

# Is Central Asia Stable? Conflict Risks and Drivers of Instability

Svante E. Cornell

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*Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*  
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# **Is Central Asia Stable?**

## **Conflict Risks and Drivers of Instability**

**Svante E. Cornell**

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## Executive Summary

In 2022, violence erupted in four different areas of Central Asia. These episodes of violence were very different from each other, and all were contained within days or weeks. The region has seen little violence since. Yet their occurrence during a single year raised the question whether Central Asia is actually more prone to instability than a cursory overview would suggest.

The episodes of violence in 2022 were varied: one was a conflict over territory between two states, while the other three were internal conflicts, featuring struggles over power and complex center-periphery relations.

In Kazakhstan, demonstrations erupted in January 2022 but were hijacked by forces that sought to implement a coup attempt against the government, making the violence an issue over control over the country's government. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan both saw violence that featured an element of separatist sentiments and a struggle between center and periphery. In Tajikistan's Pamiri-populated Gorno-Badakhshan region, the government violently sought to stomp out influential local powerbrokers. In Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan republic, a government bid to reduce local autonomy triggered violent protests. In the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, inter-state tensions over a contested border triggered the most deadly episode since tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had begun to rise in 2020.

A series of potential factors impact the risk of renewed instability in Central Asia. Internal to the region, these include the economic difficulties the region has experienced in the past decade. In addition, the remarkable

resistance to reform that post-Soviet institutions in the region have shown in the past three decades has become increasingly unsustainable in the face of new communication technologies and an emerging post-Soviet generation. Among state institutions, the region's security services can be identified as the most unreformed and retrograde power centers, and they played influential roles in most of the episodes of violence in the region.

Aggravating these risk factors are the growing disparity between states of the region and the continued malign role of Russian influence, whose array of instruments to undermine stability have only intermittently been deployed across Central Asia.

These risk factors are mitigated by the constructive efforts toward greater regional cooperation in Central Asia, which provide a window into a future where Central Asia is more integrated and able to withstand external pressure, all while internal reform efforts provide greater opportunities for economic development and accountable government.

## Introduction

In 2022, a sudden outburst of violence rocked Central Asia, a region that generally maintained stability since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Of course, this was not the first unrest to erupt in the region. The most severe violence after independence occurred during the civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997, which may have killed upwards of 100,000 people. Other upheavals in the region have been much smaller, including the several revolutions in Kyrgyzstan and bouts of inter-ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in 1990 and 2010.

What happened in 2022 stood out because violence erupted in several parts of the region within a short period of time, including countries considered stable. In January, price hikes for natural gas in Kazakhstan led to peaceful protests in the Western parts of the country that soon spread across Kazakhstan. In the country's largest city, Almaty, the protests turned violent, and appear to have been overtaken by intra-elite rivalries pitting president Tokayev against the entourage of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev. In May, Tajik authorities engaged in a violent crackdown on protests in the country's eastern Gorno-Badakhshan region, leading to an unknown number of dead and wounded, and a much-worsened relationship between the central government and a region largely populated by ethnic Pamiri Ismailis. In July, large protests broke out in Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan republic, following a proposal to amend the country's constitution to curtail the region's autonomy. After clashes that killed approximately 18 people, President Mirziyoyev flew to the region's capital and pledged to scrap the proposed changes. Combined with a large security operation, this succeeded in restoring calm to the region. Finally, in



September 2022, the smoldering border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan escalated into an armed confrontation that killed several dozen and led to the displacement of tens of thousands. Following these outbursts of violence, calm returned to Central Asia, and no serious episodes of unrest have taken place since.

One could, perhaps, dismiss the events of 2022 as a fluke, a series of coincidences. Or were they canaries in a coal mine, frustrations that spilled out into the open and were simply repressed? And what does it say about the broader risk of future instability in Central Asia?

The episodes of violence in 2022 occurred against the backdrop of significant volatility both across the region and globally. The region and the broader world had been seriously affected by disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic – whose implications, including supply disruptions and lockdowns, became a driver of instability around the world.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the violence occurred during the period leading up to and following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This was a time when Moscow was putting pressure on Central Asian states to support its military action. Accusations have been voiced of a Russian role in instigating violence, similar to Moscow's fanning of ethnic conflict in the South Caucasus in the 1990s and to its instigation of ethnic riots in Central Asia in the transition to independence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mohammad Reza Farzanegan and Hassan F. Gholipour, "How has the pandemic affected civil conflict around the world?," *Economics Observatory*, April 24, 2023. (<https://www.economicsobservatory.com/how-has-the-pandemic-affected-civil-conflict-around-the-world>)

<sup>2</sup> Yaacov Ro'i, "Central Asian Riots and Disturbances, 1989-1990: Causes and Context," *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 10 no. 3, 1991; Parviz Mullajanov, "February 1990 Riots in Tajikistan. Who Was Behind the Scenes? Review of the Main Existing Versions," *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale*, 26, 2016, pp. 247-272.

This study seeks to analyze the risk of instability in Central Asia, weighing the centrifugal forces exemplified by these episodes of violence against centrifugal forces seen in the growth of cooperation among regional states.

## General Trends in Central Asia

Central Asia's transition to independence was unexpected and challenging, in some ways overshadowed by the bloody civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997. Indeed, that conflict contributed to the restrictive approach taken by most regional leaders to political affairs, as rapid liberalization appeared associated with conflict not just in Tajikistan but also in the south Caucasus. From the late 1990s onward, however, Central Asia has generally been stable, with important exceptions that have pointed to the vulnerability of regional states.

Any discussion of conflict and instability in Central Asia must take its starting point in what has *not* happened in the region. **First**, there has been no large inter-state conflict either between Central Asian states, or for that matter between a Central Asian state and a neighboring state. **Second**, unlike in the South Caucasus, Ukraine and Moldova, there has been no instance of foreign-sponsored secessionist violence, let alone a foreign invasion to "protect" a minority group. **Third**, unlike the case in many post-colonial countries, the military has played a subdued role in politics: there have been no military coups in Central Asia. **Fourth**, despite the region's proximity to Afghanistan, Islamic militancy has not been a sizable challenge to Central Asian states, unlike the case in most of the Middle East and South Asia.

Given the sometimes gloomy predictions concerning the region, this is a notable achievement. In the late Soviet period, scholars had issued dire predictions concerning the ability of Central Asian states, particularly

Kazakhstan, to manage inter-ethnic harmony.<sup>3</sup> And in the late 1990s and early 2000s, similarly dark scenarios were drawn up in which governments' restrictive approaches to religious freedom would push "pious Muslims" into the hands of extremists and lead to a growth in Islamist militancy.<sup>4</sup> Neither of these scenarios played out.

The civil war in Tajikistan, and its aftermath, stands out as the most significant exception to the region's relative stability. The conflict centered on control over the national government, but soon came to involve underlying questions of regionalism and religion. While the country's more industrialized northern regions largely stayed out of the conflict, the eastern autonomous province of Gorno-Badakhshan sided with the opposition, but the mountainous region was not a major site of fighting. Instead, the conflict largely centered on central Tajikistan, with the government side dominated by lowland areas around Kulyab, who embraced a secularist agenda and won support from Russia and Uzbekistan. The opposition came to be dominated by highland areas around Gharm and the Islamist movement in the country, which gradually became the dominant factor. When the war ended with a power-sharing agreement in 1997, multiple cleavages in Tajik society along ideological and regional lines had been exposed.

