
A Conversation with Ambassador Tatiana C. Gfoeller

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *Can you tell us a little bit about your time as the Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan?*

AMBASSADOR GFOELLER: Of course. To back up a little bit, my first posting in Central Asia was Turkmenistan, which is sometimes referred to as “the hermit kingdom” because it is very isolated. I could literally, to paraphrase Sarah Palin, see Iran from my bedroom window. Turkmenistan taught me an awful lot about Central Asia and the ethnic groups of Central Asia. While they’re not the same throughout Central Asia, the principle is the same: there are tribes that either cooperate or don’t.

When the position for Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan opened, I was tapped on the shoulder. I had a fantastic time there, even though it was a very challenging time: Kyrgyzstan went through a revolution, and the President fled the country. With the subsequent power vacuum, some very sad events happened due to the inter-ethnic massacre of the Uzbek minority at the hands of the Kyrgyz. There were lots of very gruesome deaths, and I insisted on seeing photographs, because I needed to directly report to the State Department without euphemisms such as “loss of life.”

Eventually, things calmed down with the help of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). What was interesting,

Ambassador Tatiana Gfoeller-Volkoff is former ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic, whose foreign postings have included Poland, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the Soviet Union, Belgium, the Russian Federation, and Turkmenistan. She served as Deputy Chief of Mission in Turkmenistan, Deputy Principal Officer in the Russian Federation, and Consul General in Saudi Arabia. Gfoeller is the author of a book on U.S. foreign policy interests in the Caspian Basin and a member of numerous foreign affairs organizations, including the Council on Foreign Relations. She also served as a political advisor to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Pentagon from 2011 to 2017. She has taught graduate courses in political science at Georgetown University and continues to mentor many students and young professionals interested in careers in foreign service.

especially given today's geopolitical world, was that I worked very closely with my Russian and Chinese counterparts. Together, we realized that we needed to intervene under an umbrella that was not just the three big brothers (the United States, the Russian Federation, and China), but under a more inclusive umbrella. So, together, we asked the OSCE to come in. The OSCE was able to quite effectively negotiate peace and bring in police training so that, in the future, police would not just stand by and observe the massacres, which was unfortunately what happened. The OSCE also brought in diplomacy training and election observers for the first free and fair parliamentary election in Kyrgyzstan. Later, we had a free and fair presidential election, which was absolutely great. So, out of this tragedy came an affirmation of how—when countries work together for the greater good—it can actually work sometimes. This was an affirmation of what diplomacy is.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *Help me understand: Why does the United States have such a close relationship with Kyrgyzstan of all places? It's a small country with a relatively small population. Why is this relationship so important from a security standpoint?*

AMBASSADOR GFOELLER: Well, there are a couple of reasons, one of which has endured, and one of which has endured less. Let's go with the one that endured less: our military relationship with Kyrgyzstan. 98 percent of our men and women in uniform who were coming in and out of Afghanistan (at the time, that is, 2008-2011, we were very involved in Afghanistan) flew through the Manas Air Base, the American airbase just north of Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek. For this reason, Kyrgyzstan was vital to our military effort in Afghanistan. We also had a base in Uzbekistan called K2, but the Uzbek government asked us to leave in 2005, leaving Manas as the lynchpin of the lift effort of men and women into Afghanistan. The second reason, which has endured, is that Kyrgyzstan, of all the Central Asian countries, is by far the most open, particularly to NGOs. It has a vibrant NGO community focused on many different efforts — women's rights, ecology, small business, freedom of the press, and others. I mean, you name it and there's usually a Kyrgyz NGO that is receptive to that particular issue. A big part of my job as Ambassador was to promote these NGOs and showcase the fact that you shouldn't write off Central Asia as just a bunch of dictatorships. In some cases, unfortunately, that is the case. We don't have to name names, but there is certainly potential in Central Asia for some really interesting discussion and dialogue.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *Can you characterize why Central Asia's response to Russia's war against Ukraine has been so surprising? What does it suggest about Russia's role in the region, and Russia's standing in the post-Soviet space more broadly?*

