



Kyrgyzstan: A Political Overview

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Abstract

This article is based on more than 20 interviews with Kyrgyz who spoke about the protracted crisis that has enveloped their country. In relating their observations of what is right and wrong with their country, the respondents presented a telling portrait of the most democratic state in Central Asia, including its relations with the other countries in the region and with the United States, Russia, and China, as well as the problems it faces such as drug smuggling, corruption, and the distribution of water. Moreover, this article describes the reform movement in all of its political manifestations.

I made a trip to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, February 19–26, 2007, on behalf of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy. This visit was designed to assess the political situation in Kyrgyzstan. This trip followed meetings with Ambassador Zamira Sydykova at the Kyrgyzstan Embassy in Washington, D.C., who helped in setting up some of the 20 meetings that were held in Bishkek.

Foreign Minister Kodyrbek Sarybaev, in turn, issued an invitation to the National Committee to visit Bishkek.

The Political Situation: A Summary

The “Tulip Revolution” that occurred March 24, 2005, followed the February 2005 elections for parliament that the public saw not only as

rigged but also as setting the stage for President Askar Akayev to break his promise of retiring in the fall. Protracted public demonstrations throughout the country finally led to an atmosphere that allowed groups of demonstrators to invade the presidential palace while guards chose not to intervene, forcing the long-serving Akayev to flee from his office and the country to Russian sanctuary. The freeing of Felix Kulov, who had become widely regarded as a political prisoner and was a former presidential aspirant and mayor of Bishkek, as well as a former major general in the Soviet security apparatus, fueled the political aspirations of the public for real elections. Kurmanbek Bakiyev arose as the presidential candidate affiliated with the south of Kyrgyzstan, and Felix Kulov became the most powerful candidate associated with the north. Their decision to form a power “tandem” with Bakiyev as president and Kulov as prime minister led to an awkward agreement on power sharing that avoided a real presidential race in the July 2005 presidential elections and survived until the late December 2006 events changed the political landscape.

The “tandem” oversaw a political process that pitted their leadership against a parliament that had become increasingly resistant to their rule. The return of demonstrations last November under the banner of constitutional reform resulted in the end of the joint leadership and a presidency and parliament seemingly deadlocked in a battle for power by December. The fall of Kulov has come to be interpreted as proof of a division between the Kyrgyz of the north and those in the south

aligned with Bakiyev. The resulting political atmosphere is now charged with north-south issues that threaten to split Kyrgyz identity.

Kyrgyzstan is a country of some 5.2 million that was thrust into independence following the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991. It remains one of the poorest republics in Central Asia with a gross domestic product (GDP) of less than \$700 per capita. It has achieved macroeconomic stability with little inflation, but despite its early induction into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 1998, it has failed to attract significant foreign direct investment from the West. The only Central Asian country to embrace democracy seriously in the early 1990s, as its election of Askar Akayev, a former physicist, demonstrated, it promised a strong break from the Soviet past while other Central Asian states followed a model of transforming their Communist party leadership—largely appointed by Gorbachev—into pseudonationalist presidents. Akayev's rule, however, became increasingly autocratic, and the burgeoning bureaucracy increasingly mirrored those of its neighbors.

Kyrgyzstan became a willing supplicant of international organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the 1990s and began a march toward civil society at a faster pace than that pursued by other former Soviet republics. At the same time its foreign debt became increasingly larger than the government's budget and its bureaucracy burgeoned.

My visit followed massive demonstrations in the capital city, Bishkek, throughout much of November. The demonstrators called for a change in the constitution's delegation of powers between the president and parliament. The initial result was an agreement by President Bakiyev to constitutional changes that would limit his powers to a certain extent against those of parliament. Shortly thereafter, he dismissed his government. But Prime Minister Felix Kulov failed to obtain the parliamentary support necessary to regain his position despite several votes held to enable him

to do so. That failure brought about the end of the "tandem." Kulov joined the opposition. The government attempted to survive this crisis by including other members of the opposition in the government. The result was a political and economic crisis that has continued.

