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The critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan– Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary dispute, 1999–2000

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Abstract

In 1999 the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary became a brutal reality in the lives of borderland inhabitants, when it became the key issue in a crisis of inter-state relations. Mainstream explanations have suggested that the Soviet boundary legacy and convergent post-Soviet macro-economic policies made conflict inevitable. Drawing on critical geopolitics theory, this paper questions the implicit determinism in these accounts, and seeks to augment them by a political analysis. It suggests that ‘the border crisis’ was the product of the interaction of complex domestic power struggles in both countries, the boundary itself acting as a material and discursive site where elites struggled for the power to inscribe conflicting gendered, nationalistic visions of geopolitical identity. It concludes by insisting upon a moral imperative to expose and challenge the geographical underpinnings of state violence.

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Introduction

Between 1999 and 2000 the hitherto largely invisible border between the republics of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan became a concrete reality for those living in Ferghana, the expansive valley at the heart of Central Asia through which much of it winds (see Fig. 1). As politicians contested the ownership of thousands of hectares of land along the 870 km boundary (Polat, 2002: chapter 2), barbed-wire

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Fig. 1. Central Asia, highlighting the Ferghana Valley.

fences were unilaterally erected in disputed territory, bridges destroyed, cross-border bus routes terminated, customs inspections stepped up, non-citizens attempting to cross denied access or seriously impeded, and unmarked minefields laid. Tensions flared into violence at checkpoints, and people and livestock were killed by mines and bullets. Close-knit communities that happened to straddle the boundary were spliced in two, and a concomitant squeeze on trade added to the poverty and hardship of the Valley's folk. These experiences of 'the border question' traumatized border region populations and marked the most significant deterioration of relations between the two states since independence from the USSR in 1991.

Such affronts to any sane notion of human well-being simply demand an explanation, and that is the purpose of this paper. Regarding existing accounts as insufficient, it draws upon critical work within political geography to examine 'the border question' as the product of the interaction of domestic power struggles in both states. 'The border' acted as both a material and discursive site where elites struggled to gain or retain control of power by inscribing their own geopolitical visions of the political identity of post-Soviet space on the Ferghana Valley.

The paper begins by outlining the historical background to the present conflict, and examining explanations of it. It then situates the study in theoretical work on critical geopolitics and international boundaries, highlighting the interactions of these with reference to recent work on the Baltic region. The substantive empirical sections investigate the discursive framing of the 'border issue' in the Uzbekistani government, Kyrgyzstani opposition, and Kyrgyzstani government press, illustrating theoretical arguments introduced earlier. A debate about 'civic' versus 'ethnic'

conceptions of nationalism is discussed in relation to Kyrgyzstan. The essay concludes with a call for more attention to geography in the study of nationalism in Central Asia, and some reflections on the practice of critical geopolitics.

The Fergana Valley in history

This large and fertile valley of some 10 million people of mixed tribal descent was conquered from the Khanate of Qo'qon by Tsarist Russia in the mid 19th century. Between 1924 and 1936, it was divided up between the Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tadjik Soviet Socialist Republics. The majority of scholars argue that these states were arbitrary inventions of Soviet planners (Allworth, 1990: p. 206) in a 'divide and rule' policy (Olcott, 1994: p. 212). Akiner (1996: p. 335) desists from this view, as does Hirsch, who sees the 1920s and 1930s disputes between new republics and regions over border delimitation as "a continuation of inter-clan and inter-ethnic hostilities resumed against a new political backdrop" (Hirsch, 1998: p. 135). Whatever perspective is adopted, it is undeniable that along with the designation of capital cities, the codification of official languages, the production of USSR maps, and the inclusion of all citizens in censuses that obliged them to locate themselves within novel systems of categorisation, the establishment of republican borders was part of an ensemble of disciplinary technologies that acted to inscript new geopolitical entities onto both the landscape of the Valley and the consciousness of its inhabitants.

It is unlikely that the original cartographers ever thought that the borders they were creating would one day delimit independent states: rather, it was expected that national sentiment would eventually wither away. Soviet planning approached the Valley in this light. Gas, irrigation, and transport networks were designed on an integrated basis. The industrial, urban, agricultural and transport planning projects of one state spilled freely over into the territory of its neighbour. Although sometimes formalised by inter-state rental contracts, rents were seldom collected nor was land reclaimed when the period of tenure expired. The result was a highly complicated pattern of land-use that wantonly transgressed the administrative boundaries of the republics. Those borders themselves had never been fully demarcated: border commissions in the 1920s and 1950s had failed to complete their work, leaving different maps showing different borders.

Following independence in 1991, these states had no modern history of independent statehood to recover as a founding myth. The Soviet spatial institutionalisation of ethnicity at the union republic scale (Brubaker, 1996; Smith, 1997) ensured a structure that enabled the leaders of both countries to develop broadly nationalist ideologies to legitimise both the states and their rule (Anderson, 1997: p. 141). Nonetheless, the effects of Soviet era border planning were not felt in the years immediately following independence. Border and customs posts were established, although their impact on daily life was minimal.

This was brought to an abrupt halt in 1999. In the second half of 1998, Uzbekistan began to tighten control of its border, severely hampering cross-boundary mobility. Most dramatically, it began erecting a 2-m high barbed-wire perimeter

fence along large stretches of the Valley boundary, and mining other stretches. This led to widespread accusations within Kyrgyzstan that Uzbekistan was actually fencing off tens of thousands of hectares of Kyrgyzstani land. At the same time, arguments over natural resource allocation intensified. Kyrgyzstan depended on Uzbekistan for gas supplies, which were regularly turned off during the winter months by an Uzbekistani government, which had run out of patience at the failure of the impoverished Kyrgyzstani government to pay the bills. Many in Kyrgyzstan thought this unfair as Uzbekistan did not contribute financially to the upkeep of dams and reservoirs in Kyrgyzstani territory that primarily watered Uzbekistan's agricultural (cotton) heartland of the Ferghana Valley. Border disputes thus became a key factor in mutual relations in 1999 and into 2000. Whilst an overstatement, one commentator regarded the situation as so serious as to describe it as a "low level border war" (McGlinchey, 2000).

Explanations of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan border issue

The majority of explanations of these tensions have suggested that the fact of independence inevitably triggered territorial conflicts grounded in inherited poorly or maliciously drawn boundaries. Babakolov's (2002) version of this thesis is typical:

When Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan declared independence, an international border suddenly sprang up between the two former Soviet republics. With an international border, came border posts. And with border posts came guards, whose conduct has bred such resentment among Kyrgyz and Uzbek travellers that some analysts are warning that frontier disputes could sow the seeds of inter-ethnic violence.

O'Hara emphasises the mal-distribution of water resources as a source of border conflict (O'Hara, 2000). Gleason explains border problems to be a result of divergent macro-economic policies and the existence of security threats, advocating the managerial role of international organisations in facilitating incorporation of the region into networks of global capitalism as a solution (Gleason, 2001a,b). Although its element of field research lends a more informed account of border politics than Gleason provides, the International Crisis Group effectively boils the issue down to inter-state relations and economics (International Crisis Group, 2002: p. 13–17). In a concise overview of macro-economic policy, Gavrilis suggests that Uzbekistan's pursuit of autarchic and import substituting policies necessitates a high level of monitoring over the economy to manage its state-run cotton monopoly, whereas because the relatively poorer resource-scarce Kyrgyz Republic has strong interests in facilitating the flow of goods across its borders it is less interested in, or capable of, border control (Gavrilis, 2003). All of these perspectives envisage the border question as primarily geographical, economic, and techno-managerial, with techno-managerial solutions, and under-emphasise the role of domestic politics.

Without doubt, all of these explanations have some merit in accounting for the circumstances that enabled the dispute to occur. For example, Uzbekistan's actions to tighten border controls were partially motivated by an attempt to restrict the circulation of capital, labour and goods that became problematic due to the non-convertibility of its currency. However, the political significance that this played in both Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani domestic politics, as well as the precise course that the dispute took, suggests that these factors alone are inadequate for fully explaining the significance of the border. They do not sufficiently explain why a supposedly inevitable conflict took so long after independence to explode, or why it became significant when it did. Nor do they adequately account for the very different role of state boundaries in relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and, say, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan or Kyrgyzstan and China. They do not even attempt to trace how 'the border question' came to subsume a range of issues including water, gas, customs, transport and the personal relationships between presidents. In short, they lack an explanation of what the 'Copenhagen School' of security studies has termed 'securitization' (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998; Laustsen and Wæver, 2000), or how a single political issue becomes widely interpreted as a grave societal threat that is put beyond the realms of normal political debate, justifying emergency counter-measures. This paper seeks not to displace these mainstream explanations of the border crisis, but to augment them with another level of explanation.

Theoretical background—critical geopolitics and boundary studies

This article draws upon studies that see the political geography of the nation-state as deeply embedded within processes of identity formation and political contestation, to offer a complementary reading of the events of 1999 and 2000. It suggests that far from being a result of some given conflict over a natural resource or the inevitable logic of territorial independence, the 'border disputes' of 1999 and 2000 were vehicles for rival political factions to frame their geopolitical visions of Central Asia, and assert their control over national space. It draws on two overlapping bodies of literature within political geography, two traditions that can be traced to the establishment of the discipline in Britain, geopolitics and international boundaries.

The first is the paradigm of 'critical geopolitics'. Investigating the uses of geographical reasoning in the service of state power (Dalby, 1996: p. 656), it explores how the production of geopolitical knowledge about the relationship between states is both a political practice exercising power over others, and an instantiation of identity establishing ideas about who we are, who others are, and how they relate. Focussing on the texts of 'foreign policy'—speeches of leaders, comment in the media and civil society, legal documents such as treaties and constitutions, and popular culture, it is this process that critical geographers work to make visible (Dalby, 2002; Dodds, 1993; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Sharp, 2000a).

