**John Torpey** 00:00

Hi, my name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute that brings scholarly expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. Today we explore recent developments in several successor states of the former Soviet Union, where there's been considerable unrest and violence as of late. We're fortunate to have with us today Dr. Andrew Kuchins, President of the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Dr. Kuchins has held faculty, research, and administrative positions at the University of California at Berkeley, Stanford, and the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. Most recently, from 2015 to 2019, he was a research professor at Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service where he taught and ran the Russia Futures program. Before that, he directed the Russia and Eurasia program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington during 2007 to 2015, and directed the Russia and Eurasia program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, including running the Carnegie Moscow Center for three years. He's written widely about Russian and Eurasian Affairs. He speaks to us today from Bishkek. Thank you so much for joining us today, Andrew Kuchins.

**Andrew Kuchins** 01:34

Thanks, John. I'm delighted to be with you.

**John Torpey** 01:38

Great to have you. So, let's launch right in. This is a region that's been undergoing some serious turmoil lately. The president of the only democracy in post-Soviet Central Asia has just stepped down after large protests against what is alleged to have been a rigged election. And the leader of the country sometimes called "the last dictatorship in Europe", namely Belarus, is also facing serious opposition to his rule. Meanwhile, the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh find themselves squaring off against their Azerbaijani neighbors in a way that recalls the war of 25 years ago and that threatens a wider war, potentially involving Russia, Turkey, Iran and others. So what's going on? And why is this all happening now?

