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TRANQUILITY OR
TURBULENCE
IN TASHKENT?
UZBEKISTAN IN
THE POST-
KARIMOV ERA

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KEY POINTS

- Despite the passing of President Islam Karimov in early September 2016, Uzbekistan is not in any immediate danger of experiencing regime implosion and state collapse due to a set of geo-structural factors currently in place favoring continuity. Uzbekistan is arguably a fragile state, but in comparison to other countries that have experienced regime implosion and (at least partial) state collapse recently (such as Afghanistan during the 1990s, Iraq, Libya, and Syria) the exercise of power amongst Uzbekistan's elites remains relatively stable today.
- Uzbekistan's security-centric relationship with Western powers, advantageous demographic composition, and geographical location buttress the ruling regime in Tashkent. Furthermore, if Uzbekistan's maiden political transition was to suddenly go awry for some reason, Russia could still intervene (politically and/or militarily) in some capacity so as to forestall regime implosion and state collapse.
- Assuming that Western countries decide to reinvigorate relations with Uzbekistan in the hopes of promoting economic and political reform, it is important that they do not suddenly reverse course and distance themselves on account of Tashkent refraining from revising its governing style. Uzbekistan is not likely to undergo any major changes in the near future. As such, any Western effort to reengage with Uzbekistan followed soon thereafter by disengagement owing to a sense of futility (or perhaps in response to another state-sponsored violent episode on par with the 2005 Andijon crackdown) may yield certain unintended consequences, such as the Uzbekistani citizenry losing faith in the possibility of peaceful regime change, the further radicalization of societal elements, and a dimming of Central Asians' general perceptions regarding the resoluteness of Western commitments.



INTRODUCTION

For the first time since acquiring independence in 1991, Uzbekistan is being led by someone other than (former) President Islam Karimov. Reports indicate that Karimov died on September 2, 2016 after being hospitalized days earlier due to suffering a “brain hemorrhage”.¹ For some time, scholars have warned that the “absence of clear succession mechanisms” makes certain Central Asian countries governed by “aging autocrats” susceptible to bouts of political instability.² So, will Uzbekistan slide into disorder in the wake of the passing of the first president? The prevailing consensus seems to argue that Uzbekistan will successfully navigate its way through its maiden political transition because the elites wish to “maintain the status quo to retain control over their patches of the isolated economy.”³ According to this line of reasoning, Uzbekistan’s fate will presumably be determined by whether a select grouping of local powerbrokers decide to get along or fight it out in the hopes of amassing greater spoils for themselves. Although elite power dynamics will undoubtedly influence the trajectory of the political transition, an additional set of geo-structural factors should work to ensure its orderly nature. In comparing Uzbekistan to other countries that have experienced regime implosion and (at least partial) state collapse in recent years, this brief argues that the political situation in Tashkent should remain stable as a new leader assumes power in the post-Karimov era.

¹ See “Obituary: Uzbek President Islam Karimov, Who Long Ruled With Fear, Dead At 78,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (September 5, 2016), <http://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-islam-karimov-obituary-78/27954048.html> (accessed October 19, 2016). Karimov rose to political power in 1989 in the Uzbek SSR.

² Eric McGlinchey, “Central Asia Grows Wobbly,” *Current History* (October 2012): 280.

³ Thomas Grove, “Fortune Turns for Uzbekistan Ruling Family,” *The Wall Street Journal* (September 24-25, 2016): A 12.



WHAT KIND OF STATE?

At a glance, Uzbekistan minus Karimov looks as if it could tumble into an abyss. The death of a ruler who presided over an extremely repressive system for more than a generation arguably spells disaster in the days ahead. Add to this mixture a regional economic crunch that has been vexing Central Asia for several years now coupled with Russia's aggressive stance towards certain former Soviet states and America's military drawdown in neighboring Afghanistan and Uzbekistan looks rather shaky.⁴ Indeed, the state in Uzbekistan is debatably "failing" in a sense, but it is not on the brink of "collapsing". "Failed" and "collapsed" states are not the same. The key difference between them is that the former lack "effectiveness" and "legitimacy" (a seemingly quite common phenomenon across the developing world) while the latter constitute a "vacuum of authority" or "black hole" (a far worse condition bordering on anarchy).⁵ So, is Uzbekistan failing or collapsing today? According to the Fragile States Index, Uzbekistan resides within a category of states designated to be at a "high warning" level. Over the course of the past few years (2010-2016), however, Uzbekistan has actually been steadily improving in terms of its ranking vis-à-vis other fragile states. In contrast, states like Afghanistan and Iraq (which hover within the lower echelon of the top ten most fragile states or just outside of this grouping) have shown very modest progress, while others such as Libya and Syria have descended at

⁴ Nate Schenkkan, "Islam Karimov and the Dictator's Playbook," *Foreign Policy* (August 30, 2016).