The second body of literature is that on international boundaries. The connection between boundaries and national identity narratives has been increasingly

explored in a range of disciplines including anthropology (Donnan and Wilson, 1999), international relations (Albert, Jacobson, & Lapid, 2001), history (Sahlins, 1998), ‘Chicano’ cultural studies (Anzaldúa, 1999 (1987)), and literary studies (Cleary, 2002). Within geography, as Newman and Paasi have argued in a number of articles and chapters over recent years, this has been rejuvenated in the 1990s, with both traditional studies of empirical examples of boundary disputes and their resolution, and by engagement with theorisation in human geography looking at the way that boundaries—in their widest sense—are vital in constructing senses of identity, demarcating self/other, inside/outside (Newman, 1999, 2003; Newman and Paasi, 1998). This second point being the case, the state border, although physically at the extremities of the state, can be at the heart of nationalist discourse about the meaning of the nation, of arguments about who should be included in the nation and who should be excluded. For example, in his superb study of policing the US–Mexico border in the 1990s, Joseph Nevins (2002) argues that policy became caught up in arguments about the ethnic identity of the US and excluding Latinos (see also Ackleson, 1999; Mains, 2002). In his definitive study of the Russo–Finnish boundary, Passi (1996) uses debates about where the boundary lay to illustrate the emergence of a sense of Finnish nationhood in opposition to the perceived Russian threat.

There is some overlap between these fields of study, which is hardly surprising for, as Ó Tuathail and Dalby suggest, critical geopolitics ‘pays particular attention to the boundary drawing practices and performances that characterize the everyday life of states’ (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998: p. 3). In the post-Soviet context, geographers have applied critical geopolitical approaches to the study of the newly independent Baltic states and Finland, in particular to the intersections of struggles over their national and ethnic identity and their geopolitical relationships with Russia and the EU. They have paid special attention to the place of international boundaries in these national narratives (Aalto & Berg, 2002; Berg & Oros, 2000; Kuus, 2002; Paasi, 1996; Moisiu, 1998), clearly demonstrating that, ‘Borders and boundary-producing practices reveal the national experience of place and space’ (Berg & Oros, 2000: p. 3).

In follows from these points that the study of the international relations of states, in this case the Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over boundary questions, cannot be understood without discussion of domestic policy agendas and struggles. This has been an important debate within international relations (Ashley, 1987, 1989; Waltz, 1979, 1996). In the context of Uzbekistan, Kazemi (2003) and Horsman (1999) have demonstrated the importance of domestic sources of foreign policy.

In the light of these observations, this paper makes two main arguments.

Firstly, the explanation for the events of 1999 and 2000 is not to be found purely in the international arena, but the domestic. The government of Uzbekistan faced concerted new opposition movements, to which it responded with a variety of strategies to tighten its control over both territorial space and geopolitical discursive space. Certain elements of the opposition in Kyrgyzstan seized on these Uzbekistani measures in their struggle with the administration of President Askar Akaev.

They linked border and customs issues to popular concerns over natural resources and national weakness, interpreting them as a comprehensive indictment of key planks of Akaev's presidency. Faced with mounting unpopularity and a deepening economic crisis in the approach to crucial elections, Akaev used the border in various ways to attempt to counter opposition propaganda. 'Border disputes' were important ways for rival political factions to assert their control over national space through various textual, cartographic, military and governmental strategies. Thus just as discussion of 'the border' was as inseparable from power struggles within Kyrgyzstan as it was in Uzbekistan, these two fields of domestic conflict in turn were inseparable from each other. It is from a close analysis of these interactions that a fuller picture of 'the border dispute' arises.

Secondly, this study of the evolving border dispute demonstrates that foreign policy debates are not merely about statecraft but, as Ó Tuathail proposes (1996: p. 7), are part of an ensemble of acts that create national identities. 'The border' allowed presidents and their opponents to assert their geopolitical visions of the relationship between state, nation, and territory—and underlined their roles as the personal champions of these ideas. Dodds suggests that foreign policy discourse is not merely a description of the power relations and exchanges between states, but serves to create and police boundaries of identity that are ideological visions of who belongs within the state and who does not (Dodds, 1994: p. 199–202). The Ferghana Valley dispute substantiates this proposition, as 'the border' was variously constructed not merely as a political line between states but as a moral line drawn through society, a contested attempt to demarcate who should belong within the new polities, and who should not.

However, this article also seeks to contribute to the practice of critical geopolitical studies of boundaries by extending the discussion in three areas where dominant practice has been identified as in need of development.

Firstly, it notes Toal's belated recognition of the need within critical geopolitics for detailed studies of non-western societies (Toal, 2003). Indeed, in discussing the possibilities of a 'feminist geopolitics', Dowler and Sharp worry that the subject is becoming increasingly eurocentric (Dowler & Sharp, 2001: p. 165).

Secondly, in its structure, this paper follows Herbert in advocating the analysis of the same event as it unfolds in more than one country. Like critical international relations theory, (Herbert, 1996: p. 644), much work in critical geopolitics exclusively considers, or majors on, only one state. Again, there are notable exceptions (Dalby, 1993; Dodds, 1997), but, as the majority of chapters in the showpiece collection *Geopolitical Traditions* demonstrate (Dodds & Atkinson, 2000), Herbert's critique remains pertinent. If geopolitical identities are always formed in relation to other states, to consider them in isolation is to disembled them from the actual conditions of international relations in which they are formed, and increase the risk of producing a sophisticated textual-discursive analysis that fails to adequately understand political reality.

Finally, this work heeds the admonition of feminist geographers for critical geopolitics to take gender seriously (Sharp, 1998, 2000b; Smith, 2001; Staeheli, 2001; Dowler & Sharp, 2001: p. 165), and draws on feminist international relations

theory (IR) to facilitate this. Whilst early feminist work in IR was concerned with making women visible (Enloe, 1989), more recent scholarship has sought to problematise masculinity or, as Zalewski put it in an influential formulation, move attention from ‘the “Woman” question to the “Man” question in international relations’ (Zalewski, 1998). This work seeks not only to make men visible as men in international relations (Murphy, 1998), but also how the performance of international relations articulates and re-articulates sexualised masculine national identities (Cohn, 1998; Niva, 1998; Weber, 1999). The voluminous work on IR in Central Asia has failed to come to terms with this (see for example Allison and Jonson, 2001; Bertsch, Craft, Jones, & Beck, 2000), and this article will draw attention to the sexual and gendered nature of the border dispute.

All of these points are explored in the text and restated in the conclusion.

Methodology

Methodologically, this article studies as its raw materials the texts, pronouncements, and practices relayed in Kyrgyz and Uzbek newspapers as a set signifying practices constituting a ‘discourse’ of ‘foreign policy’. In her study of the representation of US national identity in media coverage of policing the boundary with Mexico, Mains contends that, ‘News media are particularly significant in relation to national identity and for understanding how designated issues are assigned greater importance in times of political change’ (Mains, 2002: p. 293). Tracing a number of prominent newspapers written in Uzbek and Kyrgyz, it examines the way in which every reference found to state borders between January 1999 and September 2000 was framed in wider political discourse. In this sense, it broadly corresponds to the approach in McFarlane and Hay’s study of ‘popular geopolitics’ in *The Australian’s* coverage of the 1999 Seattle anti-WTO protests (McFarlane & Hay, 2003). However, the media culture of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000 are entirely different to that of Australia at the same time. Whereas McFarlane and Hay labour to disabuse their readers of the notion that newspapers are objective, few in Central Asia would have believed that of their papers in the first place. Both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan had state-owned newspapers, produced at subsidised prices and widely distributed, which served as unambiguous mouth-pieces of government propaganda. Whilst there were no independent newspapers in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan at that time hosted a number of newspapers owned by anti-government, and often nationalistic, elites, which carried the (often polemical) perspectives of their owners or backers, who were frequently actively involved in opposition politics. Taken together, these papers are thus an excellent way to read elite geopolitical visions. In Uzbekistan, the only critical print media in operation was clandestine. Principally, the underground Islamist movement Hezb-ut Tahrir, circulated a leaflet dated January 27 2000 with the title, ‘Muslims do not make friends with Jews’, denouncing Karimov as a Jew, and calling for the replacement of independent nation-states with a single Caliphate. It was impossible to study the impact these activities at that time, as mere possession of this material constituted sufficient grounds for arrest.

In his critical study of security and identity in post-colonial Sri Lanka, Krishna supplements a similar media study with interviews with key actors (Krishna, 1999: chapter 6). However, these were taken many years after the events—an avenue not normally open to researchers investigating conflicts as they occur. I did conduct some interviews with officials, but these became increasingly risky enterprises as the seriousness of the issue intensified and the legal and political status of the border regions became increasingly uncertain. Furthermore, officials either tended to repeat the messages in government newspapers, or vouchsafed dissenting opinion on the understanding of anonymity, rendering their material difficult to use. Television had a wider reach than newspapers, but this was even more tightly in government hands and tended to reproduce the same propaganda as the newspapers did, but was harder, logistically, to analyse. For these reasons, this study thus focuses primarily on newspapers. All translations from Uzbek and Kyrgyz are my own.

