

Great power rivalries intensify ethnic conflicts in Kyrgyzstan

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In an expression of the deep political instability wracking Kyrgyzstan, fueled by great power rivalries in the region, the government postponed an international policing mission scheduled to deploy in the country's south on September 2.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) had committed to sending 52 observers to the Central Asian country, where violent clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek groups have taken place in the cities of Osh and Jalalabad.

The OSCE deployment, initially agreed in July, was prompted by demands from neighboring Uzbekistan, backed by Washington, which claimed that ethnic Uzbeks needed to be protected from the Kyrgyz majority.

Seeking to court ethnic Kyrgyz leaders in the run-up to October's parliamentary elections, the government of President Rosa Otunbayeva has moved against the planned OSCE mission, which has been accused of acting as a Trojan horse for Uzbek interests.

Lydia Imanalieva, Kyrgyzstan's representative to the OSCE, stated that the government "Believes that it would be reasonable, timely and useful if the [OSCE] starts actual work in Kyrgyzstan after the parliamentary election" due to be held in October.

Inter-ethnic fighting in the southern area of Kyrgyzstan bordering Uzbekistan broke out during the summer, with sporadic clashes taking place since. Scores of people from both Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnic groups have been killed, with hundreds more wounded and thousands displaced. The clashes were prompted by the overthrow of Kyrgyzstan's president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, in April. The authoritarian leader was driven from office amidst angry street protests centered in the capital, Bishkek.

Bakiyev's fall from power was followed by a scramble by rival factions of the country's elite to form a government, while securing their local bases of power. An interim government, headed by Otunbayeva, was formed in the capital, Bishkek, without any popular support, due to its commitment to the continued presence of US and Russian air bases.

This unpopular new regime has been unable to establish its authority in the formerly pro-Bakiyev southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad, where ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek leaders are still vying for power.

Otunbayeva had initially called for troops from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Russian-led military alliance of which Kyrgyzstan is a member, to deploy to enforce order around Osh and Jalalabad. However, Uzbekistan, also a member of the CSTO, refused to agree to the operation, and, with the backing of the US, pushed for an OSCE presence instead.

While initially agreeing the deployment, Otunbayeva has sought to whip up Kyrgyz nationalism directed against the OSCE mission in an effort to find some sort of broader base of support for her government.

Both the US and Russia maintain key military installations in Kyrgyzstan, with Washington using its Manas air base as a major supply point for the occupation of nearby Afghanistan. The respective positions taken by the Kremlin and the White House on the question of the OSCE deployment in Kyrgyzstan are bound up with their efforts to advance their own national interests in Central Asia.

The Russian government, though it agreed in August to contribute seven officials to the OSCE deployment, has backed Otunbayeva's decision. The Kremlin was clearly uncomfortable with any encroachment by the OSCE, an institution dominated by the Western European powers who are also members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in a country that Moscow regards as within its sphere of influence.

Russian envoy to the OSCE Anvar Azimov stated September 2 that the organization should respect the wishes of the Kyrgyzs government and "refrain from putting pressure on the Kyrgyz side."

"Kyrgyzstan is still going through a difficult period in its history. At the same time, our organization's obviously good intentions to help Kyrgyzstan restore interethnic harmony and public order, as well as strengthen the potential

of its law enforcement services, have recently acted to a certain extent as a catalyst for political instability,” Azimov said at a session of the OSCE Permanent Council.

Moscow is concerned that the OSCE’s presence in Kyrgyzstan could further destabilize Central Asia, where the Russian elite has extensive oil and natural gas deals. The region is considered strategically vital to Russian national security.

In addition, Kyrgyzstan borders China’s volatile Xinjiang autonomous province, where ethnic riots broke out last year. While the administration of Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has recently improved Russia’s diplomatic and strategic ties with the United States, under the policy of “resetting relations,” Moscow continues to develop its links with Beijing as a counterweight to Washington.

This month Russia and China, together with four of the five ex-Soviet Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) took part in Peace Mission 2010. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the security group co-led by Moscow and Beijing, organized the military maneuvers, which involved 3,000 troops participating in an anti-terrorist exercise in Kazakhstan.

Uzbekistan and Washington promoted the OSCE deployment for their own reasons. Relations are strained between the government of President Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and Moscow. When the ethnic fighting broke out in Kyrgyzstan, Tashkent was opposed to a CSTO deployment to the area, as this would have meant the presence of a large number of Russian troops near the Uzbek border.

The US is also unwilling to accept a major additional Russian military presence in Kyrgyzstan, a country of enormous strategic importance to its war efforts in Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of US troops have passed through the Manas base since President Barack Obama instigated the Afghan “surge,” and the air base supplies one-third of all the fuel needed for US military aircraft operating over Afghanistan. In addition, Washington has agreed with Otunbayeva to construct a new military base in Osh.

While the Obama administration has recently improved relations with the Kremlin, largely in order to gain Russian logistical support to the war in Afghanistan, the aim of US imperialism in Central Asia is to displace Moscow as the principal power and win hegemony based on its residual military might.

This poses a profound strategic challenge to the Russian ruling elite. On the one hand, Moscow has backed the war in Afghanistan in order to crush an Islamist-led insurgency that it fears could spread across the region and into its own Muslim-majority provinces. For this reason, Moscow

showed itself, at least initially, willing to acquiesce to the OSCE mission in Kyrgyzstan.

On the other hand, the Kremlin is aware that the explosion of US militarism in Afghanistan has destabilized the entire region, a situation made worse by Washington’s recent intensification of saber rattling against China. Fearing that Washington’s actions could provoke a wider conflict, possibly involving China, on its southern border, Moscow is only too happy to limit any initiative that expands US influence in the region.

Furthermore, Moscow is aware that, in the final analysis, a US victory in Afghanistan is only possible at the expense of Russian interests in Central Asia.

Washington has recently improved relations with Uzbekistan, providing the country with aid so that it can develop military supply lines through its territory. This is aimed at the short-term US goal of subduing Afghanistan, as well as its longer-term end goal of dominating the energy-rich Central Asian region.

Developing a route known as the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), the US has utilized railroads in the region to bring thousands of containers of materiel for the US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan. Originating in the former Soviet republics of Latvia and Georgia, the supply lines pass through Russia and the Central Asian republics before entering northern Afghanistan and terminating at the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, where the US is building a major new military base.

Mazar-i-Sharif is located close to Afghanistan’s border with Uzbekistan, and much of the overland military supplies for the occupation come through the country. The US and its NATO allies are also developing Uzbekistan’s Termez airfield as an alternative logistics center to Manas. The German Bundeswehr recently signed an agreement with Tashkent to use Termez as a stop-off point for military flights en route to northeast Afghanistan, where German forces play a leading role in NATO’s mission.



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