⁵ In regards to "failed" states, see Jack Goldstone, "Pathways to State Failure," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25, no. 4 (September 2008): 285-296. In regards to "collapsed" states, see Robert I. Rotberg, "The Failure and Collapse of Nation-States: Breakdown, Prevention, and Repair," in *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 9.

a rapid pace.⁶ Why is this so? The answer lies with the implosion of the elite-led governing institutions or ruling regimes in these countries, followed shortly thereafter by the disintegration of the coercive capacities of the state apparatus. Uzbekistan's elites, on the other hand, have managed to preserve their ruling regime, thereby ensuring their hold on political power.

⁶ From 2010 to 2016, Uzbekistan's *FSI* ranking rose from "36" in the year 2010 to "60" in the year 2016. Afghanistan ("6" and "9") and Iraq's ("7" and "11") respective rankings for the years 2010 and 2016 have shown little improvement, whereas Libya ("111" and "25") and Syria's ("48" and "6") respective rankings for the years 2010 and 2016 have declined at an alarming rate. See "Fragile States Index 2016" *Fund for Peace*, <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/> (accessed October 19, 2016); "The Failed States Index 2010" *Fund for Peace*, <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/rankings-2010-sortable> (accessed October 19, 2016). The occurrence of regime implosion and state collapse in Afghanistan (during the 1980s amidst the Soviet-Afghan War and the ensuing civil war in the 1990s) and Iraq (following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion) appear to predate the *Fragile States Index*. Libya and Syria's *FSI* rankings began declining in the year 2012, following the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, respectively. To see the rankings of states on a yearly basis, viewers can access the scroll bar on the *FSI* site. For a discussion on methodology, see "The Methodology Behind the Index," *Fund for Peace*, <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/methodology> (accessed October 19, 2016).



AN EMBEDDED AUTOCRACY

Uzbekistan is not in danger of falling victim to regime implosion and state collapse any time soon on account of several geo-structural factors currently in place. First, contemporary history informs us that regime implosion and state collapse can occur following the onset of a military intervention by a foreign power. The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya are two recent examples. In both instances, foreign powers forcefully intervened in the domestic politics of Iraq and Libya to such an extent that (former) Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's respective regimes crumbled, resulting in the disintegration of the state apparatus in both countries. In contrast, Uzbekistan has little to fear from the United States, NATO, or any Western powers in terms of mounting a military campaign, for in spite of its "atrocious" human rights record Tashkent has thus far managed to avoid being tagged with the label as a global menace.⁷ This is mainly the case because Central Asia does not figure prominently in Western policymaking circles. That said, castigating, isolating, or ousting the Uzbekistani government would also not serve to advance any short-term Western regional security interest. In further discussing this point, Tashkent has significantly benefited from the United States' sustained military presence in Afghanistan, in the sense that America views Uzbekistan (though perhaps somewhat reluctantly due to its repressive governing style and unwillingness to change) as a key partner in sustaining certain logistical supply lines for the ongoing war effort. As a result, the promotion of economic and political reform in Uzbekistan usually takes a backseat

⁷ For an overview of the extremely repressive nature of the Uzbekistani government, see "Uzbekistan," *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/uzbekistan> (accessed October 20, 2016).

to regional security matters when it comes to ranking U.S. foreign policy goals.⁸

Second, since Uzbekistan is predominantly comprised of Uzbeks who practice Sunni Islam, the country is not vulnerable to ethno-sectarian divisions like other fragile states. In contrast to the populations of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria (all of which have become largely defined by tribal, ethnic and/or sectarian divisions as a result of years of inclusive governance and civil war), Uzbekistan exercises stringent control over the capabilities of its citizens to engage in acts of political violence. Violent state-sponsored crackdowns (such as in the city of Andijon in May 2005) have also not set the local population against the government to such an extent that Tashkent teeters on the precipice of rebellion.⁹ Why? Simply, the Uzbekistani government benefits from being surrounded by weak and timid neighbors. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria competing foreign powers and neighbors have meddled in the domestic affairs of these states over time by providing

