

Revolution, Repression and Re-election in 2005: China's Response to Political Developments in Central Asia

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Three significant events took place in Central Asia in 2005. The March Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan led to the overthrow of former President Askar Akayev; the May Andijan upheaval in Uzbekistan led President Islam Karimov to break ties with the West; an election in Kazakhstan reinstated incumbent President Nursultan Nazarbayev in December. The main beneficiary of these political developments is China which managed to further consolidate its influence in the region as a result.

The Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan

The sudden and unforeseen change of power in Kyrgyzstan on March 24, 2005 resulted in the ousting of President Askar Akayev, who had good relations with China. For a period of more than a decade, Akayev's regime fruitfully cooperated with Beijing on issues of border delimitation, military training, the fight against the three evils of terrorism, separatism, extremism, and trade. However, the so-called 'Tulip revolution' brought uncertainty as to how the new post-Akayev government, made up of opposition party members, would regard China. Reacting swiftly, China closed its borders with Kyrgyzstan right after March 24 and evacuated many Chinese businessmen on special charter flights as there were reports of looting incidents that threatened their security and business interests.

With Kyrgyzstan bordering China's problematic Xinjiang region, concern over a quick stabilization of the situation in Kyrgyzstan was clearly observable in the official statements of the Chinese Ministry of

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Foreign Affairs: “China hopes the situation in Kyrgyzstan turns stable [at] an early date (...) As a friendly neighbor of Kyrgyzstan, China is paying close attention to the development of the situation and wishes social order there restored to a normal state as soon as possible.”¹

Analysts and government officials in China feared the western orientation of the new Kyrgyz regime, not least because of recent similar popular revolts in Georgia and Ukraine that were believed to have been influenced by western interests. China was especially concerned because the Kyrgyz revolt was instigated by people widely and publicly critical of Akayev’s lands transfer agreement with Beijing in 2001.

These concerns were finally allayed as the new Kyrgyz leadership pledged adherence to and continuation of the former regime’s foreign policy. China was the second country after Uzbekistan to which an official delegation under the Acting Foreign Minister Roza Otunbaeva made its visit. In her meetings with top Chinese officials, Otunbaeva, whom many saw as pro-western, assured Beijing of the new Kyrgyz leadership’s commitment to the preservation of good and friendly relations with China. She also stated that the new leadership regards China as an important friend and economic partner.²

In return, the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan sponsored some charity activities in Bishkek, supposedly to improve China’s image in the post-revolutionary Kyrgyz Republic. As an expression of support to the new Government, China also provided Kyrgyzstan with fireworks on the inauguration day of the Kyrgyz President and had it announced through local Kyrgyz media.

Overall, the change of power in Kyrgyzstan on March 24 did not result in the deterioration of Sino-Kyrgyz relations as China had initially feared. Beijing continued to receive Kyrgyz hydro-electric power for western China. It also received a continued Kyrgyz commitment to fight the three evils of terrorism, extremism, and separatism with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The Andijan Uprising in Uzbekistan

Unlike the Tulip Revolution, China did not maintain a wait-and-see attitude towards the Andijan incident. Indeed, Beijing’s quick response in this case was no less than that of Moscow, which is traditionally regarded as the most involved (or dominant) foreign power in the region.³ Only a

¹ Matthew Oresman, “Assessing China’s reaction to Kyrgyzstan’s ‘Tulip Revolution,’” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 6 2005.

² *Ibid.*

³ For example, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has stated that the operation in Andijan was planned and prepared with local dissidents and Islamists from the Ferghana Valley region and Afghanistan “from the Taliban camp and external extremist forces of the Taliban-type”, see Martin Walker, “Analysis: Uzbek leader escapes

week later, Chinese President Hu Jintao invited Karimov to visit China as a sign of solidarity towards the Uzbek leader following the repression of the Andijan uprising.⁴ In his first foreign trip after the violence in Andijan, Karimov reportedly received not just praise, but also expressions of delight for his handling of the uprising.⁵ China gave him a 21-gun salute upon his arrival in Beijing, an expression of the highest respect for any foreign guest. China also refused to support an international investigation into the Andijan events.

China's lack of criticism of the repressive methods of Karimov goes beyond an adherence to the principle of non-interference in others' internal affairs. Uzbekistan is an important and influential country in Central Asia with significant gas and oil resources. Furthermore, before spring 2005, it was the most pro-American among all four Central Asian Republics, having been the first to allow an American airbase on its soil after September 11. Thus, China seized the moment to curry favor with Uzbekistan while the latter was heavily criticized by western countries for its handling of the Andijan upheaval. By giving explicit political support and concluding economic agreements during Karimov's visit to Beijing, China demonstrated its friendly intentions. Indeed, China's courtship of Uzbekistan, a country of utmost strategic importance, was very successful. China managed to improve its relations with a regime that had previously shown reluctance towards developing deeper Sino-Uzbek relations.⁶

The ousting of Akayev made the remaining members of the 'Post-Soviet Presidential Club', wary of the United States' influence in their countries. This wariness was further compounded by the subsequent heavy western criticism levied against Karimov's repressive methods during the Andijan upheaval. This distrust of the West, in particular the U.S. found its most explicit expression in the joint declaration issued at the July 5, 2005 Astana summit of the SCO which called for the removal of U.S. military bases from Uzbekistan by January 2006. This development marked another victory for Chinese (and Russian) interest

isolation," *United Press International*, May 27 2005, <<http://uyghuramerican.org/phorum/read.php?3,3888,3927,quote=1>> (February 15 2006).

