

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY  
AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE  
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Chairman Cardin, Chairman Smith, members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to discuss with you the potential implications for Central Asia of the ongoing events in North Africa and the Middle East. I welcome this opportunity to consider with you the contours of U.S. engagement in Central Asia that will most effectively promote peaceful, democratic development.

Mr. Chairman, we are witnessing with cautious optimism events unfolding across North Africa and the Middle East, but truly regret the lives that have been lost and the extent to which some governments have resorted to greater repression and violence in response. Though it is easy to say in retrospect that these changes were going to take place eventually, no one could have predicted the pace with which citizens of these long repressed countries could turn the tide.

Differences in history, culture and circumstances make direct comparisons impossible. However, in some important respects the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, with the partial exception of Kyrgyzstan, share dynamics similar to those causing the upheavals in the Middle East, including unemployment and chronic underemployment, poverty, corruption at all levels of society, little or no outlet for

meaningful political discourse, and a lack of opportunity, particularly for young people. Over 50 percent of the populations in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are under the age of 25, and these youths face closed and inefficient economies, with few prospects for personal advancement. If not addressed by these governments, these circumstances are likely to present considerable social, political, and economic challenges in coming years.

There are also significant differences with the North Africa and Middle East countries, which in our view make popular uprisings in the near term less likely in Central Asia. First, the economic situation is not as dire in Central Asia. IMF unemployment projections for 2011 in Central Asia range from a low of 0.2% in Uzbekistan to a high of 5.7% in Kazakhstan, compared with 9.2% and 14.7% in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively—based on official data. Second, significant proportions of the work force in poor countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have found work in Russia, easing unemployment and providing a valuable source of remittances. Third, the hydrocarbon wealth of countries such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan has enabled those countries to cushion the impact of economic hardships. Unlike North Africa and the Middle East, regions which have maintained considerable ties to the United States and the West, the Central Asian states remain relatively less exposed to the West and its history of democratic institutions, personal freedom and liberty. Instead of travelling to the United States

or to Western Europe for employment, educational, or recreational purposes, most citizens of Central Asia instead head north to Russia. This lack of exposure is exacerbated by government controls over the internet and social media.

While citizens in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere have turned to Facebook and Twitter as forums through which to interact, organize, and exchange ideas, the vast majority of Central Asia lacks access to the internet, with 14 percent internet penetration in Kazakhstan in 2008 the highest of all the Central Asian countries (according to the International Telecom Union). Governments have succeeded in blocking outside influences and tightly controlling domestic media through harassment, prosecution, and imprisonment of journalists. The lack of independent media allows governments to control the dissemination of news and information.

Another factor is the lack of meaningful political opposition in most of Central Asia. Significant opposition parties are largely nonexistent, and organized opposition groups are for the most part either illegal or tightly constrained by the authorities. While these conditions seem oppressive to a western observer, residents in some parts of Central Asia value the stability and certainty afforded by their otherwise undemocratic governments. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan the governments derive some measure of legitimacy, at least for now, from their emphasis on stability as residents warily monitored the turmoil and unpredictability in recent years in neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan.

Still, this profound change taking place across North Africa and the Middle East demonstrates equally profound lessons for Central Asian governments and societies. One of the messages we have given to our friends in Central Asia is that they need to pay attention to these events and their implications. Leaders everywhere, not just in Central Asia, should heed the lessons of the Arab Spring. In my meetings with Central Asian officials over the last several months, I have encouraged them to provide more space for political, personal, and religious freedoms, allow for the development of a robust civil society and democratic institutions, and chart a course for economic reform.

Leaderships in Central Asia express support for gradual change, and concern that too much freedom too fast could lead to chaos and political upheaval. They are suspicious of democratic reforms, and with some exceptions have maintained tight restrictions on political, social, religious, and economic life in their countries. We think this is a mistaken view. While democracy can be messy and at times appear chaotic, it nevertheless provides for greater stability and security as it provides societies a necessary and peaceful release valve for political and economic tensions. Democratically elected governments that respond to unfettered public opinion build greater trust and confidence between peoples and their governments. Democracy as we advocate it is not violent or revolutionary. It is peaceful, tolerant, and evolutionary and demonstrated primarily through the ballot

box and a free civil society. Democracy does not equate to street violence and economic chaos. Quite the contrary – democracy provides hope and realistic, peaceful approaches to address pent up problems.

