

KYRGYZSTAN AT TWENTY-FIVE: TREADING WATER

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With its high mountain vistas and early efforts to cultivate ties with the West, Kyrgyzstan once was hailed as the “Switzerland of Central Asia”—a peaceful, multiethnic, democratic outpost of 6 million inhabitants in the midst of post-Soviet authoritarianism. Yet, for most of its twenty-five years of independence, impoverished Kyrgyzstan in reality has borne little resemblance to Switzerland, a country with high living standards, stable governance, and a generally low level of corruption. The democratic experiment in Kyrgyzstan has thus far been a story of euphoric hopes and lost opportunity. While the country could yet evolve into an island of harmonious pluralism with stable institutions and successful international relationships, global and domestic trends may be pointing Kyrgyzstan in a different direction, namely toward greater dependence on outside powers that nonetheless view it with indifference.

Since independence, the country has gone through repeated ill-fated turns away from democracy under leaders who initially appear promising, yet grow progressively corrupt and autocratic. Two of these presidents have been ousted in popular revolts, not via the ballot box, and the current president, whose time in office is limited to one term, appears to be searching for ways to retain his influence after his term expires in 2017. To some degree, despite many obvious differences, Kyrgyzstan’s political profile resembles that of Ukraine, another object of unfulfilled Western hopes and assistance. As has occurred repeatedly in the past, Kyrgyzstan’s recent reform efforts are being stymied by entrenched interest groups, many of which have found ways to co-opt—or infiltrate—the country’s democratic institutions. Civil society is robust and boasts a number of highly skilled experts, yet it has not proven strong enough to build a transparent political and economic system. Ethnic divisions inside the country prompt fears of interference by more powerful neighbors—even if Kyrgyzstan’s minority Uzbek population for the most part harbors no love for authoritarian Tashkent.

While many Kyrgyz are justifiably proud of their country’s relative liberalism, their living standards provide fodder for a narrative

avored by the region’s autocrats—that liberalism and social welfare are incompatible in the post-Soviet context. Kyrgyzstan is ranked 120 out of 188 countries in the UN Human Development Index, below more authoritarian neighbors like Kazakhstan (56), Azerbaijan (78), and Uzbekistan (114). Growing poverty and poor governance are also a toxic combination that could increase the attractiveness of radical ideologies among disenfranchised parts of the population.

Western observers are frustrated at Kyrgyzstan’s continued failure to live up to its perceived potential. Hopes that the country’s human rights activists and vocal media, buoyed by generous aid, would eventually overcome pervasive corruption and transform the country into a regional success have given way to what might be called “Kyrgyzstan fatigue.” The West is increasingly reluctant—particularly in the post-Afghanistan world—to trouble itself with a small, poor Central Asian state whose version of Western-style democracy often discredits the concept.

Kyrgyzstan’s decisions to join the Eurasian Economic Union and to not renew a bilateral cooperation agreement with the United

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States in 2015 suggest it, too, is distancing itself from the Euro-Atlantic community. So does Kyrgyz security services' harsh treatment of those they accuse—often with little evidence—of extremism, and their harassment of civil society and human rights advocates. However, tying its future so tightly to Russia's has created potential long-term problems for Bishkek as the Russian economy falters and as Moscow's foreign policy becomes much harder to predict. Fears that Russia may not be a reliable security and economic partner could explain why Bishkek officials recently have been dropping hints at their willingness to repair relations with Washington and why they eagerly welcomed German Chancellor Angela Merkel's July 2016 visit to the country.

A DYNAMIC BUT SHAKY START

Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akayev, set Kyrgyzstan on a path of liberalization and Western integration in the 1990s by launching political, economic, and social reforms, and by concluding the now-canceled bilateral cooperation agreement with the United States that opened the way for extensive international assistance. Much of that assistance went to social welfare, health, civil society, media freedom, and interethnic unity. Akayev generally said the right things about democracy and minority rights and was rewarded by the large number of Western organizations, including the American University of Central Asia, that set up shop in the country. These early efforts contributed to the creation of the most vibrant civil society in Central Asia and one of the more dynamic ones in the former Soviet space. In fact, for much of the first decade of its independence, Kyrgyzstan was the quintessential example of reform in Central Asia. For example, it joined the World Trade Organization in 1998, long before Russia or any of its Central Asian neighbors did. By 2000, however, Akayev began displaying a distinct aversion to political pluralism, much to the concern of many Western stakeholders, and the country's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures appeared to slow.

