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THE APRIL 2021 KYRGYZ-TAJIK BORDER DISPUTE: HISTORICAL AND CAUSAL CONTEXT

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In late April, 2021, deadly cross-border violence resulted in the deaths of 36 Kyrgyz and 19 Tajik citizens.[1] To say that the Kyrgyz-Tajik border is complicated would be an understatement. The Soviet collapse in 1991 transformed internal and often overlooked administrative boundaries into suddenly salient and internationally recognized state borders. Villages, farmland, pasture, and infrastructure once shared with little afterthought during the Soviet period today straddle sovereign nations. Exclaves make cross-border travel, commerce, and politics even more complicated. Three Uzbek and two Tajik exclaves are within Kyrgyzstan and some of the worst violence during the April 2021 conflict occurred along the road that leads to the Tajik exclave, Vorukh.

Although the Tajik-Kyrgyz border has seen past episodes of conflict, the April 2021 violence is unusual both in its scale and in the protracted hostility that continued in the weeks following the violence. Cross-border trade ground to a halt as Tajik and Kyrgyz-licensed trucks were denied return to their respective home countries.[2] Tajik air passengers were turned back at Kyrgyzstan's Manas international airport.[3] And local Tajik authorities intimidated ethnic Kyrgyz living in Tajikistan, warning them that holding dual passports was illegal and that a choice had to be made "between the two citizenships."[4]

Although the scale and the aftereffects of the April violence is now clear, the drivers of this deadly conflict remain difficult to disentangle. In part the violence was the result of water scarcity and the often-intractable challenges that come with attempts to manage

common-pool resources. The challenge of managing common pool resources was and remains, moreover, complicated by the muddled borders Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan inherited from the Soviet collapse. Stakes surrounding the control of these borders are further accentuated by the rent opportunities that come with controlling trade, particularly illicit trade, across the Kyrgyz-Tajik frontier. And lastly, the Tajik and Kyrgyz leaders' nationalist rhetoric serves to transform what otherwise might be treated as technocratic border disputes into seemingly existential crises of national identity. If future conflicts are to be avoided, greater attention must be devoted to understanding how common-pool resource management, murky borders, illicit trade, and nationalist rhetoric interact to produce episodic violence along the Tajik-Kyrgyz border.

COMMON-POOL RESOURCES

Common-pool resources (CPRs), even when they reside fully within a single state, are difficult to regulate. The political scientist Elinor Ostrom documented the challenges communities face in equitably sharing CPRs when there is an absence of shared norms, clear understandings of the benefits of regulation, and the ready ability to monitor the use and potential abuse of resources.[5] The CPR that at the center of the April 2021 conflict—water–straddles two populations that, regrettably, lack shared norms with regards to water usage, lack a common vision about the benefits of regulation, and most problematically, lack a single entity that can monitor the use and abuse of water consumption.

The April 2021 violence began because of both Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's competing claims to the Golovnoi water intake facility, a sluice that regulates water flow from the Ak Suu (Kyrgyz) / Isfara (Tajik) river to downstream Tajik and Kyrgyz communities. This was not the first time disputes over Golovnoi produced violence. Kyrgyz road construction near the sluice sparked an exchange of gunfire between Tajik and Kyrgyz border guards in 2014.[6] Following the 2014 skirmish the two sides, along with international partners, attempted to build a shared Kyrgyz-Tajik water monitoring regime.[7] This inchoate regime has yet to take hold and control of the Soviet-built Golovnoi facility as well as the apportionment of water flowing from this facility remains hotly contested.[8]

The Tajik government has accused Kyrgyzstan of unilaterally seeking to take possession of the critical water infrastructure.[9] The Kyrgyz government, in turn, blames Tajikistan for sparking the April 2021 violence by installing surveillance cameras on electric poles within Kyrgyz territory to monitor the Golovnoi facility.[10] Unless the cross-border

communities dependent on the Ak Suu / Isfara river can develop shared norms, a common vision, and a shared monitoring mechanism, the Golovnoi facility and disputes over water broadly will continue to spark conflict in the region.

UNCLEAR BORDERS

The high number of casualties of the Golovnoi conflict relative to other cross-border conflicts is likely the result of the nature of the infrastructure and resources in dispute. That said, Golovnoi shares with other, less violent Kyrgyz-Tajik conflicts the underlying driver of unclear borders. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan share a 976 km-long border, of which 472 km have yet to be mutually recognized by both states. During the late Soviet period the fuzziness of these then internal borders rarely resulted in bloodshed. The Communist Party centrally-planned and centrally-controlled the many infrastructure projects that crisscrossed Eurasia and, where necessary, resolved disputes that arose between constituent republics.

This indeterminacy of Central Asian borders, critically, was not a careless oversight. Conflicts that arose as a result of fuzzy borders advanced Moscow's objective of establishing the central government, not Central Asian elites, as the ultimate arbiter and authority.[11] Muddled borders inherited in 1991, once helpful for solidifying Soviet sovereignty, now are unwelcome reminders for the Tajik and Kyrgyz regimes that neither are fully able to perform the role of the state, that neither are fully able to assert sovereignty and project uncontested power over state territory.

