

# Great Games, Local Rules

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How 'central' is Central Asia in contemporary world politics and what is the region's exact strategic importance? Over the last years countless media stories and commentators have resurrected the metaphor of the new 'Great Game,' invoking analogies with the high-stakes competition between Russia and Great Britain in the nineteenth century for regional influence and control. In this iteration, the players are different: rather than from London and St. Petersburg, the capital of imperial Russia, the protagonists take orders from Moscow, Washington and, most recently, Beijing. In this framework, Russia, the United States, and China are in a winner-takes-all battle to secure vital strategic interests such as energy resources and access to critical military bases. Moreover, the pendulum in this new Great Game seems to regularly swing back and forth. After the ouster of Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010, Moscow was viewed as ascendant in the region, just as the United States was widely credited with orchestrating the so-called Colored Revolutions of the mid-2000s.

In the last decade, Central Asia has received intense engagement from the United States, Russia, and China. However, the strategic goals of these three powers have varied considerably. In the cases of the United States and China, their strategic interests lie not within the post-Soviet Central Asian states themselves, but rather in stabilizing adjacent regions: Afghanistan in the case of the United States, and the western province of Xinjiang in the case of China. Russia's interests combine a mix of material and more intangible factors, though Russia's search to retain control and regional hegemonic status is not dissimilar to the experiences of other historical postcolonial powers. In the service of these interests, each external power has wielded different mechanisms of influence, ranging from commercial military arrangements in the case of the United States, to the establishment and promotion of a new international organization in the case of China.

But to focus exclusively on the competing agendas of these external powers neglects the considerable political agency shown by the Central Asian states themselves over the last decade. The real story of the 'New Great Game' is that as Moscow, Washington, and Beijing have intensified their competition for influence, Central Asian governments have learned to more actively play one external suitor off against the other for their own narrow domestic political interests. In the cases of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which are rich in oil and gas, this competition has allowed governments to renegotiate unfavorable old contracts confidently and secure new sources of investments from competing oil companies. It has also entrenched the patronage networks of existing regimes and allowed them to resist external calls to democratize. In the cases of the poorer and weaker states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, elites have leveraged this competition to secure economic assistance that has fed endemic corruption, precipitating the near collapse of these already weak states.

All three external powers, then, have had to accommodate or adjust to playing by these 'local rules,' though they have done so with varying degrees of success. As the case of Kyrgyzstan shows, President Bakiyev exploited the geopolitical push and pull over the presence of the U.S. military base at Manas to enrich himself and his family. Ultimately, the collapse of his government, after mass street protests against him in April 2010, revealed that the Kyrgyz ruler was more concerned with maximizing personal benefits from these competing external powers than with building the institutions necessary to stabilize and develop the small and impoverished Central Asian state.

### **On the Road to Afghanistan**

During the 1990s the United States had a minimal interest in Central Asia. Aside from promoting the activities of some U.S. oil companies in Kazakhstan, the U.S. viewed Central Asia as a relatively remote area of low significance to U.S. strategic interests. The September 11, 2001 attack on the U.S. instantly upgraded the region's importance. In the lead-up to military action in Afghanistan to target Al-Qaeda and oust the Taliban, the United States concluded an agreement with Uzbekistan to let U.S. forces use an air base near the southern city of Khanabad (the Karshi-Khanabad base, later known as K2) and in December 2001 the U.S. solidified its foothold by establishing an additional airbase at Manas, a civilian airport near Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. In addition, U.S. officials concluded agreements for overflight rights with the other Central Asian states and secured permission to conduct refueling stops in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. From a previous position of low strategic interest, the Central Asian states were now providing critical support for the United States and military operations in Afghanistan.

Less widely known at the time were the quid pro quos that U.S. officials offered to Uzbek and Kyrgyz elites in exchange for these basing rights. In Uzbekistan, the United States agreed to target the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as part of its operations and gave hundreds of millions of dollars in security assistance and hardware to Uzbek security services. In Kyrgyzstan, U.S. officials offered economic incentives including paying standard civil aviation take-off and landing fees for large military transport planes and funneling lucrative fuel contracts to suppliers that were controlled by President Askar Akayev and his family.

