

# EURASIA TASK FORCE

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## Uncertain Kyrgyzstan: Rebalancing U.S. Policy

### Summary

Kyrgyzstan is lurching forward, its future uncertain. Eleven weeks after street protests forced the collapse of the regime of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and three weeks after the worst ethnic violence in the country's history, a measure of security-enforced calm has returned. The apparently successful June 27 referendum on a new constitution and mandate for Interim President Roza Otunbayeva will provide legitimacy and confidence to the government. But Otunbayeva and the group around her appear to underestimate the difficulties they face and to overestimate their ability to control events. They will have to work hard to overcome divisions among their ranks, staggering political and economic challenges, the risks of renewed violence in the south and antipathy toward Kyrgyzstan elsewhere in Central Asia.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration and its allies underestimate what is at stake in this far-away country of over five million pinched between Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China. The failure of Kyrgyzstan – which cannot be excluded given recent events – would aggravate our problems in Afghanistan. It could lead to the same kind of vacuum in Kyrgyzstan that terrorists exploited in Afghanistan a decade ago. It would expose its neighbors to similar vulnerabilities. But a successful Kyrgyzstan will be one that reinforces regional stability and security. Those working toward that end deserve U.S. and transatlantic support. However, U.S. influence and ability to help

Kyrgyzstan is now compromised by a local view that Washington “betrayed” the country by failing to confront the excesses of the Bakiyev regime and aided its kleptocracy through the arrangements to contract fuel for U.S. military aircraft using the Manas transit center. Having made support for Afghanistan operations the main U.S. mission in Kyrgyzstan, the United States has inadvertently compromised its democracy agenda there – and has compromised its Afghan efforts in the process.

The U.S. priority should be to support the Otunbayeva government that, despite its weaknesses, is now the country's best hope, and to revise the U.S.-Kyrgyzstan relationship in ways that reflect our real interests there. Key steps include:

- Backing a robust Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission that includes police, border and conflict resolution components far more serious than those currently being contemplated;
- Seeking to provide a mentoring capability, perhaps one or more senior U.S., European or other officials familiar with Central Asia, who can advise the interim government and give greater coherence to its engagement with the OSCE and key foreign actors;
- Encouraging the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to step forward with policy guidance and possibly funding to help stabilize the country's finances,

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bolster economic management and improve transparency; and

- Focusing U.S. relief and other assistance on rebuilding the south.

## **April Events and Their Background**

It was no democratic revolution that overthrew Bakiyev, but rather a street revolt that prompted the collapse of his regime. The rebellion's origins included public anger over fuel price hikes, widespread disgust with poor governance and corruption, and an onslaught of criticism by Russian media that almost seemed to give a green light for the president's ouster. Power fell like an apple into the laps of Bakiyev's opponents, who leapt onto the public upheaval hoping to save their country from chaos – or take power, with all its perquisites, for themselves. The interim government consists of people who were once allies of Bakiyev and/or his predecessor Askar Akayev, but who fell out with their patron(s). This fact compromises their standing with the public, and fresh accusations of corruption involving key interim administration figures are one indicator of problems they will face establishing a credible new government.

The April revolt and collapse of the Bakiyev regime revealed problems that had long been evident: poor governance, weak institutions, corruption and inadequate minority representation in official life. Those problems are now more sharply in focus, and they will make it exceedingly difficult for Otunbayeva and her colleagues to succeed. The interim authority is weak, and its power is highly vulnerable. An alternative effort to set up another interim government – perhaps in the southern city of Osh – cannot be excluded.

Several in the new regime articulate a positive narrative. It is that Kyrgyzstan remains committed to democratic values (even under Bakiyev, it remained Central Asia's freest country), and that functioning and effective democracy now has a third chance there.