Sharp criticises the critical geopolitics of Ó Tuathail for ‘re-masculining geopolitics’ by producing “a rather vague, impersonal and uncommitted embodiment” (Sharp, 2000b: p. 362). Whilst I present here a textual study, it is in no sense a dispassionate attempt to merely debunk accepted theories out of intellectual curiosity. Moving down from Northern Kyrgyzstan, I conducted field research in the Kyrgyzstani border city of Osh from January 1999 until October 2000. I had lived in Osh (see Fig. 1) 2 years prior to this, and previously over the border in the Uzbekistani city of Ferghana, at a time when the border had been relatively open. Living in the Valley for a number of years, I thus witnessed and personally experienced the impact of all the events that I will describe in this paper. As the border closed and both governments became increasingly authoritarian, I saw friends and acquaintances humiliated and assaulted at borders, and intimidated by the authorities for political reasons—and experienced something of the former myself. This article is thus an attempt to challenge the discursive framework within which that violence occurred.

The border dispute and the government press in Uzbekistan

President Karimov of Uzbekistan, the former Uzbek Communist Party leader, has propagated a strong sense of historical destiny around myths of independent statehood, firm leadership, and national identity. His heavy-handed rule tolerates little internal dissent, and has drawn much criticism from human rights organisations.¹ In February 1999, however, the sense of stability that he had carefully fostered was shattered by a series of simultaneous bomb attacks on prominent symbolic targets in the capital Tashkent, one of them narrowly missing Karimov himself. The enraged President pinned the blame on a supposed coalition of Islamist and more secular opponents. Further violent incidents followed, and in the summer Kyrgyzstan’s neighbouring Batken region was invaded by guerrillas of the

¹ For example, New York based Human Rights Watch. See ‘Human Rights Abuse in Uzbekistan’, Human Rights Watch, New York, September 2001.

so-called Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), calling for the replacement of Islam Karimov's secular regime with an Islamic state. Combined with the intensification of activities of high-profile exiled opponents and the underground pan-Islamist movement Hezb-ut Tahrir, and with high poverty levels increasing the potential for dissatisfaction to be channelled into opposition (Ilkhamov, 2001), the leadership of President Karimov faced a greater challenge than at any time since he had assumed power a decade earlier.

President Karimov's response to the Tashkent blasts was decisive and harsh. Mass arrests of thousands of people accompanied sweeping crackdowns on any possible source of dissent. Military and security forces were placed on high alert. The previously highly porous state border formed a vital front in this reaction, being militarised and, at times, completely sealed off. Border defence units were reorganised and upgraded. The customs regime was tightened up and rules were widely publicised (*O'zbekiston Respublikasi Adliya Vazirligi*, 2000). New checkpoints were established and unmanned crossings closed, as control of passport and visa regulations was tightened up. This was a wholesale retreat from President Karimov's stated aim at independence of preserving open borders and free travel in Central Asia, which he had believed was to the state's and the region's collective advantage (Karimov, 1992: p. 25).

I studied the daily government paper *Halq So'zi*, which channels the government's position to its readership. Examining all the articles where 'the border' was mentioned, it is apparent that *Halq So'zi* repeatedly framed the state border of Uzbekistan as the boundary between a whole series of binary dualisms: order and disorder, progress and backwardness, stability and chaos, wealth and poverty. The state boundary was not just a line on a map established by treaty, but a moral border between good and evil. At the same time, it served to enscript the official vision of Uzbek identity, of who belonged within the new Uzbekistan, and who did not. In order for this binary scheme to function, it was continually reworked and re-presented. This section examines six discursive strategies in *Halq So'zi's* reporting of the border that unabatingly reproduced this complicated ideological vision of post-Soviet Central Asian political space.

Agnew has argued that, "Boundary regions are crucial settings for the making of national-state distinctions" (Agnew, 2001: p. 13). The first strategy employed by *Halq So'zi* as a vehicle to present its binary geopolitical vision was the embodied articulation of the border as the division between two moral orders. Throughout 1999 *Halq So'zi* drew on a genre of article whereby individual people described their purported experiences of 'looking over the border.' Parliamentary deputy Qurbon Amirqulov gave one such eloquent testimony in an article published on 24th February, a week after the Tashkent bombs:

Because the Surhon Valley neighbours with Afghanistan, we have the opportunity to compare life on both banks of the river, and see that the difference is like that between earth and the sky. Afghanistan has been an Islamic state for 10 years, but see, all the same the poverty of the people has not been filled with bread, peace and safety has not come to their homes, and the tears of the people

have not stopped flowing. . . We are always one with Islam Karimov, and support his patriotic politics.²

With such discursive moves *Halq So'zi* continually linked the President with the defence of the border, and in no more imaginative a way than that provided by a schoolteacher who touchingly named his new son 'Islam Abdug'anivich Karimov', the full name of the president. In recognition of this, the local mayor invited him to an official reception. The proud father explained that he had named his son so as a sign of respect for the President:

We are located close to Afghanistan and Tajikistan. . . so more than others we greatly appreciate the importance of a peaceful and contented life.³

It is improbable that they could actually see violence daily: 'seeing' is a way of conveying an embodied sense of the proximity of danger. This illustrates of Anzaldua's contention that, "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (Anzaldua, 1999 (1987): p. 25).

Secondly, in articles detailing the apprehension of 'extremists' and 'terrorists' at the border possessing drugs, the notion of Uzbekistan as a haven of abundance and peace surrounded by lands of misery and evil was performed and enacted. The mechanism of this conflation strategy was simple: detailed reports about arrests at the border, both in *Halq So'zi* and mirrored in television reporting. On one level these accounts were transparent, being descriptions about arrests made at a certain border and the apprehension of certain goods. However, these reports contained a number of subtle devices. For example, in one article, President Karimov explained the path of the fundamentalist: "They begin with corrupt intentions, then arms, then narcotics. . .", and eventually pornography, "Last year our customs officials intercepted 500 pornographic films". This argument was substantiated by the juxtaposition of reports on arrests at the border. Following Karimov's remarks about pornography, *Halq So'zi* reported that the previous night border guards intercepted Russian citizens on the train from Tadjikistan with 200 bullets, more than 10 weapons, bullet-proof vests, and radio units hidden amongst household goods. No evidence of linkage was drawn between these people and religious groups, yet by throwing these ideas and sentences together, and doing this day in and day out, *Halq So'zi* sought to establish connections as truth in the minds of the public. Avalos and Welchman suggest that the drama of media coverage of the apprehension of Mexicans by the US border patrol mythologises and specularizes the border in a Morality Play, placing the border at the heart of US identity, not at its skin (Avalos & Welchman, 1996: p. 189) the same can be observed in Uzbekistan.

² 'Alpomishni yengib bo'lmaydi', *Halq So'zi* 38 (2076), 24/02/1999: 1.

³ 'Ham havas, ham niyat.' *Halq So'zi* (2104), 3/4/1999: 1.

Dodds insists that the representation of places and people as ‘foreign’ is crucial to the discursive performance of foreign policy (Dodds, 1993: p. 73). The makes of car of the unsavoury individuals apprehended at the border were only mentioned by *Halq So’zi* in two cases: a Volkswagen and a Volvo.⁴ In certain Soviet and post-Soviet social understandings, owning a ‘foreign’ car carries a hint of suspect patriotism, of wealth accrued by dishonest means. The Volkswagen driver had religious material published by Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the article alleged that a genuine believer would have been reading Imom Bukhariy. Bukhariy was a compiler of the primary Hadith variant used by Central Asian Islamic scholars. Born in Bukhara, he is associated in current nationalist interpretations of history with the Uzbek nation. Apparently incidental details such as make of car and what a person was *not* reading locate them outside the realm of authentic Uzbekness as defined by the ‘ideology of national independence’. Thus their opposition could be explained by essential deficiency, rather than considered political choice. They had forgotten what a homeland was,⁵ and were, therefore, less than human as ‘those without a homeland are without a conscience.’⁶ As Berg and Oros argue of Estonia, geopolitical visions require ‘natural’ borders and visualised mental dividing lines to build the nations, to recognise ‘foreign’ and ‘hostile’ territories (Berg & Oros, 2000: p. 603). The state boundary in Uzbekistan became a site where the Uzbek population was taught to differentiate between the domestic and the hostile other.

Thirdly, the strength of Uzbekistan’s border was contrasted with the weakness of neighbouring states’ borders. For example, the invasion of Kyrgyzstan’s Batken region by IMU guerrillas (explained as Islamist fundamentalists engaging in terrorism in order to profit from the drugs trade), was blamed by *Halq So’zi* on the inability of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to control the flow of drugs across their borders.⁷ This weakness was contrasted with the struggle that Uzbekistan was putting up. The article continued by asking if the same thing could happen in Uzbekistan; “No, in this country control is very strong”, argued the paper, because it pinches the flow of drugs and has a force of well-trained officials. Firm control of the state border was called for, lest it be engulfed by disorder, and President Islam Karimov was the strong leader who was delivering that.

Fourthly, although the idea of danger at the border was dominated by the trio of drugs, terrorism, and religious extremism, a number of articles drew attention to other dangers threatening to break in upon the state. These included the threat of pollution from an aluminium smelting plant poorly maintained by struggling Tajikistan,⁸ radioactive materials hidden in a consignment of metals seized as they

⁴ ‘Bojhonada nima gap? Ularning niyati buzuq edi’, *Halq So’zi* 96 (2134), 15/5/1999: 2.

⁵ *Halq So’zi* 149 (2187), 29/07/1999.

⁶ *Halq So’zi* 113 (2151), 09/06/1999.

⁷ ‘Katta fitnaning bir xalqasi’, *Halq So’zi* 179 (2217) 09/09/1999: 1; ‘Narkobiznes—terrorning moliyaviy rahnamosi’, *Halq So’zi* 190 (2228) 24/09/1999: 1.