At the time of this initial engagement, U.S. officials hoped that military cooperation with the United States would help improve the human rights situation and democratic conditions in these countries. In fact, the opposite happened: Uzbek President Islam Karimov used the U.S. War on Terror and the elevated concern with Islamic militancy to justify harsh crackdowns on political opponents and suppress media freedom. As the United States promoted a selective program of democratization and regime change—part of President George W. Bush's 'forward strategy for freedom'—Washington's main security partner in Central Asia was now increasingly employing repressive tactics to preserve the security of the regime.

The tensions in this U.S. policy of preserving basing rights and promoting democratization would come to a head in 2005, in the wake of the so-called Colored

Revolutions. In Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and then Kyrgyzstan (2005), longstanding presidents were overthrown after popular protests against falsified election results. The so-called Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005, which ousted President Akayev, was of particular concern as Karimov became convinced that the United States was plotting to overthrow his regime. The issue came to a boil in May 2005 when, following a prison break by a group of local Islamic businessmen, a crowd of thousands gathered in Babur Square in the center of the eastern city of Andijon to protest government policies. Soon after, Uzbek security forces opened fire on the crowd, prompting a mass panic and the massacre of hundreds of demonstrators. Uzbek authorities contend that one hundred and eighty people were killed, most of them militants or terrorists, while international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International place the number of dead at several hundred, insisting that the vast majority were innocent civilians.

Most of the West, including eventually the U.S. State Department, condemned Uzbek actions and demanded an international investigation into these events. By contrast, Moscow and Beijing publicly supported Karimov for his decisive crackdown. On July 30, 2005, just after the United States announced its support for a UN plan to relocate to Europe Uzbek refugees who had fled into southern Kyrgyzstan, rather than turn them over to Uzbek authorities, the Uzbek government notified the United States embassy that it would have to vacate K2 within six months. The Uzbek government also clamped down and expelled almost all Western NGOs that were working on democracy and human rights-related issues in the country. To underscore its new geopolitical orientation, Uzbekistan signed a new military cooperation agreement with Russia soon after, and joined the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The United States relocated many of its activities to the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan, while relations with Uzbekistan continued to deteriorate into 2007.

Following the K2 episode, U.S. military re-engagement with Uzbekistan was prompted improbably by events in distant Pakistan. After attacks on U.S. logistical supply lines to Afghanistan in 2007 and 2008, U.S. defense and logistics planners sought to open a northern option, the so-called Northern Distribution Network (NDN), that would transport materials, fuel, and hardware (originating either in the Baltic states or Georgia's Black Sea coast) overland to the Afghan theater via the Central Asian states, with Uzbekistan playing a key role. Over the course of 2008 and 2009, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) concluded a number of commercial contracts with regional companies to transport thousands of containers, now approaching 30 percent of logistical shipments to Afghanistan, through this new network of rail, truck, and air hubs. Under instruction from then CENTCOM commander General David Petraeus, U.S. logistics planners were encouraged to procure supplies locally where possible and find 'creative' ways to involve local companies in NDN and Afghanistan supply chains.

For supporters, NDN has so far proven to be a successful alternative to the troubled Pakistan routes and has ensured renewed Central Asian cooperation for the recent U.S. escalation of the war in Afghanistan. Some proponents of the NDN even suggest that developing these new supply routes to Afghanistan will once again stimulate broader

trade throughout the Central Asian region, resurrecting the old Silk Road as a hub for both East–West and North–South commerce. Critics, however, claim that the commercial contracts on which NDN operates actually have enriched logistical companies that are effectively controlled by the region’s ruling families and that the high level of corruption and customs delays at Central Asian borders will not be overcome by business interests that lack these official connections.

