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Intimate militarism

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The boundaries that separate the five post-Soviet states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) remain relative outliers in the comparative study of Asian borderlands. These international borders are constitutionally and empirically new, marking the territorial limits of independent states only since 1991. Significant sections of these states’ boundaries with one another remain subject to ongoing processes of delimitation and demarcation, including half of the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border (451 kilometres) and up to 60 separate sections, totalling 371 kilometres, of the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan border (Polat 2002; Alamanov 2005).

The texture of everyday life along and across these new international boundaries remains comparatively under-researched, given the significant practical, institutional, and security challenges to conducting sustained cross-border fieldwork. We should also be wary of extrapolating from research in one region to a depiction of Central Asian borders as a whole: the border is always more than (and sometimes not even) a line on a map, and this has implications for the way that borders locally are worked and made to work (Reeves 2014). In some areas concrete border posts, deep trenches and lines of razor wire stretch into the horizon as far as the eye can see, cutting through the middle of villages, dividing settlements from their fields, neighbours from neighbours, even houses from their outhouses (see, e.g. Megoran 2002: 181; Troscenko 2016). In others, the border traces the line of a river or irrigation canal, and is monitored by soldiers and observation towers to warn off any potentially unauthorised crosser. Along many of its stretches, however, the ‘border’ is impossible to read from the landscape with the juridical boundary indexed only by the pockets of trade that cluster around it: a concentration of oil-tankers moving gasoline from Kyrgyzstan to Tajikistan; a series of Kamaz-trucks parked at the unmarked border selling coal to middlemen from nearby villages. In other stretches still, where the border coincides with zones of dense residential settlement, the presence of the border provides lucrative opportunities for homes to be turned into store-houses and back yards to serve as informal, untaxed crossing points, sometimes just a few metres away from the official border post: a so-called ‘back door’ (chernyi khod) that is a critical, if legally unrecognised, part of border infrastructure and of local economies (Orlova 2003).

Rather than attempting to present an encyclopaedic survey of Central Asian borders, this chapter focuses ethnographically on the everyday dynamics of border securitisation at the
southern edge of the Ferghana Valley, a densely populated intra-montane basin where three of the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, meet. This is a region where the delimitation and regulation of these post-Soviet borders remain both politically contentious and sometimes violently disputed (International Crisis Group 2002; Megoran 2004; ACTED/OSCE 2005). It is also a region where ties of kinship, of trade, and of ritual visiting have been most dramatically ruptured by post-Soviet restrictions on cross-border mobility, as Uzbekistan maintains a visa regime with both of its Ferghana Valley neighbours. Land exchanges throughout the 20th century between what were constituent republics of a single Soviet state have resulted, upon independence, in juridical boundaries that transect settlements that had previously constituted a single moral community, bound by ties of ‘giving and taking’ daughters (kyz berüü, kyz aluu) in marriage and reciprocal attendance at funerals and family celebrations (jamanchylyk and jakshylyk toilar). It has also resulted in the appearance of some of the world’s largest sovereign enclaves (or exclaves, depending upon the particular state perspective): administrative units of one state, in some cases with populations in the tens of thousands, enclosed within the territory of another (Thorez 2003).

The extent of juridical non-determination means that one encounters stretches of disputed borderland in this region where formal prohibitions upon construction and cultivation have been ignored due to shortages of irrigated land. This administrative impasse has resulted in discrepancies between the maps that are taken to be authoritative in the respective Ferghana Valley states, just as it has between the international boundaries that Google Maps claims to be authoritative and the de facto distribution of villages and infrastructure subordinate to the respective state authority. It has also rendered infrastructure contentious and politicised. At the foothills that fringe the Ferghana basin to the north and south one finds reservoirs, irrigation canals, and dams legally owned by one state, but maintained by the down-stream neighbour that benefits from their use. One can see flags painted by hand on tea houses, bridges, or petrol stations to signal that this otherwise unmarked spot is the border, and this local landmark is the sovereign territory of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, or Tajikistan; and one can find roads with sections allocated as ‘green’, meaning that passengers are exceptionally able to enter the neighbouring state without being subject to border controls. Such arrangements, characterised by varying degrees of formality and informality, can become objects of public commentary, popular mobilisation and—exceptionally—of violent confrontation at moments of heightened inter-state tension.

It is little surprise, perhaps, that Central Asian examples feature widely in texts on ‘anomalous borders’ or ‘political oddities’ (Diener and Hagen 2010); or that Central Asian film-makers have explored the poignant ironies of relatives and co-ethnics who find that they need to apply for a visa to attend a wedding or visit a deceased relative who happens, now, to be the citizen of a neighbouring state (Alykulov 2006; Raev 2007).

