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# The critical geopolitics of danger in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan

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**Abstract. Drawing on critical security studies and critical geopolitics, I examine how geopolitical discourses of danger circulate in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Whereas some work in this field risks reinscribing the discursive articulation of danger as an inevitable condition of political formation, in this paper I emphasise the need to disaggregate the concept of danger carefully to highlight its operation in specific contexts. I explore these processes across a range of discursive sites from official media to popular music, contrasting findings with material from focus groups composed of socially marginalised populations. I demonstrate the role of discursive constructions of danger or safety in the production and maintenance of the political identity of the new states, and how this is inseparable from material conditions of elite power struggle. I conclude by echoing Hewitt's call for a critical geography that confronts and challenges the domestic exercise of state terror.**

## Introduction

Despite their relatively smooth transition from being constituent members of the USSR to becoming sovereign states in 1991, the idea that Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (see figure 1, over) are peculiarly dangerous places was a common theme in the scholarly literature of the 1990s (for example, Fuller, 1994; Naumkin, 1994; Olcott, 1993; Rubin and Lubin, 1999). Cinema has reproduced this notion in the popular realm, with movies depicting US, Chinese, and British heroes triumphing over the deceptive and dangerous villains who populate the exotic, insecure, and disordered spaces of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Bichel, 1998; Dodds, 2003a; Sines, 2002).[1]

These starkly stereotyped representations betray a geographical ignorance that is more revealing of the fears and fantasies of outsiders than it is of the complex cultural and geopolitical nexus that is modern Central Asia (Megoran, 2000a). More immediate dangers to Central Asian populations include the continued impacts of Soviet environmental degradation and the collapse of the welfare state (Sievers, 2003), and differing forms of authoritarian government (Cummings, 2002).

The exploration of why so many outsiders perceive Central Asia through the prism of danger, and how those perceptions differ from local understandings, is an important project (Megoran, 2005). The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this project by examining how discourses of danger 'work' in the two republics. Drawing on post-structural theoretical work in critical security studies and critical geopolitics, I examine how representations of danger are generated, circulated, and contested within contemporary Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and show how they work in domestic struggles over the power to define and control space and the ability to exercise violence.

This paper focuses around the years 1999 – 2000, a crucial moment in the political destinies of both states, marked by elections and antiregime violence. During this

[1] More recently, television documentaries have similarly portrayed Central Asia as quintessentially dangerous. For example, a British television series in November 2003 about Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan, and Uzbekistan was entitled, "Holidays in the Danger Zone" (BBC2, 3 – 6 November 2003).

**Figure 1.** Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia.

period, the government of Uzbekistan relentlessly bombarded the population with the idea that the state was in mortal danger, a move which instantiated the boundaries of the state's identity, and legitimised the authoritarian rule of President Islam Karimov as the defender of the state against that danger. The government was able to achieve this through control of key sites of discursive social production from popular culture, through media and education, to formal politics. In more pluralistic Kyrgyzstan, however, representations of danger operated differently. Instead of presenting itself as the necessary defender of a besieged country, the government sought to reassure the population that the wise leadership of an outward-looking president could be trusted to secure Kyrgyzstan's continued prosperity in an essentially benign world. It was, rather, opposition movements that employed a rhetoric of grave danger in order to discredit the government as being too weak to stand up to the multifarious threats that, they claimed, threatened to engulf the tiny state. More marginal members of the general public disputed both these narratives, however, seeing the ambition and greed of opposing political elites as the major threat to the people of Kyrgyzstan.

In this paper I extend the discussion of danger in the literature. Empirically, I furnish a new example outside the dominant focus on US and European case studies. Theoretically, to avoid the tendency towards monolithic accounts that reinscribe discursive constructions of danger as inevitable, I emphasise the importance of a comparative study of how discourses of danger operate in more than one society. Methodologically, in order to transcend the high politics/popular culture dualism that tends to characterise work in critical security studies, I use a variety of approaches to consider the reception

of discourse.[2] Ethically, I heed Hewitt's call (2001) for geographers to confront the systematic use of violence by the state against its own citizens and, following Dowler and Sharp (2001, page 168), the paper is not therefore merely a disinterested overview of a variety of geopolitical representations of danger.

Discursive articulations of danger in Central Asia are not merely of intellectual curiosity. That the level of danger is perceived differently by the two populations was suggested most graphically to me by an incident that occurred whilst I was conducting ethnographic research for my doctoral thesis in June 2000.[3] Having been based in the region for some years studying the impact on Ferghana Valley (see figure 1) populations of nation-states and new international borders, I visited a boundary region of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. One year earlier this mountainous area had been assaulted by guerrillas of the so-called Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a Tajikistan-based Islamist movement opposed to the authoritarian and secular regime of Uzbekistan's president, former communist boss, Islam Karimov. Shortly after my visit, the IMU were to launch further attacks, and the region was thus tense with expectation.

I first went to a mountainous pasture on the Kyrgyzstani side of the border that was highly susceptible to guerrilla attack and had been evacuated the previous year. Yet, when I visited, I encountered no security forces and roused no suspicion on the part of those camped out tending flocks. People extended hospitality, and even joked about the impending invasion, hoping the attackers would pay good money for livestock. A few days later I visited the Uzbekistani side of the boundary. However, on this occasion, my reception could not have been more different: I was mistaken for a 'terrorist' by local farmers, who rapidly mobilised an army detachment to apprehend me. The arrival of the soldiers was welcome as the large crowd of terrified residents, who refused to believe that my (British) passport and letter from the local police chief were genuine, were angrily accusing me of being a 'Wahabi' terrorist, concealing weapons in the sand, and hypnotising them.

This paper is an attempt to explain why people in Uzbekistan were far more afraid on seeing me than those just over the border in Kyrgyzstan. It suggests that, in contrast to Kyrgyzstan, the population of the Uzbek polity was animated by material, discursive, and embodied practices that inculcated an extreme sense of fear through the articulation of an ever-present and all-pervading sense of territorialised danger.

After a theoretical discussion of danger in critical security studies and critical geopolitics, the paper is divided between substantial sections on Uzbekistan and then Kyrgyzstan. Each section follows the same threefold structure. An examination of how the presidents discussed danger is followed by a consideration of how these notions were repeated or contested in national media. Finally, popular reactions to these discourses are considered. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, this is done through focus groups. I had intended to conduct a comparable study in Uzbekistan, but this proved politically unfeasible as a result of a harsh crackdown on dissent from early 1999 onwards. Instead, music is examined as a site where elite discourses of danger are reworked in the public sphere. I conclude by summarising these comparisons and drawing implications for the study of discourses of danger in critical geopolitics.

[2] In this paper I thus draw on a range of empirical materials from the two countries including ethnographic observations, newspapers, presidential speeches and books, focus groups, and pop music videos. It can be taken for granted that any one of these could form the focus of more detailed study. However, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how *danger* works in *different* contexts, and to draw a comparison between two countries. Therefore literature that contextualises the empirical material, where available, is referenced or footnoted without extensive discussion.

[3] For a fuller outline of this research and its findings see Megoran (2002).

## Discourses of danger

### Danger in critical security studies

Danger is a core theme in international relations literature, where it is commonly discussed in terms of challenges to the 'security' or survival of a state (Walt, 1991). Dominant realist accounts assume that experts can rationally objectify threats that can in turn be neutralised by the employment of relevant security measures (see O'Neil, 2003, for a typical recent example). This assumption is challenged by critical security studies. Debates about what theoretical approaches can be included under the rubric 'critical' abound (see, for example, Brown, 2001; Jones, 2001; Linklater, 1996), and Krause and Williams suggest it describes more a diffuse set of practices and orientations than a strict programme (1997, page x). However, there is broad agreement that, instead of being about protecting a given population from objective danger, statecraft is, as Ashley argues, about defining and enframing a domestic population by creating a powerful authority to describe these dangers (Ashley, 1989, page 303).