**Andrew Kuchins** 02:28

That's a great question, John. Well, if you're looking at Kyrgyzstan and Belarus, you know, these were both started as rebellions against results of - in the Kyrgyz case - parliamentary elections, which took place two weeks ago on October 4, and in Belarus a presidential election, which reelected for a sixth term by a supposedly 80% of the votes going to Alexander Lukashenko. In Belarus, people came out in the streets beginning that night, and they have continued to do so, but especially on Sundays. 100,000 to 250,000 people will come out on the streets in Minsk every Sunday, protesting against Lukashenko's presidency for the last two months. You know, I think when I look at all three things, and why might these be happening at the same time? Well, first, definitely in Kyrgyzstan, the case I know best, if there had not been COVID and an extremely poor response to COVID on the government's part in the summer, I seriously doubt we would have seen what has happened in the last two weeks. The things were... I was actually out of the country for five months and eight days. I left on March 13, I was going to go on the 15th to visit my sister in Australia, stop in Moscow. She was pretty sick, and Australia closed down and then four days later, the day before I had booked a new flight to go back to Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstan closed down. So I spent three and a half months in Moscow with my wife at her mother's apartment and then almost two months in the United States. That's kind of my COVID story. As far as I know, I was not infected. But obviously I was doing a very close touch with what's going on in Bishkek. Managing a university; we went online of course in March like most universities in the world did, and I was playing my role as president three hours away from Moscow which was reasonably manageable. 10 hours away the United States was tougher. But the the month of July, and into early August, the COVID was running rampant in in Kyrgyzstan; I really don't think the official numbers begin to tell the story. At one point, just in our staff and faculty at AUCA, about 20% were sick. I'm sure there are far more that were infected that were asymptomatic. But that's kind of the story everywhere. You know, this is a poor country; the per capita GDP is less than $2,000 a year. When I talk to people about where to go if you get sick, the response was "don't get sick". Not a great health care system. And it was completely overwhelmed in July, and it really exposed the president Jeenbekov, and government institutions as just not up to the task. In some ways, not too dissimilar from what has happened in the United States. I would say any politician running for office in 2020, if you're the guy in power, or the woman in power, you're in trouble. But that was the background, I think, that made this the parliamentary elections a lot more heated and volatile. And this second thing, when the elections - so the campaign ran for about a about a month, and then Election Day on October 4 - there were 16 parties that were running, and only four parties were able to get more than 7% of the vote, which was the requirement to have representation in the parliament here in in Kyrgyzstan. Now, those four parties that made it in, together they got about 65% of the vote, three of the parties were very much kind of pro-power, I would say kind of pro the existing ruling system. And together they got about 58%. But there were a lot of other votes out there that could have been had by opposition parties. But I think it was a real problem that the opposition was so disunited. And as a result, there were major efforts made, in particular against three parties to not get in through a lot of misinformation, a lot of the kinds of things that we saw on social media in 2016 in the United States during our presidential election, the same game plan was being followed. And, in a way as we would as a old Sovietologists say, they overfilled the plan. And none of those real opposition parties made it into the parliament. And so even though those, there were those four parties at 65% of the vote all the other votes that were out there went to them. And effectively, there was one kind of opposition party and three, definitely pro-power parties and the three pro power parties got 88% of the vote. And having 88% of the seats in the parliament was not an acceptable outcome for the people; it was never going to be an acceptable outcome for