**Exceptional borders?**

Given the violent intrusion that borders represent to ordinary life in Central Asia it may seem incongruous to explore borders as anything other than exceptional. Popular literature on the region often points precisely to this quality: borders in Central Asia are described as ‘arbitrary’, ‘incongruous’, ‘contorted’, or the object of cynical manipulation by early Soviet authorities bent on a policy of divide and rule (see, e.g. Lewington 2010; Shishkin 2013). As ethnographers of other new, or ‘anomalous’ borders have shown, however, even exceptional places become part of one’s everyday (Cons 2013), just as bullet-pocked buildings can become part of the taken-for-granted backdrop of one’s urban surroundings (Nucho 2016). This chapter, accordingly, focuses less on borders’ geopolitical or material ‘exceptionality’ in Central Asia than on the way
that such spaces become part of that which is unmarked or everyday; how they become banal. In part this is a story of borders’ routinisation; the embodied practices and institutional forms through which certain routes through a landscape become marked as ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’, ‘normal’, and ‘transgressive’, such that a border comes to be reproduced and take on social salience, even in the absence of regular border checks. But it is also more than that; for what is striking in large parts of the Ferghana Valley—a setting that is shot through with existential uncertainty over collective village futures in contexts of strained inter-ethnic relations and declining economic opportunities—is the way that borders, and more specifically, the military presence with which they are associated, come to be normalised and even desired as an index of social and geographical legibility to the state.

I argue in this chapter that taking seriously borderland residents’ concern to be ‘gridded’ (Jansen 2014)—to be recognised as legible to the state; to count and be counted, rather than to evade the state—is critical for understanding the contemporary escalation of force that we see in the Ferghana Valley. For village residents and rural officials alike, I suggest, being identified as a ‘border village’ has become a way of being seen by the state and thus of accessing material and symbolic benefits in a context otherwise marked by consistent state withdrawal. As a school teacher commented to me in 2005, reflecting on the differential benefits accorded both by government agencies and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to the school where she taught: ‘we had the good fortune, it turns out, to be considered a border village; you know, “strategically important”’ (strategicheskoe vazhnnoe echenbiz?) Rather like the uniformed citizens who take it upon themselves to check on the identity of a visiting journalist and accuse her of ‘not knowing the map’ (Geine 2016), becoming ‘strategically important’, like becoming a ‘border village’—a designation that carries both privileges and responsibilities for local men to participate in the monitoring of border movement—is becoming part of the logic and language of self-identification for borderland residents at a time when the provision of public goods is increasingly strained.

**Intimate militarism**

I develop the category of ‘intimate militarism’ to explore this dynamic, drawing upon fieldwork that I have conducted in a side valley of the Ferghana basin, along the Isfara River, over the course of a more than a decade. I draw in particular upon research that I have conducted in and around the village of Ak-Sai, a Kyrgyz-majority village (population 1,160) established in the 1970s on the border with Tajikistan’s Vorukh exclave. Along the length of the Isfara River, the borders between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have the quality of being at once apparently indistinct, with few conventional markers of membership in the form of flags, signs, and border posts, and at the same time, highly politicised and occasionally the site of violent confrontation. For all the lack of conventional border infrastructure, this is a setting where variant logics of national membership—manifest in differences of state ideology, school curricula, modes of tolerated dress, language policy, and even the time zone that is locally operative on two sides of the border—have come to structure everyday life along increasingly national lines. An important insight from this region is that borders do not need to materialise in the forms of walls and fences to be experienced as real. Indeed, it is the very capacity of the border to appear, suddenly and consequentially, in the form of a conscript soldier, a customs officer, or a member of the security services patrolling a mountain road, that gives ‘border’ here the sense of being nowhere and potentially everywhere at one and the same time.

To explore this quality in more depth, I turn to a kindred scholarly field. In his now classic monograph on ‘banal nationalism’, Michael Billig (1995) argues that nationalism should be
located not so much in the domain of political ideology as in the mundane, embodied practices that lie beyond conscious reflection or deliberation. In this national order of things, according to Billig, the citizenry’s reminders of political membership are ‘so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding’. The social correlate of this is not the flag that is being fervently waved by a nationalist politician, but the flag that hangs unnoticed on the public building (Billig 1995: 8–9).

