

# Analysis of the Role of American Non-Governmental Organizations in its Central Asia Diplomacy

Jing Yue Ma

Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, China

**\*Corresponding Author:** *Jing Yue Ma, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, China*

**Abstract:** *In the diplomatic practice of the United States, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role. In Central Asia, American NGOs not only actively participate in local social activities but also consolidate the United States' position in Central Asia by supporting, guiding, and integrating into the regional development process. After thirty years of fluctuations, the activities of American NGOs in Central Asia have taken on a distinct governmental color, with economic assistance being their main area of activity. Additionally, NGOs also serve as a vanguard for American values diplomacy, and they are currently actively cooperating with local NGOs in Central Asia. American NGOs in Central Asia, on one hand, promote the transformation of Central Asian society and further economic development; on the other hand, they also exert a certain destructive force locally, affecting the social stability, institutional security, and China-Central Asia relations of various countries. The impact of American NGOs' activities in Central Asia on the future development prospects of Central Asia cannot be ignored.*

**Keywords:** *United States, Non-Governmental Organizations, Central Asia.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a crucial supplement of foreign strategy and policy implementation of America, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a significant role in American diplomacy. Since the early 1990s, following the independence of Central Asian countries, numerous American NGOs have actively engaged in social governance within these states, thereby consolidating the American position in this region. Against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and changes in Afghanistan, the activities and adjustments of American NGOs in Central Asia have become an influential factor in the social reform of Central Asia in the future.

What exactly is the definition of a non-governmental organization (NGO)? How can this concept be accurately and comprehensively articulated? There is no clear and complete answer to this question in both theoretical and practical terms. In 1950, the United Nations Economic and Social Council's Resolution 288 (X) defined NGOs as "any international organization that is not established by intergovernmental agreements." This definition emphasizes the "non-governmental" aspect of NGOs.

In 1996, the United Nations Economic and Social Council expanded the concept of NGOs in Resolution 1996/31, incorporating international, national, and community organizations into the NGO category. The Asian Development Bank's definition of NGOs is based on recognizing two fundamental attributes: (I) NGOs are not based on governmental systems; and (II) NGOs are not profit-oriented.

Chinese scholar Wang Min defines non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as social groups and institutions that aim to serve the public good, characterized by voluntariness, a non-official status, and a non-profit nature. His definition emphasizes their value orientation towards public welfare and dedication. Xu Ying suggests that while NGOs generally share characteristics such as being non-official, non-profit, service-oriented, and voluntary, they can be categorized into different levels—local, national, or international. This categorization reflects the varying scopes and levels of activities undertaken by different types of NGOs. Yu Keping describes NGOs as social groups formed by individuals within society to pursue common interests or goals. In addition to the common features of voluntary membership and altruistic dedication, Yu emphasizes the relative independence of NGOs,

meaning they should not deviate from their core objectives due to external influences, such as social donations. Ma Quanzhong argues that the concept of "NGO" varies between countries and regions, being closely related to the activities and goals of the organization. This variation explains why definitions of NGOs are difficult to standardize globally. For instance, in developed Western countries, NGOs often refer to large international organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, Oxfam, and Amnesty International, which focus on areas like poverty relief, environmental protection, and human rights. In contrast, in relatively underdeveloped countries and regions, NGOs typically refer to organizations aimed at promoting local education and economic development, including charitable institutions, universities, and volunteer organizations.

The main purpose of this article is to analyze the activities of American non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Central Asia. In this context, American NGOs are defined as organizations founded in the United States that operate in Central Asia and possess characteristics such as relative independence, non-profit status, non-governmental nature, and international scope. The mentioned independence implies that these organizations have formal structures and frameworks, develop their own strategic plans based on their objectives, and conduct relevant activities. Non-profit status indicates that the organizations do not aim to make a profit. The non-governmental nature means that these organizations are not government departments and are not directly controlled by national governments. The international scope highlights that their activities have a cross-national dimension. The public welfare goals of these organizations include promoting democratic development, combating corruption, advocating for human rights, protecting women's and children's rights, and environmental conservation. Therefore, the subjects of this study include American charitable institutions, think tanks, foundations, and other such entities operating in Central Asia.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on American non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has received sustained attention from many famous international scholars. However, compared to other regions, studies on this topic are relatively few. Many scholars mainly focus on research periods related to American NGOs in Central Asia, particularly around the 2005 "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan and the years following the regime change in 2010. In recent years, as Central Asian societies have gradually stabilized, research on NGOs in this region has experienced a certain degree of discontinuity. This paper categorizes relevant literature into two groups based on differing attitudes toward the activities of American NGOs in Central Asia.