the people. So there was, you know, definitely vote buying and all kinds of electoral violations. But I'm not sure to what extent they were actually greater than they've usually been in Kyrgyzstan or in a lot of other elections in the so called post post-Soviet space. But it was the fact that with the the representation system in the parliament that the three parties have power, as they call them, having almost 90% of the votes. That's what got people out in the streets. And it started on Monday at 1pm. I remember very well, I was about a block away having lunch with one of my colleagues and meeting someone that we were looking to invite to the board for AUCA, and I didn't hear much going on. But that night things got quite violent in downtown and the presidential residence, the government was ransacked. And the President, Jeenbekov, basically went into hiding. We didn't hear from him for four more days while this went on. On the next day, four guys who had been imprisoned, one a former president, two former Prime Ministers, and the fourth guy, Sadyr Japarov, who is now the acting president and also the Prime Minister. They were let out of jail, and I should get on with this story so we don't spend all our time on it. But it was remarkable that this guy was let out of jail on Tuesday, October 6. Just to backup, he'd been in jail for three years. And he'd been a fugitive from Kyrgyz law for four years before that. So this guy was not exactly in political circulation for seven years. He gets out of jail. Nine days later, he becomes Prime Minister and acting president. That doesn't happen in many places. A pretty unlikely outcome. The odds in Vegas were pretty heavily stacked against that. There are a couple of - as an aside - sort of numerological interesting things about this. This is the third revolution that's taking place in Kyrgyzstan. There was one in 2005, and one in 2010. And now one in 2020. The day that this one started, it was the fifth day of the 10th month in 2020, so 5/10/20. Kind of an interesting coincidence. Also all four of the Kyrgyz presidents that have been elected to power and who've been thrown out of power, and in not too dissimilar circumstances, they left power at the age of 61. I don't know if you know, but I'm 61, John, and I'm hoping I don't get thrown out of power as the president of AUCA. But that's what happened here. It was a very bizarre 12 days. Things were resolved on last Thursday, when the President Jeenbekov, announced that he was stepping down. And Mr. Japarov had already been nominated under rather somewhat murky conditions by the parliament. There was questions by the - you know, not the new parliament that was elected because those parliamentary results were anulled also on Tuesday, October 6 - but by the existing parliament. The question was whether there was a quorum whether there was more than 50% of the parliamentarians is present.

**John Torpey** 11:17

An unlikely outcome.

**Andrew Kuchins** 13:01

But there was another moment of truth. And I'll maybe stop at this at this point on Kyrgyzstan, on Friday, October 9. So about four o'clock in the afternoon that on the ninth, Jeenbekov had not appeared before the public for five days. And he appeared, and he said that he called martial law and a curfew, and the curfew would start at 8pm. Now, that was pretty bizarre, the president who'd not been visible at all for five days, comes on, and he says that. Now my take on that John was that, "wow, he must definitely feel full support from Moscow in doing that". Otherwise, I don't see that it's it's credible from his given his very weak position. And he has been a weak president. So that evening, supporters of the former President Atambayev, who'd been let out of jail, supporters of the former Prime Minister Babanov, who'd been let out of jail earlier in the week, and the supporters of Sadyr Japarov who had been let out of jail. They all came out on the main square, Alato square. And it was a pretty wild situation out there. I had to make a couple of phone calls and when I left a little before 7pm, things were it looked like people were fighting out there. They're shooting guns out there. It looked like a pretty crazy scene. When I came back from the phone calls, it was just after eight o'clock. The Square was completely quiet. Everybody had gone home. They followed the curfew. So kind of looked at that moment like okay, Jeenbekov is the president who's back. But that didn't exactly turn out that way.