Billig’s ‘deixis of homeland-making’ can be identified in multiple domains of life in rural Central Asia, from the country-shaped icons that often decorate local taxis to the branding of local beer as nashe pivo, ‘our beer’, in the colours of the local flag (Marat 2009). Yet there are two qualifications to Billig’s thesis that are generative for thinking about the routinisation of bordered geographies in the Ferghana Valley. First, Billig is primarily interested in the symbolic register of this national flagging: in the reading of weather forecasts, in the production of national newspapers, in the learning of selective national histories, or the invocation by newsreaders of a national ‘we’. But banal nationalism is also a material and spatial practice, and the work of nation flagging may be particularly salient in states where the geographic coordinates of national territory are disputed or contentious (cf. Billé 2014). Furthermore, in many global settings, the nation that is being flagged and rendered banal is a securitised nation: a nation that is always already under threat, and which can only survive as a nation by being (collectively) on its guard (compare Ochs 2011). The ‘ban’ in banal derives etymologically from the compulsory (and thus banal, common-to-all) call to arms. To invoke Billig’s formulation again, the ‘banal’ in ‘banal nationalism’ gestures not just to what is boring or unremarkable: it is more specifically the unmarked routinisation of being-on-one’s-guard: to the national citizen as watchman or vigilante.

This nuance is significant for reflecting on the particular modalities of nationalism that figure in Central Asian public culture. In Uzbekistan, for instance, the sense of the nation being under permanent threat (whether from substandard goods being imported across the border to vermin that need to be kept under control by a vigilant citizenry to armed incursions of Islamist militants) is a staple, not just of official political discourse, but also of pop culture, estrada music, and high-school pedagogy (Megoran 2008; Koch 2011; Klenke 2015). In Tajikistan, scholars have pointed out how President Rahmon uses the threat of ‘radical Islam’ as ‘a vehicle to justify popular repression, to eliminate rivals, and to obtain material aid for the RT [Tajikistani] security apparatus, both internal and military’ (Foster 2015: 152). In Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, concerns about the illicit movement of people and goods across excessively ‘porous’ borders have resulted in a number of policies explicitly aimed at preventing out-migration and ‘strengthen[ing] the military-patriotic preparation of the population’ of territories accorded special border status, just as they have in a range of public statements about the threat of so-called ‘creeping migration’: the cultivation (and de facto appropriation) of territory that is legally disputed between neighbouring states (Reeves 2009; Proekt 2011).

These discourses, while deriving from elite concerns about political and territorial stability, also have considerable local traction. Along Kyrgyzstan’s southern border with Uzbekistan at the perimeter of the Sokh enclave, for instance, I found that my own critique of borders’ increasingly militarised presence—manifest in barbed wire military controls, and the repurposing of public buildings for military ends—did not necessarily resonate with my informants. For many of my Kyrgyz interlocutors, having a defended border was spoken of, both as a critical index of ‘normal’ statehood and as the only meaningful brake upon the increasing demands of Uzbekistan’s border guards, who would often aggressively question Kyrgyzstan citizens as they sought to reach their homes, or pester them for ‘tea money’ (choi pul) for alleged driving offences. As the director of a border market (bazarkom) asked me rhetorically in 2005, pinning his hopes on the new president that had been propelled to power by a popular uprising in March that year,
‘Doesn’t England have a border? The new President has to define and give us the border!’ (*chek anany taktap berish kerék*) (Reeves 2011)

In the ethnography that follows, I proceed by exploring three modalities through which the new international borders in the Ferghana Valley have become ‘intimately militarised’. First, they manifest in the habitual reproduction of border geography: the way, that is, that a new international border comes to shape patterns of movement and avoidance; where people choose (or are permitted) to travel and not to travel; to shop and not to shop; to visit and not to visit. Second, they manifest in the normalisation of military presence itself: in the everyday presence of conscript soldiers and their military barracks; in the presence of soldiers asking for lifts, purchasing goods, checking passports, or offering services (such as the provision of a barracks bathhouse for local use). And third, it appears in the domestication of state force: in the appeal to armed conscript soldiers and officers for the resolution of mundane, neighbourly disputes, and in the blurring of boundaries between ‘state’ and ‘vigilante’ control of borders. In the final section, I suggest how such an approach might offer a more nuanced account of how popular concerns for recognition and incorporation within state space intersect with, and become enmeshed within, elite-led agendas of securitisation.

**Becoming bordered: changing habitual geographies**

In the spring of 2004, when I first travelled to Ak-Sai, the journey from the provincial centre of Batken took over two and half hours in the yellow *Pazik* bus that had been servicing this route for the past 30 years. The journey was frequently interrupted by unscheduled stops: to coax the ageing engine into gear on a gravelly incline; to tie an extra large bundle to the roof of the bus; to fit a milk pail or carpet in among the passengers squatting and standing along the bus’s middle. Travelling on this route was a sociable affair: children and packages might be passed to seated strangers to be cared for until we reached our destination; seats would be rearranged or given up to allow an elderly passenger the opportunity to rest her feet; other seats would be created from small wooden planks across the middle of the rows. This bus, designed to accommodate no more than 30 passengers, probably transported more than double that number on each of its daily routes from Batken to Ak-Sai and back again. Its route tacked westward from Batken until it reached the Tortgul Reservoir before following the line of the Isfara River itself, dipping in and out of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the process.

