The thesis titled

The Fergana Valley and Irredentism:

What best explains Central Asia’s absence of irredentist outcomes?

written by

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**1. Introduction**

In July 2019, the leaders of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were scheduled to meet along their shared border to continue efforts to demarcate disputed border sections. In light of the leaders’ visit, locals tried to raise flags and/or put up signs defining the area (who did what depends upon who is asked). This exacerbated hostilities existing just below the surface, in a region already tense over access to resources, leading to yet another border fight (Goble 2019). In 2016, the disputed region Artsakh (Nagorno- Karabakh) faced an escalation of tensions known as the Four-Day War. Armenia and Azerbaijan both claim the other side fired first, but both sides were ready to come to an agreement to end this renewal of war (BBC). The challenges of fully agreed upon borders in Central Asia and settling the status of Artsakh in the Caucasus, serve as interesting case studies for irredentism.

At the most basic level, borders divide people, based upon the sense that nations should have a designated territory they can claim as their nation-state. A sense of connection to the land existed in Central Asia, but it was not until the nationalities policies of the early Soviet period that the region was divided into national republics. Some argue that those drawing the lines and helping to define ethnic boundaries were in fact manufacturing nationalities (Lipovsky 2012, 5,15-22; Rashid 2017, 32; Rowe 343 and Walker 13 in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf, 2018; Roy 2007, xiv, 2, 12;), others emphasize that they were simply drawing upon pre-existing identities for the creation of larger national categories (Akiner in Smith 1990, 215; Akyildiz and Carlson 2014, 5; Burghart and Sabonis-Helf, 2018, introduction; Hiro 2011, 44). People in Central Asia do not match up neatly to their national boundaries, which was once feared to indicate a potential for irredentist actions. *Somehow, even with the nearby Caucasus region erupting into irredentist violence, the states of Central Asia managed to contain irredentist movements.*

Potential benefits for achieving *and* preventing irredentist outcomes exist, such complexity makes this topic important to study. Reaching an irredentist outcome can (re)unite separated ethnic groups, settle some interethnic conflict, and adjust borders to reflect national groupings. Avoiding irredentist outcomes can prevent the change of borders, promote interethnic cooperation within a state, and maintain stability by preventing conflict. Irredentism’s study matters because it is innately international and is shaped by ethnic politics. Ethnic politics can make “international cooperation difficult although not impossible” (Saideman 2001, 203). Thus, irredentism is the fusion of international, national, and ethnic politics, and each component contributes to the potential for an irredentist outcome. Central Asia is an important case study for irredentism, because there are areas where the physical conditions exist and there have been instances where border situations have escalated, yet the maintenance of the present borders, even the unmarked ones, has been prioritized in the region. The nearby Caucasus region experienced irredentist outcomes, which encouraged scholars to assume the same would happen in Central Asia. What best explains Central Asia’s absence of irredentist outcomes?

Central Asia’s states have encouraged stability throughout their post-Soviet history. Initially, the leadership in each of these five states prioritized the creation of new nation-states from the national republics they inherited. Tajikistan erupted into civil war started with elections, a step toward creating a government. Kyrgyzstan faced two revolutions in response to governments perceived as unacceptable. Both of these episodes of instability inspired neighboring states to fear spillover, reacting with security forces at their borders and promoting the flawed myth that democracy means instability (Adams et. al. in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 487-488; Anderson and Beck in Bertsch et al. 2000, 76), therefore authoritarian measures promote stability (Omelicheva in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 72). Any form of stability appeals to the citizens of this region, as they face constant concern over instability in their daily lives: employment, water scarcity, border disputes, and terrorism (Kovalova in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 311; Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 341-342).

*Stability as a state priority does not mean the absence of conflict, merely the prioritizing of stability over potentially destabilizing situations or outcomes. The states of Central Asia seek out stability, which specifically has meant making an effort to deescalate potentially volatile events.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, the prioritizing of stability best explains the absence of irredentist outcomes in Central Asia.*

**2. Background and Literature Review**

Borders separate people, sometimes this includes ethnic kin, which can create the demand to change borders for the inclusion of land or people formerly associated with a given national group or state, this is known as irredentism. However, states do not always pursue irredentism when the conditions exist, this deserves understanding. At the collapse of the Soviet Union its composite republics became states with international borders. Some of these borders erupted, for example the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Conversely, Central Asia’s leadership in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse strove to secure and maintain their borders in an effort to build post-Soviet nation-states. Yet, with the presence of irredentist claims across Central Asia, scholars reasonably expected conflicts like those in the Caucasus would erupt, leading to irredentism in Central Asia (Barrington 2006; Belafatti 2014; Bremer 1993; Melvin 1995; Roudik 2007; Woodwell 2007), while others acknowledge the potential exists but note that there has been a maintenance of the status quo (Belafatti 2014; Bertsch et. al. 1999; Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018; Lipovsky 2012). For Central Asia the fear of any form of instability goes a long way to understanding regional border politics and the subsequent absence of irredentist outcomes.

In order to look at irredentism in Central Asia and the Caucasus, I need to discuss: irredentist theory, how irredentism is distinct from secession, and why states engage in and resist irredentism. I will then look at what authors argue contributed to irredentist outcomes in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the latent potential for irredentism in Northern Kazakhstan, and what I believe best explains the avoidance of irredentist outcomes in the Fergana Valley, even though ethnic-based conflict continues.

Scholars of irredentism vary in their approaches to explaining determinants of irredentist outcomes. To begin with, the norms of self-determination and territorial integrity are used to study what influences decision-making in situations where irredentist conditions exist and could develop into irredentist aggression (Saideman 2001; Woodwell 2007). The first factor includes domestic conditions like the demands of people and their nationalist outlook. The second incorporates the expectation of sovereignty and the potential consequences of violating a neighbor’s borders. Saideman and Ayres (2008) add to Saideman’s (2001) approach that: “Irredentism will only occur over disputed formerly intrastate borders[; and] if countries seek admission into international organizations that stress ethnic and minority rights, then they will pursue moderate foreign policies” (2008). Adding in more precise elements to account for unrealized irredentism is not an uncommon approach. In fact in a study which examines Hungary, Fuzesi (2006) seeks to make a more generalizable and succinct explanatory model for the study of irredentism. Fuzesi identifies three factors determining irredentist outcomes: “shared ethno-national identity and the political system factors that condition its politicisation domestically and internationally” (2006). Fuzesi pinpoints the need for a shared ethno-national identity and adds that irredentism requires the simultaneity of the will to act between actors. There is a good amount of overlap across the categorizations used by each of these approaches.

I will employ Ambrosio’s model in my own research, which looks at the level of ethno-territorial nationalism and the level of international toleration as determinants in irredentist outcomes (2001). Irredentism cannot take place if international toleration is low, because it is inherently a violation of state sovereignty and could incite an international reaction. Irredentism is unlikely if levels of ethno-territorial nationalism are low, because irredentism begins with a sense of territory lost abroad. If there is no sense of loss for a national group, an irredentist act would instead be seen as simply an attempt to seize foreign lands. The other categorizations have many benefits, but it is the way in which Ambrosio organizes his findings that make it the more employable framework for a comparison between realized and unrealized irredentism. Ambrosio’s model provides a more inclusive approach to the potential influences that could lend to irredentist outcomes. By looking at irredentism with these two broad categories we are able to classify different factors to understand how it is that they affect whether a situation will have irredentist outcomes or not. This is valuable when looking at different episodes of irredentism, where domestic and international factors may not align with factors explored by an author looking at a specific case study.

Irredentism theory studies territory and/or people “lost” or “unredeemed,” which is distinct from secession, but some scholars cluster them together. Horowitz and Pronto remind those studying irredentism why it is important to distinguish irredentism from secession. Horowitz remarks that they are closely related or adjacent phenomena, but that irredentism is much less likely than secession (1992). Following this logic, the targets of the two movements (creation of a new state or entry into an existing state) should determine what theoretical framework is necessary for their examination. This is why Pronto makes the case that international law (IL) needs an improvement in its framework, because IL regularly treats irredentism as a potential end goal in secession, overlooking the fact that secession movements seek statehood. This is distinct from the goals of irredentism: “the cession of territory, the modification of international boundaries, and a transfer of sovereignty.” The irredenta want to be united with their kin abroad, and this is why distinction matters in IL and the study of irredentism.