Western concern about democratic backsliding under Akayev was largely swept aside after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, at which point Washington began to take a decidedly pragmatic approach to Kyrgyzstan. The United States established the Manas Transit Center outside of Bishkek, an airbase that became the key transit point for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops going in and out of Afghanistan. For the next decade, Manas was the prism through which the United States conducted relations with Kyrgyzstan; when domestic and international observers voiced concerns about growing corruption, the poor investment climate, and democratic shortfalls, Washington largely relegated these issues to the back burner. Furthermore, Manas not only distracted

Washington from growing corruption and poor governance in Kyrgyzstan but also became a nexus of Kyrgyz corruption itself, damaging the United States' image in the country. In 2003, rumors began to emerge that Akayev and his family were profiting from lucrative U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) contracts to supply fuel to the airbase. Akayev's legitimacy had already been tarnished by a deadly crackdown on public protesters in 2002, and the new allegations cost him much of what remained of his public support. Ousted in the 2005 Tulip Revolution after a disputed parliamentary election, Akayev fled to Moscow, where he now lives.

ANOTHER FALSE START

The West hailed the Tulip Revolution as a watershed in Kyrgyzstan's democratic development, but Akayev's successor, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, proved equally corrupt and more divisive. Control of DOD fuel contracts passed seamlessly from Akayev's family to Bakiyev's now-infamous son Maksim, who reportedly profited more handsomely from the U.S. military presence in the country than the Akayevs ever did, again tarnishing Washington's image. Meanwhile, where Akayev had spoken of Kyrgyzstan as the common home of different ethnic groups, Bakiyev catered to ethnic Kyrgyz nationalist sentiment in his home base of the Fergana Valley, a multiethnic region in the south where ethnic Uzbeks constitute a majority in many districts and parts of the border with Uzbekistan remain disputed.

When Bakiyev was overthrown in street protests in April 2010, history seemed to repeat itself—only now, Kyrgyzstan's population was more jaded when it came to Western-style democracy than it had been in 2005, and more divided along ethnic lines. Bakiyev's ouster led to the worst instability in Kyrgyzstan in the post-Soviet era. A provisional coalition government, led by veterans of the two previous administrations, took the reins in Bishkek, but it lacked strong pro-reform credentials and firm control over former Bakiyev strongholds in the Fergana Valley. In its first months in power, it watched helplessly as patronage networks linked to the Bakiyev family struggled—at times violently—to hold onto their assets. Meanwhile, ethnic tensions rose as Uzbek political and business leaders in Kyrgyzstan, whose influence Bakiyev eroded considerably, agitated for a larger role in the post-Bakiyev state. These tensions culminated with riots between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the southern city of Osh that left about 470 people dead.

STARTING OVER AGAIN

When the bloodshed stopped, Kyrgyzstan entered a period of halting reforms, rising nationalism, and deceptive stability. On June 27, 2010, mere weeks after the riots, the provisional government

pushed through constitutional amendments that established a mixed presidential-parliamentary system in which the president is popularly elected and the prime minister is nominated by the majority party in the parliament and appointed by the president. The president also controls the security services, giving the holder of that office greater power. In 2011, in what remains a precedent for the region, the interim president Roza Otunbayeva, the first and only female head of state in Central Asia, became the first Central Asian leader to give up power willingly, albeit to someone in her own party, the centrist Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK). She was succeeded by the current president, Almazbek Atambayev, who was hardly a fresh face. Nonetheless, despite his being a three-time presidential candidate and former prime minister under Bakiyev, his electoral victory at the time was a triumph of moderate ideals over radical nationalist forces.

