

Kyrgyzstan: the role of global and regional powers in the April 2010 events and the ensuing ethnic clashes in the south

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Introduction

Kyrgyzstan, one of the five Central Asian republics, is located in the south of what was once the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR).² At the beginning of April 2010, people revolted for a second time in roughly five years in this poor, strategically important country. The authoritarian President Bakiyev, who took the country almost to the brink of collapse, was ousted, and people in Kyrgyzstan were hoping once more for better living conditions and economic welfare.³

Currently, some six months after the April events, the Kyrgyz interim government finds itself in a difficult situation. It is fractious, internationally unpopular, and it has to deal with a volatile southern part of the country. This southern part of the country forms part of the Fergana Valley, a densely populated area totalling about 22,000 square kilometres, inhabited by more than ten million people, and often referred to as the breadbasket of Central Asia. The Fergana Valley, covering part of the territories of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, is one of the most explosive powder kegs of the former USSR. Following the events in April, the feared, long-lasting latent ethnic tensions were sparked in the Kyrgyz part of the valley during June.⁴ And in this difficult situation, after successfully having conducted a country-wide referendum legitimising itself for the short term, the interim government will work towards the establishment of the first, nationally as well as internationally partly contested parliamentary political system in Central Asia. This will culminate in parliamentary elections on the 10th of October 2010.

In this article, the role of global and regional powers in the April events and the ensuing ethnic clashes in the south will be the central theme. In effect, the focus will be on the United States of America (USA), the Russian Federation (RF), and the Peoples Republic of China (PRC).⁵ These global and regional powers will be looked at individually, as well as through the most relevant international governmental organizations in which they participate in relation to Kyrgyzstan. All this against the background of alleged international conspiracy theories, accusing the USA and the RF of actively triggering the Kyrgyz crisis, and those aspects that make Kyrgyzstan strategically so important. These aspects are primarily the Afghanistan war, the fight against radical Islam, terrorism, and drugs.

The role of the United States of America, the Russian Federation, and the Peoples Republic of China in the Kyrgyz crisis

Under the Bakiyev administration, when the USA did not interfere in Kyrgyz internal politics, relations between the USA and Kyrgyzstan could be valued as good. This was in spite of the Bakiyev administration continually increasing fees for the use of the American military base and the alleged involvement of the Bakiyev

² Although various definitions of Central Asia and its composition exist, not a single one is universally accepted, and in this article Central Asia refers to the former USSR countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

³ See for more information the International Crisis Group report 'Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow regime Collapses' (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/B102-kyrgyzstan-a-hollow-regime-collapses.aspx>).

⁴ See for more information the Human Rights Watch report 'Where is the Justice' (<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2010/08/16/where-justice-0>) and the International Crisis Group report 'The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan' (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/193-the-pogroms-in-kyrgyzstan.aspx>).

⁵ The choice for these states originates from their position as core members of the United Nations Security Council, their substantial influence on the Kyrgyz security and/or economic sector, and their possibilities to exert a real clout on the ground. Therefore, global and regional power blocs like the European Union, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, as well as Central Asian powers like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, have not been taken into consideration for this article.

administration in the drugs trade. The USA has been investing substantial sums of money in Kyrgyzstan for a long time, also in development projects. However, Bakiyev's policy changed during his regime into an authoritarian and anti-democratic one.

The Transit Centre at Manas (TCM), located at the international airport of Manas, forms the priority for the USA in Kyrgyzstan. For the USA, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and their allies this military base is important for the transportation of matériel and troops with regard to the Afghanistan war. It also features as a back-up for the Pakistan route. Specifically after the Americans lost their Karshi-Khanabad (K2) military base in Uzbekistan, as a consequence of the Andijan events in the spring of 2005, the TCM became even more important. Other US priorities in Kyrgyzstan, bearing a relation to the TCM, concern the fight against radical Islam, terrorism, drugs, and furthering stability in the host country.

During the April events, just as during the revolt in 2005 bringing Bakiyev to power, Washington kept a low profile. On the 8th of April 2010, directly after the toppling of the Bakiyev regime, Roza Otunbayeva, the post-Bakiev interim leader and later the President, assured the USA that it could continue to use the TCM. Her administration stated, furthermore, that after the contract would end during the summer of 2010, the USA could keep the base for yet another year. However, one of the vice-prime ministers, Omurbek Tekebayev, said that there are people in the interim government who are against an American military presence in Kyrgyzstan, while others still have to make up their mind about this. In any case, he says, the final decision on the TCM will have to be taken after the elections on the 10th of October. The destiny of the Osh Polygon base, a new American base in the south of the country on which the USA had made progress in negotiating, will also be subject to the future parliament's decision.

During the ethnic clashes in the south of Kyrgyzstan, the Americans kept a low profile too. After the ethnic clashes took place, the USA provided relief items, in cooperation with the United Nations (UN) and the RF. These relief items were flown in through the TCM. After holding the country-wide referendum, the USA praised Kyrgyzstan for conducting it peacefully. The USA, supporting a parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan, then stated that it hopes for advances in the reconciliation process, accountability, as well as for more security, stability, democracy, and prosperity. The USA is in favour of the proposal to send an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Police Advisory Group (PAG) to the south of Kyrgyzstan after the elections, and it is supporting the work of the Kyrgyz commission investigating the ethnic clashes in the south. It has consequently pressed for an international investigation commission for the south from the 19th of June onwards.

