

Difficult Engagements

Political Lessons from the K2 Experience

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In July 2005, the government of Uzbekistan expelled the United States from the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base from which U.S. forces had conducted reconnaissance and support missions for Operation Enduring Freedom in neighboring Afghanistan since autumn 2001. Prior to the eviction the Uzbek government had grown wary of mounting international and U.S. criticism over its hard-line policies, especially its May crackdown on protestors in the eastern city of Andijon and its aftermath. The dramatic events in Uzbekistan provide two important lessons for U.S. policymakers: first, the policy of politically engaging non-democratic base-hosts to enact democratic reforms is practically ineffective; second, establishing an overseas basing presence will always embroil the United States in the domestic political conflicts of its base hosts, regardless of the base's actual operations, size, or policymakers' actual intentions. Both lessons are further supported by the historical experiences of the United States in dealing with other non-democratic base hosts.

Background to an Eviction: The Worst of Outcomes

The U.S. expulsion was the culmination of growing U.S.-Uzbek tensions after the Uzbek government cracked down in May 2005 on insurgents and demonstrators in the eastern city of Andijon. The Uzbek government claims that the use of force was unavoidable given that a group of armed Islamic militants led a prison break, took hostages, and raided a weapons cache. International nongovernmental organizations and human rights

groups counter that Uzbek security services fired indiscriminately into a crowd of thousands of demonstrators who were protesting the government's economic and social policies. Western observers estimate the number dead at 700-1000, substantially higher than the 180 reported by the Uzbek authorities, and criticize the Uzbek government for intimidating local witnesses after the clashes and refusing to allow an international inquiry.

Following the May events, the Bush administration initially refused to condemn the actions of the Uzbek government as White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan insisted that Uzbeks should "express their opposition in a peaceful manner." Shortly after, during a North Atlantic Treaty Organization meeting in Brussels, U.S. defense officials blocked an attempt by the organization to issue a joint communiqué calling for the Uzbek government to allow an international probe into Andijon. U.S. representatives did not contest the prevailing Western interpretation of the events in Andijon, nor did they defend the Uzbek government's crackdown as necessary. Rather, their argument was purely pragmatic: increased criticism of the Uzbek government and demands for an international inquiry would jeopardize future U.S. access to the base. As it turned out, they were right.

In June, criticism of the Uzbek government escalated as both the U.S. Department of State and a group of bipartisan senators started issuing critical statements about the Andijon events. Suspecting that the U.S. government was no longer unequivocally backing Islam Karimov's domestic actions, Uzbekistan restricted nighttime and cargo flights to and from K2 and publicly accused the United States of inflicting environmental damage in the area and failing to pay its arrears. Finally, in July, the United States backed a United Nations plan to airlift a group of Andijon refugees from camps in neighboring Kyrgyzstan to Romania, against the wishes of the Uzbek government. Uzbek officials had insisted that there were several terrorist suspects among the refugees and demanded that they be turned over to Uzbek security services for interrogation. In contrast to the growing criticism from the United States, Russia and China both strongly backed Karimov's actions in Andijon and encouraged a more confrontational attitude towards the West. Having witnessed the U.S.-backed regime changes in neighboring Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, Karimov reasoned that the United States could no longer be counted on to support his regime.

The eviction represented the worst of all possible outcomes for the United States. The United States did not receive credit for standing on political principle and voluntarily leaving K2, nor did it manage to secure operational use of the base.

Lesson #1: Politically Engaging Authoritarian Base Hosts (Still) Doesn't Work

The first lesson to be drawn from Uzbekistan is that the policy of promoting democratization through military engagement is ineffective and may even be counterproductive. U.S. officials had hoped that a military presence in Uzbekistan and regular cooperation between U.S. and Uzbek security and intelligence bodies would also be a conduit through which gradual liberalization could be promoted. The U.S.-Uzbek cooperation agreement of March 2002 stated that the Uzbek government would take steps to liberalize the political system and guarantee press freedoms. In fact, even before Andijon, the regime grew more repressive.

But the Uzbek case is only the latest in a list of historical instances where engaging with an authoritarian regime clearly failed. From 1953 to 1975, the politically controversial U.S. basing presence in Spain failed to persuade the isolated regime of Francisco Franco to democratize. U.S. officials had maintained that establishing relations with the Franco government could aid his integration into the West, yet the Spanish political system only opened after Franco's death, 22 years after the U.S. basing presence was established. In 1961-1962, the Kennedy administration backtracked on its initial policy of promoting African decolonization when the Portuguese regime of Antonio Salazar threatened to curtail U.S. access to the mid-Atlantic Azores bases. The Portuguese were outraged that the United States supported the aspirations of independence movements in then colonial Angola and Mozambique, which they regarded as an internal matter of Portuguese politics. Indeed, these threats worked as the United States subsequently refused to introduce or support UN Security Council resolutions that criticized the Portuguese, and Lisbon kept the bases' legal status in abeyance throughout the 1960s in order to maintain its political leverage over Washington. Finally, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, U.S. officials tempered their criticism of Ferdinand Marcos, the autocratic ruler of the Philippines, in order to preserve and extend agreements allowing U.S. military access to Clark Airbase and Subic Bay Naval station.

