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## A Kosovo on the Central Asian steppes

By M K Bhadrakumar  
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A robust geopolitical thrust by the [United States](#) aimed at creating a role for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in resolving conflicts in Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan promises to rewrite the great game rivalries in Central Asia in anticipation of an Afghan settlement.

The US initiative poses political challenges to Russia, which is a member of the 56-member OSCE, and China, which is not. The security vehicles piloted by each the respective two regional powers - the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) - are being outmaneuvered by the US.

Yet, coming in the wake of the deepening crisis in Kyrgyzstan and the endgame in Afghanistan, the US initiative does convey an air of positive thinking and carries a sense of immediacy, while neither Russia nor [China](#) has any counter-strategy available.

Paradoxically, Russia and China could seize the initiative if the OSCE plan to stabilize the situation in Kyrgyzstan somehow crash-lands and ethnic tensions, violence and anarchy ensue. But that would be a dubious blessing as [Russia](#) and China too are stakeholders in regional stability in their own ways.

## **'B team' for the Afghan war**

The unkindest cut of all is that it is Kazakhstan, which both Moscow and [Beijing](#) counted to be their most sober and thoughtful regional partner, which is heading the OSCE chariot. As Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev firmly asserted, "There is no doubt a new OSCE strategy on Afghanistan is necessary."

The US is delighted, and as a *quid pro quo*, Washington has accommodated the Kazakh leaderships' desire to chair an OSCE summit meeting within the year in Astana and thereby claim a legacy on the world stage. The last time the OSCE held a summit meeting was in 1999. This is also the 35th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act. [1]

"Kazakhstan's strategic approach to the Afghan issue became one of the foundations of a historical consensus reached there [the OSCE inter-ministerial meeting in [Almaty](#) on July 16-17] on holding an OSCE summit in Astana before the end of 2010," Kazakh State Minister and Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev openly admitted.

Kazakhstan will host a special OSCE conference in Astana on October 20-21, when the Afghan issue and the role the OSCE could play in the Hindu Kush will be at the top of the agenda. The conference factors in the current search for a political solution to the Afghan problem.

"I would like to emphasize the importance of changing the very paradigm of combating today's challenges which come from Afghanistan, shifting emphasis from military means to eradication of sources of these challenges," Saudabayev said. "Helping the Afghans move from the military conflict to a constructive track is a main objective of the OSCE and the [US-led] international coalition."

Astana elaborated on its thinking in a paper titled "Efforts to intensify cooperation with Afghanistan", according to which the OSCE can offer help from its niche competencies in soft security and civilian affairs. These would include training personnel belonging to Afghan security bodies involved in narcotics control, guarding the border and customs, assisting in the conduct of elections and monitoring, and helping develop Afghanistan's democratic and political institutions.

Kazakhstan proposed - evidently, with Washington's backing - that the OSCE should appoint a special representative for Afghanistan and have an OSCE presence on the ground there. Moscow promptly objected, informing the OSCE's permanent council in Vienna last month, "Referring to border, customs and anti-drug projects to assist Afghanistan ... we [Russia] cannot support the idea of the OSCE operating on Afghanistan's territory, nor can we support attempts to extend human rights and democracy obligations to this country. Nor do we see any grounds for creating the post of OSCE special representative for Afghanistan."

Russia's sense of indignation is understandable. The US has stolen a march over Moscow,

which for the past five or six years has been pleading that the CSTO can act as a constructive partner for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in stabilizing the Afghan situation, but Washington studiously ignored the plea. Now, the US is bringing in the OSCE (which includes Russia) as a "B Team" into Afghanistan so that NATO can concentrate on the major security tasks of the counter-insurgency.

Plainly put, the US is preparing for a prolonged involvement with the developing security paradigm of Afghanistan and Central Asia.

### **Moscow being reactive**

Yet, Russia is forced to react with one arm tied behind its back. The US misses no opportunity to characterize its initiative in Kyrgyzstan as a fine example of US-Russia cooperation in the best spirit of US President Barack Obama's "reset" with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev.

Moscow cannot openly dispute the US interpretation at a time when the "reset" is delicately poised. Besides, Moscow has hoped that cooperation in Afghanistan would itself develop into a major template of the "reset". As for the OSCE role, Moscow has been all along seeking a transformation of the body as an effective security organization and the US initiative in Kyrgyzstan conforms to the Russian wish. Again, Russia has shied away from playing a role in stabilizing the Kyrgyz situation unilaterally and has taken a cautious stance, fearing a Kyrgyz quagmire that could be financially burdensome.

Evidently, Russia cannot also object to the US initiative in Kyrgyzstan under the circumstances when China chooses to sit on the fence simply watching the battle of wits between Washington and Moscow. Also, the two key Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan - are themselves warming up their relationship with the US.

Generally speaking, Washington is having a sort of "reset" with Astana and Tashkent as well. Now, these two Central Asian capitals are essentially trying to emulate Russia's example of prioritizing ties with the US. On its part, Washington is also being pragmatic about its democracy project in [Central Asia](#) that used to irritate authoritarian regimes in the region.

Clearly, there is a paradigm shift in Central Asia and the credit goes to US diplomacy; US influence is on an upward curve. The fact is that unlike Russia, which has acted in an ad-hoc manner, the US is coming up with a comprehensive approach to the Kyrgyz crisis and the CSTO's credibility has suffered.