Similarly, in the transition to independence the eastern areas of Uzbekistan located in the Ferghana valley also saw instability, and the key fault line was over religious ideology. In the power vacuum that emerged as the Soviet

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Horowitz, "How to Begin Thinking Comparatively about Soviet Ethnic Problems", in Alexander J. Motyl, (ed.), *Thinking Theoretically about Soviet Nationalities*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992, pp. 16-17; Martha B. Olcott, "Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: The Demographics of Ethnic Politics," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 42 no. 2, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Eric McGlinchey, "The Making of Militants: The State and Islam in Central Asia", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 25 no. 3, 2005, p. 559; Ahmed Rashid, "The Fires of Faith in Central Asia," *World Policy Journal* Vol. 18, No. 1, 2001; Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2002; Eric McGlinchey, "Autocrats, Islamists and the Rise of Radicalism in Central Asia", *Current History*, October 2005; Kathrin Lenz-Raymann, *Securitization of Islam: A Vicious Circle – Counter-Terrorism and Freedom of Religion in Central Asia*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014.

Union collapsed, a radical Islamist movement sought to supplant state authorities and impose Islamic law. But the government of Uzbekistan succeeded in cracking down and expelling these militants, who moved into Tajikistan, where they joined the Islamist forces there and subsequently fled to Afghanistan. Limited Islamist violence re-emerged in 1999 and 2005, but since then Uzbekistan has been largely stable.

Political violence erupted in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005, following parliamentary elections that were condemned by opposition forces for alleged fraud. The weakened and increasingly unpopular government of Askar Akayev was overthrown following large demonstrations in Bishkek and particularly in the southern city of Jalal-Abad. The crisis illustrated the growing split between the more secular and Russified northern areas, and the more conservative and religious southern parts of the country, which also harbor a large Uzbek minority. This divide continues to be a strong factor in Kyrgyz politics until the present.

In 2010, Akayev's successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev, a Jalal-Abad native, was himself overthrown following protests that began in the northern city of Talas. This episode was considerably more violent, with over 100 killed. The events exacerbated the north-south divide, as Bakiyev fled the capital and ensconced himself in his residence in the south, surrounded by thousands of supporters. A larger conflagration was averted when Kazakhstan negotiated Bakiyev's departure into exile in Belarus.<sup>5</sup>

Unrest in south Kyrgyzstan then worsened after Bakiyev supporters seized control over government functions in Jalal-Abad and ousted the interim government-appointed governor. On top of the political cleavage between supporters of Bakiyev and those of the interim government was added an inter-ethnic element. Ethnic tensions exploded into widespread looting and

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<sup>5</sup> Shirin Akiner, "Kyrgyzstan 2010: Conflict and Context", Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2016, p. 53.

bloodletting that disproportionally targeted the Uzbek community, killing hundreds.

After 2010, Central Asia experienced relative calm until the end of the decade, with the exception of isolated terrorist incidents. But the end of the 2010s saw a clear uptick in violence. As had been the case previously, Kyrgyzstan was exposed to unrest. In the summer of 2019, the Kyrgyz parliament stripped former President Almazbek Atambayev of his immunity, leading to an armed standoff between police and Atambayev's supporters in which one person was killed.<sup>6</sup> In February 2020, ethnic clashes took place in the southern Kazakh province of Zhambyl between ethnic Kazakhs and Dungans.<sup>7</sup> And in October 2020, outrage over allegedly fraudulent parliamentary elections led to a third revolution in Kyrgyzstan, bringing nationalist politician Sadyr Japarov to power.<sup>8</sup>

As was the case in 2010, struggle in Bishkek was followed by inter-ethnic tensions in the south of the country. This time, however, it did not involve Uzbeks of Osh or Jalal-Abad, but Tajiks along the border of Batken province. Territorial matters there are complicated by the existence of exclaves – pockets of land surrounded by one country's territory but controlled by the other. For a number of years, tensions had risen between Kyrgyz and Tajiks over a variety of issues, most notably water sharing. In April 2021, these tensions erupted into violence, which involved regular army units on both sides. Over 30,000 people were displaced and over 40 were killed in what

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<sup>6</sup> Johan Engvall, "The Capture of Atambayev And What It Means For Kyrgyz Politics," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 10, 2019. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13585>)

<sup>7</sup> "Ethnic clashes in Kazakhstan leave eight dead, scores wounded," *Reuters*, February 8, 2020. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-brawl/ethnic-clashes-in-kazakhstan-leave-eight-dead-scores-wounded-idUSKBN202071/>)

<sup>8</sup> Johan Engvall, "The Fall of Kyrgyzstan's Parliamentary Experiment and the Rise of Sadyr Japarov," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, January 21, 2021. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13657>)

was the worst instance of inter-state violence in Central Asia since independence.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Eric McGlinchey, "The April 2021 Kyrgyz-Tajik Border Dispute: Historical and Causal Context," Crossroads Central Asia, Policy Brief, no. 2, 2021. ([https://crossroads-ca.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/McGlinchey\\_EN.pdf](https://crossroads-ca.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/McGlinchey_EN.pdf))

# The Violence of 2022

As this background suggests, the events of 2022 did not stand out because of their violence of intensity. What made these events unique is that they affected every state of the region with the exception of Turkmenistan.

## Kazakhstan's January Events

Kazakhstan's troubles started with a hike in the price of natural gas that entered into force with the New Year. This sparked popular demonstrations that began in western Kazakhstan, but soon spread to other parts of the country. These protests in particular targeted the continued influence of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev. In Almaty, peaceful demonstrations shifted to violent attacks on state institutions as the protests were joined by "hundreds of rough-looking aggressive men"<sup>10</sup> belonging to criminal gangs and radical religious groups. These groups took the lead in attacking police, taking over a local building belonging to the security services, and seizing Almaty airport – suspiciously, without meeting much resistance.<sup>11</sup> Widespread looting followed and hundreds of law enforcement

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<sup>10</sup> Nargis Kassenova on Twitter January 7, 2022.

(<https://twitter.com/KassenovaNargis/status/1479663457997922304>)

<sup>11</sup> Anatoliy Weisskopf, "Протесты и Беспорядки в Казахстане: Революция, Бунт Или Госпереворот?" [Protests and Unrest in Kazakhstan: Revolution, Riot or State Coup?"] *Deutsche Welle*, 12 Jan. 2022.



officers were wounded, and up to 18 killed.<sup>12</sup> Large numbers of protestors were killed and wounded.

President Tokayev ordered authorities to respond with “maximum toughness,” but also instantly made concessions by removing former President Nursultan Nazarbayev from his role as Chairman of the National Security Council. Tokayev further requested the Collective Security Treaty Organization to send peacekeeping forces “for a limited period of time.”<sup>13</sup> A Contingent of 2000 troops (mainly Russian, but also involving Armenian, Belarusian, Tajik, and Kyrgyz units) arrived the next day. Soon, the government announced that the “constitutional order has largely been restored.”

Reports soon emerged pointing to two of Nazarbayev’s nephews as instigators of the violence. These individuals, with past and present positions in the security structures, had long been known for their connections to radical religious movements as well as organized criminal groups supposedly under their informal command.

In the aftermath of the January violence, differing accounts emerged to explain exactly what happened. The government initially blamed foreign terrorists, while opposition groups have floated various far-flung theories of the government organizing the violence itself to consolidate power.

The government proved reticent in directly acknowledging the depth of intra-elite conflict that appear to have been at the root of the events. However, a closer look at not just the government’s public statements but the actions it undertook is instructive.

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<sup>12</sup> “Officer Beheaded, Protesters Killed in Kazakhstan’s Worst Protests Since Independence.” *ABC News*, ABC News, 6 Jan. 2022. (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-06/apn-kazakhstan-unrest/100743000>)

<sup>13</sup> Sergei Sumlenny on Twitter, January 5, 2022. (<https://twitter.com/sumlenny/status/1478807667560828935/photo/1>)

The President's main actions were to remove the entourage of former President Nazarbayev from positions of power, and to gradually go after the economic assets of parts of his entourage. The dismissal of Nazarbayev was followed by stripping the former leader of title of father of the nation, as well as returning the capital city's name to Astana, rather than Nur-Sultan, as it had been renamed upon Nazarbayev's resignation. While Nazarbayev and his closest family was not apprehended, instead the Head of the security service, close Nazarbayev confidant Karim Massimov, was put under arrest and subsequently convicted of sedition.<sup>14</sup> Following these moves, the government embarked on a wide-ranging purge and reorganization of the country's security structures, a restructuring that included changes in leadership, operational protocols, and their overall mandate to prevent any future threats to state stability. This move indicated that this is where the coup attempt had originated.

