

Testimony of Daniel Rosenblum
Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs
Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing on
“Examining the President’s FY 2018 Budget Proposal Europe and Eurasia”
July 25, 2017; 2:00pm

Mr. Chairman, ranking member, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify today. These budget hearings provide an important opportunity to set forth how the programs and policies supported by the American taxpayer are advancing our nation’s interests and values, both at home and abroad.

Since the five countries of Central Asia became independent twenty-five years ago, the United States has been there to support them, by means of diplomacy and assistance, to remain both independent and sovereign. The strong bipartisan support from Congress for this goal through those years has been essential for the success of U.S. government efforts to promote security, stability, prosperity, and improved governance in this region that remains of critical importance to the United States.

While there is still more work to be done, U.S. assistance is having a positive impact. To give just a few examples: our security assistance has strengthened the capacity of border guards and Customs officials throughout the region to stop the flow of terrorists, drugs, and weapons of mass destruction. With the help of U.S. programs, the Government of Uzbekistan is adopting rule of law reforms aimed at increasing the independence and professionalism of the judicial sector. In Tajikistan, a comprehensive reading skills program has measurably increased the reading levels in elementary schools, and community policing programs are

expanding to more parts of the country, due to their demonstrated effectiveness in improving relations between law enforcement and local citizens. In the Kyrgyz Republic the parliament rejected legislation inspired by Russia's so-called "NGO foreign agent" law, as a result of strong advocacy efforts by Kyrgyz civil society.

Our fiscal year 2018 request of **\$76.1 million for assistance to Central Asia** will focus on key U.S. priorities, including improving security and stability through economic resilience and greater regional connectivity, securing borders effectively and countering transnational crime, addressing conditions that lead to radicalization, violence, and potential terrorist recruitment, and promoting responsive and accountable governance.

With the 2015 launching of the C5+1 diplomatic platform, the United States established a framework for high-level engagement with the countries of Central Asia, providing a channel for us to come together on agreed priorities and to advance a regional agenda where one had previously been lacking. Using the funding specifically provided for this purpose by Congress in fiscal year 2016, projects being launched are helping the C5+1 advance trade and transport facilitation, energy diversification, environmental cooperation, and counterterrorism efforts. This engagement promotes greater cooperation and connectivity in a region that has one of the lowest levels of intra-regional trade in the world. It also improves the ability of the Central Asian states to resist economic and political pressures from the powerful countries that border the region.

In addition to advancing cooperation under the C5+1, we are also working to increase regional connectivity through work to lower non-tariff trade barriers by

providing technical advice on customs and standards; to address transboundary water issues; to assist the Central Asian countries to diversify markets for their goods and produce; and, to establish linkages through multi-country energy projects. The most significant of these -- CASA-1000, a regional energy project-- will allow Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to deliver excess hydropower in the summer months through Afghanistan to Pakistan.

The impact and influence of China on the infrastructure and economies of the region continues to grow, as it has now become the largest trading partner of most of the countries of Central Asia. While we do not collaborate directly with the Chinese on their projects in Central Asia, it may be possible to leverage their activity to complement the economic and trade goals of the United States. Meanwhile, the Administration will continue to underscore that projects undertaken by China in Central Asia must be transparent and sustainable, and not run counter to internationally accepted norms.

Shared borders with Afghanistan, recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters, and narcotics trafficking also mean that the security of the countries of Central Asia is another priority for the United States. Our assistance programs in FY 2018 will focus on increasing the capacity and professionalism of border troops, countering money laundering and illicit human and narcotics trafficking, in order to degrade funding sources for extremist groups and transnational criminal organizations, as well as preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, their delivery systems, and destabilizing accumulations of conventional arms. Programs will focus on building the capacity of law enforcement and civilian security forces to deter, detect, and respond to terrorism-related threats as well as to interdict terrorist transit. Our assistance also helps counter violent extremism by addressing drivers

of radicalization, including through community policing programs. Such programs are important to maintaining stability in the region, which is critical both for our efforts in Afghanistan and to prevent new havens for foreign terrorist fighters.

The largest bilateral assistance request in Central Asia is for **Tajikistan, at \$21 million**. Tajikistan has a long border with Afghanistan. At a time when unrest continues to roil in the northeastern part of Afghanistan, across the border from Tajikistan, it is more important than ever to stay engaged on issues of border security, to countering the flow of narcotics and weapons, and to work with local police and communities on ways to mitigate potential factors that lead to unrest, disenfranchisement, and radicalization. Tajikistan remains hard hit by a decline in remittances from Tajik migrant workers in Russia, and more than half of our request will go toward helping to improve the health and economic situation of this largely agrarian population. While this assistance directly helps vulnerable segments of the population, it also serves to diminish flows of labor migrants, some of whom have been vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups.

Uzbekistan is the only country in Central Asia for which the Administration is requesting an increase – bringing the ESDF request up to \$7 million compared to the FY 2016 AEECA level of \$5.4 million – in response to new openings and requests for support following the election of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in December 2016. The Uzbek government has asked for technical assistance for implementing rule of law reforms that will increase the independence, transparency, and professionalism of the judiciary, increase judicial oversight of investigative processes, and enhance the role of defense legal counsel.

The FY 2018 request will expand U.S. support for diversifying Uzbekistan's agricultural sector, as part of that country's effort to reduce its reliance on cotton. It's worth noting that this is already providing export opportunities for America's horticultural sector, including recent Uzbek purchases of walnut saplings. Additional U.S. support for economic reforms could result in opening up markets to more U.S. businesses, technologies, and equipment.

Russia remains extraordinarily influential in Central Asia, politically, economically and in terms of security relationships. This is not surprising or abnormal, given their geographic proximity and the many cultural and people-to-people linkages developed over the past 200 years. What does concern us is the "zero-sum" policy applied by the Russian government in the region, consistently implying that any actions directed at developing closer ties between the United States and the Central Asian states are really attempts to "weaken" Russia or undermine its position in the region. This is reflected in a constant stream of anti-American viewpoints and disinformation spread by Russian media throughout the region. Our assistance programs in Central Asia are intended to show Central Asians an America that is incongruous with the caricature they see in Russian media. Our programs engage with governments but also reach all levels of society, including private business and civil society, and help to show that the U.S. is interested in working directly with the people of Central Asia to help them build a stable, secure, and prosperous society.

The foreign assistance budget request for FY2018 will allow us to stay involved in our priority areas of economic resilience, security, and governance where we are making a difference, but also to capitalize on new openings that are arising.

Kazakhstan continues to be a good partner in the region, taking a greater role in

the world via a growing prosperity and non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. **Uzbekistan's** foreign policy under its new president is focused on improving relations with its immediate neighbors, which is helping to improve the environment for regional cooperation. The **Kyrgyz Republic** will hold presidential elections this fall, leading to another democratic transition of power and a new administration in that country. It is now more important than ever to stay engaged and provide encouragement to the countries of Central Asia. Prosperity and stability in that region will benefit not only the people of Central Asia, but also of the broader South Asia region and of the United States as well.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today on this important region, and I look forward to your questions.