Five years later, however, Kyrgyzstan's old problems remain. The mixed presidential-parliamentary model has yet to produce a stable and more transparent government or to increase citizens' trust in the political process. In April 2016, Kyrgyzstan lost its second prime minister in less than a year when Temir Sariyev stepped down amid allegations that he had benefited from a contract awarded to a Chinese road construction company. Sariyev, the country's twenty-seventh prime minister since independence, was replaced by a longtime Atambayev ally. Political parties have not matured and still revolve around a few leading personalities. This is due in part to a closed-list electoral system in which the party leadership, not voters, determines which deputies enter parliament. The end result is a situation in which party leaders use their parties as patronage networks, allowing them to arbitrate between competing interest groups below them. In effect, the patronage system has adapted to the country's new, more diffuse political system. In place of Bakiyev's presidential patronage network in which wealth was concentrated in the hands of his family and close associates, the country now has a patronage system that is more pluralistic, but no more conducive to good governance.

In fact, the country's corruption problems appear to have worsened in recent years. Since a greater number of elite groups are now able to compete for power and property, the scope of corruption appears to be expanding and affecting a larger segment of society, as the International Crisis Group noted in 2015. A 2013 survey by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) found that more business and economic entities had become victims of solicitation than during the Bakiyev era. Among firms taking part in the survey, 49 percent said they were forced to pay off officials, up from 37 percent in 2008. The country ranks 67 of out 189 in

the World Bank's Doing Business 2016 report. By comparison, impoverished Armenia—which is highly dependent on Russia—ranks 35.

Kyrgyzstan's court system likewise has not improved on its record of independence or transparency. The same EBRD survey found that the number of firms considering the court system fair, impartial, and uncorrupted dropped from 34 percent in 2008 to 9 percent in 2013. Prominent nongovernmental organization (NGO) activists say reform of the court system and the prosecutor's office remains heavily politicized and that corruption prosecutions are highly political.

Although President Atambayev is not an autocrat, he may be moving toward securing his hold on power after his term in office ends. Given previous presidents' penchant for changing the constitution, the 2010 version specifically banned any constitutional amendments until 2020—a provision that Atambayev last year seemed willing to contest. In mid-2015, his government called for reforms to the constitution in what human rights activists fear is an attempt to secure his political party's hold on power once he steps down from office. The proposal has been dropped for now, but it appears very similar to the successful bid by fellow term-limited Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan to enhance the constitutional power of the prime minister—a position many Armenians claim Sargsyan or one of his close allies plans to assume in order to retain formal power once his presidency is over.

Criminal probes by the Kyrgyz security services against NGOs, government attempts to influence courts, unexplained attacks against journalists, and calls to adopt Russian-style restrictive NGO and anti-gay legislation raise concerns that the civil society space is slowly being squeezed under Atambayev. It is for these reasons that Freedom House ranks Kyrgyzstan as only "partly free." Equally worrying is the persistence of nationalist rhetoric—a problem in a country with significant Uzbek and Russian minorities and border disputes with its neighbors.

OLD DIVISIONS PERSIST

While there have been no major outbreaks of violence in Kyrgyzstan since 2010, the painful legacy of the Osh riots lingers. The official Kyrgyz narrative of the riots blames the ethnic-Uzbek minority population, specifically "Uzbek ethnic secessionists" who allegedly carried out organized attacks against ethnic Kyrgyz. They reportedly did so with the support of an unlikely alliance of fighters from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the remnants of the United Tajik Opposition, and the family of deposed president Bakiyev—all of

whom are easy scapegoats for the ills of the country and the region as a whole. At the same time, the violence committed by ethnic Kyrgyz in Osh is explained as spontaneous, unorganized, and in self-defense.

International organizations and many Kyrgyz nongovernmental organizations endorse a version of the Osh events that is essentially the opposite of the government narrative: that Uzbek-perpetrated violence was brutal but largely spontaneous and that the local government in Osh was complicit in—or at least did nothing to prevent—organized attacks on Uzbek neighborhoods.

These diametrically opposed views of the Osh riots have caused significant tension internally, as well as between Kyrgyzstan and its Western partners.

