

# Kyrgyzstan, Interethnic Tensions, and Relations with Uzbekistan: A Political Geographic Perspective

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**Abstract:** Two U.S. geographers review an array of intertwining political geographic issues that provide context and set the stage for deadly armed conflict between groups of ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the southern Kyrgyzstan city of Osh in June 2010. Applying a disaggregated and localized approach to understanding the ambiguous and complex factors underlying the current instability in Kyrgyzstan, they focus on: the role of north-south political competition; the country's uneasy economic relationship with its western neighbor, Uzbekistan; widespread official corruption and the penetration of organized crime into government structures; as well as broader geopolitical issues. The latter include Tashkent's policy toward the Uzbek diaspora, perceived threats from international terrorism/Islamist fundamentalism, the potential for the export of a "color revolution" to Uzbekistan, the presence of U.S. and Russian military forces in Central Asia, and the relative ineffectiveness of regional security structures such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: F500, F520, H770, Z130. 1 figure, 161 references. Key words: Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Osh, ethnic conflict, Akayev, Bakiyev, diaspora, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, clans, organized crime, smuggling, corruption, terrorism, drug trafficking, color revolutions, water management, Collective Security Treaty Organization.

On June 10, 2010, some 20 years (minus a few days) after rioting between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan's southern provincial capital of Osh led ultimately to some 300 fatalities before Soviet troops could restore order, hostilities between the same groups in the same city produced a death toll in the hundreds, mobilizing an ethnic Uzbek refugee flow (largely women and children) into neighboring Uzbekistan numbering 100 thousand or more (Schwartz and Barry, 2010).<sup>2</sup> Almost all of these refugees now have returned to Osh (see below). Although the

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<sup>2</sup>Estimates of fatalities vary widely, from 178 according to the Kyrgyz Government in the immediate aftermath of the fighting to 700 based on eyewitness accounts in Osh (Conflicting Narratives, 2010), to ca. 2000 later suggested by Kyrgyzstan's interim president (Boudreaux, 2010a). Similarly, the number of refugees varied from the ca. 10,000 provided by Kyrgyz officials to the 75,000–80,000 reported by Uzbekistan's government (Schwartz, 2010a) in the immediate aftermath of the fighting, to later estimates in the range of 100,000–400,000 (Levy, 2010a, 2010e). The higher estimate (400,000) appears to include internally displaced persons (IDPs) in addition to interstate refugees. The main incident was preceded by clashes in late May between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the three southern provincial capitals of Osh, Batken, and Jalalabad; fighting in the latter city, at the People's Friendship University (with a sizable number of Uzbek students), left 2 dead and 62 wounded (Kramer, 2010b).

grievances underlying the two outbursts were generally similar, the events triggering them proved quite different. In 1990, the catalyst was the perception by ethnic Uzbeks<sup>3</sup> that the local government was awarding plots of land designated as homesites on the outskirts of the city disproportionately to Kyrgyz, as well as the actions of members of the latter group to occupy the homesites prematurely.<sup>4</sup>

The causes of the 2010 unrest are still under investigation, but are linked to the ouster of Kyrgystan's former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April of that year. Uzbeks in the city and throughout southern Kyrgyzstan were dissatisfied with perceived discrimination and a low level of political representation under the Bakiyev regime (Ethnic Uzbeks, 2010), and have tended to support the country's new provisional government. Conversely, many ethnic Kyrgyz in the southern portion of the country, experiencing similar feelings of exclusion under Bakiyev's predecessor Askar Akayev given the country's north-south clan-based politics (explained below) continue to support the deposed Bakiyev, a native of Jalalabad Province and its former governor. The office of the United Nations Commissioner of Human Rights, which is overseeing the distribution of humanitarian aid in the wake of the violence, concluded that the conflict was not spontaneous, but was triggered by a series of coordinated attacks carried out by separate groups of armed men (Levy, 2010a) and appear to have included detachments of the Kyrgyz military and security forces not under the control of the interim government (Levy, 2010b). Although the identity of the groups has not been conclusively established, officials in Kyrgyzstan's interim government (led by Acting President Roza Otunbayeva) have accused Bakiyev (currently in exile in Belarus) and his supporters of organizing the attacks to destabilize the new government. Other accounts refer to Tajik and Afghan mercenaries as comprising the core of the armed formations (e.g., Stalin's, 2010), and still others assign a contributing role to Kadyrjan Batyrov, a prominent ethnic Uzbek businessman (now outside the country), who was believed to be seeking greater political autonomy for Uzbeks in the south (Boudreaux, 2010b).<sup>5</sup>

The hostilities were concentrated primarily in Osh Province, and secondarily in two other provinces (Jalalabad and Batken) bordering Uzbekistan in southern Kyrgyzstan's portion of the Fergana Valley (Fig. 1). These are the provinces with the largest absolute ethnic Uzbek populations, as well as by far the highest Uzbek shares of the total population: 31 percent for Osh, 24 for Jalalabad, and 14 percent for Batken (see Rowland, 2002, pp. 547, 558). Proximity of Kyrgyzstan's ethnic Uzbek citizens to their co-nationals across the country's western border introduces an inter-state dimension to the incidents of interethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan involving Uzbeks, as evidenced by the large number of Uzbeks temporarily housed in (now closed) refugee camps across the border in Andijan Province, Uzbekistan. More ominous in this regard are signs that (a) the interim government may not be able to effectively control the

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<sup>3</sup>At the time, Uzbeks accounted for roughly 30 percent of the city's population.

<sup>4</sup>The dispute was preceded by heavy in-migration over a short period of ethnic Kyrgyz from surrounding rural areas into the city (see Zaharova and Megoran, 2000).

<sup>5</sup>Batyrov reportedly supplied a volunteer Uzbek militia (at the request of the provisional government) to help defuse the May 2010 events in Jalalabad (see note 2); Kramer, 2010e). If this was indeed the case, it may have contributed to public perceptions that ethnic Uzbeks had sided with the provisional government in an intra-Kyrgyz dispute.

situation within southern Kyrgyzstan,<sup>6</sup> and, in the absence to date of plans to introduce an outside peacekeeping force, (b) the geographic proximity of Osh to Uzbekistan, which ultimately may involve that country in the conflict, despite the strong motivation of President Islam Karimov to avoid it (see below).

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FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE  
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There is some precedent for concern that fighting in the region may attract volunteers from outside its borders. During the 1990 conflict, roughly 2000 Uzbeks reportedly attempted to cross the border from Uzbekistan to fight in Osh before Soviet security forces stopped them and sealed off all roads between the two republics (Ethnic Warfare, 1990; Huskey, 1995, p. 826). Similarly, interviews with ethnic Kyrgyz irregulars arriving in Osh from other regions of the country upon the outbreak of violence in 2010 revealed that some were motivated by a belief that the province had to be defended from forcible incorporation into Uzbekistan (Schwartz and Barry, 2010). Conversely, at least one Uzbek community leader in Kyrgyzstan has appealed to Uzbekistan’s President Karimov to take action against the “genocide of our people” (Conflicting Narratives, 2010). We thus consider the role of “homeland” or “diaspora” nationalism (Kaiser, 1992, 2002; Chinn and Kasier, 1996; Laitin, 1998) on the part of Uzbeks residing in Kyrgyzstan, taking seriously the territorial and spatial dimensions of the conflict.

This paper reviews a range of geographic issues that underlie the current instability in Kyrgyzstan. An initial point of departure is the persistent north-south competition for political power within Kyrgyzstan that has hindered the development of a broader national allegiance among Kyrgyzstan’s polity, leading to frequent regime change (Akayev–Bakiyev–interim government) that is widely perceived to reflect the competing interests of one macroregion against the other (although the regime changes oddly involve reconfigurations of an elite with a surprisingly stable membership; see below). Second, we investigate Kyrgyzstan’s uneasy economic relationship with Uzbekistan during the post-Soviet period, featuring disputes involving energy trade, water resource management, currency introduction, and trade issues—all of which are intertwined with issues of official corruption and organized crime. Finally, we consider broader events of geopolitical significance in Kyrgyzstan. Here the discussion centers on the perceived threats of international terrorism, which is generally assumed to stem from Islamist movements in the region. We also examine Russian and regional concerns about the potential for the export of a “color revolution” and about the presence of U.S. military forces at bases in Central Asia.

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<sup>6</sup>This assessment is based both on difficulties the interim government is experiencing in exercising command over security forces in the region (e.g., Schwartz, 2010b) and the fact that Uzbeks remaining in the region now appear to desire self-rule, perhaps in the form of an autonomous region, or at the very least now harbor a strong distrust of the interim government (Levy, 2010c, 2010f).

## ETHNIC CONFLICT, KINSHIP, AND REGIONALISM IN PERSPECTIVE

In this section, we provide a theoretical backdrop for the empirical analysis put forth in the rest of the paper. We consider the literature on what constitutes “ethnic conflict” and its history in Central Asia. This discussion must also be considered in relationship to the inter-disciplinary literature on clan politics and how kinship-based patronage networks have or have not been territorialized.

### Ethnic Conflict

Although the events of 2010 have been readily described in the popular media as episodes of “ethnic conflict” or “ethnic violence,” we find it necessary to first explore the meaning of these terms before embarking on our analysis. First, we must clarify that by the term “ethnicity” we mean a socially constructed category with its origins in the dual understanding of “nationality” stemming from Soviet nationalities policies (Brubaker, 1996; see also Suny, 1993; Slezkine, 1996; Smith, 1996; Martin, 2001). One side to this dual understanding of “nationality” (*natsional’nost’*) is ethnocultural, corresponding to Western academic usage of “ethnicity,” with the alternate understanding being territorial and political. As Rogers Brubaker (2004, p. 17) argues: “Ethnicity, race, and nationhood are fundamentally ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world. They are not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world” (emphasis in original). We adopt Brubaker’s skepticism of “groupist” analyses, which he defines as “the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis” (*ibid.*, p. 8).

In rejecting groupist analyses, we apply a disaggregated and localized approach (Ó Tuathail, forthcoming) to understanding ethnic conflict, long advocated by former Russian Minister of Nationalities, Valery Tishkov (1995, 1999). In his analysis of the 1990 Osh conflicts, he argued that ethnic conflict is best understood through a micro-approach, which does not cast it as a conflict between two “groups,” but as a series of specific, *local* episodes of violence (Tishkov, 1995, p. 135). Likewise, in his classic study of diasporas residing outside their nominal “homeland,” Walker Connor (1986) argued that nativist outbreaks of violence are unpredictable and highly contextual. Groups may have peaceful relations and an extensive history of cooperation and interaction prior to the outbreak of conflict—as in the Kyrgyz-Uzbek borderlands (Megoran, 2007). The task at hand, therefore, becomes a deep contextualization and intimate analysis of local contexts in order to shed light on the processes leading up to and engendering the events of Kyrgyz–Uzbek violence in 2010.