The government's authority is not only being challenged by many political sectors, but its ability to govern is severely threatened both by a growing organized crime presence that is seeking political alignments and by other social forces outside of the state's domain. Since the dismissal of the government following the resignation of Felix Kulov and other ministers in December 2006, there has not only been a split in the government along north-south lines, but there have been resignations from the newly formed Bakiyev-based government and inability to attract some significant political figures into the government. The poisoning of the second prime minister who succeeded Kulov, Almazbek Atambaev, in May is yet another indicator of the intensity of the political stakes in Kyrgyzstan. Opposition blocs have grown considerably since late December 2006.

Kyrgyzstan is different from the other Central Asian countries to the extent that the rise of Askar Akayev to the presidency offered a very different alternative based on the promise of building democracy. That objective seemed attainable when several parties emerged along with a free press and open debate. When President Akayev made one of his first visits to the United States, he stopped at Columbia University and delivered an impromptu speech to an audience of fewer than two dozen people. He did well, balancing wit with political acumen in a 15-minute speech that referred to Eleanor Roosevelt, Golda Meir, and Margaret Thatcher.

But in the late 1990s, despite U.S. help in privatization and the entry of Kyrgyzstan as the first and still only Central Asian state in the World Trade Organization and the first state to have a convertible currency (May 1993), a strong presence in the International

Financial Organization, and an NGO sector actively working to create a variety of institutions to serve democracy, women's rights, and many other causes, it became apparent that the economy had failed to attract investment and that privatization had gone very wrong.

As special interests and corruption became more significant, security issues emerged. Afghanistan-based Islamic militants of Central Asian background, who called themselves the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or at times the Islamic Movement of Turkistan, carried out significant raids in southern Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000, including a hostage-taking involving Japanese geologists whose government apparently settled by making a payment to the terrorists. Kyrgyzstan, despite what many would term the highest level of engagement with the West of any Central Asian state at the time, was rapidly becoming a debt-ridden state that functioned only because of Western aid. The democracy patina began to fade as many who had trained with Western NGOs formed their own Kyrgyz NGOs and criticized the lack of real democracy.

The events of September 11, 2001, set in motion a more comprehensive, security-driven approach by the United States to the Central Asian region, the cornerstone of which was the establishment of air bases and landing rights for U.S. planes involved in the initial assault on Taliban-led Afghanistan and the longer term deployment of NATO personnel engaged in the continuing war on terrorism. The U.S.-led coalition utilized bases in Uzbekistan and an air base in Kyrgyzstan at the edge of Manas International Airport. Despite the U.S. success in practically destroying the ability of Uzbekistan's greatest enemy, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan/Turkistan, to pose an active threat, the U.S. position in Central Asia had begun to deteriorate. That became apparent when the United States and much of the international community demanded an investigation of a protest in which thousands of demonstrators were fired on because of the

presence of a few dozen armed militants in Andijon, Uzbekistan, in May 2005. Uzbekistan's refusal was followed by its demand that the United States vacate all bases on its territory. One month later, in July 2005, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Astana produced a declaration demanding that the United States set a timetable for its military withdrawal from the Central Asian region despite the reality of the terrorism threat based in areas of Pakistan and the fragility of Afghanistan. Manas became the sole base of the United States in Central Asia, and Russia reentered Kyrgyzstan through the establishment of an air base at Kant in 2003. Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical situation became apparent this year with its selection as the site of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting in August 2007.

The stability of the presidency after the "Tulip Revolution" was based on averting new parliamentary elections. The February 2005 elections were seen as tainted and were cited as the primary reason for the demonstrations that sent Akayev into exile as well as the basis for the presidential election that averted competition between Bakiyev and Kulov in the interests of stability.

