COMPETING FOR CAKE CRUMBS: WHY CHINESE MINING LEADS TO CONFLICT IN KYRGYZSTAN BUT NOT TAJIKISTAN

by Isabelle DeSisto

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In January 2011, Chinese General Liu Yazhou called Central Asia “the thickest piece of cake given to the modern Chinese by the heavens.”[1] Liu was almost certainly referring to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, which boast large hydrocarbon and mineral reserves. Together, these three countries supply 3.4% of China’s total energy imports.[2] As population growth, climate change, and other environmental stressors threaten global resource availability, countries like China are diversifying their suppliers.[3] But with readily accessible resources dwindling, investors have turned their attention to more “forbidding, hard-to-access locations.”[4]

The other two Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are not obvious sites for investment. As one environmental NGO report states, they “are less advanced industrially and economically, have fewer mineral resources suitable for development and have been less politically stable” than their neighbors.¹ But China has taken an interest in both of them. Although their extractive potential is small, both have some underexploited gold and silver reserves.² China’s economic activity has contributed to structural dependence, underdevelopment, and environmental degradation in both countries.³ Yet only in Kyrgyzstan have these problems led to conflict between Chinese companies and local populations.

The most-similar cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan shed light on the relationship between resource scarcity and conflict, a hotly debated topic in the political science literature. Why has China’s exploitation of scarce mineral resources led to conflict in Kyrgyzstan, but not Tajikistan? What can this puzzle tell us about the conditions under which scarcity causes civil unrest?

Resource scarcity is not sufficient to provoke conflict. China’s exploitation of limited mineral resources in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan creates a complex network of mutually reinforcing environmental and socioeconomic problems, which stoke tensions between extractive agents and local populations. However, these problems do not always cause conflict. I argue here that political institutions serve as gatekeepers of conflict: while “permissive” institutions (associated with democratic regimes) allow tensions to erupt, “repressive” institutions (associated with authoritarian regimes) keep a lid on conflict. My argument recognizes the importance of context-specific factors in generating conditions favorable to conflict, but stresses that, given these conditions, institutions mark the difference between popular resistance and acquiescence.

Debates on Scarcity and Conflict

Two competing theses dominate the literature on scarcity and conflict. The “shrinking pie” thesis posits that shortages aggravate strained social relations and groups fight to survive with increasingly limited resources.⁴ Some resource scarcity theorists, most notably Homer-Dixon, argue that scarcity indirectly causes conflict by generating large population movements and economic deprivation, which in turn fuel civil strife.⁵ The “honeypot” thesis, by contrast, suggests that abundance leads to conflict. In this latter framework, resource wealth fuels competition among

¹ “Mining, Development and Environment in Central Asia,” Zoï Environment Network, University of Eastern Finland, Gaia Group Oy, 2012, 8. “Kyrgyzstan” is more commonly used than the country’s official title, the “Kyrgyz Republic.”
² Ibid., 8.
⁴ Indra de Soysa, “Ecoviolence: Shrinking Pie, or Honey Pot?” Global Environmental Politics 2, no. 4 (November 1, 2002): 1–34.
greedy opportunists. Salehyan and Hendrix, for instance, find that violent events are more frequent when water is relatively plentiful. Although my analysis concerns cases that resemble the “shrinking pie” scenario, I do not suggest that the theories are mutually exclusive.

Although Homer-Dixon and Salehyan & Hendrix concede that the relationship between scarcity and conflict is not deterministic, other scholars put even greater emphasis on context. Koubi argues that climate change fuels conflict only under certain conditions. For example, climatic aberrations like droughts reduce agricultural output, which triggers rising food prices, increased migration flows, and a heavier economic burden on the migrant-receiving area. This pathway is especially likely to lead to conflict in places with poor social services. Looking at the relationship between oil and violence in Nigeria, Watts stresses that conflicts are “always locally rooted, reflecting the particular historical configuration of customary forms of rule and governance, company activity, the history of inter-ethnic relations, and local government and state forces.”