**John Torpey** 15:08

Well, it certainly sounds like an unusual set of circumstances, to put it mildly. But I wanted to get back to a question that I think I posed initially, which has to do with the question of what the relationship might be between what's going on in Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Nagorno-Karabakh? I mean not exactly directly, but, you know, is there some reason that you could point to that explains why all this is happening at this time. I mean, we talk about the post-Soviet space, but that's obviously a large and diverse set of countries at this point. And indeed we're talking about Central Asia, we're talking about essentially Europe in the case of Belarus. So I wonder how you see the connections, insofar as there are any, between these different cases or situations?

**Andrew Kuchins** 16:08

Yeah, let me get to your first question, because it really is interesting. So Nagorno-Karabakh is a 32-year-old war. Most of the time, it's been a frozen conflict that started back in the Soviet days in '88 between Azeris and Armenians, and peace was achieved in 1994. And it was kind of referred to as a frozen conflict at that time. Nagorno-Karabakh, I know you had a show on this recently is an Armenian populated part of what was Azerbaijan as part of the the Azeri Republic in the Soviet context, and then in the post Soviet context, as well. So this has been a very, very, very deep-seated conflict. And even the 32 years, it goes back much longer than that, because of the Armenians having experienced the genocide in 1915, with the Turks. So that's a long standing situation. And Lukashenko, also sort of a long standing situation. I mean, Condi Rice called him, when she was Secretary of State more than 15 years ago, "the last dictator in Europe". Well, he's still the last dictator in Europe. He's been ruling for 24 years as the president of Belarus. So I think there are two things going on. Part of it is COVID. COVID has obviously hit each of these countries hard, both medically and economically. And so, certainly with Belarus, these look like kind of a standard color revolutions: people that are fed up with the the ruling authorities for corruption, for inept governance, etc., etc., which we've seen before, but I think we have this kind of common denominator, sort of foundation/structural disruptive event. I mean, COVID is, I think, the most disruptive event, certainly of our lives, and maybe World War Two. World War Two is more disruptive at this point, but we're not we're not through COVID yet. So there's a big economic hit on people as well. And so, if you're the guy in power, it's not a good time to be in power. And I think that's going to be the main reason why Donald Trump would lose in a few weeks in the United States, but we'll see. So that's part of it. It's a little harder to make the direct link with with Nagorno-Karabakh. I mean, the other - aside from COVID - I think the other factor that has changed is that Turkey has been much more aggressive and out front in siding with its regional ally, Azerbaijan. And the Russians are the traditional allies of Armenia. And they haven't been quite as out front as Turkey. But there's always the fear that this conflict blows up, then it could end up in a regional war involving Turkey, Russia, possibly Iran. Iran also borders Armenia. But the other common factor is that this is, you know, the former Russian Empire and former Soviet empire in Moscow. In the center is in Moscow, and Moscow is in a relatively weak position right now. You know, they have been hit very hard by COVID themselves; they're number four in infections. And their rate has been increasing dramatically in the past month or so like it has in Europe, and like it is right now in Kyrgyzstan. and a lot of other places around the world, whether you call it a second wave or not. And of course, they get a double whammy on the economic hit because they're so dependent upon the price of oil and export of hydrocarbons. So economically, Russia's in a weaker position to control things. And so I think the combination of those two factors working together, to me is sort of would be the kind of the common explanation for why these three things are happening simultaneously.

