

**JONAS CLAES**E-mail: jclaes@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.1982

Preventing Conflict in the “Stans”

Summary

- Several destabilizing dynamics persist throughout eastern Central Asia, such as weak governance, poor social and economic conditions, ethnic tensions and religious militancy. While these differ in kind and scope in each country, some conflict drivers are transnational in scope, such as energy insecurity and environmental degradation.
- Most factors mitigating or managing conflict-risks—such as foreign capital injections, migrant remittances and Soviet-style repression—are unsustainable and could trigger future violence.
- Given the deep Uzbek suspicion of any foreign, particularly Western, presence in the region, conflict prevention efforts should primarily focus on the Kyrgyz and Tajik side of the Ferghana Valley, a potential hotbed of instability.
- The U.S. government (USG) should coordinate its engagements in Central Asia with regional powers China and Russia; these efforts should be complemented by policy initiatives that tackle the unique challenges facing each country.

Although risks of regional instability abound, “the Stans” are rarely considered suitable cases for conflict prevention efforts. Regions deemed of higher strategic importance, such as the Middle East, and conflicts that have passed the threshold of high-level violence usually push Central Asia to the fringes of the U.S. policy agenda. Yet the recent riots in Kyrgyzstan resulting in more than 80 casualties and the ousting of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev on April 7, 2010 once again displayed some of the challenges undermining regional stability. Now that the dust is settling down it is opportune to step back and analyze the broad scope of conflict drivers prevalent in Central Asia. This analysis could inform USG policy aimed at preventing even larger-scale violence from happening in the future. Mustering the necessary will to take preventive action, often the quasi-insurmountable challenge for prevention advocates, should be a realistic aspiration given the strategic interest of the U.S., Russia, India and China in preserving regional stability.

Central Asia is home to important energy resources, hosts U.S. and Russian military bases, and is a key front in the global wars on terrorism and drugs. Yet the Central Asian suspicion of external intervention, along with Russia’s desire to re-establish its preeminence in the former Soviet Republics, could constrain conflict prevention strategies. Great power interest is a double-edged sword, as it could either bolster the political will to take preventive action or play a destabilizing role. In the aftermath of the ‘Kyrgyz revolution’ suspicions have risen about Russian interference. During the crisis Russia’s Federal Security Service was reported on the ground, which could indicate Kremlin meddling in what was considered a popular uprising in response to economic pressures.¹

To build a greater understanding of regional stability issues that could affect U.S. diplomacy and development aims in the region, the United States Institute of Peace convened an expert meeting

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on February 16 with nongovernmental Central Asia specialists as well as individuals from the U.S. State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS). This meeting, held prior to the bloody events in Kyrgyzstan, inspired this Peace Brief which will assess the region wide factors driving and mitigating the potential for conflict as well as some of the conflict dynamics unique to each country specifically. This brief focuses on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the Central Asian countries most prone to conflict.

Drivers of Conflict

To various degrees, four interdependent challenges pose a significant risk to peace and stability in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan: weak governance, poor social and economic conditions, ethnic tensions and religious militancy. Eastern Central Asia also faces several disruptive transnational dynamics, such as energy insecurity.

Weak Governance

Amongst the various risk factors, weak governance currently presents the greatest threat to stability in Central Asia. The regimes display high levels of authoritarianism, clan-dominated politics and severe failures in the provision of basic services.

Throughout Central Asia, political power is concentrated in the hands of leaders who are neither accountable nor responsive. The February 28 parliamentary elections in Tajikistan typified the Potemkin-style democracies of Central Asia. According to the international observers, polls "failed on many democratic standards."² President Bakiyev was surprisingly frank when he recently stated, "A system based on elections and individual human rights might not be suitable for this country."³ Both in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the population has become increasingly frustrated, as political transitions did little to improve their daily lives. Apart from Bakiyev replacing then-President Askar Akayev in 2005, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan has not fulfilled its promises. Absent a coherent reform agenda, riots, corruption and economic ills remain. The authoritarian leaders in Central Asia also show no interest in systemic reform, and continue to rig elections as the political-criminal nexus provides many opportunities for self-enrichment. This fusion of political and criminal power is a post-Soviet phenomenon that emerged as regional drug traffickers found their way into the region.

Whether incapable or unwilling, Central Asian governments also fail to provide their citizens with many essential services. The central government is only marginally present in large sections of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where hierarchical patronage systems and informal networks are often the only extant forms of governance. The low government visibility in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan strongly contrasts with Uzbekistan, where President Islam Karimov's omnipresent regime keeps a tight hold on dissident movements. Although authoritarian regimes may effectively manage grievances and conflict in the short-term, their road to development, democracy, and societal cohesion and openness is often unstable and violent. In Uzbekistan it is the question of political succession primarily raising concerns. Internal elite power struggles that are likely to ensue after the 72-year old Uzbek president leaves office could lead to large-scale violence.