In an influential study of US foreign policy, Campbell traces the notion of 'danger' from early religious settlers to the 'Cold War' and into the 1990s conflict with Iraq (1998). Drawing on a reading of Foucault mediated through Said and Butler, he argues that foreign policy is not the external orientation of preestablished states with secure political identities, but, rather, a series of boundary-producing practices that are central to the constitution, production, and maintenance of US political identity. Constituted through the logic of difference that constructs self in opposition to hostile other, he argues that, "the texts that guided national security policy did more than simply offer strategic analyses of the 'reality' they confronted: they actively concerned themselves with the scripting of a particular American identity" (pages 31 – 32). This being so, the study of foreign policy becomes an investigation into how boundaries between self and other are discursively enacted and maintained through practices that depend upon identifying some 'danger' to the state.

However, critical security studies are not merely concerned with identity and the representation of danger as abstract notions, but emphasise that the successful specification of a threat allows a state to invoke extraordinary measures of control over its own population (Buzan et al, 1998, page 207; Laustsen and Wæver, 2000). As Rawnsley and Rawnsley argue, "the threats from an external power are used more to secure *internal* benefits than *external security*" (2001, page 10, emphasis in original). Therefore, whereas realism takes the state as a given entity and asks 'how can it be secured?', critical security studies take 'discourses of insecurity' (Weldes et al, 1999) or 'representations of danger' and asks, 'what do they do, how do they work, and for whom?'

### Danger and critical geopolitics

Proposing that world political order is actively constituted through various modes of geopolitical reasoning (Dodds, 2003b), critical geopolitics is concerned primarily with explicating the politics of the production of geographical knowledge as it pertains to interstate relations. This paper will not offer a further general introduction. This is partly because introductions and definitions are provided in numerous books and articles, and many stand-alone texts exist to introduce and delimit its scope and meaning (Dodds, 2001; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998). It is also because this paper is not a general case study of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan under the rubric of critical geopolitics, but, rather, an examination of the operation of discourses of danger.

Political geographers frequently refer to danger and the political importance of threat in passing (for example, O'Loughlin and Heske, 1991, page 48; Smith, 1996, page 19). In his account of the emergence of classical geopolitics, Polelle (1999) demonstrates that the idea

of Germany as a threat was important in the formulation of the 20th-century anglophone geopolitical tradition. In a critical geopolitical study of the importance of Antarctica for southern hemispheric countries, Dodds looks at, amongst other things, the fear of threats such as other countries' expansionism, nuclearisation, and environmental degradation (1997). Dijkink's collection of short studies of European geopolitical narratives indicates that discourses of danger consistently reappear in times of crisis (1996). However, it is particularly in the work of Dalby that a comprehensive critical treatment of danger is to be found.

Although standing alongside Campbell's account of the Cold War in its insistence that the articulation of danger be considered a subjective and politicised exercise rather than an objective assessment, Dalby's work has focused more on the technical practices of formal geopolitics than on the question of identity per se. His *Creating the Second Cold War* (1990) is a comprehensive study of the arguments of foreign-policy intellectuals in the 1970s and 1980s who campaigned against détente and supported the renewal of the Cold War as the overarching theme of US foreign policy. Unlike much work on US–Soviet relations in the 1980s, Dalby does not assess the level of 'threat' posed by the USSR or recommend countermeasures. On the contrary, he examines how the 'security discourse' was constructed through repeated portrayal of threat in a way that had profound political consequences (1990, pages 15–16). Dalby describes how this realism was *geopolitical*, in that it inscribed the notion of the USSR as a dangerous alien other, an 'evil empire' geographically determined to seek territorial expansion, just as the USA was geographically determined to resist it. For Dalby the Cold War was a mode of hegemony whereby the USA dominated the political life of the planet and constructed a geopolitical order in terms of 'us' being threatened by 'them' (Dalby 1997, page 19).[4] Dalby has extended this discussion more recently with work on identities rendered insecure through articulations of danger in environmental themes (Dalby, 2002), and the geopolitical assumptions undergirding discourses of insecurity in the hypermilitarised foreign policy of the Bush administration (Dalby, 2003a).

The other substantial work under the rubric of critical geopolitics to have explored Cold War notions of danger as political and social constructs rather than as objective givens is Sharp's (2000a) impressive study of the US magazine *Reader's Digest*, *Condensing the Cold War*. Arguing that critical geopolitics tends to focus on elite politics, she examines the pages of the *Reader's Digest* as an example of everyday cultural production. The *Reader's Digest* "created a powerful geography of danger for its readers" (page 167), inscribing the notion of the USSR as a threat to the way of life represented by the USA. She emphasises the role that the representation of insecurities served as a vector for particular, conservative, notions of correct US identity.

To draw closer to Central Asia, it is at the 'other end' of the former Soviet sphere—that is, the Baltic Republics and Finland—that the critical geopolitics of independent statehood has been investigated most thoroughly by geographers [for a good introduction see the special issue of *Geopolitics* edited by Aalto et al (2003)]. These studies have unpacked the complexity of internal debates over national identity and geopolitical orientation in the light of the demise of the Soviet Union, the expansion of the European Union and NATO, and, with the exception of Finland, the implications of large ethnic-Russian minorities (Berg, 2003; Berg and Oros, 2000). In his impressive study of the archaeology of the state boundary as a social institution, Paasi demonstrates not only that the institutionalisation of Finnish territory is an inseparable part

[4] In Dalby's subsequent work he explored how discourses of danger nuance local contexts and are disputed within them (Dalby, 1993a; 1993b).

of the formation of modern Finnish national identity, but that this is inextricably bound with a sense of Russia or the USSR as threat (Paasi, 1996). Moisio (1998) places danger more centrally in his more rigorous theoretical examination of how geopolitical articulations of order and threats to security are intimately linked to practices of nationhood at the heart of the Finnish identity project. For Moisio, "the discourse of Finnish national identity is still based on the ideas of repelling a danger" and boundary construction (1998, page 120), and he examines how Russia is variously presented as a threatening source of disorder, crime, refugees, nuclear materials, and territorial expansionism. Kuus examines how the concept of sovereignty has been securitised in debates on Estonian geopolitical futures, and has been used as a category both to support and to oppose international integration on the basis of arguments construed in terms of existential threats to the state (2002).

These studies all understand security as a cultural and political construct requiring interpretation rather than as an objective given that is the product of calculation. In this paper I offer a new case study from outside the more common research areas of the English-speaking world and Europe, considering geopolitical discourses of danger in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Rather than discussing danger as one aspect of a general critical geopolitics of a country or particular debate, I foreground the circulation and performance of danger, enabling a clearer understanding of how it works—or fails to. In so doing, I seek to extend this discussion by identifying three areas of the current literature where there is room for further development.

First, as Herbert astutely observes in his essay on Campbell's work, Cold War studies are meant to be about international *relations* yet they often do not consider how the story looked from the Soviet perspective (Herbert, 1996, page 644). Herbert's point in general is well taken, although MccGwire (1991) and the work of Dalby and Dodds in general are significant exceptions. In this paper I examine the same period from both Kyrgyz and Uzbek perspectives.

