

## **Wooing Karimov “Hurts Democracy” in Central Asia**

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The West may have sound practical reasons for re-engaging with the Uzbek regime but activists say it's certainly not helping democracy.

Western attempts to forge a rapprochement with the authoritarian government in Uzbekistan are a blow to the democratic reform movement throughout Central Asia, say local and international analysts.

Both the United States and the European Union have recently stepped up efforts to re-engage with the strategically important Central Asian nation after relationships soured following a human rights dispute three years ago.

On January 24, the Commander of US Central Command, Admiral William Fallon, paid a visit to Uzbekistan designed, in the words of the US embassy in Tashkent, to “renew dialogue with an important regional player”.

While little is known about details of the visit, during which Fallon met President Islam Karimov and senior Uzbek security officials, it offered further evidence that both parties are keen to mend fences.

“We regard your visit to Uzbekistan as a remarkable event in the mutual relationship between the US and Uzbekistan”, Karimov was quoted as telling the American defence official.

Relations between the US and Uzbekistan, once strategic partners, went downhill after Washington condemned a harsh crackdown on protests in the eastern city of Andijan in May 2005 and demanded an independent probe into the events.

Shortly after the bloodshed in Andijan, which left hundreds dead, the Uzbek government expelled the US military from the Khanabad air base which had been used for flights into neighbouring Afghanistan. In retaliation, the US excluded Uzbekistan from its foreign military assistance programme.

Toshpolat Yoldoshev, a Tashkent-based political analyst and a former Soviet diplomat, says the rekindling of ties has been on the cards since a new US ambassador, Richard Norland, was sent to Tashkent.

“The main impetus [for the rapprochement] is coming from the West,” he told IWPR.

Yoldoshev said renewed cooperation that ignored the continuing repression and human rights violations in Uzbekistan would be a threat to democratic forces in the country.

“When it improves ties with such a blatant dictator, the US is letting it be known that it doesn't care who it deals with and that it always puts practical interests first,” he said.

Fallon's January 24 visit, which came less than a month after Karimov was re-elected president, is not the

only indication that the West is wooing Uzbekistan.

On January 17, a day after Karimov's inauguration, the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Pierre Morel, met the president and told him the 25-nation bloc "considers Uzbekistan a reliable partner and supports strengthening and expanding further cooperation".

Last year, the EU lifted a visa ban on top Uzbek officials, thus ending the sanctions it imposed following the Andijan violence.

Another Tashkent-based observer, who asked to be not named, said he feared the West was letting itself be pushed around.

"Uzbekistan well understands its strategic importance to Europe and the US, and is simply manipulating them, playing the role of blushing bride, and demanding an apology and gentle stroking," he said. "And in order to return to the region, the West seems ready both to seek forgiveness and to stroke Uzbekistan's back."

Analysts worry that a rapprochement with Uzbekistan, considered one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world, may be seen in other regional states as a signal that democratic principles can safely be sidelined.

"Throughout the region, the US appears anxious to re-establish itself as a close friend to Central Asian governments", said Acacia Shields, a New York-based expert on Central Asian human rights.

"When this is done without regard to the horrendous human rights records and authoritarian tendencies of some of these governments, such a policy can be extremely damaging."

Uzbekistan has much to gain from a thaw in relations with the West. With more than 60,000 service personnel, it possesses the largest armed forces in Central Asia, but its military equipment drastically needs updating.

Uzbekistan and the US also share a common interest in stabilising Afghanistan and in rooting out Islamic militants opposed to Karimov's secular regime.

Shields said Fallon should have used his leverage to demand that Uzbekistan comply with international human rights standards before offering any defence cooperation.

"Conditions should have been put on this visit, requiring that the Karimov government deliver real cooperation on human rights before receiving such an honour," she said.

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