This emphasis on contextual factors is characteristic of political ecology, which “seeks to unravel the political forces at work in environmental access, management, and transformation.” Political ecologists see violence as “a site-specific phenomenon rooted in local histories and social relations yet connected to larger processes of material transformations and power relations.” In this paper, I draw on political ecology approaches by investigating how Chinese mining companies interact with Kyrgyz and Tajik communities and placing these local histories into a broader political context. Whereas large-N studies are well-suited to identifying correlations between variables, a two-case comparison allows me to develop a more detailed understanding of the mechanisms linking scarcity to conflict.

**Setting Up the Most-Similar Comparison**

Treating Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as most-similar cases helps eliminate potential confounding variables and isolate relevant explanatory variables. The two countries are in the same

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6. de Soysa, “Ecoviolence.”
geographical region and have similar population sizes and areas (see Table 1). Both were part of the Russian Empire, and later the Soviet Union, before gaining independence in 1991. This shared past shapes present-day foreign relations: Russia is an important trading partner and military ally of both nations. The Kyrgyz and Tajik economies also have much in common, including a GDP per capita of around $1,000 and a heavy dependence on remittances—mostly from migrant workers living in Russia. Both countries produce under 20 tons of gold annually, far behind Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Politically, however, they diverge: Kyrgyzstan is an unstable democracy with a “partially free” Freedom House rating, whereas Tajikistan is a consolidated authoritarian regime.

A crucial similarity between the two countries is China’s growing economic engagement. Beijing’s activities in Central Asia are part of the Silk Road Economic Belt component of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a long-term infrastructure development project that envisions transportation routes and energy pipelines stretching all the way to Europe. Wealthy nations seem poised to benefit from BRI programs, but less-developed Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are vulnerable to debt shocks, as they borrow under unfavorable conditions to finance their respective BRI-related infrastructure projects. China holds about half of both countries’ foreign debts (see Table 2).

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18 Peter Ferdinand, “Westward Ho—the China Dream and ‘One Belt, One Road’: Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping,” International Affairs 92, no. 4 (July 1, 2016): 941–57, 950.
Table 1: Comparing Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kyrgyzstan</th>
<th>Tajikistan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population (2019 est.)</td>
<td>6.46 million</td>
<td>9.32 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area (km²)</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>143,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita (2019 est.)</td>
<td>$1,309</td>
<td>$870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remittances (% GDP)</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold production (tons, 2016 est.)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt to China</td>
<td>$1.8 billion</td>
<td>$1.38 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regime type</td>
<td>Unstable democracy</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: See text for citations

Despite these similarities, reactions to China’s mining activities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been distinct. Kyrgyz have expressed their indignation through protests and violent clashes with mining workers, while Tajiks have remained comparatively quiet. Between 2018 and 2020, nearly 10% of Kyrgyzstan’s 603 recorded protests related to extractive industries, with half targeting Chinese companies.\(^1\) Over the same period, Tajikistan had only 29 protests, and only one was anti-China (see Table 2).\(^2\)

Table 2: Protests by selected issues, 2018-2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protest Issue</th>
<th>Kyrgyzstan</th>
<th>Tajikistan</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>42 (7%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>51 (8%)</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extractive Industries</td>
<td>56 (9%)</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China AND Environment/Extractive Industries</td>
<td>23 (4%)</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Protests</td>
<td>603 (100%)</td>
<td>29 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Central Asia Protest Tracker

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\(^2\) Ibid.
Kyrgyzstan: Extraction and Conflict

Foreign mining companies entered Kyrgyzstan en masse in the late 1990s, when the country offered inexpensive mineral exploration licenses. However, local opposition to foreign involvement emerged as environmental degradation worsened and license-holders failed to provide the promised jobs to Kyrgyz citizens. In 2010, civil unrest wracked Kyrgyzstan when ethnic violence broke out between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in its southern provinces. Foreign companies transferred their operations elsewhere, while risk-tolerant Chinese companies proliferated. But as Beijing continues to expand its economic activities in Kyrgyzstan, conflicts between local populations and Chinese companies have grown increasingly frequent.