It is also worth highlighting two important elements of Brubaker’s (2004) discussion of “ethnic conflict” here. First, he stresses the role of “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs,” who “may live ‘off’ as well as ‘for’ ethnicity” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 10). It is these individuals who promote a sense of “groupness” (group identity and solidarity) rather than “groupness” being inherent to a given ethnic category. These individuals may also be active participants in ethnic organizations, although “the relationship between organizations and the groups they claim to represent is often

deeply ambiguous” (ibid., p. 16). Individuals, like certain dramatic events, “can galvanize group feeling, and ratchet up pre-existing levels of groupness” (ibid., p. 14; see also Billig, 1995, p. 5). “Groupness” in this understanding is thus contingent: a variable or event that “may *fail* to crystallize, despite the group-making efforts of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 12). As we shall see, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs” likely played an important role in instigating the conflict. The second element of Brubaker’s discussion that is salient to our analysis is his focus on the “discursive framing” of ethnic conflict, i.e., the interpretive framework within which one chooses to view conflict. During the Cold War, conflict tended to be framed in a terms of a rivalry between two competing political-economic systems, whereas today “ethnic conflict”—which “encourages actors and analysts alike to interpret conflict and violence in ethnic rather than other terms” (ibid., p. 17)—is the more widely accepted frame. The latter frame is easy to mobilize for an assessment of the 2010 conflict, as in the 1990 events, but in this paper, we seek to move beyond a facile understanding of what played out on the ground in Kyrgyzstan.

Although the fighting was primarily between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, the basis for much of the tension between the two groups is not ethnicity *per se* (both are predominantly Muslim and speak mutually comprehensible Turkic languages), but rather economic and class differences. The Uzbeks, traditionally sedentary agriculturalists concentrated in the Fergana Valley (and comprising 14.5 percent of the country’s population in the most recent 2009 census [National, n.d.]), have made the transition to business ownership more readily there than the formerly predominantly nomadic Kyrgyz (69.6 percent, many of whom are recent migrants from the countryside) and thus form the core of a relatively more prosperous commercial class in the south (Rotar, 1992a; see also Kramer, 2010c). For these reasons, and the fact that it views the unrest as provoked by militants and “the political forces that support them,” the Information Coordination Center of Kyrgyzstan’s interim government has called on journalists and others to refrain from referring to the unrest as “interethnic” (Conflicting Narratives, 2010). However, as Nick Megoran (2007, p. 267) explains, “class” in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan is intertwined with and “*constitutive* of ethnic subject positions.” Given this and the pervasiveness of the “ethnicity” frame—not to mention the fact that Uzbeks were clearly targeted—we believe use of the term is warranted. Indeed, a central question this paper seeks to address is why, given so many other societal fissures, Uzbeks in particular were targeted.

### **Clans, Kinship, and Regionalism**

In Central Asia, the issue of ethnicity is also tied up with the issue of kinship networks. Despite Soviet efforts to eliminate their importance in Central Asia, clan ties remain an important element of politics in the region.<sup>7</sup> As discussed here, clans are not considered static entities, but dynamic networks whose functions have changed in varying temporal and spatial contexts. As

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<sup>7</sup>Scholars disagree on the appropriate terminology for these networks, differentially stressing the importance of blood ties and the distribution of goods. Several settle on a highly qualified form of the term “clan” (Collins, 2004, 2006; Schatz, 2004), while others prefer “solidarity groups” (Roy, 2007), “informal ethnopolitics” (Fumagalli, 2007b), or “patron-client relations” (Ilkhamov, 2007).

Schatz (2004, p. 19) explains, the Soviet shortage economy made the function of clans much more specific in the past; their role was increasingly that of an access network to goods in short supply, a pattern that has continued into the post-Soviet period. Although scholars do not completely agree, it seems that clans also changed with the Soviet introduction of collective farms (*kolkhozy*). *Kolkhoz* or local village (*qishloq*) identities arguably became synonymous with clan identities (Schatz, 2004, p. 58; Roy, 2007, p. 87). Kathleen Collins is more careful in delineating the relationship between localism (*mestnichestvo* or *zemlyachestvo*) and clans, explaining that the “fictive kinship” of clan identities goes beyond mere blood ties and can incorporate individuals *through* geographic ties or social alliances (Collins, 2004, p. 17). But for her, locality is only an *approximation* for clan (ibid., 59) and “[r]egion matters insofar as it is a reflection of, and a venue for, the deeper traditional ties of kinship and clan” (ibid., p. 60). As the case of Kyrgyzstan demonstrates, the relationship between localism and clan identity is clearly ambiguous. Yet it is this ambiguity, mixed with certain historical realities, that is selectively drawn upon in contemporary politics. The “imagined map” of Kyrgyzstan’s clan politics is therefore important to consider here, especially as it factors into the development of the north-south divide.

The Kyrgyz consist of a number of tribes (ca. 40), most of which are organized loosely into three major clan confederations: a “left” wing consisting of seven clans from the north and west, a “right” wing constituted by the southern Adygine clan, and the Ichkilik group, also in the south, which consists of many clans, including some that are not of “Kyrgyz” origin (Wixman, 1988, pp. 107–108; Berdikeeva, 2006). Some sources have posited that competition (and to some extent animosity) between the left and right wings (“northern” and “southern” clans, respectively) can be traced at least as far back as the period of the Kokand Khanate (1709–1883), centered on the Fergana Valley. The southern clans had ties with the Khanate, and resisted incorporation into the Tsarist Empire (and later the USSR), whereas the northerners generally sought to avoid conflict and cooperate with advancing Russian forces (Berdikeeva, 2006, p. 6). Because Kyrgyz clan-based relations include a strong element of patronage, the dominance of northern clans during the Soviet period, traced to their longer history of cooperation with the Russians, enabled them to control low- and medium-level appointments in the Kyrgyz SSR state system for many years. Only by late in the Soviet era, when Absamat Masaliev (a southerner) became Kyrgyzstan’s (last) Party First Secretary in 1985, were the tables turned (ibid.). By this time a “winner-take-all” approach to political appointments among indigenous elites had become the norm, a strategy repeated when Askar Akayev became the first democratically elected president of independent Kyrgyzstan in 1991.

## **THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE**

Kyrgyzstan is often described in U.S. popular media as a South Dakota-sized country of 5 million people, divided into northern and southern halves by high mountains traversed by a

single main highway.<sup>8</sup> In the north, where the capital Bishkek is located, the legacy of Soviet rule has left a more Russified population, and a more urbanized and industrialized landscape. In contrast, the southern regions tend to be more agrarian, and have a larger proportion of ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks (Ryabkov, 2008, p. 306). The salience of the regional divide in Kyrgyzstan's domestic politics is a point of scholarly contention, and thus deserves our critical attention here. First outlining some central elements of this discussion, we then consider how the divide has or has not played out in politics since Kyrgyzstan's independence.

Regional scholars have recently begun to critically interrogate the influence of regionalism on political preferences (Radnitz, 2005, 2006; Juraev, 2008; Lewis, 2008a; Ryabkov, 2008). Radnitz (2005) has downplayed the role of the divide, claiming that localism or *zemlyachestvo* (support for people originating from the same village or locality) is the most salient factor in determining the population's political identities and their potential mobilization. In his analysis of the Aksy protests in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2002, he argued that although people in Aksy were aware of regional differences, they did not have a uniquely "southern identity" (Radnitz, 2005, p. 418). Yet this analysis is problematic in that it contains elements of a "groupist" analysis, nearly seeing political "identity" as a *thing*, rather than an *event* (as in Brubaker's [2004] formulation). As Lewis (2008a, p. 273) explained in his analysis of the 2005 anti-Akayev protests, political narratives shifted with time, with isolated local protests coalescing into more coherent regional and national movements. Thus, regional self-identification is an event that occurs or is mobilized in some political, spatial, and temporal contexts, but not in others.

Because it is not consistently articulated, when a sense of regional identity *does* occur, the important questions are how and why. As our case study will demonstrate, this is often due to elite-level manipulation of clan and patronage networks. Yet a solely elite-level analysis provides an incomplete picture. Ryabkov's (2008) statistical analysis of survey data points to significant north-south differences in political attitudes among the general population, controlling for ethnicity and urbanization. Like Lewis (2008a, p. 274), he argues that there are real cultural and political differences between the north and south. These differences ultimately provide the material for political entrepreneurs to draw upon in their efforts to mobilize the population and/or narrate a particular regional identity. The issue of narration here is key, because, especially under Bakiyev, "the reality of these divisions was only instrumentally about issues of identity and culture: in general, the key dynamic of north-south cleavages was about access to resources and rent-seeking state positions" (ibid.). In order to illustrate this, we turn to a more detailed discussion of how this has been deployed in Kyrgyzstan's post-independence politics.

### **Akayev's Tenure (1991 to March 2005)**

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<sup>8</sup>Compounding the image of isolation (or lack of integration) is that fact that during the Soviet period, that road (M-41), which skirts Uzbekistan's border for an extensive distance along its middle section, traversed a small portion of Andijan Oblast before re-entering Kyrgyzstan north of Osh (*Atlas*, 1988, p. 144).

At the elite level, the regional and kinship balance of power has been an important component since the earliest days of independence. As early as 1992, a Russian observer noted the new country's "meticulous calculation of the percentage of representatives from various areas in Kyrgyzstan's government," "the preponderance of 'northerners'," and the removal of southerners from positions of power as the government of President Askar Akayev took shape (Rotar, 1992a, p. 3). By this time the northern power base, centered around the national capital Bishkek and personified by Akayev, was already confronted by opposition from Jalalabad Province leader Bekmamat Osmonov over appointments to key government posts and undue central government oversight of that province's affairs (Rotar, 1992b). Southern grievances simmered over the following years, with the Akayev family monopolizing political power and forming what some have called a "mega-clan" around the Presidential family (e.g. Ilkhamov, 2007, p. 77), at the exclusion of southern clans. Akayev's rule periodically saw various demands from southern elites—such as one calling for the movement of select central government functions (e.g., the upper house of Kyrgyzstan's parliament and several important ministries) to a "southern capital" such as Osh (Bakeyev, 2000a).

