do this, but its regional developmental focus is less concerned with democracy and governance than it is with questions of energy and water sharing. Furthermore, by viewing Central Asia

through its relations with its southern neighbors, the South and Central Asia sections of USAID and the State Department ignore two of the most important players in the region's political development—Russia and China.

A more effective regional approach would strategically consider the political development of the region from the point of view of its different players, both internal and external. In the years since the fall of the Soviet Union, for example, the Central Asian states have experienced very uneven development. By the year 2000, Kazakhstan undoubtedly emerged as the region's leading state due to its economic successes. Kazakhstan, therefore, inevitably will be an important driver of developments regionwide for the foreseeable future, and a regional approach to democracy promotion in Central Asia must take this into account. U.S. democracy promoters need to find ways to exploit this by linking the most capable and progressive of Kazakhstan's political activists, civil society actors, and even political parties with their counterparts regionally, thus crafting an alternative narrative of Kazakhstan as a future and powerful regional leader in democracy. This is already happening organically to a certain degree as political activists and journalists from elsewhere in Central Asia seek to learn from their colleagues in Kazakhstan, but an awareness of this process among U.S. democracy promoters could result in more explicit synergies.²³

Similarly, while Kyrgyzstan has proven to be the most politically liberal country in the region, it is also quite unstable, providing a negative example of the results of liberalization. More forceful efforts, therefore, need to be taken to consolidate positive democratic developments in Kyrgyzstan as a means of establishing it as a positive example of what change can bring. This does not mean propping up Kyrgyzstan as a universal example, especially when its government has not pursued a fully reformist agenda, but it does mean helping to develop further those areas where positive change is visible and can be highlighted for others in the region.

While democratic development has been slower in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the youth of these countries in particular must be given increased

exposure to regional developments that reflect positively on democratic change. While examples of freedom of speech and political pluralism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan remain imperfect, being exposed to them may have a more lasting affect on the people of the other countries in Central Asia than will examples from places far away that can be rationalized as out of reach.

Finally, a real regional strategy for promoting political reform in Central Asia must take into consideration the roles of Russia and China in the region. Russia has overtly sought to facilitate authoritarianism in Central Asia, fearing that democratic changes would make the region's states less dependent upon Russia and more westward looking. China, by contrast, has mostly sought to avoid interfering in the region's internal politics, occasionally criticizing American concerns about democracy as an example of such interference. Both powers, however, seek influence in the region, and the Central Asian states view them with a healthy suspicion. As a result, all the Central Asian states are very interested in maintaining strong ties with the West to counterbalance Russian and Chinese interests. U.S. democracy promotion in the region must recognize this situation and the leverage it offers, letting the Central Asian states know more explicitly that America is willing to play such a role only if the countries in the region undertake gradual reform toward democracy.

INCREASE AND CONSOLIDATE SUPPORT FOR DIVERSE SOURCES OF NEWS, INFORMATION, AND POLITICAL ANALYSIS

While much of what I recommend involves scaling back on aggressive efforts to promote democracy in Central Asia and adopting more long-term and grassroots interventions, access to information is an area where I think the United States must be more proactive, immediate, and aggressive. Providing the people of Central Asia with more diverse and reliable sources of information now is critical for the long-term objectives of behavioral change. Presently, the United States is losing a subtle war of words and ideas in Central Asia. Russia, and to a lesser extent China, offer popular alternative narratives to development

in the region that do not favor democracy. Especially in the case of Russia, a significant part of its success in this regard is its incredible influence in Central Asia through media. Russian television has become extremely adept at providing quality entertainment sprinkled with both subtle and blatant informational programs that discredit the United States and its promotion of democracy while glorifying Russia's increasingly defined model of autocratic managed democracy. This information enters Central Asia in a language understandable to the majority of the population through both the nightly news and a variety of talk shows and magazine programs. Furthermore, Central Asian media are tightly controlled by the state in varying degrees, leaving few alternative news sources for the local population outside the Internet. This limited arena of information access threatens to hinder the effectiveness of any long-term interventions the United States might fund to establish a culture of democracy in the region.