Along our route, river, road, and border continuously crossed and recrossed, such that our route took us back and forth, in and out of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, no fewer than six times in the course of the journey. None of these crossing points was marked by a permanent border post or fence, and few, indeed, by any obvious indicators of being at an international border crossing, such as a road-side sign or flag. The move from one state to another had to be read in other ways: here prices were listed in Kyrgyz som, there in Tajik somoni; here the licence plates on passing cars took one form and there another; here the announcements advertising mobile phone contracts were in the Kyrgyz language, there in Tajik. My fellow passengers could identify ‘Kyrgyz’ and ‘Tajik’ villages in an instant: there were differences in the density of dwelling, the style of domestic construction, and the size of the local mosques. There were differences in habitual modes of male and female dress; even the preference for particular models of imported car.

But the social space of cross-border public transport was not marked in ‘national’ terms, and while the bus was operated from the bus station in Batken town, and ended its journey in the Kyrgyz village of Ak-Sai, its route knitted all of the border villages along its route, whether in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, in a single social space. More importantly, perhaps, the 15 or so villages that lay along our route were ones on which everyone on the bus had certain kinds of claim.
Everyone knew that to buy livestock, one went to Samarkandek, a sprawling, parched, and rather desolate Kyrgyz village that came alive on market day. To buy petrol, one went to the Tajik side too; for coal, you went to the Tajik side, where canvas-covered trucks brought coal directly from the sole functioning mine in the once flourishing border town of Shorab. In this space of intense social and linguistic mixing, the Russian rouble often served as the convertible currency of choice; just as Uzbek, understood to a greater or less degree by most Kyrgyz and Tajik adults, served as an informal lingua franca. During my earliest period of research here, what was striking in the Isfara valley was precisely how little international borders seemed to matter. There were other differences that made a difference (Green 2005): notably those of ethnicity, language, wealth, mode of life, or one’s commitment or not to pietist forms of Islam. Sometimes these differences were objects of commentary or contention: there were whispered conversations about the big traders who hid narcotics in their apricot harvest and who had managed to build lavish two-storey houses. But these were not, by and large, seen as differences that mapped onto state boundaries; still less, as sources of threat.

Looked at from a distance of 13 years, what is striking in the villages along the Isfara River is less a sudden moment of border closure than a progressive shifting of habitual geographies, practices, and registers of identification, such that social life is increasingly conducted and framed within the administrative and geographical confines of the nation state. Some of these shifts are subtle and not driven by any explicit nationalist agenda. The ending of the state-run bus service between Batken and Ak-Sai and the replacement of this route by private mini-buses (marshrutki) has meant, for instance, that ordinary people spend much less of their week in this space of trilingual (Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik) mixture. These private marshrutki typically run from a single end village to the respective district centre (Batken in Kyrgyzstan, Isfara in Tajikistan), such that citizens of Kyrgyz and Tajik villages have fewer reasons to take the mashrutka of the ‘other’ state than in the recent past, when a single vehicle serviced all of the villages along its route. The orienting of domestic livelihoods towards labour migration in Russia has also had a transformation effect. On both sides of the border, young men now typically leave to work in Russia straight after school, registering to take exams ‘by correspondence’ (zaochno) if they wish to register—at least notionally—on a degree course. Yet the patterns of migration in Kyrgyz and Tajik villages in the valley are strikingly different: young men are channelled through different national systems of transport, work in different Russian cities, and rely on different networks of friends and relatives to help in securing work and accommodation. Middle-aged interlocutors on both sides of the border often reflected on this difference: in the late Soviet period, there was a lot of habitual interaction among Kyrgyz- and Tajik-speakers, both in school and leisure time: with few television sets in the valley until the 1980s, for instance, everyone would go and watch the Bollywood movies in a make-shift movie theatre in the Vorukh house of culture. Today, with the exception of sponsored events aimed at fostering ‘inter-ethnic tolerance’ (which meet with varying degrees of cynicism and commitment), there are few opportunities among young people for spontaneous social interaction across linguistic and national boundaries.