Constitutional Crisis

The tension between the president and parliament lies at the heart of the political crisis that has hampered the building of an effective government. In 2006 a coalition of opposition members of parliament, NGO leaders, and local businessmen formed a "For Reforms" movement that brought thousands of demonstrators into central Bishkek in early November where they built a "tent city" of more than one thousand. Nearly weeklong demonstrations in early November led President Bakiyev to agree to constitutional changes in which the next parliamentary elections would be carried out with a mixed voting system that provides that

50 percent of the seats be distributed according to party lists and that the seats be increased from 75 to 90. The government would then be formed by the party that wins more than 50 percent of the seats in parliament. The president's powers would be restricted in terms of the parliament, which would have more powers regarding economic issues and would give approval to presidential nominations for the director of the National Bank, the Central Election Commission, and the Prosecutor-General.

A constitution that restricted the president's power in favor of parliament would have been quite significant given the retreat from participatory democracy evident throughout Central Asia. Bakiyev, however, took advantage of the clause in which parliament forms the government if one party has a majority. His move to bring about the resignation of his government succeeded because he recognized that parliament would agree to another constitution that would restore his powers at the price of not dissolving parliament.

Parliament's refusal in several votes to bring back Kulov as prime minister despite Bakiyev's recommendation thrust Kulov into the opposition. The result is that he has forged another opposition group, United Front for a Decent Future for Kyrgyzstan. These events, which constitute Kyrgyzstan's protracted political crisis, have affected both domestic politics and international relations quite strongly.

Some Kyrgyz have characterized these events as a constitutional battle over balancing power. Although parliament could be interpreted as the root of the constitution, it lacks the administrative capacity to be effective. As one Kyrgyz in opposition termed the current political crisis: "Reforms came from the president... he wanted a 'rubber-stamp parliament' to use as an administrative resource while members of parliament want to achieve a victory over Bakiyev."

The common Kyrgyz interpretation is that the source of the current political crisis is rooted in the failure to build impediments to corruption. Given the West's emphasis on

eliminating corruption, its pervasiveness is sometimes offered as an indicator of the failure of reform in general. Still no other Central Asian government has allowed the level of public demonstrations that have occurred in Kyrgyzstan over the past few years. Whereas many in the opposition saw the demonstrations as a sign of the strength of civil society in Kyrgyzstan and a desire by the public to be included in the decisions of government, some interpreted them as manifestations of normal disorder and portrayed Kyrgyz as anarchists.

The main result of this "constitutional crisis" is the agreement to hold parliamentary elections in 2010 and the mandatory allocation of 50 percent of the seats to party lists. It can be argued that deferring parliamentary elections until 2010 was merely a tactic by Bakiyev to gain time to consolidate power gained from a parliament that does not want to be dissolved. But in the intervening three years, some consolidation of parties may occur. There are now about 90 parties because, as one opposition leader explained, clan-based "tribalism is still very strong, and every tribe wants its own party." There are currently five or six significant parties. There was broad agreement that party lists would make a difference. "Personality has been more important than institutions in Central Asia, but parties now want capacity-building training and access to resources," noted one analyst. Who would benefit most from this three-year postponement of parliamentary elections? Is it merely an opportunity for the president to use administrative resources for his own party, questioned some?

The worst overarching aspect of the political crisis since Akayev's fall is what some have called a cultural factor. Bakiyev and Kulov have in effect institutionalized the regional division between the Bishkek-oriented North and the Osh/Ferghana-oriented South. Most observers agreed that the north-south issue was not that strong before March 24 but that what was a small crack then is now much larger—so much so that no political argument

can be made now without being perceived as pro-North or pro-South. Even the November demonstrations were perceived in south Kyrgyzstan as an effort to weaken a southern president, and according to one of the principal organizers of the November demonstrations, “it will take time to undo the North-South split as recent political language has been very harsh.”