U.S. democracy promotion, therefore, must become far more engaged in promoting alternative sources of information in the region if it is going to be effective in creating any kind of demand for increased pluralism. While USAID presently does have an innovative project that attempts to broadcast alternative local and global information via satellite that can be rebroadcast by progressive local television stations where possible and can be watched by satellite dish owners everywhere in the region, this project is grossly underfunded and remains dependent upon Kazakh authorities for its license to broadcast. Bringing this project to the next level by establishing this satellite channel as a viable alternative source of information for the people of Central Asia should be a high priority.

In addition, U.S. democracy projects need to engage the Internet increasingly as a critical source of information as well as a site for virtual communities of democratic practice. While Internet access remains limited, among youth and democracy activists regionwide it is increasingly popular as the only unregulated information source available to them. Central Asians' presence on global social networking sites, such as Facebook and YouTube, is growing daily and provides

an opportunity for establishing virtual communities of practice that could prove influential as the next generation takes over increasing responsibility in the countries of the region. Local alternative news and political analysis sites are likewise extremely popular and need increased support to become more viable sources of information regionally. The United States, however, should learn from the experience of its largely unsuccessful *Alhurra* television satellite project in the Middle East and realize that it cannot create its own credible media for an external audience. Instead, it should support indigenous alternative information sources whenever possible to ensure that Central Asians are given more choice in their interpretation of the world around them.

ENGAGE THE EMERGING MIDDLE CLASS

Finally, U.S. democracy assistance generally needs to focus more on the wider population of Central Asia in its approach to civil society rather than exclusively on small NGOs of limited reach. In particular, more efforts need to be made to reach out to an emerging middle class regionally. While the presence of such a class varies by country, the adoption of at least some market reforms everywhere in the region has created a new class of citizens whose livelihood is intertwined with the global economy. While these people often avoid politics in order to protect their business interests, they also are the most likely to understand the advantages of democratic reforms. Many already understand that their livelihoods and increased access to private property can only be protected by the rule of law, increased liberalization, access to information, and transparency. Others, however, are concerned about the uncertainty of change and are suspicious of the ability of democracy to improve their livelihoods.

This population, especially among the youth, has the potential to be an important driver of change in the region as the next generation of political leaders develops in Central Asia. Aside from having economic reasons for being interested in the development of democracy, there is historical precedent

in Central Asia suggesting that businessmen are natural drivers for reform in the region. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, it was businessmen who were at the forefront of the Muslim modernist *Jadid* movement in Central Asia. Having traveled to other countries and seen examples of modernist developments elsewhere, these businessmen became the most ardent indigenous proponents of modernization in the region. Similarly, today it is business professionals who have traveled to other democracies and have witnessed the benefits of the rule of law and transparency. It is also this segment of the population, which has been employed by western companies with strict accountability and ethics regulations, that is more likely to be attracted to the ideal of meritocracy over that of kleptocracy.

If engaged now on the ideals of democracy, the younger portion of the middle class in Central Asia will be more likely to be a positive force of change and an example to others around them. In engaging this particular group, however, U.S. democracy promoters should continue to seek long-term results since significant short-term changes are unlikely to take place until people's mindset about the state and governance more broadly is altered. In particular, the goal of U.S.-funded projects should not be to shape any kind of specific political movement in this population. Instead, they should be constructed to empower this population's interest in politics and policy debates.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it should be noted that Central Asia is a difficult environment in which to promote the adoption of democratic governance. It is entirely possible that long-term engagement may not bear fruit in the region, especially if Russia continues to follow an anti-democratic path and to be an obstacle to Central Asian political development. That being said, in the Muslim world, Central Asia is in a unique position to adopt democratic reforms. It is a region

that has demonstrated considerable cultural tolerance, has reason to engage the United States, and has a tradition of modern education. For these reasons alone, it would appear that the United States should continue its engagement of the region on democratic ideals. Even though it may seem that such engagement is a risky proposition, if it had begun sixteen years ago, we would likely see a much different Central Asia today. Regardless of one's view concerning America's continued involvement in democracy promotion in Central Asia, one thing that cannot be disputed is that U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the region should not continue to rehash the same projects that have been funded for the last sixteen years. Beyond this obvious observation, I believe it is at least worth the modest investment to try something different.