End goals guide the study of irredentism, as should the reasons why states engage in or resist the realization of irredentist goals. Suhrke and Noble (1977) looked at irredentism within an ethnic conflict study, to fill a gap in conflict studies where the ethnic factor was not yet examined as a separate variable in relation to internal and external conflict. This is in line with Fuzesi’s point that a shared ethno-national identity is an essential precursor to irredentism—without the existence of an ethnic factor, irredentism might just be a land/resource grab. Carment and James look at what motivations enable irredentism to take place, and they find that the intensity will be higher for a foreign policy crisis involving an irredentist element (1995). The irredentist crisis is usually far less manageable and harder to resolve, which requires the international community to be ready to anticipate, manage, and resolve an irredentist crisis (104-105). In a quantitative study Siroky and Hale (2016) examine why some states engage and others use restraint, finding that: being near economic parity with countrymen highlights status inconsistency and engenders grievances, and the system in a home state is a majoritarian system where kin group does not need to moderate its policies and is thus free to act on irredentist wishes. Kornprobst studies Europe’s trends regarding irredentism and finds a favoring of “peaceful resolution of conflict, ...through the abandonment of territorial claims” (2008). International law thus provides “scant tolerance for irredentist assertions” (Kornprobst 2008). Other authors also examine the conditions, in specific cases, that enable the restraint of irredentism (Ambrosio 2002; Jenne 2004; Suhkre 1975). These studies of prevented irredentism identify methods pushing states toward restraint: the hope for western integration (Ambrosio 2002), bargaining toward a resolution (Jenne 2004), and changing socio-political conditions (Suhkre 1975).

The literature does not look at irredentism in the Caucasus and Central Asia, side by side. In a report from a 2000 conference on “Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Reorientations, Internal Transitions, and Strategic Dynamics” many explanations of state behavior were identified, including one that characterized the role of Russia in these two regions as essentially: an instability perpetuator in the Caucasus and a stabilizing force in Central Asia. The specific arguments were: the collapse of the Soviet Union exposed the problems festering in the Caucasus, and perhaps Russia would be unlikely to allow a resolution removing them from the region; and that conflict in Central Asia would erupt with the departure of Russian interference. These arguments do address potential explanations for (in)stability in the two regions, but they do not explicitly connect them to levels of irredentism in the two regions. The eruption of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 1988 has been identified by Ambrosio as ending in an irredentist outcome for two reasons. First, the irredentist project was initiated, due to a high level of ethno-territorial nationalism. Second, there was a high level of international permissiveness, which enabled the modification of international borders to take place (2001). Central Asia has many overlapping claims to territory and the people associated with them. Two worthwhile parts of the region to study are: northern Kazakhstan and its high population of Russians, and the Fergana Valley with its sections of ambiguous borders. Northern Kazakhstan has been dismissed as a potential site for irredentism by many scholars for many different reasons. Among these reasons are: Ambrosio’s vision of ethno-territorial nationalism does not necessarily exist in the same form in Russia and among its diasporas as it does elsewhere, due to a legacy of empire (2001); Deiner’s identification of Kazakhstan’s policies minimizing opportunities for ethno-nationalism and their promotion of a multinational state (2015); and Laruelle elaborates on Deiner’s explanation by adding that the logic associated with Russian-driven irredentism, even in light of Crimea, does not fit (2018).

I will combine explanations for a lack of irredentist outcomes and apply them to Central Asia through the Fergana Valley. The region has been rife with ethnic conflict and border disputes or standoffs are common (see *Appendix I*). However, they have not erupted into large-scale border-changing conflicts, because the states of this region work to prioritize stability. This means situations may arise, but they are mediated or suppressed. One insightful take is that Central Asia needs to be viewed as having consolidated sovereignty and as no longer composed of states in transition (Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018). The region’s states largely accept their settled upon borders (exceptions do exist), and thus seek to protect their sovereignty. Part of Ambrosio’s model exists in the Fergana Valley, but these states do not necessarily want ethno-territorial nationalism to dictate their border politics. Second, international toleration for any form of conflict in the region is low, due to regional stability being an international priority. Stability was an international priority during the Tajikistan Civil War, when borders were militarized from fear of potential spillover (Bertsch et. al 1999); during the years immediately following 9/11, when international military bases were stationed in Central Asia; and during both of Kyrgyzstan’s revolutions, again for fear of spillover. Bertsch et. al notes first that a form of stability (relative to the Caucasus) was created in Central Asia, but it was centered around the leadership, which should be a cause for concern. Stability must be an effort at many levels and when it centers on leadership it is fragile at best. The Fergana Valley states must continue to work toward improved relations with one another, this is the only way to strengthen the prevention of irredentism in the region.

**3. Methodology**

Working toward improved relations between states means little if the policies regarding ethnic minorities are left to border officials, who are prone to demanding bribes and taking retaliatory actions (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017). Corruption runs through many levels of these governments, which could detract from the capacity of people to create change. The many components involved in the interstate relations of the Fergana Valley make it challenging to isolate a single factor as preventing irredentist outcomes. This is why I will approach my question through a comparison of similar cases with divergent outcomes. I will ask what mattered in each of these regions at different times, in order to gauge which factors determined levels of irredentist outcomes. The assessment of factors will be central to this study, which is why it is important that the cases be similar even though the results differ.

Central Asia’s Fergana Valley and the Caucasus’ Armenia and Azerbaijan serve as comparable cases in many ways. First, these cases share ethnic diversity between their composite states: Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are of Turkic origin and Tajiks are of Persian origin; Armenians and Azerbaijanis are also of Turkic and Persian origins. Second, the two regions share the experience of having a pre-Soviet cultural identity, which was shaped by and had to endure Soviet policy. Many cultural elements were forced underground in order to survive the Soviet ambition to create a larger Soviet identity. Third, these regions shared the shock of the U.S.S.R.’s collapse, leaving nation-states outside of a larger economic command structure. Finally, with the U.S.S.R.’s collapse, Central Asia and the Caucasus suddenly had to create post-Soviet identities, built upon existing Soviet era ethno-territorial nationalism.

*Central Asia and the Caucasus have many similarities, but the most significant is the drawing of territorial lines during the early years of the Soviet Union, by Stalin and his committees to create national republics.* National groupings usually reflect some form of shared identity for a group occupying a territory. The Caucasus was clustered into a large territorial unit and later broke into smaller national units these republics were drawn to reflect the nationalities they were named after. Central Asia faced similar experiences. One of the major problems with this process was the assignment of territory, traditionally associated with one ethnic group, to another ethnic group’s republic. Specifically: the traditionally Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh region was assigned to Azerbaijan (Hiro 2011, 44); formerly Uzbek cities of Osh and Jalalabad were granted to Kyrgyzstan; whereas the territories of Andijan, Fergana, Khujand, Kokand, and Namangan, which were historically associated with either Tajiks or Kyrgyz were given to Uzbekistan; and Bukhara and Samarkand were seen as Tajik territories, but Uzbekistan was granted these territories as well (Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 343-344). The shared Soviet history of assigning territories brings these cases to the forefront for a comparative irredentist study.

Nation-states currently compose the international system studied in political science, thus there is some expectation that nations will match state borders. An overlap of claims to territory lends to the expectation that irredentism could materialize to change borders, as it did in the Nagorno-Karabakh case. In Central Asia, an irredentist movement has not developed into any irredentist outcomes, like it did in the Caucasus. Irredentist actions exist in Central Asia, ethnic conflict and border disputes remain key problems in the region. Yet, the states of Central Asia have prioritized stability over irredentist-based change as a policy priority, which has contributed to the prevention of irredentist outcomes.

In the following sections I will explore the historical evolution of borders by region and their disputes. This will start with Armenia and Azerbaijan, focusing on Nagorno-Karabakh as a case with high levels of ethno-territorial nationalism and international toleration that led to an irredentist outcome. I will identify what various authors highlight as factoring into this particular outcome. Next, I will examine the border history in Central Asia. Specifically, I look at the problems of border and identity manufacturing and how they relate to nationalisms in the region. I will then cite *Appendix I* as a listing of Fergana Valley episodes of discontent. This listing illustrates how disputed territory does not necessarily lend to high levels of ethno-territorial nationalism, in fact most disputes, even those along ethnic lines, have more pragmatic causes for erupting. Then I examine border relations within Fergana Valley, to illustrate how these states are trying to resolve their territorial disputes. Finally, I will use the discussion section to synthesize Ambrosio’s irredentist theory with my explanation that the prioritizing of stability in Central Asia best explains the absence of irredentist outcomes.

Ambrosio’s model uses level of international permissiveness and level of ethno-territorial nationalism to gauge whether irredentism will end in irredentist outcomes. Ambrosio illustrates this as:

Level of **+**  Level of **→**  Level of

Ethno-Territorial Nationalism International Permissiveness Irredentist Outcomes

As Ambrosio explains this interaction of variables: “the international community, through the use of positive and negative incentives, plays a critical role in determining the initiation and outcome of irredentist projects when ethno-territorial nationalism—the domestic precondition for the emergence of irredentism—exists” (Ambrosio 2001, 184). Ambrosio’s explanation of irredentism focuses on the way that these two variables interact to produce a given outcome, as illustrated in Chart 1 below.