⁸ ‘Tojikiston alyumin zavodi salbiy ta’sir qiladigan zonadagi ijtimoiy-ekologik vaziyatni barqarorlashtirishga bag’ishlangan xalqaro uchrashuv ishtirokchilarining Tojikiston Respublikasi Majlisi Oliy hamda O’zbekiston Respublikasi Oliy Majlisiga Murojati’, *Halq So’zi* 84 (2122) 30/04/1999: 1.

were being brought over the border from Kazakhstan, apparently en route to Pakistan,⁹ and forged dollars circulating in southern Kazakhstan along the Uzbek border.¹⁰

The most peculiar of these unusual threats was locust infestation. The paper carried a number of reports on the threat that locusts posed to Uzbekistan. These came from bordering regions of neighbouring states, and the paper emphasised that this was because these states had not maintained proper control. In contrast, it stressed that Uzbekistan had maintained the fight against pest infestation, and that President Karimov had personally overseen a meeting of an emergency committee where he decided to actually take the fight into the territory of neighbouring states!¹¹ One can arguably detect a gendered notion of leadership: the man for the moment, resolutely stamping out insects that feminised and weakened neighbouring states are powerless before. Whilst neighbouring states have grown weak and unruly, Islam Karimov is still resolutely holding back at the border the foe that would ravage Uzbekistan's national wealth.

Fifthly, narratives of post-independence threats were interwoven with ancient ones in a historical myth of the ongoing struggle between Uzbekistan and the Uzbek people and those traitors who join with the insidious outside forces to plot the downfall of the state. A staple theme of President Karimov has been that modern Uzbekistan is the successor to the great states and leaders of the past that existed on its soil, and the heir to their spiritual, cultural and political legacy. It is only fitting that it should be the heir to their battles, too, which was the theme of a November 1999 article, "The undying lessons of history". The warrior-leader of the 13th century Horazim state, Jaloloddin Manguberdi, and the legendary hero of the Alpomish epic (*Yo'ldosh O'g'li*, 1998) are both characters that have been widely celebrated as part of Uzbekistan's nation-state building project.¹² The President underlined the fact that these men stood for values such as a strong state, patriotism, and loyalty:

No matter what people or country, far more than disasters from outside one must be extremely wary of those wicked individuals and faithless traitors emerging from within who, putting their own interests above everything else, rise up against the homeland that nurtured them.¹³

This reasoning strongly implies that President Karimov is their successor; indeed, he has cultivated the 'strong leader' image and drawn inspiration from the example of Amir Timur in particular.

⁹ *Halq So'zi* 64 (2361), 04/04/2000.

¹⁰ Qalbaki dollarlar', *Halq So'zi* 251 (2289) 22/12/1999: 1.

¹¹ 'Zararkunandalarga qarshi kurash—muhim vazifa', *Halq So'zi* 136 (2174) 19/07/1999:1.

¹² In the 1952 Stalinist attack on Central Asian epics, Alpomish was condemned by Uzbek academics for distorting the characteristics of working people, but glorifying the representatives of the ruling classes and their exploitative and warlike behaviour (Karimov, 1994).

¹³ 'Tarixning o'chmas saboqlari', *Halq So'zi* 230 (2268), 20/11/1999: 3.

Amir Timur (1336–1405), portrayed by Marlowe as ‘the scourge of God’, built a large empire based in Samarkand, and was described as a destructive conqueror by Soviet historians. However, in independence he has been reinterpreted as a just ruler and strong state-builder presiding over an Uzbek cultural and artistic Renaissance (Ali, 1996; Jalolov & Qo’chqor, 2000: p. 15), his brutal excesses excused as an inevitable product of his location in the ruling feudal class (Ahmedov, 1996; Karimov & Shamsutdinov, 1997). Indeed, a cult has been fostered around him as “the centrepiece of an Uzbek national ideology” (Melvin, 2000: p. 46). President Karimov unveiled an impressive equestrian statue of him in Tashkent in 1993 (that, tellingly, replaced Karl Marx) and presided over grand celebrations of his 660th anniversary culminating in 1996 (Petersen, 1996). Significant amounts of academic scholarship and more popular literature have accompanied the new freedom to re-evaluate the legacy of Timur (Ivanin, 1994 (1875); Keren, 1999 (1978); O’rinboev, 1992).

In ceaselessly urging his people to understand the importance of their past (Karimov, 1998), Islam Karimov has framed a conception of his own rule as legitimate, modelling himself on Timur (Thaulow, 2001: p. 16). Following the Tashkent bomb blasts, two further education teachers edited a book of poetry commemorating the events with contributions from builders, accountants, students, policemen and schoolchildren as well as national poets. The themes of homeland and nation were central, alongside support for the President. The longest poem was a *doston* by Habib Sa’dulla entitled ‘Jarohat’, or ‘wound.’ Following the events from explosions to funerals, one section of terrific impact was entitled ‘The Verdict of the Ancestors.’ Sa’dulla marshalled a role-call of past luminaries of science, religion, statecraft and literature claimed as forefathers of modern Uzbekistan, including Bukhariy, Naqshband, Farg’oni, Ulug’bek, Navoiy, Bobur and Cho’lpon, to condemn the attacks. This preceded the crescendo of the *doston*, a section called ‘the meeting.’ Here, Timur himself appears in a vision to the startled President Karimov, affirming the leadership of a humble Karimov whom Timur addresses as ‘my child’ (Hasanov & Hasanov, 1999: p. 116–154).

This explicit linking of Islam Karimov with Timur was apparent in *Halq So’zi*’s portrayal of the President as the defender of the border, reorganising border forces and making them directly answerable to himself. For example, a letter to *Halq So’zi* from some folk living alongside the Tajik border thanked the President for keeping them safe from the terrible things they saw across the border. A Timur quotation adorned the letter: “a country without a head is like a body without a soul”.¹⁴ This is a typical example of the nation-as-body analogy (Campbell, 1998: p. 9–13), a representational strategy which casts the polity as an indivisible living entity whose life must be protected at all costs. By defending the state border, President Karimov was emulating Timur in perfecting the body politic, and was thus a legitimate leader.

In his study of geopolitical representations of danger and the construction of Finnish identity, Moisio argues that ‘the discourse of Finnish national identity is still

¹⁴ ‘Xalqini sevganni haq ham sevadi’, *Halq So’zi* 39 (2077), 25/2/1999: 1.

based on the ideas of repelling a danger, possessing distinct boundaries, defending those boundaries and maintaining an alliance between the state and the nation' (Moisio, 1998: p. 120). The example of Uzbekistan thus furnishes a very similar example.

The sixth and final strategy that *Halq So'zi's* employed to produce of a binary dualistic geopolitical vision of post-Soviet Central Asia was the reversal of the flow over the border into Uzbekistan. The border was portrayed as the site where the prosperity of Uzbekistan leaked out. *Halq So'zi* reported many instances of customs officers apprehending people trying to secrete over the state borders items such as money,¹⁵ an electric transformer,¹⁶ honey,¹⁷ and meat.¹⁸

However the main concern was the booming trade in illegal scrap metals, largely smuggled to Kyrgyzstan before being sold on legally to China.¹⁹ The stripping of power and communications cables was widely reported, and blamed by the heads of the electricity supply industry for "inflicting great damage on our country's economy" and impeding the development of the republic".²⁰ New measures were introduced in November 1999 and March 2000 reorganising the scrap metal processing industry and introducing harsher laws that promised, "No mercy for copper thieves."²¹ The papers informed their readers that although since 1997 alone 3000 km of high quality telecommunications line had been installed to promote the "wealth and welfare of our country",²² thieving acts of "hooliganism" were threatening this.²³ On 13th March, *Halq So'zi* stressed that a group of criminals with 40 tonnes of metal were apprehended at a site on the border with Kyrgyzstan where no border control station was located. This point served to justify the stringent and disruptive new border regime.²⁴

There was no discussion of why people were prepared to risk being caught and imprisoned for inflicting such damage on their own infrastructure. In the copious reporting of these thefts, 'hooliganism' or criminality/evil were identified as the motives. It is not enough simply to explain these lacunae by dismissing *Halq So'zi* as toothless. In good Soviet Uzbekistani tradition (Ikhamov, 2001: p. 38–39), *Halq So'zi* ran various articles over the year critical of this mayor or of that service for failing to meet expected standards,²⁵ and reported convictions of officials for malpractice.²⁶ An acknowledgement that poverty drove many to these acts would

¹⁵ 'Bojhonada: 4200 dollar bilan ketayotgan yo'lovchi', *Halq So'zi* 14 (2052), 22/01/1999: 1.

¹⁶ 'Xovosga chiroq kerak emasmi?', *Halq So'zi* 14 (2052), 22/01/1999: 4.

¹⁷ 'Bojhona: Asalxo'r Inomiddin', *Halq So'zi* 111 (2149), 05/06/1999: 3.

¹⁸ 'Go'shfurushlar qo'lga tushdi', *Halq So'zi* 5 (2043), 08/01/1999: 1.

¹⁹ Megoran, Nick, May 2000, 'Scrap metal on the Silk Road'. *Eurasia Insight* (New York: OSI).

²⁰ *Halq So'zi* 45 (2342), 4/03/2000.

²¹ Mis o'g'rilariga shafqat yo'q', *Halq So'zi* 228 (2266), 18/11/1999: 4.

²² *ibid.*

²³ 'Rangli metall Shaydolari', *Farg'ona Haqiqati* 30 (20,632) 13/04/2000.

²⁴ 'Qalloblarning misi chiqdi', *Halq So'zi* 50 (2088), 13/03/1999: 4.

