

Understanding the Impact of the K2 Closure

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On July 29, 2005, President Islam Karimov ordered the U.S. military facility at Karshi-Khanabad (K2), Uzbekistan to close down within 180 days. It now appears virtually certain that U.S. forces will leave by January 2006. In September 2005, Karimov went further, declaring he would end all security cooperation with the United States in the war on terror, a complete turnaround for a leader who had been a close U.S. ally since September 11.

Why did Karimov make this choice, and what impact will the base closure have on both immediate and long-term U.S. security interests in Central Asia? While the popular press has portrayed Karimov's actions as a response to fear over U.S. pressure on human rights questions, that explanation does not square well with the facts.

Background: K2

The K2 facility opened in October 2001, when the United States signed a no-cost lease with the Uzbek government for territory inside an existing Uzbek military base. Washington agreed to pay the Uzbek state for fuel deliveries to the base and base security. Reportedly, the Pentagon intends to pay Tashkent \$23 million for services already rendered, with additional funds owed to cover continuing operations of the base after the July closure order. A bipartisan effort is pending in the U.S. Senate to put those funds in escrow until the Uzbek government changes its policies on human rights and once more begins cooperating with the United States.

Uzbek troops provide a security cordon around the base. This limits contact between U.S. personnel and Uzbek citizens, something the Uzbek side wanted more than the Americans did. However, the United States hired 715 locals for on-base jobs ranging from construction to custodial work, and K2 is a major contributor to the local economy.

K2 has served a variety of functions for the U.S. military. During the war in Afghanistan, it was a major staging point for Green Berets and soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division, as well as for attack air support. It is still used for intelligence operations in Afghanistan today. It also provides a refueling stop for military aircraft en route to Afghanistan, and a base for search-and-rescue missions and heavy cargo deliveries into the country. Experts agree that other U.S. bases in the surrounding region, including the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan, the Bagram base inside Afghanistan itself, and bases in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates can help pick up the slack for most of these functions.

Costs to U.S. Security Interests

However, reliance on other bases has real costs for U.S. interests in the region. It means the United States has lost flexibility in its ability to bargain with other host governments concerning the status and funding of bases in those countries. Washington now needs its relationship with Kyrgyzstan, and long-term base access in Afghanistan, in a way that shifts the bargaining balance.

For now, this is because Washington still requires support bases for its ongoing operations in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban is a shadow of what it once was, recent months have shown that a concerted and violent anti-government campaign remains underway. Over the long term, Washington has strategic interests in maintaining a military and intelligence presence close to both Iran and Pakistan, either of which may become immediate threats at some future point because of proliferation or domestic instability concerns.

Further, the K2 base served one purpose for which no alternative has been found. Camp Stronghold Freedom is a U.S. Army logistics hub, linking long-distance air delivery of non-perishable supplies (including humanitarian relief) with private container trucks that travel to U.S. and allied bases inside Afghanistan. Some locations, such as Mazar-i-Sharif, are difficult to reach any other way during Afghanistan's harsh winters. The United States has no other road access into Afghanistan.

While U.S. forces are helping to rebuild a major bridge on Afghanistan's border with Tajikistan, this is not seen as a useful alternative. Washington does not have a base in Tajikistan; it maintains landing rights in the country, but only for emergency and occasional refueling purposes. Tajikistan remains dependent on Russian troops for its defense and is unlikely to shift its loyalty to Washington. Experts in any

case do not believe that Tajikistan's poorly maintained highways would meet the requirements for transporting the heavy loads now taken out of Uzbekistan. While work-arounds can be managed, the fact that more heavy goods will now have to be flown into Afghanistan puts additional pressure on the Kyrgyz and Bagram bases.

The Decision to Evict the United States

The K2 base seemed to serve Karimov's interests well, and his ejection of the U.S. presence from his country is therefore puzzling, for three reasons.