NOTES

1. See “Country Reports,” *Nations in Transit*, Freedom House, 2006, available online at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=46&year=2006>.
2. See “Freedom in the World,” Freedom House, 2007, available online at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2007>.
3. See “Eritrea Ranked Last for First Time while G8 Members, Except Russia, Recover Lost Ground,” Annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders, 2007, available online at http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=24025.
4. See Laza Kekic, “The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy,” *The Economist*, 2007, available online at http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/DEMOCRACY_INDEX_2007_v3.pdf.
5. “Kyrgyzstan National Opinion Poll, November 1–13, 2007,” International Republican Institute, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, pp. 7–8, available online at <http://www.iri.org/eurasia/Kyrgyzstan/pdfs/2008-01-22-Kyrgyzstan.pdf>.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 16.
7. “Kyrgyzstan National Opinion Poll, May 6–23, 2007,” International Republican Institute, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, p. 29, available online at <http://www.iri.org/eurasia/Kyrgyzstan/pdfs/2007-07-03-Kyrgyzstan.ppt>.
8. It should be noted that these sentiments obviously are not shared by all Americans. The United States still has one of the largest per capita prison populations in the world, and numerous disadvantaged groups in society do not necessarily believe that they are treated equally by the law in contrast to the mainstream population. Nonetheless, for the majority of Americans who do display a strong respect for law and order, this sentiment is reinforced by our belief in the objective and fair nature of our legal system.
9. Interview by author with Oazu Nantoi, Institute of Public Policy, Chisinau, Moldova, May 20, 2008.
10. Alena Ledeneva, *How Russia Really Works: The Informal Practices that Shaped Post-Soviet Politics and Business* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
12. See Oliver Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000). Roy makes this point particularly for Tadjikistan, where Moscow essentially allowed a power group from the North to run the country for most of the Soviet period.
13. See Kathleen Collins, *The Logic of Clan Politics in Central Asia: Its Impact on Regime Transformation* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 102–34. Collins demonstrates how Kunayev and Rashidov created their own personality driven states within the Soviet Union, which often drew from the region’s informal kin-based and regional ties to run Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan respectively.
14. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1992).

15. This point has been made by Bruce Grant for Sakhalin (see *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995]) and by Yuri Slezkine for the indigenous populations of Siberia (see *Russia and the Small Peoples of the North: Artic Mirrors* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994]). While both authors only touch briefly on the post-Soviet period, their arguments about the long history of externally driven “reform” on the edges of Soviet power are suggestive of the lack of enthusiasm with which such formerly colonized people, Central Asians included, have greeted Western-funded democracy programs.

16. “Central Asia Rule of Law Final Report,” Chemonics International Inc., Washington, D.C., December 1997, available online at http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDABQ257.pdf, p. 40.

17. “Working on Legal Culture Changes in Kyrgyzstan; Drafting Practical Commentaries on the Civil Code,” IRIS, September 1996, p. 4, available online at http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNACC918.pdf.

18. “USAID’s Assistance Strategy for Central Asia, 2001–2005,” USAID/Central Asian Region, July 2000, p. 3, available online at http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDABU236.pdf.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 44–54.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

21. For more on the U.N. Democracy Fund, see “What Is the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF)?” The United Nations Democracy Fund, available online at <http://www.un.org/democracyfund/XWhatIsUNDEF.htm>.

22. It should be noted that the international, multilateral U.N. Democracy Fund is generally unable to support those democracy activists who need help the most—the human rights activists and journalists who are most critical of the governments in the states in which they live.

23. USAID, on occasion, has done such things, but it is not yet a part of their strategic focus. During the 2004 parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan, for example, USAID brought in political party representatives from elsewhere in the region to observe how parties in Kazakhstan approached the election. While they did not witness a free and fair election, they did learn much from how the Kazakh parties operated, helping them to think about how to go about their own work in their home countries. This was useful because, while still stifled, Kazakhstan’s political activists have more resources and are generally more sophisticated than their colleagues in the region.

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