



Interview With Navbahor Imamova of Voice of America

Evan Feigenbaum, Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs

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QUESTION: Kyrgyzstan just held elections, parliamentary elections, and we know that just one party is going to be in the parliament. And, the OSCE* described the election as unfair. They think it didn't meet any international standards. What is the U.S. position?

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: Well, I think we're still trying to digest what happened in the election. We're getting reports both from international observers but also from our embassy on the ground, so we're going to be digesting those reports overnight. We'll try to get a sense from people who actually were witness to the event, what happened. We've seen what the OSCE had to say and we've seen the statements from the OSCE that it didn't meet international standards.

Clearly we're looking to Kyrgyzstan to make improvements in the election process, both in the areas that OSCE has identified, but also in some of the areas that we've talked to them about previously. So, I think I'll have a more complete answer for you in a day or so when we hear from our embassy.

QUESTION: Kazakhstan. What would it mean – what were the reasons for the U.S. to support Kazakhstan's bid to chair the OSCE in 2010?

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: Well, I have to say, first of all, this is a historic opportunity for Kazakhstan. There's never been a Chairman of the OSCE quite like Kazakhstan. And in the first instance that means there's never been a chairman "east of Vienna," as some people like to say. So it's a chance, as Kazakhstan itself has said, to really meld, they say, East and West within the organization. But what I would say is really to help create a -- help create a sustainable institution for the long term.

Now, Kazakhstan made some very important commitments in Madrid this year. And I would encourage everybody to read Foreign Minister Tazhin's statement to the assembled delegates in Madrid. And he spoke very specifically about two things. The first were Kazakhstan's commitments to the OSCE itself, and particularly to the mandate and role of the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights², which has a particular role in election monitoring around the OSCE space.

And that role has been very controversial. Foreign Minister Tazhin made a very clear and very robust endorsement both of ODIHR, that office, but also of its existing mandate. We consider that endorsement to be extremely important and will look to Kazakhstan, as Chairman in Office of the OSCE, to provide that full-throated support for ODIHR and its mandate.

Foreign Minister Tazhin also had a lot to say about Kazakhstan's reform trajectory. And he said some things that were very specific. He talked about election laws and media laws, introducing new laws with the assistance and through consultation with ODIHR and international experts. And he talked about doing those things by the end of 2008.

So we're all looking, I think, to see what Kazakhstan does, how it moves along on its reform trajectory. We want to be a partner to Kazakhstan in that effort. We thought these were, as Under Secretary Burns said in Madrid, very, very important commitments from Kazakhstan. And so, now we look to Kazakhstan to implement those commitments, and we look forward to working with them to that end.

QUESTION: Well, meanwhile in Uzbekistan the message from the country is that Karimov's* win is almost guaranteed. Is the United States ready to accept the outcome?

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: I don't have much to say about the election. I mean I'll just be frank with you. To be very candid, we have very modest expectations for the election, so we'll just have to see whether the Uzbek Government runs this electoral procedure in a way that broadens opportunities for civil society. But my -- I think our expectations are quite modest.

QUESTION: Well, does the U.S. agree with the Liberal Democratic Party in Tashkent, who says that this would actually be Karimov's second seven year term? Because there is a lot of question about the legality of these elections.

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: My wife likes to joke that I'm not a lawyer so I shouldn't get into parsing laws. Since I'm not a lawyer, I don't even try to interpret American law, much less Uzbek law. So I think I'll leave it to the Uzbek lawyers to interpret Uzbek law.

I think the point is, as we've said many times, that we look to all governments around the world to broaden opportunities for civil society, for independent media and others, so we'll just have to see what kind of electoral procedure the Uzbek Government runs.

QUESTION: Human rights activists in Uzbekistan think that the United States chose not to pressure Tashkent to help them get registered, to help them get recognized, using the moment, you know, the election campaign. How would you respond to that criticism?

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: Well, I think we talk to the Uzbek Government a lot about the registration of non-governmental organizations, and that includes non-governmental organizations, both international groups and domestic groups, in all of the dimensions of NGO activity. So, yes, in the human rights area, but in other areas too. There used to be a lot more NGOs operating inside Uzbekistan than there are today. We think it would be very much to Uzbekistan's benefit to have more of a non-governmental sector operating.

