

Kyrgyzstan: Eurasian Geopolitics 101

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The war in Afghanistan is officially spreading to the Central Asian republics. First stop, Kyrgyzstan

For the moment, the Pentagon is breathing a sigh of relief. Vital US fuel supply flights from its Manas base to Afghanistan resumed last week even as Kyrgyzstan slid into chaos. At least 171 and possibly as many as 500 have died in rioting in southern Kyrgyzstan this week, almost all ethnic Uzbeks, with thousands injured. More than 80,000 fled to neighbouring Uzbekistan, forcing it to close its borders as it cannot cope with more. On Monday, China began evacuating the majority of its 1000 nationals.

Armed Kyrgyz in Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second largest city, Jalalabad and some villages targeted Uzbek neighbourhoods, burning and killing indiscriminately. The Red Cross said 100 bodies were seen buried in just one cemetery. The chaos spread to the capital Bishkek but was brought under control when riot police fired tear gas and flash grenades.

Kyrgyzstan's acting President Roza Otunbayeva declared a state of emergency in the south, ordered the mobilisation of military reservists, and issued a shoot to kill order after Russia refused her request Saturday to send in troops to quell the rioters. Defending her moves, said Sergei Abashin, senior researcher at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow, "Local police would easily surrender their weapons to young Kyrgyz rioters as they have common relatives and friends in this clan, and they would never shoot at their own."

After consulting on Monday with other members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO, which also includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), Russia decided to send helicopters, trucks and fuel in addition to humanitarian aid, though it ruled out sending troops. "Russia is unlikely to intervene unless it felt that the situation was going to make the region unstable or ethnic Russians were in danger," analyst Asher Pirt told Deutsche Welle.

The unrest has been simmering since the interim government came to power on 7 April, when 81 protesters were killed by police and president Kurmanbek Bakiyev fled the capital to his home in the south. The new government quickly established control over the capital and the north of the country, but not in Bakiyev's south, part of the Ferghana Valley where Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Tajiks have been living side-by-side for centuries. Stalin divided the valley up between ethnic republics in the 1920s, creating the basis for the current problems. Ethnicity, however, is really a cover for the underlying settler/ nomad distinction, the Uzbeks being more business-oriented and, in the current pro-market environment, richer, the Kyrgyz more pastoral. The People's Friendship University was razed because it was funded

by a wealthy Uzbek businessman.

Washington's discrete silence except to condemn the violence suggests it realises it would only make matters worse by speaking up. As long as its base is allowed to function, it will stay in the background. The US base is highly unpopular with locals, and the resentment and instability it encourages prompted Otunbayeva initially to call for it to be closed for "security reasons", though under intense US pressure, the contract for the base was renewed for another year. Kyrgyz authorities blocked the operations of the fuel sub-contractor Mina Corp, which is linked to Maksim Bakiyev, son of the disgraced president, accused of embezzling millions in "rent" and other service charges on the US base, but operations resumed even as the country unravelled.

The US Congress Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs launched an investigation in April into the Gibraltar-listed Mina Corp. The Kyrgyz government launched an investigation into six companies owned by Maksim Bakiyev: Manas Fuel Services, Kyrgyz Aviation, Central Asia Fuel, Aviation Fuel Service, Aircraft Petrol Ltd, and Central Asia Trade Group. Both moves augur ill for the Bakiyevs and the current travails are no doubt a welcome distraction for them.

There is little at this point the Kyrgyz can do to stop the Americans from operating their base as virtually a sovereign entity and this is one political crisis where Obama can honestly say "not me". But, alas, the US is the chief source of the ongoing instability, having drawn Kyrgyzstan and three other central Asian states into NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 1994, and dumped democracy-promoting NGOs there in the past two decades. The Tulip Revolution of 2005 was coordinated from the US embassy, overthrowing the respected president Askar Akayev (he was getting too close to China and Russia), fatally rupturing any faith in the fledgling independent state. Then there's the massive US base and the many problems it has caused and is still causing, from murder, drugs and prostitution to espionage, terror and corruption.

The longstanding ethnic divide had abated under Akayev, but worsened in the five years since Bakiyev's Tulip Revolution, as he turned Kyrgyzstan into his own clan's fiefdom, leaving the relatively prosperous Uzbeks with no political power. The Uzbeks represent 15 per cent of the population and close to half in the south. They indeed rejoiced at his downfall. But then so did the majority of Kyrgyz. The worsening discrimination has been exacerbated by the return of migrant labourers who lost their jobs in Russia's current recession. This toxic brew resulted in a replay of violent ethnic clashes in Osh in 1990 that left hundreds dead and only abated when the Soviet government sent in troops.

Interim President Roza Otunbayeva's government had hoped to hold a referendum to approve a new constitution on 27 June, but the likelihood of that vote taking place are slim. It will take all the energy of the interim government, a great deal of help from Russia, and most important, the closure of Manas to return the country to a semblance of normality.

That Otunbayeva is not the corrupt, vengeful would-be pasha that Bakiyev turned into is clear to all. Former prime minister Felix Kulov, who is not in the interim government, has formed a group under the slogan "Whoever Values Peace — Unite!"

Those most worried about the collapse of authority are its immediate neighbours. The lack of law and order now makes Kyrgyzstan a playground for the Islamic Movement of

Uzbekistan and other outlawed groups intent on overthrowing the anti-Muslim Uzbek president next door. Uzbekistan is a police state which brutally suppresses devout Uzbeks, and the regime has good cause to fear the consequences of a failed state next door. Tajikistan suffered a wrenching civil war between eastern Islamists and reformers and western pro-government forces in the 1990s, and its current peace is fragile at best.

China's Xinjiang region shares a 530-mile border with Kyrgyzstan. There were widespread riots just last year by its Muslim Uighurs, who yearn for their own independent state like their "lucky" Kyrgyz brothers. China understandably worries about the massive US military base just next door crawling with CIA operatives plus a now porous border which, according to analyst Nick Amies, will facilitate "covert destabilising operations into the strategically vital and politically fragile province."

Russia has no border with Kyrgyzstan, but like China, has geopolitical interests there. Washington's success in expanding NATO's presence throughout the region, crowned by the huge Manas base, has been justified by its "war on terror", but its real goals are political and economic hegemony. After all, it was the US that funded, trained and parachuted in the Islamic militants that now infest Eurasia, according to the principle: create the problem, provide the solution. Is there any reason to think the US has changed its modus operandi, especially now that it has such easy access to the region?

As for Afghanistan, NATO's supply routes there through Pakistan are close to unusable, making Manas the crucial link in the current surges. Last week militants destroyed 50 NATO supply trucks and the Taliban killed 31 NATO soldiers. General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of Nato's troops, boasted capturing and/or killing 120 Taliban leaders in the past 90 days, but "not enough" say officials, as more "grass" sprouts each day in Afghanistan's unforgiving climate.

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