⁸ For a discussion on the issue of whether the United States should emphasize human rights in Uzbekistan or focus on security interests as they pertain to the region (primarily the War in Afghanistan), see Sabrina Tavernise, "After '05 Uzbek Uprising, Issues Linger for West," *The New York Times* (May 29, 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/29/world/asia/29uzbek.html> (accessed October 20, 2016); Joshua Kucera, "America's Uzbekistan Problem," *The New York Times* (December 28, 2011), http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/29/opinion/americas-uzbekistan-problem.html?_r=0 (accessed October 20, 2016). For a discussion on the difficulties involved in terms of ensuring the logistical provision of supplies for Afghanistan (particularly after Russia's closure of one of the main lines of the Northern Distribution Network in 2015), see John C.K. Daly, "Central Asia Will Miss the Northern Distribution Network," *Silk Road Reporters* (June 19, 2015), <http://www.silkroadreporters.com/2015/06/19/central-asia-will-miss-the-northern-distribution-network/> (accessed October 20, 2016).

⁹ For an analysis of the 2005 Andijon crackdown, see Fiona Hill and Kevin Jones, "Fear of Democracy or Revolution: The Reaction to Andijon," *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 111-125; Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 192-198.

support to various opposition groups, thereby exacerbating identity divides amongst the local populations. As for Uzbekistan, neighbors such as Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan do not seek to destabilize Tashkent by supporting its opponents (be they democrats, nationalists, or Islamic fundamentalists) in the hopes of expanding their influence.¹⁰ Moreover, Russia and China would not find such actions agreeable in light of that a destabilized Uzbekistan could undermine their respective regional interests. As such, Uzbekistan's advantageous demographic composition and geographical location serve to buttress the ruling regime.

Third, if for some reason the planned transfer of authority goes awry, Russia could still intervene (politically and/or militarily) in the eleventh hour to save Uzbekistan from descending into chaos. On the surface, this may sound implausible. After all, any intervention carries economic and political costs, and Uzbekistan surely seeks to preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Interim President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has also stated that Uzbekistan will retain its neutrality in the post-Karimov era, thus implying that Tashkent will not rejoin the Collective Security Treaty Organization (which amounts to a multinational mutual defense pact consisting of Russia and several other CIS states).¹¹ Yet Russia's foray into Syria indicates that Moscow wields the political-military might to significantly

¹⁰ It can be argued that a portion of Uzbekistan's citizens consider themselves to be of Tajik ancestry. For a discussion on the controversy between Uzbeks and Tajiks during the 1920s concerning the delimitation of borders for the Uzbek and Tajik SSRs, see Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 174-186. That said, Tajikistan lacks both the will and the capacity to destabilize Uzbekistan by stoking nationalist sentiments.

¹¹ Damien Sharkov, "Uzbekistan's New Leader Vows to Stay Out of Russian Military Alliance," *Newsweek* (September 9, 2016), <http://europe.newsweek.com/uzbekistans-new-leader-vows-stay-out-russian-military-alliance-496882?rm=eu> (accessed October 27, 2016). Uzbekistan recently withdrew its membership from the CSTO in the year 2012.

alter the course of protracted conflicts. Moreover, ethical considerations aside, it appears that Russia's preferred method of propping up endangered autocrats and combatting insurgents has proven to be effective (in terms of keeping Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power).¹² So, even though Uzbekistan is currently not a member of the CSTO and Russia has not provided aid to fellow CSTO states in times of need (specifically on account of their membership in this organization), Moscow could still (theoretically) assist Tashkent by giving political-military support so as to halt the ruling regime's implosion and the state's collapse.¹³ However, this would amount to a last resort option, and an unlikely one due to the aforementioned factors favoring regime continuity.

¹² For a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of a state adhering to an "authoritarian model of counterinsurgency" in waging war, see Daniel Byman, "'Death Solves All Problems': The Authoritarian Model of Counterinsurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2015): 62-93.