**John Torpey** 20:48

So the European Union has tried to impose sanctions on Belarus to try to get it to behave a little bit better. I wonder if you could talk about, you know, what kinds of potentials there are for bringing these conflicts and this unrest in these different countries under control? I mean, from outside, there are outside actors: the UN that can be involved, or the EU. How are these things going to be resolved?

**Andrew Kuchins** 21:21

Well, I think in the case of in the case of Belarus, it's not going to be the EU or the UN or another outside player. It'll be, to what extent is Vladimir Putin going to be ready to support Lukashenko? And then how far is Lukashenko going to be willing to go in basically shooting and killing his own citizens. There has been a lot of nasty violence at each of the demonstrations that take place over the last two months on Sundays. I'm not sure what has happened today. But that's basically it. And Putin, he's not in a - he's never liked Lukashenko. But as FDR once famously said, 'Yeah, he's a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch.' And that's the position Putin's in with Lukashenko, the same position he was in with Yanukovich in Ukraine, six, seven years ago. Now, of course, the European Union with Ukraine was a much more significant player there, because the the kind of the preamble to the eventually the Russian seizure of Crimea and then instigating the the war in the Donbass in 2014. It was the decision of Ukraine as to whether it was going to be a partnership relationship with the European Union. And so the Russian saw that they kind of saw that zero sum terms, and to some extent, the Europeans did too. And Ukraine, just given the nature of the geography and it's economy, it can't make a black and white choice really. Anyway, we saw what happened. But in this case, in Belarus, the EU I don't see as a significant player. If there is an actual revolution and the Lukashenko regime is toppled, then there'll be a big role for Europe to play in helping Belarus reform its economy, its polity, etc. But if the EU tries to play too much of a role right now, then that's really going to further rankle Putin, frankly. So putting sanctions on Lukashenko is not, I don't think it's his biggest worry right now. But he's got a very hard choice to make, and Vladimir Putin has a harder choice to make. And right now, Russia's relations with Europe are really in a poor state. You know, the most recent event, of course, was the the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny using Novichok, the same kind of poison that was used on the Skripals in London a few years ago. I can't imagine who in Russia thought it was a good idea to poison Alexei Navalny right now. It's kind of a head scratcher to me. But Navalny, first of all he lived and he's recovered, maybe not fully recovered yet, but he's been in Germany. And so Europe has really been upset about this case, as they should be. The poisoning of Navalny is... Russia does have an opposition figure who could mobilize support amongst people and of course, that's why Putin hates him. But the timing of this is questionable. Now the thing in Belarus, there's not such an obvious leader of the opposition as there is there. So I think Belarus, it's going to come down to and I think the rubber is going to hit the road on the 25th, next Sunday, John, because the the opposition politician, Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, who has been outside of Belarus, I think, since right after the election, but she's been very much in touch with the kind of opposition and the organization of the demonstrations. You know, she and they are calling for a general strike on the 25th and the largest march ever. So next Sunday could be D-day, so to speak, in Belarus.

**John Torpey** 25:55

Well, we'll certainly be keeping an eye on what happens next Sunday. Now, I wanted to ask you about a country that you so far have not mentioned. It's the eastern neighbor of the country you're in Kyrgyzstan, and that is China. And, you know, China is directly adjacent to Kyrgyzstan. But it's also extended its influence and operations well into Europe and elsewhere in the world, in Africa and Latin America. And I wonder how you see China, and whether it plays a role in any of these developments. How you see the relationship between China and these former Soviet states?