President Tokayev also launched his "New Kazakhstan" initiative, which represented a significant step towards political reform and transformation in the country, with a view to addressing the underlying causes of discontent among the population.<sup>15</sup>

State Counselor Erlan Karin in January 2023 outlined the perhaps most concise official explanation for the January tragedy: "reactionary forces took advantage of initially peaceful protests," and their main goal was to "reverse

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<sup>14</sup> Outside of Kazakhstan, in particular, the case of Karim Massimov has garnered considerable attention, as a result of allegations that he has been held in solitary confinement with a rapidly deteriorating health condition. The fact that detailed evidence for Mr. Massimov's guilt has not been publicly presented has been seized upon by critics of the Kazakh government and human rights organizations to accuse the government of Kazakhstan of arbitrary detention and political retribution. See eg. Letter of the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Alice Jill Edwards, April 13, 2023. (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27996>)

<sup>15</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Two Years Later: Kazakhstan's January Events," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, January 1, 2024. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13784>)

the ongoing reforms and maintain the old order.”<sup>16</sup> As this statement suggests, the unrest was not merely a spontaneous outburst of public discontent but was manipulated by elements resistant to change within the country. The characterization of these elements as "reactionary forces" implies that certain groups or individuals were actively working against the government's reform agenda. These forces, as per this narrative, sought to exploit the public's grievances – initially triggered by issues such as fuel price hikes – to instigate broader unrest. The goal, as outlined by Karin, was to derail the process of modernization and reform that the government had been pursuing and to preserve the status quo that favored them.

The transformation of political structures in Kazakhstan led to the introduction of the “New Kazakhstan” initiative, which later became branded as “Just and Fair Kazakhstan.” As such the January events became a pivotal moment in Kazakhstan's political evolution, marking a departure from the old power dynamics. While these reforms have hardly turned Kazakhstan into a liberal democracy, they launched a process of change that is gradually making Kazakhstan's state more responsive to the population, while simultaneously beginning to address the large-scale elite corruption in the country.

This was a crisis that took everyone by surprise, but in retrospect perhaps it should not have. While the specific developments in January 2022 could not have been foreseen, the visible existence of rivaling power centers had been a cause of concern in the country for several years.

Kazakhstan from 2019 to 2022 existed in a form of limbo, with two rivaling centers of formal authority, but where informal authority was largely understood to rest with the entourage of former President Nazarbayev.

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<sup>16</sup> Assel Satubaldina, “One Year on from the January Tragedy in Kazakhstan,” *Astana Times*, January 6, 2023. (<https://astanatimes.com/2023/01/one-year-on-from-the-january-tragedy-in-kazakhstan/>)

President Tokayev's resolve to assert authority in January 2022 served as an indicator both domestically and internationally, that the legitimate President of the country must also assert authority over informal powerbrokers.

The tug-of-war between informal and formal powerbrokers is a phenomenon well-known across the young states of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The developments in Kazakhstan suggest that the balance is shifting in the direction of formal institutions of power. Simply put, the January crisis is a clear indication of the dangers of allowing informal powerbrokers to continue to resist, passively or actively, the gradual institutionalization of power in the hands of the formal political authority.

### **Gorno-Badakhshan**

Gorno-Badakhshan is a large, sparsely populated mountainous area in eastern Tajikistan, bordering Afghanistan, China and Kyrgyzstan. The territory is separated from the rest of Tajikistan by mountain ranges, and is populated by ethnic Pamiris that speak an eastern Iranian language more closely related to Pashto than to Tajik, and who also differ from the Sunni Muslim Tajiks by their adherence to the Ismaili faith.

In the post-civil war period, the Government of Tajikistan largely ignored Gorno-Badakhshan and essentially allowed the Aga Khan Development Network to invest in rebuilding the region. In recent years, however, the government's neglect has turned from benign to malign. Over time, as central power strengthened, tensions between Rahmon's government and the AKDN grew.<sup>17</sup> In parallel, the government's approach to religion shifted. While Rahmon had always remained committed to the notion of state

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<sup>17</sup> U.S. Embassy Dushanbe, "The Pamirs - Going their Own Way, Whether they Want to Or Not," U.S. Embassy Cable, through Wikileaks, October 22, 2008; Joshua Kucera, "The Aga Khan's tightrope walk in Tajikistan," *Al Jazeera*, August 31, 2013. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/8/31/the-aga-khans-tightrope-walk-in-tajikistan/>)

secularism and control over religion, by the late 2000s the government recognized the appeal of Sunni Islam and adapted a conception national of identity to reflect this. Tajikistan began to support the majority Hanafi form of Sunni Islam in an effort to stave off more radical and extremist foreign alternatives. As such, the government now promoted a specific, traditional Tajik form of Islam in the Sunni Hanafi tradition instead of a broader Persianate identity that would include the Ismaili Pamiris.<sup>18</sup> This shift in effect excluded the Ismailis from the government's narrative of the country's national identity.<sup>19</sup>

The gradual imposition of stronger repressive force to assert authority in Gorno-Badakhshan led to various forms of resistance by many local Pamiris, torn between the Aga Khan's pacifism and the authority of warlords from the civil war era who provide security but simultaneously act as organized crime leaders, masterminding various forms of smuggling from Afghanistan into Central Asia and beyond.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, the government of Emomali Rahmon gradually did away with the former leaders of the opposition it had integrated into government as part of the peace agreement. Soon enough, it began to target also the pro-government warlords that occupied influential positions. Unlike the practice in other parts of Central Asia, these power rivalries were not just political rivalries, but very much physical ones involving men with guns: opponents of Rahmon were not just purged politically, or jailed, but frequently physically eliminated.

By 2012, independent political authorities with a background as warlords in the civil war only really remained in Gorno-Badakhshan. And Dushanbe

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<sup>18</sup> Shahodat Saibnazarova, "Focus on Tajik Islamic Heritage," IWPR, May 29, 2009. (<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/focus-tajik-islamic-heritage>)

<sup>19</sup> Svante E. Cornell *The New Secularism in the Muslim World: Religion and the State in Central Asia and Azerbaijan*, Boulder, CO: AFPC Press, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Kucera, "The Aga Khan's tightrope walk in Tajikistan."

appeared no longer to tolerate this continued existence of independent leaders, with Rahmon's government seeking to extend its undisputed authority over the entire territory of the republic.

If the aim was to ensure that residents of Gorno-Badakhshan feel loyalty to the state, the manner in which the government sought to achieve it was highly counter-productive. In 2012, the government launched a "special military operation" in Khorogh, capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan, to target the influence of remaining informal leaders. One of those, Imomnazar Imomnazarov, was killed in August that year. But the extent of popular resistance, and willingness and ability of other leaders to stand up to government forces, made it impossible for the government to achieve full control. Further bouts of violence took place in 2014 and 2018, before the government took the opportunity arising from the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 to further strengthen its military presence around Khorogh. Following a further bout of violence and protests in November 2021, the government appears to have secured Russian support for a major crackdown in May and June of 2022.<sup>21</sup>

The 2022 crackdown was intended to eliminate the remaining warlords from the civil war era and assert full control over the region. As part of the crackdown, government forces assassinated one of the most influential local leaders, Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov, and responded with considerable force to the efforts by locals to block roads to slow down the military operation. Military operations were followed by arrests and incarcerations of numerous leading voices of the region, and the silencing of what had been considered a vibrant civil society in Khorog.