²⁵ According to *Halq So'zi* the administration of Marg'ilon was censored for preventing the blossoming of this ancient Silk Road town that was now possible under national independence ('O'ylanmasdan chiqarilgan qaror', *Halq So'zi* 192 (2230), 28/09/1999: 3.

²⁶ For example, the article 'Hokim qonunni tan olmasa...', an investigation into the corruption of a disgraced official; *Halq So'zi* 15, (2053) 23/01/1999: 1.

have ruptured the narratives of a rich and happy Uzbekistan that only knows depuration by the glances it casts from safely behind its border. Likewise, there was no mention of people smuggling foodstuffs, livestock and other goods *into* Uzbekistan, a readily observable phenomenon. Similarly, the issue of bribery and corruption of customs officers and border guards, and thus their complicity in smuggling rackets, was entirely ignored. The government was not willing to see its myth of plenitude and satisfaction challenged, or to destabilise its key discursive strategy of the geographical imagination of rich land/poor land, articulated at the state border. Together they wove a powerful geopolitical vision of what Uzbekistan was: of who was inside that moral commonwealth, and who outside.

In many instances, these discursive techniques were simply the re-appropriation of Soviet discourses. For example, Uzbekistan witnessed in the 1930s a state-led, pseudo-military, patriotic campaign against a locust infestation blamed on British intrigue across the border (Strong, 1930). In her ground-breaking study of the USSR's border policy, Chandler argues that border controls took on extraordinary significance because "Stalin considered the world outside to be plotting and scheming to conquer his government from without and overthrow it from within" (Chandler, 1998: p. 6). In the 1980s, KGB chief Fedorchuk accused Western "centres of ideological diversion" of systematically violating Soviet borders by conducting illegal trade (Chandler, 1998: p. 88). The threat of 'outside forces' held back at the border was a fear that animated pre-Soviet and post-Soviet Uzbekistan, and the campaign against them acted to mobilise populations and imbue ideology. In his study of discourses of danger in USA history, Campbell (1998) has identified recurring use of the same strategy in different times and with different foes: the same process can be observed in relation to Uzbekistan.

To conclude, in Uzbekistani official discourse during 1999, the 'border' was not merely the location of Uzbekistan's defence of its territory and security. It was also a moral border, a cartography of knowledge mapping a geopolitical vision of a vulnerable post-Soviet political space that enabled the Uzbek elite to write its authority over the material and social landscapes of Uzbekistan. The border demarcated a historically continuous binary dualism of a happy and well-governed Uzbekistan from the chaos of neighbouring states, and legitimised the authoritarian rule of President karimov as the sole guarantor of the nation's continued welfare. As Paasi argues, 'Boundaries are not therefore merely lines on the ground but, above all, manifestations of social practice and discourse' (Paasi, 1999: p. 75).

The border dispute and the press in Kyrgyzstan

The story of Kyrgyzstani political formation in the period of independence is markedly different to that of Uzbekistan. By 1991, Kyrgyz barely formed a majority in their own state. Only belatedly had the rural and nomadic Kyrgyz begun to migrate in large numbers to urban areas. Russian was essentially the language of the elites, with many Kyrgyz elites far more proficient in Russian than in Kyrgyz. Germans, Russians and other European immigrants formed the cores of

northern towns such as the capital Bishkek, and southern towns, including the second city Osh, were dominated by Uzbeks. A dispute over an insensitive land allocation from Uzbek farmers to Kyrgyz immigrants in Osh led to days of inter-communal fighting in 1990 that left hundreds dead and injured. With a far less homogenous population than Uzbekistan, and with intellectual, industrial, cultural and commercial life dependent to a far greater degree on titular minorities, President Akaev has had to tread a careful line in official attempts to define the ideological meaning of the nation, and seemed to be more internationalist than Karimov in his political outlook, making Kyrgyzstan the first CIS state both to establish an independent currency, and join the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Scholars commonly differentiate between *ethnic* and *civic* forms of nationalism (Geertz, 1994; Lecours, 2000). Ethnic nationalism equates the nation with the dominant ethnic group, whereas civic nationalism stresses incorporation into the nation on the basis of citizenship. This distinction matters enormously in contemporary Kyrgyzstan as it mattered in the Soviet Union, where the position of an individual in this system, based on the ethnic ascription in their passports, had important implications for life chances and access to scarce resources (Brubaker, 1996: Chapter 2). It is a distinction that Bohr and Crisp use to map the terrain of Kyrgyzstani political struggle. They identify an inclusive civic nationalism of President Askar Akaev, who has sought to promote forms of national belonging encompassing all ethnic groups, and a “virulent strain” of ethnic nationalism associated with extreme opposition movements and their newspapers, that equate the national with Kyrgyz ethnicity (Bohr & Crisp, 1996: p. 403).

I also find the ethnic/civic nationalism distinction to be of great utility in describing differing positions taken by competing actors in domestic Kyrgyz power struggles. However, I will argue in this paper that positions are not as clear cut as Bohr and Crisp suggest. I suggest that Askar Akaev moved between two inherently contradictory positions of ethnic and civic nationalism. The civic nationalism was built around the idea encapsulated in President Akaev’s key slogan, ‘Kyrgyzstan is our common home’, an inclusive homeland in which all groups can participate. His ethnic nationalism was fostered upon a cult of ‘Manas’, the legendary warrior leader whose memory is preserved in an extraordinary oral epic, the longest poem in the world, and whose 1000th anniversary was, entirely arbitrarily, celebrated in 1995 at the heart of the government’s national identity building programme (Aydarkulov, 1994; Brudnyi, 1995; Asankanov and Bekmuhamedova, 1999: p. 119–123). The political opposition, on the other hand, defined ‘the nation’ as unambiguously ethnic, depicting the territory of Kyrgyzstan as primarily the home of Kyrgyz people and the bearer of Kyrgyz virtue. The contradictions and conflicts between these two antagonistic positions were central to understanding ‘the border conflict’, and the formation of political identities in Kyrgyzstan.

The border dispute and the opposition press in Kyrgyzstan

Paasi argues that the major challenge for boundary studies is to analyse how state-centred naturalization of space is produced and, ‘how the exclusions and

inclusions between ‘We’ and ‘Them’ that it implies are historically constructed and shaped in relation to power, various events, episodes and struggles’ (Paasi, 1999: p. 83). In Kyrgyzstan, this process was initially driven by opposition attacks on the government over its border policy (or lack thereof), attacks that constructed the border as both marking territorial limits and advocating a vision of an exclusive ethnic national identity.

From the dramatic deterioration in relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan following Uzbekistan’s unilateral closure of the border in February 1999 and the suspension of cross-border traffic, the pages of the Kyrgyz opposition press became filled with alarming reports on the impacts. One of the first examples is provided by an hysterical article published in *Aalam* in February 2000 under the title “Kyrgyzstan—here today, gone tomorrow?” with a dramatic cartoon map depicting helpless Kyrgyzstan being consumed at its borders by ferocious ogres coming from the general directions of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and China (Fig. 2).

The author begins with a gem of ancient statecraft:

In the old days a khan would give this counsel to his son: ‘If, during your reign, you add one inch of land to your country you are a great khan. If you



Fig. 2. “Kyrgyzstan—here today, gone tomorrow?” (“Bügün Kırğızstan Bar: Erteng jok bolup ketishi мүмкүн?”, *Aalam* 7 (259), 34/02/1999–02/03/1999).

don't even add one inch, but nonetheless lose not an inch, you are an average khan. However if you lose even one inch of the country's land then the people will curse you, you are bad khan- therefore guard your land like your right hand'.

This historical allusion is clearly a challenge to President Akaev to protect the state border of the body politic as one would protect one's own body. The article goes on to accumulate evidence that the President had already failed this test. Water was flowing to neighbouring states without their paying for it. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were swallowing up sections of Kyrgyz border area. Chinese herders were penetrating deep into Kyrgyz land for pasture. Uzbekistan was advancing its border posts into Kyrgyz territory. Tajiks were occupying whole areas inside Batken province, settling in land vacated by impoverished Kyrgyz who emigrated abroad or to the cities. "Currently it is as if someone drove a donkey-cart through our map, careering all over the place"—not the way a khan should oversee his territory. The article poured scorn on President Akaev's civic nationalism:

The slogan 'Kyrgyzstan is our common home' has sunk deep into the hearts of everyone. You remember it every time you see someone of a different nationality,

it sneered. This scornful treatment of a key conceptual plank of the president's policy transforms a geographical notion of harmony and tolerance to an ironic indictment of a state policy that fails to protect the country against illegal immigration. The paper continued:

Another 10–15 years of this 'politics of hospitality' and it is possible that we will not be able to find our border at all. But, thanks be to God, we have a number of deputies who take up this matter.

These were opposition parliamentary opponents and hopeful presidential challengers of Askar Akaev, Daniyar Üsönöv and Ömürbek Tekebaev. For the paper, "The border question is not a joke, it is extremely important, and may be the issue which decides the future of our country".