⁴ On June 29, 2005, Karimov made an official visit to Moscow where Russian officials stated that the violence in Andijan was planned in advance by terrorist groups abroad. Claire Bigg, "Uzbekistan: Karimov, Putin say Andijon Violence was Planned Abroad," *Radio Free Asia/Radio Liberty*, June 29 2005, <www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/6/EAD4764D-584A-4E4B-992C-C087982C0930.html> (February 12 2006).

⁵ Stephen Blank, "Islam Karimov and the Heirs of Tiananmen," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 14 2005, <www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2369877> (December 5 2005).

⁶ M.S. Ashymbaeva, *Politika KNR na sovremennom etape: realii i perspektivi* [PRC's Politics Today: Realities and Perspectives] (Almaty: Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of RK, 2005), 127.

in Central Asia since it meant a decrease of U.S. influence in the region and arguably amounts to being the biggest achievement of their foreign policy efforts in the region for 2005.⁷

December 4 Kazakh Elections

In light of the year's other developments, the December 4 presidential elections in Kazakhstan represent the third major event possessing important implications for China's interests in the region. Although the event took place amidst political stability and the victory of Nazarbayev was widely expected, China, alarmed by the two earlier events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, nevertheless kept a wary eye on the possibilities of instability after the elections.

Kazakhstan has close strategic ties with China. This is reflected in China National Petroleum Corporation's (CNPC) purchase of Petro-Kazakhstan in 2005. In addition, the Atasu-Alashankou pipeline linking Kazakh oil fields to western China started operation in December 2005. The continuation of Nazarbayev's rule is therefore a guarantee of an energy supply to China for the next seven years.

In addition, Nazarbayev's continued rule is important for the SCO as Kazakhstan has been a consistent pillar of support for the organization. This is in contrast to Uzbekistan, which was the last of the four Central Asian countries to join the 'Shanghai Five', and remained as the main U.S. ally in the region up until the Andijan events. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan openly denied support to the SCO Astana Declaration of 2005. When it comes to Kazakhstan, it has however remained loyal to the 'Shanghai spirit' throughout the whole process of its establishment and the life of the organization.

Astana under Nazarbayev also contributes greatly to the fight of SCO against the three evils of terrorism, extremism and separatism; Kazakh security services keep a close eye on Uighur diasporas in the country. Kazakhstan has also extradited Uighurs accused of terrorism to China, despite fierce opposition from human rights NGOs.

The results of the December 4 presidential elections are even more crucial to the SCO in terms of the role Kazakhstan can play in the establishment of the Free Trade Zone announced at the Tashkent summit of 2004. Kazakhstan is the third largest SCO nation and borders all SCO members except Tajikistan. The strategic location of the country puts Kazakhstan in an important position in promoting a free flow of goods. In addition, increases in the standard of living in the second most populated Central Asian country makes it a lucrative consumer market.

⁷ However, it has to be noted that while Russia's efforts are resulting in a re-gaining of lost influence, China's overtures in Central Asia are leading to new strategic advancements. In this sense, Beijing can be seen as a bigger winner than Moscow.

In sum, Nazarbayev's re-election means support for the SCO's agenda for at least the next seven years. SCO Secretary-General Zhang Deguang, who personally headed the SCO International Observer mission to Kazakhstan during the elections, outlined in his Astana press conference that "Presidential Elections in Kazakhstan have a great meaning to the stability of the region and the cooperation within the framework of SCO, therefore they are at the center of organization's attention."⁸

Indeed, with its rich energy resources, a prospering economy and rising regional influence, Kazakhstan is regarded as China's most favored ally in Central Asia. Therefore, it would be a severe setback for China and the SCO if Nazarbayev loses power as a result of revolution or instability following the elections. In this regard, the undisputed re-election of Nursultan Nazarbayev to the Kazakh Presidency marked another victory for China and its Central Asian strategy.

The ever-growing ties between the two countries were reflected during the swearing-in ceremony in January 2006 where a Joint Communiqué was signed by Deputy Chairman of the PRC and the re-elected Kazakh leader. A principal aspect of the communiqué involved the affirmation of their bilateral cooperation and the continuation of an active promotion of the interests of the SCO. The Joint Communiqué attached significant importance to the upcoming summit in Beijing in June 2006, where new strategic goals will be defined.⁹

Conclusions

The Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, the Andijan events in Uzbekistan and Nazarbayev's re-election in Kazakhstan have pushed many experts and strategists to re-evaluate the positioning of Russia, the U.S. and China in the region. The developments in Central Asia suggest that China has managed to strengthen its influence in Central Asia. Specifically, the Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan did not end in the deterioration of Sino-Kyrgyz relations as initially feared by Beijing. The consequences of the Andijan events have forced Uzbekistan to move closer towards China at the expense of U.S. interests, and finally, the December 4 Kazakh presidential elections reaffirmed Nazarbayev's

⁸ SCO Secretariat, Main Events of SCO Secretariat in 2005, Secretariat Chronicles, December 3 2005, <www.sectsc.org/html/00039.html> (February 15 2006).

⁹ Joint Communiqué of Kazakhstan and China, January 11 2006.

power which is of crucial importance for the Chinese and the SCO's long-term interests in Central Asia.

The Chinese exercise of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic tools in response to political developments in Central Asia in 2005 indicates the importance it places on its western front. Significantly, the Chinese diplomacy reflects a growing level of engagement in responding to changes and challenges in the region. Such behavior underlines China's growing confidence in its relations with Central Asia.