One of the most foreboding of these episodes was the series of protests in Aksy Rayon (in Jalalabad Oblast) from January to November 2002. The stimulus was the politically motivated arrest of a local member of parliament (the *Jogorku Kenesh*), Azimbek Beknazarov, who had criticized Akayev's transfer of land to China (Radnitz, 2005, p. 405). Because the protests did not spread outside this region, and protesters' concerns were almost exclusively articulated at the local level, Radnitz (2005, p. 417) argues that describing the protests as merely a manifestation of "clan politics" or the north-south divide is an "oversimplification at many levels." Although regional "groupness" did not materialize, the episode did set the stage for future protest movements in which regional identities ultimately became salient. More specifically, the Aksy protests set a precedent for the "Tulip Revolution" in March 2005—perhaps even more so than the "color revolutions" of Georgia and Ukraine (Radnitz, 2005; Kulov, 2008; Lewis, 2008a; Tursunkulova, 2008). Most importantly, the opposition began to see what kinds of actions might undermine the regime, and realized how weak the state was in certain areas (Lewis, 2008a, p. 267).

Although still commonly referred to in the West as the "Tulip Revolution" (and as part of the "color revolution" phenomenon), Kyrgyzstan's regime change in March 2005 is seen by most residents of Kyrgyzstan as more of a *coup d'état* than a revolution (Kupatadze, 2008, p. 284). Even subsequent president Bakiyev, the primary victor of the event, avoids defining it as the "Tulip Revolution," preferring instead the "March 2005 events" (Marat, 2008b, p. 231). Most analysts agree that its consequences have been especially *non*-democratic (Juraev, 2008) and that it was "elite, not mass instigated" (Cummings and Ryabkov, 2008). Essentially, the argument goes, mass protests were mobilized through "top-down" patronage networks, drawn upon by dissatisfied candidates in the March parliamentary elections (Radnitz, 2006; Cummings, 2008; Juraev, 2008; Lewis, 2008a). In contrast to some Western portrayals of the regime change, domestic and international NGOs played a decidedly minor role (Radnitz, 2006; Heathershaw, 2007a; Cummings and Ryabkov, 2008; Juraev, 2008), and unlike the allegedly similar



revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, the protests were concentrated in rural areas and protesters were not predominantly youth. Although other observers have read the event primarily through the lens of the north-south divide (e.g., Fairbanks, 2007), the situation was in fact much more complicated.

In response to the regime's serious miscalculations regarding election reform<sup>9</sup> in the 2005 parliamentary elections (Lewis, 2008a, p. 275), opposition reached a critical mass. Protesting what the OSCE later determined were fraudulent parliamentary elections (as well as continuing poverty and massive corruption in the Akayev administration), Akayev's loosely organized opponents assumed *de facto* control in Jalalabad, Osh, and Batken (Dual Power, 2005; Pala, 2005). A "dual power scenario" materialized, with Akayev's administration maintaining power in the north. Protests were for the most part peaceful, with local police pledging allegiance to the protestors and to new provincial governors replacing those appointed by Akayev.<sup>10</sup> Akayev fled the country on March 24, after crowds at a large opposition rally in Bishkek seized control of the presidential palace, and the process of forming a new government began.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, protestors freed Feliks Kulov, a former security minister from the north, who had been jailed by Akayev for alleged abuse of office, but widely believed to be a political prisoner whose sentence was imposed so as to prevent his candidacy in a presidential election scheduled for October 2005.

The opposition's interim government settled on Kurmanbek Bakiyev as the interim President. Although a former prime minister in Akayev's regime, Bakiyev was a southerner, and his selection represented an informal pact among the opposition to "balance power sharing among northern and southern political elites" (Marat, 2008b, p. 231). Bakiyev was thus seen as a compromise to northern elites, with the goal of achieving cross-regional consensus (Lewis, 2008a, p. 274). In advance of the July 2005 presidential elections, Bakiyev and his main rival, Feliks Kulov, reached an agreement: Kulov conceded the presidency to Bakiyev in return for the job of prime minister (Cummings, 2008, p. 225). Kulov explained his concession and his participation in Bakiyev's government as resulting from a desire to prevent the country from splitting into the north and the south (Ryabkov, 2008, p. 307). He explained: "And because the elites traditionally position themselves as representatives of either the south or the north of Kighizia, their influence on the common people (*prostykh lyudey*) creates the danger of a partition of the country" (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 308). Bakiyev was thus elected with 88 percent of the vote in elections on July 10, 2005, with none of the opposing candidates garnering over 4 percent (Chivers, 2005). Although tainted by the scandal, the parliament elected in early 2005 (and loaded with northern supporters of Akayev, who by that time had resigned his post) remained seated.

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<sup>9</sup> Namely, the cut in the number of parliament seats and the removal of the partial party list system.

<sup>10</sup> The Kyrgyz government attributed the unrest as a coup organized by terrorists and "criminal elements connected to the drug mafia" (Pala, 2005, p. A9).

<sup>11</sup> Prominent opposition figures included Ishenbai Kadyrbekov (named interim president of Kyrgyzstan), Kurmanbek Bakiyev (a former prime minister under Akayev) who soon replaced Kadyrbekov as acting president, Omurbek Tekebayev (parliamentary speaker), Roza Otunbayeva (a former foreign minister), and Feliks Kulov (former security minister) (Biryukov, 2005; Nikonov, 2005).

## **Bakiyev's Tenure (June 2005 – April 2010)**

After the March regime change, the north-south divide became an increasingly important part of political dialogue in Kyrgyzstan (Ryabkov, 2008, p. 307), with Bakiyev often intentionally playing up the competition to enhance his public approval (Marat, 2008b, p. 231). With Kulov as prime minister, Bakiyev quickly moved to name southerners to other key posts. Overall, however, the new government was far from revolutionary; it consisted of many holdovers from the Akayev era, who quickly pledged their allegiance to Bakiyev's new regime (Radnitz, 2006, p. 144; Marat, 2008b, p. 232). Relations between government and the parliament, already rocky, were exacerbated by the adoption of a new constitution in November 2006, leading to fresh protests and a crisis in governance.<sup>12</sup> Kulov, who had a particularly high approval rating (Marat, 2008b, p. 231) and was increasingly resentful of Bakiyev's tightening hold on power, broke with the administration. In an effort to avert political stalemate and paralysis, Bakiyev accepted Kulov's resignation in December 2006 (while asking other cabinet members to continue serving in an interim capacity) and appointed opposition figure Almaz Atabayev as interim prime minister in March 2007 (Greenberg, 2007). Regardless of how "accurately" it reflected the situation, the Bakiyev–Kulov break-up was *read* and *narrated* as sign of danger of the worsening confrontation between the north and south (Marat, 2008b, p. 231; Ryabkov, 2008, p. 307).

After navigating this turbulent situation, the regime scheduled a referendum on a (second) new constitution and election law in October 2007, which voters approved.<sup>13</sup> Bakiyev also disbanded parliament in October pending new elections, to be held three years ahead of schedule that December (Stern, 2007a). These elections too were tainted by allegations of fraud by opposition candidates (Stern, 2007b). The subsequent formation of a new government in the wake of the December 2007 parliamentary elections increased the discontent of the northern elite (and the northerners in general) over Bakiyev's continued habit of awarding of the majority of key posts (e.g., ministries of defense, finance, internal affairs, emergency situations, and state security; deputy prime minister; prosecutor general) to southerners (Khamidov, 2009b).

A recent study based on interviews of 36 leading members of the movement opposing Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan during the period July 2008–July 2009 sheds further light on the situation (Huskey and Iskakova, 2010). When interrogated about the what they perceived as the major impediments to working together to oppose the current government, political values (ideology) was listed as the *least* important (ibid., p. 234), reflecting a conviction that ideas matter less in terms of mobilizing elite opposition than such factors as the ability to trust other opposition members, clan/region/ethnic loyalties (which was assigned moderate importance), conditions of the

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<sup>12</sup>A new constitution approved in November 2006 delegated the job of forming a new government and appointing a candidate for prime minister to the political party winning parliamentary elections according to a party-list vote. Because the March 2005 parliamentary elections were based on a "first-past-the-post" rather than "party-list" system, the current government was rendered illegitimate until new parliamentary elections could be held.

<sup>13</sup>But independent observers noted numerous violations, including a voter turnout significantly below the required 50 percent threshold. Many believed the exercise was simply a ploy to ensure a more compliant parliament (Stern, 2007a).

economy and everyday life, and specific unpopular government policies. Tellingly, the *most* important obstacle to cooperation among the opposition cited was political ambition (*ibid.*, p. 244), suggesting a wary maneuvering among opposition politicians to position themselves so as to maximize their access to patronage and other benefits once an old government falls and the process of forming a new one begins.<sup>14</sup>

The rising profile of organized crime within the country under Bakiyev was also certainly a major obstacle to the democratic functioning of the new government. Although organized crime was also an issue under Akayev, the regime change in March 2005 marked a dramatic shift in state-crime relations.<sup>15</sup> High-profile criminals increasingly infiltrated into Parliament (thereby achieving immunity from prosecution), while Bakiyev mobilized criminal elements as agents of intimidation (Dubnov, 2006a, 2006b; Kapatadze, 2008; Marat 2008a, 2008b; Huskey and Iskakova, 2010).<sup>16</sup> Parliamentary representatives of Bakiyev's Ak Zhol party not only had significant criminal ties, but also tended to have weaker financial bases, making them more dependent on the regime (Marat, 2008b, p. 233). Meanwhile Bakiyev's family enriched itself substantially during his tenure (an allegation Bakiyev denies; Kirgisiens, 2010). Both his son, Maxim, and older brother, Zhanysh, were reputed to be in control of all major legal and illegal business activity, serving as the primary *kryshas* in the country (Kapatadze, 2008, p. 287; Marat, 2008b, p. 234). Yet another elder brother, Akhmat (a chair of the Jalalabad City Council), allegedly controls organized crime and drug trafficking in southern Kyrgyzstan (Marat, 2008b, p. 234).