Closely following these events, the government began asserting control over entities created or supported by the Aga Khan Development Network,

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<sup>21</sup> Rooftop Info, "What is happening in Tajikistan?" January 17, 2025, p. 25. (<https://wechange.de/project/roof-top-info/?v=3>)

(AKDN) including schools, the University of Central Asia campus, as well as a medical center. Government entities either dismantled these organizations or asserted direct control over them.<sup>22</sup> The government also began to assert greater pressure on expressions of Pamiri identity and Ismaili religion.

Against this background, further unrest is not unlikely and a broader conflagration in the Pamirs is plausible in a scenario of broader unrest in Tajikistan, but there are mitigating factors. First of all, the Pamirs are isolated geographically. Among foreign powers, neither Russia nor China are likely to support the Pamiris, instead supporting the Tajik Government. This mitigates against large-scale conflict. Yet it is similarly unlikely that the current tension in Gorno-Badakhshan will dissipate easily; the most likely scenario may be low-intensity or recurring bouts of unrest and violence.

## **Karakalpakstan**

To the extent that Karakalpakstan had been on the radar of anyone outside Central Asia prior to 2022, it would likely have been the result of the environmental disaster of the Aral Sea. The Soviet Union's large agricultural projects in Central Asia – especially cotton monoculture – coupled with extremely poorly designed and maintained irrigation systems led to drastic cuts in the water supply to the once-vast Aral Sea, reducing its volume and sea levels to yield the famous pictures of stranded large fishing vessels far from any sight of water. This had extreme economic, social and health implications for the population of Karakalpakstan, lying south of the Aral Sea, because of the contamination of pesticides used upstream, alongside other factors. As one observer notes, the region suffers from “frequent droughts, ever less potable water, a collapsing economy, extraordinarily

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<sup>22</sup> “Tajikistan puts the squeeze on Aga Khan-linked entities,” *Eurasianet*, July 28, 2022.  
(<https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-puts-the-squeeze-on-aga-khan-linked-entities>)

high cancer rates from the mineral salts blown from the former seabed, and life expectancies that have fallen like a rock since the 1980s.”<sup>23</sup> Life expectancy is over ten years lower than other areas of Uzbekistan, even though it has recovered from lows in the low 60s in the 1980s.<sup>24</sup>

Karakalpakstan has almost 40 percent of Uzbekistan’s territory, but a population of less than two million, which has communities of Karakalpaks, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs that were relatively similar in size in the late 1990s. The percentage of Karakalpaks declined gradually during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of greater growth rates among Uzbeks, and migration of both ethnic Kazakhs and some Karakalpaks to neighboring Kazakhstan. Recent studies suggest that Uzbeks form now perhaps 38 percent of the population, Karakalpaks 34 percent, and Kazakhs 18 percent.<sup>25</sup>

The government of Uzbekistan paid scant attention to the region until President Mirziyoyev came to power, and the region is stricken by poverty – its GDP per capita is the lowest of Uzbekistan’s regions, and its poverty rate is the highest in the country.<sup>26</sup> Mirziyoyev, however, took steps to direct investment to the area, and traveled there frequently.

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Goble, “Window on Eurasia: Some Karakalpaks Now Seeking Independence from Uzbekistan,” *Windows on Eurasia*, May 2, 2014.

(<https://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2014/05/window-on-eurasia-some-karakalpaks-now.html>)

<sup>24</sup> Oral Ataniyazova, “Sea of Troubles,” *Index on Censorship*, no. 2, 1998 (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03064229808536329>); Médecins sans Frontières, “Karakalpakstan: A Population in Danger,” 2003. (<https://www.aerzte-ohne-grenzen.de/sites/default/files/attachments/2003-04-karakalpakstan-report-population-in-danger.pdf>)

<sup>25</sup> III. X. Джумабаева, “Демографический Потенциал Республики Каракалпакстан,” *Narodonaselenie*, vol. 23 no. 3, 2020, pp. 145-154. (<https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/demograficheskiy-potentsial-respubliki-karakalpakstan>)

<sup>26</sup> “Real per capita income growth slowed threefold in Uzbekistan last year,” Kun.uz, January 29, 2024. (<https://kun.uz/en/news/2024/01/29/real-per-capita-income-growth-slowed-threefold-in-uzbekistan-last-year>) UNDP and Institute for Social Research under the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan, *Needs of the Population of the Aral Sea Region*, 2017.



Given the modern history of Karakalpakstan, the existence of grievances is hardly surprising. Nor would it be surprising if such grievances led to separatist sentiments, given the poor health conditions and relative economic deprivation compared to the rest of the country, combined with the trappings of statehood endowed in an autonomous republic. Indeed, as has been seen elsewhere, the existence of a clearly delineated territory and state-like symbols and institutions combine to provide an impetus for separatism.<sup>27</sup> That said, equally significant factors mitigated against secessionist activity in Karakalpakstan. The most obvious is the minority status of Karakalpaks and the mixed settlement patterns in the republic. Furthermore, neighboring Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan would be almost certain to side with Uzbekistan and mitigate rather than support ethno-political mobilization in Karakalpakstan. Any separatist movement in the region would require external support, and it would not come from the territory's neighbors.

Separatist ideas received several boosts starting in 2008, when Western powers engineered Kosovo's independence from Serbia. This triggered discussions among would-be activists for Karakalpakstan's separation from Uzbekistan, and the emergence of a largely internet-based separatist movement. This movement gained some fuel in 2014, following two key events. One was Russia's annexation of Crimea, which constituted a blatant effort to redraw post-Soviet boundaries; but equally significant was Uzbekistan's decision in 2012 to leave the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. Uzbekistan had vehemently opposed the creation of a CSTO Rapid Reaction Force and the proposed deployment of CSTO troops on Afghanistan northern border. The Rapid Reaction Forces could

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([https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/uz/un\\_uzb\\_survey\\_in\\_the\\_Aral\\_Sea\\_region\\_eng.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/uz/un_uzb_survey_in_the_Aral_Sea_region_eng.pdf))

<sup>27</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Autonomy as A Source of Conflict," *World Politics*, vol. 54 no. 2, 2002, pp. 245-276.

theoretically be able to intervene on the territory of member states without a consensus of the organization's members, and a deployment of foreign troops on Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan was anathema to Tashkent.

As an Uzbek scholar reported in summer 2012, "Tashkent worries about possible provocations, sabotage or even revenge" as a result of this decision. Veiled threats did in fact come from Russia, as when Russian Army General Vitaliy Chirkin warned "of the potential for local armed conflict that may erupt soon in Central Asia."<sup>28</sup> While no immediate armed conflict emerged, Karakalpak separatism did develop in the years that followed. This development was well-noted in Russian media, which provided coverage to a Facebook announcement by the unknown group "Forward Karakalpakia" which emphasized that Karakalpaks "do not agree with the domestic and foreign policies" of Uzbekistan, and suggested that with Moscow's support, "Karakalpakia is ready to raise the flag of the Russian Federation."<sup>29</sup> The Uzbek government called this a "provocation organized by a foreign state."<sup>30</sup>

In 2022, the proximate cause for the eruption of violence was an unforced error on the part of the government of Uzbekistan. Drafts of a proposed constitutional amendment had removed Karakalpakstan's stated right to secession, enshrined in the first post-Soviet constitution of Uzbekistan. While it would make sense for Tashkent to remove such a clause, thus removing a source of possible future vulnerability to outside powers, the move backfired. Conflict theorists have long known that one of the most

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<sup>28</sup> Zabikhulla Saipov, "Factors that Influenced Uzbekistan's Decision to Pull out of the CSTO: The View from Tashkent," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 18, 2012.

(<https://jamestown.org/program/factors-that-influenced-uzbekistans-decision-to-pull-out-of-the-csto-the-view-from-tashkent/>)

<sup>29</sup> Igor Rotar, "Are There Possible Future 'Crimeas' in Central Asia?," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 13, 2014. (<https://jamestown.org/program/are-there-possible-future-crimeas-in-central-asia/>)

<sup>30</sup> Paul Goble, "Moscow Set to Use Karakalpak Separatism Against a Pro-Western Tashkent," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 12, 2024. (<https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-set-to-use-karakalpak-separatism-against-a-pro-western-tashkent/>)

powerful explanatory factors in triggering ethnic violence is the revocation of autonomy.<sup>31</sup> The proposal to amend the constitution thus had clear potential to generate a reaction, something the government underestimated.