Other infrastructural interventions have been more explicitly concerned to shape local geographies of movement and identification. The road network throughout Kyrgyzstan dips in and out of the neighbouring states: as a mountainous republic within the Soviet Union it was largely bypassed by the highway network. Until the early 1990s, to travel from Batken to the republican capital of Frunze (today’s Bishkek), one would travel the faster, easier ‘lowland’ route, via Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan had few highways of its own, and the single two-lane road across southern Kyrgyzstan was puckered with potholes, not fully tarmacked along its length, and was frequently unpassable in winter. Reaching any other town in southern Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, involved crossing international borders—through Uzbekistan’s Sokh.
exclave to reach the city of Osh to the East—and through Tajik Surh and Chorkuh to reach the western-most district of Leilek. This fact fed into characterisations of Batken in public culture as itself a kind of ‘enclave’ (even though, legally and administratively, it is not), just as it inflected local discourses in Ak-Sai about the village’s ‘strategic significance’. As I was often told by acquaintances and village officials, Ak-Sai’s geographical location—squeezed in between two large settlements in Tajikistan, and acting as a buffer between their apparently relentless expansion—was the only thing that prevented Batken itself from being ‘cut in half’. That was one reason why it was important for the village’s border status to be ‘seen’ in Bishkek, and why a vocal strand of ethnonationalism had considerable traction here. As one village official put it, leaders had to encourage local patriotism to ‘defend the border’ against much larger, neighbouring villages, ‘for there are just 1,000 of us, and how many in Vorukh? 25,000? 30,000? You can do the maths!'

It is in this context of territorial anxiety that we need to understand the importance attached, locally and in Bishkek, to the building of so-called ‘independent roads’ (nezavisimye dorogi): roads that would lie entirely within the borders of the Kyrgyzstani state. In Batken in 2008, as part of a larger national project of road ‘rehabilitation’ construction work began on a new bypass road that was explicitly intended to obviate the need for Kyrgyzstani border-residents in the Isfara valley to have to cross into the territory of Tajikistan to reach their district centre of Batken. In a speech to mark the opening of the bypass, which circumvented the large Tajik settlements of Surh and Chorkuh, the provincial governor celebrated the road’s completion as a mark of national-territorial fulfilment. The smooth asphalt bypass, he argued, would, for the first time, give the people of Batken the ‘taste of genuine freedom, the taste of independence’ by providing a means of circumventing ‘foreign enclaves’ (innostrannye anklavy) (Anarkulov 2008). Kyrgyzstan’s prime minister, meanwhile, announced that the new road would turn Kyrgyzstan from a country of dead ends into a country of transit (iz tupikovoi strany v tranzitnuyu) (Kabar 2008). Nor was it just political leaders who saw the expressly territorial and military significance of the road. In publicly available documents, the World Bank acknowledged that, in addition to the economic benefits of the new road (cutting down journey times and limiting time-consuming customs checks), the renovated section in the territorially contentious Isfara valley would ‘serve to define the nearby border into the future and reduce the risk of encroachment’ (World Bank 2009: 5), both through its material form and through the facilitation of border guards’ foot patrols.

Celebrated in Kyrgyz public discourse as a ‘road of peace’ (tynchtyk jolu) (e.g. Nazaralieva 2014), it is clear that within a few years of its construction, the new road had served significantly to reshape local geographies of movement and confinement. In part this is because, from Kyrgyz border villages such as Ak-Sai, it made little sense to travel to the market in Chorkuh, Tajikistan, despite its geographical proximity, when the Kyrgyz market in Batken could now be reached much more comfortably and speedily along smooth asphalt. It is also, however, because the new road, running more-or-less along the line of the previously unmarked border, enabled the border itself to be policed much more visibly and systematically, both by border guards and by vigilante groups seeking to stop the felling of trees for firewood and the gathering of mumio (a marketable mountain gum, valued for its medicinal properties) on what was now more obviously ‘Kyrgyz’ land.

**Domesticating the border guard**

The Batken–Ak-Sai road provides a salutary lesson in the ways that well-intentioned initiatives of borderland infrastructural provision can generate a range of unexpected consequences, the most striking of which, a decade after the road’s opening, is the way that local patterns of
mobility are now habitually conducted in ‘national’ terms, to the extent that a ‘Kyrgyz’ car on a ‘Tajik’ road is remarked upon locally as anomalous, or that Kyrgyz girls are discouraged from taking the ‘Tajik marshrutka’ for fear of inappropriate glances or gestures from unrelated men. The road also reminds us that ‘border infrastructure’ can take many forms, and that it is not just wire, walls, or watchtowers through which a new international boundary can come to materialise. Roads, like rivers, can divide as well as connect.

An equally significant factor in the everyday securitisation of the Isfara valley, however, is the increasing presence of military and security personnel and associated infrastructures of surveillance. In Ak-Sai, for instance, the largest and best-equipped building in the village is the military barracks, situated prominently on the village’s central street. The walls of the barracks are today painted with a stencil design showing a border guard looking out over a mountainous landscape. The accompanying lettering reminds passersby, in Russian and Kyrgyz, that they are ‘At the Border’ (Na granitse / Chegarada) and that the border is necessarily a place where one should naturally be on one’s guard.