We view this moment as an opportunity to re-inforce our engagement with Central Asia on issues related to religious, political, and personal freedoms. To strengthen our engagement in Central Asia, we instituted in December 2009 Annual Bilateral Consultations with each country. Each bilateral consultation constitutes a face-to-face structured dialogue, based on a jointly developed, comprehensive agenda which facilitates candid discussions on the full spectrum of bilateral priorities, including human rights and media freedom. These discussions result in work plans to address key priorities and outline practical steps to advance U.S. policy goals. While pursuing these goals often poses serious challenges, our robust engagement and assistance to Central Asia have yielded important results, including support for ongoing efforts in Afghanistan. We have also used the annual consultations as a forum to engage civil society and the business community in the Central Asian countries. In the annual consultations we held earlier this year in Kazakhstan, for example, the Kazakhstani Deputy Foreign Minister co-hosted with me a meeting with Kazakhstani civil society in the Foreign Ministry, a welcome precedent that we hope to duplicate elsewhere.

In the twenty years since independence, the leaderships in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan have frequently and publicly called for building democratic institutions in their countries. They have given speeches and issued decrees, but they have done little to put them into practice. The parliaments, media, and public institutions are still dominated by the head of state and his views. In our engagement with these leaders, we challenge them to make the choice for the greater stability and security that real and responsible democracies provide. We also continue to provide support for those elements in civil society who remain committed to building democracy peacefully albeit under restrictive and even harsh conditions.

Kyrgyzstan has been the primary exception in Central Asia. The democratic gains recently made in Kyrgyzstan since the April 2010 events – the passing of a new constitution establishing a parliamentary republic and the subsequent elections of a President and Parliament – are cause for optimism even as the ethnic violence in June of last year demonstrates the fragility of democracy in the country. As President Obama told President Otunbaeva earlier this year in Washington, we are prepared to support democratic institutions to help Kyrgyzstan succeed as a democratic example in the region. Kyrgyzstan's democracy requires substantial international support to build strong, publicly accountable institutions. We estimate the U.S. provided over \$140 million in humanitarian aid, economic

development, support for democratic elections and good governance, and other foreign assistance in response to the events in FY 2010, and we urged others to provide such support. Kyrgyzstan faces its next test in presidential elections slated for later this year. We look forward to working with the Helsinki Commission and others to help organize international support and monitoring efforts.

Other Central Asia states are at differing stages in their democratic development, but there are some signs of hope in all. Kazakhstan hosted the first OSCE Summit in 11 years last December, which included a robust civil society component which Secretary Clinton found extremely encouraging. Kazakhstan has also made some progress toward meeting its Madrid commitments on political pluralism, and reform of media and electoral laws, although much more needs to be done.

President Karimov of Uzbekistan gave a speech in November 2010 calling for greater political pluralism and civil society development. Uzbekistan has done little to turn this vision into a reality thus far, but we will encourage President Karimov to meet the commitments he made in that speech. Tajikistan has the region's only legal Islamic party, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), even though IRPT and other opposition officials continue to be subject to various forms of harassment. And even in Turkmenistan, President Berdimuhamedov has

spoken publicly of the need to expand space for other voices in the political system.

To be clear: I am not predicting extensive changes in the near term. The Arab Spring notwithstanding, democracy is a long-term process, and we will work with all of our Central Asian partners to help them develop stronger democratic institutions and more open societies.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, nearly thirty-six years ago leaders from North America, Europe, and the Soviet Union came together to sign the Helsinki Accords, committing themselves to a core set of human rights, including the fundamental freedoms of association, expression, peaceful assembly, thought, and religion. It was argued by those gathered in Helsinki in 1975 that security among states was directly connected to the way that those states treat their own citizens. As Secretary Clinton presciently asserted at last year's OSCE summit in Astana and as events this Spring further underscore, these values remain relevant today and are critical to the building of sustainable societies and nations that are committed to creating better opportunities for all of their citizens.

In conclusion, we seek a future in which the United States and the countries of Central Asia work together to foster peace, security, economic development and

prosperity, and advance the democratic values and human rights that unite free nations in trust and in respect. We recognize that the pace of change will be defined by the citizens of the countries of Central Asia and that our efforts must focus on long-term, meaningful results.

The most important lesson gleaned from the events that have occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere is that governments must respond to the needs and the desires of their people. People everywhere want to provide for their families and to ensure that their families have proper education, and adequate livelihoods. And people everywhere want to have basic democratic freedoms.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

