

Geopolitical Competition and Energy Security in Central Asia

SFRC Sub-Committee Hearing

March 8, 2023

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, colleagues,

I just returned on Friday from Central Asia traveling with Secretary Blinken. This was his first visit to the region as Secretary. I am pleased to report that each of the countries is eager for more U.S. engagement. We saw real and substantial opportunity there.

I propose saying a few words about Central Asia and Ukraine. Then I'll talk about the economies of the region and how Russia's war in Ukraine is affecting the lives of everyday people. Finally, I want to say a few words about human rights.

Central Asia and Ukraine

The governments of Central Asia have been under intense pressure to support Putin's invasion of Ukraine. They have been pressured to send troops from Central Asia to fight. They refused. They have been pressured to recognize Russia's purported annexation of parts of Ukraine. They refused. They have been pressured to publicly endorse Putin's claims that Ukraine is merely a part of Russia. They have not only refused, but several have loudly and clearly said they support Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity.

It is true that Central Asian countries have abstained on UN resolutions condemning Russia's invasion, but even that is a courageous act as they have been under enormous pressure to vote against these resolutions. People in Central Asia have historically had strong ties to both Russia and Ukraine. Many studied in Ukraine, did business there, or have friends and family living in Ukraine.

People in Central Asia have responded with compassion to the suffering of Ukrainians. They sent tons of humanitarian supplies – blankets, clothing, and medicine. When Russia destroyed some of Ukraine’s electrical grid, Central Asians sent generators. Private citizens in Kazakhstan raised money to send yurts to Ukraine, where regular people who suddenly found themselves without electricity and heating could come to get out of the cold, have a hot cup of tea, and charge their cellphones. They called them Yurts of Invincibility.

### The Economies of Central Asia

Secretary Blinken told his Central Asian counterparts that the United States sees the hardship in Central Asia caused by Putin’s war of aggression, and we want to help. We see rising food and fuel prices. We see rising unemployment. We see difficulties in importing and exporting goods to and from the region. And we see large numbers of migrants coming from Russia to escape conscription.

Last year, the Congress generously provided \$41.5 million in new assistance to help Central Asia meet these challenges. Of this amount, \$16.5 million is being used to promote food security. The remaining \$25 million is being used to retrain workers to reduce unemployment, to pilot new trade routes that do not go through Russia, and to help private sector businesses to succeed and to grow.

Last week, Secretary Blinken announced that we would be working with Congress on securing an additional \$20 million to support these programs. He also announced \$5 million to support regional connectivity through economic and energy programs. We want to show that we are a reliable partner that acknowledges the hardships caused by Russia’s war of aggression.

### Human Rights

Mr. Chairman, I have had the opportunity to work and live in Central Asia on and off for the past 20 years. Most of us expect to see progress on human rights proceeding at a snail's pace. I am happy to report that we have seen some important strides over the past year.

In Uzbekistan, the International Labor Organization has recognized the end to systemic state-sponsored forced labor and child labor in the cotton harvest. The Government of Uzbekistan achieved this through implementing a series of presidential decrees that prohibited the use of forced and child labor in cotton production and abolished cotton quotas at the national and local levels.

In Kazakhstan, the courts convicted three policemen in January for torturing detainees after video footage emerged showing beatings and other physical abuse. In February, the courts convicted five more policemen charged with torturing detainees with a hot iron. These are small numbers, and steps remain to hold security services fully accountable, but these convictions reflect a presidential priority to end torture and physical abuse in places of detention – a goal we fully support.

There is a lot more that needs to be done in Central Asia to prevent human rights abuses, promote freedom of religion and labor rights, and secure a free press. Seeing these steps over the past year makes me optimistic that with the help of their partners, Central Asian countries can make important progress in the short-term in improving respect for human rights.

### Closing

Let me end where I began. The countries of Central Asia are under tremendous pressure from Moscow. They do not want to be caught up in Putin's war. They want to live in freedom and decide their future for themselves.

We can support these aims with well-crafted foreign assistance programs, with support for human rights, and most importantly, with our sincere engagement.