Second, critical geopolitics concentrates on formal politics. Sharp considers this to be flawed, arguing that in times of crisis elites need to mobilise populations to support them, and thus sites of everyday cultural production become vital to the long-term efficacy of a geopolitics predicated on danger (Sharp, 2000a; see also Sharp, 1998). In this paper I seek to advance the study of discourses of geopolitical danger by illustrating how they are represented in both popular and elite sites of knowledge production.

Third, the ability of elite actors to inculcate notions of geopolitical insecurity successfully might be essential for mobilisation of the population in support of foreign military action or a militarised domestic security culture. However, with the partial exception of Sharp, critical studies of danger have largely overlooked the reception of texts (Power, 2003, page 186; Toal, 2003, pages 160–161). This paper uses focus group data to examine the reception of elite articulations of danger in Kyrgyzstan.

## Discourses of danger in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is one of Asia's most repressive dictatorships. The judicial and extrajudicial killing of opponents of the regime is not unusual and, according to Amnesty International, torture is 'systematic' (Amnesty International, 2003). Human Rights Watch (2002) claimed there were 7000 prisoners of conscience in Uzbekistani jails in 2003. The formal or de facto power of the government extends into most areas of public life, from news media to popular culture.

From the mid-1990s, observers of Uzbekistan warned that such repression might be counterproductive (Olcott, 1994, page 154). True enough, 1999–2000 saw intensified opposition to the regime of President Islam Karimov. The pan-Islamist movement Hizb-ut Tahrir grew rapidly in small underground cells that clandestinely distributed leaflets

denouncing governmental corruption and calling for the reestablishment of the Caliphate (Hizbut Tahrir, 2000). The IMU staged guerrilla incursions into Kyrgyzstan's Batken region and southeastern Uzbekistan in 1999 and into Uzbekistan in 2000, calling for the replacement of Karimov's secular regime with a government based on Islamic legal precepts, and demanding release of what the group claimed were 100 000 wrongfully jailed Muslims. This group was also blamed for bomb blasts in the Uzbek capital Tashkent in February 1999, which killed sixteen people and missed the president by a matter of minutes. Finally, the exiled political opponent and one time presidential challenger of Karimov, poet Mohammed Solih, stepped up his anti-Karimov writings from Norway, where he had been granted political asylum.

The government responded with a massive crackdown on actual and potential sources of opposition and dissent, employing means such as discriminatory arrests, incommunicado detention, harassment of relatives, show trials, severe prison sentences, public rallies to denounce 'enemies of the state', executions, border closures, and the progressive militarisation of society (Yakub, 1999 cited in *Turkistan Newsletter* **3** 15 December 1999, http://www.euronet.nl; see also Human Rights Watch, 2000). In many cases, these targeted people whose only apparent crime was to be pious (Human Rights Watch, 2001). This campaign was predicated on and justified by the notion that the polity faced extreme danger. This sense of danger was inculcated in the population at large through its unremitting representation across a range of discursive sites. Three of these—the books of the president, the news media, and popular music—are examined here.

**Danger in presidential geopolitics**

The first channel that inculcated a sense of extreme danger was the stream of books purportedly written by the president himself. Mass-produced and sold at subsidised prices in bookshops and kiosks around the country, they form a compulsory course of study for all university students, required reading for access to many state jobs, and are cited as a necessary strategy of legitimisation in scholarship and political discourse in the way that Lenin was before independence.[5] Whether discussing love of the homeland (Karimov, 1995), the importance of a historical consciousness (1998), or some other theme, they thus function as a key purveyor of official ideology amongst students and professional groups.

The importance of the social construction of danger for understanding Uzbekistan is highlighted by comparing books written by President Karimov in the period immediately after independence with his more recent titles. His *Building the Future: Uzbekistan—Its Own Model for Transition to a Market Economy* (1993) is an exuberant celebration of independence and a patriotic statement of hope and expectation for the postcolonial future. This hope gives way to grimmer reflections on the "short but sometimes bitter experience of our years of independence" in Karimov's 1997 book *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century.* Danger is at the heart of the president's analysis. The book is divided into two sections. Part one is entitled "Threats to security" and is a dark litany of the "problems, difficulties, and trials" (page 2) that Uzbekistan will face in attaining its historical destiny, including drugs and arms trafficking, religious extremism, terrorism, nuclear weapons manufacture, ecological dangers, nationalism, criminality, and 'great power chauvinism'. Although an "ideology of national independence" (page 113) is shaping citizens of high moral value and laying the foundations of a prosperous and happy state, this is threatened because "Uzbekistan is encircled by

[5] For example, the philosopher To'lanov's strategy of citing Lenin in his communist book *Kollektiv—Qudratli Kuch* (The collective is a mighty force) (To'lanov and G'afurav, 1984) closely resembles his references to Karimov in his nationalistic *Qadriyatlar Falsafasi* (The philosophy of values) (1998).

countries burdened with ethnic, demographic, economic and other problems" (page 6). It is just this scripting of boundaries between "the domain of freedom and the domain of danger, the inside realm of community and the outside realm of anarchy" that Ó Tuathail (1993, page 8) emphasises. The 1990s thus witnessed a marked shift in Karimov's sense of the geopolitical identity of Uzbekistan, from a self-confident polity at peace with itself and its neighbours to a besieged island of civilisation in a sea of anarchy that threatened to submerge it.

**Danger in the news**

Although widely available, the books and texts of Karimov were compulsory reading only for students and a range of government employees and professionals. The same geopolitical visions were conveyed to a far wider audience through national news media, which acted as mouthpieces of the Karimov regime. It was impossible to watch the ever-popular television news, or read daily papers such as *Halq So'zi*, without being bombarded with a relentless reworking of the same themes that enframe the president's books: a happy and prosperous Uzbekistan, which, under the leadership of Karimov, has finally achieved its historical destiny of independence, yet is assailed on all sides by danger.

This was conducted through the incessant restatement of two opposite images of place. Uzbekistan was imagined as a site of prosperity, peace, and happiness. Independence was presented as the most significant moment in Uzbek history, as the putative thousand-year struggle and desire of the people for their own state had finally been achieved. Examples of this type of discourse are plentiful. One is provided by history professor Hamid Ziyoev in an extract printed from a paper at a conference on recent Uzbek history.

> "The young people living in our country today are an exceedingly happy generation. That is because they have been delivered from the politics of colonialism and the clutches of national oppression, and are living contentedly. The value of this cannot be measured" (*Halq So'zi* 1999a).

The following extract from the letter of a 'hero of labour' from Qashqardarya region painted the same picture:

> "Our nation is living in peace and tranquillity. Recently our grain was safely harvested. Our storehouses are full of seed. We have just begun to gather in our cotton. We are busy with our own work. Our homeland is daily growing more prosperous" (*Halq So'zi* 1999b; see also *Halq So'zi* 1999c).

Similar assessments can be found in almost any issue of *Halq So'zi* or television news broadcast.

This image is in sharp contrast to the consistent portrayal of neighbouring states as spaces of chaos and desperation. For example, an article run on 1 June 1999 entitled "Tajikistan's unsettled times" captured the essence of this, describing how that unfortunate land was host to "murder, kidnapping, intimidation, plunder, banditry ..." and other evils perpetrated by Pakistan-backed 'extremists' (*Halq So'zi* 1999d; see also *Halq So'zi* 1999e). Over the years, Tajikistan has acted as a bogeyman for the government of Uzbekistan, which has argued that the civil war that followed the early period of independence was caused by too hasty a transition to democracy. This has been a key justification of the failure to introduce promised democratic reforms, and maintain tight control over the population—what March, in his study of Karimov's ideological discourse, terms the 'transition defence' of authoritarianism (2002, page 372). The binary geopolitical envisioning of Uzbekistan as a land of plenty and its neighbours as places of deprivation has thus been central to the legitimisation of authoritarian rule.