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC)

Kyrgyzstan’s rejection of the HIPC Initiative of the World Bank in February necessitated that the Bakiyev regime tackle more than two billion dollars in debt via its budgetary and finance processes or from another source. The World Bank would have eliminated some eight hundred million to one billion dollars of this debt according to different estimates, but it would have tied Kyrgyzstan more closely to the international community’s supervision. Key to understanding this decision is the perception on the part of many Kyrgyz that the international community and especially the World Bank and Washington supported the corruption of the Akayev regime. Thus, as one opposition leader put it, there was the sense that HIPC was “a Western agent.”

The media do not present in any broad sense the alternatives of a tight budgetary process or dependency on the largesse of a neighboring great power such as Russia or China. Nevertheless, Felix Kulov has openly called for a public referendum on a union between Kyrgyzstan and Russia as a political and economic solution to Kyrgyzstan’s crisis.

Central Asian Regional Relations

Logically, the relations of Central Asian states with one another should be primary,

but in general they are poor. The reasons are complex. The borders that the Bolsheviks drew intentionally built nationally oriented states that owed their loyalty to Moscow while purposefully ensuring that many peoples would find themselves straddling two states. The Ferghana Valley is the best example. There Soviet machinations not only produced three states, including Kyrgyzstan’s South, but the Soviets’ self-proclaimed attention to detail also produced ethnic enclaves that were well within one state’s borders but were separated from administrative control, which the Soviets had designated to another state. Kyrgyzstan has a “Soghd region” within its borders. It is an ethnic Tajik enclave administered by Uzbekistan. According to one analyst, one-half of the Kyrgyz army is deployed safeguarding the border with enclaves. The problems of border demarcation and delineation still exist in Central Asia. Consequently, there is still a need to establish mutually accepted borders and border controls.

The most important issue for the region that has been unresolved since the end of the Soviet period is water, its distribution and value. The problem is the lack of regional cooperation because Tashkent will not enter into regional water negotiations that could change the balance of water distribution. Another aspect of this failure is the legal need to provide access to Amu Darya water for irrigation purposes in Afghanistan. The Soviet regime excluded Afghanistan from any regional water agreement.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the “head-water states” where the two main rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, which reach westward across Central Asia toward the Aral Sea, form. Both states lack any significant oil or natural gas deposits and would like to use uninhabited mountain valleys to accumulate water to fuel hydroelectric energy stations to work toward solving their energy crises. Because Uzbekistan—the main water consumer—will not swap hydrocarbon energy for

water and Turkmenistan is greatly dependent on Uzbekistan's willingness to allow Amu Darya water from its lower reaches to be diverted to Turkmenistan's Kara-Kum Canal for irrigation purposes, there is plenty to be negotiated in order for the regional water issue to be resolved. Kazakhstan has also criticized the lack of a water regime for the Central Asian region. It was emphasized that the tensions within Kyrgyzstan and in other Central Asian states over the scarcity of resources could be the basis of resource-based conflicts in the future.

The competition between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to be recognized as the primary state in any Central Asian regional organization has served to undermine the concept of regional cooperation and allow Russia with its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and other organizations to be involved in convening Central Asian states for policy recommendations as well as to maintain its primary regional role. China has used the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the same way. Kazakhstan's undisputed economic status has led to renewed efforts to establish itself as the center of a Central Asian union. Its primary influence stems from its unique capacity in the region to foster investments; for example, Kazakhstan has become Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's main investor. The broader question is whether Kazakhstan can be accepted in what Central Asians term "an older brother" role.

Kyrgyzstan's National Security Concerns

Drugs

Drug smuggling, organized crime, militant Islamic movements, and nationality enclaves form some of the most persistent concerns. Despite international involvement through

agencies such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UN DOC) and investments in national agencies to fight it, drug smuggling is not only increasing and becoming more and more aligned with the rising power of organized crime clans, but it is undergoing increasing international coordination. Drug smuggling requires the coordination of related criminal gangs and special interests to achieve passage from Pakistan and Afghanistan through Central Asian countries onward to Russia and Western Europe. There are also basic problems in accounting for what goods are crossing at Kyrgyzstan's most carefully monitored international border. According to one expert, what Chinese and Kyrgyzstan customs services computers show as goods can be construed as possible components for drug processing. Greater interagency coordination is the key to winning the war on drug smuggling, but that will be difficult to achieve without a greater level of cooperation among Central Asian states.