The criminal element might have blurred, rather than reinforced the north-south division, however. Although organized crime networks may have a stronger base in a given region, they can also follow ethnic divisions or, more frequently, follow networks formed in prison, where inmates are not divided by region of origin (Kapatadze, 2008, p. 294). Many of Kyrgyzstan's top criminals, more than a few incorporated in Bakiyev's government, sought to legitimate their business, and are often important patrons in their own locales—and supported by the general population as such. If not outright criminals at the outset, politicians under Bakiyev increasingly needed to navigate some difficult and potentially life-threatening terrain. Given the absence of strong political parties with clear ideologies and election platforms in Kyrgyzstan, political elite have needed to mobilize public support across multiple axes of difference. North-south political differences have thus served as only one of many factors influencing political leaders and their constituents, albeit an important tool in popular mobilization in support of regime change.

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<sup>14</sup>Huskey and Iskakova (2010, p. 239) note that the benefits of a government post in much of the post-communist world extends far beyond the prominence and powers entailed in the formal job description and the officially listed salary. Rather it is accompanied by an informal income stream “derived from rents paid by supplicants in need of government licenses, contracts, or protection.” This is certainly the case in Kyrgyzstan, which in 2009 ranked 162<sup>nd</sup> of 180 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index; Uzbekistan, incidentally, ranked 174<sup>th</sup> (Corruption, 2009).

<sup>15</sup>For more extensive details than can be presented here, see Kapatadze (2008) and Marat (2000a, 2008b).

<sup>16</sup>His younger brother, Zhanysh, for example, was known as the “grey eminence in the president's intimidation of political opponents” (Marat, 2008b, p. 234).

The discussion of north-south differences thus far neglects an additional complicating dimension: that of the ethnic Uzbeks. Uzbeks have tended to navigate the arena of Kyrgyz politics cautiously. By virtue of their concentration in the Fergana Valley they are “southerners” by geography if not by political preference.<sup>17</sup> They have leaned toward support of the northerners, such as Akayev, whom they believe was chiefly responsible for providing stability during the decade following the 1990 Osh riots (Khamidov, 2000). Nonetheless, Uzbek community leaders in southern Kyrgyzstan during the Akayev period cited a litany of frustrations ranging from the status of the Uzbek language (not granted official status alongside Kyrgyz and Russian; Bakeyev, 2000b), inadequate representation in regional and local governmental structures, and difficulties in accessing Uzbek-language television broadcasts (Khamidov, 2001). While they initially reacted to the new Bakiyev administration in 2005 with guarded optimism, they soon grew disenchanting with its increasing nationalist rhetoric, policy of ministerial appointments (no ethnic Uzbeks appointed to key posts; ascendance of perceived Kyrgyz nationalists to the posts of parliamentary speaker and prosecutor general), and breakdown of informal channels of communication between the government and Uzbek community leaders (Saipjanov, 2005; Ethnic Uzbeks, 2006). Uzbek discontent escalated in 2006 and 2007 when Kyrgyzstan’s court system failed to protect farmland and buildings owned by a prominent Uzbek businessman Kadyrjan Batyrov from occupation by 200 Kyrgyz families (Rotar, 2007). The episode reinforced perceptions among Uzbeks of a “double standard” exercised in property disputes, harkening back to Osh events in 1990. Community leaders most recently have expressed alarm over the decline in Uzbek-language primary and secondary education (Umetov, 2009).

### **The Events of Spring and Summer 2010**

In late March and early April 2010, local opposition media in Kyrgyzstan as well as Russian state television and electronic media began to increasingly issue articles criticizing the Bakiyev government of corruption. And on April 1, Russia raised tariffs on refined petroleum products exported to Kyrgyzstan and curtailed certain types of banking transactions with Kyrgyzstan (Kramer, 2010a). The primary catalyst for Bakiyev’s ouster, however, was a rally of thousands in Bishkek on April 7, 2010. Protesters complained of rising utility rates and government corruption and repression, and seized several government buildings, forcing Bakiyev to flee to the south. As with demonstrations in 2006, when the government reportedly hired mobs (comprised of various criminals, public employees, and law-enforcement representatives) to provoke the opposition into starting a fight, there were warnings that Bakiyev might try a similar tactic (Marat, 2008b, p. 232). Indeed, after failing to disperse protestors with tear gas and concussion grenades, snipers loyal to the Bakiyev government began shooting protestors;

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<sup>17</sup>We ignore in this calculation the ethnic Russians, once a plurality of the total population and extremely influential political force, but now declining rapidly in numbers since the late Soviet period. As recently as 1989, Russians still constituted a plurality of the republic’s urban population, but their overall population share has fallen from 21.5 percent in 1989 to 12.5 percent in 1999 to 8.4 percent in the 2009 census (Rowland, 2002, p. 40; National, n.d.).

casualties ultimately amounted to 83 deaths and 1,500 injuries (Cullison and Toktogulov, 2010; Power Struggle, 2010).

Thus, however fleetingly, the regional competition for political dominance in Kyrgyzstan seems to have come full circle, with the “northerners” again in power, as the south mobilizes its resistance. However, the explanatory power of a model based on north-south competition can be taken only so far. One of the more confounding aspects of the ongoing political instability is that “governments may change, but [to a large extent] the faces remain the same” (McGlinchey, 2010, p. A17). For example, Kyrgystan’s current interim president Roza Otunbayeva (a nominal southerner), served as foreign minister both to Akayev and Bakiyev, before subsequently joining the opposition that resulted in the downfall of both of her previous mentors. Similarly, Feliks Kulov, an erstwhile prime minister under both Akayev and Bakiyev, is now positioning himself to play a role should the interim government survive the latest round of turmoil. Yet, as the outbreak of interethnic violence in June 2010 has shown, the latest regime change in Kyrgyzstan has been far from smooth, with the interim government in fact losing control of parts of the south and apparently lacking the full allegiance of the military (Levy, 2010c).

On the eve of the 2010 violence in Osh, the interim government had announced dates for still another referendum on a new constitution (June 27)—this time establishing a parliamentary republic with a weak presidency<sup>18</sup>—and new parliamentary elections (October) (Kyrgyzstan’s Interim, 2010). The referendum took place as scheduled and was approved by roughly 90 percent of those voting, reportedly with higher than expected turnout among ethnic Uzbeks. Although the new constitution is now already in effect, many observers feel that an essential prerequisite for stability and support for the new government is the organization of an independent investigation into the causes of the violence (e.g., Trilling, 2010; A Referendum, 2010).

## **GEO-ECONOMIC ISSUES**

In this section, we address several major themes revolving around the complex geo-economic legacies inherited by the Central Asian states from their Soviet past. The five Central Asian successor states of the Soviet Union have had troubled relations with each other since independence, with conflicts ranging from border delineation to water and energy supplies. With the withdrawal of Soviet power and border forces, a Pandora’s box of demarcation issues was opened for the newly independent states, because little importance had been accorded the precise demarcation of the borders of “fraternal” republics in the USSR. This ambiguity was a remnant of Soviet nationalities policy during the incorporation of Central Asia into the USSR during the 1920s (and during subsequent border adjustments during the 1930s). A point of scholarly

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<sup>18</sup>The concept had originally been proposed by the opposition during the Bakiyev administration as a means of stemming the shift of political appointments and power toward the south (Huskey and Iskakova, pp. 251, 254). Whether the current incarnation is rooted in a genuine desire for fundamental reform (rather than a tactic for maintaining political control) remains to be seen. The constitutional referendum also will confirm Ms. Otunbayeva as president until the end of 2011 (Boudreaux and Toktogulov, 2010).

contention, it seems to some that a prime objective of Soviet officials, including Josef Stalin, during this period was the delineation of borders in such a way as to discourage the emergence of independent cores for pan-regionalism (e.g., Abramson, 1997; Lubin and Rubin, 1999). Other studies suggest that border demarcation in the region was the result of a complex power struggle between Moscow, regional political and commercial elites, and ethnographers employed on the ground (Farrant, 2006, p. 62). Ultimately, however, regional identities were characterized by so much overlap and ambiguity that even the most meticulous or benign border demarcation effort would have failed to accurately capture the everyday realities of this region.

Resulting from this territorial integration and Soviet economic policies, the economies of the Central Asian republics became highly regionally integrated. In the post-Soviet era, these interconnections have largely bred conflict in the place of cooperation. With the largest population (27 million) and the largest armed forces (spending is 2 percent of GDP), regional observers have often considered Uzbekistan the “regional hegemon” (Kaiser, 1992; Bohr, 2004). Although the Central Asian regimes have varying degrees of authoritarian tendencies, Uzbekistan has been particularly averse to cooperation and often makes unilateral decisions with regional repercussions (e.g., shutting down its borders without warning or explanation, intervention in Tajikistan’s civil war; Horsman, 1999, p. 51). This has led observers to identify a certain “virtual cooperation,” with regional cooperation organizations’ tendency to lack substance—ultimately reflecting the regimes’ lack of interest in “pooling some elements of their jealously guarded state sovereignty” (Allison, 2008, p. 186). The varying economic paths taken by the new states has also hampered cooperation. Uzbekistan, for example, is still largely dependent on a cotton monoculture, whereas Kazakhstan’s oil, gas, and metallic mineral resources have enabled it to diversify its economy away from agriculture. Industry has largely collapsed in most states, with the economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan relying heavily on a single aluminum factory and gold mine, respectively. Lacking other major resources, these two countries in particular have been heavily implicated in drug trafficking,<sup>19</sup> which has proved an important factor in inter-state trade relations.

### **Currency Conversion and Balance of Payments Problems**

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have encountered particular difficulties in reconciling broad economic and environmental/resource management issues. More specifically, these have involved Kyrgyzstan’s early departure from the ruble zone (and introduction of its own currency, the som) in 1993, indebtedness to Uzbekistan (and secondarily Kazakhstan) for hydrocarbon imports, and river diversion plans with the potential to upset the fragile water management balance between downstream irrigation and upstream electricity generation needs. Before proceeding further, it is useful to put the relative size of the Central Asian countries’ economies in perspective. With a gross domestic product (purchasing power parity) of US \$11.5 billion in

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<sup>19</sup>On Tajikistan, see Lewis (2008b, chapter 5). On Kyrgyzstan, see Marat (2008a) and Kupatadze (2008), and on Turkmenistan, see Lewis (2008b, chapter 3).

2009, Kyrgyzstan's economy is now the smallest in the region<sup>20</sup> (eclipsed even by Tajikistan), and less than one-tenth the size of the largest, Kazakhstan (\$177.5 billion) and one-sixth that of Uzbekistan (\$71.5 billion) (IMF, 2010). Given the country's small size and internal market, its dearth of domestic fossil fuel resources, and landlocked location, Kyrgyzstan's economy was one of the more vulnerable to disruption from the severing of supply linkages from the USSR's centralized command economy and the transition to the rules of the global economy.