¹³ For an analysis as to why Russia did not respond via the CSTO to the overthrow of Kyrgyzstani President Kurmanbek Bakiyev or the outburst of ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010, see Alexander Cooley, "The Kyrgyz Crisis and the Political Logic of Central Asia's Weak Regional Security Organizations," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 140*, George Washington University (May 2011), https://www2.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pepm_140.pdf (accessed October 19, 2016).



STATE FAILURE IN SLOW MOTION

Today, fragile states like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria tend to dominate the media headlines. However, these cases do not necessarily represent the norm when it comes to how states disintegrate. Actually, the process of fragile states breaking down and becoming consumed by systemic violence and political disorder (particularly as it applies within the African context) is a long and drawn-out ordeal, sometimes lasting several decades. It entails the dissolution of an “equilibrium” between the “specialists in violence” responsible for providing security to ordinary people and the masses tasked with generating wealth. In countries where unbalanced relationships between elites and masses flourish, the former prey upon the latter, eventually sparking the breakdown of order.¹⁴ But even if Uzbekistan’s elites govern in a similar manner to their African counterparts, anarchy is not lurking around the corner in Tashkent, at least not yet. For all of the aforementioned reasons, the country’s maiden political transition (presumably with the election of interim President Mirziyoyev on December 4th) should be decided by a coterie of powerful local actors who do not wish to revise the current system of rule.¹⁵

In summary, the government’s ability to repress citizens without having to contend with much in the way of international condemnation or consequences, the absence

¹⁴ Robert H. Bates, *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late-Century Africa* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 15-29. In regards to the pervasiveness of state fragility across Africa today, in looking at the *Fragile States Index* for the year 2016, six of the top eight countries designated to be on “very high alert” and 19 of the top 25 are located in Africa. See “Fragile States Index 2016.”

¹⁵ For an overview of Mirziyoyev’s political background and what types of policies he is likely to promote, see Jack Farchy, “Meet the New (and Tougher) Uzbek Boss,” *Financial Times* (September 13, 2016). Prior to becoming the interim President, Mirziyoyev had served as Uzbekistan’s Prime Minister since 2003.

of any major ethno-sectarian fault line within the country that neighboring states could exploit for strategic purposes, and the apparent unwillingness on behalf of foreign powers and neighboring states (most notably the Central Asian Republics) to meddle in Uzbekistan's domestic affairs all favor regime continuity. Moreover, if things were to spiral out of control in the days and months ahead due to some unforeseen circumstance, Russia could still lend Uzbekistan a helping hand (and in doing so safeguard its regional hegemony in the process). Scholars and policymakers should therefore expect to see more of the same manner of governance practiced in Uzbekistan in the post-Karimov era. Hence, it is worth emphasizing here that not all fragile states break apart in dramatic fashion. To the contrary, it appears that some fragile states are capable of enduring indefinitely, even after a founding father figure dies. Uzbekistan's continued political stability thus informs us that some fragile states are seemingly built to last. Or at least for a long time anyway.



RECOMMENDATIONS

How should the West address Uzbekistan in the post-Karimov era? With the passing of the first president a new opportunity for renewed engagement presumably exists. It bears mentioning, however, that the next Uzbekistani leader is unlikely to initiate a sharp break with his predecessor's policies. Tashkent may implement some cosmetic reforms in an attempt to court the West, but there is no indication that Uzbekistan's elites will cease governing in a restrictive manner. Overall, the chances that meaningful change will take hold are very slim. That then leaves the West with essentially two options: continue with keeping Uzbekistan at a distance and prioritizing regional security concerns; or initiate a change in foreign policy and concentrate instead on promoting economic and political reform. Should Western countries adhere to the first option (or try to perform some type of balancing act between addressing security concerns and simultaneously pressing for human rights and democracy), then the status quo will surely persist; Uzbekistan will continue behaving like an uncompromising authoritarian state, hyping the threat posed by radical Islamists and repressing the local population in the name of stability and order.¹⁶ Realist policymakers may find this to be an acceptable option (if not the only one available). However, others (who adhere to a longer-term view and understand the ruthless nature of the ruling regime in Tashkent) will question the feasibility of such a foreign policy, namely because they find it unconscionable and are concerned about the reputational costs their countries will incur by prizing relations with such a government.

