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Human rights or security: A false choice

By Maran Turner

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This month, Akzam Turgunov, an Uzbek human rights advocate, spent his 60th birthday in a prison work camp. Just before his birthday, the Obama administration moved to weaken U.S. sanctions against Uzbekistan that have been in place since 2004 due to its abhorrent human rights practices. Turgunov's imprisonment, recently declared a violation of international law by the United Nations, stands as one example of those practices.

Turgunov's record as a political and human rights activist is well established. He helped lead an opposition party, and he founded an organization devoted to defending the rights of political and religious prisoners and protesting torture.

Before his arrest, Turgunov had been working as a public defender and was investigating police corruption in the town of Manget. Town police officers arrested him and accused him of extorting a local landowner. But the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has concluded that the Uzbek government used the pretext of a civil dispute "to prosecute and punish [Turgunov] for his human rights and political activities." Moreover, it found substantial violations of Turgunov's right to a fair trial, and it called for his immediate release.

The working group also rebuked Uzbekistan for inhumane treatment of Turgunov during the first few months of his imprisonment, when police beat him and poured scalding water on him, causing burns and scars. Outrageously, Uzbek officials have claimed that Turgunov intentionally poured hot tea on himself.

Turgunov's case is not isolated. Uzbeks are systematically deprived of their fundamental rights by a corrupt autocracy headed by the strongman Islam Karimov, which replaced Soviet rule there more than two decades ago. U.S. officials in the State Department and elsewhere have noted as much.

These days, however, Washington and Tashkent are closer than ever. With the U.S.-Pakistani relationship on the skids, Uzbekistan has emerged as an important partner in the region. NATO supplies still have to get in and out of Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan has readily taken Pakistan's place in providing most of the critical routes. The Obama administration obtained and recently invoked a waiver from congressional human rights sanctions so it could provide aid to Uzbekistan and solve the logistical problem.

Now, however, it has a new problem: Its ally is a dictatorship known for abuses of its own people.

But the choice between human rights and security is a false one; indeed, the two are related. The United States can maintain defense ties with Tashkent while also pressing the Karimov regime to release individual prisoners of conscience and address other human rights violations. The administration must leverage its increased access and press the regime to improve its record. Recent history shows that when America consistently raises specific cases at a high level, regimes listen.

It is unrealistic to expect U.S. foreign policy to emphasize human rights over all other issues. But that does not mean our strategic partners in places like Uzbekistan should get a pass from scrutiny and condemnation of their rights records. It should be just the opposite: We should hold our strategic partners to a higher standard.