Following the publication of draft amendments on June 25, several social media profiles in Karakalpakstan raised attention to the amendments and urged people to oppose them. Protests began in several towns in Karakalpakstan, and major protests broke out in the capital Nukus on July 1 – reportedly as a response to the detention of a separatist blogger. As the protests turned violent, Uzbek security structures rapidly suppressed the demonstrations.

President Mirziyoyev immediately flew to Nukus and announced he had withdrawn the controversial proposed amendments. In meetings, he berated Karakalpakstan officials for not informing him of public opposition to the amendments, which per the official narrative had been proposed by the parliament of Karakalpakstan itself. Given the close relationship between Tashkent and governing bodies in Nukus, however, it is difficult to know where these particular amendments actually originated.

Close to twenty people were killed and several hundred injured in the violence, making it the worst incident of violence in Uzbekistan since the 2005 Andijan uprising.

The rapid emergence of the protests has given rise to questions whether outside actors were involved in triggering the violence. Indeed, the pattern visible in Karakalpakstan is reminiscent enough of the escalation to conflict in the South Caucasus to entertain the possibility that outside interference had taken place. In particular, the indications of prior Russian manipulation

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<sup>31</sup> Ted R. Gurr and Will R. Moore, "Ethnopolitical rebellion: A cross-sectional analysis of the 1980s with risk assessments for the 1990s," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 41 no. 4, pp. 1079–1103; David Siroky and John Cuffe, "Lost Autonomy, Nationalism and Separatism," *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 48 no. 1, pp. 3–34.

of Karakalpak secessionist movements at times of political differences between Moscow and Tashkent raises suspicions. The purpose of instigating such violence would be to weaken Uzbekistan's stability and international reputation, and pressure its leaders to respect Russian priorities. By indicating its ability to weaponize the Karakalpak issue, as it showed already in 2013, Moscow may be indicating its possession of a powerful instrument that forces Tashkent to take Moscow's interests into account.

### **The Kyrgyz-Tajik Border Conflict**

The September 2022 conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan marked a brief yet intense period of violence along a 110-kilometer stretch of their disputed border in the Ferghana Valley. The fighting resulted in significant civilian casualties and mass displacement.

The conflict stemmed from long-standing border disputes that have plagued Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan since their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The Soviet-era borders, which were drawn in the 1920s and 1950s, left numerous ambiguities, particularly in densely populated Ferghana Valley. Both countries have faced challenges in demarcating their borders.

The September 2022 conflict was not an isolated incident but part of a larger pattern of violent confrontations. Tensions between the two countries had worsened significantly in 2020, as skirmishes occurred over access to water resources and infrastructure in contested areas. The most notable confrontation occurred in April 2021, when clashes erupted over a water intake station near the Isfara River. This resulted in over 50 deaths, hundreds of injuries, and the displacement of 58,000 Kyrgyz civilians.

Throughout early 2020, a series of smaller-scale conflicts took place along the border, primarily triggered by disputes over roads and water canals. These skirmishes, while less deadly than the April 2021 conflict, reflected the ongoing tension and the inability of local or national authorities to

resolve underlying territorial disagreements. The recurrence of such conflicts in 2020 and 2021 set the stage for the larger September 2022 clash. The lack of effective institutional arrangements to manage shared resources like water and pastures, combined with the absence of a demarcated border, fueled ongoing tensions that regularly erupted into violence.

During the four-day conflict in September 2022, Kyrgyz forces deployed artillery, tanks, and drones, allegedly targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, while Tajik forces were accused of targeting fleeing civilians and engaging in looting and extrajudicial executions. This led to the displacement of over 130,000 people, many of whom remained unable to return home months after the fighting ended. The ferocity of the September 2022 conflict highlighted the volatility of the region and the fragility of the ceasefire agreements between the two countries.

In April 2023, however, presidents Sadyr Japarov of Kyrgyzstan and Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan reached an agreement that demarcated 90 percent of their shared border. The scale of progress achieved in 2023 is unprecedented. Unlike earlier fragmented efforts, this agreement addressed a substantial majority of the disputed territory, indicating a newfound willingness from both governments to engage in constructive dialogue rather than resorting to military confrontations.

The 2023 agreement not only addresses border issues but provided an opportunity to heal grievances. The two countries agreed to exchange certain parcels of land and establish joint water resource management in some areas. In July 2024, the two countries agreed on another 4 percent of the border, while an agreement on the remaining 6 percent was finalized in

a meeting in Batken in December 2024.<sup>32</sup> As of this writing, ratification was still pending.

However, the local populations in the border regions like Kyrgyzstan's Batken Province and Tajikistan's Sughd Province still face challenges, as displaced civilians from the 2022 conflict remain unable to return home due to ongoing security concerns and the destruction of infrastructure.

The border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is rugged and mountainous, with difficult terrain that makes surveillance and management challenging. Much of the demarcated border lacks formal barriers, with military outposts and checkpoints scattered along the most strategic points. These checkpoints are intended to monitor movement between the two countries, prevent smuggling, and manage any potential flare-ups of violence. Regarding checkpoints, there is no definitive public record of the exact number along the demarcated portions of the border, as it varies depending on the terrain and security needs. However, previous reports have indicated that both countries have maintained numerous checkpoints at critical crossings, especially near disputed areas and in regions with significant cross-border movement.

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<sup>32</sup> Catherine Putz, "After 33 Years, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Announce Border Agreement," *Diplomat*, December 4, 2024. (<https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/after-33-years-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-announce-border-agreement/>)

## **Looking Ahead: Central Asia's Vulnerability**

This overview of the troubled year of 2022 raises the larger question of Central Asia's vulnerability to instability. What vulnerabilities have the potential to exacerbate conflict and violence in the region? The following sections identify three significant vulnerabilities and aggravating factors. These include Russia's malign influence in Central Asia, the region's economic difficulties, the relationship between political systems and society, the specific role of security services as blocks to reform, and the growing disparity between regional states.

### **Russian Influence**

While China's influence is rising rapidly in Central Asia, for now Russian malign influence must be considered one of the key vulnerabilities in the region. China's role in the region is much more predictable, while active Chinese interference in Central Asian affairs is thus far limited. For the foreseeable future, the effects of Russian intervention in the region must be considered of a different and more challenging nature, because of the fundamental difference that China continues to crave stability, while Russia has a track record of creating instability and conflict whenever that furthers its interests.

Russian influence in Central Asia must be seen against the background of Russia's broader agenda in the former Soviet Union, and what has been termed Russian "hybrid" strategies in a number of countries designed to restore control over the former Soviet Union. Central Asia has thus far been a lower priority than Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and the South Caucasus,

but this does not mean that Russian designs on Central Asia are necessarily different – as Russian rhetoric against Kazakhstan in the past two years has shown.

Moscow has deployed a bewildering array of tactical steps and instruments against post-Soviet states and beyond, which may appear ad hoc but at their core form a coherent strategy.<sup>33</sup> A combination of some of these instruments has been used in every former Soviet state with tactical sophistication and at times impressive coordination.

