

FOREIGN POLICY AND AGING CENTRAL ASIAN AUTOCRATS

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Abstract: This article examines the puzzle of why autocratic leaders in Central Asia support the foreign policy interests of Western democracies, while the one democratic leader in the region does not. The answer lies in the authoritarian leaders' need to gain domestic legitimacy, while the democratically-elected leader does not need outside help in asserting his right to rule.

In 2011, the foreign policies of Central Asian states stopped making sense. Central Asia's strongest autocratic rulers—Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbaev and Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov—have become obsessed with winning praise from, and partnerships with, Western democracies. At the same time, Central Asia's lone democratic leader—Kyrgyzstan President Almazbek Atambaev—has displayed little desire to deepen relations with other democracies and, instead, has told the world's most powerful democracy—the United States—that it must vacate its base in Kyrgyzstan by 2014. What explains this paradox? Why are the Kazakhs and Uzbeks seeking audiences in London and Washington while newly democratic Kyrgyzstan is evicting the U.S. military?

The answer to this question, I suggest, lies in the changing realities of Central Asian autocratic rule. On the surface, not much has changed in Central Asia in recent years. The same autocrats who have ruled Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan since the Soviet collapse remain in power in Astana and Tashkent. And in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's own peculiar status quo of uprisings and leadership changes would appear to indicate that there too it is business as usual. Profound change has, though, arrived in

Central Asia. Nazarbaev and Karimov are now in their early seventies, an infelicitous age for Soviet leaders. As for Kyrgyzstan, for the first time in post-Soviet Central Asian history we have seen the peaceful alternation of power to a democratically-elected president. Together these changes have yielded a new Central Asian reality where it is not the region's lone democracy, but rather Central Asia's gerontocracies, that most desire western approval and support.

In this article, first, I detail the diverging foreign policy orientations of Central Asian states. Next, I develop a hypothesis for this divergence. More specifically, I suggest that growing domestic insecurity among Central Asia's aging autocracies drives Nazarbaev and Karimov to seek approval and support abroad because they can no longer ensure approval and support at home. Conversely, Kyrgyzstan's president, because he is democratically elected, has no need to pander for partners among the international community. I conclude by exploring the implications of these diverging foreign policy orientations. There is no small degree of irony: in Central Asia, Washington's goals of democracy and strategic defense appear, at least in the short run, to be at odds with one another. Central Asia is critical to supplying the U.S. military in Afghanistan and it is the region's autocracies, not its democracy that appear most willing to aid this U.S. supply mission.

Timid Autocrats and a Defiant Democrat

Nazarbaev Ennobled

Nazarbaev, perhaps more than any other Central Asian leader, craves the respect of his peers abroad. In October 2011, reports emerged in the British media that he had secured a year's worth of advisory services from former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who, Nazarbaev hoped, could secure a Nobel Peace Prize nomination to commemorate the 20-year anniversary of Kazakhstan's renunciation of nuclear weapons.

Although Nazarbaev's Peace Prize gambit might appear far-fetched, it is worth noting that the Kazakh leader has pursued similarly implausible schemes in the recent past and with considerable success. In December 2007, for example, the Bush administration yielded, after months of hesitation, to Kazakhstan's bid to become the first post-Soviet country to hold the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. In 2010, Kazakhstan served out its chairmanship of this prestigious international organization. By early 2011, though, some of the sheen of the Kazakh chairmanship had disappeared. In April 2011, Nazarbaev called early presidential elections—elections he handily won. Revealingly, the OSCE concluded of the vote: "While the election was technically well-administered, the absence of opposition candidates and of a vibrant

political discourse resulted in a non-competitive environment.”

The OSCE rebuke and passing of the 2011 Nobel season without a Kazakh nomination, no doubt, is a disappointment for Nazarbaev. Perhaps in 2012 Blair will deliver on his \$13m contract.