Militant Islam

Since independence Islam has struggled for authority—a direct consequence of the Soviet attempt to extinguish any international component of Islam in Central Asia while building a limited Islamic hierarchy that owed its primary allegiance to Moscow. The attraction of study abroad in madrassas in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which offered a subsidized education in Islam, is a consequence of that vacuum of authority in Islam in Central Asia. Largely it still exists.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan/Turkistan (IMU) did not hesitate to make Central Asia a battlefield in its attempts to challenge the authority of successor states to the Soviets. Though the IMU, in its armed militancy, became deeply involved in the politics of the Taliban and enjoyed their support, it is no longer the movement that the states of Central Asia focus on the most because of its losses in

the Afghanistan war despite its very high level of training for armed insurgency.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is the movement currently accorded the highest level of concern throughout Central Asia. It is a movement that, loosely defined, is of Palestinian origin reaching back to the years following the establishment of Israel. It works for the reestablishment of an Islamic caliphate as the answer to a world divided along the lines of nation-states. That part of its ideology is derived from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan/Turkistan, not to mention Al Qaeda. Hizb ut-Tahrir is organized into small cells of members sworn to secrecy. Each cell leader may know the identity of another cell leader, but the total membership is known only to a few at the highest level of leadership. Although its politics are extremely radical, it claims to be a nonviolent movement. The states of Central Asia in recent years have claimed otherwise. Whether it is, as Zeyno Baran recently argued in *Foreign Affairs*, “a launching pad” for militant Islam or not, its main claim to increasing membership is based on supplying social welfare benefits to the rural poor. As one Kyrgyz who has witnessed the process explained, “they send a scout into a village where many men are working abroad and see which families have men absent; they return later with a representative that offers the women whose husbands are absent some social welfare in the form of money or food if she and her children will attend Islamic education classes once or twice a month.” Kyrgyzstan’s authority over its own people, like any state that cannot offer social welfare or an environment for social mobility and a functioning legal system that is seen as fair, is very limited.

U.S. Relations

Military-to-Military Relations

In December 1992 Kyrgyzstan joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, a mechanism

for countries that are not members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Partnership for Peace Program of NATO is the most enduring framework for cooperation and has concentrated command staff and field training for peacemaking. There has been an increasing emphasis on counterterrorism training since armed radical Islamist groups first began coordinated activity in 1999. Although the demands on Kyrgyzstan’s military have grown considerably over the past decade, their growth in effective capacity has been constrained partly by budgetary concerns. Russia’s sponsored CSTO has increased the involvement of Kyrgyzstan’s military in regional exercises that included at least one other Central Asian country in recent years. August 2007 marked both the first time that China has been able to include Kyrgyzstan in a military exercise with another Central Asian country within the SCO framework and at a new level of engagement.

Manas

Since the Bakiyev–Kulov “tandem” rose to power, U.S. relations with Kyrgyzstan have plummeted. The U.S. use of an air base (Ganci—named after New York Fire Chief Peter Ganci who died in the September 11 attacks) at the expanded Manas airport has come to act as a lever in both Kyrgyz international and domestic politics.

The air base was established in the fall of 2001 after the September 11 attacks to support the U.S. war against the Taliban Afghanistan regime. Located in a corner of the Manas International Airport near Bishkek, the air base became a source of funding for the regime. About two million dollars in lease payments annually as well as additional payments of about \$7,000 per takeoff were made. It became a domestic issue in Kyrgyz politics when the extent of the Akayev family’s involvement in fuel and service fees became known. President

Akayev's son Aydar partly owned Manas International Airport and was involved with the fuel services company of President Akayev's son-in-law, Adil Toiganbaev.