But the official media did not merely picture two separate realms of happiness and sorrow: they continually suggested that the chaos and evil of its neighbours was

threatening to engulf Uzbekistan. They constantly represented drugs, terrorism, and religious extremism as the main dangers threatening the peace and prosperity of Uzbekistan. Throughout 1999 and 2000 the media carried repeated stories of terrorists, religious extremists, and drug runners apprehended as they engaged in, or prepared to perpetrate, some heinous crime. The social and political grievances and the proposals of opponents were never examined or explained. Rather than being indigenous proponents of alternative political forms of government, those challenging the leadership of Karimov were portrayed as external threats to Uzbekistan, 'outside forces' (*Halq So'zi* 1999f), or traitors (*Halq So'zi* 1999g), motivated only by an irrational evil, and using religion "to stop and reverse the democratic and spiritual progress of Uzbekistan" (*Halq So'zi* 1999h). These reports were followed with coverage of ghastly show trials, where young men made public confessions of being 'led astray'. They were then granted presidential pardons, which they humbly accepted whilst their weeping parents blessed the president's magnanimity and expressed despair that their children had brought such shame on them. Other captives were imprisoned or executed, or died in custody. It was traumatic simply to watch these events on the television. Although Dumm might have been speaking of the USA in writing that "Those who watch television regularly are prepared for fear by the evening news" (1993) his comments are equally apt for Uzbekistan.

**Elite discourses of danger in the popular sphere**

In recent years, geographers have increasingly recognised the importance of music as a medium shaping cultural identities. Smith argues that, although geographers had come to realise that art matters because spatial strategies and metaphors mediate its production and consumption, they had mostly seen this as a visual affair (1997, page 502). Whilst acknowledging the important work on the sounds that fill spaces by humanistic geographers such as Pocock (1995), she insisted that the full significance of inserting the art of music into the geography of cultural politics has yet to be explored (Smith, 1997, page 504). Studies as far apart as Congo, Zaire (Gondola, 1997) and Singapore (Chye and Kong, 1996) have demonstrated that popular music is frequently an important, if understudied (Dodds, 2000, page 90; Kong, 1995, page 183), site in struggles to control, utilise, and define space. Citing recent examples of state attempts to control and manipulate music from countries as diverse as Canada, New Zealand, Burma, and Afghanistan, Connel and Gibson insist that popular music is embedded in the creation and maintenance of nationhood, as it is an important cultural sphere where identities are affirmed, challenged, and reconstructed (2003, especially pages 117 – 143).

In contemporary Uzbekistan the most influential form of popular culture is arguably neither film nor the novel, but music. As a result of both state sponsorship and the enormous appetite for music on the part of Uzbeks, the music scene in Uzbekistan is extremely vibrant. As well as bathing the streets from the hi-fis of roadside bootlegged-cassette salesmen, music is played incessantly on radio and television, intermingled with news and other programmes. With limited access to external programming and a lack of alternative affordable entertainment, this ensures a high degree of diffusion amongst the general population.[6]

[6] There has been no substantial research published on Uzbek popular music, and little on the politics of the pop and rock scene in the USSR and its successor states. This latter point is surprising because, as MacFadyen (2001; 2002) shows, this music was enormously popular and leading performers were extremely famous. As studies of Eastern Europe demonstrate, the politicisation of rock music by ruling regimes or by performers themselves may be an important aspect to stories of regime change or endurance (Gordy, 1999; Ramet, 1994). Klenke (2001) suggests that the lack of research in the Uzbek context may be a result of the predilection of ethnomusicologists (both Soviet and Western) towards 'indigenous' music as a purer expression of culture.

This reach has been exploited and deepened by the government to inculcate its project of national identity creation amongst young people. Structurally, the government has fashioned an environment that ensures maximum exposure of suitable music. For example, it set up the popular youth television channel Yoshhlar (youth). When the radio station Radiyo Sezam was reopened after a 'technical break', its founder said at a press conference, "We are well aware of the fact that radio is not a means of entertainment, but above all is a mouthpiece for propagating national ideology" (Martin, 2001, page 67). He announced that the majority of its programming would now be in Uzbek, rather than in Russian as before. Earlier, popular stations that played mostly Russian and Western music were closed down.

Since 1991, the Uzbek-language music industry has been reoriented in line with President Karimov's 'ideology of national independence': indeed, Klenke suggests that Uzbek popular music "plays a major role in nation building since independence" (2001, page 4). Those at odds with political orthodoxy were muffled, such as singer Dadajohn Hasanov, who went temporarily into exile after his early 1990s Islamist political and social critiques fell foul of the Karimov regime (Tyson, 1994). The production of popular music is supervised by the state, and artists may find it disadvantageous to their prospects if patriotic songs are not included in their repertoire (Klenke, personal communication).[7] These may explicitly hymn the virtues of Uzbekistan, or portray in their backdrop videos the beauty of the Uzbek countryside, the comfort and stability of patriarchal village life, or the gleaming new financial buildings of Tashkent.

The notion of the nation being under extreme danger is portrayed most clearly in the music of the group Setora. A chic girl-band combining Uzbek rhythm with Western rock and pop, they have been nicknamed 'the Spice Girls of Uzbekistan'. The video of one of their best-known songs *Sen Borsan* ('You're there'), is a poignant depiction of the tragic end of a love affair between one of the young women, a university student, and her partner, a soldier. The video opens by cycling between scenes of a wicked-looking man restraining frightened children, the three young women in mourning, a military funeral, the handsome soldier on drill, and rose-tinted images of the lovers cavorting through a city and parks. This confusing medley is explained as the plot unfolds. The lover is part of a unit that moves in on an empty warehouse, where a helpless woman and children have been kidnapped by a stereotypical 'Islamic terrorist': with a malicious smile, bearded, and sporting a Palestinian headscarf (figure 2). The haunting music provides an atmospheric accompaniment to rising tension as rotating camera angles follow the soldiers as they close in on the terrorists, who are callously beating their petrified captives. These scenes are intermingled with further images of the happy young couple, playing in the snow or reading love letters in lectures, adding to the pathos when the inevitable tragedy occurs. The captives are eventually rescued and the terrorists overcome, but the hero dies in the firefight, gunned down by the terrorist at whom he does not return fire, apparently to avoid hitting a little girl held by a knife to her throat as a human shield. The video concludes with the girls singing beside his grave, remembering his handsome smile and the lost days of love, and the liberated children roaming freely in the fresh air. At the same time as the release of *Sen Borsan*, Arslan reported the explosion of the phenomenon of army television programmes hosted by khaki-clad presenters sentimentalising military life (Arslan, 2000).

This hit was followed by a song that gave historical depth to the idea of Uzbeks resisting the dangers of barbarism, *Ajdodlar Ruhi* (Spirit of the ancestors). The video opens with the three women happening upon an unusual book in a library. On opening it up,

[7] For what may be the first detailed study of the politics of the production of Uzbek pop, see her forthcoming doctoral thesis (Klenke, forthcoming).

