

The Kyrgyz Crisis and the Political Logic of Central Asia's Weak Regional Security Organizations

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For the second time in five years, political events in Kyrgyzstan shook the Central Asia region and caught the international community off-guard. In early April 2010, a few sporadic protests against increases in electricity tariffs quickly mushroomed into a series of anti-government demonstrations that toppled the regime of Kyrgyzstan's President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Just two months later, during the rule of a weak interim government, ethnic violence among Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities erupted in southern Kyrgyzstan on a scale not seen since the late Soviet period.

The horrific consequences of the Kyrgyz pogroms, in combination with the rapid destabilization of the political situation across the country, also drew attention to the seeming inaction and incapacity of the international community. Despite the fact that Kyrgyzstan was a member of three high-profile regional security organizations – the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – these organizations proved either incapable or unwilling to intervene in this Central Asian state, thereby further eroding their credibility as effective regional security bodies.

Organizations to Guarantee Regional Security or Regime Survival Vehicles?

The puzzle of why regional security organizations proved ineffective in the Kyrgyz crisis is directly related to the question of why Central Asian states such as Kyrgyzstan decided to join multiple and, at times, overlapping regional security institutions in the first place. Consistent with the work of political scientists Roy Allison and Kathleen Collins, I argue that membership in regional security institutions, since independence, has been driven more by the desire for Central Asian governments to promote regime survival, sovereign recognition and conflate their own regime stability with broader

regional security, rather than to counter external foreign military or transnational threats.

The exact nature of what the Central Asian states have sought from regional security organizations has varied according to their level of development and institutional composition. For the smaller states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, membership in regional security organizations has offered the opportunity for elite rent-seeking, access to modern equipment for impoverished security agencies, and the means to play external powers off one another. For Kazakhstan, membership in multiple security organizations has been a key component of its multivector foreign policy and external image crafting, which culminated in Astana's recent chairmanship of the OSCE. Uzbekistan, too, has used regional security membership as a tool of regime survival, joining organizations and projects when helpful from a domestic political standpoint and rejecting them when they have directly criticized or threatened Tashkent's domestic authority. The rest of this memo will overview the big three Central Asian security organizations and account for their poor performance in the wake of the Kyrgyz crisis.

CSTO: Moscow's Reluctance, Member Concerns

The CSTO, now comprising seven member states (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), is the most developed of Central Asia's security organizations. Headed by Russia, the organization was formalized in 2002 (with Uzbekistan joining later) as a counter, some argue, to both regional transnational threats and to NATO's encroaching eastward march and heightened Partnership for Peace (PfP) activities in Central Asia. Originally conceived of as an intergovernmental alliance, the CSTO has developed a number of cooperative mechanisms and a rapid-reaction force (KSOR) that could quickly respond to regional crises, humanitarian emergencies, and low-intensity threats. The organization also operates military bases, under Russian supervision and in conjunction with Moscow's bilateral agreements with hosts in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Armenia.

The collapse of the Bakiyev government sent shockwaves around CSTO member states and caught the organization flat-footed. Although Moscow was favorably disposed to the new interim government following the troubles it had endured with the Bakiyev regime, other member states were far more critical of the change of government in Kyrgyzstan. At an informal summit meeting in May, leaders declared that the change in power in Bishkek had been "unconstitutional." Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who embraced deposed President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and offered him residence, was particularly outspoken, commenting "What sort of organization is this, if there is bloodshed in one of our member states and an anti-constitutional coup d'état takes place, and this body keeps silent?" Lukashenko's criticism clearly revealed the expectations of at least a few CSTO members regarding what constitutes a regional security threat. By not taking a clear stand in opposing the toppling of a member state's government, the organization had undermined its own unofficial *raison d'être* of promoting common regime survival.

The ethnic conflicts in June once again thrust the spotlight on the CSTO and its regional role. On June 11, Kyrgyz Interim President Roza Otunbayeva appealed to Moscow to deploy an emergency peacekeeping force under CSTO auspices to help stabilize the situation in the south. Moscow initially refused, however, citing the need to consult with its allies. The stalling crystallized into a clear reluctance to become actively involved in the region, even though the situation in Kyrgyzstan appeared to be a textbook case of instability and violence that would justify such a deployment. On June 15, 2010, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, in a somewhat contorted explanation for Russian and CSTO non-action, explained that the organization would intervene only against “foreign intrusion” or an “external attempt to seize power,” while CSTO secretary-general Nikolai Bordyuzha similarly categorized the ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan as a “purely domestic matter.”

In the end, several factors likely contributed to the Russian decision not to send troops in June: a genuine fear of committing to an open-ended mission without a clear purpose and timeframe; strong opposition expressed behind the scenes by the government of Uzbekistan, which feared the long-term presence of a third party in what it considers a vital area of national interest; and pushback from authorities in southern Kyrgyzstan itself, who have steadily resisted any external intervention in their local affairs. Though the organization did subsequently follow up on a pledge to provide some humanitarian assistance, its credibility was damaged and openly questioned as a result of events in Kyrgyzstan.

