

## The gathering threat to the US in Kyrgyzstan

When Putin and American sack out a plot for the next big political battle, they should look no further than Kyrgyzstan.

The circumstances under which Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov came to power are one for the history books, if not the big screen.

It's not often that a convicted kidnaper serving an eleven-year jail term morphs from prisoner to prime minister and president of his country in a matter of days. But when protesters, angered by fraudulent parliamentary elections, took to the streets last fall, Japarov was not only liberated but celebrated by a large contingent of Kyrgyz citizens who consider him to be a populist savior. Since his ascent to power in October, he has been hard at work gutting Kyrgyzstan's minorities, curtailing its constitution, and seeking revenge against his critics, not least of which is the United States.

The economic enemies of Kyrgyzstan's unraveling political narrative were not lost on US Ambassador Donald Lu, who remarked last year that although the story here was striking resemblance to "a Hollywood media movie," the ending was not yet inevitable. At the time, he was one of the few US State Department envoys in Central and South Asia, his mission here to help American security and intelligence agencies maintain but responsibility to stand up to the Japarov regime and curtail its attacks on Kyrgyz and US institutions.

In the past few months, the Kyrgyz security services have been cracking down on NGOs, journalists, academics, and anyone with the nerve to directly or indirectly criticize Japarov. US organizations have likewise found themselves targeted. Andrew Kuchin, a respected Central Asia scholar and president of the Central American University of Central Asia (AUCA), was brought into the Kyrgyz Ministry of Internal Affairs upon allegations of illegal importation of drugs.

The abrupt instructions against Kuchin will reportedly be dropped, but they were almost certainly intended to send a message not just to the university but also to Washington. What's more, the accusations leveled against Kuchin are part of a crackdown on Kyrgyz civil society as a whole.

The AUCA and its president have been caught up in a state-sanctioned turf war over progressive and liberal-minded movements in the country. Kyrgyz officials did not suppress the 1992 election and human rights activist Leah Nagmetova sought an intervention from one potential candidate for this institution's inauguration for US criticism of Japarov and scrutiny of organized crime in Kyrgyzstan. Lu has not shed light on this calling attention to Japarov's abuses and has vocally highlighted the case of Kyrgyz economic official Raimbek Maimurov, who is facing sanctions under the US Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act for his involvement in a scheme that defrauded the Kyrgyz treasury of over \$700 million through an offshore smuggling empire.

The attack on the president of what is arguably the United States' most important lever of soft power in the region serves as a warning not to make waves in Bishkek.

Among the abrupt accusations leveled at AUCA is the charge that the university is turning the Kyrgyz gay.

That is according to a series of videos circulating on social media that highlight the dangers posed by "women's rights" and LGBTQ activists, who the videos claim pose a direct threat to traditional Kyrgyz values and the capital of playing women into chaos. The videos warn that the United States is planning to start a war in Central Asia and that USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Radio



Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and other pillars of US soft power as agents of Kyrgyz domination.

The video features alarming surveillance footage of AUCA students and NED representatives, suggesting they could be the work of state security services. These reports are attempts to undermine and silence American institutions and their Kyrgyz partners, but the full extent of Lu's success, Washington's plans to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, is too soon to say. It is unclear that Lu will be able to maintain his position as a liaison to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which has recruited from Kyrgyzstan.

Although the US government is reportedly discussing hiring American troops in a number of Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan didn't make the list. In terms of US interests, Kyrgyzstan is far from a priority. There is also no way that the United States can consistently out-spend Russia or China in a region that is a priority for Moscow and

Beijing. But a few things are certain. American soft power and democracy-building efforts make a negligible difference when it comes to the safety and civil liberties of the Kyrgyz people. The United States and European Union are unlikely to maintain and even give permission to keep independent media alive. Although the government of Kyrgyzstan to entrench itself by supporting the United States and other Western powers has the potential to feel empowered by American sentiment that could be used to fuel separatism, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which has recruited from Kyrgyzstan, has not been able to do so. American government agencies spend between forty and fifty million dollars a year in Kyrgyzstan in a variety of initiatives meant to improve quality of life and governance in the country, but it seems that many Kyrgyz people don't enjoy the benefits of these programs or associate those benefits with the United States.

