

Riots in southern Kyrgyzstan. The international aspect

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The riots in the Osh and Jalalabad regions of Kyrgyzstan, which have been ongoing since 10 June, have shown that the interim government does not control the south of the country, and is unable to stabilise the situation on its own. At the present time, the only way to calm the situation seems to be Russian military intervention; the interim government has made an official request to Moscow to that effect. Without the positive participation of Russia, it is also hard to imagine how a long-term plan for stabilisation, of the kind needed to ensure that the current state of affairs is not repeated in the future, could be prepared and implemented.

As it appears, Russia would be ready to intervene in Kyrgyzstan; the delay in taking this decision results from a desire to strengthen its position, and the need to agree upon a formula for the intervention. Much indicates that this could take place under the banner of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). By stabilising the situation in the south of Kyrgyzstan, Moscow would have a chance to expand its influence in Central Asia and strengthen its position with regard to the other global players in this region, especially the USA; among other things, Washington would thus be obliged to accept Russia's conditions for using the Manas base near Bishkek. It should be assumed that a Russian intervention would meet with the acceptance of world opinion.

What has happened?

Since 10 June riots have been taking place in southern Kyrgyzstan (in the towns of Osh and Jalalabad and their surroundings), as a result of which 179 people have died so far, according to official data (although unofficial estimates speak of several hundreds, and even as many as two thousand dead).

Organised groups of tens or hundreds of people of Kyrgyz nationality, armed with machine guns and grenades (acquired during raids on military units), have been attacking the Uzbek community. Up to 1 million Uzbeks, who make up between 15 and 20% of the country's population, live in Kyrgyzstan. According to estimates from the Red Cross, around 80,000 Kyrgyz Uzbeks have escaped to neighbouring Uzbekistan. Shops and bazaars are also being robbed and set fire to. Despite signs that the peak of this wave of attacks has passed, the situation in Jalalabad and Osh regions is still tense, and exchanges of gunfire and looting are still going on. The current riots are the latest in a series of such clashes which started in southern Kyrgyzstan after the overthrow on 7 April of President Kurmanbek Bakiev. The scale of the current clashes, however, is unprecedented.

The interim government has proved helpless in the face of the riots, and the *ad hoc* actions it has taken (announcing a state of emergency in the conflict region; sending significant amounts of armed forces and special forces there; simplifying procedures for the militia to use their weapons, and partially mobilising reservists) have proved to be ineffective, among other reasons because the institutions of force are suffering from low morale. This testifies to a very deep erosion of the state institutions, and a probable breakdown of the state.

The riots' causes, background and results

It is hard at the moment to state unambiguously what caused the riots and who their instigator might be. The southern part of Kyrgyzstan clearly differs from the north in social and cultural terms, a fact which in the past was the source of much internal tension (among other things, the overthrown President Bakiev came from the south and had most supporters there). The interim government has accused Bakiev's circle, including his son Maksim (who was arrested on 14 June in Great Britain at the interim government's request) as well as organised criminal groups linked to him, of provoking and financing the clashes. Deputy premier Almazbek Atambayev expressed fear that a similar scenario of destabilisation could be repeated in the north of the country as well. The scale of the internal disturbances is so great that, considering the central government's weakness, a *de facto* disintegration of the territory of Kyrgyzstan cannot be ruled out.

Animosity between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks has existed in southern Kyrgyzstan for two decades, and one of the sources of conflict is the division of the Fergana Valley. The current state borders are the former borders of the Soviet republics, which were devised on the principle of 'divide and rule'. They cross ethnic boundaries, traditional paths of communication, and sources of water supplies. Although the latest incidents do in fact bear the hallmarks of provocations, the underlying causes of the disturbances have existed for many years, and the overthrow of President Bakiev has proved to be their catalyst.