Shortly afterwards, *Aalam* ran another polemic damning government border policies, entitled, "Are the neighbouring states placing an economic blockade on Kyrgyzstan?" The article was a comprehensive critique of Kyrgyzstan's foreign relations, an arena in which President Akaev sought to make much political capital, being bullish about his reputation abroad as a democrat and achievements such as joining the WTO. *Olcott, Åslund and Garnett (1999: p. 126)* wrote that the financial crisis of 1998 forced Kyrgyzstan to choose between the obligations of its customs union with Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus, and international trade: by joining the WTO it chose the latter. *Aalam* argued that this was the wrong choice, since it had created intolerable conditions as neighbouring states imposed 200% tariff rises on Kyrgyzstan's exports in retaliation

for breaking ranks. Added to the bribes taken at each new border post, Kyrgyz traders were being, “suffocated”.²⁷

Aalam further charged that it was now “easier to fly to Turkey²⁸ and back than to get across the border to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan”. Whilst literally untrue, this hyperbole brought into relief the radical geopolitical dislocation that Kyrgyzstan was experiencing. Regular summits between Central Asian leaders produced fine-sounding words and declarations about eternal friendship and ‘open’ borders, but are farcical as the reality on the border showed: “There is no difference between a meeting of the CIS presidents and a group of drunkards in a sauna”, the paper derided. The border issue showed that Kyrgyzstan needed these neighbours more than America and the WTO, therefore: “Our foreign policy should begin not at the far side of the oceans, but with our neighbours”.

Other opposition papers subjected the government to mounting criticism over the border issue during the spring of 1999. *Kyrgyz Ruhu* was alarmed that Uzbekistani security forces crossed the border apparently at will to snatch Kyrgyzstani citizens whom they suspected of having links with anti-Karimov groups.²⁹ *Asaba* ran an interview with filmmaker and outspoken opposition deputy, Dooronbek Sadirbaev, who was questioned about Uzbekistan’s border closures. He accused Uzbek forces of penetrating 24 km deep into Kyrgyzstan’s territory, aided by the local authorities who illegally sell on “the Kyrgyz lands which have been handed down from father to son, for one plate of *palov* and 200 grams of cognac”.³⁰ “If we don’t quickly demarcate the border with our neighbours, it will later be very difficult to prove that those lands are ours”, warned Sadirbaev. The interviewer commented that the Kyrgyz would do “well to heed the wisdom and knowledge of Sadirbaev, who has studied the 800 year history of our border”. Quite what this time scale refers to is not explained, but it had rhetorical value in bolstering Sadirbaev’s image as champion of the border and true patriot.

In a polemic against President Akaev’s policy towards Uzbekistan, *Res Publica* asserted that Uzbekistan was less an ally than a would-be ‘regional hegemon’³¹, failing to respect Kyrgyzstan’s borders. This discussion on foreign policy and borders moved to a consideration of the ideal state, which *Res Publica* believed had an ethnically and linguistically homogenous population of 30–100 million people. However, only 61.2% of Kyrgyzstan’s paltry 4.7 m inhabitants were ‘native’ due to large numbers of Uzbeks and Russians, and although 10 years had lapsed since the law making Kyrgyz the state language, it had clearly failed, as Russian was still used more in the public sphere. The discussion shifted from the geopolitical frailty

²⁷ Later that spring I spoke to a truck driver who normally spent the spring and summer transporting fresh produce to Russia: he was glumly sitting at home, the expense of the new border arrangements having made his trade uneconomical. The border and customs issue compounded a fall in Kyrgyzstani trade with Russia as a consequence of the latter’s financial crisis in 1998 (Olcott et al., 1999: p. 126).

²⁸ An important trading partner, and well served by Turkish Airlines.

²⁹ ‘Tüshük Sindromu’, *Kirgiz Ruhu* 10 (315), 23/04/1999: 5.

³⁰ ‘Sadirbaev bir Akaevdi on Karimovgo almashpayt’, *Asaba* 10, 5-11/03/1999.

³¹ ‘Tübölük dostuktun baası 5000 bölkö nan’, *Res Publica* 8 (340), 16-22/03/1999: 1.

of the state revealed by its defenceless borders, to its national weakness caused by insufficiently strong markers of ethnicity. As Aalto, Dalby and Harle (2003: p. 1) argue, tensions at the inter-state level produce boundaries that both delimit territory and symbolically demarcate a sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’.

According to some articles in the opposition press, the threat that these minorities posed was a particularly gendered one. Nash (1995); Nagel (1998) and Walby (2000) have shown how nationalism and state building are gendered projects, as illustrated in Central Asia by Akiner (1997), and Tishkov (1997: p. 148), although the role of gender in constructions of post-Soviet nation-states in Central Asia has not generally been recognised by scholars (Megoran, 1999). The importance of gendered conceptions of the nation is clear in an interview given to *Asaba* by Daniyar Üsönöv March 1999, in which he sharply criticised the government’s decision to hold a parliamentary border debate behind closed doors. He expressed fears of the ‘fifth column’ posed by immigration of Uighurs (a Turkic Muslim people) from China across the open border. For Üsönöv, Uighur women using their wiles to subvert Kyrgyz men threatened the national and territorial integrity of Kyrgyzstan, as they repeated an ancient trick of Chinese statecraft:

There was a tradition amongst the Chinese that if a Chinese girl married a foreigner, the emperor summoned her, and set two duties. ‘Nurture your husband, make him a minister, or a king. Then, he must join his country to China. If you can’t do that, at least then make your son a king.’³²

This resonates with Sharp’s findings that the *Reader’s Digest* portrayed Cold War American security as threatened by the seductive powers of Communist agents (Sharp, 2000a). However, it was not merely Uighur women that posed a threat to Kyrgyzstan; poverty had made Kyrgyz women immoral, a weak link in the nation:

Do you all know, that this happened a hundred years ago. We don’t know what will happen tomorrow... I have no enmity against the Uighurs. But their relationship with the official powers in China makes me very uneasy. Today, they come from the villages, and give bread to penniless, shameless girls and marry them to bear them children. What will happen in 50 years time? Will we be turned into Uighurstan?

To a patriarchal culture that designates nationality through paternal descent, this racial contamination through miscegenation presents a profound danger. It was compounded by rural depopulation as impoverished Kyrgyz left the border regions of China that were decimated by the economic mismanagement under Akaev. Conflating a notion of the racially pure Kyrgyz ethnos with the state, Üsönöv concluded that, therefore, the very idea that there was a border was being thrown into doubt. Soon afterwards *Asaba* declared Üsönöv “man of the month”, and he was also praised in *Res Publica*. He had started his election

³² ‘Tübüng bütünbü, tübölük dostuk?’, *Asaba* 12 (9687) 19-25/03/1999: 6–7.

campaign, and through his outspoken comments on the border had made himself the government's prime enemy. He later declared his intention to stand against Askar Akaev in the presidential elections, but was prevented from doing so by being

prosecuted in what was widely regarded to be a politically motivated trial over a minor offence committed some years earlier. This meant that he also lost his parliamentary seat in the February 2000 elections.

The invasion of Batken by the IMU in summer 1999 thrust the 'border question' back into the central stage of Kyrgyzstani politics. Following Batken and into 2000 the opposition press continued to carry numerous reports of Uzbekistan's border policies encroaching onto Kyrgyzstan, and extensive pieces combining detailed case studies and general analysis, printed in parts over a number of issues.³³ An *Asaba* article about a border village just outside Osh called Sürüt-Tash, where there was no border post and the Uzbek population had close connections with Uzbekistan, raised similar fears about Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical frailty at its borders: "Is Kyrgyzstan also the neighbours' home?" it asked in a parody of Askar Akaev's beloved slogan.³⁴ "Do you believe that Kyrgyzstan actually has a border?"³⁵ asked *Aalam*. Ackleson argues that "Heterogenous and fluid borderlands in reality pose significant questions about the relationship between borders, territory and identity" (Ackleson, 1999: p. 161). The answer of the nationalistic Kyrgyz opposition to these questions was that these borders, and with them the ethnic identity of the nation, should be policed.

For the nationalistic Kyrgyz opposition, 'the border' functioned to discursively link a range of concerns including loss of sovereign territory and water resources, immigration and squatting, poverty, failures of foreign policy, depopulation, loss of water resources, the diluting of the Kyrgyz cultural identity, and sexual moral bankruptcy, into a coherent and comprehensive assault on President Akaev's claim to be an authentic defender of the body politic of the Kyrgyz nation and territory. 'The border' was also the site at which a vision of authentic Kyrgyz identity was envisioned, scripting the qualities of those who should belong within the polity, and defining terms of those who should be excluded. This was achieved through the articulatory practices of a series of mutually reinforcing evocative cartoon maps and highly charged rhetorical and polemical texts. This occurred within a bitter power struggle, and thus also formed a political platform: a failure to protect the border demonstrated a weak and indifferent leader presiding over a weak state and nation: a leader who ought to stand aside for more resolute and firm men. State boundaries represent territoriality, but are also heavily laden with strong metaphorical dimensions about the identity of the state and nation (Paasi, 1996: p. 63).

³³ 'Alachykka orun jok, aylang keter, Ala-Toonu chetinen sata berseng...', *Kirgiz Ruh*, published in three parts on 7th, 14th and 26th June 2000; Asmanin achikpi, Ata-Jurt?!' *Asaba*, published over 7th, 11th and 14th April 2000 (*Asaba* editions 27 (9794), 28 (9795) and 29 (9796).

³⁴ 'Chek ara it jatkan jerde', *Asaba* 81 (9756), 23/11/1999.

³⁵ 'Kirgizstandin chek arasi bar dep ekenine ishenesizbi?', *Aalam*, 29/09/1999.

The border dispute and the government press in Kyrgyzstan

Throughout 1999, the Kyrgyzstani government did not physically attempt to contest the new border and concomitant control posts that Uzbekistan established. Nonetheless, the opposition continued to make valuable political capital out of what they had termed ‘the border issue’ issue, so the government was compelled to respond. This conflict was to ably demonstrate Paasi’s contention that an international boundary is not merely a border line between two states or social systems, but an object of a continuing cultural struggle and ideological signification between different social forces (Paasi, 1996: p. 62).