Although the barracks are a space set apart within the village, with high walls, metal gates, and a metal watchtower, the awareness of border-as-threat is routinised through the very intimacy of its militarisation. The barracks here are banal in the dual sense described above. For one thing, the barracks are a source of livelihood to several in the village as one of the major consumers of local flour, rice, and potatoes. The area immediately in front of the entrance gate serves as an informal meeting ground and taxi pick-up stop, where petrol can also be purchased and where village news is exchanged. One family I knew regularly used the barracks bathhouse to wash their clothes because they and their neighbours lacked a bathhouse of their own. This sense of military ‘closeness’ worked the other way, too: driving east out of Batken, one might encounter conscript soldiers at the side of the road requesting a lift to their duty station or barracks. Officers were a regular presence in Batken, and often rented rooms from local families if they had been posted to the district from elsewhere. When, in 2014, special forces (OMON) were sent to Ak-Sai in the wake of an escalation of cross-border violence precipitated by the construction of a new stretch of contested road between Ak-Sai and its mountain pastures, these elite troops were temporarily housed in the hall of the village school. Cars bearing Kyrgyz number plates, moreover, would rarely stop for Kyrgyz military patrols. ‘They are our lads’ (Özübüzdün baldarabyz?) the driver would typically comment to the passengers—implying that there was no need to stop, as they would not be seen as a source of threat.

This military intimacy had a particular quality in border villages such as Ak-Sai. In many routine situations of intra- and inter-village dispute, the authority of informal village leaders, whether the elected head of the administrative district of the ak-sakals (‘white beards’) who in many villages constitute a semi-formal court of elders, has come to be overshadowed by a much younger ‘face of the state’ (Navaro-Yashin 2002): that of the local head of the border unit, a figure with direct and immediate connections ‘upwards’ to the state bureaucracy, backed up by threat of force. In Ak-Sai, 35-year-old Azamat (a pseudonym), the officer responsible for the local border unit, was a well-known figure in the village and frequently called upon in times of dispute. Many men in the village had his telephone number and would refer to him through the informal pronoun, sen.

The physical and social ‘closeness’ of this military presence is significant to its mode of operation. Azamat’s authority works both because he is familiar—a young man with local knowledge and extensive local contacts, who is a regular at weddings and other celebrations—and because his words and actions have the capacity to speak to, and on behalf of, the state. On several occasions, I witnessed what was essentially a trivial dispute between young Kyrgyz and Tajik men (had someone pushed someone else deliberately? Had a car with Tajik number plates been travelling too
recklessly through Ak-Sai?) first escalate through phone calls between young men warning each other that things had ‘kicked off’ (topolong bashtaldy), to be followed by calls to ‘invite Azamat’ (Azamatty chakyryp koichu!) to serve as a mediator whose words could be backed up by threat of force. A critical aspect of intimate militarisation, then, is not just the routinisation of military presence, but rather the normalisation of appeal to threat of force to resolve habitual disputes, such that the non-local head of the border unit comes to be spoken of and appealed to, locally, as the best meaningful guarantor of local peace and de facto arbiter at times of inter-communal dispute.

Escalating force?

Writing of the US/Mexico border in the 1990s, Josiah Heyman described what he calls the ‘state escalation of force’—the process of ‘adding increments of force to a failing or incomplete system of control’ (Heyman 1999: 285). In the Isfara valley, we can see traces of a rather similar dynamic. In Tajik border villages throughout the valley (and now, increasingly, in online forums and videos), the intensification of border controls, facilitated by and materialised through the new road that bypasses Chorkuh and Surh, has exacerbated the sense of relative neglect by a political elite that is geographically and socially distant. It has also fed into a lingering feeling of territorial injustice; of having been repeatedly ‘cheated’ of land in a cycle that goes back to the middle of the 20th century (e.g. Ismoil 2013).

The official response to increased local tension, however, has less been to find transboundary solutions than to intensify state presence, whether in the form of border guards, police officers, or members of the security services. An example from my fieldwork can illustrate here. The period 2009–2011 was marked by an increase in local incidents of low-level cross-border crime in the Isfara valley, including theft, arson, and the retaliatory pelting of ‘foreign’ cars with stones by young boys observing traffic along the new roads. Many of these incidents had, it seems, been exacerbated by the new restrictions on cross-border mobility and the difficulties of accessing irrigation water resulting from the bypass road, particularly for young men from Chorkuh and Surh in Tajikistan whose own local mobility had been constrained by the new road. In the wake of political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan and ethnically marked violence in Kyrgyzstan’s southern city of Osh, there was a palpable sense among my Tajik interlocutors in 2010 that their own concerns were being ignored, not least by a political elite in Dushanbe that cared little about the remote Isfara district. Reporting in February 2010 on an altercation along the bypass road between a Kyrgyzstani border guard and an elderly woman from Chorkuh village who was struggling to climb the steep incline that now separated her village from the road, a Tajik journalist described the journey from home to work for the communities now circumvented by the road as a ‘real trial’ (nastoyashchee ispitanie). It was also, she implied, a historical injustice:

While citizens of Tajikistan have to overcome a difficult mountain path and constantly have to fend for their rights with the organs of law and order, citizens of Kyrgyzstan are able to move about freely in the streets of Chorkuh [in Tajikistan]. […] Citizens of both states hoped for their transport problems in the borderland to be solved. But so far, the new road has brought only difficulties (s novoi trassoi voznikaiut tol’ko slozhnosti).