Mired in the general economic malaise experienced by the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in the aftermath of the disintegration of the USSR, Kyrgyzstan's particular economic deficiencies (e.g., the need to import almost all of its petroleum products, finished metals, natural gas, and timber as well as almost half of its food and feed grain consumption) produced a rapidly falling trade balance that by 1992 could no longer be sustained by credits granted by other CIS member states such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan (Trofimov, 1993). Forced to turn to international lending institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) for additional loans and credits, the country also became obliged to follow their rules. In the case of the IMF, one prerequisite for funding was steps toward the establishment of a national currency, so that the country could escape the inflationary pressures generated by currency emissions by the Russian Central Bank in the ruble zone. Within a roughly three-week period from late April to early May 1993, the status of a Kyrgyz national currency progressed from being the subject of parliamentary debate (initially negative) to *fait accompli*, with the som becoming the country's sole legal currency on May 15 (Whitlock, 1993).

Kyrgyzstan's trading partners in the CIS were caught off guard by its surprisingly rapid exit from the ruble zone, as firms lacked sufficient time to devise interim agreements with customers and suppliers. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan responded by halting many types of bank and cash transactions (a move designed to give the Russian Central Bank time to assign a reliable value to the som for currency conversion purposes). Uzbekistan, fearing that the move was prelude toward Kyrgyzstan's repudiation of its debts, briefly closed its borders, curtailed natural gas supply, and severed telecommunications links (Brown, 1993). These actions and an initial period of high inflation<sup>21</sup> caused major disruptions in inter-regional (including cross-border) trade and economic output in Kyrgyzstan (which fell by 28 percent in the first seven months of 1993 compared to the same period in the preceding year; Crisis Deepens, 1993).

After publicly criticizing the move as "ill-prepared" (Whitlock, 1993) and a "political subversion against Uzbekistan" (Fuller, 1993), Uzbekistan's President Karimov met with his Kyrgyz counterpart in late May to forge a mechanism for regulating economic issues between the two countries. The meeting was followed in mid-June by an agreement to use the dollar (instead of the ruble) as the basis for all interbank transactions between the countries, and by Kyrgyzstan's

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<sup>20</sup>Although the size of Kyrgyzstan's shadow economy is quite large, estimated in 2006 to be 53 percent of the annual GDP, or 50.5 billion som (approximately US\$1.222 billion) (Kupatadze, 2008, p. 281).

<sup>21</sup>This was linked to the fact that only roughly half of the rubles in circulation in Kyrgyzstan were initially exchanged for som, creating an artificial shortage of the currency (Trofimov, 1993).

formal acknowledgment of its debt to Uzbekistan on the date of the som's introduction was valued at US \$13.3 million (Martin, 1993).

By July 1993, monthly inflation in Kyrgyzstan had begun to subside as the new currency gained greater acceptance, and was down to 4.9 percent by May 1994 (compared to 40 percent in May 1993; Brown, 1994). However, bilateral trade tensions between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan persisted, as evidenced in Uzbekistan's renewed threat in November 1993 to terminate natural gas deliveries pending the settlement of Kyrgyzstan's rapidly mounting outstanding debt to its western neighbor (\$9 million). Kyrgyzstan experienced major difficulties that winter in securing sufficient quantities of gas (especially given the latter's rapid rise toward market rates), and the problem has persisted (albeit with somewhat less urgency) into the present.<sup>22</sup> In turn, Kyrgyzstan raised the prices for exports of electricity from its Naryn River hydroelectric stations to the point where former customers such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan cut back on purchases dramatically, further exacerbating the trade imbalance (Razgulyayev, 1994).

Yet, as we shall see, by far the greater issue surrounding hydroelectric generation in the republic involves the sometimes conflicting water management interests between upstream (power generation) and downstream (irrigation) uses along the Naryn River, which rises in Kyrgyzstan before flowing into the Syr Dar'ya in Uzbekistan's portion of the Fergana Valley. This issue is approaching critical mass given Kyrgyzstan's desperate efforts to reduce its dependency on imported energy via a massive expansion of hydroelectric capacity.

### **Water Management Disputes**

In Central Asia, "control over scarce water supplies has always been associated with power. Control over water supplies ensures control over irrigation systems, and thus the power of life or death over the mass of the rural population" (Lewis, 2008b, p. 100). Yet water in the region is not distributed or allocated equally among the five former Soviet Central Asian states. The Amu Dar'ya and the Syr Dar'ya river systems comprise the Aral Sea Basin, with mountainous Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan representing the two "water-rich" upstream nations. They supply 55 and 25 percent of the average flow, respectively, to the Basin, but together accounted for only 11 and 5 percent of the withdrawals, for example, in 1995 (Micklin, 2002, p. 509). Conversely, the three more populous and agrarian downstream states (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) withdraw much more water than they supply to the basin.<sup>23</sup> More to the point, Kyrgyzstan is the second most important supplier of water to the region (although its headwaters—via the rivers

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<sup>22</sup>For example, on the eve of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Bishkek in October 2008, the republic was still subject to rolling electricity blackouts, in Bishkek for 8–10 hours per day (Dubnov, 2008). The inability to pay for a sufficient amount of Uzbek gas imports on a timely basis, and lack of sufficient alternative energy sources, was reported as the cause.

<sup>23</sup>In the case of Uzbekistan the respective proportions in 1995 were 8 (supply) and 52 percent (withdrawal); for Kazakhstan, 4 and 10 percent; and for Turkmenistan practically 0 and 20 percent (Micklin, 2002, p. 509). The percentage shares do not sum to 100 because the small portions of Iran and Afghanistan that are part of the Aral Basin are not included.



Naryn, Chu, Talas, and Karadar'ya—drain only into the Syr Dar'ya system), whereas Uzbekistan is by far the largest consumer.<sup>24</sup>

One of the first interstate accords forged by leaders of these countries upon their independence, scarcely a month after the disintegration of the USSR in February 1992, was an agreement establishing an Interstate Coordinating Water Commission (ICWC). The Commission, consisting of the heads of the water management organizations of each republic (or their designate), was charged with hearing interstate water management disputes and, more critically, setting the annual allocation of water among the republics. The current water-sharing arrangement, a legacy of the Soviet period, clearly favors irrigation as well as the downstream states whose economies are most dependent on it. Although ICWC allocations do not always correspond to the pattern of actual withdrawals, they tend not to deviate strongly from it. Kyrgyzstan has contested the allocation regime as unfair in terms of the amounts of water it is allocated: in hydrologic year 1996–1997, it was allocated only 0.4 percent of the combined flow of the Amu Dar'ya and Syr Dary'a (Micklin, 2002, p. 517).

Officials also bemoan the fact that Kyrgyzstan is required to store water (during fall and winter) in its massive reservoirs, such as Toktogul, for release downstream for irrigation during the growing season, restricting its ability to generate badly needed hydroelectricity in winter.<sup>25</sup> Although during the Soviet period, planners sought to reimburse Kyrgyzstan for the “opportunity costs” it incurred from foregoing winter generation of hydropower by subsidizing deliveries of coal from Kazakhstan and gas from Uzbekistan (Sukhov, 2001), such annual arrangements have ranged from incomplete and erratic to nonexistent in the post-Soviet period. Consequently, the current view articulated by Kyrgyzstan's elites is that the country is giving away “free” water to neighboring countries that feel no qualms about letting its residents shiver in the winter darkness. Kyrgyzstan has thus repeatedly violated ICWC winter release limits on the Naryn River (downstream from Toktogul), reducing growing-season water availability downstream and causing winter flooding in parts of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Resenting the annual winter flooding that follows the winter generation of electricity at Toktogul, the Karimov and Nazarbayev regimes have retaliated by suspending deliveries of gas and coal (Sukhov, 2001).

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<sup>24</sup>This is in large part due to its greater population, and its intense economic dependence on a cotton monoculture. For an enlightening report on the cotton industry and its connection with organized crime in Central Asia, see International Crisis Group (ICG, 2005).

<sup>25</sup>The bulk of Kyrgyzstan's hydroelectricity is generated from four dams on the Naryn' River: Toktogul (1200 MW capacity); Kurpsay (800 MW); Tash-Kumyr (450 MW); and Shamaldy-Say (240 MW). A small fifth dam on the river, at Uch Kurgan (180 MW), is in Uzbekistan. Although the potential of other rivers such as the Chu, Talas and Karadar'ya also is being developed, the main thrust of plans to expand hydroelectricity exports relies on construction of the massive Kambarata-1 and -2 power stations (combined capacity 1840 MW) upstream from Toktogul. The plans have been on the drawing board since the mid-1980s (see Shabad, 1986 for background) and, as elaborated later, figure heavily in what appears to be the lead-up to a potentially dangerous confrontation.

What the official squabbling belies, however, is pervasive corruption in the hydro-energy sector and under-the-table deals between elites of the different countries.<sup>26</sup> The failure of regional and international agencies and agreements to manage the situation reflects the aforementioned broader phenomenon of “virtual regionalism,” in which substantive cooperation is feared as a threat to political authority (Allison, 2008, p. 186). Cooperation could, in large part, threaten elite capture of resources and threaten the status quo, which entails extra-legal enrichment of elites and their allies in the criminal underworld. As in neighboring states, water management has “remained rigorously elitist and decision makers often sought to secure immediate benefits rather than develop long-term strategies for water resource management” (Marat, 2008b, p. 236).<sup>27</sup> Under Bakiyev, corruption in the hydro-energy sector was rampant, contributing to a severe energy crisis beginning in 2008. Urban residents in particular have suffered from rolling blackouts and scheduled power outages, while water shortages resulting from accelerated wintertime hydroelectricity generation have impoverished rural populations dependent on small-scale agricultural production (ibid., pp. 236–237). The extreme conditions are reminiscent of those experienced in the immediate aftermath of the USSR’s dissolution, and increased popular resentment toward Bakiyev’s regime for these failures.