The state's response to the Osh riots continues to tarnish its democracy record, as does the Uzbek community's disenfranchisement. While 74 percent of those killed reportedly were ethnic Uzbeks, so were 79 percent of those later accused by Kyrgyz law enforcement of participation in the violence. A 2011 report found that Uzbeks were more than 30 times as likely as ethnic Kyrgyz to have been convicted of murder in connection to the Osh events. Due to the state's apparent bias against the Uzbek population, many Uzbeks have withdrawn from political life. While ethnic Uzbeks constitute roughly 14 percent of the country's population, since 2010, only three of the 120 parliamentary delegates have been Uzbeks. (Ethnic Russians make up about 8 percent of the population, and there are four in parliament; a deputy prime minister is also an ethnic Russian.) The October 2015 parliamentary elections did not bring more ethnic Uzbeks into the country's legislature, highlighting the political system's failure to reflect the country's full diversity. Marginalization of the country's Uzbek population and frequent harassment of that ethnic group by security services are a regular concern for local and international human rights groups and could be pushing some young Uzbeks toward radical ideologies.

Meanwhile, politicians who espouse Kyrgyz nationalist rhetoric remain prominent in the opposition, particularly the Ata Jurt party—which could explain the relatively good showing of Atambayev's SDPK among the Uzbek population in Osh. Seeing the rise of Ata Jurt, however, more moderate parties have incorporated the rhetoric of their more radical counterparts, and one, the formerly centrist Respublika party, even merged with Ata Jurt in October 2014. With turnout at around 59 percent, the combined Respublika–Ata Jurt won 20 percent of the vote in the 2015 parliamentary elections, coming in second after SDPK, which

garnered just over 27 percent. Respublika–Ata Jurt was not invited to join the new coalition government, but with 28 seats it is the largest opposition party in parliament and continues to push a nationalist agenda.

SHIFTING FOREIGN POLICY APPROACHES

The U.S. Department of State gave Azimjan Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek human rights activist who was sentenced to life in prison after the 2010 riots in what many domestic and international legal experts believe was not a fair trial, a Human Rights Defender Award in July 2015. The decision to honor him led to Kyrgyzstan's annulment of a 1993 bilateral cooperation agreement with the United States and the most public spat between the two countries in years. The award touched a sore point for Bishkek; many Kyrgyz believed that Washington was siding with the Uzbek minority in a domestic political issue. While the decision to annul the agreement certainly damaged Kyrgyzstan's image in the United States, it was just the latest sign of a steep downturn in bilateral relations that began with tensions over the Manas Transit Center. Its closure in 2014—a decision that Atambayev reportedly made at Russia's urging—followed years of haggling over how much the United States should pay to retain its presence at Manas that left Washington decidedly exasperated. With Manas gone, Bishkek lost an important constituency in the U.S. Department of Defense.

As Kyrgyzstan has grown alienated from the West, it has grown closer to Russia. This shift stems from a number of factors, including direct and indirect pressure from Moscow, opportunistic self-interest on the part of Bishkek, a genuine desire for Russian security guarantees, sincere disillusionment with the West, and strong cultural ties with Russia. Still, Bishkek's approach to foreign policy tends to be transactional, and given that Russia's current capacity is limited, it is already showing signs of looking elsewhere—including to the West again—for support.

With the closure of the U.S. facility at Manas, Russia has increased its military presence in Kyrgyzstan, which is governed by the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Russia's Defense Ministry announced in 2015 that it operates surveillance drones out of the country. Of all the benefits of increased closeness with Russia, Kyrgyzstan's leadership is most enthusiastic about Russia's security assistance, due to real or perceived threats from neighboring Uzbekistan, growing instability in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and fears of extremism at home.

Kyrgyzstan's ability to respond to any internal or external security issue is highly constrained given its meager military capabilities

and small defense budget. Military spending was roughly \$230 million in 2014—much of it lost to corruption. Given the NATO drawdown in Afghanistan and the West’s growing indifference to Central Asia, Russia is an obvious partner for dealing with security threats. However, Bishkek cannot count on Russian assistance in an emergency. Russia and the CSTO largely stood on the sidelines during Kyrgyzstan’s March 2016 border dispute with Uzbekistan, as they did during the 2010 violence inside the country.