QUESTION: In his recent speeches, Islam Karimov said that his government is very interested in reconnecting with the West, specifically with the United States and Europe. How do you see that?

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: Well, you know, we saw that speech, and I think we noted that speech. What's interesting is that the United States and Uzbekistan have a very complicated history together. It goes back 16 years. We were really one of the first countries to recognize Uzbekistan's independence, to open an embassy in Tashkent. We've spent millions and millions of dollars in cooperation with the people of Uzbekistan, and we have really the vision of a true partnership with Uzbekistan. The question is not the vision, it's can we realize that vision?

And I often say, and I said this when I went to Tashkent in March, that in some relationships we have to search around for a vision, but in this one we have one really handy. In 2002 our two countries signed a Framework Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Cooperation. And it's a very interesting Framework Agreement, because it's truly a vision of a multi-dimensional relationship. It talks about security, it talks about economics and trade. Yes, it talks about political development and democracy and human rights. It talks about regional cooperation and legal cooperation. So the vision is there.

The question is how can we, the United States and Uzbekistan, our governments, our peoples, our private sectors, our businesses, our NGOs, work to realize that vision. I think it's not a secret that the last couple of years have been very, very difficult in this relationship, but I think the potential is there; and we look to the government of Uzbekistan, frankly, to work with us and to adopt policies and make choices that make it possible to realize that vision that President Karimov himself endorsed in 2002.

QUESTION: Would the United States have any preconditions to engage the Uzbek Government after the elections? Would you have any conditions if you want to start discussions, or --

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: I'm not somebody who really likes to talk about preconditions and things like that. We have an embassy in Tashkent so we look to engage the government and people of Uzbekistan every day. It's something that we've done since 1991. It's something that we continue to do even today as we speak, and that we'll look to do after the first of the year as well. The question is going to be, what's possible? What is the Uzbek government willing to do, prepared to do? What are we willing to do? What are we prepared to do? So, I don't want to think about it that way. I want to try to realize the vision of the relationship that's out there.

QUESTION: So continue talking to the government and try to find a common ground?

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: Well, we always talk to the government. I mean, we have an Ambassador in Tashkent, Ambassador Norland. He's a new Ambassador, and he talks to his counterparts in the government every day. So, I think the issue isn't to talk or not to talk. It's what do we talk about and how do we talk about it but, more importantly, not just talking but doing. What can we do individually, jointly, and with other partners to make Central Asia a more prosperous, democratic, and secure region?

QUESTION: Could you give any examples of success in U.S. cooperation with the countries of Central Asia in a way to show the countries to Uzbekistan, that there are ways to work with --

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: We work with all of the countries in Central Asia, even Uzbekistan. And, as I said, we try to have multidimensional relationships with all of these countries. We don't have a one- or two- dimensional policy. And that means we can't have one- or two- dimensional relationships. And by that I mean we don't have, some people say we have a defense policy, we have a democracy policy, we have a trade policy. No. We have a foreign policy, and we want to do all of these things simultaneously. So as I said in Tashkent, and as I say in Bishkek and in Dushanbe -- wherever I go -- we want to move forward in our relationships with these countries in every basket simultaneously.

Now I personally don't expect that the speed of progress will necessarily be the same in terms of our cooperation in every basket. It wouldn't be realistic. But we do think it's important to be moving forward in every basket. So I think with each government and with each country the pace has varied a little bit from country to country.

And as I said, it's not a secret that we've had a lot of difficulties in the U.S.-Uzbek relationship over the last two years. But I can give you plenty of examples across the region, whether it's educational cooperation or high school programs -- for instance the Future Leaders Exchange Program -- our university programs, our Fulbright programs in that basket. We have examples of programs in the security area. We have an airbase in Kyrgyzstan that provides very important logistical support for the war in Afghanistan. We run training and equipment programs across the region. We helped to build the national drug control agencies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. We work with Kazakhstan in all kinds of ways. For instance, not all of that is government: we're the number one foreign investor in Kazakhstan today.*

And what's interesting, coming back to your question about Uzbekistan, is at a time when U.S. trade with each of the Central Asian countries individually is rising very, very rapidly, our trade with Uzbekistan is falling quite rapidly. And that's really a tragedy in many ways, because Uzbekistan has a lot of potential. It has good infrastructure. Why should that be the case?

