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OPINION Contributor

Stopping ethnic cleansing in Kyrgyzstan

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The low geopolitical importance of Kyrgyzstan to Russia and the United States should also make cooperation in the troubled Central Asian nation easier.

On June 12, the leader of a sovereign state in Russia’s periphery reportedly requested that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and the U.S. government send troops to its territory to restore order. Both – for the time being – have refused.

Russia was eager to intervene back in August of 2008 when it fought a war against Georgia over two breakaway republics, under the pretext of humanitarianism. Likewise, the United States and NATO intervened in Serbia under the rationale of preventing ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

Why did the two governments refuse to intervene in Kyrgyzstan even though it is experiencing a major humanitarian crisis? The short answer is that the geopolitical importance of Kyrgyzstan to Russia and the United States is much lower than in the previous cases of military intervention. Yet the low stakes should also make cooperation in the troubled Central Asian nation easier.

Since the April 7 overthrow of the Kyrgyz regime, the new government has been unable to provide security throughout most of the country. As a result, for the past two months, local clashes have broken out in several regions, sometimes along ethnic lines. Beginning June 11, deadly attacks perpetrated by ethnic Kyrgyz on minority Uzbeks broke out and violence spread throughout the country’s southern half in a matter of hours. According to the latest official reports, several hundred have been killed, thousands have been wounded and 400,000 have fled toward neighboring Uzbekistan.

The United States and Russia both perceive limited strategic interests in Kyrgyzstan. Since 2001, the U.S. has maintained an airbase there, primarily providing logistical support for operations in Afghanistan. Russia also has a military base as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a regional security body of former Soviet states. Both powers have thus far turned down the Kyrgyz government’s request to intervene. Russia has stated it will only send troops if the CSTO agrees to such an action. Contrast this with the rapid Russian intervention in the Georgian crisis.

What is different this time around? Besides safeguarding their military bases, the two powers perceive little at stake in Kyrgyzstan. The country is impoverished, possesses no oil or gas and has no known al-Qaeda presence. Unlike Georgia, Kyrgyzstan has never been under consideration for NATO membership and is therefore not at risk of exiting Russia’s “sphere of influence.”

Kyrgyzstan’s low geopolitical value has left it in the lurch. The U.S. and Russia have proved willing to intervene – even when uninvited – for “humanitarian” purposes if there is a strategic interest involved. This has been illustrated by the military interventions in Serbia and Georgia. However, a clear-cut case of ethnic cleansing occurring under the nose of 1,000 American troops can easily be ignored.

If two of the world’s greatest powers are unwilling to intervene, other states may take matters into their own hands, to the detriment of all. Thus far, the government of Uzbekistan has not threatened any military action to protect its co-ethnics, despite having the most powerful military in the region. Uzbekistan has always prioritized internal stability above all else. Its lack of initiative should not be surprising – countries



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do not always act to protect their co-ethnics.

However, as residents of Uzbekistan witness the incoming throngs of beleaguered fellow Uzbeks and hear their stories, they are likely to put pressure on their government to rescue those (primarily men) who stayed behind. The Uzbek government may then have to choose between suppressing its own people and invading its neighbor.

Kyrgyzstan’s only hope lies in a peacekeeping force from outside the region that can stop the violence and protect vulnerable populations. Fortunately, U.S.-Russian relations have been “reset” since Barack Obama became the U.S. president and mistrust has been replaced by engagement on a number of issues. Given that Kyrgyzstan is not a geopolitical flashpoint and both powers have an interest in preventing an escalation of the conflict, the two should be able to cooperate with minimal friction to address the crisis. The alternative is more instability that may irreparably change the character of the region. The U.S. and Russia should answer Kyrgyzstan’s call for help.

* This article was written by Harris Mylonas, an assistant professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, and Scott Radnitz an assistant professor of international studies at the University of Washington. Radnitz’s book “Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-led Protests in Central Asia” is forthcoming from Cornell University Press in December.

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