NDN expansion has also created some inescapable paradoxes about U.S. policy in Central Asia when compared to neighbouring Afghanistan. On the one hand, most military and civilian planners acknowledge that the greatest obstacle to building an effective and legitimate state in Afghanistan is the problem of corruption, which has eroded the legitimacy of the Karzai government and its political allies. At the same time, the deals established by the NDN seem to be doling out private economic benefits and rewarding the Central Asian regimes with lucrative contracts. As with the fallout from the Colored Revolutions, the United States must seemingly manage an uneasy tension between promoting a values agenda of ‘good governance,’ while supporting the practices of the Central Asian regimes that are necessary to maintain their cooperation for the all-consuming military campaign in Afghanistan.

### **Imperial Resurgence or Last Throes?**

Following the events of 9/11, the then Russian President Vladimir Putin initially supported U.S. efforts to establish temporary bases for the Afghanistan effort. However, as Russian economic power increased and concerns about Western influence grew, Russian officials became much more ambivalent and, in certain quarters, openly hostile to the continued Western military presence in Central Asia.

Some Western commentators have interpreted President Dmitri Medvedev’s reference to Russia’s right to a “zone of privileged interests” in the post-Soviet space as proof that Moscow wishes to re-establish imperial rule in Central Asia. But the ‘Russia as a resurgent empire’ view is overly simplistic. After all, historically speaking, many former colonial powers have sought to preserve or re-establish some ties with former colonies after decolonization. For Moscow, some of its interests in Central Asia are self-evident and concrete: Russia aims to preserve political stability, counter the spread of militant Islam and other transnational threats, combat the narcotics trade from Afghanistan, which is growing into a critical human security issue, and protect the rights of Russian citizens still living abroad in these now independent states. At the same time, the West’s perceived encroachment in the region since 2001 has prompted Russia to counter Western influence more aggressively on all fronts.

Of all the external powers, Moscow still wields the most levers of influence over the Central Asian states. Russian security services and intelligence services cooperate closely with Central Asian counterparts, while Russian officers and advisors played a prominent role in the transition from the Soviet military to the construction of national militaries. Economically, Russian firms invest throughout the region, Russia remains the region’s most important trading partner and market (though China is rapidly gaining), and until

2009, Russia still held a near monopoly on the regional pipelines for the export of Central Asia's gas and oil, thereby tying the fate of Central Asia's hydrocarbon producers to Russia's energy companies and state energy strategy.

Further, Russia's 'soft power' over the region remains considerable, as the Russian language is still the region's lingua franca, especially among educated elites, and Russian media function as a leading outlet for news and entertainment across the Central Asian states. Lastly, Russia continues to host millions of Central Asian migrant workers. Drawn predominantly from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, many of them work in sectors such as construction, or as domestic caregivers. International financial institutions estimate that these workers' remittances constitute about 25 to 35 percent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and 40 to 50 percent of Tajikistan's.

Russia is less successful when it uses these levers to lock the Central Asian states into regional security or economic architectures that privilege Russia as the dominant player. For example, all of the Central Asian states with the exception of 'neutral' Turkmenistan are members of the Russian-dominated CSTO, but a number have expressed reservations about deepening security cooperation and establishing a CSTO 'rapid-reaction' or peacekeeping force that could interfere in the internal affairs of member states. Similarly, while Russian-controlled oil and gas pipelines offered Central Asian producers a means to bring their hydrocarbons to market, both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have vigorously pursued a 'multivector' policy of partnering with different countries and planning alternative export routes so as to reduce their dependence on Russia and increase their bargaining leverage. To quote a popular slogan and bumper sticker in Kazakhstan over the last decade, 'Happiness is multiple pipelines.'

Beyond these instruments of influence, the greatest political opening given to Moscow to reclaim some of its Soviet-era authority occurred in the wake of the Colored Revolutions. After the fall of regimes in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia regarded the whole Western-backed process of democracy promotion as a direct assault on Russia's hegemonic position in Eurasia. Beginning in 2005, Russia, under the banner of supporting its 'sovereign democracy,' took a number of steps to counter Western-sponsored democratization influences. New Russian laws restricting media, particularly the internet, as well as stricter controls over foreign NGOs and their activities were soon emulated by all of the Central Asian countries.