**Chart 1: Ambrosio’s model of variable interactions and level of irredentist outcomes**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable Interaction | Level of International Toleration (high) | Level of International Toleration (low) |
| Level of Ethno-territorial nationalism (high) | Successful irredentism (4) | Adjustment to international norms (3) |
| Level of Ethno-territorial nationalism (low) | Potential Irredentism (2) | Diaspora-accepting (1) |

Ambrosio 2001, 27.

When applied to this study, prioritizing stability can explain both components of Ambrosio’s model. First, international permissiveness or toleration for a change in borders does not exist [at least not consistently] in the region or globally, as it is a change that not many view as permissible. Second, ethno-territorial nationalism may exist, but the historical development of nationalism in these states contributes to a government-focused nationalism. Thus, the state sets the tone for how an irredentist act will end, regardless of whether or not a movement exists for the changing of territorial lines.

**4. Nagorno-Karabakh: Ethno-territorial Nationalism, & International Permissiveness**

During Stalin’s era as Commissar of Nationalities, the Soviet Union made the largely Armenian populated region of Nagorno-Karabakh part of Azerbaijan in 1923 (adst.org; Ambrosio 2001; BBC; Bertsch et al. 2000; Smith 1991). Historically both countries had claims to the territory, and it was regularly passed between colonizers with little regard to those who inhabited the region (Dragadze and Herzig in Smith 1991). The Armenian connection to it endured throughout the Soviet period, aided by the Armenian majority in the region. However, ownership was granted to Azerbaijan in 1923. In this case, the 1994 irredentist outcome resulted from the simultaneous existence of both of Ambrosio’s factors, which meant there was little regard for the instability that such an event could potentially cause in the region.

Map taken from *Journal of Diplomacy* 2017

The role of ethnic identity to an irredentist effort is important, because the communal ties to the land serve as the basis for claims of a lost homeland. Fundamentally the form of ethnic identity must promote ethno-territorial nationalism in order for an irredentist effort to materialize, without the ethnic-based connection to the land, irredentism is unlikely.

Ethnic identity among Azerbaijanis has taken many forms over the centuries, due in large part to the diversity of influences in the area. Most recently, during the Gorbachev period, the Azerbaijani “ethnic identity and sense of nationhood” took on the “strongest sense of territoriality yet documented”. This was the direct result of high population growth rates paired with economic mismanagement that resulted in high unemployment during the Soviet period (Dragadze in Smith 1991, 275). In direct reaction to these issues, the people of Azerbaijan protested in 1988, against the Soviet Union to take back control. Those in power were concerned about such a movement, and one of the leaders of the anti-government Popular Front movement Neimat Panakhov went as far as to connect “the authorities’ fear of an Azerbaijani democratic workers’ movement” to “inaction to stop the Armenian irredentist movement” (Dragadze in Smith 1991, 277-278). Such a distraction could potentially unite Azerbaijanis under the government in power, in order to fight the outside threat. Yet, Azerbaijanis wanted to take back control and viewed their national identity as linked to territorial sovereignty. Thus the anti-Soviet movement led to independence and helped unite Azerbaijanis with a sense of territorial nationalism.

Ethno-territorial nationalism existed in an equally resolute form in Armenia toward the end of the Soviet Union, which encouraged those Armenians living in Azerbaijan’s Nagorno-Karabakh to fight for return. This sense of nationalism endured the entirety of the Soviet Union, however a sense of indebtedness to the Soviet Union for its role in helping rescue Armenia took priority over the desire for irredentist changes (Herzig in Smith 1991, 250-255). Specifically Herzig notes:

Nationalist aspirations have since [WWI] largely been directed toward avenging 1915, gaining international and Turkic recognition of the Genocide and achieving retroactively a territorial settlement more in line with Armenian claims and the Allies’ promises. All strands of Armenian nationalism are to some extent irredentist: all consider the territory currently occupied…

as missing pieces of the Republic of Armenia, lost to Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan (Herzig in Smith 1991, 253). Herzig’s take on Armenian nationalism summarizes how it is that irredentist outcomes came to be realized in the region. Following the model provided by Ambrosio, irredentist outcomes are the result of the level of ethno-territorial nationalism and level of international permissiveness. Sustained high levels of ethno-territorial nationalism in Armenia contributed to irredentist actions regarding Nagorno-Karabakh.

During the ceasefire Armenia annexed part of Azerbaijan (Ambrosio 2001, 146; Saideman and Ayres 2008, xvi). Since 1994, there have been regular challenges to such annexation, stemming from the lack of agreement between combatant parties. Based upon previous demands, this should have been the result that the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh wanted, but their push for independence was not reflected in this decision. Periodically, (2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016-present) fighting has resumed largely reflective of Armenia accepting irredentism instead of the secessionist hopes of Nagorno-Karabakh, which now considers itself the independent Republic of Artsakh. Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan are not resolved and will likely continue to spark conflict, especially since their biggest issue remains disputed: Nagorno-Karabakh’s secession from Azerbaijan has not been formally recognized (Walker in Bertsch et al. 2000, 152, note 1).

When using the case study of Nagorno-Karabakh, perspectives differ on how to interpret the outcome and wishes of the people in the region. The wishes of the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh vary from the beginning of the uprising and as time went on: independence, to return to Armenia, or to remain in Azerbaijan. This is why it is crucial to study different interpretations of irredentist events: if goals are split, then interpretations of the event will vary, thus assessments will likely pick up on different factors influencing outcomes.

This for some is considered a case of realized irredentism (Ambrosio 2001; Saideman and Ayres 2008, xvi), yet some view it as incomplete secession (Walker in Bertsch et al 2000, 152). Scholars identify different factors contributing to this case’s 1994 outcome. In January 1988, Gorbachev misinterpreted the situation that erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan as infighting within the Soviet Union, instead of an irredentist event between countries. Gorbachev sent in troops to crack down, which backfired, showing a lack of connection to the republics during this surge in ethnic nationalism (Rashid 2017, 36). Mismanagement and misinterpretation by the Soviet Union, could be seen as an early factor contributing to how this event played out.

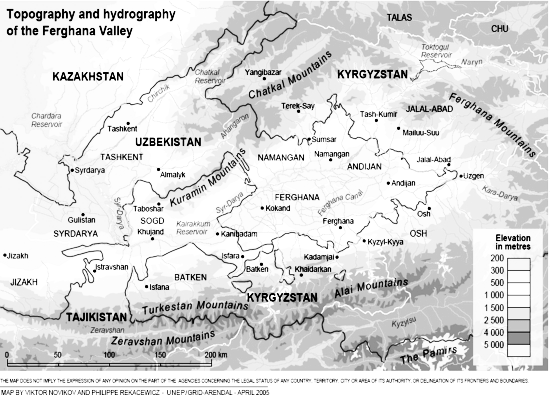
Ambrosio identifies Armenia’s “diplomacy and effective lobbying” as the factors that enabled Armenia to “consolidate its irredentist gains” (2001, 183). As Ambrosio uses level of international permissiveness and level of ethno-territorial nationalism as the two key factors contributing to an irredentist outcome, it seems logical that the state seeking an irredentist outcome would necessarily use diplomacy and lobbying to achieve such ends. Specifically, Ambrosio views Armenia as “an illustration of the result of a sustained high level of international toleration. Both the United States and Russia have, with varying degrees of intention, supported Armenia’s irredentist project” (2001, 187). For Ambrosio ethno-territorial nationalism is a precondition for irredentism that will factor into the outcome, but it is the level of international permissiveness which enables irredentism to be realized.

The absence of a clear resolution over Nagorno-Karabakh, should inform our understanding of the outcomes in the region. Jones urges us to look at the lack of resolution in the Caucasus as resulting from discontinuity of leadership in the region. Comparative continuity in Central Asian leaders has allowed leaders to “contain or suppress potential ethnic disputes” whereas “discontinuity of leadership in the Caucasus, in contrast, has hampered efforts to deal with ethnic disputes there” (Jones in Bertsch et al. 2000, 9). The outcome of Armenia annexing part of Azerbaijan has not been agreed upon, but Azerbaijan does interpret this as lost territory. For Jones, if the leadership had some degree of continuity, perhaps there would be a better connection to the problem and thus the capacity to address the unresolved issues.