First, Karimov appeared to evict the base primarily in retribution for U.S. criticism of his regime's brutal crackdown against protestors at Andijon in May 2005. Some Uzbek senators, in justifying their unanimous approval of Karimov's order, cited U.S. calls for an international investigation into the Andijon events, as well as Washington's support for the United Nations' effort to airlift Uzbek refugees out of the border area in Kyrgyzstan. The Uzbek press is filled with claims that the Central Intelligence Agency was behind the Andijon uprising. More recently, those accused by the Uzbek government of leading the Andijon unrest have stated, apparently under torture, that their activities were encouraged and funded by the U.S. embassy in Tashkent. All of this would imply that Karimov is no longer interested in dealing with the United States because of Washington's push for democratization in the region and its concerns for human rights. Certainly, the successful democratic movements in Georgia and Ukraine, aided in part by long-term U.S. democracy assistance projects, must have given Karimov pause.

Yet, the U.S. reaction to the Andijon events was actually quite muted. The Pentagon bent over backwards not to offend Karimov unduly: for example, negotiations continued over a strengthened, long-term basing contract even as the crisis broke. True, the U.S. Department of State has repeatedly criticized Karimov's human rights record, affirming this criticism after Andijon, and it has refused to authorize military training funds because of ongoing human rights concerns, announcing in July 2004 that it would cut \$18 million in assistance to the country. This news, however, was a year old when Karimov made his move. Furthermore, the Pentagon had offered Tashkent \$21 million in August 2004 for biological weapons stockpile removal assistance, blunting the State Department's action. Overall, the United States has given Uzbekistan more than \$500 million since September 11 for border control and other security upgrades. A shocking report in the *New York Times*, released just a few days before the Andijon uprising, stated that the CIA may have sent prisoners from the war on terrorism to be interrogated in Uzbekistan, with the understanding that those prisoners would be tortured. In other words, despite State Department criticism, the United States was not merely closing its eyes to the practices it officially decried: it was endorsing them.

Karimov did well by his security relationship with Washington, and has now bitten a hand that fed him.

Second, Karimov claimed the K2 base was creating social problems in the region. Uzbek state television publicized complaints about U.S. environmental practices on the base. Yet the environmental problems are mostly left over from the Soviet military's use of the base, and U.S. cleanup efforts had actually improved the base's environmental footprint. Furthermore, the local population, according to *New York Times* interviews in the area, welcomed the base because of the jobs and economic opportunity it provided for an impoverished area. Uzbekistan is in a situation of simmering unrest, in large part due to the country's extreme poverty and disenchantment with state corruption. At a time when his regime is demonstrably threatened by popular revolt, Karimov should have valued the economic support provided by the K2 base. Security assistance funds from the Pentagon and other U.S. government agencies also served as substitutes in his government's coffers for money he would otherwise had to have gotten by taxing his own people. In other words, Karimov could have used the U.S. presence in his country and its associated financial support for his own political benefit.

Third, Karimov, like other Central Asian leaders, had engaged in a game of playing U.S., Russian, and Chinese interests in the region off each other. If he was not getting sufficient support from one outside power, he could simply threaten to fall into the orbit of another. For example, Uzbekistan hosted both the U.S. base and the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is dominated by Russia and China (all post-Soviet Central Asian states except Turkmenistan are members). Through RATS, permanent members of each state's security apparatus are located in Tashkent. Karimov also accepted military assistance from Moscow. This included officer training and integration into the Russian-led regional air defense system. In 2004, he agreed to hold joint military exercises with Russia, which were carried out shortly after the Andijon events.

Indeed, at first it seemed that Karimov's threats to shut the U.S. base were simply part of an effort to renegotiate the base contract. Weeks before the base closure was announced, he complained that he needed an additional \$168 million to compensate his government for infrastructure costs associated with K2. But the United States refused to give ground on this, and with the eviction decision, the bargaining was over. While Washington has had to scramble to find alternatives to the base, Karimov has no alternatives for security support except Russia and China. He has thereby lost a major bargaining chip he held in the game with other outside players. What appeared in 2001 to have been a drive for independence from Moscow's orbit did not last.

While we do not know why Karimov acted as he did, it was clearly under pressure and cajoling from Moscow and Beijing. Most obviously, the SCO called for the U.S. military to leave Central Asia just days before the base eviction was announced, claiming that the Taliban had been defeated and U.S. troops were no longer needed in the region. In actuality, Russia, China, and Uzbekistan all free-ride off of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, since it is only U.S. military support that is holding that country together and providing a modicum of stability.