Bakiyev’s primary strategy for ameliorating energy shortfalls focused on increasing hydroelectric generating capacity. Following a meeting between Bakiyev and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in October 2008, it was announced that Russia had agreed to invest \$1.7 billion in construction of the massive Kambarata-1 and Kambarata-2 hydroelectric stations (Dubnov, 2008; Kyrgyzstan: Bakiyev, 2009).<sup>28</sup> The announcement came at a time of elevated tension between upstream and downstream states, as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had run reservoirs down far lower than normal the preceding winter to combat the effects of particularly cold weather (Khamidov, 2008); if anything, the new capacity would only exacerbate the problem.<sup>29</sup> Apparently in retaliation, in October 2009 Uzbekistan threatened to withdraw from the Central Asian Unified Grid system, a mechanism set up in 2001 to coordinate electricity swaps and deliveries among the five Central Asian states (Kyrgyzstan: Bishkek, 2009; Marat, 2010a); Kazakhstan reportedly was considering a similar move. However, events took an unexpected turn in February 2010, when Russian Energy Minister Sergey Shmatko disclosed that he and then-Kyrgyz Prime Minister Daniyar Usyonov had discussed the need for an international study on the environmental impact of the operation of the Kambarata hydrostations for the broader

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<sup>26</sup>In his interviews with experts and with law enforcement officers in Kyrgyzstan, Kupatadze (2008, p. 292) ascertained that, unofficially, “energy is sold abroad at increased prices and the kickbacks are shared among the corrupt top officials in the energy sector, who, in turn, pay off Maksim Bakiev”—the son of ex-president Bakiyev.

<sup>27</sup>Allegedly, Kyrgyzstan’s refusal to join the Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative “was partly an effort to prevent international donors from intervening in the established corruption pyramids within the hydro-energy sector” (Marat, 2008b, p. 236).

<sup>28</sup>As noted above, the two stations had been planned for many years, with site preparation already undertaken during the Soviet period; the original plan was for it to produce its first electricity in the mid-1990s (Shabad, 1986). Disintegration of the USSR put the project badly behind schedule. Although construction proceeded haltingly thereafter, the project remained far from completion due to a lack of funding.

<sup>29</sup>Like Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan is seeking to bolster its hydroelectric generating capacity through construction of an enormous new power station (Rogun). Tashkent likewise strongly opposes this project (e.g., see Panfilova, 2010).

Central Asian Region, possibly under the auspices of the World Bank (Shepherd, 2010). This raises a number of questions about the viability of the project going forward, given the use of environmental impact studies by Russian officials in the past to delay or alter the terms of projects to which they were opposed on other grounds (e.g., the Sakhalin-2 oil and gas development in 2007–2008; see Bradshaw, 2010, p. 350).<sup>30</sup>

### **Unregulated Border Trade**

In addition to resource management difficulties, another source of tension between the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan has been the issue of unregulated border trade. We must keep in mind that there is a long history of cross-border cooperation and interaction in this region, and much of the conflict centering on the issue of the border trade is stemming from the elite level, rather than the local level, where tightening of border regimes is actually more detrimental to livelihoods (Megoran et al., 2005; Fumagalli, 2007a; Megoran, 2007). Tension between the states, however, has centered around two main issues related to trade along the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border: the shuttle trade and drug trafficking.

Starting in about 2002, Uzbekistan began an effort to crack down on the cross-border shuttle trade. The Karimov regime ordered the closing of Uzbekistan's border in several places (not just with Kyrgyzstan but also Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan). The move reflected Karimov's frustration with these countries' (and especially Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's) inability or unwillingness to crack down on the activities of cross-border shuttle traders moving goods to and from Uzbekistan after that country imposed very high duties (as high as 90 percent) on imported goods. Although officially announced as part of a program to protect innocent Uzbek merchants from the unscrupulous traders flooding the country with poor-quality and unsafe products manufactured in China,<sup>31</sup> the border closures could equally be viewed as a measure to insulate Uzbekistan's relatively unreformed retail economy and non-convertible currency from free market competition (Uzbek Border, 2003).

Efforts by Uzbek customs officials to collect the duties at official border crossings were hampered by the proliferation of unofficial, locally administered crossings: for a fraction of the duties commanded by customs officials, shuttle traders were able to move to and from thriving bazaars on the Kyrgyz border (such as at Kara-Su<sup>32</sup> and Osh) by paying fees making their way into local government coffers (or personal bank accounts) (Sershen, 2006).<sup>33</sup> The dilemma, in part, is that the region's states have neither the financial resources needed to establish an

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<sup>30</sup>Among other things, Moscow reportedly was concerned that part of an early tranche of the US \$1.7 billion allotted to the project had been diverted by Bakiyev for "unintended purposes" (Shepherd, 2010).

<sup>31</sup>See Kaminski and Raballand (2009) for a description of the role of Kyrgyzstan's bazaars as entrepôts in the distribution of Chinese goods within Central Asia.

<sup>32</sup>On the Uzbek border, the Kara-Su is one of Kyrgyzstan's two largest markets, which is an important destination for Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik merchants, and also known as a distribution hub of Afghan drugs (Marat, 2008a, p. 18).

<sup>33</sup>The shuttle trade moves such commodities as diesel fuel, fruits and vegetables, cottonseed oil, and pirated media to Kyrgyzstan and rice, potatoes, and Chinese consumer goods to Uzbekistan (Umetov, 2009).

adequate number of official crossings, nor to shut down the large number of unofficial crossings that thrive in their absence. In an effort to eliminate some of the red tape encountered at the official crossings (for traders and for travelers visiting relatives alike), Uzbek and Kyrgyz authorities announced plans to initiate a visa-free travel regime between the two countries (*ibid.*); to date no official agreement has been concluded.

In recent years, incidents not directly related to commerce have provided a convenient pretext for border restrictions hindering the volume of the shuttle trade. Following a suicide bombing and armed raids executed by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Andijan and Khanabad in May 2009 (Kyrgyzstan: Hunt, 2009), which Kyrgyz officials denied originated in Kyrgyzstan, all border crossings were sealed by Uzbekistan for two days. This was followed by the digging of 3-meter wide trenches in some sections on the Uzbek side of the border, which Kyrgyz officials claimed violated previous agreements that banned fortifications along sections of the border that had not been officially demarcated (Kyrgyzstan: Uzbek Authorities, 2009). A Kyrgyz border official noted that the trenches, which pose more of an obstacle to passenger vehicles than to armed militants, were located along sections of the border where most of the shuttle trade in fruits and vegetables had been taking place (*ibid.*). Diversion of water from the irrigation system on the Uzbek side of the border to fill the trenches with water has generated complaints among farmers as well (Kyrgyzstan: Uzbek Border, 2009).

The boundary enforcement measures in recent years have largely been justified “in terms of protecting the economic and military security of the state” (Megoran et al., 2005, p. 726). In connection with the threat posed by terrorism, the Karimov regime has identified the drug trade in the region as a particular danger, considering it both an important source of terrorist funding and a highly destabilizing force contributing to violence on its borders. Although neither the Akayev nor the Bakiyev regimes were so vocal in denouncing the drug trade, it appears that precisely such trade is a central element in the continued weakness of border enforcement—despite Uzbekistan’s extreme militarization of its border and its receipt of significant U.S. funding for customs and border control (Megoran et al., 2005, pp. 733–734). Corruption and official complicity in the drug trade has a direct impact on governance, with traffickers requiring state institutions remain “weak and vulnerable to capture by criminal groups” (Lewis, 2008b, p. 178). Kyrgyzstan is a case in point; it is not clear, however, who has captured whom. Alexander Kupatadze (2008, p. 283) explains: “In the late 1990s and early 2000s, organized crime groups already had strong collaborative links with political and economic elites, giving birth to powerful political-criminal clans that totally blurred the boundaries between underworld and upperworld.” This trend only increased during Bakiyev’s tenure (Collins, 2006; Hale, 2006; Radnitz, 2006; Cummings and Ryabkov, 2008; Kupatadze, 2008; Marat, 2008a, 2008b).

Although Kyrgyzstan is not a major producer of drugs, it has become an important transit site, with widely varying estimates of the quantity of heroin annually trafficked through the country—from ca. 20 to 60 metric tons (e.g., Kupatadze, 2008, p. 288; Leonard, 2010). Drug busts are rare, however, reflecting official involvement in the trade. The “protection chain” extends into the highest reaches of Kyrgyzstan’s government. Although the situation is likely to

have changed with the ousting of Bakiyev, Kupatadze's research in 2007 confirmed that the drug trade was protected and controlled by a member of the *Jogorku Kenesh* (ibid., p. 289), while there were also reports (see above) that Bakiyev's older brother, Akhmat, controlled organized crime and drug trafficking in southern Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, "heads of customs departments are widely assumed to be the main illegal financiers of the ruling families" (Kupatadze, 2008, p. 287). The borders between criminal "underworld" and the political "upperworld" are oftentimes not only unclear to observers, but to the actors themselves:

In December 2007, Uzbek border guards detected train cargo containing radioactive cesium-137 travelling from Kyrgyzstan to Iran. The cargo was loaded in Kyrgyzstan and crossed three state borders—the Kazakh–Kyrgyz border twice and the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border once—before being caught in Uzbekistan. Kyrgyz security officials remained largely silent about the incident because the train compartment with the deadly cargo belonged to a government agency. The entire intrigue suggested that deals such as this are brokered at top political levels, and security agencies at times are unaware of them. (Marat, 2008b, pp. 233–234)

As is apparent here, any given transaction may involve a myriad combination of elements of the "political–business–criminal nexus" acting in concert. Regardless of whether the "underworld" or the "upperworld" that has the upper hand, the weakness of Kyrgyzstan's border regulation reflects the strength of crime–state relations, which have far-reaching consequences, not only for the country's domestic politics, but for its relations with neighboring and distant states.

## **GEOPOLITICAL ISSUES**

This section addresses broader political geographic issues that serve as an important backdrop to the interethnic conflict that arose in June 2010. First, we examine the role of the ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, in addition to their relationship with the state of Uzbekistan. Following (from) this, we consider the issue of terrorist activity in the region and its implications for Kyrgyz–Uzbek state relations. Lastly, we describe the role of international actors in Kyrgyzstan, concentrating on those who were the most likely candidates for involvement in diffusing the conflict—the United States, Russia, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – but who largely remained on the sidelines.