*Nagorno-Karabakh Factors/Outcomes*

1. Misinterpretation and mismanagement of crisis in the early years, furthers irredentist violence.
2. The existence of both ethno-territorial nationalism alongside international diplomacy and effective lobbying allow for Nagorno-Karabakh to become a disputed irredentist outcome.
3. Discontinuity of leadership contributes to a lack of resolution regarding the status of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The significance of Nagorno-Karabakh is both its role as an irredentist outcome and an unresolved case. Central Asia’s push for stability contrasts with the instability in the Caucasus. The leaders in Central Asia address demands made by non-ethno-nationals in their territories in order to prevent the eruption of irredentism and thus the subsequent instability that could follow with an irredentist event. If the leaders are able to prevent irredentism at the stage where sustained levels of ethno-territorial nationalism inform irredentism, then the role of international permissiveness will likely matter little to the outcome.

**5. Fergana Valley: Borders, Identity, and Legacy**

Map taken from *United Nations* 2006.

Clear borders did not exist in Central Asia before the 1920s, even ethnic boundaries were imposed by Soviet policy. Ethnic boundaries were in part reflective of ethnic ties (Roy 2007, 2-3), but for Central Asia, there are some facets of identity that were largely overlooked in order to create a clustering of five national identities. Culturally, nomads and settled groups had different ways of living (Hiro 2011), paired with divergent connections to the land. Different religions were practiced that were fusions of larger religions and cultural practices in the region; classifying them as Muslim overlooks the regional practices that are not uniform across the religion (Lipovsky 2012, 72). Self-identification was largely based upon clan or kin ties, meaning ethnicity was not a clear cut identifier. Instead identity before the Soviet Union was based upon being descended from or related to a clan member—not on physical attributes or residency in an area (Kavalski 2010; Radnitz 2009; Rashid 2017; Roudik 2007; Roy 2007). The U.S.S.R. used ethno-territorial nationalism to define groups as distinct, only to later breakdown that uniqueness for the promotion of a larger vision of the Soviet nationality (Hiro 2011, 44-48). Due to the identity factors overlooked during the manufacture of identities and the confusion associated with imposing national identities, Central Asians often do not know what to define themselves as when there is/was a national census taken. Additionally, because they did not want to lose their benefits from their state of residency, many groups felt compelled to self-identify as the nationality of the republic where they lived (Megoran in Deiner and Hagen 2010; Hiro 2011; Roy 2007). Subgroups were thus absorbed into larger identities, because of practical considerations, overlooking how people identified themselves. In the aftermath of the U.S.S.R.’s collapse: Central Asia’s states’ “nationalism was built within the framework of the existing republics, and not on the basis of ideological rationalisations produced by intellectuals extrapolating from concepts of ethnicity. ...Nationalism was a *habitus* and not a constituted ideology” (Roy 2007, 132).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia’s national identities have either moved toward a civic or moderate vision, or have continued the ethnonational route cultivated during the Soviet period. Overtime, Kazakhstan created an inclusive Kazakhstani identity based upon a civic sense of nationalism, and has worked toward balancing this with cultural differences between ethnic groups (Deiner 2015; Hiro 2011; Laruelle 2018). Kyrgyzstan has fluctuated between a moderate vision and ethnonationalism. Kyrgyzstan saw a spike in ethnic-based nationalism in the aftermath of a conflict with Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010, this could be seen in how many politicians highlighted this vision of nationalism in order to garner the favor of voters (Marat 2016). Tajikistan continues to deal with divisions between north and south, as Tajik nationals define themselves by regional ties over national ones (Kasymov 2013). Turkmenistan’s leaders have worked toward building a presidential personality cult, which has been argued to have de-ethnicized part of Turkmenistan’s national identity (Polese and Horak 2015). Ethnicity still plays a role in Turkmenistan’s national identity, but it is superseded by the pull of the personality cult. In Uzbekistan, Karimov built upon the Soviet divisions of ethnonationalism and perpetuated this through the use of spectacle to highlight Uzbek uniqueness, an avenue chosen by an authoritarian leader to highlight continuity with the past (Adams 2010).

Creating national identities happened during the Soviet era, and fostering these national identities for the betterment of the nation-state narrative took place in the early independence period. Yet, it is the unique ways in which these states approached nationalism that makes identity a significant factor in how we conceptualize the potential for irredentism in the region. In his conceptualization, Ambrosio’s model emphasizes high levels of ethno-territorial nationalism as necessary to witness an irredentist outcome. Central Asia’s unique history of national identities and their ties to their territory are important in understanding how it is that Central Asia has not seen irredentist outcomes. First, there are many claims to territory, as reflected by the nature of pre-Soviet identities in the region. Overlapping claims are often the foundation for irredentist efforts, but overlapping identities further complicate such matters. Second, the way in which identities formed shapes the ways in which people connect themselves to the land; whether it is civic or ethnonationalist, the state controls the narrative of nationalism and limits how people engage with it for their own ends. Third, if there is not an ethnic-based tie to a specific territory, then the likelihood that ethno-territorial nationalism will be accepted or engaged with, is limited (Ambrosio 2001). Fourth, nationalism has been created to reflect and accept the status quo, this includes the history taught. If people are taught to believe certain lands are associated with a certain group, it undermines the wish to reunite with such lands.

The borders drawn during the Soviet period were drawn to reflect something resembling the reality on the ground (Hiro 2011, 44), but it was and still is impossible for a single ethnic group to be assigned to a specific area, because people migrate, settlement patterns are not monoethnic. Even today border areas are multiethnic, and people do not see a problem with that unless they are denied access to resources or are persecuted. When doing research in the region, Madeleine Reeves asked locals about some logistical matters, including taxes. It was explained that taxes were paid to the home ethnonational state (Reeves 2014). Simply put, someone of Kyrgyz descent living in Tajikistan would pay taxes to Kyrgyzstan. This may not seem entirely logical to an outsider, but the practices on the ground that seem hard to grasp are what makes this region important to study. Interethnic settlement serves in part to prevent irredentist outcomes, as the accepted reality of situations like these encourages stability.

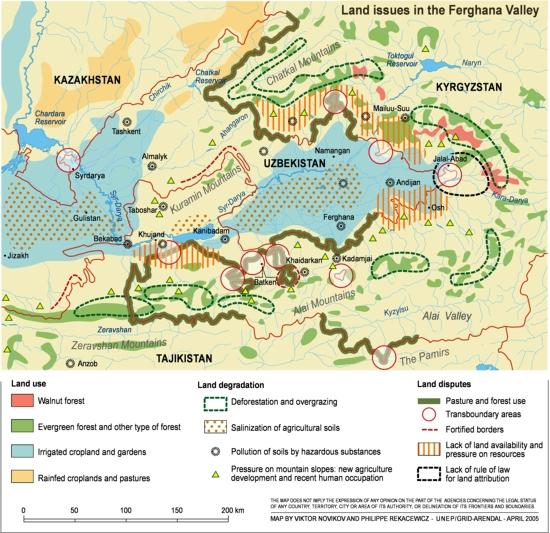
Even though the region’s governments attempt to use nationalism to prevent instability, the existence of undemarcated borders and disputed zones or enclaves litters the landscape of Central Asia. Specifically the Fergana Valley holds many longstanding disputed areas, as seen in Chart 2. Disputed zones and enclaves can serve to challenge stability, especially when those living or working in a region are restricted access, either to resources or travel routes.

**Chart 2: Disputed Zones and/or Enclaves Assigned/Enduring Soviet Legacy**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Owner State** | **Exclave** | **Surrounding State** |
| Kyrgyzstan | Barak | Uzbekistan |
| Tajikistan | Sarvan/Sarvak/Sarvaskoi | Uzbekistan |
| Tajikistan | Vorukh | Kyrgyzstan |
| Tajikistan | Western Qal’acha/Kayragach | Kyrgyzstan |
| Uzbekistan | Sokh | Kyrgyzstan |
| Uzbekistan | Shakhimardan | Kyrgyzstan |
| Uzbekistan | Qal’acha/Chon-Qora/Chongara | Kyrgyzstan |
| Uzbekistan | Dzhangail/Jani-Ayil | Kyrgyzstan |

Chart taken from: Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 343.

Stability challenges in Central Asia are dealt with before becoming events that could change land distribution between states. *Appendix I* lists various events that have taken place in the Fergana Valley that were contained before becoming true challenges to the status quo. *Appendix I* illustrates the trend that issues between ethnic groups result from practical needs: access to and ownership of water, roads, and land. This region holds many of Central Asia’s best water resources and land plots for farming and grazing. Discontent is typically localized and does not spark larger interethnic issues, because either the police or military intervene to quell episodes, and governing officials suppress or mediate further conflict. Politically the Fergana Valley has made strides in demarcating their land for the prevention of any renewed episodes of discontent, yet the challenges from the people and the land itself continue to make this a delicate matter. The map below shows “Land Issues in the Fergana Valley” as of 2006. Some border progress has been made, but relations remain focused on stability management.