SCO: China’s Passivity and the Problem of Deliberative Norms

The SCO appeared even more powerless than the CSTO during the Kyrgyz crisis. The organization (comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) was established in 2001 as a successor to the Shanghai Five group that successfully negotiated and demilitarized the Central Asian portions of the old Sino-Soviet border. Over a decade, the SCO had increased security cooperation, particularly among internal security services, and conducted biannual “Peace Missions” dominated by Russian and Chinese troops. Interestingly, these exercises usually simulated some sort of a regime collapse or terrorist attack scenario.

Of course, the SCO has also been the subject of much hysteria and confusion in the West. Following Uzbekistan’s eviction of U.S. forces in the summer of 2005, a few days after SCO leaders issued a joint statement that U.S. bases in Central Asia had served their purpose and should be placed on a timetable for withdrawal, officials and analysts in Washington were quick to blame the organization for pressuring Tashkent to oust U.S. forces. In fact, we now know that the U.S. eviction from K2 was grounded in bilateral U.S.-Uzbek tensions over human rights issues and the fallout of events in Andijon.

At the time, the SCO’s backing of Uzbekistan reflected an elevated concern about regime stability triggered by the color revolutions and opposition to Washington’s perceived aggressive policy of promoting regime change under the guise of democratization. In 2005, Moscow’s and Beijing’s security agendas were aligned, but for

slightly different regions. Moscow feared that new Eurasian governments would adopt a pro-West, pro-NATO orientation, as had happened in Georgia and Ukraine, while Beijing feared that such uprisings could critically destabilize its Western province of Xinjiang.

The aftermath of the August 2008 war revealed the schisms in these regional Russian-Sino security agendas. The Central Asian states' refusal at the 2008 SCO summit in Dushanbe, under significant Chinese pressure, to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, suggests that Beijing is far more concerned with countering acts of separatism that could be used as models to challenge its own territorial integrity than in backing Moscow's support of the breakaway territories. By contrast, the speed and vigor with which the SCO supported China's crackdown on Urumqi demonstrators in July 2009 and its recent declaration criticizing the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Lu Xiaobo suggest that Beijing's security agenda remains the primary driver of the SCO's security agenda.

During the Kyrgyz crisis, Chinese officials proved reluctant to take any position on the legitimacy of the interim government. Stories in the Chinese press emphasized the chaos and instability of events in April, as well as the plight of some Chinese migrants who were targeted. However, there was no appeal to any actual SCO mechanism or authority to intervene in events. Moreover, many Chinese officials viewed the destabilization in Kyrgyzstan as a direct result of U.S.-Russian geopolitical maneuverings and thought it best to lay low until the composition of the new Kyrgyz government became clearer. The SCO's inaction did not sit well with certain neighbors. For example, President Imomali Rahmon of Tajikistan openly questioned the value of the organization given its inability to intervene and prevent the toppling of a neighboring government. Certainly, as the Tajik president implied, it is hard to imagine a more appropriate test case in the region that merited intervention according to the organization's own security mandate.

Moreover, the Kyrgyz crisis also underscored additional organizational weaknesses that limit the SCO's capability as an effective security body. Chief among them is that the group openly operates according to the norm of consensus, which seriously constrains its ability to try to solve disputes and resolve conflicts among members. Problem issues, such as regional water disputes, cannot even be placed on the SCO agenda and so are left outside the basket of the SCO's negotiations at the principals level. Similarly, its ability to effectively respond to crisis situations appears to directly clash with an organizational culture of slow deliberation and consensus. Although the SCO has served China's regional security interests and provided a useful forum to Central Asian governments to balance their dealings with Moscow and Beijing, its limitations as a regional security mechanism were exposed by the Kyrgyz crisis.

OSCE: From Helsinki to Osh (and Back Again)

The third regional security organization under consideration, the OSCE, was also severely challenged by the Kyrgyz crisis. The 56-member OSCE remains the world's

largest intergovernmental security organization. Many of its activities and programs have targeted Central Asia, including high-profile projects in the areas of border management, anti-terrorism cooperation, police training, and conflict prevention.

Over the last decade, however, Central Asian governments have increasingly challenged the organization's so-called "third dimension" or human security branch. Chief among these have been the election monitoring and human rights work undertaken by the Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). It was ODIHR's criticism of election day procedures in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan that helped provide opposition demonstrators a platform to mobilize. Since 2007, ODIHR has been at the center of an East-West confrontation regarding how intrusive its activities should be, as all the Central Asian states have backed a Russian proposal to limit the size and mandate of the organization's monitoring missions.

The challenge to the ODIHR also reveals that the Central Asian states, more broadly, have successfully managed to roll back the human dimension or "values agenda" of the OSCE and transform it into an organization that primarily manages projects that assist with regime survival and sovereign promotion. The endurance and expansion of the OSCE's "police training" projects is a good case in point. Police training missions have been widely implemented throughout the region, but with unclear project goals and post-project metrics of evaluation. As a result, critics accuse the OSCE of inadvertently having strengthened the coercive apparatus of Central Asia's authoritarian rulers. For example, in 2008 when the Kyrgyz parliament, then dominated by Bakiyev, adopted a highly controversial law restricting freedom of assembly, one that was heavily criticized by the ODIHR, the OSCE's police reform project in Kyrgyzstan remained untouched. And whether OSCE-trained officers actually were among those who fired on anti-Bakiyev protestors in Bishkek remains an open question.