**Figure 2.** Dangerous terrorist: kidnapper of innocent children, from the video of the Setora hit, *Sen Borsan*.

a story comes alive. It is the tale of the invasion of what is now Uzbekistan by the Mongols. The savage horsemen rudely interrupt scenes of pastoral bliss. Screaming mothers flee and plead for help at the feet of the handsome figure of Jamoluddin Manguberdi, the contemporary leader of the Khorezem state (present-day Northwestern Uzbekistan and Eastern Turkmenistan) and resister of Mongol aggression. In spite of putting up brave resistance he is overcome, and the Mongols sadistically massacre all present, only three baby girls escaping with their lives. They grow up to become Amazon-type warriors and, tracking down the Mongols who massacred their people, exact violent revenge in mortal combat, taking grim satisfaction as they recall the terror they witnessed as infants. The music and accompanying video is as strident as *Sen Borsan* is poignant, the artists wearing armour and wielding swords as they sing aggressively into the camera.

The video concludes in modern-day Uzbekistan, with the three students paying homage at a new statue of Jamoluddin Manguberdi, who is claimed by Karimov as a forerunner and model for modern Uzbekistan. A scene gratuitous in its depiction of national iconography, such as state flag, national currency, and revelers in national dress, faithfully portrays the official version of a happy modern Uzbekistan rejoicing in its past. After kneeling to lay flowers, the women look from the face of the statue through the crowd and see the handsome warrior Manguberdi, who fought for them before, now standing amidst the people. As the music fades, text appears on the screen reminding the viewer that "The homeland is as holy as a place of prayer".[8] Whilst Uzbekistan may still be threatened, the 'spirit of the ancestors' endures, an abiding essence of Uzbekness calling the people to protect the beloved homeland from the evil foes that endanger it—and stressing the value of strong leadership.

These enormously popular songs are extremely well constructed, making compelling viewing and great music, and are an uncomplicated reworking of the government's

[8] This is the title of a widely circulated collection of the president's early speeches (Karimov, 1995).

propaganda and 'ideology of national independence'.[9] As Martin argues, the images are deeply ironic: for example, Manguberdi adhered to the sharia law that the 'Islamic terrorists' want yet which Karimov is resisting (Martin, 2001, pages 66–67). But it is the notion of *danger* that is consistent. Whether in the 13th or 21st century, the nation is threatened by an evil enemy. The motives, grievances, and ambitions of the enemy are not explained, nor is the historical and geographical context examined—it is simply enough to know that they are evil.

These videos hinge on the portrayal of the timeless certitudes of transcendent nationhood struggling against enduring threat. However, to exhaust their significance in a deconstruction of their ideological content is to risk missing their emotional impact on embodied subjectivities in specific geographical settings. As Tuan demonstrated in his classic work on landscapes of fear (1980), and as Sparks argues in his influential book on the construction of fear of crime in television (1992), fear is not a static entity to be measured, but a mode of human perception. This being so, it is not enough simply to describe the ideas embedded in these songs: the modalities of their reception are also significant.

Within geography, Thrift has pressed this point by calling for a 'nonrepresentational' theory that locates the textual analysis of discursive construction alongside embodied practices of the reception of those discourses (1996), which means "thinking with the entire body" (Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000, pages 411–412). This approach draws on anthropologists such as Ingold and Radley, who suggest that worldviews are best understood not as social constructs but as ways of experiencing the world that emerge from the embodied practices of everyday life (Ingold, 2000; Radley, 1995).

In terms of music, this is a scholarly summation of the truism that the power of music is extralyrical, subsisting in its ability to evoke emotional responses within the listener. From this starting point a number of writers have begun explorations of the ideological importance of music. Nash traces the history of the tango, detailing how ideas of culture, class, masculinity, and nation were rehearsed through the dance (2000). For Muecke, the effect of an Australian dawn piper on Remembrance Day in recreating the nation is more than just the conveyance of cerebral ideas by flagging ideological concepts: it is the power of a vital force on "bodies full of effect" (1999, pages 2–3). As Revill argues, against purely textual readings, national music is far more than just a conveyor of the texts of patriotic ideology. Its sounds appear to speak to us directly, communicating through bodily involvement "the participatory imperative generated by its rhythmic and melodic qualities" (2000, page 605).

Uzbeks learn to dance as small children through communal rites of passage such as weddings, and people dance a lot—at discos, in schools and university dormitories, and at parties of all kinds. In these contexts, the music of bands such as Setora is extraordinarily compulsive. An example is furnished by the words of one young Uzbek woman—much exposed to an English-language intellectual milieu and fully aware of external criticisms of her state's national identity building project—who said to me at a party where Uzbek music was playing: "Me and my friends know all this stuff is just propaganda: but when I hear it, I just can't stop myself dancing, and feeling that I love Uzbekistan."

That extraordinary power of embodied national music in generating a collective feeling in response to danger was demonstrated by a unique gathering of popular–patriotic

[9] This is the idea that modern Uzbekistan and the Uzbek nation are the teleological fulfilment of all the history played out on modern Uzbek soil. As March (2002, page 382) suggests, this ideology implies authoritarian lessons from history, positing the importance of strong leaders, strong states, and communitarian values of duty.

singers in a 'Military–Patriotic Song Festival' at a packed stadium in Tashkent in July 2000. Involving military displays, sporting heroism, and songs, it was named "I Will Give You Up To No-one, Uzbekistan", the title of a song by colourful and glamorous singer Yulduz Osmonova. She was forced into exile after apparently making disparaging remarks about her country in the mid-1990s, but by writing patriot songs she has been rehabilitated in line with the all-pervading ideology of state nationalism.

The event was highly charged. One weeping spectator said:

> "I am a guy, I have never cried ... however for some reason, when listening to the songs at this festival, tears ran down from my eyes. I did not hide my tears. With my heart bursting over and together with all my comrades, I sang 'I will give you up to no-one, Uzbekistan!'"

A journalist for the popular youth magazine *Darakchi* wrote solemnly, "It started on July 1st. It will continue forever" (Megoran, 2000b). Amidst scenes of mass emotion and flag-waving televised across the country, a festival organiser declared triumphantly: "I believe our nation is a very strong nation. There will never be a nation like it" (2000b).

It must not be thought that the danger in these songs was experienced only while watching them on television or at a concert. The songs became diffused throughout Uzbek social life. The Military–Patriotic Song Festival was given wide coverage in the media, and pirate video recordings of the event quickly flooded the bazaars. After one had become familiar with the video and live versions, it became impossible not to hear the haunting opening bars of *Sen Borsan* or the galloping stridency of *Adodlari Ruhi*, or to sing or dance along to *Sen Borsan*, without remembering the threat of the bearded Islamic terrorist. In another example, a colleague of mine went to a 'Christmas–New Year' presentation in an Uzbek school. Children performed seasonal poems about snowflakes, and *Qor Bobo* (a Father Christmas equivalent) was also present. The children performed both the Setora songs outlined above: in their version of *Sen Borsan* little children with toy guns kidnapped Qor Bobo, before being overcome by other children!

It is clear that the places and practices of youth cultures are linked with the cultural identities of young people and thus merit the attention of geographers (Skelton and Valentine, 1998; for musical spaces in particular see Maldon, 1998; Richard and Kruger, 1998). In Uzbekistan, the spaces of popular music may even be more flexible than in these European examples, expanding from discos and clubs to student dormitories, primary school classrooms, streets, and homes. Through music, the Uzbek population—and particularly its youth—learned to dance to a geopolitical script that could be found in learned academic tomes, the news media, the universities, and in the discos and living rooms across the state, binding the population together in a fearful experience of a nation in danger. This illustrates the contention of Ó Tuathail and Dalby that "geopolitics saturates the everyday life of states", its sites of production being both multiple and pervasive (1998, page 5). Furthermore, the unabated bombardment of public and private space with these discourses of danger enacted a notion of the correct historical identity of Uzbeks, and legitimised the role of the president as the moral guarantor of that order. It is no surprise that the net effect was the type of fear and paranoia that I experienced on the border in June 2000.

