The Improbable Course of Freedom in Central Asia
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One would be hard-pressed to find an analyst either in the West or Russia willing to stake his/her reputation on the likelihood of actual democracy taking root in Central Asia anytime soon. A confluence of factors suggests that the democratic deficit in the region is unlikely to be reversed: historical circumstances, the methods of state-building in the region, the nefarious influence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the cynical "Great Game" interests of major powers, and, of course, immediate proximity to what some might call the imploding 'democratic experiment' in Afghanistan. It is; however, precisely the soft bigotry of low expectations that may well prove the pundits wrong – if not tomorrow, then increasingly by the year 2030. Recent tumult in Kyrgyzstan, uncertainty in the next stage of Kazakh state-building and a deceptively fragile state in Uzbekistan all provide a basis for speculating that the peoples of Central Asia may not be as readily condemned to tyranny as the prognosticators presume. It is the very improbability that currents of freedom and pluralism might emerge sooner than anyone thinks that I would like to discuss with you this afternoon.

In late 2003, Anatoly Chubais –a former deputy chief of staff to Russian President Boris Yeltsin and key figure in the early development of Russia's market economy—told students at a speech in Saint Petersburg that their country was the center of a "liberal empire" that bore an almost Kipling-esque responsibility of extending liberal values to the states on its periphery. Admirer though I am of Chubais' great intellect in many respects, in this one he was 180 degrees wrong. At that time in Russia, Putinism was growing firm roots. Shortly after that speech, Georgians had their "Rose Revolution," followed by Ukraine's "Orange Revolution," and, a year later, Kyrgyzstan's "Tulip Revolution." Regardless of the outcomes of any of these three events today, what they represented then was a powerful rebuke to the Kremlin's brand of 'managed democracy.' Russian paranoia about colored revolutions tainted its domestic and near-abroad policy in the years that followed. Today it remains an open question whether Russia's best hopes for liberalism do indeed come from within or the near-abroad and it's a discussion worth expanding on shortly. Centuries of pronounced Russian influence on Central Asia make Chubais' ill-fated prediction a useful point of departure. From where will the liberalizing currents in Central Asia spring, and how will we know that it is happening?

One month ago, I found myself in the midst of a small, early morning mob on the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border. Pressed between a rambunctious bunch of Kyrgyz seeking to return to their side of the river and Kazakh border guards trying to preserve an element of order to the overflowing passport control line, I listened as impatient women shouted at the guards to let them through and one guard, exacerbated, responded, "go on, go home, enjoy your revolution." It was not an isolated bit of sarcasm. Yesterday, I sat across a table from Kazakhstan's ambassador to the United States and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev's political advisor as they pointed out with some chagrin that the Kyrgyz had their first election for a parliamentary democracy and "the wrong parties," i.e. two that oppose the idea of a parliamentary democracy, got into parliament. It is ironic, true, but democracy as we see in America particularly at the present moment, can be a messy business.

Historical experience suggests that politics in Central Asia are clan-based and centered on the indispensible roles of strongmen. In the late Eighteenth Century, the Kazakh Ablai Khan cut a deal with the Russian Empress Catherine that allowed limited self-rule in exchange for protection from Russia. Subsequent rulers have been equally pragmatic. When a former Secretary of State asked Nazarbaev why he moved his country's capital to Astana, he told her it was "so I could be equidistant from all my enemies." Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov fancies himself the 21st Century reincarnation of Tamerlane. The Late Sapparmurat Niyazov, a.k.a. Turkmenbashi, developed a cult of personality that would be laughable were it not so terrifying, his successor is decidedly lower-key. When conducting some research in Kyrgyzstan in the run-up to their October 10th election, I heard focus group participants repeatedly say they needed a strong leader because there is an Asian country and that's how things work. America was hardly Oriental at the time of its founding, though our republic's earliest publically-concerned citizens begged George Washington to become king. History is kind of like Forrest Gump's box of chocolates: it comes it whatever particular assortment and then you just have to work with what you've got. The excuse that nations are somehow shackled by history to a particular course of action has been shown to be more self-serving than prescient. History is important, but not determinative.

How the Central Asian states have tackled the question of state-building from 1991 to the present is perhaps more relevant to the probability that their citizens might have a voice in self-rule. How many successful states do we see looking at the region? I know too little about Turkmenistan to say, but the fact that Global Witness finds 75% of their state budget to be run out of the personal bank accounts of various individuals is certainly not encouraging for state institutions there. Tajikistan is now facing a second wave of violence after its crippling civil war in the mid 1990s. Three weeks after its most recent election, Kyrgyzstan has yet to form a government, but there—at least on paper—we see the foundations for democratic governance if only their fledgling constitution holds. The Uzbek state is based on one man, the power ministries under his unquestioned control, but Karimov's health is frequently said to be in question and a successful decapitating attack, unlike the failed bombs in 1999, would likely unravel things there unpredictably. The Kazakhs maintain that they pose the only example of durable state-building, and why they have demonstrated some successes, it too is crafted under the authority of a single individual, now recognized in law as "the Father of the Nation." The durability of states can be tested in two ways: 1. By how they serve the needs of their citizens, and 2. By how they address the challenge of succession.

Succession is the great unknown in all the Central Asian states. It has only occurred in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. In the former, Turkmenbashi's personal physician (and later Minister of Health) stepped into the great leaders' shoes after a brief interregnum in which security services raced for a solution. Kyrgyzstan has now seen two revolutions – in 2005 and earlier this year – and the answer remains unclear. Its interim president, the first female head of state in the region, will need to effectively balance the ambitions of various men between now and the presidential election next year. At the same time, she will have to work even harder to ensure the current constitution isn't amended again, as it has been in the past, to expand presidential powers. Kazakhstan has emerging commercial elites, but not competitive political ones (a Singaporean configuration that Nazarbaev, who sees himself more likely as a Lee Kwan Yew than a mandarin, may well prefer). Uzbekistan remains a guessing game. Yet the space between Turkmenistan's and Kyrgyzstan's successions indicates the range of possibilities: from a security-service facilitated switcheroo to a constitutionally-mandated process of elections, the result of which is not known before the voting takes place.

