

Kyrgyzstan Unrest Adds New Edge to Global Powers' Regional Rivalry

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As politically and ethnically-charged violence continues in Kyrgyzstan, three powerful nations who have hugely important strategic and geopolitical interests in the region are becoming particularly concerned.

The Central Asian nation's worst ethnic violence in decades, which has reportedly left over 117 people dead, many more injured and has forced tens of thousands to flee their homes, has wider implications in a region full of strategic and geopolitical importance for the world's biggest powers.

The violence that erupted on Friday between Kyrgyz and Uzbek clans may have been ignited by the escalating tensions between the country's two dominant ethnic groups but the conditions for the fighting have been created by the on-going unstable political situation in Kyrgyzstan; a situation that has the fingerprints of the world's most influential nations all over it.

Kyrgyzstan's wider role in international affairs is such that Russia and the United States continue to jostle for military influence there while China, which shares a 530-mile border with Kyrgyzstan, pursues significant strategic and economic interests in the country and its surrounding region.

This most recent uprising stems from the ousting of the Washington-friendly regime of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April which left the country in turmoil. Bakiyev's removal from power and the rise to power of the current provisional government has not only allowed ethnic tensions to reach boiling point in Kyrgyzstan but could trigger a new struggle for proxy control of the country and the regional benefits which come with it.

Bakiyev's installation as president in 2005 with US backing may have provided Washington with a friendly government with whom to do business with but it also gave the US a significant foothold in a country that some strategists believe is paramount to its plans for regional dominance.

Regional unrest could put US objectives under threat

Experts say that it has been a prime US strategic objective to increase its influence in the former Soviet states of Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The inclusion of Kyrgyzstan and three other central Asian states in NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1994, was seen as a major step toward increasing US military presence in the

region which eventually led to the US base at Manas, outside Bishkek in the north, being established.

“During the April unrest, the US Manas Airbase was closed and the vital supply route for sending military hardware and troops to Afghanistan was not being used,” Asher Pirt, an expert on Central Asian affairs and military issues, told Deutsche Welle. “The US needs a stable Kyrgyzstan in order to keep the supply route working.”

“There is also the possibility of Uzbek intervention in the restive Osh region due to the fact that Uzbeks are being killed and hurt in the violence and any such intervention is likely to lead to further instability and will continue cause problems with the US principle supply route to Afghanistan and its troops deployed there,” he added.

“Another issue is if the instability spreads throughout the rest of Central Asia and there is a rise of Islamic extremism this could significantly affect US interests in the region.”

US presence increases Russia’s concern over NATO plans

While Manas remains a key hub for US operations in Afghanistan, it is also used as a NATO base – a situation which angers and concerns Russia which fears the eastern enlargement of its former Cold War opponent, putting Kyrgyzstan at the center of a power struggle for regional influence.

“The current unrest is a major threat to the authority of the Kyrgyz government,” Dex Torrike-Barton, an international security analyst, told Deutsche Welle from Kyrgyzstan.

“The provisional government is still very weak. If violence spreads beyond the cities currently affected, then we could see major political instability. In that context, all bets are off the table on whether the US can retain its airbase in the country. There are plenty of political factions in Kyrgyzstan who don’t want to see the Americans keep any sort of foothold in the country. If Russia or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation – the regional defence alliance – ultimately ends up intervening, the same result is likely.”

Russia, which itself has its own military base at the Kant airbase near Bishkek and a strategic naval base on Lake Issyk-Kul, is highly suspicious of the United States’ interest in Kyrgyzstan and the wider Eurasian region. Since the US-backed Bakiyev regime was ousted in April, Moscow has unsurprisingly been the biggest supporter of the new provisional government, presumably in the hope that if order is restored the swing of influence will return to Russia.

Washington’s plans for the regions sit very uncomfortably with the Kremlin. While the US may justify that its increased influence is mutually beneficial by claiming its presence will help stop the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia and solve the hugely destabilizing problem of Afghanistan, Russia believes the US has another agenda. The Kremlin says that Washington is aiming to prevent Russian and/or Chinese hegemony while securing energy resources and pipelines.

