

Tajik-Kyrgyz border conflict erupts in violence

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19 September 2022

After several days of fighting, an uneasy truce appears to be holding along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Nearly 100 people died and hundreds more suffered injuries when a long-standing conflict between the two Central Asian countries erupted in violence late last week.

The governments in Bishkek and Dushanbe each accuse the other of provoking this latest episode. Kyrgyzstan insists that Tajikistan sent troops and paramilitary forces into villages in its Bakten region. Its soldiers, allegedly confronting an “invasion” with tanks and armored personnel carriers, engaged enemy border guards in a firefight when they refused to leave. The Tajik military maintains, however, that its towns were first shelled from across the border and then repeatedly hit by heavy weaponry over the course of several days.

Videos on social media appear to show a civilian bloodbath on both sides, with children and medics among the fatalities. Kyrgyz officials evacuated 136,000 residents from the area over the weekend, and one regional airport was reportedly packed with people trying to leave on Saturday. Some are now returning home.

The immediate cessation of hostilities does not indicate any lasting end to the violence. While indicating on Sunday that his government is ready for negotiations and a “peaceful” resolution, in a statement just released on YouTube, Kyrgyzstan President Sadyr Zhaparov emphasized his country’s readiness for military conflict, insisting that it is fully capable of “defending its borders.” Authorities in Bishkek continue to accuse Dushanbe of engaging in a “disinformation” campaign regarding who is responsible for last weekend’s deadly events. Since 2014 alone, there have been 11 major conflicts along a portion of their 600-mile-long shared border. In May of

last year at least 54 people died in fighting.

Both mountainous countries with large tracts of arid land and not enough agricultural resources to support their populations, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan each lay claim to the fertile Fergana Valley. According to the UN, Tajikistan’s population is expected to more than double by the end of this century, putting immense pressure on the already food-insecure country. Of the 7 percent of its land that is arable, the World Food Programme says 97 percent is vulnerable to soil degradation, which is expected to worsen as the effects of climate change intensify. According to the Ecological Threat Register, out of 157 countries studied, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are among the top most 19 endangered. They face the imminent threat of desertification.

During the Soviet period, the two states were joined together in the Soviet Union, and questions related to access to water, grazing grounds, and farm land were resolved administratively. The region’s extremely diverse and intermixed population moved back and forth across what are now government borders patrolled by armed forces.

When the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the USSR in 1991, the newly-emerging ruling class in the two Central Asian countries each laid claim to different maps—one drawn in the 1920s and the other in the 1950s—demarcating Tajik and Kyrgyz territory. The death and suffering in the area are a direct consequence of the Communist Party’s final betrayal of the struggle, initiated by the 1917 Russian Revolution, to unite the long-oppressed peoples of the former Tsarist Empire on egalitarian foundations.

Current tensions are being exacerbated by the combined effects of the war in Ukraine, the US’ efforts to destabilize and break-up Russia, the rapidly

escalating conflict with China, and the fight for Central Asia's resources.

Skyrocketing global grain prices are making it evermore difficult for poor and already food insecure countries to feed their populations. The COVID-19 pandemic and Western sanctions against Russia have seen masses of migrant workers from Central Asia, whose families rely on their remittances to survive, lose jobs. In addition to making the scramble for the Fergana Valley more important, these factors drive the corrupt and super-rich who rule Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to seek an outlet for mass social discontent in nationalist, military hoopla.

Facing a debacle in Ukraine, Moscow's ability to manage the conflict between its two, frequently unsteady, allies is increasingly in question. This weekend, Russian President Vladimir Putin appealed to both sides to "de-escalate" and find "peaceful, political and diplomatic means" to resolve their differences.

Behind this muted response, however, the Kremlin is trying to hold onto its influence in these areas, which are of major geostrategic and economic importance. A few weeks prior to the present crisis, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin met with Chairman of Cabinet of Ministers of Kyrgyzstan Akylbek Japarov in an effort "to speed up the signing of a new economic cooperation program for 2022-2026, which will further expand ties, increase trade turnover, the volume of mutual investments." The Russian statesmen described the Kremlin as "keen to enhance cooperation with Kyrgyzstan in all current directions," adding, "It is necessary."

While short on arable land, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are both home to significant gold and iron ore deposits, as well as many other metals essential to industry. Because of their locations, they both offer potential transit routes for the shipment of oil and gas to areas otherwise highly dependent on sea lanes.

During a recent meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Kyrgyzstan, China and Uzbekistan agreed to move forward with a long-stalled plan to create a rail link that will connect China to the Middle East, bypassing Russia in the process. Bishkek's deepening relationship with Beijing is also a dependency, with the majority of its \$5.1 billion in foreign debt owed to Chinese banks.

Meanwhile, the imperialist powers, which have a

long involvement in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are pressing forward with their own agendas. UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres just appointed former leader of Kyrgyzstan's US-backed Tulip Revolution, Rosa Otunbayeva, as special envoy to Afghanistan.

The crisis in that country, brought on by 20 years of the US bloody occupation and the recent return of the Taliban to power in Kabul, is destabilizing all of Central Asia. It poses a particularly significant threat to Russia, which has a large Muslim population. The Kremlin, fully aware of Washington's long history of using Islamic fundamentalism to destabilize Russia, has well-grounded fears that the surging power and influence of this movement will be used to foment separatist movements in its south and southwest. Russia's Supreme Court just labeled Tajikistan's main opposition party a "terrorist" movement. On Monday, Kyrgyzstan declared that Islamist militants were among the troops sent into its territory by Tajikistan's military this past weekend.



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