

AT LARGE**Kyrgyzstan: Not Washington's Crisis**

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The scenes are sadly predictable. Ethnic conflict. Murdered innocents. Distressed refugees.

We have seen them all many times before around the world. But despite heart-felt pleas for Washington to do something, the Obama administration should keep the troops at home. The U.S. cannot afford another lengthy deployment in another distant and unstable client state.

Kyrgyzstan is one of the Central Asian Soviet republics that won independence when the Soviet Union dissolved. Kyrgyzstan's president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was overthrown in a popular uprising in early April. Some 84 people died in the violence and Bakiyev first fled south, where he retained political support, before going into exile in Belarus.

Bakiyev was an opposition leader when he led a similar uprising against his authoritarian predecessor Askar Akayev, tagged the "tulip revolution." Unfortunately, the tulips soon wilted. A month before he was forced from office the State Department reported:

[R]estrictions on citizens' right to change their government; arbitrary killing, torture, and abuse by law enforcement officials; impunity; poor prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; lack of judicial independence; pressure on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and opposition leaders, including government harassment; pressure on independent media; government detention of assembly organizers; authorities' failure to protect refugees adequately; pervasive corruption.

Few in the West mourned Bakiyev's ouster, though both the Bush and Obama administrations had generally overlooked his flaws in return for access to Manas airbase. Some American defenders of the Afghanistan war spoke darkly of Russian involvement in his overthrow, but the Kyrgyz people had ample reason to dump him.

Since then hope built that the interim administration of Roza Otunbayeva would adopt liberal reforms. A new constitution was to be voted on later in June and a parliamentary election was supposed to take place under that constitution in October.

Now all bets are off. After the uprising there were a series of violent incidents across the country, many Kyrgyz versus Uzbek. Last week in Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second-largest city, the "violence escalated into more extensive fighting, burning, killing, and expulsions," according to journalist Vicken Cheterian.

Officially nearly 200 are dead and 1,600 injured, though unofficial estimates run higher. Uzbeks have been the principal victims, though Tartars and ethnic Russians also have been targeted. Some 80,000 or so people fled across the border into neighboring Uzbekistan before that government closed the border. Thousands more have been prevented from crossing.

The police have been unable to contain the violence; in fact, in some towns Uzbeks accused the security forces of joining in the killing. So the government has mobilized the army. Unfortunately, that force has received no training in dealing with civil strife and there is no guarantee that, if deployed, it would escape ethnic division as well. Mobilization, warned Paul Quinn-Judge of the International Crisis Group, "seems to be another indication that the interim government is running short on options."

The government in Bishkek appealed to the U.S. for military aid, including rubber bullets and by some accounts, denied by the American embassy in Bishkek, troops. 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." Ousted President Bakiyev seemed to agree, telling a press conference that international peacekeepers were necessary to "bring the situation back to normal."

Both Washington and Moscow said no. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev called the atmosphere in Kyrgyzstan "intolerable" but referred the issue to members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, made up of seven former Soviet states. The initial CSTO answer was to offer "comprehensive assistance," including military equipment, but not troops. However, Russian Nikolai Patrushev said that the meeting "did not rule out the use of any means that the CSTO has at its potential, depending on how the situation evolves."

The drumbeat immediately started for intervention. For example, Human Rights Watch proposed a UN-sponsored force, which almost certainly would include U.S. troops.

James Collins and Matthew Rojansky of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace want a joint NATO, CSTO, and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) force: "NATO and the U.S. must immediately engage with regional partners to help restore security." Moreover, "By holding out a hand not only to the Kyrgyz authorities, but to national regional partners, including the CSTO, and the OSCE, the United States and NATO can demonstrate the sincerity of their interest in regional security."

So far the Obama administration has said little. State Department spokesman Philip Crowley endorsed humanitarian assistance and said that "we seek a coordinated international response to the ongoing violence there."

However, the administration hasn't closed the door 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."