In sum, Kyrgyzstan's regime is the least authoritarian in Central Asia having introduced relatively liberal economic and social policies after the Tulip Revolution. Nonetheless, it remains too weak to fulfill its aspirations. In the months prior to the bloody uproar in Bishkek, the Kyrgyz regime had become increasingly repressive, suppressing media and government critics. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, and Tajikistan, to a lesser extent, possess more capacity to function as responsible states. Yet, these regimes prefer to suppress grievances rather than address them, focusing on the symptoms rather than the causes of their problems.⁴

Poor Social and Economic Conditions

The eastern part of Central Asia is also one of the world's most underdeveloped areas. In particular the region's large rural areas fall within Paul Collier's "Bottom Billion."⁵ According to the World Bank, 41 percent of Tajiks lived in poverty in 2007. When the region experiences a strong winter, the usual food and electricity shortages, together with poor or absent medical care, turn an already deplorable socioeconomic situation into a humanitarian disaster. Education and health indicators are also tumbling, as the region's social infrastructure further collapses.

Kyrgyzstan, a foster child of the international community since independence, may always struggle to become economically self-sufficient. Weak governance is not the only reason for the social and economic challenges in eastern Central Asia. In addition, the entire region is landlocked, severely hit by the global economic crisis and in desperate need of economic diversification. Moreover, both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan suffer from topographic impediments to internal and regional trade, as well as restrictions in social and economic interactions resulting from the de facto economic blockade installed by the Uzbek government. As central transit points in the opium, arms, and human trafficking routes to Russia, Iran, and the West, these countries also suffer from growing illicit economies. This phenomenon creates yet another uphill battle for a region in which ordinary citizens have few alternatives to the informal economy as a means of survival. All of these factors perpetuate the fragility of the region's economic infrastructure.

Ethnic Tensions and Religious Militancy

Violent disputes between Turks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks have occurred throughout the Ferghana Valley, where the arbitrarily drawn borders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan meet. Fighting between these ethnic communities often results from disputes over land or water, mostly on the Uzbek and Tajik side of the valley. With respect to ethnic or religious minorities, the relatively tolerant Kyrgyz state approach strongly contrasts with the political exclusion and harsh repression used by the Uzbek and Tajik regimes. But despite its liberal laws, Kyrgyzstan still occasionally cracks down on its Uyghur minority at the request of China, which uses its economic leverage in Central Asia to control the separatist tendencies of this community, even after emigration.

The proliferation of jihadist movements also seems to be an emerging security challenge throughout Central Asia, as violent attacks become increasingly frequent. Militant Islamist movements such as Hizb-ut Tahrir (HT) are a source of sporadic violence, but not powerful enough yet to pose a significant threat to political stability in Central Asia. In response to the rising extremism, the Uzbek government has clamped down on Muslim organizations, promulgating restrictive religious laws, which, if strictly enforced, could foment communal frustration and violence. Recently clashes have also taken place between security forces and militants in southern Kyrgyzstan, where several HT-members relocated to escape the Karimov regime.

It is unclear whether the repressive counterterrorist approach is a result or cause of the rising Islamic militancy and ethnic identification. At least for Uzbekistan, it is safe to say the regime abuses the perceived threat of radical Islam to legitimize its dictatorial practices.

Transnational Challenges and Interstate Tensions

The foregoing challenges are prevalent throughout Central Asia, but differ in kind and degree in each country. Several other drivers of conflict, such as energy insecurity, environmental degradation and illicit trade, are distinctly transnational in scope, and therefore require regionally integrated solutions. Yet so far the region's mountainous topography, lack of infrastructure,

traditional interpretations of national sovereignty, and—most importantly—interstate tensions have trumped most regional cooperation initiatives.

Several disruptive dynamics not only threaten to spur internal conflict, but also trigger interstate tensions in Central Asia. Relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been tense for over a decade due to migration, the rise of Islamic militancy and energy insecurity. For example, Uzbekistan has long accused Kyrgyzstan of harboring jihadist militants. Relations reached a low point after the 2005 massacre in Andijan, when the Uzbek military opened fire on demonstrators, causing a spike of Uzbek migration to Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, Uzbek-Tajik relations have suffered from border disputes and Uzbek support for Islamists during the Tajik civil war, recently deteriorating further amid disputes over the Roghumb dam project in Tajikistan. While Tajik officials claim the enormous dam will improve the energy security of Central Asia as a whole, Uzbekistan is concerned it will place its water supplies at Tajikistan's mercy.

Conflict Mitigating Factors

Despite this litany of conflict drivers, Central Asia has remained relatively peaceful for the past 20 years, apart from the 1992 Tajik civil war. Unlike most regions at low risk of conflict, Central Asia cannot rely on its institutional capacity to pave the road to self-sustainable peace. Although very effective in the short term, some of the factors mitigating conflict are unsustainable sources of stability.