The first category of research takes a generally negative view of American NGOs activities in Central Asia, with frequent criticism. Li Lifan and Liu Jinqian adopted a critical perspective, providing an in-depth analysis of the anti-government actions of American NGOs in this region. Wen Feng's *The "Greater Central Asia" Plan and American International NGOs* (2007) approaches the issue from the standpoint of geopolitics and national interests, emphasizing the strategic importance of Central Asian countries on the Eurasian continent, and highlighting the key role American NGOs play in the broader American strategic layout in Central Asia. In addition, the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) published a book in 2010 titled *Overview of Foreign NGOs*, which briefly summarizes foreign NGOs in Central Asia, analyzing the reasons behind the development of American NGOs in the region, their main types, areas of activity, and their influence on Central Asia.

The second category of research takes a neutral stance, acknowledging both the negative impacts of the "color revolutions" and the positive role that NGOs play in areas such as democratization, environmental protection, infrastructure development, and international relations. In the context of rapid globalization and the development of the internet, more and more scholars have come to recognize the importance of international NGOs in promoting the modernization of societies and international relations. In their article *On the Activities and Roles of American NGOs in Central Asia*, Liu Sai and Shi Lan point out that NGOs have significant influence in American diplomatic practices. In Central Asia, American NGOs are actively involved in local social activities, while simultaneously supporting, guiding, and integrating into the regional development process, thereby consolidating American influence in the region. The American Agency for International Development (USAID) publishes an annual *NGO Sustainability Index*, which examines the sustainability, legal environment, financial situation, organizational initiatives, service quality, infrastructure, and public image of

NGOs in the five Central Asian countries. Additionally, other organizations such as Freedom House, the Soros Foundation, and the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTR) have also conducted research on NGOs in Central Asia and published related reports.

## **2.1. History of American Ngos in Central Asia**

### *2.1.1. Phase I: Early Development (1991–1999)*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rapidly emerged in Central Asia. NGOs began to infiltrate all aspects of social life across the region, gradually becoming an influential social force. During this period, the swift rise and development of NGOs in the five Central Asian countries were primarily influenced by the dramatic changes in the global political and economic landscape following the end of the Cold War.

In November 1994, the United States and Kazakhstan signed an agreement titled "Agreement on Assistance to Kazakhstan Through Non-Governmental Organizations." Following this, the American government began providing regular funding to NGOs to assist Kazakhstan in political, economic, cultural, educational, environmental, scientific, and healthcare areas, supporting Kazakhstan's government in democratic and market reforms. This agreement provided legal assurance for American NGOs to conduct various activities in Kazakhstan during the early years of its independence.

The breakthroughs achieved by the United States in Kazakhstan had a significant demonstrative effect in the Central Asian region. Kyrgyzstan became the second country to receive American foreign aid through NGOs. In May 1993, the United States and Kyrgyzstan signed the "Agreement on Cooperation for Promoting Aid Between the United States and Kyrgyzstan," which simplified the activities of the American Agency for International Development (USAID), American foundations, and humanitarian organizations in Kyrgyzstan. It also granted diplomatic status to civilian and military personnel involved in implementing aid programs in Kyrgyzstan.

In March 2002, the United States and Uzbekistan signed the "Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework between the United States and Uzbekistan." The agreement included American assistance to the Uzbek government in prioritizing democratic reforms, establishing a genuine multi-party system and independent media, strengthening NGO development, improving the judiciary, building a rule-of-law government system, and promoting humanitarian cooperation.

During this phase, major American NGOs, including the Peace Corps, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Open Society Foundations, and Freedom House, conducted a wide range of activities across Central Asia. These activities included assisting with democratic and market reforms, supporting educational development, improving the judicial system, funding independent media, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, providing microloans, promoting healthcare, advancing fiscal and banking reforms, pushing for land and customs reforms, and offering counter-terrorism, military, and nuclear security assistance. These organizations gradually became involved in the social governance of Central Asian countries, establishing extensive and deep connections with various government levels, their departments, and the general public. Some local NGOs in Central Asia also evolved into advocates for American NGO activities.

