

Slippage in Uzbekistan (COMMENTARY)

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While President Bush talks about promoting democracy throughout the world, the United States July 29 lost a portion of its influence to lead and support nations toward that goal. Uzbekistan formally ordered the closing of Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base, which houses some 1,000 troops supporting U.S. efforts in Afghanistan.

Ironically, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan made similar requests for troop withdrawals earlier last month at the behest of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a group of states led by China and Russia.

Fortunately however, U.S. diplomats convinced Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to reverse their decisions, leaving State and Defense department officials to apparently concede the loss of Uzbekistan, seemingly without much of a fight. All this, while the United States pushes a democratic agenda throughout the world, most sincerely in Iraq and Afghanistan.

However, while trying to extend democracy, President Bush must realize what is happening in competing countries. China, Russia, Syria, Iran and others not only suppress democracy within their own borders but actively oppose U.S.-led pro-democracy efforts in other regions. America's lack of attention to their low-key, anti-democratic agenda allows them to cooperate toward undermining our efforts toward this goal.

That cabal of countries even publicly uses democratic words to describe their sub-rosa authoritarian actions. For example, while President Vladimir Putin talks about democracy in Russia, he tightens control over regional governments and their media, using almost KGB-like tactics to preserve central control.

China's Communist Party's leaders continue strictly repressing religious and peasant reform movements in the name of "social stability." Iran's extremist religious leaders are putting down their reformers, now with the help of their new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Finally, Syria has failed to have a legitimate election in more than 35 years due to the Alawite minority's domination of the other 90 percent of the people.

Despite America decrying measures that consistently deny the individual citizen's importance, Beijing, Moscow, Damascus and Tehran pointedly continue without abatement. They depend on rigid social control to preserve their nefarious regimes.

Furthermore, these countries participate in mutual economic treaties that strengthen each other's anti-democratic efforts. For instance, Russia has recently forgiven more than \$9.8 billion of Syrian debt, accumulated largely from arms sales. China and Iran have signed a \$100 billion energy deal guaranteeing close ties for at least the next 10 years.

These economic pacts have deeper implications than oil prices and trade deficits. Sociopolitical, economic and military factors are all connected to each other.

Not long after forgiving Syria's debt, Russia began selling Damascus SA-18 surface to air missiles. China is selling major conventional weapons systems to their new energy partners. All these countries seem to share their nuclear technology. Russia and China, and the rest of the SCO, have agreements to provide each other military support in event one is attacked by from the outside. These deals not only empower

their political elite to suppress democratic movements domestically but to impose their will on vulnerable neighbors.

Finally, this antidemocratic agenda extends influence to susceptible regions. The turmoil in Iraq is a prime example as insurgents receive weapons, money, intelligence and logistical support from neighboring Syria and Iran. Many of these weapons and explosives are bought from Russia with money from the mutual trade deals and handed over to insurgents.

Once armed with the necessary resources, insurgents fight to destabilize the fledgling Iraqi government, at a cost of American lives and resources.

The United States must realize this bloc of countries is working to subvert democracy where America is working so hard to promote it. The growing ties among these anti-American, anti-Western and anti-democratic states are leading us directly into a more robust "Cold War II."

The American people must be made to understand that the loss of K2 is a harbinger of future struggles. The public must be willing to support U.S. confrontation of these oppressive coalitions. We must act now to impede further alignment of pseudo-democratic/authoritarian states: The stronger these alliances grow, the greater becomes their threat to America and democracy around the globe.

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