

Foreign Policy Consequences of Homegrown Eurasian Nationalism

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U.S. policymakers confront a paradox in Eurasian politics: more pluralistic Central Asian states are more prone than the region's solidly authoritarian states to ethno-nationalist violence. In particular, Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's turn toward nationalism has been problematic for these two countries' ethnic minorities, but it also has implications for U.S.-Kyrgyz and U.S.-Tajik relations. Kyrgyzstan, once the U.S. government's closest partner in Central Asia, is now estranged from Washington. Diplomatic rows with Tajikistan have been less dramatic, perhaps due to the fact that Washington's efforts to promote political pluralism in Tajikistan have been less forceful. Taken together, the Kyrgyz and Tajik cases demonstrate that U.S. democratization efforts in Central Asia are constrained. The U.S. government can either choose to champion political pluralism and risk strategic partnerships, as it has in Kyrgyzstan, or abide autocratic repression of minorities and maintain strategic partnerships, as has been the case in Tajikistan. Washington cannot have it both ways. Attempts to do so in Kyrgyzstan, much like Washington's similar attempts in Egypt to promote reform while maintaining its military partnership with Cairo, have failed.

Nationalist Conflict in Central Asia

Ethnonationalist conflict is largely absent among Eurasia's stable autocracies. Conflicts, to the extent they exist in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, occur among groups within the ethnic majority. The 2011 Zhanaozen violence was a conflict between two Kazakh economic classes, the managerial class running the Zhanaozen oil refineries and the working class that staffed these refineries. The 2005 Andijan violence was a conflict between the center and regions, between Uzbeks in the Fergana valley who sought greater autonomy and a Tashkent leadership that is intolerant of deviations from centralized autocratic rule.

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The 2010 and 2012 violence in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in contrast, were conflicts fueled by nationalism. U.S. diplomats laud the Tajik regime and, especially, the Kyrgyz leadership for tolerating some degree of political pluralism. This acceptance, though, is the result not of central government design but central government deficiency. The Tajik and Kyrgyz states are too weak to repress opposition. Pluralism is the result of state incapacity, and nationalism is the strategy the Tajik and Kyrgyz regimes use in an effort to mitigate the opposition challenges that come with state incapacity.

This is the bind that U.S. policymakers must confront: how to push Eurasian states toward political pluralism without simultaneously pushing them toward nationalism. Were the latter inclusive—the nationalism of a united polity marshaled to advance civic pride or defend against real or imagined outside threats—then U.S. proponents of Central Asian democratization would not need to worry about unintended consequences. But Tajik and Kyrgyz nationalism has neither been inclusive nor primarily outward directed. Instead, it has targeted domestic ethnic minority groups: Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan's Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces and Pamiris in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region.

Kyrgyzstan's Turn toward Nationalism

Four pillars serve as the foundations of Kyrgyzstan's autocratic instability: (1) the absence of a dominant presidential party; (2) limited resources for patronage politics; (3) a population inclined toward protest; and (4) deep ethnic and regional divides. These four pillars have prevented Kyrgyzstan's presidents from consolidating autocratic rule and have allowed for political competition at the parliamentary and local levels. In addition, as is often the case in diverse states where institutions are weak and contestation is real, politicians turn to nationalism in an effort to curry favor with the population.

The fact that the drivers of Kyrgyz nationalism are domestic in origin is critically important as well. Were the drivers international, with, for example, Kyrgyz nationalism the result of postcolonial discourses of independence or a national campaign juxtaposing traditional values to encroaching outside cultures of excess, Kyrgyz politicians would have considerably greater latitude in the conduct of their foreign policy. Kyrgyz politicians at home could rail against an external other, the former colonial ruler, or Miley Cyrus, while maintaining cordial diplomatic relations with external powers.

Neither Moscow nor Miley, though, are the wellsprings of Kyrgyz nationalism. Political competition drives nationalism. Kyrgyz politicians, even politicians once inclined toward inclusiveness and liberal values, are falling over themselves to demonstrate their nationalist bona fides. In May 2011, the Kyrgyz parliament voted unanimously to reject the findings of the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, an independent investigation led

by Finnish parliamentarian Kimmo Kiljunen. The Commission's report concluded that ethnic Uzbeks were disproportionately affected in southern Kyrgyzstan's deadly 2010 riots and, moreover, faulted the Kyrgyz military for contributing to the violence that left hundreds of Uzbeks dead and thousands without homes. Roza Otunbayeva, at the time interim president of Kyrgyzstan and widely perceived in diplomatic circles to be a proponent of reform and tolerance, did not dispute the parliament's vote nor challenge the parliament's decision to declare Kiljunen *persona non grata*.