In some cases, conflict is violent. In September 2018, an angry population locked Chinese gold miners in a cargo container. In August 2019, villagers near the Solton-Sary gold mine accused a Chinese mining company of releasing toxic chemicals into the soil, poisoning local livestock. The ensuing brawl between villagers and Chinese workers sent 20 people to the hospital.

In other cases, conflict is nonviolent. In 2013, Chinese workers at a power transmission company in southern Kyrgyzstan were injured during a conflict with Kyrgyz villagers over an alleged theft. In 2014, protestors forced a Chinese-operated oil refinery to cease operations due to concerns over soil and air pollution. Evidence of corrupt contracts between Chinese companies and local politicians mounted in 2018, causing further public outcries. Since then, large-scale anti-China demonstrations have become common. Protesters regularly express outrage over issues ranging from environmental degradation and corruption to Chinese immigration and Beijing’s repression.

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 15.
31 Ryskulova, “V dolgu u bol’shogo soseda.”
of Muslims in neighboring Xinjiang. Between 2018 and 2020, 42 anti-China protests were recorded in Kyrgyzstan. Of these, 23 related to either the environment or extractive industries (see Table 2).

**Tajikistan: Extraction and Acquiescence**

China’s economic activities in Tajikistan closely resemble those in Kyrgyzstan. After the collapse of the USSR, Tajikistan experienced a devastating five-year civil war. Foreign mining companies attempted to establish operations in the country but were largely unsuccessful. Risk-tolerant Chinese companies, however, capitalized on Tajikistan’s post-war economic vulnerabilities to win lucrative mining contracts. In 2007, a Chinese mining company acquired a 75% equity stake in the Zarafshan gold mine, which accounts for over 70% of Tajikistan’s total gold production. Over time, Chinese companies became major stakeholders in gold mines across the country. Collectively, their activities have had a disastrous environmental impact.

Recent developments in Beijing’s extractive policies have been particularly controversial. In June 2016, Tajik president Emomali Rahmon opened a new gold-mining company, which he claimed would provide many jobs for Tajik workers. But allegations of corruption soon emerged: Rahmon’s son-in-law would run the company and a Chinese firm owned a controlling stake. In 2019, criticisms of Tajik-Chinese mining deals sharpened after information surfaced that the Tajik government had awarded China exclusive rights to two gold deposits until Tajikistan could repay a $331.5 million Chinese loan.

Like their Kyrgyz neighbors, Tajiks object to the corruption and environmental degradation associated with China’s mining activities. Unlike in Kyrgyzstan, however, popular outrage has not translated into conflict. In 2019, Tajiks used social media to criticize their parliament’s hasty decision to grant a Chinese company the rights to develop a silver mine. Yet the only China-related

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34 “Central Asia Protest Tracker.”
35 Reeves, Chinese Foreign Relations with Weak Peripheral States, 74–75.
38 Ibid.
39 Reeves, Chinese Foreign Relations with Weak Peripheral States, 84.
40 Lavrov, Velska, and Sabados, “Zhazhda zolota.”
protest to occur between 2018 and 2020 involved Chinese nationals, not Tajiks: in May 2020, Chinese metal plant workers demonstrated for the right to return to China because of the coronavirus pandemic.\textsuperscript{42} No protests related to the environment or extractive industries were recorded during the period.\textsuperscript{43}

The Inseparability of Environmental and Socioeconomic Factors

The Kyrgyz and Tajik cases highlight that the environmental and socioeconomic drivers of conflict are inseparable. China’s extractive activities have generated environmental consequences like soil, water, and air pollution.\textsuperscript{44} Chinese companies are also responsible for destroying pastures and forests while conducting mineral exploration, and their dams have reduced river flow and caused food shortages.\textsuperscript{45} Local populations often blame these companies for adverse environmental consequences even when it is unclear that they are responsible. In 2019, farmers near Kyrgyzstan’s Solton-Sary gold mine claimed that livestock were dying because a Chinese mining company had polluted their drinking water with toxic chemicals. Although Kyrgyz veterinary officials attributed the deaths to parasitic diseases, farmers remained skeptical.\textsuperscript{46}