### **Uzbeks as a "Beached Diaspora"?**

In his discussion of the status of ethnic Russians after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Laitin (1998, p. 29) referred to them as a "beached diaspora" (see also Harris, 1993). Here we consider the position of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan as a similar case of a large ethnic group located outside of

its titular republic upon the country's newfound independence. Although the nation-state is a veritable myth (nowhere in the world do national borders perfectly match those of a state), it is a powerful myth, which leads us to examine how the Uzbek diaspora in Kyrgyzstan has navigated its position between its country of residence and its purported "homeland." In the division of Soviet land, territorial jurisdiction was ascribed to certain nationalities, but "territory" and "nation" were neither spatially, conceptually, nor legally congruent. Through the complex and dynamic mechanism of Soviet nationalities policies, autonomous territories came to be seen as "belonging" to the titular nations, which in turn privileged these groups in "their" republics (Kaiser, 1992, p. 280; Brubaker, 1996, pp. 39–40; Slezkine, 1996; Martin, 2001, p. 151). In its political-territorial understanding, national identity in the Soviet Union brought with it concrete advantages and disadvantages, but advantages granted to certain nationalities were only available to those residing in "their own" republics (Slezkine, 1996, p. 228). Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, for example, were thus generally excluded from the ranks of power in the Kyrgyz SSR.

Following Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991, the general lack of involvement of ethnic Uzbeks in the country's domestic politics continued. Yet unlike the enormous out-migration of Russians from the ethnic republics (generally since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but a process that began perhaps a decade earlier), Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan did not leave the country en masse. In the 1990s, much scholarly attention was paid to the question of the relationship between diaspora populations and their nominal "homelands" (Kaiser, 1992, 1994; Brubaker, 1996; Chinn and Kaiser, 1996; Laitin, 1998). The connection between diaspora and "homeland" can be seen as a "dynamic political stance" (Brubaker, 1996, p. 60) contingent upon the agency of identity or ethnopolitical "entrepreneurs," whose goal it is to create a sense of connectedness between the diaspora population and the territorial homeland (Laitin, 1998, p. 31). These entrepreneurs may or may not be successful, or there may not even be such an effort on the part of elites to cultivate loyalty from the diaspora residing abroad. Uzbekistan's relationship with Uzbeks abroad is a case in point of the latter.

Uzbekistan does not have a diaspora policy (Fumagalli, 2007a, p. 115), which may in part be due to the fact that Uzbeks already constituted a large majority in Uzbekistan upon independence (unlike Kazakhstan), and President Karimov failed to see the return of co-ethnics abroad as necessary (*ibid.*, p. 108). Another factor lies in the nature of the Karimov regime's nation-building project, which has largely centered on articulating *external* threats to the country's sovereignty, i.e., foreign terrorists (Megoran, 2005, 2007; Fumagalli, 2007a). Thus, Karimov's imagination of the Uzbek nation "would map it as coterminous with the newly-independent nation-state, demarcated by new boundaries" (Megoran, 2007, p. 265).<sup>34</sup> This is not just a passive exclusion, but an active rejection—especially of those Uzbeks residing in Osh and other parts of the Fergana Valley. The Karimov regime's suspicion toward them "is particularly acute,

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<sup>34</sup>Megoran (2007, p. 265) found that "Osh Uzbeks reject this [view], prioritising non-territorialised kinship practices over the institution of nation-state and international boundaries." Similarly, Fumagalli (2007a, p. 111) determined that "Uzbekistani Uzbeks do not regard Uzbeks living on the other side of the border as different."

due to the alleged [imagined or real] association between the religious sentiment of the valley's dwellers and their involvement in militant activities" (Fumagalli, 2007a, p. 118). According to Fumagalli (ibid., p. 115), this is precisely why Uzbekistan has not developed a policy aimed at the repatriation or protection of co-ethnics abroad.

In the unfolding of the violent episodes in June 2010, there was an apparent disjuncture between popular perceptions among Uzbeks (in Kyrgyzstan) of Uzbekistan as a "natural safe haven" (Levy, 2010g), as evidenced by the massive outflow of refugees to Uzbekistan, and Uzbekistan's elite-level wariness of the Uzbek diaspora, as evidenced by the general reluctance to accept refugees and efforts to close the border as quickly as possible. The government was also incredibly eager to repatriate the refugees out of fear that they could cause unrest because "they were a more politically active community than the citizens of Uzbekistan" (i.e., they were citizens of a more liberal state than Uzbekistan), with some refugees purportedly being told by Uzbek authorities that they would lose their Kyrgyz citizenship if they did not return before the June 27 constitutional referendum (Kramer, 2010f, p. A8).

### **Armed Incursions**

The Karimov regime's wariness of threats emanating from this region of Kyrgyzstan is not completely without basis. In August and September 1999, as many as 1,000 armed militants entered southwestern Kyrgyzstan from Tajikistan (where they were nominally engaged in operations in Tajikistan's civil war). Belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the group called for Karimov's secular regime to be replaced with an Islamic state (Mogorin, 2004, p. 740). They declared Uzbekistan, not Kyrgyzstan, to be their real target and called their actions the beginning of a *jihād* against "the tyrannical government of Uzbekistan and the puppet Islam Karimov and his henchmen" (Khalid, 2007, p. 159). The group encountered sporadic resistance from Kyrgyz forces before being repulsed by Uzbek forces at Uzbekistan's border.<sup>35</sup> Before the onset of winter, all but roughly 100 were able to filter back into Tajikistan, in part through the efforts of Kyrgyz negotiators (see Panin and Stepanov, 1999).

The immediate response from Uzbekistan was the rapid increase of checkpoints throughout the Fergana Valley (Mogorin et al., 2005, p. 719). The events prompted the first of many criticisms by Karimov and Uzbek officials of Kyrgyzstan's seeming inability to secure its borders against such incursions. The government blamed Kyrgyzstan for being too weak to stop the militants (Khalid, 2007, p. 159) and went on to make a show of its boundary enforcement thereafter. Responding to the criticism, Kyrgyzstan's President Akayev created a commission to demarcate Kyrgyzstan's borders<sup>36</sup> and signed legislation designed to enhance the country's border security

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<sup>35</sup>The IMU fought with the opposition in the Tajik civil war and received refuge in areas of Tajikistan still controlled by the opposition after the 1997 ceasefire. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (in response to the September 11 events) in 2001, the IMU moved its operations to Afghanistan in order to fight alongside the Taliban (ICG, 2001). From time to time it is believed the IMU still makes use of eastern Tajikistan as a base of operations.

By 2009, this commission reportedly had demarcated nearly three-fourths of Kyrgyzstan's shared border with Uzbekistan (Khamidov, 2009a).

(Megoran, 1999). A new province, Batken, was carved out of the western portion of Osh so as to more effectively administer the remote area traversed by the insurgents. The border thus became a site where power was manifested, where elites in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan used the incursions “to assert their geopolitical visions of the relationship between state, nation, and territory—and underlined their roles as the personal champions of these ideas” (Megoran, 2004, p. 737).

The militants returned in smaller numbers the following summer, but this time encountered more organized resistance from Kyrgyz forces and were turned back (Islamic Rebels, 2000). Although this 2000 campaign marked the end of organized incursions into Batken from the south (with minor exception in 2006; Wilensky-Lanford, 2006), it reinforced the image of Kyrgyzstan as potentially harboring a number of threats, and reinforcements along the Uzbek side of the border proceeded unabated. In early 2000, Uzbekistan attempted to unilaterally demarcate its borders with some of its neighbors—going so far as to mine portions of its border, supposedly as a “counterinsurgency measure” (Gleason, 2001, pp. 1090–1091). This militarization of Uzbekistan’s border has been marred by violence, with a high “death toll of people who have strayed onto Uzbek minefields, been shot when smuggling, or died accidentally when following precarious contraband routes to avoid customs officials and guards” (Megoran et al., 2005, p. 732). Notably, the official focus on border delineation obscures the fact that, due to concerns about terrorist activity in neighboring countries, Uzbekistan exercises certain extra-territorial influence, maintaining “a form of informal control in cities like Osh through a network of informants among the local population” (Fumagalli, 2007a, p. 115).<sup>37</sup>

### “Great Power” Rivalry?

Geopolitical discussions of Central Asia often portray the region as a stomping ground for “Great Powers” in conflict for influence—a portrayal that overwhelmingly neglects the agency of the individual regimes to navigate (successfully or otherwise) the seemingly resilient Cold War construct of opposing “Western” and “Russian” interests (Heathershaw, 2007b, p. 135). As we shall demonstrate in this section, such a monolithic interpretation of geopolitics in Central Asia does not get us very far. We thus do not take a *longue durée* approach to the issue of supposed “Great Power” conflict, but focus on the specific case at hand: international reactions to Kyrgyzstan’s outbreak of ethnic violence in June 2010. “Pro-Russian” and “pro-Western” labels obscure the fact that Central Asian elites often have little ideological commitment to a given foreign policy orientation, but in their 20 years of independence, have rather tended to play “off different powers against each other to produce the most advantageous political and economic benefits” (Lewis, 2008b, p. 215). In Kyrgyzstan, the central tool for this leveraging has been its leasing of military bases to Russia and the United States; although in the case of Bakiyev, this “gamesmanship” was ultimately a factor in his political demise.

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<sup>37</sup>This might explain, for example, such incidents as the murder of Alisher Saipov. Saipov, an ethnic Uzbek (Kyrgyz citizen) journalist and well-known, outspoken opponent of the Karimov regime, was murdered in Osh in December 2007. It is widely believed that the assailants were members of the Uzbek security services (see Stern, 2007c).



Media discussions of the interethnic fighting in June 2010 have often pointed to the importance of Kyrgyzstan's two military bases (Kant and Manas) to other international actors, suggesting that their respective Russian and U.S. military presence there might provide an impetus for their intervention in the conflict. However, the events have been most notable for the absence of international intervention. The United States and its partners in Europe have been rather quiet, seemingly signaling that Russia should play a leading role in a possible humanitarian intervention (Felgenhauer, 2010) and being content with United Nations relief efforts. Russia, China, and the regional security organizations of which they are a part (the CSTO and the SCO), also have been remarkably reticent to act, and the events have in fact exposed significant divisions among member states.

Much of the hesitation on the part of Kyrgyzstan's would-be allies stems not just from elite confusion over who to support, but more broadly from fears of the "color revolution" phenomenon. Although scholars have convincingly argued that these regime changes in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) were not exactly "revolutionary" (e.g., Cummings, 2008), these events have contributed to an important debate in much of Eurasia about the dangers of democratization. As perceived by elites, the threat is largely to regime security; although there is a popular perception of the threat as well, in which the "color revolutions" are associated with chaos and disorder (Kupatadze, 2008). For at least the past five years, these threat perceptions have been important in framing interactions among CIS states, China, and the West.