¹⁶ For a discussion concerning why the Uzbekistani government exaggerates the nature of the domestic threat posed by radical Islamic groups, see Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 169-170.

Embracing a reformist agenda though should not be taken lightly, for the West needs to go all in for it to (hopefully) work. Historically, the West has exhibited fleeting interest in Central Asia, while Uzbekistan has demonstrated itself to be very resistant to outside pressure. That said, assuming Western countries decide to reinvigorate relations with Uzbekistan for the purpose of promoting economic and political reform, they should not disengage shortly thereafter owing to a sense of futility in helping to bring about change. One reason why is because doing so might spur the citizenry to lose hope in the possibility of peaceful regime change and turn to more radical societal elements.¹⁷ The promotion of reform should therefore serve as the foundation of a long-term and united Western foreign policy agenda. Generally speaking, Western interests do not really diverge that much on Uzbekistan. Liberalization is needed in order to halt Uzbekistan's slow slide towards becoming engulfed by state failure. Obviously, this will be a most difficult talking point with Tashkent, so the West will need to speak with a single voice.

¹⁷ Although the situations in Uzbekistan and Syria are quite different (with the former being characterized by stability and the latter civil war) an interesting parallel can arguably be drawn between the two countries, for recent history indicates that Western disengagement in Syria spurred the further radicalization of societal elements. In the fall of 2013, the United States threatened military action against the Syrian government for its alleged use of chemical weapons against civilians in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. According to Warrick (2016), the failure of the Obama administration to respond with punitive measures dealt a "psychological blow" to moderate rebel groups fighting against the Syrian government. Consequently, the ranks of radical Islamic groups increased thereafter, despite that Washington (with Moscow's support) convinced the Syrian government to relinquish control over its chemical weapons. See Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (London: Transworld Publishers, Corgi Edition, 2016), 400-401. Although Uzbekistan is not beset by civil war, Western reengagement followed soon thereafter by disengagement during a time of heightened political uncertainty or in the aftermath of another state-sponsored violent episode on par with the 2005 Andijon crackdown might spark a similar backlash.



CONCLUSION

Reform is not likely to take hold in Uzbekistan, but it is not impossible either. That said, it will only happen (assuming it happens at all) in an incremental fashion and with some degree of support coming from Tashkent. Now, with the passing of Karimov, this brief stipulates that Western governments should work to reinvigorate relations with Uzbekistan, but in a manner which is fully consistent with their shared liberal democratic principles. The War in Afghanistan should no longer preoccupy Western foreign policy interests in Central Asia, since the United States can neither force Afghanistan's elites to govern in an effective manner nor convince Pakistan to overhaul its strategic interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan.¹⁸ Indeed, if the establishment of a stable, prosperous, and peaceful Afghanistan stands as a hopeless venture at this point, then Western countries should shift their foreign policies toward containing the potential spread of violent extremist groups across the wider region. Scholarly research indicates that the governmental repression of opposition groups can serve to broaden the cause of Islamic militancy in countries like Uzbekistan.¹⁹ As such, since the war in Afghanistan is virtually unwinnable, the West should focus instead on improving the governance standards of other bordering countries.

The West needs to collectively demonstrate to the peoples of Central Asia that it is united and steadfast in its aim to

¹⁸ For an overview of the challenges facing the United States in Afghanistan, see Charles J. Sullivan, "The Coming Fall of Kabul," *PONARS Eurasia* Policy Memo No. 386, George Washington University (September 2015), http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Peprm386_Sullivan_Sept2015.pdf (accessed October 20, 2016).

¹⁹ Eric McGlinchey, "The Making of Militants: The State and Islam in Central Asia," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 3 (2005): 554-566.

nurture the growth of democratic institutions across the region. Any engagement with the region's worst human rights abuser should thus entail all parties involved firmly committing themselves to a long-term strategy emphasizing civil society development, economic liberalization, enhanced governmental accountability, human rights, and vociferous intolerance towards all repressive actions carried out by the local authorities against Uzbekistani citizens. How the West responds to Tashkent's governing style in the future will send a message to Central Asians regarding what the West thinks of them in general. By adhering to a long-term strategy (grounded in shared liberal democratic principles) which does not relegate those who inhabit the region to pawns on a twenty-first century chessboard on account of prevailing regional security concerns, the West can begin charting a new foreign policy course in Central Asia.



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