Newman contends that boundaries and borders constitute, “both spatial and social constructs at one and the same time” (Newman, 2001: p. 150), and this is clearly illustrated in the mixture of government responses to the border issue. There were some practical responses. Whilst the government generally denied there were any problems at the border, it implicitly accepted their existence in the announcement of a range of practical measures. Kyrgyzstan’s gas procurement problems were not political, it countered, but due to the market price of gas.³⁶ National and regional governments announced or trumpeted existing plans to improve transport links to the outlying areas, such as the re-establishment flights between Osh and Isfana after a 10 year hiatus,³⁷ and the Jalal-Abad administration announced that it was embarking on a project to construct roads to outlying districts such as Ala-Buka that would bypass new Uzbek customs posts.³⁸ Much was made of President Akaev’s visit to inspect work on construction of the Osh-Bishkek route, to cut out the need to travel through Uzbekistan, which had become harder due to new border controls.³⁹ The impact of legislative responses including border guards⁴⁰ and customs⁴¹ was minimal, and even the centrepiece, *Law on the Kyrgyz Republic’s External Borders*,⁴² only began to have limited effects a year later, once a joint border commission had been formed with Uzbekistan.

In 2000, as the presidential elections drew closer, the government was to apply increasing pressure upon opposition papers and activists through the courts, attempting to disqualify candidates from standing. These would also include an

³⁶ ‘Gaz akisi—rinok talabi’. *Kirgiz Tuusu*, 2-5/07/99.

³⁷ ‘Osh-Isfana aerjolu achildi’, *Osh Jangirigi*, 01/05/99.

³⁸ ‘Jol azabi azayat’. *Kirgiz Tuusu*, 27-28/07/99.

³⁹ ‘Bishkek-Osh avtojolu transkontinentaldik magistral. Uлуу Jibek Jolunun kayra jaralishi’. *Kirgiz Tuusu*, 25-28/06/99.

⁴⁰ ‘Chegarachni boshini aylantirmang!’, *O’sh Sadosi* 30 (9083), 17/02/1999; ‘Kirgiz Respublikasinin Mamlkettik chek arasi jonundö: Kirgiz Respublikasinin Prezidentinin Ukazi’, *Erkin Too*, 02/06/1999.

⁴¹ ‘Kirgiz Respublikasinin Ökmötünün 1997-jildin 11-uyunundagi No. 347 Jeke jaktardin Kirgiz Respublikasinin baji chek arasi arkiluu tovarlardi jana bashka zattardi alip ötüüsünün Erejelerin bekitüü jonundö toktomuna özgörtülördü kirgizüü tuuraluu Kirgiz Respublikasinin Ökmötünün toktomu’, *Erkin Too* 37 (846), 14/05/1999: 7.

⁴² ‘Kirgiz Respublikasinin Mamlkettik chek arasi jonundö’, *Erkin Too* 23 (832), 26/03/1999: 8–9. The paper states that the law was passed by parliament on February 18th, although it was debated in closed session on 12th March, as the opposition piled pressure on the government.

attempt by those close to government to close down and even allegedly buy off newspapers.⁴³ However, in the first half of 1999 the government attempted initially to counter the opposition arguments through its own press channels.

Whereas the opposition press wove around the ‘border question’ a highly charged ethnic nationalism, up until the Batken crisis the government framed its response in terms of civic nationalism. This argued that a democratically rejuvenated state, which had achieved domestic harmony in its ‘common home’, had transferred this experience to the international stage making border disputes unthinkable.

In 1999 the government celebrated the 5th anniversary of the establishment of ‘The Assembly of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan’, a toothless consultative body representing the major ethnic minorities of Kyrgyzstan to the president. Its work was celebrated in many articles in the spring and summer of 1999. *Erkin Too* printed a full-page collage divided into smaller sections which gave summaries of the work of the different ethnic sections, under the headline ‘Kyrgyzstan is our common home’, the key slogan of president Akaev’s nationalities policy.⁴⁴ The work of the Uzbek centre was praised more fully in a long article in the Uzbek-language state paper *O’sh Sadosi*.⁴⁵ Regional newspapers continued to report stories of warm relationships between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz at the individual and inter-state level.⁴⁶ According to Kyrgyz government discourse, this special relationship was paralleled in inter-state relations. In 1997 Presidents Akaev and Karimov had signed a ‘treaty of eternal friendship’, and the existence of this treaty and the relationship it symbolised was frequently invoked by the Kyrgyz government in absolute denial of any inter-state tension. In March 1999, 1 month before a dramatic resignation as mayor of Bishkek and defection to the opposition, government papers carried an interview with Felix Kulov. He said that the warm relationship between the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was the basis for solving any border disputes, and the interventions of opposition deputies like Dooronbek Sadirbaev were simply political profiteering.⁴⁷

Geography professor and head of the Kyrgyz Republic’s governmental delegation on border issues, S. Almanov, wrote a scholarly rebuttal of the opposition’s arguments for *Kirgiz Tuusu*. He dismissed charges of government inaction, explaining that no one should be surprised at either the existence of border disputes or the time it takes to resolve them. Referring (without directly naming it)

⁴³ Melis Eshimkanov, editor of *Asaba*, said in an interview in August 2000 that a government official offered him US\$ 500,000 to buy off *Asaba* until after the election. Megoran, Nick ‘Presidential Candidate Melis Eshimkanov Discusses Kyrgyzstan’s Political Climate and Central Asian Relations’, *Eurasianet Q&A* (New York: OSI) 8/11/2000.

⁴⁴ ‘Kirgizstan—jalpibizdin üyübüz’, *Erkin Too* 34 (843), 05/05/1999.

⁴⁵ ‘Xalqimiz olmos bo’lsa, jilosin biri—O’zbek: O’bek milliy-madaniy markasining II qurultoyidan’, *O’sh Sadosi* 25 (9078), 02/03/1999. A suggestion from the floor of the meeting (at which I was present) to send a formal note to Uzbekistan complaining at border closures was rejected by the podium, and the exchange not reported in the article.

⁴⁶ ‘Siyilaship, siyluu jürüşöt, kirgiz, özbek bir tuugan’, *Osh Jangirigi*, 28/04/1999.

⁴⁷ ‘Obodan emas’, *Mezon* 9 (109), 27/03/1999.

to the International Boundaries Research Unit attached to Durham University's Geography Department, he wrote that:

according to research at Great Britain's Durham university, 25% of land borders in the world today have not been fully agreed upon, 75% of conflicts are connected to unresolved border issues, and there are 95 border conflicts.

Explaining the complications of border delimitation and demarcation, he cited the signing of the Kyrgyzstan–China border in 1996, but which dates back to the 1882 Kashgar Protocol between China and Tsarist Russia, as a great achievement as

on this day the independent Kyrgyz state, for the first time in the long history of the Kyrgyz people, as an equal with a neighbouring state, and in accordance with international laws and standards, established the basis of its own border (Almanov, 1999).

The state border policy showed that, under the leadership of Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan was standing proudly as an independent country. He accepted that there were still outstanding issues arising from the piecemeal and incomplete settlements of border issues during the 1924–1927 National Delimitation that left a legacy of “lots of incorrect, twisted and contorted borders in our region, especially in the Ferghana Valley”. Even here some progress had been made and:

the government of Kyrgyzstan is ceaselessly working to delimit our independent country's border. The experts working on this strongly believe that the border is an easily wounded living organism that demands careful treatment.

Kirgiz Tuusu concluded another article by framing around the border a confident assertion of civic nationalism and state patriotism articulated through the ‘common home’ myth:

If you don't know, we will tell you something wonderful: we have one goal, the sacred wish—‘Kyrgyzstan is our common home.’ More one hundred 100 nationalities are labouring to turn this home into a blossoming country. That they might dwell in peace, our border guards are watching over them. By day and night, in heat and cold, our vigilant young heroes are standing firm at the border.⁴⁸

These fine sentiments were rendered tragically absurd soon afterwards, as IMU guerrillas swept across Kyrgyzstan's southern Batken frontier unopposed, dramatically redefining the ‘border’ debate.

The Batken crisis was an extreme embarrassment to the government from start to finish, exposing the absolute failure of intelligence services, the wretched state of the armed forces, and the almost non-existent border control regime. In making patriotic appeals to the nation to rally round the government, it increasingly switched emphasis from discourses of civic nationalism to an ethnic nationalism

⁴⁸ ‘Chek aradan chir izdegen Chuykov...’ *Kyrgyz Tuusu*, 22-24/06/1999.

drawing on traditional notions of nomadic Kyrgyz identity and the cult of Manas. In calling on the nation, it was calling on the *Kyrgyz* nation. In an address to the soldiers the President said to them, “You are the noble offspring of our illustrious father Manas!” and prayed that Manas’ spirit would protect them. In the darkest days of the conflict an emphasis on the ethnic nationalism of the Kyrgyz nation, rather than the civic nationalism of the ‘common home’, suggests that the government considered the former to have greater efficacy and political value at a moment of national crisis.

Another article suggested to the people that they had the duty to preserve the integrity of the borders of contemporary Kyrgyzstan that were a legacy of Manas:

We have no treasure more precious than that wealth which is the peace of the homeland and the integrity of the borders bequeathed by the illustrious Manas and formed over many centuries by our people.

The suggestion that Manas, whose very existence is disputed by scholars, was in any way the originator of the modern boundaries of Kyrgyzstan is the ‘invention’ of national myth (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Nonetheless, this claim allowed *Kirgiz Tuusu* to position Askar Akaev as the legitimate successor of Manas:

In looking at the border and state security, it cannot be denied that the policies and efforts of president Askar Akaev in the last 10 years have



Fig. 3. President Akaev inspects the southern border forces. ‘Our border is secure. Our people can go about their work in peace’ (‘Chek arabiz bekem. Elibiz tinch emgektene berse bolot’, *Erkin Too* 27 (941), 29/03/2000).