Map taken from *United Nations* 2006.

In the Fergana Valley, border relations are regularly tested, as the borders remain a locus of discontent and are in many places disputed (see *Appendix I* and *II).* This could challenge the stability that the region values so highly. In the rest of this section, I will look at border relations within the Fergana Valley and provide details on current events to show how border relations are shaped by much more than the ideological components of nationalism. Border relations in the Fergana Valley are about access. I will look at the shared borders of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, then finish with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. This illustrates a trend toward cooperative efforts, even with the most formerly troubled relations indicating a preference toward stability maintenance.

Generally, relations between states in the Fergana Valley are shaped by: incompletely delimited borders, inhabitants isolated from the wider world and their own nation states, poverty and poor infrastructure, ethnic diversity; along with factors directly shaping interstate relations between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan: local concern over transit rights and access to resources, national-level fears of interethnic violence, the spread of radical Islam, terrorism, and drug trafficking (Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 341-342). I have addressed some components identified by Rowe, but the persistence of crime and corruption in Central Asia is a layer that must also be understood. Kovalova wrote of a nexus, wherein one factor enabled the perpetuation of another (Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018). Criminal activity persists because officials are willing to accept bribes in lieu of persecuting criminals.

The acceptance of illicit activity increases distrust between governments, which in turn damages relations. The interplay of this can be seen in how corruption and crime exists in the Fergana Valley. Throughout both of Kyrgyzstan’s revolutions, protestors fought: corruption, judicial inefficiency, and organized crime. Yet, after the 2010 revolution, general perceptions of corruption endured (Kovalova in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 318). In Tajikistan, the illicit drug trade provides many opportunities for underpaid officers to extort bribes; as well as have cases thrown out for connections and monitoring seen as non-existent (Kovalova in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 318). In order to correct their issues, Uzbekistan’s government engaged in international anti-corruption efforts, focusing on raising awareness and educating about corruption. However, Uzbekistan shows limited evidence of progress. Just like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan’s officials get bribes to overlook, but not necessarily to engage in smuggling (Kovalova in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 319). Building bilateral relations requires some expectation that with both parties will follow through with their agreements, but this is made exceptionally hard by this cycle of illicit activity.

*Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan*

Border relations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan show progress, as they have resolved many points and are working toward resolution of their remaining border conflicts. Talks started in 2001, but Kyrgyzstan’s revolutions, Karimov’s leadership in Uzbekistan, and various episodes of violence in both states all combined to delay progress. By 2018 much of the border was considered resolved, with meetings occurring regularly between Kyrgyzstan’s Jeenbekov and Uzbekistan’s Mirziyovev. During the 2018 border meetings, certain factors continued to challenge the credibility of Uzbekistan at the negotiating table, which in turn delayed complete resolution of existing disputes. These included past/present: terrorism, mined borders, and unilateral border marking.

In a study comparing Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Radnitz identifies discrepancies in their respective stability trends: “Kyrgyzstan stands out from its neighbors—particularly Uzbekistan—in its tendency toward instability, having experienced extra-constitutional changes of government as a result of protests in 2005 and 2010” (Radnitz 2009, 9). While Radnitz speaks of instability of government in Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstan has historically viewed Uzbekistan as more unstable. Uzbekistan views Kyrgyzstan as a neighbor rife with instability, because Kyrgyzstan chose the path of building a democracy. In its years since independence, Kyrgyzstan’s revolutions have stemmed from people refusing to accept a leader abusing their power. When looking at how Kyrgyzstan views Uzbekistan, it is through the lens of another kind of instability, the kind created by authoritarian leadership.

Islam Karimov dictated many aspects of Uzbekistan’s government and daily life, including interstate relations. In short, Karimov’s Freedom House scores ranked consistently in the not free category. The situation has not improved drastically since his death, but some change has taken place. To show what Karimov was responsible for, it could be helpful to look at a regularly cited episode of repression: the Andijan Massacre, which shows how willing Karimov was to suppress dissent:

As the trial of the businessmen neared its end in early May 2005, their relatives and friends started gathering outside the court. On May 11, nearly 4,000 demonstrators assembled to hear the verdict. The judge deferred the sentencing. The next day, the police arrested the ringleaders of the demonstration. On the night of May 12, a posse of armed men raided the jail where the accused were held. They killed several guards and released the businessmen as well as hundreds of other inmates. They seized the regional administrative office where they held hostage twenty government officials and called on Karimov to resign. ...[The next day,] troops fired live ammunition from automatic rifles on unarmed civilians (Hiro 2011, 188-189).

The exact number of people killed during the Andijan Massacre varies depending upon who tells the story, some say 1,500, while the official claim is 187 (*The Guardian* 2015). The SCO after this episode accepted Karimov’s version of the story that the actions were taken in response to a terrorist plot, and told Kyrgyzstan to deny Uzbek refugees (Hiro 2011, 190). What is significant here is that stability goes both ways. Kyrgyzstan had a revolution earlier in the year, and was labelled as unstable. Yet from fear of persecution, people in Uzbekistan would rather seek refuge in this so-called unstable state than remain in Uzbekistan. Bilateral relations after these events were hardly cooperative.

In 2010, Kyrgyzstan had another revolution, this one lasting from April to December. Uzbekistan once again had reason to label Kyrgyzstan as unstable. This was not helped by the events in Osh in June 2010, where Kyrgyz groups attacked Uzbeks in Osh. The exact reasons are disputed, but the systematic nature (Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 355) of the attacks makes this important to relations between the states. The environment of the revolution stoked interethnic tensions, which led to anti-Uzbek behavior in the largely Uzbek region of Osh. Attackers: destroyed over 2000 buildings, killed around 400 people (mostly Uzbek), and created approximately 120,000 Uzbek refugees (Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 347-348). It was a relentless pursuit of those labelled as the enemy, even though the revolution was supposed to be about a change in government. Trust between ethnic groups takes a long time to rebuild after an episode like Osh, just as trust between people and their government takes a long time to rebuild after an event like Andijan. This also applies to relations between states, an attack on people by either the people or the state cannot lend to strength in interstate relations.

Bilateral relations improved over time, but in 2016 border tensions were heightened. Specifically, in March 2016, a border dispute took place between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan over access to and the status of the Orto-Tokoi Reservoir in Aksy, Kyrgyzstan (The Diplomat 2017; Eurasianet 2016). The reservoir was disputed because it was built on Kyrgyz territory in the 1950s by the Uzbek SSR. Uzbekistan’s specialists were denied access to the reservoir to make needed repairs (Eurasianet 2016; Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 348). This led Tashkent, at the time still under Karimov’s rule, to occupy (with troops and armored personnel carriers) part of a “road between two Kyrgyzstani settlements.” This led Kyrgyzstan’s retaliation: it “mobilized its own forces in the area and blockaded Tashkent’s Sokh and Shakhimardan exclaves in Kyrgyzstan’s southwest” (Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 348). They deescalated the situation with negotiations but failed to resolve the issues of access to and the status of the Orto-Tokoi Reservoir. Later, in 2016 Karimov passed, so Uzbekistan had an opportunity to rebrand and thus rebuild relations with its neighbors, which is exactly what it did. One of the primary issues they resolved was the status of the reservoir with Kyrgyzstan: Kyrgyzstan would have control, both states would have access, and both states would split the cost of maintenance based upon water consumption (The Diplomat, 2017).

Progress continues in 2019, as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan went as far as to trade territory to eliminate further conflict over access to resources. Specifically Kyrgyzstan traded 1.6 square miles including the Kerkidan reservoir for a similar sized piece of land near Gulbaar in Aravan in Osh region (Djanibekova 2019). The Kerkidan reservoir is where Kyrgyzstan’s Kerkidan residents access their water, which under this agreement would not change. The portion of land given to Kyrgyzstan near Gulbaar permits access to the Aravan district, which previously included the road being split between the two states (Gazette of Central Asia 2019). Both states claim they lost nothing, that this was an equitable trade, but some disagree on the matter (Djanibekova 2019). Regardless, this exchange is a significant step in fostering their vision of stability in the region.

*Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*

In an effort to resolve territorial disputes, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan began border talks in the years after Tajikistan’s Civil War. Yet, their shared border continues to be classified as unresolved, as they have only settled 53.5% of it (Larin 2019). Rahmon and Jeenbekov met in 2019, after nearly a year of monthly violent border clashes, to work toward resolution (Larin 2019). Goble cites the political role that enclaves play in each state: political groups use ethnic nationalism to garner influence—thus they are unlikely to generate real resolution even if it could end violence (Goble 2019).