Russian tools include traditional diplomacy and economic levers, as well as the use of Russian-controlled information outlets, which are widely watched in Central Asia. Indeed, the power of Russian media is greater in Central Asia than elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. But Russia's deployment of propaganda and its ability to rapidly gin up a campaign against specific countries or leaders in its media outlets goes beyond normal diplomatic procedure, as was seen when Russian media actively contributed to the overthrow of the Bakiyev government in Kyrgyzstan in 2010.<sup>34</sup>

Moscow also engages in subversion through co-optation, working to penetrate government institutions to ensure that loyal, pro-Russian figures remain in important positions. Moscow has found this increasingly challenging recently, particularly in states that have undergone generational changes in government bureaucracies. As seen below, Russian influence is strongest in security sector institutions across Central Asia. For example, Russian security services established a direct operative role in overseeing

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<sup>33</sup> See S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Blank, "Russia's Fingerprints in Kyrgyzstan's Storm," Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, April 14, 2010, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12033>; Simon Tisdall, "Kyrgyzstan: A Russian Revolution," *Guardian*, April 8, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/08/kyrgyzstan-vladimir-putinbarack-obama>.



the security services of Kyrgyzstan following the ousting of Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010. Open intelligence and research firm Stratfor reported a “pervasive, noticeable presence of Russia’s Federal Security Service on the ground” during the 2010 revolution,<sup>35</sup> and senior Kyrgyz officials privately report the presence of Russian operatives embedded in the Kyrgyz services to this day.<sup>36</sup> The implications of this for any political leaders seeking to adopt a more independent foreign policy are obvious. Moscow has also deployed economic and energy warfare,<sup>37</sup> and used debts accrued by Central Asian states to secure strategic state-owned assets in these countries.<sup>38</sup>

Further west, as mentioned, Moscow has created or manipulated territorial conflicts in places such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, as well as Crimea and Donbas. While there is not sufficient evidence to determine that Moscow played a role in the 2022 unrest in Karakalpakstan, such activity by Russian services, there or elsewhere, would hardly be surprising given its use as a tool of Moscow elsewhere.

Finally, the risk of Russian military action in Central Asia cannot be excluded. The country most at risk of such a scenario – whether through the spontaneous creation of a Donbass-style “people’s republic,” or outright

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<sup>35</sup> “Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Resurgence,” Stratfor, April 13, 2010.

([http://web.archive.org/web/20100416161701/http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20100412\\_kyrgyzstan\\_and\\_russian\\_resurgence](http://web.archive.org/web/20100416161701/http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20100412_kyrgyzstan_and_russian_resurgence))

<sup>36</sup> This is a fact that has not been studied, but which is volunteered privately by an array of Kyrgyz government officials in the past decade.

<sup>37</sup> David Trilling and Chinghiz Umetov, “Kyrgyzstan: Is Putin Punishing Bakiyev?” Eurasianet.org, April 6, 2010. (<https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-is-putin-punishing-bakiyev>)

<sup>38</sup> Stratfor, “Kyrgyzstan Swaps Equity for Debt Relief,” October 5, 2000.

(<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/kyrgyzstan-swaps-equity-debt-relief>); International Monetary Fund, “Republic of Tajikistan : Sixth Review Under the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility-Staff Report”, February 2006, p. 55. (<https://www.bookstore.imf.org/books/republic-of-tajikistan-sixth-review-under-the-poverty-reduction-and-growth-facility-staff-report-staff-statement-press-release-on-the-execut>)

military assault – is Kazakhstan, whose northern and eastern areas harbor a large ethnic Russian population. A future military confrontation with Russia may be unlikely, but Kazakh leaders are acutely aware of the precedent set in Georgia and Ukraine. Other countries, particularly Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, already are home to Russian military installations, and multiple scenarios exist where these forces could be involved in hostile actions against their host governments.

In sum, Russian pressure, manipulation, and subversion is a constant reality for Central Asian leaders. Leaders need to account for Russia's reaction when taking major policy decisions, including their reform efforts: in states further west, efforts to embrace reform were a factor triggering hostile Russian actions against Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Moscow may be less concerned about the domestic affairs of Central Asian states, as their domestic trajectory's demonstration effect pose less of a danger for Russia's regime security than do Georgia or Ukraine. Still, it is clear that Russia prefers authoritarian and corrupt regimes in its neighborhood to functioning and accountable ones, and Central Asia is no exception.

### **Economic Troubles**

An acute vulnerability in Central Asia is the economic trouble the region has experienced in the past decade, which has been exacerbated by global and regional trends. Two factors – landlockedness and a reputation for considerable opacity in political-economic issues – hamper the region's economic development. The peculiar fusion of political and economic power is discussed below, but it is clear that the region's political economy does not make it an attractive destination for foreign investment, and serves as a brake on economic development. Landlockedness is also a serious impediment to economic development. As a UN report observed, "high transport costs erode [land-locked developing countries'] competitive edge, discourage investors, reduce economic growth and subsequently limit the

capacity of landlocked countries to achieve sustainable development.”<sup>39</sup> Central Asia lacks outlets to world markets and pays a heavy distance tax on anything imported to the region and exported from the region to world markets. This reality was on display in 2022, when Russia’s invasion of Ukraine led to the curtailment of the land trade routes connecting the region to Europe through Russia.

In addition, a widespread dependence on commodity prices generates economic volatility in the region, exposing it to external shocks. Kazakhstan’s dependence on the price of oil is well-known, but even smaller countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan rely on the sale of commodities for government income. Kyrgyzstan’s biggest source of export revenue is a gold mine, while Tajikistan relies on a very large aluminum factory. Several regional states are reliant on the export of cotton, another commodity with highly volatile prices, though Uzbekistan is actively working to reduce this dependence. Millions of Central Asian also rely on remittances from workers abroad, mainly Russia, which fluctuate depending on the economic situation in that country.

Political factors exacerbate the region’s economic situation. While the region’s economic downturn can be traced to the decline of the oil price in 2014, Central Asia also became collateral damage in the mutual sanctions imposed by the West and Russia on each other. Several of the region’s states are members of the Eurasian Economic Union, but even those that are not members were hit by the downturn in the Russian economy. The drop in the value of the Russian currency was replicated across Central Asia. This impoverished the region’s population by increasing the cost of life.

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<sup>39</sup> United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, “About Landlocked Developing Countries.” (<https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/about-landlocked-developing-countries>)

Economic woes were further exacerbated by Covid-related lockdowns, and from 2022 onward, the fallout of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In sum, the economic situation in Central Asia has been bleak for a decade, in spite of valiant efforts especially by Tashkent and Astana to implement economic reforms and advance regional cooperation. In Kazakhstan's case, matters were made worse by Russia's politically motivated decision to intermittently block Kazakh oil exports from the port of Novorossiysk.

The decline in living standards hit the lower and lower middle classes the worst, at a time when modern technology made it easier than ever to disseminate imagery of the lavish lifestyle of the region's elites. Nowhere was this more visible than in Kazakhstan, where the gap between an uber-rich elite and the remainder of the population became a serious political problem in recent years and contributed to the demonstrations in 2022.

More broadly, economic inequality was less of a political factor as long as everyone's living standards were rising up to 2014. The less well off appeared not to mind that the rich were getting richer as long as they, too, saw their situation improve. The moment they did not, however, the very social contract in the region risked breaking.

### **Political Systems and Society**

A significant challenge to Central Asian states going forward is to respond to growing popular demand for a transition away from the peculiar political and economic system that emerged with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A failure to meet popular demands for change risks leading to renewed unrest.

Post-Soviet political systems have proven remarkably resistant to reform. The reasons for this go back to the transition to independence, where statehood was built in parallel with the introduction of private property. This left the politically connected with tremendous advantages in securing economic assets and taking the reins of a budding capitalist economy.

Meanwhile, the weakness of political institutions meant that political power came to rest largely on informal rather than formal institutions. Political power came to be a function of control over patronage: political leaders required an economic base to maximize political power. In effect, they needed to control institutions that provided patronage and ensured the loyalty of their followers. This, in turn, created a fusion of political and economic power, which created strong vested interests in the maintenance of a *status quo*. But this *status quo* was fundamentally unsustainable, because its survival required authoritarian government, control over media, and the use of government power to sustain economic monopolies, including the manipulation of customs and taxation authority to maintain a playing field that advantaged some actors while disadvantaging others. As a result, state institutions were, for many practical purposes, privatized: they existed not to provide services to the population, but to extract resources from the people to be fed upwards into the pyramid of patronage.

