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Kyrgyzstan: not Washington's crisis

By Doug Bandow

The scenes are sadly predictable. Mass refugees flow in response to ethnic violence.

But despite heart-felt pleas for Washington to do something in Kyrgyzstan, the Obama administration should keep the troops at home. The U.S. cannot afford another lengthy occupation of another unstable client state.



The Central Asian republic's authoritarian president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was overthrown in a popular uprising in early April. Since his ousting hope built that the interim administration of Roza Otunbayeva would enact liberal reforms.

Now all bets are off. A series of violent incidents led to large-scale ethnic fighting, especially in Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second-largest city.

Officially nearly 200 are dead and 1,800 injured, though unofficial estimates run higher. Uzbeks have been the principal victims, though Tartars and ethnic Russians have also been targeted.

Some 100,000 people fled across the border into neighboring Uzbekistan. Another 300,000 have been displaced within Kyrgyzstan.

The government in Bishkek appealed to the U.S. for military aid. Then the Kyrgyz authorities asked Russia for peacekeeping troops. Interim President Otunbayeva said: "we need the arrival of outside forces to calm the situation down."

Both Washington and Moscow said no. However, the drumbeat immediately started for American intervention. Human Rights Watch proposed a U.N.-sponsored force, which almost certainly would include U.S. troops. James Joyner of the Atlantic Council urged joint U.S.-Russian intervention.

Ariel Cohen of the Heritage Foundation suggested that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which includes the U.S., "take command." James Collins and Matthew Rojansky of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace argued: "NATO and the U.S. must immediately engage with regional partners to help restore security."

The Obama administration endorsed humanitarian assistance and left the door open to military intervention. An unnamed administration official was quoted as saying: "if we get to the moment that unavoidably there has to be troops, we will be doing it in a cooperative way, not a zero-sum way. We'd like the international community to be fully invested and supportive if military intervention happens."

Why would anyone in Washington want to make such an investment?

The violence has at least temporarily ebbed, and Bishkek has withdrawn its request for foreign troops. But no one knows if this is the end or merely a pause in the violence.

Some observers fear that the violence could spread to both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Carnegie's Collins and Rojansky even claim that the recent events in Kyrgyzstan "pose a defining challenge for mutual security in the Eurasian region as a whole."

Yet the strife, though ugly, is little different than that routinely seen in other unstable, divided countries around the world. So far the fighting is contained in Kyrgyzstan.

Uzbekistan does not appear inclined to intervene to aid Kyrgyzstan. Chaos in Kyrgyzstan could aid Islamic extremists, but all of the region's governments are vigilant in targeting this movement.

Collins and Rojansky suggested that neither Russia nor the U.S. ``can afford to allow the violence there to destroy the vulnerable Kyrgyz state or plunge the region into a wider ethnic war." Yet America's only interest, other than humanitarian, in this obviously vulnerable state is the use of the Manas Airbase for supplying Afghanistan.

Manas sits in the north, well away from the fighting. Moreover, Washington knows that the facility, in operation since 2002, is vulnerable to local politics. Last year the Bakiyev government announced that it planned to close the facility after the Russians increased their aid; Bishkek reversed itself after the U.S. agreed to treble its rental payments.

Although the interim government said it planned no changes, it recently asked for more money, suggesting the U.S. lease could be at risk if the British don't extradite Bakiyev's son (blamed for inciting the violence), and reportedly offered to close the installation in return for Russian intervention.

There obviously are no guarantees for the future. Moreover, the unexpected and unpredictable consequences of intervening also could threaten American access to Manas.

Washington should stay out of Kyrgyzstan, whether or not Kyrgyzstan's government renews its request for foreign troops. The U.S. military is very busy elsewhere.

Moreover, it would be necessary to resolve numerous deep-seated divisions to prevent a recurrence of violence. Strife between the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz is not new, and involves economic as well as political differences.

In short, if Washington intervened, it would have to engage, yet again, in nation-building. And there is nothing to suggest that its occupation would be short. The U.S. continues to have troops stationed attempting to fix Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The U.S. Constitution states that the federal government is to provide for the ``common defense." That means the defense of America. That doesn't cover Kyrgyzstan. The ongoing violence is a human tragedy, but is one crisis which Washington should not make its own.

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