AMBASSADOR GFOELLER: I actually do not find the Central Asian countries' responses to the Ukraine crisis surprising. They are between a rock and a hard place geopolitically, specifically between the Russian and Chinese spheres of influence. We in the West deny that such spheres exist, while happily ensuring that the Monroe Doctrine prevails in Latin America (with some exceptions, of course, including Cuba and Venezuela). The countries of Central Asia are pragmatic. As far as I know through my work there, their heart is with Russia as demonstrated by the case of the Kyrgyz oligarch, who once lamented to me that his wunderkind daughter could no longer go to ballet school in St. Petersburg because of the breakup of the USSR. However, one might say as well that their head is with China because it now has a far more dynamic economy than Russia. That said, the Central Asians fear China far more than they do Russia. Ukraine is an existential issue for Russia. Kiev, not Astana, was Russia's first capital. The Kyrgyz actually invited the Russian Empire into Kyrgyzstan to settle a dispute between tribes. Ironically, this attitude makes the Central Asians feel more comfortable with the Russians, since they will (at worst) become vassal states of Moscow, but will not be incorporated territorially, as Ukraine could be. China, on the contrary, could incorporate the Central Asian states, as it has in the past. Please note the situations of the Uyghurs or Tibet for context. Once, at the height of the Afghan war, then Kazakhstani President Nazarbayev remarked to me that his country had spent centuries under both Russian and Chinese domination. The difference, he noted, was that the Russians had not tried to ethnically assimilate the Kazakhs, while the Chinese had. I believe this view is widespread, despite China's growing economic role in the region.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *How would you characterize the five Central Asian Republics' relationship with climate change? Have they been impacted disproportionately as compared to other developing countries? Are they major contributors to climate change?*

AMBASSADOR GFOELLER: I am no expert on climate change. That said, from my perspective, Central Asians (except for a few Western-funded NGO elites) care little about climate change. Central Asia is grappling

with more urgent issues, the gravest of which is poverty. True, much of the region is desert and climate change does seem to be intensifying desertification. But most Central Asians are not very concerned with this. Who cares about how the climate will be in a few decades when you live in an impoverished dictatorship now? Moreover, the impacts of climate change in the region are variable. While desertification is increasing in some areas, rainfall in the Tien Shan mountains is rapidly increasing. Similar changes are being observed in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the Caucasus.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *What predictions would you make about the economic potential of the region? Are we going to see any kind of major economic developments in either the near or short term?*

AMBASSADOR GFOELLER: Not to be snide, but we must look at the very question of what the Western-minded term “economic potential” means. It basically implies becoming more like a Western consumerist society. No, I do not think Central Asia is interested in heading that way. Kazakhstan has vast fuel resources that are being exploited by Western corporations and China. Other Central Asian countries do not have such exploitable resources. Hydropower is the region’s other great asset, but it is difficult to export. While serving as U.S. Ambassador for three years, I noted that the forcibly-imposed Soviet sedentarization (including schools and hospitals) of originally nomadic people receded following the breakup of the USSR. At the same time, a surprising number of people opted to become nomads again and so—in their minds at least—regain their freedom. I do not see Central Asia becoming a Western or Chinese-style economic power-house unless it is totally taken over by China. It could, however, become more prosperous and stable, while remaining poor by Western standards.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *From your understanding, why is Kyrgyzstan the only country in the region with a relatively functional democracy? What major cultural, political, or economic factors set Kyrgyzstan apart in a highly illiberal and authoritarian region?*

AMBASSADOR GFOELLER: Kyrgyzstan is definitely an anomaly in Central Asia. Since it was never dominated completely by one tribe (there are still Northern and Southern tribal confederations that vie for power), a space for dissent was established that was not available in other Central Asian countries, which were run by absolute rulers. In came the Western donors who funded many NGOs, which I helped do. Such activity would

not have been allowed in other Central Asian countries. The Kyrgyz had no alphabet until they invited the Russians into their country. At the time, the two main tribal confederations were fighting each other, and the Kyrgyz invited the Russians in to side with them and turn the tide of fighting. Then Russia became Communist and the Kyrgyz paid dearly for this initiative. Therefore, all their history is oral, much of it preserved in the “Manas” epic poem. The Kyrgyz only became predominantly Muslim about 200 years ago. Thanks to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin’s border demarcation decisions, which were designed to pit ethnic groups against each other so they would not rebel against Moscow, Kyrgyzstan contains many Uzbek residents. These people bore the brunt of the horrifying inter-ethnic massacres during my watch as American Ambassador. I made a point of visiting all the massacre sites and watching videos of what had happened. I also called the Kyrgyz government to account. I wrote detailed top-secret cables to the State Department detailing the extent of the massacres. I worked hard with the OSCE (though unsuccessfully) to prevent the ethnic Kyrgyz from razing the smoldering Uzbek family compound ruins (which is how their families like to live—around a communal family garden) and relocating them into soulless high-rise apartments, all as a way to crush their identities and way of life. I worked (successfully) with the Russian and Chinese ambassadors to bring the OSCE in to retrain the Kyrgyz police force, which had stood by ineptly as the massacres were proceeding, and to organize free and fair elections, both parliamentary and presidential. *f*