

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC, AND THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515

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Opening Statement

April 8, 2008

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing on Central Asia. This is a region that is very important for the United States, and its strategic value has increased exponentially ever since Russia began aggressively reasserting its influence worldwide. Central Asia is a vital bridge that links two civilizations and two hemispheres together. We must use the full potential of America's soft power and leadership to ensure that the Central Asian republics develop in a direction that favors openness, freedom, and democracy.

The success of America's fight in Afghanistan, and in the broader war against terrorists, is significantly linked to the successful development of the five countries we are discussing today. If the Governments of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirgizstan implement much needed political and democratic reforms, then they will be in a much better position to tackle the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, and narcotics trafficking within their own border. This in turn will greatly bolster American efforts in the region and here at home.

Unfortunately, the reality is that most of the Central Asian countries lack the important principles of freedom, democracy, and human rights that are needed to ensure their positive development. For example, Freedom House gave Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan its lowest possible ranking with regard to political rights and civil liberties, grouping them with the world's most repressive countries. In fact, the State Department lists Uzbekistan as a country of particular concern with regard to religious freedom and human trafficking. For this reason, I urge the Administration to offer a comprehensive engagement strategy for Central Asia that will help reinforce supporters of freedom within these countries.

Central Asia also plays a critically important role with regard to American energy security. With record energy prices hurting Americans in a time of economic uncertainty, we must do all we can to ensure that our energy supplies are secure and free from political influence. Even as we speak, Russia is committing its full weight to woo Central Asia into lucrative energy contracts that allows the Kremlin to use energy supplies to achieve political ends. The *New York Times* reported late last year that President Vladimir Putin successfully negotiated a deal to supply Russia with natural gas from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. At a time when energy demand from Europe is on the rise, such a bold move by Russia not only affects energy price but it actually reduces the availability of critical energy supplies. Thus, energy security is threatened.

Mr. Chairman, we must work together to ensure that America does not cede all its influence in Central Asia. When the Russian state commits the full amount of its resources, including personal visits by President Putin to the region, is it surprising that the U.S. looses out? In addition to Russia, there are reports that Iran is attempting to improve its relationship with Turkmenistan, especially given a shared background and language.

What I advocate is a two pronged approach to bolstering America's relationship in Central Asia. On one track, the U.S. must not compromise its principles in upholding the importance of freedom, human rights, and democracy. We must actively encourage regimes in Central Asia to make real reforms. On the second track, the U.S. desperately needs to improve its diplomatic outreach to the region. For example, the Administration can start upgrading its effort by appointing an ambassador to Turkmenistan. Another easy step is to dispatch high-level officials to the region to counter the charm offensive Russia is engaging in. We must also urge our European allies to develop a joint U.S.-European Union strategy for Central Asia that takes into account all of our shared interests.

I look forward to hearing from our distinguished witness today.