Five years after the 2010 ethnic riots, Kyrgyz politicians are once again competing to demonstrate their nationalist credentials. In response to the State Department's awarding jailed ethnic Uzbek activist, Azimjon Askarov, the 2014 Human Rights Defender award, the administration of Almazbek Atambayev cancelled a 1993 cooperation agreement with the United States. The Atambayev administration, moreover, sentenced a prominent Uzbek imam, Rashot Kamalov, to ten years in prison for alleged religious extremism, charges international organizations such as the [OSCE](#) have questioned. These moves by the Kyrgyz president are understandable. Atambaev faced a real challenge in October parliamentary elections from populist parties like Respublika-Ata Zhurt. By ramping up its rhetoric in the manufactured Askarov and Kamalov cases, the Atambaev administration ensured the pro-presidential Social Democratic Party would not be outflanked on the nationalism issue.

Perhaps U.S. officials did not intend to provoke the Atambayev administration by honoring the jailed Askarov with the Human Rights Defender award. As anthropologist Sean Roberts, a one-time USAID democratization officer for Central Asia, recently observed, the decision of one office within the State Department to honor Askarov is not indicative of a unitary and intentional U.S. government policy to [reprimand](#) Kyrgyzstan for human rights abuses. What the ongoing diplomatic dispute does demonstrate, though, are the difficult waters that lay ahead in Kyrgyz-U.S. relations.

Until recently, Washington's primary objective in Kyrgyzstan was to secure access to the Manas Air Base. Now that the United States has drawn down its military campaign in Afghanistan and left Manas, Washington has greater freedom to champion political reform in Kyrgyzstan. This is a laudable objective and one that many Kyrgyz citizens support. In pursuit of this objective, however, Washington policymakers must be sensitive to the reality that Kyrgyz politicians, even reform-leaning politicians, have little choice but to engage in Kyrgyz nationalist discourse. Were Kyrgyzstan like Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, that is, were the Atambayev leadership secure in its rule, it would not perceive the need to coopt its opponents' nationalist rhetoric. But Kyrgyzstan is neither a strong autocracy nor an institutionalized democracy. Instead, it finds itself in a gray zone where four pillars of instability—a weak presidential party, few patronage resources, a population inclined to protest, and deep ethnic and regional divides—force the central leadership to lash out against any and all external critiques of Kyrgyz nationalism. U.S. policymakers would do well to anticipate outbursts of

ethnonationalism during Kyrgyz elections and, particularly in non-election years, support the efforts of the many Kyrgyzstan-based civic organizations working to promote interethnic understanding and cooperation.

Tajikistan's Turn toward Nationalism

Tajikistan shares many of the same state incapacities that have weakened Kyrgyz autocratic rule. President Emomali Rahmon has been able to establish a dominant presidential party, the deceptively named People's Democratic Party. But like his Kyrgyz counterparts, Rahmon suffers from limited patronage resources, a country with deep regional and ethnic divides, and, at times, a population willing to protest central government rule. Here too, as in Kyrgyzstan, these pillars of instability have given rise to nationalism. Although Rahmon does not face the same degree of opposition that Kyrgyz presidents do, he does feel compelled to demonstrate his Tajik nationalist vision.

At times these demonstrations are comical, as can be seen in the omnipresent billboards of a hardhat-wearing, arm-extended, finger-pointing Rahmon extolling the promise of the yet-to-be-built Rogun Dam. Where Lenin once pointed to the West to symbolize the future glory of Soviet communism, Rahmon now points to what would be the world's tallest dam to symbolize post-Soviet Tajik nationalism.