Moscow also launched a diplomatic assault against the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The ODIHR's election monitoring division was perceived as particularly threatening, as its public criticisms of elections in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan had provided the political cover for opposition groups to mobilize anti-government protests. Russia and the Central Asian states pressed for a dramatic declawing of the organization, restricting the number of election observers, and proposing that the organization make judgments on the quality of elections only in collaboration with the host government. By appealing to the Central Asian governments' overriding concern with their own survival,

Russia seemed to have successfully reasserted its influence in the region in the wake of the Colored Revolutions.

But just as it seemed that Moscow's momentum toward regaining its authority over the Central Asian states was unstoppable, two events in the summer of 2008 soon brought Russia's new political offensive to a halt.

First, the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 was a landmark political event for the region. Having used the Georgian military's clumsy attempt to retake control over the breakaway territory of South Ossetia as a pretext to launch an all-out assault on U.S.-equipped Georgian forces, Russian troops for a number of days invaded undisputed Georgian territory. A few days later, Moscow recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But although most Western commentators at the time viewed the war as evidence of Russia's regional resurgence, the medium and long-term fallout from the conflict and from Russia's recognition of the separatist territories was far less favorable to Moscow.

Moscow assumed that its close relations with countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan would result in at least a few Central Asian states following suit and recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Although critical of the provocations of the vocally pro-Western Saakashvili regime, all of the Central Asian states subsequently reaffirmed Georgia's territorial integrity and refused to sanction the redrawing of post-Soviet national boundaries. At both the 2008 summits of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the CSTO, Central Asian states, despite enormous pressure from Moscow, refused to budge. Moreover, Moscow's military intervention on the pretext that it was defending the rights of Russian citizens in the breakaway territories also concerned the Central Asian governments and reminded them of the need to pursue more multivectoral foreign policies to guard against a resurgent Russia.

Second, the international financial crisis of 2008 devastated Russia and eroded its economic power. The Russian stock market fell by over 70 percent and many of the projects that Moscow had planned in Central Asia were either scaled back or placed on hold. Countries including Uzbekistan and Tajikistan complained that Russia did not follow through on long-promised investments to improve energy infrastructure.

In Turkmenistan, tensions with Moscow escalated even further in the wake of the economic crisis. As a result of depressed energy demand in Europe, Russia and its state-controlled gas giant Gazprom were forced to cut back on natural gas deliveries to the region. Turkmen gas was one of the main suppliers to Gazprom and the company had just concluded a new long-term supply deal with the Central Asian supplier. But in April 2009, without warning, Gazprom shut down the Turkmen pipeline, thereby triggering a pressurized explosion, and declared that it was unwilling to pay such a premium price for gas that was no longer needed. The Turkmen government was furious at Moscow's breach of contract and coercive act and redoubled its efforts to find alternative markets and partners for its gas development. It soon concluded new deals with China and Iran.

The Turkmen pipeline–Gazprom episode also highlights the fact that resistance to Russian influence in Central Asia comes not as a reaction to Moscow’s soft power or to claims of a privileged historical relationship, but rather to Russian attempts to monopolize the economic and security policies of the Central Asian states. Simply put, while Central Asian states value Russia as a major partner, in the energy field and elsewhere, they do not want to be coerced by Moscow or boxed into exclusive arrangements.

### **New Eastern Influence**

In recent years the Central Asian states have found a new partner to counter Moscow’s attempts to monopolize regional relations. That partner is not the West or the United States, as was once feared by Moscow, but rather China with its growing economic and political clout.

China’s preferred vehicle for dealing with the Central Asian states is the SCO, a regional organization (except for Turkmenistan) founded in 2001, with its headquarters located in Beijing. The organization’s predecessor, the Shanghai Five, provided a successful forum for concluding Sino–Central Asian border negotiations in the late 1990s. Since 2001, the renamed SCO, which groups China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, has expanded its purview into other security matters.