The conflicts that arise are not due to a sense of attachment to territory abroad, but a lack of clarity over where one state ends and another begins. The idea that a border could be that porous could create concern for a push toward irredentism. Instead, this should be considered a demand for clarity in a region of ambiguity. It is not a sense of loss that drives people, it is a demand for answers and resources. As Walker points out: “Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan...build their foreign policy strategies on the absence of economic potential, seeking foreign assistance to make up for considerable resource shortfalls” (Walker in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 6). If two neighbors both need resources, they should come together on some resource-based issues, but if enough of their needs are not met by one another, then they will fulfill their resource needs elsewhere. Trying to balance the need for answers on borders and enclaves has been less of a priority for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, who focused on fulfilling their resource demands through relations with other states. This tension between the need for clarity and resources has typically trended toward need fulfillment, overlooking the unrest created by ambiguous borders.

In April 2013, Kyrgyzstan began construction on a road cutting through disputed territory near Vorukh, Tajikistan, thus violating an agreement to not build on disputed territory. Even after a hearing, construction resumed and Tajikistanis reacted with violence, which was met with Kyrgyzstani violence. Representatives worked to “reduce tensions; they agreed to foster greater dialogue between local citizens and security forces from both sides” (Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 351). This could have been resolved by defining territorial divisions, but instead these states prioritized immediate stability and created a mechanism to resolve future disputes over similar issues. Again in Vorukh in July 2014, a dispute broke out, which was either initiated by “Tajikistani border guards [who] had tried to set up a new border post on disputed territory and had opened fire on its forces” or by “Kyrgyzstani citizens [who] provoked the clash by trying to repair a bridge in disputed territory” (Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 349). This escalated to firing and using mortars in August 2016, in Batken, Kyrgyzstan. Tensions festered up, because the underlying source of conflict was left unresolved.

At best, these states have interacted “intermittently at the national level” to resolve their disputed territory, but only around “520 of the 978-kilometer Tajikistani- Kyrgyzstani border has so far been agreed upon” (Rowe in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 353). This ratio should be considered as demanding further progress, even though these states have historically been more focused on gaining access to resources in their foreign relations than structurally settling disputes with their neighbors.

*Tajikistan and Uzbekistan*

Relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have been largely problematic. These neighboring states have regarded one another with hostility and suspicion (Eurasianet.org 2018; Trofimov 2002). With the death of Karimov, hope returned that bilateral relations would improve; but improvements have been slow. They opened ten new border crossings in 2018, which is quite a step considering only two border crossings were previously open (Eurasianet.org 2018). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan struggled to even begin talks to resolve or define their shared border. Uzbekistan took it upon itself during the Tajik Civil War to mine and define their shared border (Trofimov 2002). Tajikistan does not regard this as legitimate as it was done unilaterally. Uzbekistan does have human irredenta in Tajikistan, and Tajikistan wants the return of Bukhara and Samarkand from Uzbekistan. These states found a way to come together both in 2018 (Central Asia News 2018) and 2019 to agree upon a border settlement plan. The most recent one will be implemented in 2020 (Eurasianet 2019). The exact details and areas to be traded have not yet been disclosed.

Karimov and his influence were discussed generally in the Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan section above, therefore this section will focus on of Karimov’s role in isolating Uzbekistan from engagement with Tajikistan. Tajikistan’s Civil War encouraged Uzbekistan to mine and define its shared border to prevent a spillover from the conflict. Karimov feared the violence, but it was the destabilizing power of dissent that concerned him more. Karimov worked with other actors to bring an eventual end to the conflict (Kavalski 2010, 160-162), but did not work with Tajikistan to define their shared border in the aftermath of Tajikistan’s Civil War. Such a move might have prevented the decades of isolation that followed. With Karimov’s death, relations have improved, showing the significance of leadership to interstate relations.

Following a state visit between Mirziyoyev and Rahmon, Mirziyoyev identified Uzbekistan’s hopes for bilateral relations to improve: “Tajik-Uzbek relations will be reaching the level of strategic partnership in the nearest future” (RFERL 2018). This means the two states will work together not just to resolve border issues, but on other political and economic issues. Relations improving may have to start with a state meeting, but they have reached a point where these neighbors acknowledge the value of cooperation on key issues. After a visit in August 2018, Rahmon stated:

From the first days since taking office, my dear friend and brother Shavkat [Mirziyoyev] became a staunch supporter of strengthening cooperation among Uzbekistan’s regional neighbors. He strived to create the basis for a multifaceted development of our relations. (The Diplomat 2018)

Here Rahmon acknowledges the significant shift in Uzbekistan’s politics following Karimov’s death. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan should be shifting away from the isolationist views taken toward each other, but this took a dramatic political change to take place.

The Fergana Valley, along with the rest of Central Asia, needs to settle its disputed territory to reduce tensions between states and minimize the likelihood of conflict. The trends show that the leaders of these states want to resolve their territory disputes, especially since these disputes provide an opportunity:

Transnational criminal groups took advantage of the weak and inefficient border control and increasingly used the Central Asia region for trafficking and smuggling. Their capabilities to build up channels for illicit transit operations significantly exceeded cross-border cooperation in the region (Kovalova in Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2018, 324).

Not only is outright conflict an outcome of not settling these disputes, but so is larger criminal activity. The crime-corruption nexus discussed previously showed the cyclical nature of crime feeding into corruption allowing for the perpetuation of further crime. With border issues unresolved and regular conflict arising, illicit activity grows with little chance of it being addressed. The issues are far beyond historical claims to territory, it is about strengthening the state’s capacity to act on behalf of its citizens.

*Fergana Valley Factors/Outcomes*

1. Each episode of potentially volatile interethnic or general discontent sees government intervention to either mediate or repress, as illustrated in *Appendix I*. This handling of discontent has in some recent instances trended toward mediation, but has trended historically toward repression.
2. Neither ethno-territorial nationalism nor international permissiveness/toleration have existed with any degree of strength or consistency in the Fergana Valley regarding irredentism.
3. Leaders in the Fergana Valley are connected to the issues that exist, especially given the length of time Central Asia’s five leaders have been in power. However, this does not mean they should be in office without a check, merely that they are connected enough to silence opposition with ease. To show their trends toward longevity, I have listed the length of each ruler’s entirety in their role in the highest office of each country (not just since independence).
   1. Kazakhstan: Nazarbayev just under 29 years (April 1990-March 2019), resigned but still holds some political power.
   2. Kyrgyzstan: Breaks the trend of longevity, due to a lack of tolerance for abuse of power: 2 revolutions and in 2019 former President Atambayev charged for crimes in office.
   3. Tajikistan: Rahmon 27 years (1992-present)
   4. Turkmenistan: Berdimuhamedow 12 years (2007-present); Previous leader Niyazov just under 21 years (1985-2006)
   5. Uzbekistan: Mirziyoyev 3 years (2016-present); Karimov 27 years (1989-2016)

In this section I have explored how identity took form in Central Asia, as well as listed Fergana Valley’s disputed areas and its episodes of discontent. Identity and discontent in the Fergana Valley are not intricately related, but at times discontent overlaps with ethnic lines. This is especially true as states seek to resolve territorial disputes without creating conflict, therefore applying a vision of ethno-territorial nationalism to Central Asia would be a misapplication of the concept. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan have all faced instability, but strove to prevent irredentist outcomes as they did not want to exacerbate instability regionally. The border relations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan show progress, as they are working to resolve points of dispute—even though border violence erupts periodically, and they have viewed one another as unstable in the past. Border relations between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have improved, but cooperative efforts for clarification are seen as a limited reaction to violence along the border and are regularly at odds with a focus on foreign relations to fulfill resource demands. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are also working to resolve their shared border. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are building bilateral relations in the revitalization taking place under Mirziyoyev, working to breakdown historic distrust. Ethno-territorial nationalism should be focused on the ethnic groups tied to the land, but for this region, land and ethnicity were assigned by outsiders and nationalism is shaped by state leaders. This does not mean there is no possibility for irredentist outcomes, but the process of constructing identity contributes to how national identity is practiced and bilateral relations shape borders.

**6. Discussion**

The historical evolution of a nation’s borders and its national identity shapes the path a given nation-state will take. Specifically, irredentism requires the existence of both ethno-territorial nationalism and international permissiveness. If ethno-territorial nationalism (Ambrosio 2001) does not exist in a consistent manner (Fuzesi 2006) it is unlikely irredentism will occur. If nationalism was the manufacture of an outside power, it will shape the way in which the successor states envision nationalism. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan serve us as Fergana Valley countries where borders have been ill-defined and enclaves litter the landscape. It could be expected that this interstate land seizure might take place regarding lands considered lost, but somehow it does not.