At other times, however, Rahmon's nationalism takes on real rather than symbolic meaning. In July 2012, Rahmon dispatched thousands of troops to the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) following a deadly clash between supporters of a local warlord, Tolib Ayombekov, and the central government's commander in the region, General Abdullo Nazarov. Although the cause of the clash between Nazarov and Ayombekov remains disputed, the optics were clear: Ayombekov, his supporters, and the GBAO population broadly are ethnic Pamiris. Nazarov, who died in the fight, was Tajik. The dispatching of central government troops and the suppression of Ayombekov's supporters was Rahmon's message to the Pamiris, and equally to ethnic Tajiks, that there would be no toleration of ethnic minority challenges to majority rule.

Where Rahmon's nationalist agenda is most apparent is in his anti-Islamist campaign. In an October 2015 television address, Rahmon underscored his government's efforts to "propagate and honor national values." To achieve this end, Rahmon urged "every patriot of the country to prevent the recruitment of residents, specifically teenagers and young people, by radical and extremist groups." In a January 2016 [report](#) about policing in Tajikistan's Khatlon region, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty illustrates how the president's exhortation is implemented at the local level. Here, so as to combat "foreign influences," the Khatlon police "brought to order" 12,818 men with "overly long and unkempt beards," shuttered 162 stores that sold hijabs, and "convinced 1,773 women and girls to shun the alien headwear."

Rahmon's portrayal of outward expressions of Islam as alien, radical, and anathema to Tajik national values is understandable. Until recently the greatest challenge to Rahmon's rule was the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), a party whose representatives, according to the 1997 UN-brokered peace agreement ending five years of civil war, were to be assured representation in government. In September 2015, however, the Tajik courts banned the IRPT, ruling the party was a terrorist organization. Since the September court ruling, the IRPT leadership has been jailed or forced into exile.

In contrast to its response to growing Kyrgyz nationalism, the U.S. government has been slow to fault Tajikistan's growing nationalism. This silence has drawn criticism, so much so that the State Department's Office of Inspector General conducted an inspection of the U.S. embassy in Dushanbe and submitted a report in which the IG [concluded](#): "Tight front office control of information reported to Washington has undermined confidence that the embassy provides a full and reliable picture of local developments essential for assessment of Arms Export Control Act concerns." Stated directly, the IG faulted the U.S. embassy in Dushanbe for whitewashing the 2012 GBAO violence and, moreover, the IG suggested the goal of this whitewashing was to ensure continuity in U.S.-Tajik military programs. The IG report appears to have had a positive effect. The U.S. embassy, following the September 2015 crackdown on the IRPT, promptly [faulted](#) the Tajik government for arresting IRPT members and for failing "to fully implement its OSCE commitments and international obligations on freedom of expression, association, and assembly."

Foreign Policy for the Future

Competition and nationalism in diverse societies go hand in hand. Social scientists disagree on the extent to which the gravitation toward nationalism can derail the process of political reform.² What is clear, though, is that nationalism, when its origins are domestic rather than international, boxes leaders of weak autocracies into stances they must defend abroad. Not to defend nationalist claims internationally would precipitate a leader's downfall domestically.

This reality poses challenges for U.S. foreign policy. Washington can ignore, as it has at times in the Tajik case, nationalist excesses and thus secure continued military cooperation. Alternatively, U.S. diplomats can denounce nationalism and the repression of ethnic minorities. This approach, however, all but ensures strained bilateral relations with weak autocrats whom U.S. policymakers might want to engage for geopolitical reasons.

² See, for example, the debate between Donald Horowitz and Arend Lijphart: Horowitz, "Democracy in Divided Societies," *Journal of Democracy* 4, no. 4 (1993): 19-38; Lijphart, "Constitutional Design for Divided Societies," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 2 (2004): 96-109.

Foreign policy toward Eurasia's secure autocrats is more straightforward. Washington's ambitions and these autocrats' fears are less pronounced. Karimov and Nazarbayev do not harbor high concerns about domestic opposition and Western democracy promoters do not harbor high hopes for political reform. Expectations and foreign policy aspirations on both sides are moderated and foreign policy disappointments therefore are less frequent.

Despite the foreign policy challenges that come with engaging weak autocratic states like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it is nonetheless in Washington's interest to endure spats such as the one U.S. diplomats are currently having with their Kyrgyz counterparts. Not to call out abuses and not to push for political reform in the Eurasian states where reform is most likely means abandoning the sizeable populations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan who favor democratization. Liberalization is a protracted process and, if realized, U.S. foreign policy will be remembered in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan more for Washington's support of democracy than its occasional charges of nationalist excess.