In its mission statement, the SCO claims to oppose the ‘three evils’ in the area—terrorism, extremism, and separatism. The organization has fostered cooperation among internal security services and hosts biannual joint Sino–Russian military exercises. In 2004, it established the Regional Anti Terrorism Structure (RATS) center in Tashkent, which is dedicated to combating a common list of regional transnational movements (which has not been made public) and coordinating cybersecurity efforts. For China, the SCO has provided an invaluable mechanism through which Chinese security services can cooperate with Central Asian counterparts to target Uighur movements that operate in Xinjiang, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. Western critics have charged the organization with also targeting political dissidents as part of its overly broad security mandate.

The SCO presents itself as a new-style international organization that opposes hegemony in world politics, fosters mutual respect, and represents the democratization of international relations. The organization also claims to respect the sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its member states, drawing thinly-veiled contrasts to Western political and economic bodies such as the OSCE or the IMF, which impose liberalizing conditions on member states. As such, the Central Asian states have found the SCO a useful counter to Western pressures for reform.

Concerns about the anti-Western orientation of the SCO peaked in July 2005, just days before the K2 eviction, when the organization at its summit in Astana announced that U.S. military bases in Central Asia had served their purpose and should be placed on a timetable for withdrawal. In the wake of the Colored Revolutions, the statement seemed

to signal the emergence of a new Sino–Russian axis against the Western and NATO military presence in Central Asia.

However, we now see that although both Russia and China vehemently opposed the Colored Revolutions, they did so for different reasons: Russia feared that these new regimes would be Westernizers that opposed Moscow’s regional influence, whereas China was concerned that revolution and ‘democratic regime change’ in Kyrgyzstan would set a dangerous precedent for autonomy-seekers in neighboring Xinjiang.

But the aftermath of the Georgia war exposed the tensions and differences in Beijing’s and Moscow’s regional security agendas. Contrast the SCO’s refusal to support Russia’s recognitions of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 with the organization’s vigorous response to the rioting and violence that erupted in July 2009 between ethnic Uighurs and Han in the city of Urumqi, Xinjiang. After the rioting broke out, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs circulated a draft statement supporting Chinese actions to restore order and declaring that the matter was China’s internal affair. The statement was adopted by the SCO within a day. Moreover, the SCO secretariat’s strong statement last year criticizing the award of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese jailed dissident Liu Xiabo also suggests that Beijing’s security priorities and political interests are the principal driver behind SCO official policy.

Beyond differences in the security dimension, China and Russia are fundamentally at odds over the extent to which the SCO’s economic activities and non-security dimensions should be developed. Chinese leaders have regularly stated that they would like to see the SCO develop into a regional economic organization that fosters free trade and promotes finance for regional development. Russia, however, has increasingly become alarmed by China’s rapid economic development and growing investments in the region and has stalled on agreeing to deepen SCO-led integration. Any free economic zone fostered by the SCO would, in Russian eyes, lead to the rapid economic absorption of Central Asia by China. Already, by some accounts, total Chinese trade in Central Asia has surpassed Russia’s, while China is outpacing Russia in regional investments, particularly in upgrading regional infrastructure and establishing better connections to western China.

While the SCO has provided the multilateral regional front through which Beijing publicly presents its regional engagement, China has also been ramping up its bilateral investments in Central Asia’s energy resources. In April 2009, in the midst of the financial crisis, China announced a \$10 billion economic package to Kazakhstan, including a \$5 billion loan from China Exim Bank to the Development Bank of Kazakhstan, and a \$5 billion investment by the China National Petroleum Corporation in the state company KazMunaiGas. Overall, Chinese companies are now estimated to control over 25 percent of Kazakhstan’s oil production, despite their exclusion from the large international consortia in Tengiz and Kashagan.