**Andrew Kuchins** 26:43

How much time do we have, John? It's a great question, which I've done a lot of work on, actually, particularly looking at the Belt and Road Initiative. But what's happened over the last 15 to 20 years in Central Asia, with all the Central Asian countries, is that China has become by far their most important economic partner from the standpoint of trade as well as investment. So this actually predates the beginning of what came to be known as the Belt and Road Initiative, which was first announced in actually Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2013. That time, the Silk Road Economic belt, too much information, perhaps. Kyrgyzstan owes China about $5 billion, which is an awful lot of money for Kyrgyzstan, which has a GDP of the country of somewhere, I don't know, $10-11 billion, although there's a lot of informal economy, a lot of informal economy. The but the Kyrgyz are very, very wary of China. What is that? So China has a lot of economic power and influence and of course, with economic power and influence, it brings political power and influence as well. And often it gives a great power like China or whoever, they have stakes that they think they have, they may need to defend. And so it can also involve not only political power, but also military power. Hasn't gone that far yet. Because there's sort of an informal agreement, division of labor between the Chinese and the Russians, and that the Russians, they are the managers of political stability and military security for Central Asia. Moscow was never looked upon the other republics, former republics of the Soviet Union as fully independent. In 1992, the term came about, they're referred to as the ближнее зарубежье, that is, the near abroad. So that's a way of not saying they're not they're not fully sovereign. Obviously, some are more sovereign than others. Kyrgyzstan is not necessarily one of them. But the Chinese role in this has been very, very quiet. My view on this is there is a kind of division of labor in how China sees it; I think if China is confident that Russia is able to manage things politically, and so there's no display. Both countries don't want to see what's happening right now in Kyrgyzstan. Let alone in other countries like Kazakhstan that has a lot of hydrocarbon wealth. And so they're higher economic stakes. So China kind of gets the feeling that Russia may not be up to the task, kind of looking forward, then I think ultimately, they're going to increasingly play a larger security role in the region. But that's not there. Right now, it's strictly economic. But some of this economic influence not exactly, well, it's pretty murky, to put it mildly. One of the most, I would say, controversial political economic figure is the former number two guy who was sacked in 2017, I think, Matraimov for corruption. He was the number two guy in the customs service. And the story goes, and there were a lot of facts or a lot of reporting about this that came out in November of last year leading to some demonstrations against corruption and against this particular person in Bishkek, but that he had made in the neighborhood of $700 million, with basically facilitating trade from China through Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan. So I do scratch my head and wonder what the Chinese are thinking about this and to what extent they are, they're playing a role. And what has been happening is something I don't think they want to see happen. Now, let me give you just a little more historical backdrop on this. The Kyrgyz, they've been dealing with the Chinese and Chinese expansion into Central Asia for about 2000 years, probably a bit more. And, in fact, in these 2000 years, it was in the eighth century, where the Chinese Empire had reached its furthest expansion into Central Asia. And there was a big battle. It's called the Battle of Talas. Talas not all that far away from Bishkek. It's Kyrgyz. And so, think about that: 2000 years of a lot of conflict. The Russians basically emerged there in the middle of the 19th century as the Russian Empire, and then later the Soviet Union. You know, they colonized Kyrgyzstan, basically, they modernized Kyrgyzstan. And in fact, without some of the nationalities policy for the republics including Kyrgyzstan, which had never been a nation state before - Kyrgyz actually means 40 tribes, and so it's always been kind of a confederation. This is a mountainous country, about 95% mountains. So it you know, being united is a new thing, and as is a state. But, if you look at recent surveys on what do Kyrgyz think about Russia, well, it's about 97%, positive. Putin about the same. I mean Putin's I think more popular here than he is in Russia. And the Chinese, those numbers are about 25-26% positive. And so a lot of this, I think, is this historical background. And then you get to the United States, and the United States has only been dealing with Kyrgyzstan, really since 1991. So we've been we've been a player for 29 years, the Russians for 170 and the Chinese for 2000. That's why the the Kyrgyz have much stronger cultural, linguistic, historical ties to Russia that are more favorable.

**John Torpey** 34:47

Okay, it sounds as though Kyrgyzstan has been historically part of China's near abroad in effect, but I sort of want to ask you to expand a little bit on your thoughts on China's expansionism, if that's the right word. I'm no expert on China, but it does seem to me that its historical expansionism has always been essentially land based, and that they didn't really go outside of the landmass of Eurasia. And yet, now they are doing that in a way that I think is historically unprecedented (a term I use or rejected, basically, in a piece that I wrote last week because I think tends to be the case that few things are really unprecedented in our lives). But in any case it does seem to me that the term is appropriate. And I wonder how you see that, is that something we should be worried about? I mean, there's been a dispute between the Europeans and the Americans over how to deal with this company, Huawei, and the development of 5G technology and whether or not we should be sharing information data with with this company. I wonder how you see the Chinese challenge? Is it a threat? Is it a challenge, or what exactly is it?