The question, of course, is why anyone in Washington would 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 of or merely a pause in the violence. Osh is now divided ethnically, as well-armed groups have fortified their respective enclaves. All the causes of the violent spasm remain.

Observers fear that the violence could spread to both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Cheterian calls the stakes "very high, for the country and the region alike." Carnegie's Collins and Rojansky go so far as to 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 from that which routinely breaks out in unstable, divided countries around the world. And there are many potential sparks for violence in the region: drug trafficking, gang disputes, the activity of Islamic militants, squabbles over land or water rights, resistance to other authoritarian regimes, and arbitrary boundaries dividing ethnic groups.

So far the fighting is contained in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan has given no indication that it is inclined to intervene to aid Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks, which could lead to efforts to create a "greater Uzbekistan." Chaos in Kyrgyzstan could aid Islamic extremists, but all of the region's governments have trained all of their many tools of repression on this movement.

The fighting would have to be truly exceptional to threaten the stability of nearby states. And even if their stability was at risk, that would be of only modest geopolitical interest to major nations, most notably China (which Kyrgyzstan borders), Russia, and the far more distant U.S.

Collins and Rojansky suggest 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 Manas airbase for supplying Afghanistan.

In fact, Manas sits in the north, well away from the fighting. Moreover, Washington knows that the facility, in operation in 2002, is vulnerable to local and regional 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, there are no guarantees for the future. Intervening to save the base would be penny-wise and pound-foolish, especially since the unexpected and unpredictable consequences of acting also

could threaten access to Manas.

History and geography give Moscow a much greater interest in Kyrgyzstan. It was part of the Soviet Union, is located close to Russia today, and contains some 750,000 ethnic Russians. Yet despite fears that Moscow is intent on reasserting its authority over the former constituent parts of the Soviet Union, there appears to be no enthusiasm in Moscow for intervening. "This is the last thing that Russia wants to do, get involved in a civil war in a failed state," said Sergei Karaganov, head of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy in Moscow. A long-term force commitment there also would drain funds from a military modernization program already clipped by lower energy prices.

Washington should stay out of Kyrgyzstan, whether or not Kyrgyzstan's government renews its request for foreign troops. If all that was needed was a temporary garrison to separate potential combatants, then other nations could provide the personnel. The U.S. military is very busy elsewhere.

Unfortunately, a passive occupation probably wouldn't be enough. It would be necessary to resolve numerous deep-seated divisions to prevent a recurrence of violence. And that's not something Washington likely could do. As Russian President Medvedev noted, "all the problems of Kyrgyzstan have internal roots."

Strife between Uzbek and Kyrgyz killed hundreds in 1990 and was only put down with Soviet troops. But abstract ethnic differences were not the only spark for violence. Both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are largely Muslim and speak a mutually understood Turkic language. Alexander A. Cooley of Columbia dismisses the "narrative of long-simmering ethnic tension."

Kyrgyz tend to be nomads, many of whom lack property while Uzbeks were farmers who have moved into a wider variety of commercial activities. Kyrgyz resentment against the more economically successful Uzbeks is high.

These divisions have spilled over into the political sphere. Many Uzbeks complain of discrimination and are pushing for broader political and cultural rights. Some members of the interim government blame local Uzbek extremists, including leader Kadyrzhan Batyrov, for their inflammatory rhetoric.

Many Uzbeks helped oust Bakiyev, who had used Kyrgyz nationalism to build support. But Bakiyev retained particularly strong support in the south among ethnic Kyrgyz. The interim government accuses him of stoking the violence, which he denies, but there is evidence of his son's involvement, and Bishkek is seeking the latter's extradition from Great Britain.

In short, if Washington intervened, it would have to assume complex nation-building as well as peacekeeping duties. And there is nothing to suggest that its occupation would be short. More than a decade later the U.S. still has troops in Kosovo, which remains a failed state-wannabe. Iraq's future is very much in doubt and American forces remain on station. No one would point to the Karzai government in Afghanistan as a model for anything.

And some people would have the Obama administration now try to fix Kyrgyzstan?

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