Kyrgyz demands in late 2005 for an exorbitant price for air base rights led to protracted negotiations that placed the price within the context of a broader aid package. That fueled charges in the Russian dominated local press that there were secret deals and led several members of parliament to demand that the United States become more open in its accounting. The expulsion of two U.S. diplomats because of "inappropriate contacts between U.S. embassy personnel and nongovernmental organizations" in July 2005 was shocking not only in its audacity but in its emphasis of a theme that Putin and Russia's controlled media have been echoing in their criticism of "color revolutions" as being essentially managed by the United States.

A minor wing tip scraping incident with a Kyrgyz plane in September and the fatal shooting of a civilian who failed to halt while approaching a U.S. aircraft refueling in December helped charge the scene. Kyrgyz Parliament Speaker Marat Sultanov held talks in February 2007 with U.S. officials in Washington and stated that Kyrgyzstan is not demanding that American troops leave the base but wants to renegotiate the terms of the lease agreement because of the near-crash and the shooting incident.

While Manas air base was becoming a fulcrum for criticism of the United States, Russia was able to return to Kyrgyzstan in the late Akayev period and establish its own base at Kant. Kulov even offered Russia an additional base in the south, in the more crowded and ethnically contentious Farghana Valley portion of Kyrgyzstan. The offer has not been acted on. Russia's presence is currently very strong in Kyrgyzstan because Russians now have money to invest. The comment by Russia's deputy foreign minister in January that the U.S. base should stay in Kyrgyzstan as long as it is necessary for Afghanistan's stability can be

interpreted as an attempt on the part of Russia to negotiate Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy through Moscow, at least as far as U.S. interests are concerned. An alternative suggestion would be for the United States to engage via Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, as "it would be better for Kyrgyzstan to be a junior partner via Astana" rather than watch as the Kremlin exercised control.

A prominent intellectual and organizer of both the March 2005 and November 2006 demonstrations emphasized that the ease with which the U.S. diplomats were ejected last year, as well as the relative acquiescence of the United States government in this behavior, was quite a shock to many in Kyrgyzstan. This happened, he thought, because the United States has not adapted to changes in Central Asia in recent years. Since the Iraq war began, the United States has been increasingly portrayed as weak and impotent in the media, and working with the United States is no longer seen as necessary or important to Kyrgyzstan. He further explained that for the overwhelming majority of the Kyrgyz political class, the media that are prominent and readily available to them are Russian or Russian dominated. The U.S. foreign policy establishment is seen by some as too dependent on Kyrgyz think tanks whose output is mainly directed to the West.

Many Kyrgyz view the problems of the United States in maintaining its presence in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan as symptomatic of its failure to engage with Central Asia seriously. Russia and China are attempting to fill the void that a comprehensive U.S. policy for the region might have averted.

Russian-Kyrgyz Relations

Russia's presence goes far beyond its political interests in Kyrgyzstan. Russians are returning with a great deal of money to be invested in mineral resources. Russia's regional approach in Central Asia under Putin has been

not only to seek control of mineral resources but energy resources as well, which are represented by the United Energy System's monopoly interests in developing large hydroelectric stations in oil- and gas-poor but water-rich Kyrgyzstan. Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) last year became the training center where Kyrgyzstan's own MVD officers will be sent for training, mirroring the relationship in the Soviet period.

Increasingly Russia and now Beijing are where the elite of Kyrgyzstan send their sons and daughters for education abroad.

Russia has a great deal of leverage in Kyrgyzstan because nearly 400,000 Kyrgyz, mostly male, are estimated to be working in Russia. Kazakhstan is estimated to have fewer than one hundred thousand, but both countries account for nearly half a million or close to 10 percent of the population in a country of 5.2 million. Remittances are thought to be at least twice the budget. Whereas one opposition member characterized this large labor migration "as a means for Russia to rule," another put it more pragmatically: "The economic situation is such that we need a direct connection with some country. For better or worse Kyrgyz work in Russia, but now whole families are leaving."