This state of affairs helped trigger popular upheavals in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan from 2003 to 2005. Resource-rich countries managed to keep stability longer, as a result of the resources at their disposal and their ability to subsidize the population. But following the collapse of oil prices in 2014, leaders in the region increasingly understood that the existing system was no longer sustainable. The continued maintenance of economic monopolies and other obstacles to trade and investment, such as deeply corrupt customs and taxation systems, prevented regional cooperation in Central Asia, and served as a hindrance to the development of trade across the region. Meanwhile, a more modern and progressive generation had begun to gain influence in government offices across the region, most visibly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Presidents Mirziyoyev and Tokayev came to be identified with this urge for reform, which sought to make state institutions more efficient, shifting their purpose to delivering services to the population – while maintaining control over the political system.

Efforts to effect change have, thus, been of two types: the revolutionary change attempted in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and the evolutionary change under way in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Twenty years after the “color revolutions,” the record is clear: revolutionary change failed to achieve sustainable development in the political systems of regional countries, and in the absence of solid backing from the democratic world, helped trigger aggressive Russian backlash. Meanwhile, countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are engaging in processes of evolutionary change, which is limited in scope and with an end result that is not immediately visible and may take years to develop.

Across the region, thus, economic troubles are feeding a growing frustration with stagnant political systems. At present, there appears to be no easy fix to this deep-seated problem.

## Security Services

As mentioned in the beginning of this study, the role of the military in post-Soviet states has been limited. Instead, it is the security services – heirs to the notorious Soviet KGB – that have been functioning as a “state within a state” in most Central Asian countries. These institutions long remained fundamentally unreformed, the most retrograde institutions in each state. Security services have been a key instrument in Russian influence, a leading impediment to political reform, and in many cases maintained links to criminal networks across the region.<sup>40</sup>

Recent examples validate the thesis that security services are a key impediment on the development of regional states’ foreign and domestic policies. A significant episode took place in Uzbekistan. After a year in power, President Mirziyoyev moved decisively against the country’s

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<sup>40</sup> S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, “Security Services: Moscow’s Fifth Column Across Eurasia,” *The Diplomat*, January 17, 2022. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/joint-center-publications/item/13351>)

National Security Service (SNB). The SNB was responsible for the country's borders, the detection and eradication of threats to the state, and important areas of censorship, among other functions. The realm led by SNB Chief Rustam Inoyatov since 1995 was a state within the state. In a January 2018 speech, Mirziyoyev called the SNB "mad dogs," called out the "atrocities" they had committed against innocent people, and observed that "no other country has given so much power to these unscrupulous people in uniform."<sup>41</sup> Mirziyoyev dismissed Inoyatov, but it was widely reported in Tashkent that Moscow had intervened on Inoyatov's behalf. As a result, Inoyatov was not prosecuted, and instead made a personal "advisor" to the President, a post from which he was relieved in 2021. In a private meeting in Washington D.C. shortly after this event, a senior Uzbek official informed his counterparts that President Mirziyoyev had challenged the security services "at the risk of his own life."<sup>42</sup> This claim is backed up by the fact that Mirziyoyev had abstained from using government-owned aircraft during his trips abroad during 2017, instead opting to charter private aircraft. It had been reported that the SNB had sabotaged aircraft as a warning to Mirziyoyev against reforms he undertook that undermined the economic interests of the SNB.<sup>43</sup>

The case of Kazakhstan's security services may be more complicated. The Kazakh KNB never developed as strong a figure as Inoyatov in Uzbekistan, and did not quite have the predatory role in the country's business life and society as the SNB. However, the developments in January 2022 suggest that the Kazakh KNB, or parts of it, were implicated in the effort to overthrow

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<sup>41</sup> "President Says Time's Up For 'Mad Dog' Uzbek Security Service," *RFE/RL*, February 19, 2018. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-president-takes-on-mad-dog-security-service/29048969.html>)

<sup>42</sup> Personal communication to author, Washington, D.C., March 2018.

<sup>43</sup> "Uzbek president leases Russian tycoon Alisher Usmanov's private jet," *BNE Intellinews*, October 16, 2017. (<https://www.intellinews.com/index.php/uzbek-president-leases-russian-tycoon-alisher-usmanov-s-private-jet-130734/>)

President Tokayev. Tokayev's moves after the events, and particularly his dismissal and arrest of the key leadership in the security services, at the very least indicates a severe elite conflict implicating the security services. Where the example of Kazakhstan breaks the mold is in the role of Moscow: the fact that Tokayev appealed for Russian support to stabilize the country would tend to suggest that the KNB was not acting in coordination with Moscow. Still, following the example of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan is now embarking on a process of reform of the security services.

The security services may currently be most problematic in the smaller states of Central Asia. As already mentioned above in the section on Russian interference, the security services of Kyrgyzstan were a key target for Moscow when it orchestrated the downfall of the Bakiyev government in 2010. Moscow's key demand was that the top brass of Kyrgyzstan's security services be replaced with Moscow's appointees. Moscow also recruited a cadre of young Kyrgyz to come to Moscow to study at the FSB's training facility. Kyrgyz officials confirm that this transformation of Kyrgyzstan's security services did take place. Notably, Moscow showed no similar concern for any other office of the government in Bishkek, suggesting that having a strong hand in Kyrgyzstan's security services was a top priority in Moscow.

Similarly, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that the security services in Turkmenistan are the most decisive advocate of maintaining the status quo in the country, rejecting efforts by other state bodies to institute moderate change.<sup>44</sup> The role of Tajikistan's security services, meanwhile, was central in the escalation of violence in Gorno-Badakhshan. In sum, the role of security services as a break on reform and a direct source of instability should be taken into account in any analysis of conflict risks in Central Asia.

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<sup>44</sup> Personal communication, Turkmen high official, 2017.



## **Disparity between States**

Central Asia has always been divided into two larger and three smaller states. However, recently this disparity has been growing in both economic and political terms. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have developed stronger institutions of statehood, capable diplomatic services that help their countries navigate their fraught neighborhood, and most importantly, taken the lead in opting for political and economic reform as well as regional cooperation. The willingness of these two states to cooperate forms a bedrock of Central Asian stability going forward. And while both were affected by crises in 2022, they managed to contain the crises that confronted them through a combination of the deployment of the repressive apparatus of the state, and a willingness to make concessions to protesters. The three smaller states, by contrast, have not developed the institutional capacity of the larger two, find it more difficult to advance their interests on the international stage, and have largely been less eager to engage in meaningful reforms.

The three are, of course, very different. Kyrgyzstan has been the most open society in the region, but also the most unstable political system, experiencing three revolutions that thus far failed to bring stability and sustainable development to the country. Still, Kyrgyzstan has consistently been a supporter of regional cooperation. Tajikistan, by contrast, continues to reject even most basic reforms, and the rule of Emomali Rahmon has come to rely ever more on loyalists not just from his home region of Kulyab, but his native district of Dangara.<sup>45</sup> Along this concentration of power has come growing instability; violent incidents have not been occurring only in Gorno-Badakhshan, but featured violence between the government and former field commanders in the Rasht valley in 2010, and near Dushanbe in

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<sup>45</sup> Ankita Mishra, "Central Asia: Issues of Geo-Politics and Instability," New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation, August 2015, p. 26.

2015.<sup>46</sup> The country has also seen the rise Salaf-Jihadist groups, including the defection of a high-ranking Interior Ministry official to the Islamic State in 2015. As for Turkmenistan, it continues to remain slightly aloof from the rest of the region, though it has progressively become more involved in efforts to develop regional cooperation both in Central Asia and with its neighbors across the Caspian Sea. Yet the mercurial rule in the country as well as reports of food shortages have led to concern for its future stability both in the region and beyond.

The growing disparity among Central Asian states is a factor of instability, particularly if Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan continue to reform and the other states do not follow suit. The demonstration effect of change in the two larger states could further increase demands for change in the three smaller states, which leaders in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are likely to resist.