(Komilova 2010)

From the perspective of state officials, however, it was precisely the increase in incidents of hooliganism associated with the road that was cast as the source of threat: a threat that is to be contained with more force and more state presence. In a vivid illustration of Heyman’s ‘increments of force’, the interim President of Kyrgyzstan, Roza Otunbaeva, announced in February 2011 that she would
be sending an additional 500 troops to Batken district to guard the oblast’s borders with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Speaking to activists gathered in the Batken regional administration building, Otunbaeva noted that her decision had been prompted by the increase in incidents of cross-border violence over the preceding year. While just one violent cross-border conflict had been recorded on the Kyrgyzstan–Kazakhstan border in 2010, 26 had been recorded on the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan border, and 24 on the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border. Had it not been for the ‘decisive action of the relevant state organs’, Otunbaeva argued, ‘many of these incidents could have turned into armed conflicts. The most dangerous thing is that each of these disputes [sporov] has the potential to turn into an inter-ethnic and inter-national conflict’ (Otunbaeva, quoted in Centrasia.ru 2011).

Otunbaeva’s narrative framing, pitched as much for a national television audience as it was at the local Batken activists, situated the urgency of political intervention within a global risk of threat. ‘The whole civilized world has declared that it is fighting against subversive and terrorist activity from international extremist terrorist organizations’, Otunbaeva argued. ‘And if we consider that, because of our geopolitical specificity our state is currently the centre of attention of a variety of external powers, then the importance of the border forces is difficult to over-estimate’ (Otunbaeva, quoted in Centrasia.ru 2011). Otunbaeva’s language effectively subsumed local actions of cross-border violence into a larger discourse of threat, ignoring both the specificity of these local dynamics in 2010 and obviating the question of whether border controls that are experienced as arbitrary, draconian, or coercive might themselves be a factor in provoking borderland incidents of violence. Her response begs the question of who is provoking whom, and whether, in the context of a region where livelihoods on both sides of the border are precariously dependent upon equitable access to water and pastures, more force might not, as Heyman suggests, lead to more retaliation. Certainly, the dynamic of transboundary relations in the half decade since Otunbaeva delivered her speech would give credence to such an interpretation.

There is something else about this incident, however, that may be equally important for our understanding of the region and of the progressive escalation of force that can be seen in the borderlands of the Ferghana Valley. For while the increased presence of border patrols was certainly a source of concern when it referred to the military of the neighbouring state, in Ak-Sai, Otunbaeva’s words resonated with, and gave credence to, a rather different set of local concerns: to see and be seen by the president when she visited the provincial capital. ‘It’s good that she came to Batken’, I was told by one of the selected aktivisty who had heard the president speak in the Batken administration building. ‘It’s good when she listens to us.’ For the village social worker who made these comments, a state employee whose task was compiling lists of families with invalids or veterans that would entitle them to compensatory payments, the concern was less whether the 500 new border forces proposed by Otunbaeva were a good or bad thing, than with being legible to the state in a context where the basic material resources for making a life—the infrastructures of water provision; the institutions of medical care; the payments made to pensioners and to those requiring humanitarian aid (gumanitarnaia pomosh’)—were both chronically insufficient and unequally allocated. In such a context, reiterating one’s status as a ‘border village’ that is the locus of ‘threat’ (still more, as Otunbaeva’s words suggest, the locus of unspecified geopolitical danger) had become a crucial vehicle for establishing a direct connection to the capital city and its perceived sources of material and political protection.

Conclusion

The category of ‘intimate militarism’ that I have sought to develop in this chapter conveys a double dynamic in the Ferghana Valley. It refers, first, to the routinisation of national geographies and of military presence at new international borders. It also signals a shift in the way that
habitual disputes over water allocation, pasture-use, and access to canals, springs, or goods that are treated as common property (such as mountain herbs, animal dung, or gravel for construction from the Isfara river) come to be framed as ‘transboundary’ issues that can only be resolved through the intervention of state officials, backed up by the threat of force.