Just a few months later, in December 2009, the China–Central Asia gas pipeline was inaugurated. Originating in Turkmenistan and traversing Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan into China, the pipeline brings Turkmen gas to western China and then on to a pipeline



network destined for eastern coastal cities. Overall, the capacity of the pipeline is expected to reach forty billion cubic meters a year, a level which would rival the volume of Turkmen gas supplied to Russia's network and account for about half of China's current demand for natural gas. The pipeline is remarkable not only for its rapid construction (about three years total), but also in that it represents the first major new gas pipeline that will altogether bypass Russian territory to bring Central Asian gas to market.

As when talking about other parts of the developing world, such as Africa or Southeast Asia, Chinese officials go to great lengths to downplay the perception that they have a geopolitical interest in the region and to calm fears about growing Chinese power and regional influence. Policymakers frequently qualify discussions of Central Asia by acknowledging Russia's 'special interest' in the region and speaking of the need to foster harmonious relations and 'win-win' solutions with the Central Asian states. However, throughout Central Asia there is also a popular unease about China's future role, one founded both in Soviet-era cultural Sinophobia and genuine uncertainty about how China will exercise its economic power in the future.

### **Kyrgyzstan's Collapse**

The recent U.S.–Russia competition over U.S. military basing in Kyrgyzstan illustrates the clash of great power interests in the region, as well as how Central Asian rulers have managed to harness this competition for their own private benefit.

Each month, about fifty-five thousand U.S. personnel entering and exiting Afghanistan are staged via the Manas base, located just outside the capital Bishkek. The base also serves as a refueling hub for Afghanistan operations, which requires the daily use of approximately five Olympic-sized swimming pools of jet fuel. As a staging post and logistical hub, Manas is deemed to be a critical facility for U.S. operations in Afghanistan.

After he replaced the ousted President Akayev in 2005, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev assumed a much tougher negotiating stance on the legal terms of the basing agreement. Throughout 2005 and 2006, Bakiyev demanded a renegotiation of the amount of rent that the U.S. paid to the Kyrgyz government—from \$2 million to \$200 million a year—claiming that the presence of the base, including the lucrative fuel contracts, had damaged Kyrgyz sovereignty and had enriched the Akayev family, not the country as a whole. Throughout these talks, Kyrgyz officials would regularly play up the 'threat of Russia' card, claiming that Moscow was unhappy with the U.S. military presence and regularly pressured the Kyrgyz government to close the base. A new agreement was signed in July 2006 that committed the United States to providing Kyrgyzstan with a total package of \$150 million a year, including base rent and economic assistance, though the actual rent agreed was \$17 million.

The financial crisis of 2008 put renewed strains on the Kyrgyz state and its finances. Already, the Kyrgyz government had been pilfered by Bakiyev and his son Maxim, who had acquired a controlling interest in nearly every major moneymaking Kyrgyz business and asset. Facing a budget shortfall of \$125 million and out of external borrowing options,

Bakiyev pulled what can only be described as one of the most brazen stunts attempted by a small state in recent international relations.

In February 2009, just at the beginning of the new Obama administration, Presidents Medvedev and Bakiyev announced at a joint press conference in Moscow that Kyrgyzstan had decided it would close down the Manas base and that Russia would offer an emergency economic package worth over \$2 billion, comprised of \$300 million in short-term assistance and a promise to invest \$1.7 billion in the Kambarata hydroelectric power plant. Although the leaders denied that the Russian package was a direct quid pro quo for closing the base, the link between the two was widely acknowledged in both Russia and the United States.

After securing the receipt of the \$300 million payment from Russia, which was deposited in a bank account controlled by members of the Bakiyev family and is still unaccounted for, the Kyrgyz leader then turned to the Americans and concluded a new agreement to keep the base open. Under the new terms announced in June 2009, the U.S. would now pay \$60 million annually in cash to the Kyrgyz government and the base would be renamed the 'Manas Transit Center' so as to provide some political cover for the Kyrgyz government. According to a December 2010 report released by a U.S. Congressional investigation, a representative of Mina Corp, a mysterious company supplying the base with jet fuel, played a key role in the renegotiation by facilitating back-channel discussions between the Bakiyevs and the U.S. Department of Defense. Though Washington considered the 2009 renewal as a triumph over Russian meddling, Bakiyev's double-cross infuriated the Kremlin and Russian-Kyrgyz relations deteriorated to a new low.