The easy explanation can be overlooked, but in this particular case it best explains the outcome. For Central Asia, the way their nation-states were formed and how their nationalisms have evolved created this insistence that to survive and maintain the state, those in power had to avoid instability in any form. The shapes of these countries were the product of early Soviet era collaboration, as were their nationalisms. The successor states chose not to veer too drastically from the Soviet design, and thus nationalism is defined and sculpted by the state and its wishes. The will of these countries to de-escalate and prevent the spread of any form of inter-ethnic discontent is greater than the pull of irredentist wishes.

Ambrosio’s model uses level of international permissiveness and level of ethno-territorial nationalism to gauge whether irredentist acts will end in irredentist outcomes. Prioritizing stability fits into both factors of this model. First, ethno-territorial nationalism may exist sporadically, but the development of nationalism in these Central Asian states has been government-driven and this means the state determines how an irredentist act will end. Second, international permissiveness or toleration for a change in borders does not exist [at least not consistently] in the region or globally, as it is a change that not many view as permissible. When examining subfactors, like the need for timing, it is possible to understand how international permissiveness is a determinant in irredentist outcomes. Even if the desire for an irredentist based change existed presently, there would be a lack of toleration for change in borders. International toleration would have to indicate that irredentism would not be seen as an egregious territory violation and would be somehow legitimate, a trend that is not present regionally or globally regarding irredentism.

Ambrosio looks at four cases, each with different explanations for the level of irredentist outcome. Ambrosio’s premise is that the international environment is a determinant in how an irredentist act will play out. The cases the author examines show how the level of international toleration and level of ethno- territorial nationalism interact, by identifying cases involving the fluctuation of the two variables. The case of Nagorno-Karabakh illustrates a change in international toleration through the involvement of global actors in the crisis, which in turn has the capacity to continue the crisis.

**Chart 1: Ambrosio’s model of variable interactions and level of irredentist outcomes**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable Interaction | Level of International Toleration (high) | Level of International Toleration (low) |
| Level of Ethno-territorial nationalism (high) | Successful irredentism (4) | Adjustment to international norms (3) |
| Level of Ethno-territorial nationalism (low) | Potential Irredentism (2) | Diaspora-accepting (1) |

Ambrosio 2001, 27. Categorizations of case studies listed below are based upon a chart on page 188.

The cases Ambrosio covers are categorized as follows:

1. Hungary 3. Serbia, Croatia

2. (None included) 4. Nagorno-Karabakh

Ambrosio’s study identifies the level of a given variable based upon an end point. In the Nagorno- Karabakh case there has been no acceptance of an outcome, but Ambrosio classifies this as a case with high levels of irredentism—because it involved sustained high levels of both variables and involved the departure of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan. Even though international observers and other states disagree over the status of the region, it is a case involving high levels of the variables with the greatest influence on an irredentist outcome.

When examining Ambrosio’s classification of the case studies used, it was easier to understand why many scholars assumed irredentism would happen in Central Asia, specifically in Northern Kazakhstan and the Fergana Valley, at the collapse of the Soviet Union. The international environment was characterized by both confusion and the hope that the new successor states to the Soviet Union would not cause too much chaos. There was a certain degree of acceptance that some borders may need to change following the end of Moscow determined restrictions. Specifically, in the case of Nagorno- Karabakh the long disputed territory had already expressed, through violence, a desire to return to Armenia. Thus the assumption was that misaligning of people and borders would be met with irredentism. This encouraged observers to note that such a misalignment existed in Central Asia.

The problem with such an assumption is that it was made based upon the idea that the national identities of these five states were aligned with a push to recover territory and people abroad. Instead the domestic and regional environments encouraged the acceptance of the status quo over any less than necessary changes. At the time the level of international toleration might have been high, but the level of ethno-territorial nationalism was low. At that point it would logically have been classified as potential irredentism (category 2), but today it would be considered diaspora accepting (category 1).

It must be assumed that it was challenging to identify a case where levels of international toleration were high while levels of ethno-territorial nationalism were low. It is interesting that the case of Central Asia immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, might be categorized as such, but perhaps this means we should dig a bit deeper. To say that the international climate might have been permissive to irredentism is a stretch and involves limited documented evidence, as it would require specifics regarding international attitudes toward Central Asia’s irredenta that largely do not exist. The best that can be done is a description of post-Soviet international perceptions and engagement with the newly created states and their irredenta. If we apply the case of Nagorno-Karabakh as comparable, then there is some information supporting such claims. However, this is limited. Thus the best that can be done is to say that even though there are overlaps in territorial claims and ethnic boundaries that do not align exactly with national ones, Central Asia is largely diaspora accepting. It would require a major shift in policy for any of these states to lay claim to neighboring territory based upon ethno-national historical ties.

**7. Conclusion**

In this comparative examination of the Caucasus and Central Asia, I looked at what made these cases worthy to study side by side. They shared the Soviet era demarcation of borders, which misaligned territory and people creating a potential for irredentism. This meant that both regions had the foundation for irredentist demands to arise, but only one saw an irredentist outcome. Nagorno-Karabakh erupted during the end of the Soviet period, and the post-Soviet international environment enabled the realization of an irredentist outcome. This permissiveness coupled with the strong pull of ethno-territorial nationalism, by both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, for this act of irredentism to be carried out. This was not the case for the Fergana Valley or the rest of Central Asia.

When examining the border history in Central Asia, I illustrated the regularity of resource and access-based conflict which contributed to renewed state-driven efforts to resolve disputed border points. This matters because the development of nationalism in Central Asian has been government-driven, thus the state determines how an irredentist act will end. Stability’s prioritizing should innately be a desire of most states, but for these states it has been a central component of retaining control. Actions taken for the promotion of stability are usually not questioned in Central Asia, because the leaders in the region have fostered a fear of instability. Therefore a key component of nationalism is a fear of that which challenges stability. In turn irredentism is a challenge to the stability of borders, which could erupt into larger state-wide instability, therefore it is unlikely to be deemed an acceptable course of action for these states.

Shared ethno-national identity needs to exist between a state and its irredenta abroad for irredentism to occur (Fuzesi 2006). This means the concept of identity between the two groups overlaps enough to compel both groups to demand return. In Central Asia and the Caucasus the process of constructing identity shaped how it played out. The evolution of state/national and ethnic identity in Central Asia and the Caucasus did not follow the same path. The idea of a nation-state in the Caucasus was not new as the identities of the region’s states largely existed before Soviet rule. Whereas Central Asia’s composite states were undefined and more scattered in their settlement patterns. Central Asia’s nations were identified based upon generalized ethnic categories observed by Soviet era planners. Since then Central Asia’s states identify themselves by the ethno-national identities ascribed to them in the 1920s. Ethnic identity exists across state lines in much of Central Asia, but the ascribed national identity is now used as a state-based national identity. Thus ethnic boundaries may not need to align with state boundaries, as the state will continue to determine its respective nation’s will. This in turn explains why there has been no irredentist outcome in the region, prioritizing stability matters more.

Central Asia’s Fergana Valley shared some experiences with Nagorno-Karabakh, but the slight variations in their development shaped their outcomes. The will for ancestral lands is not a nationalistic cause uniting groups in the Fergana Valley. The region’s people are connected and have felt a sense of loss, but the origins of aggressive acts have not pointed toward irredentist wishes, instead they have aligned with resource demands. Access to resources is not the same as making demands based upon historic ties or a sense of ownership. The unique timeline of coming into statehood following decades as part of the Soviet Union matters to the identities of these five states. They want to be stable states and push to avoid state failure. Yet they have experienced violence and conflict in many forms: inter-ethnic, resource-based, civil war, revolution, and involvement in neighboring conflicts. There is even the persecution of various Central Asian groups in China challenging the capacity of these states to maintain their stability. Central Asia is not stable, but the countries want to avoid giving the impression that any of their statehoods are even slightly volatile. Groups within these states do not seem to demand, in a consistent manner, to be reunited with irredenta. Many explanations for why a state does not invade the sovereignty of another can be given—yet stability is the most logical and its pursuit cannot be overlooked.