Bishkek’s disenchantment with the West has coincided with a legislative push to reorder Kyrgyzstan’s political, cultural, and civil society landscape according to so-called traditional values. While experts say this push enjoys significant grassroots support, some of the legislation associated bears resemblance to laws passed in Russia that seek to counteract Western cultural and political influence. In late 2014 parliament introduced a bill modeled on Russia’s infamous law opposing so-called gay propaganda. Kyrgyzstan’s version, however, adds prison sentences for violators. That bill passed two of its three requisite readings, raising human rights concerns at home and in the West. This legislation was on the heels of another 2014 bill aimed at NGOs that drew heavily from a Russian law. If passed, the Kyrgyz version would have imposed tough restrictions on Kyrgyz groups that receive foreign funding or donations from abroad and required them to register as “foreign agents.” After two years of discussion, that bill was shelved in May 2016, in what some Western media saw as a triumph of the country’s more pro-Western elements.

Yet, a draft law that some Kyrgyz civil society leaders term a modified version of the defeated proposal emerged in June, as did a new bill limiting the amount of foreign funding that Kyrgyz media outlets can legally receive, which civil society representatives claim takes cues from legislation introduced in Russia in February. These developments suggest it is too early to claim that the country’s pro-Western elements are on the upsurge or that the country is returning toward its tradition of balancing Russian interests with those of the West.

The most concrete expression of Kyrgyzstan’s strengthened ties to Russia is its 2015 accession to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the trade bloc that also comprises Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Belarus. While the EEU, which mandates the free movement of products, assets, services, and people among its member states, was the brainchild of Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1994, it has since evolved into what many see as a project of Russian President Vladimir Putin to protect Russia’s sphere of influence and promote closer integration among former Soviet states.

TIES THAT BIND

Although a majority of Kyrgyz appear to support EEU membership, its benefits are decidedly ambiguous. Membership in the union brings a few much-needed benefits, including help from Russia’s Gazprom to modernize gas infrastructure and reduce the country’s dependence on gas imports from Uzbekistan. Yet, custom union regulations also force Kyrgyzstan to raise import tariffs on goods from non-EEU countries, putting it in violation of its World Trade Organization obligations. The new tariffs, as well as the stricter enforcement of border regimes mandated by EEU membership, also mean reduced revenue for small traders who make their living off the sale and re-export of cheap Chinese goods. The mixed benefits of EEU membership may explain the sharp fluctuations in its public support over the past few years—from 67 percent in 2013 to 50 percent in 2014, and back up to 86 percent in 2015.

Moscow’s threats to curtail the flow of migrant workers to Russia from non-EEU countries may have been the decisive factor in Bishkek’s decision to join the union. Many elites, as well as rank-and-file citizens, see Kyrgyzstan’s exclusion from the Russian labor market as a nightmare scenario, given that this would strain household budgets, drive up unemployment, and possibly contribute to civil unrest. Kyrgyzstan is the world’s second-most dependent country on remittances from migrant workers abroad—after neighboring Tajikistan—with remittances constituting the equivalent of 33 percent of the country’s GDP. Most of these remittances come from Russia, but Russia’s economic woes are reducing remittance flows considerably: the Russian central bank reports that remittances to Kyrgyzstan fell some 46 percent—from \$2.026 billion in 2014 to \$1.083 billion in 2015. If this trend continues, one of Russia’s key sources of leverage over Kyrgyzstan could start to crumble. Russia’s economic troubles have also curtailed its scope for investing in Kyrgyzstan. In 2012, the Russian energy giants Inter RAO UES and RusHydro made deals with Bishkek to construct two hydroelectric plants whose annual output would have exceeded 5.3 billion kilowatt-hours. But in January 2016, after months of foot-dragging by Moscow due to economic difficulties, Kyrgyzstan canceled the deals.