Testifying before the Helsinki Commission in Washington last week, US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake was frank about the US's intention to keep its military presence in Kyrgyzstan for the foreseeable future. He said:

We are not in competition with any country for influence in Central Asia ... Maintaining the Manas Transit Center is an important national security priority for the United States, but that center can only be maintained if Kyrgyzstan itself is a stable and reliable partner

and we ourselves are totally transparent in the functioning of the center. The center is an important part of our partnership, but our focus has been and remains developing our overall political, economic and security relationship.

The US has also lost no time pushing through a big aid program for Kyrgyzstan's economic reconstruction. The international donor conference held in Bishkek, the Kyrgyzstan capital, on July 27 was sponsored by the World Bank but it bore Washington's imprimatur. The donors' pledge of US\$1.5 billion for Kyrgyzstan over the next 30 months exceeded Bishkek's own request. In political terms, it unmistakably underscores that the "United States has a strong commitment to Kyrgyzstan", as Blake put it.

In a July 30 speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Blake made it clear that Washington was in no mood to concede Central Asia - "a region of significant importance to US national interests" - to Russia as the latter's backyard. He said:

We recognize that other countries have interests in Central Asia. But we don't accept any country having exclusive interests. We maintain it is in the interests of all countries in the region to undertake policies that can produce a more durable stability and more reliable partners for everyone, including the United States, in addressing critical regional and global challenges, from non-proliferation to counter-narcotics to energy security and combating terrorism.

#### **Another Kosovo?**

Having said that, the audacious US strategy is also not without real risks and Kyrgyzstan's medium-term prospects are worrying. The political landscape is highly fractured and there is no certainty as to how a new constitution will work in practice and whether elections expected in October will be free and fair. Clan politics are acute and the interim government in Bishkek remains weak.

Furthermore, regional divisions in Kyrgyzstan are deepening. Kyrgyz nationalist rhetoric is becoming strident, insecurity continues, the Kyrgyz-Uzbek ethnic divide remains enormous and minority Uzbek grievances are largely unaddressed. With the security bodies and law-enforcement agencies showing bias against Uzbeks, revenge attacks are possible.

Meanwhile, as Martha Olcott, a prominent US expert on Central Asia, put it, "Uzbeks are unlikely to simply fade away ... small numbers of young men also seem to be drifting into the jihadist camps and networks in Afghanistan, and beyond in Pakistan. All this means that even if the Kyrgyz government is able to keep the lid on ethnic tensions in the south in the near term, the events of June [the pogrom against ethnic Uzbeks] could have serious ramifications in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan for years to come."

Conceivably, as a perceptive Kyrgyz expert wrote in the Guardian newspaper recently, "There are three possible templates for the future: that of Sri Lanka, where a powerful guerrilla organization emerged after ethnic riots; that of Chechnya, where a nascent nationalist movement fell prey to Islamist networks; and that of Uzbekistan, which

reacted to Andijan [the uprising there in 2005] with overwhelming repression. None of these is very inspiring."

Indeed, some Russian observers discern a fourth template as the most likely scenario - Kosovo. They feel that the US is proceeding according to a carefully choreographed plan where the induction of OSCE policemen is a necessary first step.

After all, the 52 unarmed OSCE policemen put in place under the group's plan can't do much to stabilize southern Kyrgyzstan. They are most likely to fail in a hostile environment where the Kyrgyz majority population appears to be opposed to the OSCE's intervention. A Moscow politician who is a member of the Russian Duma's international affairs committee said:

If anything happens to these OSCE policemen, orders will be given to bring in armed units to Kyrgyzstan. Who is going to send military units there? Of course, it's NATO. There's a US military base in Manas, a French air base in Dushanbe, a 154,000 NATO military contingent in Afghanistan. What's the problem? If that happens, we will witness a very interesting situation that will resemble the one in Kosovo ... And the threat of active Western interference according to the Kosovo scenario is very realistic.

Above all, the OSCE deployment may be designed to soothe tensions, but its downstream impact could be quite to the contrary. It could well turn out that the presence of international observers might embolden ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan to pursue autonomy.

To an extent, the US is already pandering to latent Uzbek separatist sentiments in the Osh and Jalalabad regions in southern Kyrgyzstan. Whether this is a calibrated approach happening in concert with Tashkent is a key question with immense consequence to the future trajectory of the geopolitics of Central Asia, and indeed Kyrgyzstan's own integrity and viability as a state.

A surge in Uzbek separatist sentiment in southern Kyrgyzstan would be bound to trigger a backlash of Kyrgyz nationalism and it would only be a matter of time before some Kyrgyz "strongman" took the stirrups and rode to the center stage, brushing aside the US-backed Kyrgyz democrats in Bishkek to take matters to a point of no return.

If that happens, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan - given the Vorukh ethnic enclave in Batken province in southern Kyrgyzstan - would almost inevitably be drawn in, locking in three of the five Central Asian states. In sum, it could be Yugoslavia all over again.

**Note** 1. The Helsinki Final Act was the final act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe held in Helsinki, Finland, during July and August of 1975. Thirty-five states, including the US, Canada and all European states except Albania and Andorra, signed the declaration in an attempt to improve relations between the communist bloc and the West.