The one international organization least likely to promote pluralism and democratic aspirations in any of the Central Asian states is the SCO. Its leading lights in Beijing and Moscow are advocates of strong, central control. Both Russia and China saw in the 'color revolutions' of 2003-5 a threat to their own forms of governance. An equal threat from the SCO perspective is instability and unpredictability. During June's violence in Kyrgyzstan, Moscow declined Bishkek's appeal for them to send troops, which is interesting to note. Similarly, Beijing may view the Tien Shen mountain range as a political border, but not a commercial one. Increasingly, China is flexing its global "soft power" muscle, namely in the form of international assistance though it is arguably easier for them to do this is in faraway Africa than next door Central Asia, where more complicated political arrangements could impact its immediate interests. For now, the SCO exists as a foil, and a defender of the status quo. Should improbable movements towards greater pluralism emerge and spread in Central Asia, one can expect to see the SCO to play the role of a Thermidor, blocking and tackling any nascent democratic trend.

Much has been said, and written, about a Great Game for influence in the region stretching back to Persian, Macedonian, Turkic and later Russian and American interests competing to determine outcomes. The United States entered into regional politics twice in the past twenty years: initially in support of its energy companies seeking to export oil and then, after September 11, 2001, via the Department of Defense, seeking alternative supply routes into Afghanistan. A very useful study done by Lora Lumpe for the Open Society Institute compares U.S. foreign assistance to the region by distinguishing that which came from the State Department/U.S. Agency for International Development from that emanating from the U.S. Department of Defense. Not surprising, after 2002, DoD assistance took a substantial lead. Just as "pipeline politics" lead to a certain tunnel vision in the 1990s, the effort to secure access to transshipment facilities and a Northern Distribution Network has had a similar effect in more recent years. This is most evident in Kyrgyzstan, where the U.S. can be said to have indulged the previous president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, at the expense of democratic values. The jury is still out on whether Washington has learned the lessons of Kyrgyzstan in its bilateral policy to Uzbekistan: are we betting on Karimov at the expense of human rights and fundamental freedoms?

The region's proximity to Afghanistan – indeed Afghanistan and Pakistan fall within the State Department's bureau of South and Central Asian affairs – must have some bearing on our hope for democratic practices taking root. If policymakers have, as the U.S. president has said, given up on the prospect of Afghanistan becoming "a Jeffersonian democracy" anytime soon, what does that say about our intentions for the Central Asian states? Proximate influence is more important than it sounds. Currently the concern is about "an arch of instability" and drug-trafficking corridor stretching from Afghanistan through Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan. Addressing this is a question for security planners and state-builders. Political development is more likely to be driven by political actors, interest groups and activists within neighboring countries learning from one another. The substance of those lessons will either be positive – in terms of more effective, participatory governance, or negative – in terms of tightening domestic controls in reaction to instability in the neighborhood.

How the negative trend develops all too clear. Iron-fisted autocrats portray themselves as the peoples' best defense against instability which, if we're talking about Uzbekistan, also means Islamic extremist. But as home to the third holiest city is Islam, how long can the Tashkent regime really afford to vilify the Muslim faith? The Kazakhs can look disdainfully at Kyrgyz chaos. Slowly, and in some cases perhaps not so slowly, the rising generation is going to look beyond such arguments for autocracy. Like historical predestination, they will, in the age of the Internet, continue wearing ever more thinly.

Rising generations in each of the Central Asian states will, in their own voices, demand better, more transparent governance than their parents have known. Will SCO hybrids—with freer markets but closed political systems—meet these demands? Does Nazarbaev have the right idea for these aspirations with a Singaporean model? Given the inevitable pace of globalization, one can only guess that Uzbek style press, and Internet, censorship is the aberration as opposed to the norm. For these natural demand to be voiced, and met; however, a more durability stability is required than the people of Tajikistan, now Kyrgyzstan, and I would argue also Uzbekistan have known. The false choice of freedom versus stability is belied by the cruelty with which dictators like Karimov cling to power. To those who grew up in the Soviet Union, such repression may be both familiar and tolerable, but younger Central Asians share a different frame of reference. Their world is shaped less by Persian princes, Turkish sultans or Russian czars than it is by an understandable desire to integrate further with the world beyond these 'near abroad' frontiers. Flashes of nationalism, and the increasing appeal of Islam, and an ever more evident want of justice are defining their environment today, all of which call for constructive balancing forces from the globalized world.

Today there is a battle for hearts and minds in Central Asia, but the principal competitors – the regional strongmen, great power actors and trans-national corporations both legal and illicit – are all faced with a changing landscape. In its bilateral relations with each country in the region, the United States should remember that its offer is unique from Moscow's or Beijing's or Tehran's. None of these countries will make demands on an Uzbekistan or a Turkmenistan to improve its human rights record. That's good news to the autocrats who rule today, but less welcome to the citizens of each country who are being denied their freedom on a daily basis. The struggle then for the United States is two-fold: First, the U.S. should not bargain away what is in many respects our unique advantage, and, second, when speaking of freedom for these new states, the U.S. should do so in a meaningful context for the citizens who might benefit from greater liberalization. For the peoples of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, that can mean the same thing: freer markets, more transparent governance, greater opportunities, and the chance to play a meaningful role in global politics. All of these, ultimately, are within reach.