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A perfect storm could well be brewing in Central Asia

By Kenneth Weisbrode

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Dean Acheson, secretary of state to the former United States president, Harry Truman, liked to quote a friend who said that being in government made him scared, but that being out of it made him worried. To those of us not privy to the hidden complexities of NATO's military intervention in Afghanistan, the situation in the country – and indeed across Central Asia – is extremely worrisome.

As Afghan President Hamid Karzai is said by his critics to be on the verge of casting his lot with Pakistan and the Taliban, the Pentagon has signaled its fear that the Afghanistan war may spread beyond the Pashtun heartland to the largely Tajik and Uzbek areas in the north of the country. The United States is reportedly constructing a \$100 million “Special Operations Complex” near the city of Mazar-i-Sharif across the border from Uzbekistan.

The United States has also planned to build a similar “counter-terrorism training compound” nearby in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, the site last June of the worst outbreak of fighting between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Central Asia's Ferghana valley since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Several hundred people were killed, entire neighborhoods were destroyed, and an estimated 400,000 people were turned into refugees.

There is little agreement about who lit the fuse. Possible culprits include various Russians, the family of deposed Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and criminal gangs based in Kyrgyzstan and in neighboring countries.

A favorite candidate for blame is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group that has been allied with the Taliban in the past and has been active across Central Asia, including in Afghanistan. The IMU is also reportedly having success in recruitment drives in northern Afghanistan. But no matter where the movement goes or what its militants do, the IMU's number-one target is Uzbekistan's ruler, Islam Karimov.

Karimov, for his part, acted with unusual statesmanship during the recent violence in Kyrgyzstan. Unlike his neighbors, he opened the border to desperate refugees, mostly women, children, and the elderly.

The refugees were Uzbeks, and Karimov had good reason to fear the possibility of a much bigger crisis within Uzbekistan, which is also home to many Tajiks, Kyrgyz, and of course millions of Uzbeks who might have been inflamed by the persecution of their ethnic kin in Kyrgyzstan.

This is par for the course in the Ferghana valley. As in much of Central Asia, and that includes Afghanistan, national boundaries, enclaves, and exclaves separate various groups that have historically intermingled within a single region. Political boundaries have had a powerful effect on the region's economy and culture. Differences, whether real or manufactured, are easy to magnify and to exploit.

The precariousness of the situation throughout the Ferghana valley has attracted the attention of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has gained much experience in defusing difficult border conflicts in the Balkans and in other regions. And it just so happens that neighboring Kazakhstan currently holds the chair of the OSCE and will host an OSCE summit in its capital later this year.

But the OSCE was almost completely powerless during the crisis in Kyrgyzstan, and only recently was it finally able to secure agreement to send a small police advisory group to the country. Of course, the OSCE had very few resources in the region to begin with, but some members, notably Russia, have been unwilling to give the OSCE a larger role.

Uzbekistan, which ought to welcome all the help it can get and probably doesn't object to greater OSCE involvement in principle, is nonetheless dragging its feet, supposedly because of jealousy over all the attention that Kazakhstan is gaining from its chairmanship. (Karimov and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev are perennial rivals.)

The keenest proponent of a revitalized OSCE now is the US State Department. Not only does it want to use the opportunity to test the "reset" policy with Russia, but it also sees the OSCE as an important component of a longer-term strategy to bring stability and good governance to Eurasia, as the OSCE was in Central Europe. For this reason,

American diplomats are lobbying hard for the OSCE, and Kazakhstan in particular, to be given a fair chance.

This is a worthy aim, but it is not clear that the main actors in Central Asia – including China, which reportedly is quietly but firmly backing Karimov – are playing on the same team. Uzbekistan, especially, has presented an extremely cautious, even an ambivalent, face in public.

Even if serious dialogue with Uzbekistan is taking place behind closed doors – and the Pentagon's new initiatives suggest that it is – its low, almost undetectable, profile sends mixed signals that fly in the face of the open, transparent, and collective ethos of the United States' big OSCE push.

Another explosion in the Ferghana valley could be hard to contain if the pieces of declared and actual policy are not brought together, and if the most important regional leaders aren't brought on board. Among its first victims would be the noble aspirations of the OSCE, and NATO's investment in Afghanistan. That is something big to worry about, regardless of whether one is in government or outside.