- The first opportunity belonged to Akayev, who saw role models in George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and, as an academician and physicist, was one of very few non-Soviet Communist Party leaders to take power after the USSR's collapse. Akayev's leadership gradually sank into corruption, family favoritism and authoritarian rule.
- The 2005 Tulip Revolution represented a second try. It brought Bakiyev and reformers estranged from Akayev to

power. But it soon repeated the descent into authoritarian abuse and more malign corruption and nepotism, magnified by the role of the president's son, Maksim Bakiyev.

- Now Kyrgyzstan has a third opportunity, and its leaders are determined. Their priority is to make succeed the new constitution that replaces presidential rule with a parliamentary system that will ensure no one person or family can so corrupt Kyrgyzstani governance that the state itself is at risk. This is a noble vision. Its realization seems like an almost Herculean task.

## **Ethnic Clashes**

The worst interethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan's history began June 10 in the south and was unexpected virtually across the board in Bishkek. As one international observer put it, there were serious ethnic problems, but no obvious reason for them to blow up at this time. While the specific origins of what happened are murky and may never be clear, the events as they played out represented a failure by the Bishkek authorities to fulfill the security functions that are any government's most basic responsibility.

- The official narrative is that former President Bakiyev's son and/or other cronies plotted together with the al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and possibly other radicals to arrange provocations that would inflame the mixed Kyrgyz-Uzbek south.
- This version of events, or elements of it, may be true, but it is also a way for the interim government – all ethnic Kyrgyz – to evade responsibility for the atrocities that took place and for the underlying problem of Uzbeks' marginalization from official life that the authorities did nothing to address.

By the time of the referendum, some 50,000-70,000 refugees had returned to Kyrgyzstan – the majority of those who had fled to Uzbekistan. The status of some 300,000 internally-displaced persons (IDPs) within the country was less clear. Although the situation in the south is reportedly much calmer, the area remains tense. Confrontations have been reported elsewhere in the country between Kyrgyz and other ethnic minorities.

- The return of Uzbeks less than two weeks after terrible ethnic fighting seemed early. The recombination of ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south puts the government in a risky position. It must rely on a massive and rather traditional (Soviet-style) security effort that may not be

able to control – and could worsen – ethnic animosities, especially given the ethnic Kyrgyz dominance of the security forces.

- Widespread poverty, desires for revenge, weak governing structures, disregard for the interim government, still questionable policing abilities, drug traffickers, and both local and international terrorists in the region all leave Kyrgyzstan and especially the south like dry kindling waiting for another spark.

It will take extraordinarily adroit policy and a large measure of luck for the interim government to manage these related dangers through the fall election. An effectively-scaled OSCE police mentoring and conflict resolution presence should help to calm and depoliticize interethnic ire. The sooner such a mission can be stood up, the more likely Kyrgyzstan can manage the situation in the south while it grapples with its broader renewal this year and next.

## Politics

The referendum's success is a boost for the Bishkek authorities and bolsters the legitimacy of Interim President Otunbayeva. But she and other leaders have their work cut out for them.

- Otunbayeva may be a uniting figure, but she has not yet shown strength. On the contrary, it appears that others in the divided interim administration have alternatively tried to manipulate, undermine and hide behind her. Moving forward, they must overcome what has been a serious lack of unity and common sense of purpose. Otunbayeva needs to establish a more effective presidency capable of managing the power brokers and ministries around her.
- For too many Kyrgyzstanis, the leadership has done what others with power have done before – divide up the spoils, reward allies with plum jobs and position themselves to skim money from the system. Leaked telephone transcripts detail alleged bribery and payoffs for official appointments involving Otunbayeva and Finance Minister Temir Sariyev, for example.

As the country moves beyond the referendum, a number of figures in the interim government will likely resign their posts to campaign for parliament – perhaps to be replaced by technocrats until a new government is formed. This could leave the remaining administration around Otunbayeva less divided and less politicized. The parliamentary election, which is scheduled for October 10, but may be moved up,

and the government formation process that follows are likely to be difficult and contentious.