### *2.1.2. Phase II: The Prosperous Period (2000—2005)*

Since the early 2000s, interactions between American NGOs and Central Asian governments have deepened. The number of American NGOs in Central Asia continued to grow, and their areas of focus expanded beyond initial efforts in human rights and "democracy" promotion to include diverse fields such as economics, education, social issues, healthcare, and civil rights protection. Their operational models also became more specialized.

During this period, American NGOs evolved from focusing primarily on promoting "human rights," "democracy," and "freedom" to building what they termed "civil society," and addressing areas such as education, healthcare, economic development, and political reform. They developed into organizations with significant social influence and public appeal. Evidence shows that American NGOs in Central Asia were characterized by political and ideological features. Their role in the political democratization process of the region became increasingly prominent, while they also spread American democratic and freedom ideals and fostered pro-American sentiments. They mobilized the

public to express dissatisfaction with ruling authorities through "street politics," aiming to create a region aligned with Western values and governance systems, thus eliminating the lingering influences of Soviet history and achieving strategic objectives for the American in Central Asia

### *2.1.3. Phase III: Decline (2006–2013)*

The "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 marked a turning point, signifying a shift from prosperity to decline for American NGOs in Central Asia. Following this event, Central Asian governments imposed restrictions on the activities of civil society organizations. American initiatives supporting "freedom and democracy" and civil society building faced resistance in the region.

In Kazakhstan, for example, the government regulated the activities of American NGOs through citizen forum meetings to address concerns about "infiltration." By 2011, the number of American NGO branches in Kazakhstan was limited to 28. Overall, during this period, the development and operation of American NGOs in the region slowed considerably.

### *2.1.4. Phase IV: Recovery (2014–Present)*

In 2013, the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative received broad support from Central Asian countries. Amid increasing global competition in the region, some American NGOs took the opportunity to re-enter Central Asia. However, Central Asian governments have progressively institutionalized the management of NGOs, leading to a more regulated environment for American NGO operations in the region. In 2018, the American government provided \$15 million in funding to advance the development of the media sector in Central Asian countries. Against this backdrop, American NGOs in Uzbekistan achieved significant results, with the Uzbek government awarding certifications to American NGOs focused on education. For example, in August 2018, the American Educational and Language Research Cooperative (ACCELS), which had been inactive for 12 years, resumed operations in Uzbekistan.

## **2.2. Characteristics of American NGO Activities in Central Asia**

### *2.2.1. American NGOs' Activities in Central Asia Display Clear Governmental Influence*

Andrew S. Natsios, former Administrator of the American Agency for International Development (USAID), has candidly pointed out that many beneficiaries of NGO aid are often unaware that the driving force behind numerous humanitarian projects is, in fact, the American government. Within the American government, numerous agencies are involved in implementing foreign aid programs, including USAID, the State Department, the Department of Defense, the Department of Energy, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Trade and Development Agency, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Justice, the Department of Labor, the Department of Interior, the Department of Treasury, the Department of Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Pan American Foundation, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Peace Corps. The sheer number of these departments and their broad scope is unmatched by any other government worldwide.

In Central Asia, many NGOs are visibly influenced by the American government. These organizations receive funding from USAID and other American government departments, and are even directly controlled by them to serve American foreign policy objectives. Representative organizations include Central Asia Network Election Organizations, Youth Human Rights Groups, and International Voices. However, the most prominent NGO is the Soros Foundation, with the National Endowment for Democracy also playing a significant role. Notably, the "American Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025" indicates that American direct aid to the region has exceeded \$9 billion, aimed at promoting peace and security, democratic reforms, economic growth, and addressing related humanitarian needs. This also reflects the financial support provided by American economic aid to NGO activities.

### *2.2.2. American NGOs as Frontlines for Promoting American Values*

Due to their large number, widespread distribution, and grassroots nature, NGOs often become key players in spreading values. In Central Asia, American NGOs are numerous and active across various social sectors, leveraging their expertise, organizational flexibility, and diversity to engage closely with local populations. Over the decades, NGOs have deeply rooted themselves in society, developing

strong grassroots connections and communication capabilities. For instance, organizations like International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch focus on spreading Western viewpoints and ideologies, while the Soros Foundation targets youth in Central Asia, promoting Western values of "democracy" and "freedom" through education and training. The International Republican Institute and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems monitor and sometimes intervene in political processes and elections, influencing or disrupting Central Asian governance and social order.