The Soviet legacy, characterized by extreme deprivation and violent suppression, nonetheless operates as a conflict-managing factor in Central Asia. Quantitative studies established a quasi-consensus among scholars on the negative effect of both extreme democracy and extreme autocracy on the risk of civil war, anocracies being most conflict-prone.⁶ The brutal Soviet practices hardened and intimidated the population, discouraging popular uprisings. Current law enforcement tools used in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are often Soviet-inherited and serve as effective yet inhumane conflict management instruments. A recent report by the United Nations Human Rights Committee condemned the human rights situation in Uzbekistan, stressing the excessive use of torture. The Kyrgyz security forces, on the other hand, are rather ineffective, providing a safe-haven to militant groups based in the region. In Tajikistan, the civil conflict bred war fatigue, reducing the odds that an opportunistic leader will be able to mobilize Tajiks to violently undermine their government.

Though they cannot assure stability in the long term, some of the region's financial and socioeconomic lifelines also mitigate conflict in the short term. International, regional, and nongovernmental organizations, as well as individual countries, provide vital assistance to Central Asia's development. Unfortunately, a significant proportion of the aid is lost to corruption before it reaches its targets. Chinese and Russian capital injections offer some breathing space, as well as crucial investments in economic infrastructure. Yet, as indicated earlier, these benefactors may demand political concessions in return. Migrant remittances also serve as an important source of revenue for the region, especially in Tajikistan, where remittances make up almost half of the country's gross domestic product—by far the highest number worldwide.⁷ If Russia were to act upon its recent threats to expel foreign workers, the consequences could be disastrous for Tajikistan's remittance-based 'welfare system,' as it is incapable of reabsorbing its emigrants into society.

Despite its institutional weaknesses, several stabilizing factors are unique to Kyrgyzstan. Even with its heavy handed response to anti-government protests, the country serves as an example to its neighbors in terms of political freedom and retains significant amounts of vital human capital, as reflected in its growing civil society. Like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan also has a dam project in the works, which could alleviate some of its energy concerns. Regional energy potential could push these largely agricultural societies forward. The current Uzbek-Tajik debate about the Roghumb dam

and the Uzbek-Kyrgyz debate about the Kambarata-1 hydropower facility could, in the best case, improve region wide energy security, or in the worst case, lead to a Central Asian resource curse.

Policy Recommendations

This brief assessment of conflict drivers and mitigating factors in Central Asia leads to several policy-relevant conclusions. A U.S. conflict prevention strategy should treat Central Asia as an area of strategic importance, and focus on both structural and operational prevention efforts, while upholding a degree of strategic realism.

- *Treat Central Asia as an area of strategic importance, with distinct challenges in each country:* So far the U.S. government has adopted a regional approach towards Central Asia. Yet, strategies targeting the region should acknowledge the distinct dynamics facing each country and subregion. U.S. support for Central Asia is premised on its strategy in Afghanistan in terms of aid and troop presence. The U.S. should demonstrate that its presence in Central Asia is not merely a derivative of other security interests, a common perception in the region, but primarily aimed at building peace in Central Asia.⁸ New USG policy initiatives towards Central Asia should also be coordinated with Russia, China and India.
- *A focus on structural and operational prevention:* Based on the foregoing assessment, a structural emphasis on good governance, security sector reform, socioeconomic development and regional cooperation seems crucial. Long-term engagements to ease key conflict drivers should go hand-in-hand with vigilant efforts to anticipate destabilizing dynamics or potential turning points, such as energy shocks, a deterioration in Afghan security, regional regime changes or modifications in the Russian or Chinese Central Asia policies.
- *Uphold a degree of strategic realism:* Ideally, the focus of any USG conflict prevention strategy in Central Asia should be on Uzbekistan. The country is very conflict-prone given the potential for a post-Karimov political vacuum and the rise of extremism. Moreover, tensions in Uzbekistan could easily spill over to its eastern neighbors. However, since the Uzbek regime is not open to international engagement, a focus on the Kyrgyz and Tajik side of the Ferghana Valley seems an appropriate suboptimal alternative. Besides stabilizing Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and mitigating the fallout from Uzbekistan, such engagements could create positive spillovers into Uzbekistan, as long as they consider the country's vital interests in energy and border security.

Endnotes

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5. According to the International Monetary Fund, the estimated 2010 GDP per capita of Tajikistan (\$929), Uzbekistan (\$1,325), and Kyrgyzstan (\$1,374) are significantly smaller than in Turkmenistan (\$6,142) and Kazakhstan (\$11,334).
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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

On February 16, USIP convened an expert meeting on Central Asia to build a greater understanding of regional stability issues that could affect U.S. development aims. This meeting and the 'Kyrgyz revolution' in early April inspired this Peace Brief, which will assess the region-wide factors driving and mitigating the potential for conflict as well as some of the conflict dynamics unique to each country specifically. This brief focuses on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the Central Asian countries most prone to conflict.

7. United Nations Development Program. "Human Development Report 2009." Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2009_EN_Complete.pdf.
8. Matveeva 39



United States Institute of Peace

1200 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036
202.457.1700

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