- The country boasts some 120 parties, a number of which are linked to various figures within the interim government. Perhaps only six to eight of these parties will make it into parliament, but few expect that any one will win a sizeable plurality.
- Then an unprecedented negotiation will follow to set up a new coalition government. Among the evident dangers are that ethnic violence or other events might overwhelm this work and/or that a variety of corrupt bargains will be struck among competing parties, factions and leaders. Either scenario could lead the country further toward dysfunction and disorder. A key issue will be whether Uzbeks feel disenfranchised in the election or ignored in the coalition government that emerges.

Guiding the country through this tense period will require skill, unity of purpose among the core leadership and luck. Effective, behind-the-scenes mentoring will be essential – by the OSCE and key foreign missions (e.g., Russia, the United States, and the European Union).

## Economy

In the view of Finance Minister Sariyev, Kyrgyzstan faces the grave task of carrying out political reform at a time of economic collapse. He talks about a need for budgetary support from the international community amounting to \$200-250 million, puts reconstruction costs in the south at \$400 million and argues that, if left unaided, Kyrgyzstan's need for external support will continue to grow.

The foreign trade on which several elements of the economy depend has largely seized up following border closures by its neighbors. Kazakhstan is a partial exception, but only three of eleven crossing points were open in late-June – and then only for food, medicine and other relief supplies. Adding to the country's long-existing poverty and the effects of the current crisis will be the implementation from July 1 of the Russia/Kazakhstan customs union, which will significantly raise tariffs and other barriers to trade that Kyrgyzstan faces.

## Foreign Factors

Kyrgyzstan's neighbors have no love for it.

- Much of this reflects antipathy for the country's attempts to foster democracy and a measure of freedom for its citizens, halting though those efforts have been.
- Some concern may also reflect fears that a poor and divided Kyrgyzstan, lacking a sufficiently strong leader, will descend into violence or state failure that will worsen the already substantial problems the neighbors face.
- But the other Central Asian states presumably would prefer a disorderly, democratically-oriented Kyrgyzstan to a failed state – something reflected in Uzbek President Karimov's decision earlier in June to open the border to ethnic Uzbeks fleeing violence in Osh and Jalalabad.

Kazakhstan's current role as OSCE chairman-in-office puts Astana in a position where it is almost forced to step up to the plate and display statesmanship. If it can help midwife an effective OSCE presence in Kyrgyzstan to head off chaos there, its action will also have the indirect effect of supporting the interim Otunbayeva administration and could be a basis for future cooperation.

Russia's role in Kyrgyzstan has seemed both uncertain and shifting. At least some believe that the Russian media assault on Bakiyev green lighted the movement to oust him. But even if that reflected a conscious policy decision in Moscow on regime change, it seems very unlikely that Russia anticipated what followed. Here too, a democratizing Kyrgyzstan that is friendly toward the West must seem preferable to a failed state. It is noteworthy that when the southern violence erupted in mid-June, Otunbayeva called Moscow rather than Washington, Brussels or any of Kyrgyzstan's other benefactors. Through the media and remittances, Russian influence remains immense in Kyrgyzstan; according to one report, 98 percent of all Kyrgyzstanis have a favorable opinion of Russia. Given the West's obviously lean role in the country, Moscow may have concluded that it had little to lose by cooperating with Bishkek – in the form of an expanded OSCE presence and cooperation with the United States.

## International Institutions

Most international institutions are ill-suited to lead an international response to the crisis. The UN agencies have played an important role in managing the humanitarian

response to the refugee situation. However, they have done little to help stabilize the broader political situation. Although Russia has demonstrated little interest in sending peacekeeping forces into Kyrgyzstan, it likely would not have been able to mobilize the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) had it so desired. The charter of the CSTO does not provide for intervention within its member states, and Uzbekistan and Belarus are prepared to veto all but the most minimal of CSTO responses to the crisis. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has been silent. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has offered little more than rhetorical support, while the European Union has offered only humanitarian assistance. The Turkish-led Conference for Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia has no capacity to play a role on the ground. Each of these institutions lacks the broad-based membership, the local credibility and the organizational capacity to be effective.