Concerns over environmental degradation are intimately tied to growing socioeconomic problems—like unemployment and the loss of traditional sources of income—in mining regions. The pollution of pastures and cropland threatens the livelihoods of farmers, while industrial mining puts artisanal miners out of work.\textsuperscript{47} Before the Chinese company scaled up operations at Solton-Sary, Kyrgyz workers mined the gold themselves, earning a stable income in an area where jobs were scarce. Now authorities arrest and fine locals for illegal mining.\textsuperscript{48}

Chinese workers are another source of tension. Despite the Chinese and Central Asian governments’ promises that mining will create jobs, local populations rarely see economic benefits. Capital-intensive mining operations do not require a large labor force, and Chinese companies prefer to hire Chinese workers. At the same time, poverty and unemployment compel many Kyrgyz and Tajik men to seek work abroad.\textsuperscript{49} The fact that Chinese companies profit using foreign labor while locals migrate for work fuels resentment in both countries and leads to exaggerated reports

\textsuperscript{43} “Central Asia Protest Tracker.”
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{46} Ryskulova, “V dolgu u bol’shogo soseda.”
\textsuperscript{47} “Mining, Development and Environment in Central Asia,” 34.
\textsuperscript{48} Ryskulova, “V dolgu u bol’shogo soseda.”
\textsuperscript{49} Eshaliyeva, “Is Anti-Chinese Mood Growing in Kyrgyzstan?”
of illegal immigration. The anti-Chinese sentiments that manifest themselves in conflicts throughout Kyrgyzstan appear to be grounded more in economic deprivation than racism or historical grievances. “In most instances, the real sources of mining conflicts are ... nuanced, especially when accounting for local residents’ unfulfilled hopes regarding work and quality of life. Yet the ‘Chinese factor’ emerges as an effective mechanism for public protests to take off,” concludes a Kyrgyz researcher who conducted interviews at 15 mining sites.

The roots of conflict between local communities and Chinese mining companies are both environmental and socioeconomic. Nor can we isolate these two types of factors; the health of the environment impacts ways of life in mining villages, while economic anxieties influence villagers’ perceptions of environmental threats. These interweaving patterns set the stage for conflict but, given their presence in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, they do not explain why conflict occurs in one country and not the other.

**The Key Difference: Permissive versus Repressive Institutions**

I argue that differences in political institutions explain why tensions have turned into conflict in Kyrgyzstan, but not Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan’s political institutions are permissive, allowing citizens to voice their discontent—sometimes violently. Tajikistan, by contrast, relies on repressive institutions to crack down on expressions of opposition, creating a culture of fear that discourages citizens from speaking out.

Over the past two years, Kyrgyzstan has witnessed democratic backsliding. Still, analysts consider it the most democratic—or least authoritarian—of the five Central Asian republics. In 2018, Kyrgyzstan received a score of 8 on the Polity5 democracy index, compared to Tajikistan’s score of -3.

Although crackdowns on protesters occur in both countries, they are much more severe in Tajikistan than in Kyrgyzstan. In October 2014, Tajik authorities blocked entry into the capital city

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52 Polity5 scores range from -10 (strongly autocratic) to +10 (strongly democratic). This index may overestimate the level of democracy in Kyrgyzstan, but it is still a useful metric for comparing Central Asian countries. “Polity5 Annual Time-Series, 1946-2018,” Center for Systemic Peace, accessed February 20, 2021, https://www.systemicpeace.org/inscrdata.html.
and deployed armed security forces to prevent an opposition group from holding a rally. These measures explain why Tajiks rarely protest. When isolated protests do occur, they are often government-supported and target political opposition groups. In Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, punishments for protesters rarely exceed small fines.