A TROUBLED ECONOMY

Even before Russia’s recent slowdown, Kyrgyzstan’s economy was deeply troubled. The country’s state debt recently rose to approximately \$4 billion, over one-quarter of which is owed to the Export-Import Bank of China. Kyrgyzstan has a negative trade balance, which is unsurprising given that its top export is gold and its main import is fuel. Other exports include agricultural

products, metals, and chemicals. These are generally not in top demand in global markets, nor is landlocked Kyrgyzstan a reliable exporter. There is no reliable transportation infrastructure to deliver agricultural goods to global markets before they spoil. As a result, the country's top trade partners are its immediate neighbors—Kazakhstan, Russia, and Uzbekistan—a problem given the economic turmoil in all three.

Although foreign direct investment has risen steadily since 1993 to about \$750 million, corruption and repeated bouts of instability undermine Kyrgyzstan's investment climate and ability to diversify foreign investors. Ranked 123 of 168 countries in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index, Kyrgyzstan is tied with Kazakhstan but ranks below Russia, Mozambique, and Pakistan. One of the more successful efforts to bring in Western investors is the Kumtor gold mine, the largest in Central Asia and an important revenue source for the government. The mine, which began production in 1997, is run as a joint venture with Canada's Centerra Gold, though the government holds only about one-third of the shares. Kumtor, however, is mired in corruption scandals. The mine has long faced accusations of cronyism, misuse of funds, uneven distribution of wealth from gold extraction, and degradation of the local environment. Locals are particularly angry over the destruction of traditional pasture and farmland, and damage to surrounding glaciers. Over the years, there have been several bouts of protests and attempts to stop production at the mine—which led to a 2013 government crackdown and calls by Kyrgyz opposition groups, including Ata Jurt, for the outright nationalization of Kumtor.

The government and Centerra have been in endless negotiations over a new ownership structure for the past few years. Yet greater control of the mine by the state might not be the cash cow local residents and government officials hope for, given the fall in gold prices and the drastically reduced estimate in 2014 of the mine's gold reserves. Furthermore, any nationalization of the mine would further sully Kyrgyzstan's image among Western investors.

THE CHINA CARD

As Russia's economic reach in Kyrgyzstan weakens and Western companies face a challenging investment climate in the country, China's economic influence continues to grow. Bilateral trade has more than doubled over the past decade, and China is now Kyrgyzstan's fifth-largest export partner and second-largest import partner after Russia. Trade turnover varies each year between \$5 billion and \$10 billion, much of it accounted for by shuttle trade

that moves Chinese goods through Kyrgyzstan to wealthier markets in Russia and Kazakhstan. While EEU membership is expected to make a heavy dent in profits from shuttle trade, some Kyrgyz officials are optimistic that these losses will be counterbalanced by new forms of business with China. Chinese enterprises appear interested in opening factories in Kyrgyzstan, which would allow them to enter the EEU market at a relatively low cost rather than operating in richer EEU member states where costs are higher.

China's large-scale investments in Kyrgyzstan have largely followed the same pattern as its activities elsewhere in the region, with a focus on improving infrastructure and promoting greater regional integration. Bishkek has generally been a willing partner, as the recent prime minister corruption scandal suggests. Following Russia's exit from the country's hydroelectric sector, China's State Power Investment Corporation appears poised to take its place. Bishkek is also eager to take advantage of the One Belt, One Road initiative, seeing itself as an important link between China and points west. However, its mountainous terrain and history of instability make it a less welcoming transportation route than some of its neighbors. In 2013, Bishkek agreed to become part of Line D of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline, even though it does not have large reserves of natural gas. Line D was envisioned as a spur of the main pipeline running through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and initially it was expected to bring Bishkek \$40 million in annual transit fees. The portion running through Kyrgyzstan was expected to cost up to \$2 billion to build and was seen as a way for Beijing to diversify its route structure for gas deliveries. However, the Uzbek government put Line D on hold in early 2016 for "technical reasons"; in reality, the decline in the Chinese economy and China's natural gas demand probably played a part. The postponement of the Uzbek portion of the pipeline raises questions about the future of the Kyrgyz section as well.