## Pakistani intelligence accused of torture in crackdown on dissent

Walking to the barber's one evening, Shafiq Ahmad began to feel his head being hit. The 37-year-old lawyer and social media activist in Pakistan worried he was about to be abducted.

A few weeks later, a group of men grabbed him and forced him into the backseat of a waiting car. The kidnapping in December 2019, in the eastern city of Okara, was captured on CCTV. Mr. Ahmad can be seen desperately trying to fight back, while his attackers appear to threaten bystanders against intervening.

After Mr. Ahmad was handcuffed in the car, no one would hear from him for weeks.

He believes that the men who abducted him worked for Pakistan's intelligence services. Mr. Ahmad was a firsthand critic of the government led by Prime Minister Imran Khan, as well as all of the country's powerful military, which many allege plays a controlling role in politics from behind the scenes.

Mr. Ahmad's disappearance and torture appear to be part of a wider crackdown in the country on dissenting voices, designed to suppress allegations that Pakistan's military is interfering in the political system and helped manipulate the 2018 elections in Mr. Khan's favor.

Speaking from the hospital room where he was recovering, Mr. Ahmad told the BBC what happened after he disappeared from the frame on the CCTV footage.

"They put handcuffs on me and blindfolded me," he said. He was then taken to an unknown location. "They dragged me out of the car and threw me into a room and started torturing me. They didn't ask me anything, they just strapped me naked... and began beating me continuously with knobby fists and wooden sticks on my back and the sides of my face."

The beating lasted for five to six days in small, windowless cells, Mr. Ahmad said. He didn't think he would survive. "They told me, 'We will throw your body into the river.'"

Since then, the crackdown appears to have only intensified. Last week, journalist and social media activist Ghazala Begum was hospitalized after she and her husband were brutally beaten by men in black uniforms, which many allege play a controlling role in politics from behind the scenes.

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"I told them, 'No-one is telling me to write them. I have my own independent beliefs about the importance of civilian rule.' But they weren't prepared to listen to me," he

## India's Covid crisis has ripple effects for garment industry worldwide

As the coronavirus pandemic rages across India, forcing garment factories to shut down or work at half capacity to stem new cases, retail suppliers are scrambling to more production in China. But with trade war tariffs still in place, the shift could mean higher prices for U.S. consumers.

While clothing suppliers have warned the worst is still ahead, they can absorb the costs in the short term, and many suppliers will eventually have to raise prices, unless suppliers can find cheaper labor and production options.

"One India opens back up, things will go back to normal," the Row, CEO of United Nations Consumer Suppliers, an international retail wholesale and distribution company, told the BBC. "Now, more than ever, we want to buy more, new pants and new bags." A closed factory doesn't help that.

As virus case counts in the U.S. continue to decline, sending it reeling back in anticipation of a resurgence, officials and the return to in-person schooling. Consumer spending, which accounts for two-thirds of economic growth, increased by 10.7 percent in the first quarter, according to the Commerce Department. Some cracks have appeared, however, and personal income is a record high. Gross domestic product growth hit 6.4 percent last quarter.

"It's just a perfect storm right now," said Row, whose partner factories in India are not expected to return to production until June 7. "We just have to run out of fabric."

India made up about 18 percent of textile imports to the U.S. and about 3 percent of apparel and accessories, according to a trade mission report from the U.S. International Trade Commission data by the Princeton University.

If India dropped off the face of the world, where you would notice an impact is currently in manufacturing goods, textile and apparel, especially. "We don't just move supply chains. They're like a river, not a pipe," said the Gap Inc. CEO Sonia Syngal, who said the company is "not planning to work overtime on our machines to meet their order deadlines after state-mandated lockdowns."

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