So in all of these areas we look to the Government of Uzbekistan to adopt the kinds of policies and to make the kinds of choices that would enable us to realize the vision of that Strategic Framework Agreement, and that included in the area of democracy and human rights as well.

QUESTION: Alisher Saipov, a VOA reporter, was killed in Kyrgyzstan, an Uzbek reporter was killed in Kyrgyzstan almost two months ago and we still don't know who killed him, and why. There are many theories. The most prominent seems to be that Uzbek agents who had been following him for a long time killed him. Is his death a concern to the State Department?

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: well, his death was clearly a very -- He was a -- he was a journalist. He was a very famous individual. It was clearly a tragic event. And I'm not really in a position to speculate on all the theories. I don't like to do that. I think, my understanding is that the Kyrgyz Government is engaging in an investigation so we'll look to see the results of the Kyrgyz investigation.

QUESTION: What are the major goals for Central Asia in 2008?

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: I think I would cite a few. The first is to try to develop these multidimensional relationships, as I said. We want to find a way to push forward with each of the countries bilaterally, but across the spectrum of the baskets. We don't want one- or two- dimensional relationships. We want to move forward with each country individually in all of these baskets.

The second thing I'd highlight for you is really regional cooperation. And I talk about this a lot because this is a region where cooperation in many ways has been lacking, both among the countries of the region but also with the neighbors. For 200 years -- Well, once upon a time Central Asia really was a crossroads, and we see the potential for Central Asia to be a crossroads again. So it's a region that was oriented to the north and to the west for 200 years, but really is very close to a lot of economic dynamism in the Asian region to the east and to the south. So, we intend also to advance our agenda on regional cooperation among Central Asian countries, but also with the neighbors, and that includes on these north-south electricity corridors that we've talked about in previous conversations.

QUESTION: So, specifically with Afghanistan --

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: Well, I think it's Afghanistan, but I think --

QUESTION: -- going south?

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: Well, I think the vision is broader. I mean what I often say is that -- you know, some people often say, they caricature American policy and they say you're promoting connections to the south at the expense of connections to the north. No. We think that countries should have connections in every direction on the compass -- north, west, east and south.

You may know we reorganized the State Department a couple of years ago to help promote this vision.* So, I'm the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. And not everybody was so enthusiastic about this; let's just be candid. We heard a lot of voices from within the region, including even --

QUESTION: Saying that Afghanistan is not a peaceful place or it's not a country yet ready to work with or to benefit from? Those are --

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: That's one thing we've heard. But we've also heard people who I think make very curious -- they use very curious analytical frames of reference.

I'll give you an example. I was in Kazakhstan a couple of years ago. And somebody said, "Well, you've done this reorganization in the State Department. Who do you think we're more like: Russians, Ukrainians and Armenians or Bangladeshis, Nepalese, and Sri Lankans?" And I said you know, that's really the wrong way to frame the question. You shouldn't be asking: Are you more like them or more like them. You should be looking for economic opportunity in every direction on the compass.

So, there already are these very strong connections to the north. There are strong connections to the west. There are increasingly strong connections, particularly to the Chinese economy in the east and to the dynamic economies of the Pacific Rim. So we, the United States, what we want to promote are connections in every direction on the compass, but particularly to the south first, because it's the least developed direction; but second, because given our role in Afghanistan we think we have a unique role to play. But the vision doesn't stop in Afghanistan. It's to give these countries access to more markets, more infrastructure, more trading partners, and to deep water ports to the south as well. So I think in addition to the bilateral issues, I'd say that moving forward our regional integration agenda is important.

And I do think I'd like to see more robust trade relationships between the United States and the countries of the region. It shouldn't be that American trade with Uzbekistan is falling. And we'd like to see human rights and democratic development advance as well. And so we look forward to working with all of the governments of the region on a process of both political and economic reform.

QUESTION: Thank you. Thank you, I know my time is up, so (inaudible).

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FEIGENBAUM: Thanks very much.

*Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

*ODIHR

*President Islam Karimov

*The United States as a nation, and not the United States Government, is the number one foreign investor.

* In February 2006, the Bureau of South Asian Affairs absorbed the Office of Central Asian Affairs, and was renamed the Bureau for South and Central Asian Affairs. The Office for Central Asian Affairs had been part of the Bureau for European Affairs.

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