**Andrew Kuchins** 36:23

I think it's a challenge. It's going to be a long term challenge. And, for example, actually, if you look at how the Chinese presented the Belt and Road Initiative a few years ago, and also the way Xi Jinping has presented himself, you know, he is now also a leader for life. And he is in the pantheon of Chinese communist leaders along with Mao and Deng Xiaoping, that level of significance, at least as he's positioning himself. From the get go. I've always looked at him as a very, very ambitious person who wanted to have achieved a lot historically for China, and consolidating power is essential for that. So, 1949 was the founding of the People's Republic of China. And that is after about 100 years of humiliation by the Western powers going back to the Opium Wars, in the 1840s. And with that revolution, that is the start of the beginning or the restoration of a Chinese Empire, the Middle Kingdom. And I think that it's deep in the, if you will, Chinese sort of political or cultural DNA, that we are still barbarians. And their culture, going back 4000 or 5000 years is superior, and the natural way of things will be for China to be a much more dominant player in the world. So I think it is going to be a huge challenge for the United States, and the rest of the world, in how this is going to play out. And we're not in a new Cold War yet, but it's moving more in that direction. It's much harder to do that with China because the economic relationship is so deep and developed. But, you know, it's been pretty clear that the Trump administration policy has been to call China out for intellectual property rights violations and all kinds of things they've been doing to really not only to cheat the United States, but Europe and other countries. Then initially the Europeans, they don't like they don't like Trump's style, because it's just so noisy and forceful, but I think they kind of share the same concerns. And yeah, this Huawei dispute has become kind of a watershed for that. Initially, when they got the Silk Road economic belt going, I know the scholar - you know, I was trained as Sovietologist, and Sinology is my hobby. I did my dissertation on Sino-Soviet relations and relations between great powers have always fascinated me. Since the Soviet Union was our big bad enemy, that's why I eventually was a Soviet expert now Russian expert, if you will. The idea was from actually an Americanist, Wang Jisi, a pretty good friend who wrote this article called "China Marches West". And the article was that China should not be so active right in the United States' face in the South China Sea and Taiwan. And those are areas of definite conflict. But there are other areas where possibly there could be more cooperation. And that could be to the west. And there was definitely thoughts - I spent a lot of time John about 10 years ago working on Afghan policy. (I said, you know, Russia has gotten too hard. So let me pick something easier, let me do Afghanistan.) But that was the way some Chinese elites were seing it, that we could, because the Chinese were interested in the mineral wealth of Afghanistan. And the idea of the Silk Road economic belt in a nutshell is sort of to build a superhighway to the Middle East into access to Middle Eastern oil that can be transported over the continent, rather than over by water, which could be potentially impeded by the US Seventh Fleet. I think strategically that is where it started. I think it has expanded. The last thing I've written it was a chapter for a book on Chinese foreign policy. I'm not a Sinologist, but I was asked to write the chapter on Chinese policy toward Russia and Europe. And when I looked at, if you look at it from a military strategic standpoint, you can see what the Chinese are doing in buying up all of these ports, access to ports in the Indian Ocean, in the Middle East, and in Europe. And the US Navy has always, or at least, since World War Two, it's main task has been to ensure freedom of navigation, freedom of the seas. It looks like the Chinese counter to that, possibly is getting access and control to ports. Now, some of them are they have specifically have desires to for military purposes, but a lot of them are commercial ports. But I mean, this thought struck me that that's kind of interesting, you know "okay, okay, America, you can have, you can control the seas, but you can't come to port." So I thought it was an interesting possible strategy for what what they were doing in a big sense, kind of looking at Eurasia as the supercontinent, like the famous Halford Mackinder, the British geographer of the early 20th century, talked about it. It's a big strategy, but I think it's an overreach as well. No country is going to be able to be the sort of the master of Eurasia, if you will. And there's nothing like a country that is trying to do that for neighbors to develop antibodies to fight against it. So they're having a lot of bumps in the road, so to speak, and the Silk Road. And I think they will learn a lot. Each country has difficult choices to make, especially if you're a small country, and there are not very wealthy countries in Southeast Asia or in Central Asia. You know, I remember Nursultan Nazarbayev, when he was still president of Kazakhstan, he came to Washington, I think, three years ago in 2017, after Trump had been elected. And Trump was trying to tell them, "look, you gotta look what the Chinese are up to, they really want to control your economy, etc." And Nazarbayev said "well, you know, who else is going to pay for some of these things that we need to have done?" Well, the United States is not going to. We talked about in the Obama administration, and this was kind of something that I was advising from the outside, I called it a modern Silk Road strategy with some others thinking about a trade and transport connectivity strategy for Afghanistan at the hub. And they call it the New Silk Road initiative. Okay, if you call it an initiative rather than a strategy, that means you're not really serious about it. And everybody in the everybody in the region understood that the Americans were not that serious about it. And that we're short timers, and those people here, they see that so then they're left with "okay, look at that. We've got Russia, we've got China. Oh, yeah, we've got Iran nearby and Pakistan." It's a challenging neighborhood. Then across the way, you've got Turkey that has lots of interests over in this this neck of the woods. When I was advising Afghan policy, my position - it was not a popular one, but I thought it was strategically a good one - was that the United States should have an open-ended military commitment to Afghanistan. It doesn't mean we're going to have 100,000 troops there, but just maintaining some kind of presence there. And why not? You know, when Russian and Chinese interlocutors would talk to me about US Afghan policy, and also what I was advising them, definitely one Chinese guy I know, I'm sure he's an intelligence officer. But often intelligence officers are very smart, you know, they can be interesting, interlocutors. He said "is the administration actually taking what you're saying seriously?" No, no, I'm afraid not. He said "Oh, that's good." Because the Chinese would say, "there's no way that - why is the United States spending all of this blood and treasure in Afghanistan. It can't be just to fight terrorism and the Taliban?" No, they thought that we wanted a strategic presence in their rear. And I think that's not a bad idea,a actually, not just for not just for China, but given where Afghanistan is, you have look at Pakistan, Iran, Russia is not too far away, you know, the biggest foreign security policy challenges the United States faces. So I thought, well we've had troops in in Europe for now 75 years, we've had troops in Japan for 75 years, we have troops in South Korea for almost for about 70. Why not just make more of an open ended commitment? But that's something that the United States is not ready to buy into where we've made some big strategic mistakes. And people, they're not up for that. I understand it.