At this point I wish to offer a caveat. To argue that the discursive practices of Uzbekistani statehood inscribe and perform a political identity is not to deny that they are simultaneously an attempt to insulate the state from actual military or economic damage. Nor is it a suggestion that they are merely cynical masks for oppression. Rather, it is to accept that social formations and political processes are a complicated product of everyday understandings, abstract ideologies, and practical necessities. All of

these are inherently implicated in power, forming an ensemble of strategies that protected Karimov's hold on power.

**Discourses of danger in Kyrgyzstan**

Like Karimov, Kyrgyzstan's President Askar Akaev also survived what he claimed was an assassination attempt in 1999. Like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan experienced a noticeable growth of the underground group Hizb-ut Tahrir. Like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan was also threatened by the invasion of the IMU (it bore the brunt of IMU attacks in 1999, and suffered again in 2000).

However, unlike Uzbekistan, in Kyrgyzstan independent voices and opposition forces had existed in human rights organisations, independent media, and the parliament throughout the 1990s. The reasons for this are complex. The government was weaker, controlling only weak armed forces and few cash-earning natural resources. The clan structure of Kyrgyz society, combined with a high degree of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity, mitigated against the concentration of centralised power. Furthermore, Akaev was an academic, and more was liberal by inclination than Karimov.[10] Thus, whether through structural constraint or personal restraint, the political terrain of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan was altogether more liberal than that of its bigger neighbour Uzbekistan (Anderson, 1999; Collins, 2002; Jones Luong, 2002). This different framework meant that discourses of danger circulated differently in Kyrgyzstan.

The period 1999–2000 was a crucial time in Kyrgyzstani politics. Parliamentary elections at the beginning of 2000 and presidential elections in the fall followed local elections in autumn 1999. These elections were fought hard and dirty, and the interpretation of danger was to play a key role in domestic political formation.

**Danger in presidential geopolitics**

The discursive strategies of the government of Akaev were wholly different to those of Karimov. Whereas Uzbekistan's official media constantly depicted neighbouring states as dangerous, hostile, or inferior, the Kyrgyz official media continually reported claims of the president that relationships with neighbouring states were improving, to the benefit of Kyrgyzstan's economic and political position. For example, in June 1999 the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan met in Bishkek to discuss the progress of the creation of a unified economic space under the aegis of the Central Asian Economic Community. Although the other leaders complained that the organisation was ineffectual, President Akaev insisted that it was making progress in establishing a new 'common home' of Central Asia (*Erkin Too* 1999).

In October 1998, in a major statement of his geopolitical vision of independent Kyrgyzstan, Akaev published his 'Silk Road Diplomacy' 'doctrine' (*Kïrgïz Tuusu* 1998). Having secured peace between different ethnic groups, he insisted that, with democracy, Kyrgyzstan has "entered an age of renaissance" (1998, page 11). It has achieved ethnic harmony at home, and established good and open relations with its neighbours. Threats to this order received only a cursory mention. The idea that Kyrgyzstan was gravely endangered by threats originating in neighbouring states was absent from the president's discourse, making it very different to that of Uzbekistan's president.

**Danger in the news**

Government newspapers in Kyrgyzstan repeated this presidential message, denying opposition accusations that Kyrgyzstan was in danger. For example, in June 1999 government newspaper *Kïrgïz Tuusu* carried a polemic against opposition claims that

[10] For example, whereas Karimov had been at best ambiguous about the hard-line anti-Gorbachev coup in 1991, Akaev had openly opposed it.

Kyrgyzstan was a weakly defended state with a weak government. It acknowledged that many doubted the ability of independent Kyrgyzstan to survive, worrying that "age-old border conflicts with our powerful neighbours will start up again" (*Kïrgïz Tuusu* 1999). However, dismissing this as an unpatriotic attack on the sovereignty of Kyrgyzstan, the paper declared that its neighbours were "confidantes not quarrellers", and that independence had actually improved cultural and economic ties. Whilst it insisted that its forces were guarding the state border, the article made no specific reference to any particular threat. This was the standard theme that the government propagated through its newspapers and television channels. There was no attempt to inculcate a pervading sense of emergency, no incessant pronouncements of grave existential threats to the state, and no wholesale effort to exercise a bloody and overbearing control over society at large that depended on the identification of a titanic Manichean struggle of good versus evil. Rather, the government insisted, under the enlightened leadership of pro-Western Akaev, Kyrgyzstan enjoyed peace at home, peace with its neighbours, and a welcome in the 'international community'.

However, danger was a recurring and important theme in the independent and opposition print media. Through a combination of provocative cartoons, eloquent lamentations, and polemics, this press continually reworked a core motif: that Kyrgyzstan was, under the premiership of Akaev, a fragile geopolitical entity whose very existence was endangered—unless there was a leadership change. This danger was not merely geopolitical and economic, but also threatened to destroy the spiritual and cultural fabric of the nation.

The three main nationalistic opposition papers were agreed that events of 1999 and 2000 threw Kyrgyzstan into an impossible situation—'between two fires'. For *Aalam,* these two fires were Uzbekistan and Japan (1999a),[11] for *Asaba* they were Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (1999a), and for the independent nationalistic paper, *Kïrgïz Ruhu* poor Kyrgyzstan was stuck between President Karimov and his opposition (1999a). The particular configuration of the threat is less significant than the general sense that Kyrgyzstan was caught helplessly in mortally threatening geopolitical pincers, its territory being torn away by guerrilla invasion or the encroachment of powerful neighbours.

The opposition press ran many articles suggesting that ethnic minorities, especially Uzbeks, posed a danger to the Kyrgyz nation and state. *Kïrgïz Ruhu* printed an article about 'Wahabism', the puritanical Islamic ideology of the Saudi Arabian ruling elite allegedly motivating the IMU, asserting that it was hostile to the syncretic beliefs of the Kyrgyz. The accompanying picture showed apparently Uzbek men at prayer in the grounds of a mosque, implicitly identifying the minority with the threat to Kyrgyz culture (*Kïrgïz Ruhu* 1999b). *Aalam* resented the attention that 'foreign' organisations were paying ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan, and accused the High Commission for National Minorities of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation on Europe of stirring up trouble where it did not exist: the Kyrgyz were actually worse off than the minorities who threatened the very unity of Kyrgyzstan (*Aalam* 1999b). Thus, whereas the Kyrgyz government regarded its support of ethnic minorities and its engagement with foreign organisations as a policy strength, the opposition interpreted these actors as dangers to the national integrity of Kyrgyzstan.

Although this message was repeatedly carried in texts, the liberal use of illustrative cartoons and montages was an extremely powerful way of graphically representing the threat. Critical geopolitics has increasingly recognised the value of cartoons as

[11] The IMU took four Japanese geological prospectors hostage when they surged into Batken region, ensuring close Japanese involvement as the saga unfolded.

forms of geopolitical reasoning. With reference to Steve Bell's political cartoons of the Falklands and Bosnian conflicts for *The Guardian* newspaper, Dodds shows how cartoons can be used to illuminate or subvert particular state foreign-policy practices (1996; 1998). In Kyrgyzstan, political cartoons are given even more prominence, often dominating a front page in the way that high-quality colour photographs might do in British newspapers. Berg and Oros have demonstrated that, in the Estonian context, cartoons may be particularly effective ways of enframing geopolitical threats (Berg, 2003; Berg and Oros, 2000). In Kyrgyzstan, cartoons carried an even starker message, as the following two examples indicate.