Karimov: K2 Take 2

In November 2005, the United States withdrew the last remaining soldiers from what had once been a 1,750 strong troop presence at Karshi-Khanabad, an Uzbek airbase 100 miles north of the Afghan border. Five months earlier U.S.-Uzbek relations had soured when interior security forces killed hundreds of protestors in Andijan, a city in Uzbekistan’s Fergana Valley. On the one-year anniversary of the Andijan massacre, U.S.-Uzbek relations hit rock bottom. “Instead of seeking accountability,” lamented the U.S. ambassador to the OSCE, Julie Finley, “the government of Uzbekistan has adopted a defensive posture, lashing out at critics and declining to seek the truth.”

Six years later, the U.S. Department of State continues to fault Uzbekistan for “human rights problems,” such as “citizens’ inability to change their government peacefully,” “instances of torture and mistreatment of detainees,” “arbitrary arrest and detention,” and “restrictions on freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association.” Despite this chilly assessment, Karimov enthusiastically welcomed U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the presidential palace in October 2011 and stressed his desire to “strengthen bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and the USA.” Clinton, for her part, thanked Karimov for his “warm reception and hearty hospitality.” Earlier that month Clinton had paved the way for the Tashkent visit, noting in a press conference that “we value our relationship with Uzbekistan ... they have been very helpful to us with respect to the northern distribution network.”

Uzbekistan has fallen back in line and once again is home to a critical U.S. supply route to Afghanistan. Approximately 90 percent of all “non-lethal” supplies to U.S. forces in Afghanistan transit Uzbekistan. In return for Karimov’s cooperation, U.S. President Barack Obama pressed Congress to lift sanctions on U.S. military aid to Uzbekistan, a move Congress agreed to in its December 2011 defense authorization act. Obama, moreover, noted to Karimov in a September 28, 2011, phone call to mark 20 years of Uzbek independence that the U.S. was keen to “build broad cooperation between our two countries” and to “develop a multi-dimensional relationship” between Washington and Tashkent.

Atambaev—Democracy, You Bet... America, Ket!

In striking contrast to his predecessors, Atambaev, in October 2011, became Kyrgyzstan’s first peacefully and democratically elected president.

Moreover, further differentiating himself from Kyrgyzstan's two previous heads of state, Atambaev has thus far demonstrated no equivocation in his conviction that the United States must leave the Manas Transit Center once the lease for the airbase expires in 2014. Thus, although American-style democracy, at least for now, is welcome in Kyrgyzstan, the American military must go. If the revolutionary chants in 2005 and 2010 were against the autocrats—Akaev and Bakiev, you must go, Akaev and Bakiev, *ket!*—the post-revolutionary chant in Kyrgyzstan in 2012 is—America, *ket!*

What explains Kyrgyzstan's curious divergence? Why would Central Asia's one democracy, albeit an inchoate democracy, suddenly rebuff Washington while Central Asia's long-ensconced authoritarian rulers assiduously seek U.S. and western approval? One potential answer is that the United States and the European Union have more to offer to Central Asia's aging autocrats than to Central Asia's new democracy.

Searching Abroad for What Is Lost at Home

Autocratic leaders are thought to enjoy considerable flexibility when crafting foreign policy. In contrast to their popularly-elected counterparts, autocrats need not conduct international relations with an eye to the ballot box. Nor, moreover, must autocrats pursue foreign policy that aligns with and advances the norms of democratic ideology. Central Asia's aging autocrats, though, despite these enabling factors, are curiously timid in their conduct of international relations. The source of this timidity is the reality that Nazarbaev and Karimov are increasingly constrained at home—and therefore abroad—by mounting domestic threats to autocratic rule.