In these historical cases, as in the Uzbek case, political engagement failed to work for the simple reason that these autocratic rulers knew that the United States valued its operational access to its military bases more than it did promoting democratization in the hosts. Authoritarian rulers' concern for their political survival will trump international agreements, even in military or security affairs.

Lesson #2: A Foreign Military Basing Presence Will Always Have Political Consequences

The second lesson for U.S. policymakers from the Uzbek case is that establishing a foreign military or basing presence will necessarily enmesh

the United States in the internal politics of a base host, regardless of the base's actual operations, size, or official U.S. policies.

As part of its Global Defense Posture Review (GDPR), the U.S. Department of Defense is now transforming its global basing posture by creating a number of smaller and more flexible facilities, known as "forward operating bases" (FOBs) and "cooperative security locations" (CSLs), in a number of regions where it has traditionally not maintained an onshore presence (Central Asia, the Black Sea, and Africa). New facilities such as K2 or Ganci (Manas) airbase in neighboring Kyrgyzstan have been widely touted as representing this new generation of FOBs. In terms of its troop size, K2 was typical of the smaller size of FOBs, about 1,000-1,500 U.S. personnel, but the political impact of the base was the same as if it hosted considerably more troops. Both the Uzbek government, in its calculations regarding the political threat posed by the base's continued presence, and the Pentagon, in its refusal to criticize the Uzbek government's actions for fear of losing access to K2, behaved in a manner that suggested the base was strategically vital. Although DOD planners hope that the creation of a global network of such smaller facilities will diminish the political significance of each of them individually, the opposite outcome is just as plausible: the United States may find itself embroiled in the domestic politics and internal disputes of dozens of countries in which it has no compelling national interest other than maintaining a small base or CSL.

Second, the Uzbek case suggests that regardless of the intentions of policymakers, the host country and the international community at large will regard a basing presence as a tacit approval of that country's regime and policies. Again, comparative and historical analysis suggests that even when DOD officials denied any link between the presence of an overseas base and support for a particular regime, public perceptions within the country explicitly linked the U.S. military presence to a broader support for non-democratic governments and practices. As authoritarian base-hosts democratized, U.S. officials had to confront challenges to the basing presence by new domestic elites, parties, and institutions that viewed the U.S. presence as illegitimate and democratically unaccountable. In Spain, Greece, the Philippines, and Thailand, new nationalist pressures and democratic forces made the U.S. basing presence a major political issue in these countries, leading to contentious renegotiations and/or outright evictions. Even in present-day Republic of Korea (ROK), NGO activists and progressive politicians still link the presence of U.S. forces in Korea with support for previous South Korean authoritarian rulers. Indeed, echoing some of the events of Andijon in Uzbekistan, Korean activists still accuse the U.S. military of failing to adequately intervene or denounce the ROK government after it brutally cracked down on student demonstrators in the city of Kwangju in May 1980, killing hundreds (some say up to 2,000). In sum, regardless of the

historical accuracy or causal validity of these claims, a U.S. military presence will always be viewed as condoning and even abetting the actions of a host country's regime.

Conclusions: The Political Consequences of the Present and Future U.S. Basing Presence

The dramatic turn in U.S.-Uzbek relations over the last year should serve as ample warning that the traditional political dilemmas associated with establishing and maintaining an overseas basing presence in non-democratic states remain the same, regardless of the new operational purposes of these facilities, their location, or smaller size. In the short-term, some of the functions of K2 will be transferred to Manas in Kyrgyzstan. Although the regime of newly elected President Kurmanbek Bakiyev is far more democratic and less repressive than his Uzbek neighbor, it is still unclear whether Bakiyev will act as the committed reformer that he claimed to be. And there are already signs that the Kyrgyz government is prepared to take full advantage of its renewed strategic importance, and bargain for increased rent flows and economic benefits for hosting the U.S. presence in Manas.

Reports that U.S. planners are negotiating a possible replacement for K2 in other parts of the former Soviet Union should also be cause for political concern. The non-democratic regimes of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan are hardly the types of partners that the United States should want to associate itself with, regardless of their public stands in the war on terror. Establishing a basing presence in any of these countries will once again bring these political dilemmas back to the fore. CSL agreements, such as the one currently contemplated with Azerbaijan, have the potential to be less politically visible now, but may also compromise the State Department's future ability to engage with these countries. In sum, there is little cause for optimism, either theoretically or historically, when one considers how a U.S. basing presence in the current southern tier of former Soviet countries can be reconciled with this administration's formal commitment to aggressively promoting democratization abroad.

On the other hand, future U.S. bases in Romania and Bulgaria will offer attractive facilities and a supportive and dependable political climate in democratically consolidated and solidly pro-Western NATO members. Their expansion and heavier use, as well as a possible future presence in Georgia, may offer a more reliable and politically acceptable alternative to establishing a new FOB in Central Asia.