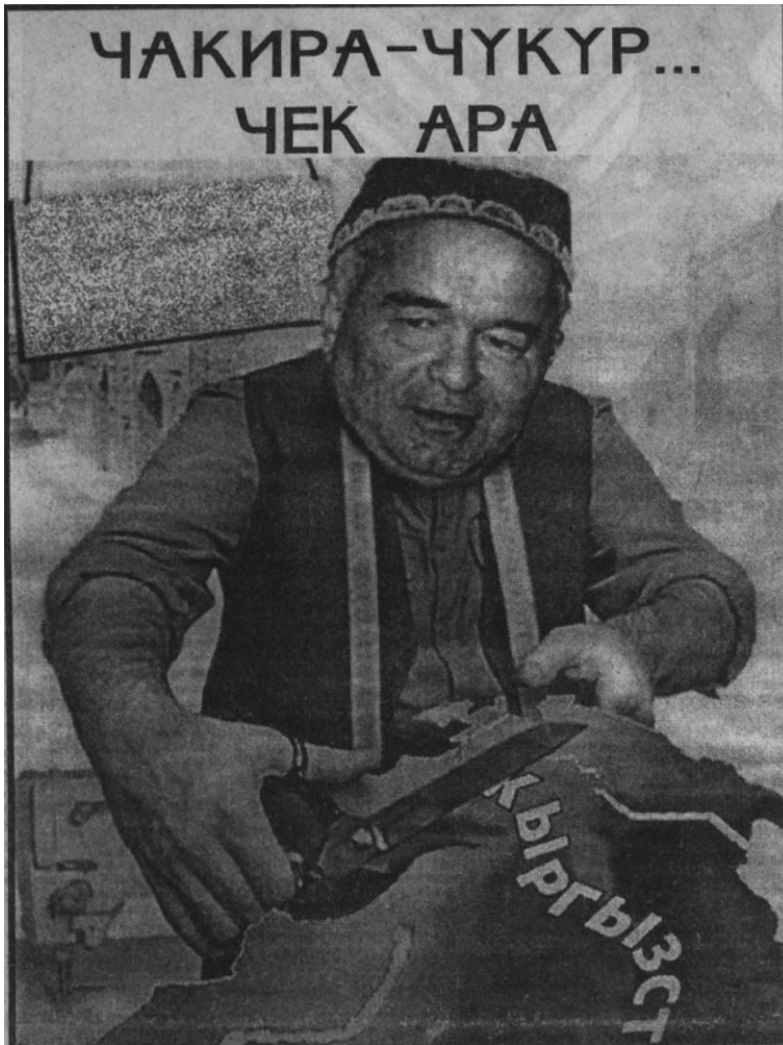


Fig. 4. President Karimov snips away at the Kyrgyzstan border ('Chakira-chükür...chek ara', *Asaba* 15 (362), 29/03/2000).

steadily strengthened our independence and allowed us to establish ourselves [internationally]⁴⁹

In similar vein, a Professor Baigaziev appealed to “My people, the Kyrgyz” to give their all for the fatherland as Manas had been prepared to do.⁵⁰ His article

⁴⁹ ‘Sabirduu Ak Sanatay Sayasat’. *Kirgiz Tuusu* 32 (22,429), 5–8/05/2000.

⁵⁰ Egemendüü Ata Jurtubuz kimge tayanat? *Erkin Too* 104-05 (913-14), 31/12/1999: 12–13.

was peppered with pastoral scenes of stereotypical nomadic Kyrgyz life and Kyrgyz women in traditional costumes, interspersed with military reliefs of legendary warriors and the modern Kyrgyz army. In addressing his “respected countryman” it is clear that he is envisaging a male, *Kyrgyz* ready to die for his beloved Kyrgyz women, the nomadic way of life, and the honour of Manas. It is not an appeal to ‘nation’ envisaged as the inhabitants of the progressive, multi-ethnic ‘common home.’ Whereas pre-Batken the government emphasised the civic notion of citizenship in the nation, at a time of national emergency it fell back increasingly upon exclusive, romantic and patriarchal ideas about the Kyrgyz ethnic identity.

Berg and Oros argue that the meaning of borders is historically contingent (Berg & Oros, 2000: p. 610). These meanings are thus contested. As I have traced the coverage of the ‘border question’ in the Kyrgyzstani press throughout this paper, two entirely different worlds have been portrayed. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than coverage of the issue in different newspapers on the same day, as elections for the *Jogorku Kengesh* moved into a second round. Both *Erkin Too* and *Kirgiz Tuusu* provided extended coverage of President Akaev’s visit to the southern border, depicting a masculine leader masterfully handling phallic-shaped weaponry, inspecting troops, and insisting that the border was secure under his leadership⁵¹ (Fig. 3). On the same day, *Asaba* printed a montage rubbishing these claims, in an article backing Felix Kulov’s presidential election campaign. Depicting Islam Karimov as a tailor cheerily singing away as he shredded defenceless Kyrgyzstan as if it were some mere fabric off-cut, it scorned the Kyrgyz leadership’s much-vaunted joint commission on demarcation (Fig. 4). Published on the same date, they illustrate the absurdities of the debate on the border, and demonstrate forcibly how foreign policy and security concerns were inseparably embroiled in the bitter struggle for domestic power, fought out over the assertion of competing geopolitical visions of the identity of state and nation.

Conclusion

“Geography dictates foreign policy”, wrote Ismagambetov on the role of boundaries in Central Asian inter-state relations (Ismagambetov, 2002: p. 10). However, it is insufficient to explain the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan Ferghana Valley ‘border dispute’ in 1999 and 2000 as merely the product of topography, the Soviet border legacy, the imperative of independence, or the pursuit of diverging macro-economic policies. This paper has argued that in 1999–2000 different political factions in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, in material conditions of political power struggle, sought to articulate notions of ‘the border’ that both envisioned their concept of the nation in the contested terrain of post-Soviet geopolitical space, and sought to legitimise their claims to exercise power over it. The particular configuration of issues politicised as ‘the border question’, was the product of the interaction of these struggles. The ‘geopolitical visions’ (Dijkink, 1996) of the relationship

⁵¹ ‘Elibizdin beykuttugu er-azamattar kolunda’, *Kirgiz Tuusu* 22 (22,419), 28-30/03/2000: 1–3.

between territory and identity in the international scene articulated in these disputes created and policed moral boundaries of belonging to and exclusion from the nation state. This illustrates the central insight of critical geopolitics, that:

the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy, and administer space (Ó Tuathail, 1996: p. 1).

By emphasising the importance of geography and gendered nationalist ideology in struggles to map terrains of power in post-Soviet Central Asia, this paper contributes to the understanding of political formation in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In the literature on the political development of independent Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan the salience of these issues has been insufficiently recognised (International Crisis Group, 2002), ignored (Huskey, 2002), or even denied (Collins, 2002: p. 146). Whilst it is “through the construction of an imagined geography of national identity that a sense of belonging is achieved” (Sharp, 2000b: p. xi), the relationship between space, identity, ideology and power still largely awaits investigation in the Central Asian context.

Likewise, the importance of gendered nationalism and sexual politics in Central Asian domestic and international politics has been largely ignored but, as this paper argues, may be extremely important for depicting political geographic scenarios and representing notions of authentic leadership.

As well as highlighting how critical geopolitics can enhance an understanding of contemporary Ferghana Valley political formation, this study makes four comments on the practice of critical geopolitics.

Firstly, whilst it is by now almost banal to dismiss ‘borderless worlds’ and ‘the end of the nation state’ theses such as Ohmae’s (1995) as Eurocentric, variations of these themes persist both in popular and scholarly discourse (for example Edwards, 2000). The increasing salience of boundaries in many parts of the world should be studied as an antidote to this tendency, and to enable the construction of a more global understanding of processes of ‘de-bordering’ and ‘re-bordering’ (Berg & Houtum, 2003). However, students of critical geopolitics have often shied away from the challenge of cross-cultural fieldwork. More work is needed to heed Dodds’ plea that ‘greater attention needs to be paid to the histories of geopolitics within non-western geopolitical imaginations and polities’ (Dodds, 2001: p. 471).

Secondly, following Herbert, this paper advocates analysis of the same event as it unfolds in more than one country. If geopolitical identities are formed in relation to other states, to consider them in isolation is to disembody them from the actual conditions of international relations in which they are formed, and increase the risk of producing a textual-discursive analysis that fails to take adequate account of real, material power struggles.

Thirdly, this study suggests that caution is necessary in identifying the goal of critical geopolitics as the celebration of marginalised voices, as Ó Tuathail (1996: p. 256) and Heffernan (2000: p. 351) suggest. The voices marginalised by the Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani governments included xenophobic nationalists tainted

with corruption, violent, and anti-Semitic groups. Whilst this neither renders them potentially less able governors nor discounts their complaints, it should at least lead us to question the naivety of a blanket endorsement of the benefits of ‘giving voice to the excluded’.

Finally, as indicated in the introduction, the impact of these border disputes and closures on local populations was traumatic (for an ethnographic account see Megoran, 2002: chapters 4 and 5). At the same time, the ‘border question’ facilitated entrenchment of the authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan, and provided a platform for anti-minority propaganda in Kyrgyzstan. That geographical arguments were at the heart of these debates entails a moral imperative to expose and challenge the operation of geography in exclusionary practices of state violence, an imperative that is at the heart of the project of critical geopolitics.

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