This dynamic is consequential for our understanding of the (strained) work of social ordering in rural Kyrgyzstan. The kinds of everyday disputes that occur within and among villages along the Isfara River, including the allocation of irrigation water from a shared irrigation infrastructure (and associated maintenance of a decaying irrigation network), access to pastures and the ‘de facto’ privatisation of common grazing land, the polluting of down-stream water sources by up-stream users, the (deliberate or accidental) destruction of crops by grazing livestock, and inequitable access to a limited supply of piped drinking water, are by no means confined to this or any other border region. As scholars of Central Asia have long argued, communal disputes, between neighbours, relatives, landlords, and tenants, up-stream and down-stream water users, or different ethnolinguistic communities, are part of the fabric of everyday social life (Bichsel 2009). Such disputes may coexist with a popular discursive emphasis upon social ‘harmony’ (*yntymak*) and considerable informal coercion to prevent social relations from breaking down beyond repair (Beyer 2016). But contention, in a context of limited and unequal resource access, is itself unremarkable: and in the Isfara valley there are well-developed mechanisms for allocating and regulating a shared and unpredictable supply of irrigation water (Pak et al. 2013). This has, after all, always been a region where sedentary and pastoral livelihoods have depended upon a limited supply of both water and irrigated land.

The framing of such disputes here as ‘national’ issues means that over the course of the last decade, my interlocutors have often spoken of relations having ‘broken down’ (*buzuldu*) between the Kyrgyz-majority villages that depend on the Isfara River and the more populous Tajik-speaking communities of Vorukh, Chorkuh, and Surh with which they are geographically contiguous. These villages used to be connected through multiple ties of trade, ritual visiting, religious learning, kolkhoz labour, and military service (though not, except in rare cases, through kinship or marriage). More importantly, there were dense ties of connection between elders from the various communities, such that disputes between young people were quickly resolved through the intervention of respected figures of authority, or symbolic acts of ‘everyday diplomacy’ (Marsden et al. 2006) in order to prevent a neighbourly dispute from escalating (see, e.g. UNDP 2011: 70).

This has implications, I suggest, for a broader anthropological conversation about how and when the state—in this case, a state that is able to ‘defend its borders’ and protect its territorial integrity—becomes a register through which ideas of political membership, existential security, and concerns for the possibilities of a ‘normal life’ gain social salience (Obeid 2010; Reeves 2011; Jansen 2014). As Jonathan Spencer argued in a 2007 study of the postcolonial state in South Asia, much anthropological literature on the state, whether drawing inspiration from post-structuralist critique or studies of everyday bureaucratic evasion, has tended to treat ‘the state’, analytically as an ‘an absolute externality’ which can be conceived, only as ‘a force to be resisted, with more or less heroism, by the plucky subjects of our field research’. Such an approach is unconvincing, Spencer argues, not just because it presumes that we know what the state, in any given situation, is and does. It is also unconvincing because it ‘fails to account for the moral investment that many people make in the idea of being owners, or at least members, of a state of their own’ (Spencer 2007: 102).

It is in this realm of moral investment, I suggest, that we need to understand the intimacy of militarism in rural Central Asia. While much of the growing scholarly and policy literature on Central Asia’s borders has focused productively on the way that borders and their agents are
resisted, bypassed, subverted, or undermined by those seeking to get people, goods, valuables, and ideas across them (e.g. Dolina mira 2004; Jackson 2005; Megoran et al. 2005), there has been less attention to the complex alignments between the routinisation of military presence, the formalisation of dispute resolution, and the dynamics of territorial desire. For marginalised border residents, I have suggested, belonging to a ‘border village’—a village that is, moreover, explicitly and visibly protected by uniformed border agents—has become a vehicle for anticipating and enacting certain kinds of claim upon the state that demand recognition and response. This dynamic may yet prove consequential for the local practices through which everyday peace is enacted and sustained in contemporary Central Asian borderlands.

Notes

1 For instance, one of the few sustained initiatives of cross-border monitoring and violations of civilian rights conducted in the early 2000s by a network of Kyrgyzstani, Tajikistani, and Uzbekistani NGOs, Dolina mira (‘Valley of Peace’), was abruptly halted following political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan and subsequent crack-downs on civil society organisations in Uzbekistan in 2005. See Dolina mira (2004).

2 In 2016, for example, Uzbekistan’s security services announced the discovery of a 120 metre-long tunnel running 6 metres underground between houses in Burbalyk (Uzbekistan) and Kyrgyz-Kyshtak (Kyrgyzstan) that was being used for the smuggling of contraband. While the authorities in Tashkent warned that the tunnel had been used for the illicit transfer of ‘arms, military equipment, explosives, anti-constitutional literature, narcotics and militants’ (Sputnik 2016), this particular pair of villages is well-known in the border region as one of the main crossing points for potatoes, macaroni and other foodstuffs that find their way into local border markets (see Reeves 2014: 153).

References


Intimate militarism