However, the OSCE is “fit for purpose,” according to a local observer. It brings together 56 countries in a comprehensive approach to security in Europe and Eurasia. Kyrgyzstan is a member as are its Central Asian neighbors, Russia, the United States, Turkey, and all EU members. The OSCE already has a leading profile and strong track record in Kyrgyzstan. According to one local, its work there since 1998 means that it is “embedded in the fabric of society.” The OSCE Center in Bishkek – ably led by a British career diplomat and veteran of 21 wars – has been working with governmental and non-governmental authorities in the areas of policing and rule of law, border security and management, good governance, legislation, environmental protection and regional cooperation. In doing so, the center has gained the trust of the former opposition that now constitutes the interim government, non-governmental organizations and the Uzbek minority. It has achieved this with only twenty international staff and a budget of €5.5 million.

While the OSCE offers the best prospect for structuring an effective international response to crisis, it risks falling short. The OSCE's risk-averse election-observing arm failed in declining to send 300 short-term observers to monitor the referendum. (It did field a 36-person long-term observer mission.) Diplomats at OSCE headquarters in Vienna are now debating how to ramp up conflict prevention efforts and have deployed an assessment team to Bishkek. Proposals on the table include sending fifty police monitors embedded in six locations throughout the country, enhancing the OSCE

Center's capacity by adding eight to fifteen personnel to its staff, and deploying the High Commission for National Minorities to support ethnic reconciliation efforts in the south.

These ideas tinker on the margins of the problem. Measures currently on the table in Vienna will not stave off failure. It is time to be bold. But long plagued by differences between the United States and Russia, the OSCE can only respond boldly with joint leadership by those two countries.

## **A Compromised America**

A startling change for those involved in Central Asia a decade ago is the extent to which the United States has lost its influence in Kyrgyzstan and is in important ways now discredited.

- One Kyrgyzstani who served in the interim government spoke of “betrayal” by the American embassy and U.S. policy for their support of Bakiyev and failure to condemn his corruption and serious abuses of power. Remarks by others echoed this sentiment.
- U.S. Department of Defense contracting of fuel for military aircraft using the Manas transit center is another lightning rod. The accusation is that the United States must have known the Bakiyev family had gained control of those contracts and was siphoning off the proceeds for its own benefit.
- By some local accounts, the U.S. embassy had estranged itself from independent and opposition figures who now lead the interim government, leaving it ill-placed at a personal level to influence events.

The truth of any of these perceptions may not be important. For too many Kyrgyzstanis, the effect is that the sole U.S. interest has been prosecuting the war in Afghanistan, that it turned a blind eye to all else, and that the United States subverted its democratic and good governance ideals in the process.

## **What the Kyrgyz Want**

Kyrgyzstanis across the board made clear their need for the support of the international community as they work their way forward. Several appealed for “recognition” of the interim government and complained the United States and the West have fallen short of that mark. Despite Otunbayeva's panicked appeal for Russian intervention on June 11-12, the interim authorities now oppose a foreign

peacekeeping presence, which they believe would cause more problems than it would solve. They do want the proposed OSCE police mentoring and conflict resolution components and recognize the value of such a neutral presence in calming the south. They want Maksim Bakiyev extradited from London (where he has reportedly claimed asylum) and to recover what they believe are hundreds of millions of dollars he allegedly stole. They want budgetary and reconstruction assistance as they cope with the recovery of their country and the restoration of effective governance.

## **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

The U.S. interest in Kyrgyzstan is what it has always been: to promote a strong, secure, prosperous and sovereign country that is friendly toward the United States. Kyrgyzstan matters because it sits along an arc of real and potential instabilities of which Afghanistan is but one part. The failure of any one state increases the likelihood that the entire region may fail and that pre-2001 Afghanistan could be repeated in Central Asia. The United States must not allow such a threat to its security and that of its friends and allies to take root. As suggested in a sense of the Senate resolution unanimously passed on June 25, Washington needs to show more leadership and coherency of purpose in supporting Kyrgyzstan. Ideally this should take place in harmony with Russia, as President Barack Obama's diplomacy with President Dmitri Medvedev has already begun to do.