A montage in the opposition-controlled *Asaba* (1999b) in December 1999 (figure 3) intimated the gravity of the existential threat posed to the republic. It was entitled, "Namangani is preparing for a spring offensive", and warned that the IMU leader, Juma Namangani, was again preparing to invade Kyrgyzstan. As there were no pictures of Namangani in general circulation, the paper actually used Osama bin Laden as a stand-in for the IMU leader. The map also does not depict Kyrgyzstan. These details are unimportant, and highlight that, for the paper, it is not the individual characteristics or motivations of the IMU that is important, but that it is dangerous. This threat is presented in the bodily comportment of Bin Laden. Sitting at ease and pointing his stick at will over a map, the image suggests that the attackers could strike at leisure, unopposed by a weak government. The grave danger posed was embodied in a strong ethnic Other mastering a Kyrgyzstan that was as vulnerable and passive as a map spread before him.

A very different notion of danger was articulated in the Russian-language paper *Vecherniy Bishkek* (1999). It described the subjection of a young Kyrgyzstani Uzbek schoolteacher to the humiliation of repeated strip searches by Uzbekistani border guards

**НАМАНГАНИ ЖАЗГЫ ЖОРТУУЛГА ДАЯРДАНЫП АТАТ**

начальниги Нуритдин Чо-моевдин айтуусуна ка-раганда, бул жерде бо-евиктердин лагери: штаб, 700 чакты боевиктен турган негизги отряды, ку-

рал-жарак склады жайгашкан. Барымтага алынган кишилерди да ушул айылда кармап турушкан. Азыр Кожо-Ашканда жаш лейтенант жетектеген отуз чакты чек арачыдан башка жергиликтүү элден эч ким калган жок.

нен өкмөттүк аскерлердин ортосунда эң кандуу кагылыш болуп өткөн Сырт айылына террористтерди дал ушул Элүүбай Көлбаев баштап келген, ал эми Орозбай Төлөбаев болсо барымтага алынган милиционерлерди боевиктердин жумушун жасаганга мажбурлаган. Бирок эки чал тең өздөрүн күнөөлүү деп эсептешпейт. "Алар деле биз сыяктуу мусулман баласы. Алардын кыргыздар менен согушайын деген оюу жок" - дешти алар тергөөдө. ОБСЕнин эксперттеринин маалыматы боюнча азыр исламисттердин

**Figure 3.** "Namangani is preparing for a spring offensive" (source: *Asaba* 1999b).

as he crossed a border in transit between two sections of the Aravan region of Osh oblast[12] that were spliced by Uzbekistani territory around the town of Marhamat, a border that was previously open for through traffic. The teacher, 23-year-old Ozodbek Maidinov, told Kyrgyzstani authorities that Uzbekistani guards were looking for tattoos that would identify him as a religious extremist. The article was entitled “Iron curtain”, and the accompanying montage (figure 4) superimposed barbed-wire fencing over a map of the Ferghana Valley, suggesting an irony of independence: the end of the ‘Cold War’ might have removed the ‘iron curtain’ between East and West Europe, but it had led to a new one between the peoples of the valley. Of particular significance is the image of four men standing at the border, stripped to their underpants, but still identifiable as Central Asians by their traditional hats. This suggested not only humiliation at the hands of Uzbekistani officials, but also an impious indifference to local Islamic scruples about male attire in public space. This setting aside of behavioural norms indicated that the geopolitical threat to the integrity of Kyrgyzstan was also an unraveling of core cultural values, represented by humiliated and degraded bodies.

Thus, whether the source was neighbouring states, radical Islam, or ethnic minorities, the opposition repeatedly insisted that Kyrgyzstan was in grave danger, from which it could be delivered only by a change of leadership.

**Figure 4.** “Iron curtain?” Front-page leader in the Kyrgyzstani press makes charges of degrading Uzbekistani inspections policy at border posts (source: *Vecherniy Bishkek* 1999).

[12] An oblast is the major subnational regional territorial division of Kyrgyzstan.

**Elite discourses of danger in the popular sphere**

Berg believes that, "Political cartoons bear geopolitical information and leave an impact on people's understanding of the surrounding world" (Berg, 2003, page 114). However, the nature of this impact cannot be assumed. Sharp has criticised the critical geopolitics of Ó Tuathail for being elitist in its preoccupation with discourses and representations of the powerful, whilst reducing, "ordinary people to culture industry drones, empty of agency and awaiting their regular injection of ideas" (Sharp, 2000b, pages 361–362). It is therefore important not merely to describe the discourses of danger, but to balance this with an understanding of how they were received by their intended recipients, the population at large—what O'Loughlin terms the 'average citizen' in making the same argument (2001, pages 44–45). Both geographical and international relations variants of critical security studies have been more adept at producing eloquent deconstructions of texts than they have of assessing their reception. It is here that critical geopolitics can draw upon the writings of social geographers working on intrastate issues, who have long been concerned with both the relationship between fear of crime and incidence of crime and the everyday experience of fear of crime (Bannister and Fyfe, 2001; Pain, 2000; Shirlow and Pain, 2003). They have commonly used methods such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups. This paper uses material derived from focus groups.

The use of focus groups has found increasing popularity amongst geographers (Limb and Dwyer, 2001). Focus groups have the advantage over interviews in that, whilst speaking to peers, people are more likely to talk in locally relevant ways, which makes focus groups more sensitive to emic categories of knowledge (Goss and Leinbach, 1996, page 117). Epistemologically, they are an ideal method for research within a post-structural paradigm, as they highlight the way in which opinions are socially constructed and expressed, rather than being seen as stable attributes adhering to individuals, awaiting discovery through interviews (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999, page 5; Myers and Macnaghten, 1999, page 182). In 2000 I conducted fifteen focus groups, exploring thoughts about the perspectives of the opposition government on Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical challenges. These were conducted with relatively socially marginalised people—destitute, young people, and women's groups. Space limitations prevent anything beyond this brief discussion of the theory and practice of focus group research, and to outline the full results of these wide-ranging discussions is beyond the scope of this paper.[13] In this section I will explore responses to a single cartoon, used as one part of the group discussion. I gave photocopies of the cartoon and accompanying headline to the participants, and asked them what they thought it referred to.

The cartoon originally illustrated the article "Kyrgyzstan: here today, gone tomorrow?" printed in February 1999 in the opposition paper *Aalam* (1999c) (figure 5).[14] Alleging that the very existence of Kyrgyzstan was radically threatened, the article savaged President Akaev for failing to protect the Kyrgyz state from border incursions by its neighbours, linking this with other dangers such as Chinese and Tadjikistani land grabbing, in-migration of non-Kyrgyz people, lack of access to resources such as gas and oil, and poor knowledge of the national language. Without knowing the theme of the article, the majority of groups immediately surmised that it referred to their *chongdor* (Kyrgyz) or *kattalar* (Uzbek). This word literally means 'big ones', those wealthy elites including politicians, businessmen, and heads of public bodies whose

[13] For a fuller discussion of both methodology and results see Megoran (2002, pages 212–256).