Perhaps most distressing for Nazarbaev and Karimov is the reality that there is little they can do to limit the likelihood of growing domestic opposition. Nazarbaev and Karimov continue their now familiar strategies of illiberal rule. Nazarbaev applies the windfalls of oil wealth to maintain a system of robust patronage politics. Karimov never hesitates to repress threats, real and imagined, to his centralized power. Yet these strategies are increasingly ineffective as questions about each president's mental and physical decline mount. The May 2005 Andijan popular uprising in Uzbekistan and the December 2011 Zhanaozen mass protests in Kazakhstan illustrate that many in Uzbek and Kazakh society have tired of Karimov and Nazarbaev. In time, the same logic that has driven these public defections from autocratic rule will begin driving defections among the Uzbek and Kazakh political elite as well.

In the 1990s, when Nazarbaev and Karimov were comparatively more robust, it did not make sense for members of the presidents' ruling elite to switch sides and support an opposition candidate. The Kazakh and Uzbek presidents enjoyed large, pro-presidential parties and, as such,

could easily replace defectors. Nazarbaev and Karimov continue to enjoy large, pro-presidential parties today. What has changed from the 1990s, though, are the political calculations of Kazakh and Uzbek political elites. Absent a clear succession mechanism—no such mechanism exists in either Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan—political elites must weigh the decreasing, short-run benefits of remaining loyal to Nazarbaev or Karimov against the growing future returns that can accrue from supporting younger challengers to autocratic rule.

Presented with age-induced challenges to otherwise stable autocratic rule, leaders like Nazarbaev and Karimov can pursue two different strategies. An autocrat can attempt to increase his repressive capacity and, thus, postpone his weakening grip on power. Alternatively, an autocrat can readjust his metrics of personal success from one of sustained power to that of a graceful departure to international applause.

Critically, to be effective in either strategy, an aging autocrat cannot be defiant, but rather, must demonstrate deference to international counterparts. Karimov, thus, opens Uzbekistan as a supply corridor for U.S. troops operating in Afghanistan. In return for this renewed cooperation with the United States, Karimov secures much needed military aid and, moreover, an expectation that Washington will not intervene—Egypt or Libya style—to support an anti-autocratic popular uprising.

Nazarbaev, instead of seeking to buttress repressive capacity, has instead chosen to lobby international organizations and prize committees in the hopes of securing the external validation necessary for his retirement as a dignified statesman. The dilemma for Nazarbaev, however, is that such lobbying efforts are only potentially effective so long as he remains in power. This dynamic of constant yet unmet attempts at winning international praise and the Kazakh president's resulting reluctance to yield power makes Nazarbaev's vulnerability to a putsch evermore likely.

Kyrgyzstan's Atambaev, in contrast, faces no such pressures. In contrast to Nazarbaev and Karimov, Atambaev has a domestic mandate to rule and, as a result, has considerably less need of external validation and support. In short, Atambaev's domestic mandate—one the United States very much supported—frees the Kyrgyz president's hand in the conduct of international relations.

Policy Implications of Dictatorship and Democracy in Central Asia

That democracy is in the U.S. strategic interest is a refrain one frequently hears in Washington. In the long run, this overlap of democracy and U.S. strategic interests may indeed be true. For the immediate future, though, the deepening of democracy in Bishkek may lead to an erosion of U.S.

access to what, for the past decade, has been a critical airbase for projecting and sustaining American military power in Afghanistan.

Central Asia's changing domestic political realities have forced not only Nazarbaev's and Karimov's foreign policy hands, but Washington's foreign policy hand as well. The United States has no alternative but to support, at the very least verbally, democratic reform, whether in Kyrgyzstan, Egypt, or Tunisia. At the same time, in promoting democracy, Washington may ultimately find itself supporting new, elected leaderships who, in turn, have little desire to maintain their country's past strategic and military alliances with the United States. It is in these cases that the seeming paradox of strategic disagreements with Kyrgyzstan and strategic cooperation with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan suddenly make sense. International relations are not for the faint of heart. The Kazakh and Uzbek gerontocracies demonstrate, however, that the increasingly faint of heart may help Washington in its conduct of international relations.