Especially since the "color revolutions," the CSTO (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) and the SCO (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) have served the function of "protective integration" (i.e., with Russia and each other), which creates a basis for political solidarity among the leaders and against Western "democracy-promotion" efforts (Allison, 2008, p. 188). However, the actual substance and internal cohesion of these organizations (described above as "virtual regionalism") is questionable. The CSTO does not provide any additional security benefits from Russia that members do not already have from bilateral agreements, whereas Russia benefits more insofar as it can deploy forces locally "under the guise of CSTO mutual support" (ibid., p. 194). And though the CSTO has increasingly come to be viewed by Central Asian regimes as an instrument for enlisting Russian support for regime security, it might be unrealistic for member states to assume that Russia would automatically take their side (ibid., pp. 193, 195). Nor does the SCO, which includes China as a counterbalance to Russia, open any exceptional avenues for regional cooperation, especially given its members' continual affirmation of its unique "Shanghai spirit," a norm of non-interference in domestic affairs of member states. These organizations have, nonetheless, served as a discussion forum and a means for China and Russia to exert pressure on other members to achieve certain foreign policy goals. In recent years, this has centered on the U.S. military presence in Central Asia.

After the Andijan uprising of May 2005, in which Uzbekistan's armed forces massacred around 500 citizens (according to OSCE estimations), the SCO rallied to defend Uzbekistan's actions

(Heathershaw, 2007b, p. 133). President Karimov subsequently kicked out U.S. military forces from its base at Karshi-Khanabad. At the SCO summit on July 5, 2005, member states also called for Kyrgyzstan to develop a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces at its Manas base (Lewis, 2008b, p. 224). Although it is commonplace to refer to Russian irritation at perceived U.S. encroachment on “their” sphere of influence in Central Asia, Lewis (*ibid.*, p. 222) suggests that China may have been even more concerned by the presence of U.S. troops in the region, seeing it as a “long-term effort at encirclement of China.” Since the July 2005 resolution, however, Bakiyev’s regime displayed an inconsistent and rent-seeking approach in its policy toward the base. Kyrgyzstan’s relations with Russia became increasingly shaky when Bakiyev reneged on a pledge to expel American forces from Manas, after receiving a US\$2 billion loan guarantee from Russia in 2009.<sup>38</sup> Russian officials by this time (some two months prior to Bakiyev’s ouster) had already grown uneasy with Bakiyev’s precarious position and “made no secret” that they had become disillusioned with his regime (Blagov, 2010a). In July 2009, soon after Bakiyev concluded the agreement with the U.S. on renewed use of the Manas air base, “Kyrgyz opposition leaders began to get audiences with leaders in Moscow” (Kramer, 2010a, p. A6), culminating with a March 2010 meeting between Otunbayeva and Sergey Mironov, speaker of Russia’s Federation Council and a close associate of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Bakiyev himself was aware of Russian outrage at his government’s continuation of the United States’ Manas contract, which he saw as playing a role in his ouster (Kirgisiens, 2010). After the regime change in April 2010, Russian officials were quick to develop ties with the interim government, pledging a US\$20 million grant, a US\$30 million preferential loan, and promising to supply 25,000 tons of fuel and oil products to the country (Blagov, 2010a). Foreshadowing the divisions that would become apparent in the CSTO (McDermott, 2010), Bakiyev was granted asylum in Belarus, which angered Russian officials enough to make them threaten to cut natural gas supplies to the country (Felgenhauer, 2010). Russian and regional support wavered, however, with the outbreak of violence in June 2010, when the interim government became incapable of controlling security forces and increasingly seemed to lack legitimacy.

Several days after the violence broke out on June 10, Kyrgyzstan’s interim government asked for Russian help in controlling the situation. However, Russian officials only indicated they would consider the request, and sent paratroopers to protect its own military facilities at the Kant base on 13 June (Schwartz, 2010a). At an emergency meeting of the CSTO, members offered humanitarian assistance, but made no commitment to send troops and merely labeled the situation “intolerable” (Schwartz and Barry, 2010). Likewise, at a June 11 SCO summit, the organization refrained from making any formal statement on the situation and claimed it would “consider” multilateral aid to Kyrgyzstan (Blagov, 2010b; Sharip, 2010). By June 18, Kyrgyz

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<sup>38</sup> Another point of contention (in addition to the aforementioned spending irregularities at the Kambarata hydroelectric stations) seemed to be Kyrgyzstan’s Dastan defense plant, which produced torpedoes and other military hardware. After promises in October 2007 to grant Russia a 37.3 percent stake in the plant in exchange for \$30 million and writing off outstanding debts, Dastan was instead placed under Maksim Bakiyev’s control (Blagov, 2010a).

officials realized that help from Russia was not forthcoming, and withdrew their request for support, but asked the OSCE to send an international police force on June 24 (Kramer, 2010d).

The inaction of Russia and other CSTO and SCO members in June 2010 has several possible explanations. The first is connected to Russia's domestic political environment. Felgenhauer (2010) argues that the Russian mass media and internet blogging community have tended to portray the Central Asian citizens as unworthy of support and sacrifice. Xenophobically casting them as "unwanted aliens," these popular media voices do not support putting Russian conscripts in harm's way.<sup>39</sup> Unlike Uzbekistan's relationship with its Uzbek diaspora, Russia has generally supported a policy of protecting "its" co-nationals (i.e., ethnic Russians) abroad (evidenced, for example, by recent intervention in South Ossetia). But because it was not apparent that Russians were threatened in Kyrgyzstan (McDermott, 2010), this frame could not be deployed. McDermott (2010) also suggests that Russian officials may have been wary of legality issues, in addition to the complexity of devising and financing such a mission. Russian officials were also seemingly concerned with the interim government's democratic rhetoric, with President Medvedev warning that the new, especially liberal (for Central Asia) constitution was dangerous and might even lead to an "unpleasant collapse of the state" (Marat, 2010b). Russian officials may view this as pandering to the West and its penchant for democratization rhetoric, and are worried about the true allegiances of the interim government once its power is consolidated.

A second reason underlying regional powers' inaction could be internal conflict within their organizations over how to approach the situation. In addition to structural obstacles to cooperation, such as the "Shanghai spirit" of non-interference, a high degree of mistrust among member states continues to shape foreign policies. Russian commentators have expressed concern that Russian inaction in the region could leave a vacuum to be filled by China (McDermott, 2010), while China's President, Hu Jintao, actually showed little interest in Kyrgyzstan's "internal affairs" at the June SCO meeting (Sharip, 2010). By no means new to the CSTO, infighting over Bakiyev's asylum was an early sign of the difficulty of developing a coordinated response to Kyrgyzstan's troubles.<sup>40</sup>

## CONCLUSION

International confusion about how best to deal with Kyrgyzstan's instability in 2010 seems to be paralleled by domestic confusion on the part of the interim government. From the point of view of international observers, it is not entirely clear to what extent to government retains control of the country's security forces, especially in the south.<sup>41</sup> It is also still unclear what the exact cause of the violence was. Western media have generally accepted the interim government's

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<sup>39</sup>This position has been a point of contention, however, with some commentators bemoaning Russian inaction as a sign of Russian military and political impotence (McDermott, 2010).

<sup>40</sup>Ironically, this issue does not appear to have derailed a long-awaited agreement forging an economic union among Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, concluded on 5 July (Kramer, 2010h).

<sup>41</sup>Although Otunbayeva denies that the interim government does not have full control, Bolot E. Sherniyazov, the interior minister, acknowledged that he was in command of 80 percent of the Ministry of Interior, with the other 20 percent "still waffling" (Kramer, 2010e).

accusation that Bakiyev instigated the attacks so as to contest the opposition's efforts to consolidate its newfound power.<sup>42</sup> While Bakiyev's strong family connections in security and law-enforcement structures lend support to this argument, subsequent events have tended to challenge it. Interim leader Roza Otunbayeva's actions and statements have increasingly failed to correspond with continued persecution of Uzbeks in the south (Marat, 2010b), where the government-authorized investigation has, according to human rights groups, turned into a campaign against ethnic Uzbek political and religious leaders (Kramer, 2010g). Meanwhile, the domestic intelligence agency is increasingly drawing on discourses about international terrorism and blaming Islamist radicals for the violence (ibid.). Although Bakiyev's ouster represents at minimum a nominal regime change, we are probably seeing a repeat of 2005, with "a handful of political elites going in circles" (McGlinchey, 2010, p. A17).

Yet as earlier studies of ethnic violence in Fergana (Tishkov, 1995; Abramson, 1997; Megoran, 2007) have demonstrated, the "true" cause of the violence may be impossible to reveal, inasmuch as participants and victims tend to remember the events differently. On the ground, the power of rumor is undeniable. In 2010, two popular Kyrgyz rumors regarding the cause of the conflict shed light on some issues that are typical touch points in nationalist rhetoric. One is the idea that Uzbekistan desires to take over southern Kyrgyzstan (Barry, 2010), and the other that Uzbeks raped Kyrgyz women in a university dormitory (Boudreaux, 2010b; Pannier, 2010); both were seen as reasons to justify retaliation against Uzbek "aggressors." Both rumors manifest a nationalist anxiety about the integrity of the Kyrgyz territory, with the national "body" not limited to physical territory, but also the bodies of women (Mayer, 2004). Likewise, the Uzbek diaspora obviously feared for its national body, with 90 percent of the refugees being women and children (Levy, 2010g), and they likely remember having been the target of widespread rape in the 1990 Osh violence (Tishkov, 1995). As the elite politicians work out their differences, and as one or another interpretation of the conflict becomes hegemonic, the general population's memory of the violence will most likely continue to be ambiguous. Ultimately, it is these memories (which may be influenced by rumors as much as eyewitness experience) that will filter relationships between individuals and the entopolitical entrepreneurs who claim to represent them.

We thus cannot conclude by identifying a particular cause and effect relationship explaining the 2010 ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan, but rather have argued that various intertwining political geographic issues set the stage for its ambiguity and complexity. By avoiding an "ethnic conflict" frame in interpreting the violent episodes, we hope to escape reliance on politically charged definitions that impose limits to our understanding of the conflict and the response to it. By taking a disaggregated approach, we have acknowledged that although there seem to be real differences (class and otherwise) between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz residing in Kyrgyzstan, the outbreak of violence was much more complicated than the sudden ignition of the Central Asian "tinderbox" (as the region is often described). Historical, political, and geographic relationships have long been implicated in making this conflict possible, but its particular manifestation in the

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<sup>42</sup>Indeed, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton indicated that those accusations might be plausible (Levy, 2010d).

June 2010 violence is deeply contextual and was by no means a “natural” disaster bound to happen.

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