Specifically, the United States should:

- Make strong statements of support for the results of Kyrgyzstan's referendum, and especially Otunbayeva's interim presidency, and find ways in the coming months to demonstrate U.S. backing for the Bishkek administration.
- Invite Otunbayeva to visit Washington as soon as circumstances in her country permit.
- Follow up the visit of Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake to Kyrgyzstan by adding Bishkek to the itinerary of the senior U.S. official participating in the OSCE informal ministerial in Kazakhstan on June 16-17.
- Revise the fueling arrangements in Manas in consultation with the new Bishkek government. These and other U.S. military efforts in the country need to be much more

effectively coordinated with the U.S. embassy to ensure unity of purpose and consistency with overall U.S. policy and interests in Kyrgyzstan.

- One suggestion floated by a former interim government official is that the United States purchase fuel directly from the Russian suppliers with whom Kyrgyz middlemen have been dealing. This deserves consideration and could be a way further to facilitate cooperation with Russia.
- The Obama administration should also cooperate with Congressional investigations into the Manas fuel contracts.
- Also in consultation with the Kyrgyz authorities, work to make Manas a joint U.S.-Russian operation or at least to establish there a joint U.S.-Russian presence that would symbolically demonstrate that zero-sum politics are over and that the country does not have to choose between Moscow and Washington.
- Call for a much more robust OSCE police support capacity numbering several hundred trainers and mentors, their deployment in the south, and the development of a program to collect small arms and small weapons.
- Support other initiatives to augment and upgrade the OSCE mission, with emphasis on conflict resolution/mediation to help ameliorate tensions in the south. This could include a large-scale OSCE High Commission for National Minorities presence to facilitate Uzbek-Kyrgyz reconciliation.
- Ensure that the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) provides technical assistance to help the Kyrgyz authorities prepare for the fall parliamentary elections and fields a large elections observation mission.
- Encourage the Kazakh OSCE chairman-in-office to initiate an independent ODIHR investigation of the interethnic violence and atrocities in June.
- Support a border security management regime to help the interim government maintain control of its borders and prevent terrorists and extremist elements from entering the country and trafficking of illicit material.
- Provide logistical, technical and financial support for these OSCE and other international efforts.
- Seek the establishment of a senior-level mentoring capability to give ongoing policy support and advice to Interim President Otunbayeva and her leadership team. Such a mentor might be American, but ideally this capacity would include input from Brussels and Moscow, and it should, in any case, dovetail its functions and key messages with those players and with the OSCE mission in country.
- Encourage emergency World Bank and IMF efforts to stabilize the country's finances, give policy guidance to its economic managers and ensure against corruption.
- Focus U.S. relief and other assistance on sufficient rebuilding of the south so that all elements of the population feel more included in Kyrgyzstan's future and fully prepared for the winter that is only five months away.

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## Eurasia as Part of Transatlantic Security

In the spring of 2010, the Atlantic Council launched a task force on "Eurasia as Part of Transatlantic Security" with the task of developing a coherent, effective U.S. strategy toward Eurasia. Chaired by Atlantic Council Chairman Senator **Chuck Hagel**, who as a U.S. Senator visited all five Central Asian republics, the project draws on experts from the Atlantic Council network with deep experience in Eurasia, transatlantic security and OSCE matters. To inform the task force's policy recommendations, Atlantic Council President and CEO **Frederick Kempe** led a delegation consisting of Ambassador Ross Wilson, Damon Wilson, Boyko Nitzov and Jeff Lightfoot to Vienna, Austria, Astana, Kazakhstan and Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in June to meet with government representatives, OSCE officials and members of civil society. This project seeks to shape the transatlantic debate on security in Eurasia and the future of the OSCE by publishing policy-relevant issue briefs, organizing strategy sessions with senior officials and issuing a task force report.

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