[14] For an analysis of this article within the political and discursive contexts of contemporary Kyrgyzstan see Megoran (2004).

**Figure 5.** "Kyrgyzstan: here today, gone tomorrow?" (source: *Aalam* 1999c).

access to power enables them to trap resources and advance themselves and their families and allies.

The general interpretation of the cartoon was that the chongdor were devouring Kyrgyzstan for their own ends. Untold amounts of foreign aid had poured into the country, but had been embezzled without any of it benefiting the common people. This interpretation transcended ethnic boundaries. Klara, a participant in a focus group which comprised a Kyrgyz rural women's consciousness-raising group, said, "The chongdor love gobbling everything up, for their own benefit; why, they are ready to lick the whole of Kyrgyzstan clean, if it comes to it!" The words were echoed by an Uzbek in a different group: "At the moment people are stopping work, becoming unemployed, workshops and factories are closing .... If people keep gobbling [Kyrgyzstan] the way they are at the moment, the mountains themselves may disappear!" The resultant social ills of poverty, a drift from professions to the bazaars, narcotic abuse, factory closures, hunger, and unemployment, were freely rehearsed. The chongdor were prospering whilst the common people suffered.

Another explanation of the ogres was that they were foreigners. After domestic chongdor, the terrorist threat from the IMU was named as a major danger. Much reference was made to foreign capitalists—Turkish and Chinese traders and 'Western' capitalists. These were sometimes described as being in cahoots with the Kyrgyz chongdor, and were together draining the wealth of Kyrgyzstan.

Some groups hit upon the actual topic of the article, the threat of neighbouring republics grabbing Kyrgyz territory. I revealed the topic of the article to all groups in time; every group agreed in theory that it was, 'the most serious issue' facing Kyrgyzstan, as the text of the article claimed, but, nonetheless, they expended far more time and emotion discussing the threat to Kyrgyzstan posed by the chongdor. When threats to Kyrgyzstan's territorial integrity were discussed, they were generally in the context of impeded border crossings, tortuous routes, broken kinship ties, and more expensive goods

in the bazaar (all as a result of tighter control of borders by neighbouring states), rather than the more abstract accusations. Although some Kyrgyz participants did express a worry that Uzbekistan was intent on acquiring parts of Kyrgyz territory, this was not afforded the enormous significance that the opposition papers ascribed to it.(15)

People connected the discussion with interstate relations and disputes over gas, water, and electricity, as the article did; but no group made any connection at all with the supposed weakness of the Kyrgyz language and the sense of identity that the opposition so bemoaned. What is more, the term 'chongdor' was used to refer to political elites in general, to opposition as well as to government. Although differing degrees of sympathy could be found for both government positions and particularly opposition sentiments, the participants of the groups on the whole, male or female, Kyrgyz or Uzbek, articulated a surprisingly coherent *class-based* analysis of the threat to Kyrgyzstan, a material threat posed by the political class struggling to claim to represent them, rather than an abstract geopolitical threat. This illustrates what the work of Sievers (2003) and Cummings (2002) suggests, that the greatest dangers facing post-Soviet Central Asian populations are not external, but social and economic collapse and bad governance.

Such discussions would have been unthinkable in Uzbekistan, where people were afraid of being so openly critical of political elites, who were in turn afraid of allowing them the opportunity to be so. This relative freedom for elites to present conflicting accounts and for the populace to evaluate their propaganda partially explains the very different operation and role of everyday fear in the two states, and contests any monolithic theory of the place of danger in geopolitical identity.

## Conclusion

Drawing on critical security studies and critical geopolitics, I have examined discursive constructions of danger in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. I suggest that, whilst these processes do underwrite the imagination of a geographical community, "the claims to a virtuous home place and perfidious external threat [are] a powerful political language intimately tied to the justifications of many varieties of political violence" (Dalby, 2003b, page 82). The paper makes empirical, theoretical, methodological, and ethical contributions to this literature.

Empirically, it extends analysis to a previously underresearched area, Central Asia. The government of Uzbekistan relentlessly bombarded the population with the idea that the state was in mortal danger, a move which instantiated the boundaries of the state's identity, and legitimised the authoritarian rule of Islam Karimov as the defender of the state against that danger. In contrast, the Kyrgyzstani government eschewed any such discursive strategy, insisting instead that the leadership of Askar Akaev ensured the state's prosperity in an essentially benign world. It was, rather, opposition movements that employed a rhetoric of a gravely endangered state in order to discredit the government. Both these narratives were disputed by more marginal members of the population, however, who saw the ambition and greed of opposing political elites as the major danger to the people of Kyrgyzstan. The relative openness of society afforded more opportunities for populations to draw their own conclusions. Consequently, the sense of everyday fear that so permeated Uzbek society was less apparent in Kyrgyzstan. The account of my experience during ethnographic research suggests that the different levels of 'saturation' of discourses of danger had genuine impacts on everyday consciousness.

(15) This finding suggests that simple quantitative surveys of 'opinions', when taken alone, might be misleading indicators of the public reception of elite discourse.

Most immediately, these differences exist because the government of Uzbekistan has been able to monopolise multiple sites of discursive production more effectively than has its Kyrgyzstani counterpart. The reasons for this are complex and will not be better understood until further work has been done to account for political formation in the two republics—work that may not be possible during the incumbencies of the current presidents. Nonetheless, in this paper I have suggested a number of factors including differential access of ruling elites to resources, the characters of the leaders, and different paths of development of clan-based political formation. In both cases, discursive constructions of danger or safety were integral to the continual production and maintenance of the political identity of the new states, and were inseparable from material conditions of political struggle. As Shirlow and Pain argue, there is both a *geography* and a *politics* to fear (2003, page 15).

Theoretically, I emphasise the importance of examining not just how discourses of danger work and are contested in one country, but how they may be less important in another. Some work in critical security studies and critical geopolitics (for example, Campbell, 1998; Sharp, 2000a) has produced accounts of a state's identity being relentlessly reconstructed through the articulation of danger. This paper does not question those empirical studies, but shows that, whilst this scheme works extremely well for Uzbekistan, it does not fit Kyrgyzstan. As anthropologists such as Douglas (1992) have reminded us, not all societies operate the same mechanisms of demonisation and exclusion, and we must be wary of reinscribing them as inevitable conditions of social formation. It is important to disaggregate the concept of danger carefully in order to highlight its working in specific historical and geographical circumstances (Gold and Revill, 2003).

Methodologically, recognising that geopolitical discourses are articulated across multiple sites of social formation, I model a way of studying danger that transcends the high politics/popular culture dualism that tends to characterise work in this field, by grounding an examination of elite textual practices of representation of danger in a study of their reception. I suggest that work on discourses of danger can be both broadened and deepened by connecting textual analysis to a range of literatures and approaches well beyond critical security studies and critical geopolitics. These include work on social geographies of youth culture and fear of crime, theories of cultural reproduction such as embodiment and performativity, and methods such as ethnography and focus groups. As geographers tend to be more comfortable with these approaches than do scholars of international relations, critical political geographers can make a useful contribution to the development of critical security studies.

Finally, this work suggests an inevitable ethical imperative, taking up the call of Hewitt (2001, page 338) for geographers to confront the systematic use of violence by the state against its own citizens. Human rights agencies have catalogued a shocking indictment of the violence enacted on the population of Uzbekistan in the name of taming danger, and Kyrgyz opposition groups have at times bordered on the xenophobic in their denunciation of ethnic minorities. It is imperative that critical geographers challenge these practices.

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