**John Torpey** 47:19

Right. I mean, it's a fascinating tour of the, you know, region, and indeed, the whole Eurasian landmass. So thank you for that. But you've also raised now the question of the United States. And, you know, it's hard not to think a little bit at least about our upcoming election, which is almost just a little more than two weeks away. And I guess I wonder, how you see the consequences of the first, perhaps only term of the Trump administration? You compared our success or otherwise, with the Coronavirus to that of Kyrgyzstan. Now that's not the kind of comparison that Americans typically want to hear.

**Andrew Kuchins** 48:05

Kygyzstan has done better.

**John Torpey** 48:08

I see (laughing). But I wonder, how you assess what has been a relative with withdrawal from the world scene and combined with antagonism towards our traditional allies, and cozying up to various nefarious characters, some of whom you've mentioned, that has been sort of inexplicable, certainly from a traditional for Russia, Republican foreign policy standpoint, None of this makes any sense. So I wonder what you would say about that, as we sort of come to closing out.

**Andrew Kuchins** 48:49

Well, foreign security policy: there's probably been more continuity from the Obama administration than Democrats would want to admit. You know, he is the most ignorant president we've ever had come to power since the 19th century in knowledge and history of the world. And how he despises multilateralism, and his use of diplomatic tools, is deeply disconcerting to me. I think he's done tremendous damage to a lot of our relationships in some way, and I don't want to get into the into Russia because I would just take us too long, but, you know, he does seem to have this fascination with dictators, thinking that he can actually make the art of the deal with Kim Jong Un in North Korea and it goes on down the line yet. So I think there's just been a lot of damage to US foreign and security policy and another four years - and also it's just so unpredictable. I've never been a big John Bolton fan. But I have to tell you after reading his book and his time in the White House working for the Trump administration, I liked him a lot better. And for what he was trying to do, at least, try to bring some order think of a strategy. There is no strategy, the United States has been operating basically, without much of a strategy for for 30 years in my view, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. We had a focal point testing Soviet power, then we got just dizzy with success in the so called unipolar moment. And we started making, in my view, colossal mistakes, the biggest one being the Iraq war. But sort of the larger thing was thinking that we could do whatever we wanted, no matter what anybody else's says, because, you know, we're the United States. It was this notion that we're the indispensable power, Madeleine Albright called it in 1999, which was at the time the dotcom economy was exploding. I mean, that was sort of the peak of the of the unipolar moment, if you will. We were dizzy on on fumes. And so no one thought about strategy, because strategy entails having to make trade offs. You can't do everything all at once. And we haven't understood that. And clearly, Donald Trump is not a strategic thinker at all. And he doesn't have the focus for it. But I haven't I haven't seen a frankly compelling strategy, from any of our administrations in this post-Cold War era, and we are looking at the longer longue duree of history. When there is a changing balance of power happening, it's very unpredictable. And then we have the impact of climate change. And now we're getting the evidence of this pandemic problem, well now we've actually really got it. It's gonna be hard for whoever is president of the United States to to manage things. But we need to have more discipline and more focus, more humility, and just really an understanding that we are not this indispensable country. And that's kind of what the world's been finding out for the last three or four years that, okay. And if you look at Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, no we're not a significant player there, we're not going to be that to two external powers, or Turkey or Russia. If you look at Belarus, what we're talking about today, we're not a significant - a big player in any of any of these places, including the place I am. I think the biggest achievement, the biggest most important thing that the United States has done in this country, and actually, in Central Asia, is contributing to the foundation and the sustainability of the University of which I'm president: investing in higher education. And where people learn to think critically, we are a liberal arts university, John, and we'll get back to our Amherst background, our roots. And what is the essence of liberal arts? I didn't really understand it, actually, when I was a student at Amherst, but now I understand it better. It's learning how to think critically about things and to question your assumptions all the time, and then to be able to express them, in written form, in oral form, in a cogent way. You know the Soviet Union, they weren't interested in training people to think critically. On the contrary, a lot of places aren't interested in training people to think critically. But that is the critical thing behind innovation, which is the key to economic development, and that's why a lot of kids, they want to come to the American University of Central Asia. We are the best university in the country. To me, that's a great achievement of United States foreign policy, that this university exists. I'm getting a little bit too much on my own hobbyhorse, but it is something I strongly believe in. So less wars, invest more in education, exchange programs, things like that. And we'll do better. The first thing is always do no harm.

**John Torpey** 55:16

Indeed.

**Andrew Kuchins** 55:18

I think I've never had a big such a big management job like this. But every day when things come my way the first thought has got to be "Andy, okay, do no harm." It's like playing golf, you hit the ball in a place you don't want to be. The first thing you don't want to do is compound the error.

**John Torpey** 55:41

Well, I think there's an old, I believe it's an Irish proverb that says we grow too soon old and too late smart. But it sounds like you've gotten smart, and that you're in a really important and valuable role there. And I'm going to really want to thank you for sharing your insights about the part of the world that you've been studying since we were in college, indeed. But that's it for today's episode of International Horizons. I want to thank Dr. Andrew Kuchins, president to the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, for sharing his insights. I also want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us, and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons.