



Fifteen years of U.S.-Tajik Relations: Look Toward the Future

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Remarks to the Tajikistan Center for Strategic Research Conference on the 15th Anniversary of U.S.-Tajik Relations

Dushanbe, Tajikistan

April 13, 2007

Well, thanks so much for having me. And let me particularly thank my friend, Suhrob Sharipov, with whom I spent a day in Khorog last year, for inviting me to help celebrate fifteen years of Tajik-American relations.

It's just a pleasure to be back in Tajikistan. In fact, it's my second trip here in just seven months. But it's a particular pleasure to be in Dushanbe at a moment when we can celebrate not one but three anniversaries: over fifteen years of Tajik independence; fifteen years of Tajik-American relations; and fifteen years of the American diplomatic presence in this capital.

We've come a long way in a short time. And I hope every Tajik—whether leader or citizen—shares our pride in our robust and growing partnership, and shares our enthusiasm for the future of U.S.-Tajik relations.

It's worth reflecting for just a moment on how far we've come together over fifteen years.

In 1991 and 1992, in a breathless period of just sixteen weeks, the United States recognized this country's independence, opened a temporary Embassy in a hotel here in Dushanbe, and the Secretary of State, James Baker, arrived in Central Asia on what he later described as "perhaps the most fascinating journey I took as Secretary of State."

The American Embassy consisted of a floor at the Avesto hotel with little office equipment, bad telephone lines and few of the trappings we associate with a modern Embassy. Our neighbors on different floors were the Russian and Iranian embassies.

In those early years, our countries did just \$10 million in bilateral trade. At that time, few Tajiks had lived, studied, or worked in the United States. And I'm sure that even fewer Americans had been to Tajikistan.

How far, then, have we come together in fifteen years? Well, even five years after independence, we had just six American Embassy officers assigned to Dushanbe and, because of security concerns, they spent most of their time outside the country in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Today we have grown to over fifty full-time American Embassy staff based in Dushanbe. U.S. assistance funding to Tajikistan will reach almost \$50 million this year. And that effort has been transformed from mostly humanitarian to development assistance. That paltry \$10 million in bilateral trade volume had grown more than 20-fold by 2005: up to more than \$260 million in imports and exports.

Through the years, many more Tajik students and scholars have studied and worked in the United States. Some, like Suhrob Sharipov, are here with us today. And quite a number of American students, scholars, and businesspeople have since been to Tajikistan, touching lives and building understanding.

That sort of human interchange really does change lives. It's the kind of interchange that takes place in programs such as our Future Leaders Exchange, or "FLEX," program, which brings as many as 50 Tajik high school students to the United States each year, and has brought 430 since 1993.

Just listen to what one young Tajik high school student, Ilhom, wrote upon learning that he had become a finalist for the FLEX program: "I did it! Thank you, Mum and Dad! Thank you, American Councils!—the sponsors—"Thank you, God!"

So, yes, we have come far together in just fifteen years.

Now, what I thought I would do today is to try to illustrate some of what's happened over the last fifteen years—what the intensive efforts of our governments, and of individual Americans and Tajiks, have meant for our two nations.

I'm going to do two things: First, I'll talk briefly about why we care. Why does the United States, a country 7,000 miles from Tajikistan, care deeply about what happens here? And why do we have a national interest in supporting the aspirations of so many Tajiks for stability, security, prosperity, and democracy? Second, I want to talk a bit about what we're actually doing—individually and together—to help Tajikistan and its people realize those aspirations.

Why do Americans care? Americans care, first, because 220 years ago we went through war and hardship as we struggled to build our own nation. Indeed, like Tajikistan's founding, the first years of the United States were spent at war—our war for independence—which led to some 25,000 deaths and an equal number of wounded or disabled.

Yes, yes: I know the circumstances were very different. And the historians tell us our countries' early wars have little in common. But I mention it because of the way in which war has shaped the American experience. For generations, our legacy of independence born from the experience of war, has led Americans to take a particular interest in helping emerging nations achieve their own goals of independence.

One way or another, across the generations, American foreign policy has sympathized with those who seek to establish their place in the world. That experience shaped our response to your independence in 1991. And it has shaped our policy toward Tajikistan ever since.

Second, Americans care because we see opportunities to help an independent Tajikistan to prosper. We know the daunting challenges you faced when you declared your independence in 1991. We know your country was plunged into a civil war that lasted five years, took more than 50,000 lives, displaced hundreds of thousands, and devastated your economy. We know those trying times are still in your memories. And we know the loved ones you lost are still in your hearts.

Americans honor and pay respect to their sacrifices. During and immediately after your civil war, we focused on delivering humanitarian assistance and helped to foster lasting peace and security in Tajikistan. But from that sacrifice of the 1990s has come an opportunity to build an era of stability and greater prosperity.

Third, Americans care because we think we can support your independence by helping you attain some additional strategic and economic options. We respect your relations with your neighbors and with other, longstanding partners. But since our focus is to support your sovereignty, quite logically more options in more directions

mean more opportunities and, thus, more independence.

We don't think countries should foreclose their options. And to prosper, Tajikistan needs more than one option—more than one market, one trading partner, one vital infrastructure link.

From the first days of our relations in December 1991, American policy has been clear: We put Central Asians themselves at the center of our approach to this part of the world. And today we reject the notion, once again so fashionable, that Central Asia is merely an arena for outside powers to compete for influence. Tajikistan is not the object of America's geopolitical struggles with anyone. Nearly everything we do here aims to support your goal of an independent nation whose citizens have the opportunity to realize their destiny.

Fourth, Americans care because, to be candid, Tajikistan faces profound transnational threats that are important to regional and international stability. Terrorism, drugs, crime, corruption: all have posed challenges to Tajikistan's stability, and all affect our own security just as they affect yours. Thus we have a strong national interest in working with you to address these threats. And we think Tajik interests overlap with our own. The very nature of the threats arrayed against us is changing every day.

Americans learned dramatically on September 11, 2001 that American power does not mean American invulnerability. Even a country with unprecedented global power cannot insulate itself from every threat, particularly in a world shaped by globalization.

Indeed, globalization has brought new vulnerabilities along with new opportunities. It has shrunk the globe, spurred growth, and spread wealth and capital, technology and skills. But it also has unleashed terrorism and disease, crime and drugs, climate-destroying pollutants, and trafficking in women and children. Inevitably, such problems demand cooperative responses.

Without partners, we cannot easily or efficiently tackle problems that transcend our borders. Al-Qaeda operates in some sixty countries. HIV/AIDS doesn't stop at Immigration and Customs to get its passport stamped. And so as you and your neighbors seek to defeat these transnational scourges, the United States seeks to be your partner because it is in our interest to do so.

Finally, we care because this country lies next door to Afghanistan. And it also lies astride the ancient trade routes of Asia: east to west, north to south. We seek to restore traditional Continental trade, or, more precisely, to foster trade between Central Asia and its neighbors, including to the south in a reopened and rebuilding Afghanistan. So that's why we care. And those are our national interests.

We are a distant nation. We have no imperial ambitions in this part of the world, no legacy of war, conflict, or colonialism in Central Asia. As Secretary Rice has put it, we seek peace and security. We seek economic development and prosperity. We seek democratic values and human rights that unite all free nations in trust and respect. And we seek a region of strong relations between neighbors.

But it's not enough just to "support" opportunity. We need to seize it. And the manner and means through which the United States and Tajikistan act together in pursuit of shared interests have deepened and matured over these past fifteen years.

Let me describe a few of our successes but also highlight some challenges, as we see them. We are working in several areas simultaneously: security; regional integration; trade; and democracy and human rights.

We're especially proud of our cooperation in the security area, building on Tajikistan's experience in the 1990s. Your country has been an indispensable partner in promoting security in Afghanistan. Your Government supports coalition forces there through the provision of over flight rights and a French contingent at Dushanbe airport. And it rightly sees peace and stability in Afghanistan as essential to its own security.

We could not agree more. And we are working closely with the Afghan government and other partners to bring lasting stability, democracy, and prosperity to that country.

Tajikistan has also been keen to expand cooperation in the fight against narcotics, terrorism, and human trafficking. We have helped by funding programs that strengthen border controls, build defense and law enforcement capacity, improve communications, and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The Border Guards offer one example. Since Tajikistan assumed control over the Tajik-Afghan border from Russia in 2005, U.S. assistance has helped it to meet its sovereign responsibility. We have provided some \$40 million for the reconstruction, renovation, and equipping of 15 stations on the Afghan border, as well as training and equipment for the Tajik border forces.

This program is now in transition because last year's re-organization gave authority for the Guards to the State Committee on National Security. But we want to continue by working with the Committee to develop the Guard's capacity to control your frontiers.

And we are proud, too, of our strong support for Tajikistan's Drug Control Agency, whose seizure rate has made it a model for others in Central Asia. We applaud your efforts. And we intend to seek further opportunities for cross-border cooperation on security.

A second area in which we work involves economic development, including regional integration, trade, investment, and creating new business opportunities. Together, we are promoting trade links between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and, more broadly, between Central and South Asia. President Rahmon and his government strongly support this joint initiative. And I'm happy to say that much work is underway.

This summer, we will inaugurate a U.S.-funded \$36 million Afghan-Tajik bridge over the River Pyanj: open 24 hours a day, with customs and border facilities on both sides, and the capacity to handle 1,000 vehicles per day. The bridge is a tangible example, in asphalt and steel, of our joint efforts in this area. We are proud to have provided the funding. We are proud to have worked so closely with Tajikistan on it. And we are proud of the role played by other partners, including Japan and Norway, which also provided generous contributions.

The electricity sector is another area in which we see exciting prospects. And our governments are working closely, alongside the International Financial Institutions, to bring about new regional arrangements.

Last October, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan signed a memorandum of understanding for a model project to trade 1,000 megawatts of electricity, if feasibility studies demonstrate economic viability. The World and Asian Development Banks are financing these studies, which should allow electricity trade to South Asia to begin in 2010.

Of course, there are some obstacles to overcome. But the potential benefits are considerable. And Tajikistan's position as a leading hydro-energy producer leaves it well-placed to take advantage of those opportunities.

Here's another example: Last year we initiated a Regional Energy Markets Assistance Program (REMAP) to help with energy market reform and to stimulate private investment. Now, we know other governments have made specific financial commitments to fund specific hydro projects in Tajikistan. America hasn't. It's not how we work. We believe it's more important and, ultimately, better for your industry to attract experienced private sector partners.

Attracting American and other private investors is a key priority for President Rahmon. And like him, we are committed to promoting Tajikistan as a market for U.S.

companies in many sectors.

Last year, our Embassy convened a roundtable to explore the possibility of opening an American Chamber of Commerce here. Almost 30 companies took part, and we look forward to seeing a Chamber opened soon. It's precisely this sort of business interest that can best promote sustained growth in Tajikistan 's economy.

The United States doesn't have state enterprises that can be instructed to invest for geopolitical purposes. Nor can we tell our private investors where and how to invest. Instead, we believe attracting private investment is the key to Tajikistan 's future.

Cross-border capital flows have tripled in the past decade, and foreign capital stocks now outnumber global gross domestic product 2 to 1. But very few of these investment flows are reaching Central Asia . And so to attract investment, policies are needed that encourage transparency, predictability, non-discrimination, and a stable macro-economy.

We are funding programs to promote development and reform in agriculture, a sector which employs two-thirds of your workforce, and to create the small- and medium-sized enterprises that can serve as an engine of job creation. By creating jobs and promoting growth, we want to help Tajiks work here in Tajikistan , not abroad, providing stability and reducing the attraction of crime and extremism.

Now, as I said earlier, among the biggest challenges to Tajikistan 's capacity to attract foreign investment is corruption. Your President has acknowledged this, and he recently created a new anti-corruption agency, which we hope will have a mandate to tackle corruption at every level of government.

We seek to help create the social conditions that can contribute to growth—an educated workforce, a healthy populace: For instance, we are helping Tajikistan 's health system to meet the threats of tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. We are working jointly to improve your educational system through new teaching methodologies and the involvement of parents and local communities in school management. Most important, we offer Tajik students opportunities to study in the United States , a life-changing experience that can prepare them to work in the global economy.

But ultimately, citizens also need to play an active role in political life. I know the lingering memories of civil war make many Tajiks nervous about instituting democratic change. They fear "instability." They wonder whether the United States sees only one route to political development, only one kind of political institution. But it is our firm belief that sustained stability requires not just security but a stake for citizens in their own governance and development.

People always find ways to express themselves politically. But without the institutions to do so freely, they can turn to other, less productive means. And so as Secretary Rice has said, "our goal is not to lecture our friends on how to do things the American way." To the contrary, we seek to help our Central Asian partners achieve the stability they themselves seek. This means good governance. It means a more institutionalized rule of law.

The thing is, democracies flourish all over the world: in different cultures, and out of different historical traditions. Democracies take distinct forms. No two are precisely alike. But no-one can claim that political liberty is something for Americans alone. The record speaks for itself.

We know the path to democracy is long, and imperfect, and different for every country. But we hope to see reform, good governance, and strengthened rule of law in Tajikistan . We seek an environment open to organized, legal opposition. And we hope your government will ease controls over the media to help enhance debate.

To do this, we seek to work with the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda to assist with specific improvements to your last presidential election.

We believe it is important for the government to study the OSCE's assessment of that election and to address the specific points it identified for future contests. Indeed, we look forward to further reform of the electoral system in the run-up to parliamentary elections in 2010. Ultimately, we believe Tajikistan has nothing to fear from open debate.

Nor should it fear the work of international organizations whose role has been to provide assistance in a balanced way, including two of the most well-known and respected international non-governmental organizations—the National Democratic Institute and Freedom House—and other non-governmental groups, such as Internews, which promotes the development of independent media. We think Tajikistan will be all the stronger for their participation in society.

Friends, we have come a very long way together in just 15 years. And for our part, we have, and will continue, to stand with you as you build your country. We are proud to call Tajikistan a friend, a partner. And we look forward to continuing our joint efforts to sustain a proud, independent, strong, and prosperous Tajikistan .

So thank you for having me here, and let us continue the work of building our relations for another fifteen years and beyond.

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