Why, though, is conflict along these borders sporadic rather than constant? Here a border spat one month following the April Golovnoi violence provides insight. In early June 2021 Tajikistan placed a container on disputed territory between Kyrgyzstan's Chong-Alay and Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakshan regions. In response to the Kyrgyz government's protests, the container was moved back to undisputed Tajik territory, the security ministers of both countries met, and both governments agreed to a draw-down of troops along the border.[12]

Such negotiated agreements to abide unclear and uncontrolled borders is not unique to Central Asia. Jeffrey Herbst documents similar arrangements among countries in sub-Saharan Africa.[13] Here, as in the Central Asian case, newly independent states inherited rather than fought to defend state borders. Deals among and between colonial powers, deals made to procure riches and avoid war, shaped many of the African state boundaries we see today. And African states, many of which struggle to exert control

over their own populations, are often more inclined to negotiation rather than armed confrontation to resolve persisting cross-border disputes.[14]

Central governments in Dushanbe and Bishkek, much like their African counterparts, are distant from the passions that spark conflict among largely agrarian populations living along interstate borders. The Tajik and Kyrgyz governments have little appetite and few resources to fight pitched battles over grazing and agricultural lands along their states' poorly demarcated borders. Yes, central governments may initially respond with bluster and bravado when their citizens in the borderlands are perceived to be under threat. In the long run, though, the Kyrgyz and Tajik regimes perpetuate the status-quo, this negotiated understanding to continue living with unclear borders, rather than risk the cost of going to war to resolve episodic border conflict.

RENT-SEEKING AND ILLICIT TRADE

Tajikistan, in contrast to Kyrgyzstan, has yet to join the Eurasian Economic Union, a common market that includes Armenia, Belarus, and, most critically, oil-rich Russia and Kazakhstan. Tajikistan's position outside the Eurasian Economic Union has hardened what was already a long-standing disparity in the pricing of one critical commodity—fuel. Tajik drivers pay on average 40 percent more for gasoline than do their Kyrgyz counterparts.[15] This disparity in gas prices has given rise to an extensive contraband economy. Contraband Kyrgyz fuel is thought to make up 30 percent of Tajikistan's total gas supply.[16]

Fuel is not the only commodity that is enriching Tajik and Kyrgyz criminal networks. Illicit drugs from Afghanistan transit Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan en route to Russia and European markets. Narcotics trade flows are even more opaque than cross-border fuel smuggling. That said, we know that the narcotics trade can inflame conflict at the border. In 2012, for example, militants loyal to a local Tajik warlord, Tolib Ayombekov, clashed with state border guards. The clash had its origins in Ayombekov and the Tajik state's competing efforts to capture the rents that come from controlling the narcotics trade that passes through the Ishkashim border post with Afghanistan.[17]

There is little evidence to suggest that contraband, either fuel or narcotics, was a direct contributor to the Golovnoi violence. Importantly though, given that the Tajik-Kyrgyz border is awash with rents that stem from the control of illicit trade, the Tajik and Kyrgyz leaders have strong incentives to undermine rather than professionalize state institutions like the border guards. It is not the strength but, rather, the "weakness of government

agencies" that paradoxically empowers autocrats to benefit from illicit trade.[18] Problematically, as William Reno notes of cases of illicit cross-border in Africa, weakening state agencies so as to facilitate corruption concomitantly produces environments where armed conflicts are frequent.[19]

NATIONALISM

Borders and border conflict—real and manufactured—are ideal backdrops for nationalist politicians. In 2015 candidate Donald Trump launched his successful presidential campaign with the imagery of Mexico sending drug runners and rapists across the border. Nationalist leaders in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, like their American counterpart, have similarly found that accentuating presidential responses to border conflicts is politically expedient. Kyrgyz President Japarov promised families who lost relatives in the April violence $11,700 in government assistance.[20] This presidential beneficence, while it can never replace the loss of a loved one, does burnish Japarov's carefully cultivated image as protector of the nation. President Rahmon has similarly sought capitalize on this period of heightened hostility. He has assured Tajik citizens living in the exclave, Vorukh, that there is "no possibility" Dushanbe would cede this territory to Kyrgyzstan.[21]

Fortunately for now, both presidents appear to prefer bluster to bullets. Rahmon and Japarov, while they did little to silence nationalist rhetoric in their countries' respective media outlets, assured one-another by phone that they would each pull troops back from the area of conflict and that state delegations would continue to meet to discuss border delimitation. Achieving concrete advances on this delimitation will be difficult given the nationalist stances both leaders have taken. And the continued indeterminacy of the border, moreover, works to both leaders' advantage. Periodic yet short-lived border unrest, be it migrants amassing along the US southern border or sporadic violence between Tajik and Kyrgyz villagers, provides nationalist presidents regional and, indeed, world stages on which they can play out the role of state defender.

COMPLEX CONFLICT

Parsimony, not complexity, is what analysts and social scientists typically seek in their analysis. The origins of violent conflict rarely though are monocausal. The April 28-29 deadly violence along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border shares much in common with other deadly

conflicts that have occurred along Central Asia state frontiers. These conflicts cannot be distilled into disputes over resources. Nor can they be explained away by invoking the region's murky borders, the cartological the legacy of a collapsed empire. That one country is a member of an economic union and the other is not, yes, may imbue these murky borders with new meaning and new rent-seeking opportunities. And yes, both President Rahmon and President Japarov's nationalist rhetoric engenders an environment that is permissive of cross-border violence. Ultimately, though, nationalist rhetoric, murky state boundaries, ilicit economies, and disputes over common pool resources are constants yet cross-border conflict is sporadic.

Ultimately the proximate driver, the proverbial spark that ignites any one bout of deadly violence, is idiosyncratic and varies from case to case. Strategies designed to mitigate cross-border conflict will not succeed if they chase these proximate sparks at the expense of deeper, though not always immediately causal variables of violence. Challenges of resource management, indeterminate state boundaries, illicit trade, and increasingly nationalist discourse are shared preconditions that make Tajik-Kyrgyz cross-border violence more likely. Addressing these preconditions as well as the complex interactions among these preconditions holds the potential to limit the sparks of cross border conflict from turning into conflagrations of cross-border violence.

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