In 2010, Moscow intensified its exercise its soft power against the Bakiyev regime. Throughout February and March, it broadcast a series of stories that emphasized the regime's corruption, nepotism, and repression. U.S. officials, by contrast, stayed largely silent about increasing human rights abuses in Kyrgyzstan out of fear that they might jeopardize the status of the base, creating the rather unusual situation in which Russia was more outspoken on Kyrgyzstan's human rights abuses than the United States. Then, in April 2010, the Kremlin intervened to stop the shipments of jet fuel from Russian distributors to fuel contractors at Manas, while it also imposed a new duty on Russian fuel exports to the country as a whole. The new excise tax threatened massive price increases in almost all areas of economic life, leading to anti-Bakiyev protests in northern Kyrgyz cities. On April 8, the regime quickly collapsed as protestors stormed the Presidential White House in Bishkek and Bakiyev fled to his stronghold southern city of Osh, before leaving for exile in Belarus as a guest of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Though Kyrgyzstan was rid of the Bakiyev kleptocracy, his rule had decimated Kyrgyz state institutions and bankrupted the country. Interim President Roza Otunbayeva, in her attempt to purge the country of the Bakiyev era, dissolved the pro-Bakiyev parliament a few days after assuming power in April 2010. However, this move, coupled with the interim government's continuing inability to restore local security, soon prompted

increasing defiance from southern politicians towards the new Bishkek government. In June, violence erupted in southern Kyrgyzstan between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities. The ethnic Uzbeks suffered most, with hundreds of them killed and hundreds of thousands displaced in a major humanitarian crisis. After a new parliamentary election in October 2010, a new coalition government, now under a pioneering parliamentary system, was formed in Kyrgyzstan, but the country's institutions remained fragile and the government's grip on power and political order tenuous at best.

Though we cannot definitely make the argument that U.S.–Russian geopolitical competition 'caused' the ethnic violence and near failure of the Kyrgyz state, the aggressive rent-seeking and corruption that was promoted by competing payments to the Bakiyev regime in connection with the U.S. base certainly contributed to the regime's illegitimacy and its flagrantly self-serving actions.

### **Falling Apart at the Seams?**

In the wake of last summer's events in Kyrgyzstan, Presidents Obama and Medvedev have adopted a markedly more conciliatory tone regarding Manas and have emphasized the need for cooperation and joint consultation. Bakiyev's fall was widely interpreted as a victory for Moscow, but the disintegration of political order in Kyrgyzstan, followed by increasing violence and recent signs of state failure in neighboring Tajikistan, also suggests that years of external engagement and geopolitical competition have not helped with state-building, let alone democratic consolidation, in the Central Asian states.

To take the comparative example of Africa's postcolonial trajectory one step farther, all of the Central Asian states are showing signs of developing predatory institutions, where state power and government access is used almost exclusively for private benefit, not for the good of the country. External competition, particularly that emanating from the U.S.–Russia–China strategic triangle, has fueled these dynamics of rent-seeking and political self-preservation by Central Asia's ruling elites. Yet the region now faces serious and immediate challenges, including reviving economic growth after a devastating financial crisis, managing the potentially explosive issue of political succession, coping with increasing social and demographic pressures, and building responsible institutions that are not simply vehicles for elite-driven patronage politics.

U.S.–Russia–China engagement with Central Asia is only likely to increase in the near future. However, without better coordination, external engagement may once again devolve into competition, and it carries the risk of further regional destabilization. Such an outcome would be against the interests of all the great powers. The prospect of state failure in Central Asia, coupled with growing tumult in Afghanistan, should give pause to those remaining 'Great Gamers' in all three countries who have continued to privilege scoring narrow geopolitical victories over promoting the long-term needs of the Central Asian region itself.

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