### *2.2.3. Strengthen Communication and Integration with Local NGOs*

A key factor in the rapid development of local NGOs in Central Asia post-independence was the support and nurturing from American government agencies and NGOs. This support provided substantial funding and technical assistance, aiding in the spread of American ideologies, increasing political influence, seeking economic benefits, and affecting government decisions.

## **2.3. Impact and Prospects of American NGOs' Activities in Central Asia**

Over the past thirty years, as Central Asian countries have improved their governance systems and capabilities, they have increasingly recognized the security and national security risks posed by American NGOs operating in the region. Consequently, these countries have implemented various countermeasures. Compared to the early years of Central Asian independence, the activities of American NGOs have faced varying degrees of restrictions due to both internal and external factors. Despite these limitations, American NGOs continue to have a multifaceted impact on the development and security of the Central Asian region.

### *2.3.1. Accelerating Modernization in Central Asian Countries*

First, the activities of American NGOs have prompted Central Asian countries to develop and refine their legal frameworks for regulating NGOs. In 2015, Kyrgyzstan announced the termination of the 1993 American-Kyrgyz Cooperation and Assistance Agreement. As other Central Asian countries have increasingly focused on legally managing NGOs and their activities, preventing potential risks and harms has become a priority. Uzbekistan, for instance, has enacted over 200 laws since its independence to regulate NGO activities in social and political spheres, including the 1991 Law on Social Associations, the 1999 Law on Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations, the 2007 Law on Guarantees of NGO Activity, and the 2014 Law on Social Partnerships. Kazakhstan, in response, has invested in domestic NGOs to counteract the negative impacts of American NGOs on domestic politics and society. In 2020, Kazakhstan provided 1.8 billion ₸ in funding to local NGOs, with allocations for youth policies, social development, and education.

Second, the democratic awareness in Central Asia is gradually increasing. Although American NGOs have faced various constraints and engaged in opposition activities in the region, these events have spurred greater attention and reflection on political development among Central Asian societies. Currently, American NGOs indirectly promote democracy through media, seminars, and research reports, positively influencing shifts in democratic values among the Central Asian populace.

### *2.3.2. Promoting Economic Development in Central Asia*

Firstly, advancing the Free Market Economy: Historically, Central Asian countries have been constrained by the legacy of planned economies, hindering their development. Achieving domestic economic prosperity has become a shared goal for these nations. Reducing government intervention in economic activities has long been a common objective for Western countries and NGOs. In this context, American NGOs have actively engaged in economic reforms in Central Asia by hosting "citizens' forums" and holding roundtable discussions with local governments to provide constructive advice on economic reform. For example, Open Society Foundations (the Soros Foundation) has offered specific reform measures for Kyrgyzstan's domestic economy. Additionally, American economic aid aims to foster economic development in Central Asia, akin to the Marshall Plan, helping shift the region's economic model towards a free market economy favored by Western countries.

Additionally, Enhancing Interaction with International Markets: To encourage the expansion of Western multinational companies in Central Asia, American NGOs have actively engaged in dialogue with local businesses and, in some cases, have become extensions of multinational interests. This interaction with international markets has supported the development of Central Asian enterprises. For instance, ExxonMobil, a leading global oil and gas producer, has invested in Kazakhstan's Kashagan and Tengiz oil fields, bringing advanced extraction technologies to the region. Furthermore, with support from American NGOs, local Central Asian NGOs have played a role in economic

development, promoting land privatization and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, thereby positively impacting economic growth.

While NGOs have played a positive role in Central Asia's transformation, their impact is dual-faceted. Negative effects include fostering "color revolutions" and undermining national sovereignty, which are significant concerns.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

American non-governmental organizations (NGOs) serve as a crucial supplement to America's foreign strategy, aiming to support American interests globally. In Central Asia, these NGOs work to advance America's strategy in the region and expand American interests. However, it is also important to recognize that they play a necessary supplementary role in intergovernmental cooperation, contributing positively to local economic and social development and improving living conditions. At the same time, they have had some adverse effects on political stability and China-Central Asia relations. Therefore, monitoring the activities and evolving roles of American NGOs in Central Asia is of significant value for understanding the future development of the region in the context of new geopolitical dynamics.

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**AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**



**Jing Yue Ma**, Graduate student of Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, China.

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