The apparent rewards to Karimov for turning away from the United States include strong political support from both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Hu Jintao, who lauded him for stopping the Islamist threat he claimed was behind the Andijon unrest. Karimov further received a \$600 million joint venture with the China National Petroleum Corporation for oil and gas development in Uzbekistan, signed when he was feted as an honored guest in Beijing two weeks after Andijon. This follows a broader pattern in Chinese petroleum investments worldwide, which target countries, such as Sudan and Venezuela, that have fallen out of favor with U.S. human rights supporters.

But given that real U.S. actions against the Uzbek human rights records were not as strong as State Department words, most likely it was not fear of human rights objections or democratization alone that motivated Karimov. It may have been more important to him that financial support and contracts from Russia and China come with a wink and a nod to the corruption of Uzbekistan's state-owned companies. While U.S. contracts arrive with demands for economic transparency and accountability, Russian and Chinese deals do not. This may mean that Karimov can skim some of the proceeds to line his own pockets and pay off domestic supporters.

Uzbekistan is widely understood to be a corrupt state, but there is little public record of what this means. The controversial ex-ambassador from the United Kingdom to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, claims that Karimov takes a 10 percent cut of revenues from state gold and uranium production, but this cannot be verified. However, Murray cites public records from the divorce case of Karimov's daughter in New Jersey, Gulnara Karimova-Maqsudi, to describe the family's unexplained wealth. While working in the government bureaucracy of Uzbekistan, Karimova-Maqsudi amassed tens of millions of dollars in cash and real estate, including a 20 percent stake in a cellular phone joint venture founded by the Uzbek state. She has just been accredited by Russia as a counselor in Uzbekistan's embassy in Moscow, which Murray claims she sought to obtain diplomatic immunity and avoid arrest. The New Jersey court issued a warrant for her in June when she failed to comply with its ruling that her ex-husband be given sole custody of their children. Her holdings, as well as the help the Russian state has given her in avoiding U.S. law,

provide at least indirect evidence of the extent of Uzbek corruption and the lack of Russian concern about it.

Implications for U.S. Policy in Central Asia

The fact that it is not merely concerns about human rights and democratization, but the lure of cash and a free pass on corruption that may be driving Karimov, is bad news for Washington's ability to maintain a foothold in the region in the future. Russia and China together scored a major point by evicting the United States from a base in their backyards. They will therefore be encouraged to keep trying elsewhere. In a region where economic transparency is absent, and corruption on behalf of clan and family ties is enormous, the United States is at a real disadvantage in seeking any relationship, including military base or security assistance ties, involving the exchange of funds.

It is clear, for example, that the new regime of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan is as corrupt as that of his predecessor, ousted in the Tulip Revolution this past spring. U.S. Manas base contracts for petroleum delivery are once again lining the pockets of the president's family members. As in Uzbekistan, the U.S. base in Bishkek provides a significant source of jobs to locals, and military assistance provides resources to the state. But also as in Uzbekistan, state leaders in Kyrgyzstan may be convinced by Russian or Chinese pressure or cajoling to sacrifice that public economic good for private gain. The United States should consider what it would do if this occurs.

Beyond the dangers of losing a regional foothold for security purposes, driving the U.S. security presence from Central Asia could also redound to the harm of human rights concerns. While it is tempting to say at a blanket level that the United States should not support corrupt regimes that violate human rights, and that the exit from Uzbekistan is a good thing, human rights activists express mixed emotions on this point. The U.S. base in Uzbekistan probably brought more attention to the country than it otherwise would have had, making Andijon a front-page news item in a way that state-supported massacres in other countries sometimes are not, and focusing State Department criticism on Karimov.

In this new post-Cold War world, Washington is playing a game with Moscow and Beijing that it may not fully understand, where its own concern for economic transparency and propriety put it at a disadvantage. A new kind of economic leverage may be the emerging weapon of choice for U.S. competitors.