Even if the Line D project goes forward, the fact remains that when it comes to bilateral cooperation, the interests of Bishkek and Beijing simply differ. While Kyrgyzstan looks to China to jump-start—or at least stabilize—its economy, China can take or leave its investments in Kyrgyzstan. For Beijing, economic cooperation with Bishkek is a means to an end—namely ensuring stability on its borders and neutralizing the threat of conflict in Kyrgyzstan, which hosts a sizable Uighur diaspora, spilling over into neighboring Xinjiang. Beijing also pursues this goal through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which conducts anti-terror exercises in Central Asia with increasing frequency—and which Bishkek wishes would play a stronger economic role.

SPOKEN AND UNSPOKEN THREATS TO STABILITY

As in the other Central Asian states, the threat of terrorism in Kyrgyzstan is both grossly exaggerated and very real. Like its neighboring regimes, Bishkek has for years used the specter of violent extremism to justify crackdowns on social groups that appear to threaten the government's hold on power—mostly Muslims whose religious practices fall outside the mainstream and members of ethnic minorities. This tendency may be growing; while security services' prime suspects for extremist activity have historically been members of ethnic Uzbek communities, some civic activists allege that the war against homegrown terrorism increasingly targets that already vulnerable minority. Unfortunately, there is evidence that radicalization could be escalating, largely among those marginalized groups that feel socially, economically, and ethnically disenfranchised. The heavy-handed ways in which the security services target those groups likely strengthen the appeal of extremist movements.

According to some official Western estimates, up to 2,000 Central Asians have joined the so-called Islamic State, and Kyrgyzstan may be contributing to that flow. Last year, the International Crisis Group reported that as many as 500 people, ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz alike, may have left the southern capital of Osh to join the Islamic State, although it relied on local government estimates that may have been exaggerated for political reasons. Recruits appeared to be motivated by state corruption and scant economic opportunity as well as the post-2010 marginalization of the ethnic Uzbek community. In February 2015, a prominent ethnic Uzbek imam was arrested for allegedly calling on followers to join the terrorist organization, and he has since been given a hefty prison sentence. He maintains that law enforcement organizations misinterpreted an Uzbek-language sermon in which he was in fact denouncing the Islamic State; his real crime, his followers claim, was that he had openly criticized the state's heavy-handed anti-terror tactics. While his sentence may well have been politically motivated, his case nevertheless highlights the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between legitimate critiques of the state and calls to radicalization.

In July 2015, a series of shootouts in the capital between security forces and alleged Islamic State members who were citizens of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan made the threat of terror more palpable to many Kyrgyz. To date, though, authorities have produced only murky details concerning the nature of the incidents and the

assailants' alleged ties to the Islamic State. In any case, the revelation that one of the participants in the deadly June 2016 attack on the Istanbul airport may have been from Kyrgyzstan likely will increase fears of terror attacks in the country.

While Bishkek arguably overstates the threat of extremism in Central Asia, the dangers posed by climate change receive frighteningly little attention—and could have equally negative impact on the country's citizens. As one of the region's poorest countries, the country has limited ability to deal with this growing threat. According to a 2015 study, Central Asia's glaciers have melted at four times the global average over the past five decades, and they have lost 27 percent of their mass over the past fifty years. Climate change models suggest they could lose an additional 50 percent of their mass by midcentury. Already, floods and flash floods may be growing increasingly common, a trend that is expected to continue.

Glacial melt has catastrophic implications for Kyrgyzstan's agriculture sector and for the physical safety of the rural population, particularly as the country's Soviet-era infrastructure—much like that of its southern neighbor Tajikistan—is deteriorating at frightening speed. Agricultural challenges could in turn have serious consequences for the country's ability to feed its rural population. Already in 2012, 18 percent of Kyrgyz households (about 1 million people, the vast majority of them in rural areas) were considered food insecure by the UN World Food Program.