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<sup>46</sup> Erica Marat, "Post-Violence Regime Survival and Expansion in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 35 no. 4, 2016, pp. 531–48.

## **Centripetal Factors**

This study has detailed the factors driving instability in Central Asia, or in other terms the centrifugal factors affecting the region. However, on the other side of the ledger are the centripetal factors that counter such tendencies, enhancing stability and development.

These fall under two interrelated headings. The first is the domestic reform process currently underway in the region, while the second concerns the development of regional cooperation.

### **Domestic Reform**

For close to a decade, key states in Greater Central Asia have embarked on a process of gradual and evolutionary change to their political and economic systems. The start of this process can be tracked back to the economic downturn that followed the collapse of oil prices in 2014, exacerbated by the downturn of Russian-Western relations following Moscow's annexation of Crimea and first invasion of Ukraine. This economic downturn, with significant devaluation of currencies that undermined the population's purchasing power, led to a renegotiation of the social contract, as government were no longer able to deliver constantly rising living standards, in return for which they expected, to put it in perhaps oversimplified terms, a free hand in governance.

There are indications that the leadership in regional countries concluded that they could no longer engage in business as usual, and that it was necessary to answer the popular demand for change, while seeking to

maintain control of the political process to maintain stability and avoid upheavals. This process was particularly visible in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan.

In Kazakhstan, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev from 2019 through 2022 introduced a series of packages of reform, targeting the political system, the economy, and social reforms as well. To support the process, he established the National Council of Public Trust (NCPT), a presidential advisory board constituted of representatives of the public, of the government, and of civil society. Reforms made it easier to create political parties, strengthened the role of parliament, and expanded the direct election of local governors. Kazakhstan also partnered with international organizations to reduce corruption in all levels of government, including through a broad digitalization program. Reforms were introduced to modernize law enforcement and promote women's rights, and in the economic field, the government in particular has focused on the diversification of the economy, through targeted investments in supporting the development of agriculture and manufacturing. Following the January 2022 events, the government embarked on another wave of exclusively political reforms, focusing on nine priorities concerning the powers of the president, the representative branch of government, the electoral system, political parties, human rights institutions, decentralization of local government, and anti-crisis measures.

Uzbekistan's reforms kickstarted when President Mirziyoyev launched his electoral campaign in late 2016. Opening a direct communication line for popular petitions, the President short-circuited the system and obtained information about the government agencies citizens found most problematic. The President focused largely on accelerating the market transition and making Uzbekistan's economy more attractive to investors. But the reforms also sought to strengthen the role of parliament versus those of the President, and focused particularly on reforming the judicial system in the country. In 2022, Mirziyoyev announced plans to amend the

constitution of Uzbekistan to make it more compatible with demands of the times. While most western focus has been on the extension of the President's term limits, the amendments touch on a majority of articles in the constitutions, and provide a considerably larger social responsibility to the state for the well-being of citizens.

In Azerbaijan, the government launched the Azerbaijani Service and Assessment Network (ASAN) model of single-window, electronic provision of public services ranging from birth certificates and driving licenses to real estate documents in 2012, thus largely eliminating petty corruption in the provision of public services. From 2015 onward, President Aliyev went on the offensive, verbally speaking, against high-level corruption, and made more personnel changes in three years than in his previous thirteen in power. A New, western-trained generation of technocrats took over major ministries. With advice from Western consulting firms, the government adopted a new roadmap for reform and specifically targeted the notoriously corrupt taxation and customs sector for wholesale reform, introducing transparent electronic systems that "eliminate the middleman." In parallel, reform was introduced in the judicial system, and the government created industrial parks and special economic zones to attract investments.

These reform programs were not intended to liberalize political systems or develop democracy. Still, they constituted a step toward shifting the logic of state-society relations away from the Soviet model, where the state dominated society, to a modern one where the state's task is to provide services to society. In so doing, they play a significant role in strengthening the resilience of the political systems, strengthening the legitimacy of governing structures, and providing for solutions to problems within the system rather than outside the system.

## Regional Cooperation

While Central Asian states sought to develop structures of regional cooperation in the 1990s with a considerable degree of success, in the 2000s this endeavor was weakened by Russian-led efforts to subsume Central Asian cooperation under Russian-led processes of Eurasian integration. However, the arrival of President Mirziyoyev to power in Tashkent in 2016 gave impetus to the development of Central Asian cooperation. The Presidents of the five Central Asian states began meeting on a yearly basis and started to launch *ad hoc* instruments of cooperation. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been seeking to institutionalize this cooperation based on international examples like ASEAN and the Nordic Council.

Almost a decade into this new period of cooperation, Central Asian leaders are meeting more frequently than ever, and coordinating policy on various issues in a novel way. This newfound coordination and cooperation is based in part on a greater sense of confidence in their sovereignty and statehood, certainly in the case of the two leading states, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It is also a result of a greater sense of political and economic urgency. The above-mentioned economic downturn from 2015 onward has made it clear that Central Asian states need to diversify their economies, which in turn requires the dismantling of economic monopolies and barriers to trade that had existed as a result of the peculiar post-Soviet political economy, in which political access and influence remains central to economic success. On the political front, greater pressure from Russia and China made the prospect of regional cooperation a necessity to counter the tendency of great powers to adopt divide and rule policies toward the region.

This development of regional cooperation has significantly lowered the risk of conflict among regional states, while actively contributing to the mending of fences between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It also has begun to unleash some of the economic potential of the region, given the rapid increase in intra-regional trade, which is a key step toward raising standards of living

across the region, mitigating the effects of landlockedness as well as the economic uncertainty of the past several years.

In sum, the rise of reform and regional cooperation helps mitigate the drivers of instability in Central Asia, and makes it possible for regional leaders to overcome considerable challenges. But as discussed above, these processes are uneven, with the level of buy-in among regional states diverging considerably, and the risk of greater divergence across the region increasing as time goes by.

## **Conclusions: Centripetal versus Centrifugal Forces**

Central Asia has been relatively quiet since 2022, and there is much positive news emanating from the region. Indeed, the development of regional cooperation is an important centripetal tendency that mitigates the risk of instability. Greater coordination among Central Asian states has helped resolve the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and this coordination also lessens the ability of outside actors to sow discord among Central Asian states. It also has led to a considerable boost in trade between Central Asian states, thus mitigating the negative economic developments of the past decade.

That said, renewed unrest in Central Asia continues to be a risk that must be reckoned with. Internally to the region, social and economic changes contribute to produce a more restive population. The relative political apathy of the last Soviet generation is being gradually replaced by a more active, more nationalist emerging generation. In combination with technological change, this means Central Asian governments can no longer count on passivity of their population. Some governments are reacting to this shift by enacting reforms; others are doubling down on centralized control and reliance on security services. Both strategies are risky: lack of reform may lead to greater public frustration; while political change could itself provide opportunities for various forces to challenge the status quo. In the long term, however, political and economic change is difficult to avoid in the absence of a heavy reliance on repression, which itself might become unsustainable.



External factors exacerbate the situation. An assertive China, an aggressive Russia, a chaotic Afghanistan and a retreating America summarize the geopolitical reality of Central Asia. In the short term, the danger of Russia's "active measures" or hybrid warfare being deployed in Central Asia is very real. Such measures, designed to maintain Russian influence and prevent a more integrated Central Asia from speaking with one voice, could once again play a role in igniting tensions internal to the region.

While the dangers facing the region are real, so are also the countervailing factors. Central Asian states have, three decades after independence, largely become real and functional states. The ability of these states to withstand internal or external shocks is considerably greater than in the past. Even more promising is the new spirit of regional cooperation on display in Central Asia in the past several years. If this process continues, growing solidarity among Central Asian states will play an important role in shifting the balance in favor of centripetal forces working for stability and reform, and away from the centrifugal forces of instability and violence.

## Authors Bio

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