Moscow fears ethnic instability on Russia’s borders

Russia has its own interests of course. As well as the obvious future of regional energy security, Russian domestic security is heavily linked to the stability of the countries on its

borders. Regardless of whether there is a Kremlin-friendly regime in place or not, Kyrgyzstan is of huge importance when it comes to the stability or instability of Russia's neighbours.

With states throughout Russia's Central Asian periphery simmering with ethnic tensions, Moscow doesn't need a civil war sparking a wider conflict on its doorstep, one which could spread to within its borders and explode in its cities.

"Russia wants a stable international neighbourhood," Torriке-Barton said. "Violence, especially with an ethnic or religious dimension, could potentially become contagious throughout the region. The brutalization of the Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan could fuel Islamic extremism – and there is no greater nightmare for a Russian state still dealing with insurgent forces in the Caucasus."

"It is not in Russia's interests to have an unstable Kyrgyz Republic as it will affect their interests in Central Asia," Asher Pirt added. "The main interest is the fact that Moscow is concerned about instability spreading from the region to its own country. A stable region without ethnic unrest or religious extremism is a strategic goal for Russia. Furthermore, Moscow cares about the status and the wellbeing of its ethnic Russians or compatriots."

"Russia is unlikely to intervene unless it felt that the situation was going to make the region unstable or ethnic Russians or compatriots were in danger. However, the Kyrgyz Provisional Government would very much like the Russians to intervene. At present it is unlikely that this will happen but if the violence escalates, Moscow might decide that it has to."

Russia is also concerned about the possibility of being encircled by NATO member states should the alliance go ahead with its provocative eastern enlargement. Having Kyrgyzstan onside, especially as a partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization – the emerging Eurasian economic and military cooperation organization – would mean that Russia would continue to have a significant obstacle in its plan to block NATO expansion.

China wants to protect economic interests, secrets from US

China also has much to be concerned about. Beijing has clear strategic interests in a stable and friendly Kyrgyzstan but also in keeping the United States from dominating the region.

China was the main financial benefactor of President Askar Akayev, a former US-backed leader who was dropped by Washington as soon as he took China's cash, and its huge economic clout remains Beijing's strongest weapon in retaining a foothold in Kyrgyzstan. While this is seen as crucial for China's own plan of spreading its influence throughout Central Asia, it is also an important factor in reducing the chances of the US doing the same.

The Chinese see increasing US influence as not only a threat to its plans for Eurasia, which along with promoting its emerging market policy also includes energy security and supply, but also a threat to the People's Republic itself.

China's border with Kyrgyzstan runs along the outer reaches of the politically sensitive Xinjiang Province where ethnic Uighurs rioted in July 2009.

"Kyrgyzstan is the number one export market for Xinjiang," said Torriке-Barton. "It's a profitable destination for Chinese goods and labourers, so there's an important economic dimension driving Chinese policy toward Kyrgyzstan. But like Russia, the key priority is security. An unstable Kyrgyzstan with a restive Muslim population does not help Chinese

efforts to preserve stability in Xinjiang and the Uighur community.”

While Beijing would be concerned by the possibility of an upsurge in ethnic violence stirring up further unrest in Xinjiang, it is more concerned that the porous nature of the border is allowing US intelligence agencies to run covert destabilizing operations into the strategically vital and politically fragile province. Beijing believes the flow of people across the border gives US operations a perfect cover.

“China is unlikely to intervene in the crisis, and despite its economic influence and status as a patron for many Kyrgyz politicians, has limited capacity to affect the current situation,” Torriker-Barton added. “Without greater Chinese involvement in settling the violence, I doubt we’ll see many repercussions for US-China relations.”

With so much suspicion, distrust and power games at play between the world’s most powerful nations, the future of Kyrgyzstan may not only shape the region but have an equally important influence on global politics.

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