Initially, the OSCE played a constructive political role in the Kyrgyz crisis. In the wake of Bakiyev's fleeing from Bishkek, the local field office organized meetings of the Kyrgyz opposition and aided in the quick establishment of the interim government. As a body tasked to coordinate political meetings and liaise with major interested countries, the OSCE found itself as a key political interlocutor between the interim government and many countries and international organizations, especially at a time when many foreign governments were reluctant to officially recognize the legitimacy of the interim Kyrgyz government. Moscow and Washington's backing of the interim government also offered some hope that, absent the usual East-West tensions, the organization could provide an effective vehicle to actively stabilize the security situation in the south.

However, like the other organizations under consideration in this memo, the OSCE's weak response to the ethnic violence underscores more enduring problems that confront the organization. Chief among them is how domestic political agendas and regime survival in Kyrgyzstan trumped what was a clear need for an on-the-ground OSCE presence. Even though both Washington and Moscow favored sending a robust OSCE peacekeeping or policing mission, and the Permanent Council in Vienna approved a more modest 50-person deployment on July 22, 2010, local authorities in the

south effectively vetoed the proposal. Self-styled Kyrgyz nationalist Osh Mayor Melis Myrzakmatov used the proposed OSCE mission to publicly oppose Bishkek's intrusion into its local affairs, thereby consolidating his power base, and attacked the legitimacy and nationalist credentials of the interim government in Bishkek.

Faced with an already ungovernable situation in the south, the interim government in Bishkek dragged its feet and eventually caved to domestic pressure. President Otunbayeva continued to stall throughout the autumn on the pretext of disagreeing about the deployment's exact mandate (active patrolling versus training) even while international concerns grew about the role of Kyrgyz security services in inciting the violence in the south. As of February 2011, the OSCE police force, now modified to just 30 people, has still not been deployed, while the whole proposal has become in Kyrgyzstan a political symbol for preserving Kyrgyz sovereignty against external interference.

Conclusion: Regional Security Organizations and Central Asia's Weak States

This brief examination of the CSTO, SCO, and OSCE and their shortcomings during the Kyrgyz crisis underscores a current disjuncture between the roots of emerging security challenges in Central Asia and the inadequate institutional design of current regional security organizations. Central Asian governments participate in these organizations more to further their regime survival, extract rents, and garner international legitimacy than to robustly cooperate on important emerging security threats.

At present, all these regional security organizations are designed as intergovernmental bodies meant to coordinate activities against outside or foreign threats. Yet as we saw in the case of Kyrgyzstan's ethnic clashes, the most likely cause of destabilization and insecurity in the region is the weakness of Central Asian state institutions themselves. Twenty years after independence, major cracks in political stability in the region are clearly surfacing. Kyrgyzstan's experiment in parliamentary democracy may give some in the West hope, but the country has increasingly become severed and any institutions in Bishkek will lack the capacity and legitimacy to govern the south. Of perhaps even greater concern is the situation in Tajikistan, where the last year has seen an escalation in insurgent attacks that included a suicide car bombing, a well-planned and coordinated ambush of a Tajik military column, and various bombings of both government and civilian targets. The carefully crafted patron-client deals between Dushanbe and regional figures appear to be in danger of unraveling, as Tajikistan slides further into chaos at a time when Northern Afghanistan also shows increasing signs of instability.

The most pressing security challenges in Central Asia stem from the region's own state weakness, predatory governmental institutions, critically decaying infrastructure, porous borders, and ungoverned areas, not classical intergovernmental security threats or even the transnational militant movements that the CSTO and SCO are more focused on. Yet, it is in the interests of the weak Central Asian states to avoid addressing the core root of this institutional decay and, instead, to bolster external support for their regimes through assorted external projects and cooperative initiatives

that involve these various regional security actors. In the interests of promoting “regional stability,” as proposed by the Central Asian governments and uncritically accepted by external actors, these projects often unintentionally encourage the very institutional malformation that lies at the heart of many of the region’s current security challenges.

Moreover, the external security dimension, especially lingering competition among Russia, the United States, and China for influence in the region, may also prevent the emergence of more effective regional security mechanisms and further encourage patterns of rent-seeking and forum-shopping by Central Asian governments and their security services. Some positive steps have been taken by Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, who have jointly emphasized the importance of stabilizing Kyrgyzstan and maintaining operations at Manas for the duration of the Afghan conflict. However, one level below the presidential level, the militaries of both countries continue to pressure and promote themselves as security partners to their Central Asian counterparts, while Russia, the United States and China all now provide security training and assistance in the region under the justification of capacity-building. Based on the regional record, it is doubtful that such bilateral external interventions will have any more of a stabilizing influence over the long-term than the regional security organizations that have tried to actively engage the Central Asian governments in the name of promoting stability.