Russia has had a declining population for decades because of low birth rates and outmigration. Its labor force need in the past decade has led to the influx of about 10 million labor migrants from Central Asian and South Caucasus countries. President Putin has not failed to use this labor force need to Russia's advantage in foreign policy, as displayed by last year's threat of sending Georgia's labor migrants home when a dispute arose with President Saakashvili. The failure of so many states to Russia's south to build their economies to provide employment for people living there has led to this strange balance of power in labor migration.

Russian control of the media, especially television broadcasts, was seen by many as heavily influencing Kyrgyz public opinion.

Even intellectuals turn to Russia's *Komsomolskaya Pravda* primarily because there is no alternative newspaper that is well financed enough to compete with it. One overt display of Russia's involvement in actively isolating Kyrgyzstan was the blocking of Internet communications recently: "Kyrgyz providers and Websites were attacked four times in 2006 because Kyrgyzstan is more politically active than other Central Asian countries," claimed one media analyst. Although independent media are seen as shrinking and only a few newspapers remain independent, it was noted that the opposition has done nothing to create an alternative television channel.

Chinese–Kyrgyz Relations

China, like Russia, sees the region as a cheap source of mineral resources for its industry and is following suit in buying mines and resource sites. But it has also promised to build a railroad connecting Kyrgyzstan to China to be used for exports.

Could China be on the brink of implementing a regional policy for exporting factories to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and possibly Uzbekistan where the male labor outmigration is highest? Migration plays a role in China's policy as well, but there the presence of a diaspora community, largely illegal, is estimated by some Kyrgyz to be close to 100,000, a number greater than in neighboring, wealthy Kazakhstan.

China's selection of Bishkek to host the 2006 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit could be the springboard for a new large-scale Chinese initiative for Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan's Deputy Foreign Minister Kadyrbek Sabaev spoke of the necessity for Kyrgyzstan to build a new conceptual basis for its international relations, which is being worked on now, and Nurdin Abdylbaev, MP and head of the Committee on International Relations, spoke of how the SCO could solve the region's

problems on a government-to-government basis. The necessity of a “neutral Central Asia” was emphasized in this context. It is possible that a neutral Central Asia under the SCO umbrella and promised new investments and jobs will increasingly become the centerpiece of China’s new policies in Central Asia.

Summary

Kyrgyzstan’s crisis has become quite protracted. Many emphasized, in one form or another, the need for some outside force, economic or political, to solve their problems. The U.S. record of engagement is quite spotty: Different levels of interaction have occurred at various times. The building of a civil society that actively organizes to voice its concerns is an accomplishment unique to the region. Several Kyrgyz voiced the opinion that the United States should continue its emphasis on building civil society in Kyrgyzstan. They lamented its incompleteness and expressed shock that the millions of dollars in foreign financial aid given to Kyrgyzstan were squandered instead of used to add to the economic base of the country. The role of international organizations has been substantial over the past 15 years, but their ability to continue to build on the base already formed is increasingly threatened. As the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) representatives

explained, under rules established this year by Kyrgyzstan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), their meetings with anyone now necessitate a one-and-a-half page report to the MVD. This rule extends to every NGO.

If Kyrgyzstan is to develop its level of civil society more extensively, it will need to establish a more organized multiparty system than exists now. The fact that Kyrgyzstan’s most gifted students study in Russia or China rather than the United States does not support the sustainable elements of an open society. Kazakhstan has not built the level of civil society already achieved in Kyrgyzstan, but its economic development, partly owing to an oil export oriented economy, has resulted in its being able to send thousands of Kazakh students abroad to the West and mainly the United States for higher education. The gains that Kyrgyzstan has made in civil society may not be sustainable without the same experience. Nor can Kyrgyzstan be expected to survive without an economy that attracts investment.

About the Author

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