Media censorship is also more pronounced in Tajikistan than in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan ranks 82nd out of 180 countries analyzed in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index. In Kyrgyzstan, social media is an important tool for mobilization. For example, in November 2019, Kyrgyz citizens used social media to organize a protest against corruption along the Kyrgyz-Chinese border. Although Kyrgyz courts sometimes sanction social media users for making derogatory posts about ethnic minorities, authorities have not resorted to large-scale censorship. Tajikistan, in contrast, exercises tight control over social media. In 2018, the authorities restricted internet access by creating a government monopoly, and responded to protest rumors by blocking media outlets, social networks, and messaging services.

Finally, the Kyrgyz government has been more permissive of political opposition, which allows entrepreneurial politicians to use environmental degradation and anti-Chinese sentiments to discredit the ruling regime. In 2014, then-Economy Minister Temir Sariyev accused government opponents of manipulating anti-China protests “to earn political points.” Ironically, the previous year, Sariyev had applied this same tactic to force a foreign mining company to renegotiate its license on the pretext that it had caused nearly US$500 million of environmental damage. Former Kyrgyz president Soorobay Jeenbekov used a corruption scandal involving a Chinese-built power

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55 “Anti-China Protesters Fined in Kyrgyzstan.”
61 Trilling, “Kyrgyzstan Suspends Work at New Chinese Refinery.”
plant to clear out government ministers loyal to his predecessor. In Tajikistan, however, authorities systematically repress political opposition, which prevents political hopefuls from capitalizing on public discontent.

Overall, Kyrgyzstan’s institutions—including government officials, security forces, and courts—are much more permissive of political opposition than Tajikistan’s. This explains why Kyrgyz citizens publicly voice their grievances about China’s extractive policies whereas Tajiks do not.

Conclusion

The relationship between scarcity and conflict is neither linear nor deterministic. In this paper, I use the most-similar cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to show how scarcity leads to conflict. Both countries are resource-poor but have experienced a surge of Chinese companies seeking to exploit their limited mineral reserves. Chinese mining operations contribute to environmental degradation, which interacts with socioeconomic vulnerabilities to aggravate tensions between Chinese companies and local communities. Controversies regarding corruption scandals and China’s persecution of Muslims exacerbate existing anxieties. Against this backdrop, widespread protests and clashes between villagers and Chinese workers have broken out in Kyrgyzstan. Puzzlingly, however, no such conflict has occurred in Tajikistan.

These divergent outcomes suggest that scarcity generates conflict only under certain conditions. The tensions caused by environmental and socioeconomic problems associated with Chinese mining are not sufficient. To understand why conflict occurs, we must consider not only the complex web of underlying tensions, but also the political contexts in which social actors operate. The key distinguishing factor in the Kyrgyz and Tajik cases is their political institutions. Kyrgyzstan’s permissive institutions create a relatively open climate in which citizens mobilize through social media and politicians galvanize support by accentuating the environmental degradation and corruption caused by Chinese business interests. Tajikistan’s repressive institutions create a climate of fear by restricting citizens’ media freedoms and systematically marginalizing political opposition.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan may be two small Central Asian countries, but their situations are not unique. As global pressures on natural resources mount, Chinese companies are pursuing new suppliers. Their investments pose risks for the environment, employment opportunities, and ultimately China’s international image. As Beijing’s economic reach expands under BRI, the kind of conflicts observed in Kyrgyzstan are likely to multiply.

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Finally, it is worth considering that while conflict can cause violence and destruction, it can also be productive. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, a Chinese-run oil refinery promised to clean up its act after locals denounced its polluting practices. Conversely, the absence of conflict in Tajikistan prevents physical injuries, but it also means that environmental degradation and corruption can continue unchecked.

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66 Trilling, “Kyrgyzstan Suspends Work at New Chinese Refinery.”