

**Ranking Member Gregory W. Meeks  
Opening remarks**

**Subcommittee on Europe and Eurasia hearing  
“U.S. Engagement in Central Asia”**

**July 24, 2012**

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Thank you Chairman Burton, for holding this timely hearing after our fascinating trip to the region over the July 4th recess.

I would like to start by thanking our generous hosts in the Central Asian republics. We were able to meet with the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and had very frank and productive exchanges about the topic at hand today – U.S. engagement in Central Asia.

U.S. relations with Central Asia are frequently perceived in the context of the stabilization of Afghanistan, but I believe that a broader regional policy agenda is merited and well advised. Central Asia plays a key role in establishing the desired outcome in Afghanistan, but U.S. policy towards the region should not just be a means to this goal, it should engage the five republics as responsible members of the international community, and seek to consolidate democratic gains, continue to open markets for mutual trade and investment, and strengthen human rights and the rule of law.

Any region that borders Russia, China, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan is bound to be at the center of many currents. I am particularly interested in hearing our witnesses' assessments of the five republics' ability to navigate between the competing interests and influence of Russia, China, Turkey, the United States and Europe.

During our trip, the topic of China's growing influence in Central Asia frequently came up, and as we have seen in other parts of the world, China's engagement strategy focuses on extractive industries and access to energy resources in particular, but very rarely on democratic advancement and human rights. I look forward to exploring China's increased role in Central Asia with our witnesses today.

In Afghanistan, security responsibility will transition to Afghan security forces in 2014, and this could have significant ramifications for Central Asia. I would be interested in hearing how this announcement has affected the Central Asian republics, how they are preparing – or should be – for this event, and whether other countries are looking to increase their presence as a result of this time line?

It is evident to me, after visiting the region, that the countries of Central Asia have come very far in a very short period of time. Our first stop in Astana, Kazakhstan, felt like a visit to a futuristic vision with dazzling architecture, complete with a modern interpretation of The White House. This impression is not what most people would expect, but I found it to be a fascinating symbol of the extraordinary efforts that these countries have undertaken to solidify their independence and build governance institutions following their sudden independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

That said, we also heard about authoritarian rule, ethnic tensions, and unevenly distributed revenues from energy riches. These should be important elements in our conversation with the Central Asian republics, as the consequences of repressed populations, poor human rights standards and failed governance structures are all too visible in neighboring Afghanistan.

I would like to publicly commend the Central Asian countries that participate in the Northern Distribution Network. As other supply routes remain unreliable or subject to extraordinary transit fees, it is a relief to know that we have real friends in the region that we can rely on.

I want to thank our witnesses again for participating today and I look forward to our discussion.