Glacial melt can also lead to glacial lake outburst floods, which occur when lakes created by melted glaciers expand so rapidly that they burst their banks. Experts point out that this condition could have especially dire consequences in Kyrgyzstan given that the country's largest glacial lake is located five kilometers above a tailings pond for the open-pit Kumtor gold mine. Scientists fear large amounts of cyanide and other chemicals from around the mine could spill into the local water supply if a glacial dam bursts or if the glacial lake otherwise floods; Kyrgyzstan clearly lacks the capacity to respond on its own to a disaster of this nature. Kumtor has already been the subject of prolonged demonstrations from nationalist forces, who accuse the government and its Western partners of poisoning the population by allowing by-products to seep into the local water supply. The environmental risks posed by glacial flooding, together with the mine's fraught history, highlight what remains a key underlying danger throughout the region—that of social unrest spurred by a combination of environmental mismanagement, nationalism, poor governance, and questionable practices on the part of domestic and international business.

Climate change and aging infrastructure are also contributing to interstate tensions by prompting skirmishes along the border between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Each year, the spring planting season brings localized unrest in the Fergana Valley as villagers compete on all sides of the borders for shrinking supplies of arable land and for scarce water supplies funneled through increasingly shaky pipes. Because all countries in the Fergana Valley are experiencing economic declines, it is unlikely any of them will invest in the region's aging infrastructure, a fact that could compound local tensions in the future.

The region's borders meant little in the Soviet period and were never fully demarcated, yet in the past decades they have grown progressively militarized even as large sections remain undefined. As a result, disputes over land and water have taken on ethnic and national overtones—and have increasingly ended in shootouts rather than fistfights. The recent buildup of Uzbek troops on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border is just the latest iteration of this phenomenon. In light of these worrying trends, both U.S. and Russian officials have voiced concerns that water shortages in the region could contribute to armed conflicts and eventual state failure.

Climate change is also likely to complicate Kyrgyzstan's periodic energy shortages, along with efforts to develop the hydroelectricity sector. Hydroelectricity provides 80 to 90 percent of the country's energy, and news outlets report the water level in the national reservoir almost as frequently as they do the national currency's exchange rate. Unfortunately, Kyrgyzstan faces significant seasonal energy shortages, which experts attribute to inappropriately low tariffs, state-sponsored theft, and reduced river flow and precipitation. Officials estimate the country's energy deficit could rise to around 3 billion megawatt-hours by 2017—a point of concern for the government given that electricity shortages played a decisive role in protests that led to Bakiyev's 2010 ouster.

Bishkek had hoped to overcome energy deficits and transform itself into an energy exporter to Afghanistan by 2025 through a series of

large and small hydroelectric plants; the failure of its joint venture with Moscow threw a wrench into these plans. While Beijing, as noted, may be picking up the slack, science has raised questions about the long-term viability of these plans. Glacial depletion is expected to cause river flows to shrink significantly by the 2030s, making it impossible for the country to cover even its domestic energy needs with hydropower.

WHERE NEXT?

Unlike other perennially unstable post-Soviet states, Kyrgyzstan is not likely to emerge as an object of geopolitical tug-of-war between world powers. It is simply too small, too remote, and too devoid of natural resources to merit a diplomatic struggle. This may, in its own strange way, be a blessing—at least politically, if not economically. Kyrgyzstan's relative unimportance could allow it to emerge as a possible geopolitical neutral zone, a place where rivalries that apply elsewhere in the world could be put aside. Its strong civil society and politically engaged populace may allow it to withstand the growing trend toward authoritarianism throughout the region and perhaps eventually develop a more mature party system.

The operative word, however, is “may.” In the worst of cases, the border and resource disputes in the Fergana Valley, compounded by the effects of climate change and nationalism, could bring about an alternate future—one marred by larger-scale interstate or internal conflict. In a less dramatic scenario that seems more probable in the short term, the country could avoid violent conflict but suffer from increasing political dysfunction and ever-shakier international alliances. This will be the likely result if Atambayev chooses to cling to the modus operandi of the past decade—making cynical bids for support from large powers and playing them off of one another. Given that Kyrgyzstan is hardly at the top of any of its partners' lists of priorities, the country will gain little from such tactics.

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