The perspective of Russian intervention

Confronted with the impossibility of stabilising the situation alone, Roza Otunbayeva, the acting president of Kyrgyzstan, appealed to Russia on 12 June to introduce mediatory forces into the conflict region, although Moscow (as the press spokeswoman of the Russian president had stated) initially ruled out becoming involved in the conflict. Despite this, a battalion of airborne troops was sent to the Russian air force base at Kant near Bishkek, with the official task of strengthening the base's defence. On 14 June an emergency session was held in Moscow for the secretaries of the security councils of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)'s member states. The Organisation statements amounted to promising Bishkek logistical, military and technical assistance (with the exception of arms shipment), although the Russian president's declarations after this meeting may be a sign that preparations for intervention were being made.

Russia and the CSTO (which it dominates) have taken a position of distancing themselves from the crisis. This seems to result from a desire to avoid any accusations of interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state, and to emphasise Moscow's role as only the

power which could potentially conduct an effective intervention. The Kremlin may also expect international support for such an intervention to grow, especially in the case of an escalation in (or at least a maintenance of) the current level of tension. The intervention would then take place not only at the request of interim government in Bishkek, but also with the agreement of world opinion and the acceptance of the neighbouring states (support for such intervention by China seems to be of crucial importance) and the USA. It would most probably be carried out under the banner of the CSTO, which would strengthen the mandate of the stabilisation forces. The intervention may also be delayed by the worsening relations between the interim government and the CSTO - its secretary Nikolai Bordyuzha suggested that Bishkek appoint the Kyrgyz KGB general Miroslav Niyazov for talks with the Organisation; the interim government sees the latter as a possible competitor for power.

The crisis's regional consequences

The possible expansion of the disturbances into the whole of the Fergana Valley threatens the three states among which it is divided with destabilisation; Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan is currently experiencing a very disturbing situation; several tens of thousands of Uzbek refugees have arrived there, a fact which could pose a serious threat to the stability of the authoritarian political system in that country (for example, if uncontrolled riots in defence of Kyrgyz Uzbeks take place). If attacks on the Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan continue, a more decisive reaction from Uzbekistan cannot be ruled out, including military intervention.

The Uzbek refugees often have nothing to live on and nothing to return to (the Uzbek districts in Osh and Jalalabad have been totally or partially burned down and looted). The real threat of a humanitarian disaster is growing with every passing day. This also threatens the south of Kyrgyzstan, which has been devastated as a result of the latest clashes; in this area the lacks of electricity, gas and especially food, which could cause famine, are an increasingly acute problem.

The slow reaction to these events from Kazakhstan, which this year is holding the chairmanship of the OSCE and aspires to the role of regional leader, confirms its lack of readiness to meet these obligations. Astana's only declaration has been to send the vice-chairman of the lower house of parliament, Zhanybek Karibzhanov, to Kyrgyzstan.

Consequences of the crisis for the US and the operations in Afghanistan

The events in Kyrgyzstan are a very serious problem for the USA. Supplies for the ISAF and OEF missions are delivered via the Transit Centre (base) in Manas near Bishkek, and also some tens of thousands of soldiers en route to and from Afghanistan pass through it every month. If the destabilisation of situation in Kyrgyzstan continues, it is unlikely that the base could function without being affected, which would significantly hinder NATO (including EU states) from conducting operations in Afghanistan.

Russia permits the American military presence on the territory of the former USSR, but only with its agreement and on its terms. Currently, by postponing an intervention, Moscow probably hopes to win a stronger bargaining position in future talks about the base with

Washington; in the light of the ongoing destabilisation in Kyrgyzstan, the US may prove to be more amenable to Russian suggestions. Russia, which is seen as the only state able to stabilise the situation in Kyrgyzstan, may prove to be essential to the West's conducting its operations in Afghanistan.

Summary

It seems that if the instability in southern Kyrgyzstan continues, in face of the helplessness of the interim government, only Russian intervention would allow a further escalation of violence, and a consequent humanitarian disaster, to be avoided. The United States, which is also potentially capable of such an intervention, cannot do so for political reasons (such as the threat of conflict with Russia; the reluctance of American public opinion for overseas military operations; a probable lack of agreement from Kyrgyzstan's interim government). It is also hard to imagine that China would intervene.

Thus, for the first time, Russia is facing international expectations that it will play a stabilising role in its zone of interest. How Russia copes with this challenge may decide its position in post-Soviet Central Asia - and in a wider context, its relations with NATO, USA and China.