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Brookings Index of State Weakness in Developing World

CIA World Factbook

Eurasianet.org

Freedom House

FSI

International Crisis Group

NewEurasia.net

Transparency International

United Nations

***Appendix I***

**Episodes of Discontent in the Fergana Valley (1989-2019)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **When** | **Participants** | **Location** | **Issue/Cause** | **Action Taken** |
| 1989 | Tajiks | Bukhara & Samarkand, Uzbekistan | Demands for reincorporation into Tajikistan | None, per Soviet policy |
| July 1989 | Kyrgyz,  Tajiks | Batken, Kyrgyzstan | Tajik land given to Kyrgyz | 1 dead 19 injured |
| February 1990 | Tajiks | Dushanbe,  Tajikistan | Armenians refugees resettling | Riot |
| June 1990 | Kyrgyz,  Uzbeks | Osh, Kyrgyzstan | Ethnic Uzbek land given to Kyrgyz | Riot; gun battle |
| July 1991 | Tajiks,  Uzbeks | Samarkand, Uzbekistan | Public discontent over Karimov’s policies | Tajik police “rough up” Uzbek revelers. |
| 1991-2000 | Kyrgyz,  Tajiks |  | Water rights | Recurring conflicts |
| 1992-1997 | Tajikistan, neighbors | Tajikistan | Civil war first time ethnic identity in Tajikistan crosscut by regionalism (Rowe) | Neighboring states take various actions to contain conflict. |
| 2005 and 2010 | Kyrgyzstan | Kyrgyzstan | Power hungry central authority strays from democratic values. | Revolutions |
| 2005 | Kyrgyz,  Uzbeks | Andijan, Uzbekistan | Demonstrations against Uzbek government. Took place during a trial of businessmen facing charges of terrorism. | Andijan Massacre/Unrest, government troops fire into the crowd, number of casualties disputed. (187-1,500) |
| June 2010 | Kyrgyz,  Uzbeks | South Kyrgyzstan: Osh, Jalalabad, Bazar Kurgan | Politicians engage Uzbeks in attempt to garner support. Kyrgyz angered by this, tensions turn into violence. | 356 confirmed dead  (*HRW* 2010) |
| May 2010 | Kyrgyz,  Uzbeks | Sokh | Grazing, restricting movement | Blockade and traffic attacks |
| 2011 | Kyrgyz,  Tajiks | Vorukh | Truck denied passage, refusal to pay bribe | Escalates, protestors involved, worsened later |
| January 2013 | Kyrgyz,  Uzbeks | Sokh | Erecting electricity pylon in ill-defined area | Uzbek citizens attack Kyrgyz border guards |
| April 2013 | Kyrgyz,  Tajiks | Vorukh | Building on disputed pastureland | Ruled by authorities to be illegal building, attacks occurred when construction resumed |
| 2013 | Kyrgyz,  Uzbeks | Border, near Sasikisai | Claim of intrusion, cause disputed | Uzbekistani officer shot by Kyrgyzstani border patrol |
| Later 2013 | Kyrgyz,  Uzbeks | Aksy, Kyrgyzstan | Flag raised on disputed territory | Uzbekistan flag raised at Kyrgyz telecom site |
| December 2013 | Kyrgyz,  Tajiks | Vorukh-Isfara road | Tajikistani arson of Kyrgyzstani teahouse | Kyrgyzstanis block road |
| May 2014 | Kyrgyz,  Tajiks | Kok-Tash, Batken, Kyrgyzstan | 1500 people involved in stone throwing | Citizens gather to demand border demarcation |
| July 2014 | Kyrgyz,  Tajik | Vorukh | Building border post or repairing bridge in disputed territory | Exchanged fire |
| August 2015 | Kyrgyz,  Tajiks | Chorku and Kok-Tash | Kyrgyz blocked from cemetery | Kyrgyz block a canal in response |
| March 2016 | Kyrgyz,  Uzbeks | Chalasart | Disputed area | Border standoff, moved in troops |
| March 2016 | Kyrgyz,  Uzbeks | Aksy, Kyrgyzstan | Tashkent specialists denied access to repair Orto-Tokoi Reservoir. So Uzbekistani troops blocked road between two Kyrgyzstani settlements. | Kyrgyzstani troops block access to Uzbekistani settlements. Negotiations diffuse situation. |
| 2010-2019 | Tajik,  Kyrgyz | Along shared border | 150 Border incidents[[2]](#footnote-2) | Typically leaders get together trying to resolve ongoing issues, but violence delays efforts. It is cyclical. |
| July 2019 | Tajik,  Kyrgyz | Border area near Vorukh | Tajiks erected flagpole **or** Kyrgyz erected road sign on undemarcated area, just before their presidents were scheduled to meet for border talks. | Exchanged fire, fighting includes rock throwing; roads blocked in aftermath. |
| September 2019 | Tajiks,  Kyrgyz | Northern Tajikistan border district of Bobojon Gafurov | Residents begin construction on unsettled section of border. Fence built in response by Kyrgyz. | 4 killed during exchanged fire.[[3]](#footnote-3) |

***Appendix II***

**Evolution of borders/ documented changes:**

*External Borders*

1995 Kazakhstan-China Border agreements: 1994, ratified in 1995 disputed area goes to China; more precision added 1997-1998

2009 Kyrgyzstan-China border delimitation agreement finalized, started in 1996. “China gave up part of the Khan Tengri Peak located in the mountains of Tien Shan while Kyrgyzstan ceded the Uzengi-Kush” (Durham)

2011 Tajikistan ratified a 1999 deal: Tajikistan giving portion of country to China in Pamir mountains to end a long dispute and China relinquished claims to Tajikistan’s territory. Eurasianet recently (2019) cited this cession of territory negotiated in conjunction with China forgiving Tajik debt. (Eurasianet) Others (Jardine *Washington Post* 2019) note the secretive nature of the trade and the immediate release that 1,500 Chinese farmers would be farming 2,000 hectares of land.

Kazakhstan-Russia: Border unchanged

Afghanistan and Tajikistan: unchanged, drug corridor

Afghanistan and Turkmenistan: unchanged, security heightened on Turkmen side

Afghanistan and Uzbekistan: unchanged

Iran and Turkmenistan: unchanged

*Internal/Central Asian Borders:*

*Kazakh-Kyrgyz*: agreements reached in cooperative manner,

2001 agreement into effect 2008

*Kazakh-Turkmen*: initial treaty 2001, border fully demarcated 2003-2005

*Kazakh-Uzbek*: full demarcation is still ongoing; borders tense and Kazakhstan making accusations about unilateral border demarcation by Uzbekistan;

Began demarcation process in 2001, remains ongoing.

*Kyrgyz-Tajik*: border demarcation is ongoing and sporadically agreements reached, including

2019, but implementation remains an issue. Among other issues IMU slowed process.

*Kyrgyz-Uzbek*: hard to draw because of: terrain and ethnic overlap in Fergana Valley; and 1999-2000 Uzbekistan mined and unilaterally demarcated border, justifying their actions with concern over terrorism. Additionally in 1999 Uzbekistan had a barrier blocking parts of the border due to concerns regarding terrorism.

2001 attempt to reach agreement involved some border changes/territory exchanges and Kyrgyzstan did not approve of this.

Agreement for border demarcation signed in 2018, enclaves remain an ongoing point of discussion. As of 2019 talks are ongoing, with a trade in territory agreed to. The exchange indicates a trend toward resolving disputes over access to resources and clarifying borders.

*Tajik-Uzbek*: demarcation seemed long off; borders matched the Soviet-era ones, but improving relations since Karimov’s death. In 2019, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan reached a border settlement plan, to be implemented in 2020.

Problems include: Uzbekistan mining and unilaterally marking the borders after 1999; before 1999, Uzbekistan wanting at varied times to protect their irredenta in Tajikistan; and Tajikistan laying claim to Bukhara and Samarkand; IMU

*Turkmen-Uzbek*: some disputes settled 2004; full demarcation ongoing[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Traditional scholarly applications of stability/instability factors will not be applied in this study, as this is in part an exploration of how largely authoritarian governments have used “stability” as a means to maintain the territorial status quo. Leaders in this region often elicit a fear of instability as the justification to not embrace change. This works in the region because leaders build upon the fear of instability that they have associated with democracy in Kyrgyzstan and the civil war in Tajikistan. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Larin, Ivan. 2019. RITMEurasia.org. Information cited by The Jamestown Foundation to paint a picture of the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan shared border. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Resources drawn from for information presented in discontent chart: *Diplomacy Central;* *The* *Diplomat; Eurasianet; Human Rights Watch;* *The Jamestown Foundation* 2019;Johnson 2007; Rashid 2017; *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*; *Reuters;* Rowe 2018; *UNHCR 2016*; Walker 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Much of this information came from: *BBC; CIA World Factbook; The Diplomat; Eurasianet; The Guardian; Washington Post* 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)