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## Addressing instability in Kyrgyzstan

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be found, and all the countries involved need to work on and contribute to new solutions. The creation of an SCO fund should be further explored. By consolidating the SCO's role to attract international financial institutions and strengthening commercial banks, a regional system to finance development could be established.

Li Xin says that although the SCO countries have been severely affected by the financial crisis, the lessons learned from it have created the potential for closer regional financial cooperation. To break dependence on Western financing, companies from SCO member countries should be listed on the Chinese financial market (Russia has already begun listing companies on the Hong Kong market). Through the implementation of bilateral agreements, Moscow and Shanghai could become international financial centres. Li suggests exploring possibilities for financial cooperation in the energy sector, where China, as a capital-rich country with large energy needs, can benefit from working with the other member states of the SCO that need Chinese investment. To build multilateral financial cooperation, SCO countries should coordinate the monetary policies of their central banks and establish a regional platform for exchanging financial information. They need to set up monitoring systems and create support structures to deal with any future financial crisis. The successful creation of a regional financial system, remote as it may seem, could eventually be the decisive factor in achieving regional stability and international recognition.

#### 4. Addressing instability in Kyrgyzstan

**Martina Bassan**

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When the riots that led to the fall of President Bakiyev and his government broke out in Kyrgyzstan in April 2010, the international community woke up to the country's political instability. Kyrgyzstan had experienced a "colour revolution"<sup>25</sup> in 2005, but the change neither stabilised the country nor satisfactorily resolved its internal conflicts. Most Chinese analysts think the "Kyrgyz revolution" of 2010 was brought about by internal factors, such as inequality and social fragmentation, economic stagnation and poverty, corruption and ethnic conflict, but agree that external factors were also involved. Kyrgyzstan is not one of the main players in the region, either in terms of size and demography or natural and energy resources. However, its central geographic position places it at the intersection of the geopolitical interests of the great powers. Kyrgyzstan is the only country that has both American and Russian military bases on its soil. Chinese analysts are

21 Jia Lihong (贾丽红) is a doctoral student in international politics at the Institute for International Relations at the People's University of China (Renmin University) in Beijing. Her research focuses on relations with Central Asia and the United States.

22 Lu Gang (陆钢) is a journalist at *Lianhe Zaobao Wang*.

23 Pan Guang (潘光) is Director of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Studies Centre and the Shanghai Centre for International Studies and Institute of European and Asian Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, as well as President of the Centre of Jewish Studies Shanghai (CJSS), and Vice-President of the Chinese Society of Middle East Studies.

24 Zhao Huirong (赵会荣) is a researcher at the Research Institute on Central Asia, Eastern Europe and Russia at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

25 The "colour revolutions" is the name given to the non-violent anti-government protest movements that developed in the post-communist societies of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The coup that overthrew Kyrgyzstan's President Askar Akayev and his government on 24 March 2005 following the elections of 27 February and 13 March is referred to as the "tulip revolution".

mostly concerned with the international dimension of the country's current situation, and what it means for China in terms of its strategic interests in Kyrgyzstan, its national security, and its position as a member state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Kyrgyzstan was ruled by China from the Han period until the end of the Qing dynasty. Because of its geographic location, it has always been of great strategic importance for China. Jia Lihong says this small Central Asian country is important to China in terms of traditional security, as a strategic entry point to Xinjiang: "For China, Kyrgyzstan's security corresponds to Xinjiang's own – a threat for Kyrgyzstan is also a threat for Xinjiang (...) and for this reason, China must defend this country against any attempt by another country to occupy or subjugate it." As regards non-traditional security, Kyrgyzstan is crucial to China's fight against terrorism, secessionism, and religious extremism,<sup>26</sup> especially in relation to the separatist movements in southern Xinjiang. These separatists aim to obtain the separation of Xinjiang from China and establish what they call "the Republic of Eastern Turkestan" (东突厥斯坦, *dong tujuesitan*). Jia says the separatist movement in Xinjiang has carried out several terrorist actions and that they are supported by "encouragement and external aid" from Russia and some Western countries. Kyrgyzstan is also important to China in its efforts to diversify energy supplies to ensure energy security. China's main suppliers of oil in Africa and the Middle East are politically unstable, and its supply route through the Straits of Malacca is also problematic. Central Asia is beginning to be seen as the "new storehouse" of energy resources for the twenty-first century. Although Kyrgyzstan has itself only limited oil reserves, it is important to China as a port of entry for oil from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

So how should China respond to the internal crisis in Kyrgyzstan and the growing influence of Russia and the US in the region? Because of the situation in Xinjiang as well as China's strategic interests in Kyrgyzstan, Lu Gang says "China cannot simply stand by and do nothing". Pan Guang thinks China must support stability and development in Kyrgyzstan so as to support regional stability and encourage good relations between Kyrgyzstan and China. At the same time, China must be aware that the US and Russian military bases in the country give those countries a degree of influence over Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs.

China's position as a member of the SCO complicates its relationship with Kyrgyzstan – as an SCO member, China cannot act unilaterally in Kyrgyzstan but must instead act through the organisation. If the SCO were to intervene in Kyrgyzstan on its own initiative, Beijing would most likely support it. China respects the principle of non-interference, but, Lu says, "principles must be understood in the context

26 Religious extremism (宗教极端主义, *zongjiao jiduan zhuyi*), international terrorism (国际恐怖主义, *guoji kongbu zhuyi*) and separatism (民族分裂主义, *minzu fenlie zhuyi*) are more generally known as the "three evils" (三股势力 *san gu shili*).

of reality". Lu thinks that if the SCO refuses to act because of its principles, its prestige in the region will be affected, and outside parties might step in to take action instead.

Zhao Huirong thinks the SCO needs to find new ways to combat terrorism, secessionism, and fundamentalism in Kyrgyzstan, and should concentrate in particular on the activities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the influence of Hizb ut-Tahrir in southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>27</sup> If the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates as US and NATO forces withdraw, extremist religious groups in Central Asia could strengthen relations with terrorist groups in Afghanistan, so the SCO must act to prevent future terrorist threats. Politically, the SCO should enhance cooperation among its member countries, promote mutual confidence, and safeguard the security and stability of the member countries. And since Kyrgyzstan needs the financial support of the SCO to ensure stability and development, the SCO must come up with an appropriate aid scheme for the country.

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Pan Guang says any intervention by the SCO in Kyrgyzstan must necessarily be limited. Since a military alliance is out of the question, if the situation in Kyrgyzstan deteriorates, only the United Nations as the representative of the international community can intervene. But Pan interprets the April 2010 "Joint Declaration on Cooperation by the Secretariats of the UN and the SCO" to mean that any action by the UN in Central Asia must be approved by the SCO. As a member of the SCO, China has a privileged position in Central Asia, and it has to be ready to assert it. It cannot allow other powers like Russia and the US to exert too much influence in such a strategically important region.

Jia and Zhao think Russian and US interference in Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs has been a crucial factor in the development of the country's internal crisis. Pan acknowledges that there is no proof that Russia was involved in any conspiracy to bring about the 2010 coup. But he says that Russia's support for the Kyrgyz opposition had the clear goal of overthrowing the president. And just before the fall of the Bakayev government, the USA was in frequent contact with Roza Otunbayeva, the opposition leader who became president of the Kyrgyz Provisional Government in April 2010. China needs to take Russian and US involvement into account in coming up with a political strategy that can best help it to defend its interests and borders.

27 A Muslim group set up in Amman, Jordan, in 1953, the Hizb ut-Tahrir was the product of a split in the Muslim Brotherhood. The movement is active today in over 70 countries and has several million followers and sympathisers throughout the world. It is especially active in Central Asia, where it is subject to severe repression by the authorities, for example in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia and the US have been competing for influence in Central Asia. So Chinese analysts think it is interesting that in Kyrgyzstan, they have been “keen to collaborate and coordinate their actions” – Zhang sees a “mutual sympathy” (相互示好期, *xianghu shi hao qi*) and Jia Lihong notes a “common Russian-American management style” (美俄共治, *mei-e gongzhi*). The writers conclude that both countries want to prevent any political instability that could threaten their interests and their military bases. Zhao notes that “from the outbreak of violence in the country, the main concern of the US and NATO has been to secure the Manas Air Base”.<sup>28</sup> He points to the fact that the US has contacted the interim government on several occasions to make sure the base will continue to be available for NATO’s use in the conflict in Afghanistan. Zhao adds that the US hopes to strengthen its military presence in the country to help it contain the regional influence of Russia and China and to reinforce its position in dealings with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Zhao thinks “there might be new foundation for the old idea that the US would like to move its troops from Afghanistan to the Fergana Valley and turn it into an axis for controlling Central Asia”. Jia says that the US fight against terrorism and the Afghan Taliban is only a pretext for the US presence in Kyrgyzstan: “American troops have already left other countries in Central Asia, while Kyrgyzstan, which does not have a common border with Afghanistan and which has enormous strategic importance for China, is the only country where they are still present.” He thinks the real intention is to “stand up to China”. But China is not the only country that objects to the US presence. Since 2001, the Kyrgyz and Russian governments have both tried but failed to persuade the US to close Manas. Russia too has own strategic ambitions in the area. Jia thinks the Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan is also focused on China. But Zhao thinks the base is there to help Russia retain a monopoly on influence over the former Soviet space and to limit the capacity of the US and NATO to act in the region.

Both the US and Russia have supplied humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan, but they have refused military assistance to suppress the unrest. Zhao and Pan agree that the two countries are reluctant to get too involved in Kyrgyz internal affairs. The US and Russia want to avoid any confrontation that could disrupt their current amicable relations, and neither wants to get drawn into a complicated conflict that could prove difficult to disengage from. So they prefer to accept the current state of affairs in which each protects its interests by maintaining its own military base. If the US and Russia were to increase their military presence, it could destabilise the situation in Kyrgyzstan still further, which would have consequences for the neighbouring countries –

including China. Jia concludes: “It can be safely said that the enormous influence of the US and Russia in Kyrgyzstan represents an extremely serious threat for the security of Chinese Xinjiang.”

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<sup>28</sup> The Transit Centre at Manas, previously Manas Air Base, is a US military base located at Kyrgyzstan’s main airport, Manas International Airport, 25 km from the capital, Bishkek. Opened in 2001, it is used as a base for the war in Afghanistan. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has been urging Bishkek to close the base since 2005. Since the closure in 2005 of a base in neighbouring Uzbekistan, Manas is the last remaining US base in Central Asia.