Both the April events and the ethnic clashes in the south have endangered international policies which the USA shares with the RF, i.e. the Afghanistan war, the fight against drugs, terrorism, and radical Islam, and furthering stability in Central Asia. American recognition of the temporary Otunbayeva government followed only after a while. In order to calm things down, hence increasing stability Central Asia-wide, the USA, in coordination with the RF and the OSCE, was instrumental in facilitating Bakiyev to leave the country.

The relations between Kyrgyzstan and the RF deteriorated substantially during the reign of Bakiyev. This was mainly because of the American military presence in Kyrgyzstan. After several unsuccessful attempts by Moscow, finally the Bakiyev administration agreed orally with Moscow to discontinue the existence of the American TCM. However, this agreement has not been lived up to. That was very difficult for the RF, since the closure of the TCM was a precondition for Kyrgyzstan to receive a grant of 150 million US dollars, 300 million

US dollars in loans, and 1.7 billion US dollars in credits. Subsequently, part of the pledged Russian money had not been spent on the goal agreed upon, i.e. bridging the state budget deficit; it was rather misused by the Kyrgyz administration. Finally, a definitive Kyrgyz response to the Russian request to have an additional military base in the south of the country remained unanswered, thereby having a further negative impact on relations between both countries.

During the winter of 2009, the relations between Kyrgyzstan and the RF deteriorated even more. This was the result of Moscow increasingly addressing the TCM issue, as well as the violence against and the murder of Russian journalists and experts in Kyrgyzstan. Two things are important to note here. The first is that it seemed to be the specific wish of the former President and current Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, that the TCM closes its doors. The second is that the probably most powerful of the two unofficial factions of the Bakiyev administration, the one headed by the President's younger son Maxim, was in charge of the department dealing with foreign investments, and that Maxim did not hide his contempt for Vladimir Putin in public. In the wake of April 2010, a campaign in Russian newspapers against the Bakiyev administration was being conducted, while opposition leaders visited Moscow more and more frequently.

After the 2010 revolution, the first country by far to congratulate the new interim government was the RF. However, the alleged active RF involvement in triggering an uprising in Kyrgyzstan, as is the case with the USA, remains questionable. It seems more like the RF simply released the right signals towards the opposition at the appropriate moment.

For Moscow, a military presence in Kyrgyzstan has the highest priority, too. The one visible reaction to the April events was to send 150 Russian paratroopers to their military Kant base, to protect Russian material and citizens. As for the Americans, taking sides in an internal conflict like this one in Kyrgyzstan might have negative consequences, while waiting until the political situation has crystallised seems to be a more secure approach. Whoever will constitute the new Kyrgyz government, they will have to cooperate with Moscow to a substantial extent anyhow. The April events put international policies which the RF shares with the USA, i.e. the Afghanistan war, the fight against drugs, terrorism, and radical Islam, and guaranteeing stability in Central Asia, at risk.

Issues of importance related to the official recognition of the new leaders by the RF were, among others, the security of Russian possessions and citizens, and the ability of the interim government to curb political unrest. The RF, together with the USA and the OSCE, trying to restore stability in Central Asia, played an important role with regard to Bakiyev leaving the country.

The RF considers Kyrgyzstan, and the whole of Central Asia, to be its sphere of influence. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, however, after the first ethnic clashes took place, the RF reacted very cautiously. Reacting to a letter from the Kyrgyz interim government requesting military assistance, the RF called the Kyrgyz crisis an internal matter, and said it would not immediately send troops to Kyrgyzstan. However, it would send humanitarian aid once more. Later on, Moscow turned down a second Kyrgyz request for military assistance.

Moreover, if the RF wanted to stage a military intervention in the south of Kyrgyzstan, it could more conveniently do so by means of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This is an intergovernmental mutual security organization, founded in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on the 7th of October 2002. It is currently composed of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Armenia, Belarus, and the RF, the

latter having the lion's share of the military clout. The Russian Kant base in Kyrgyzstan also functions as the regional CSTO base.

Concerning the April 2010 events, the CSTO called them unconstitutional on the 8th of May, and it sent Deputy CSTO Secretary General Valery Semerikov as a representative on a week-long fact-finding mission to Bishkek. On the 16th of April Semerikov reported to Medvedev, but no visible action was subsequently taken.

In relation to the ethnic clashes, after the RF twice refused military intervention, the CSTO was approached with the same request. The organization nevertheless refused and stated that deploying peacekeepers would only be a measure of last resort. This decision would be in line with the CSTO Charter, stating that support would be available for other member states in case of an external threat, not in case of domestic instability or civil war, and only with UN approval.⁶

Apart from the CSTO Charter, there was a range of other problems precluding the deployment of CSTO peacekeepers in the south of Kyrgyzstan. The organization was not ready to deploy such a mission at that time, and it perceived difficulties in getting those countries surrounding Kyrgyzstan, like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, to agree to military intervention. This might be related to the risks in conducting military operations close to the Chinese border as well, although China officially suggested that the CSTO should intervene in the ethnic clashes. Yet another reason might have been the diminishing support of Moscow for the Otunbayeva administration, the RF already being disillusioned with the new interim government. According to this interpretation, Moscow would now support the strongmen, who are, together with other Central Asian authoritarian regimes, against the precedent of a parliamentary democracy in Central Asia. Finally, just as for all actors in the Kyrgyz crisis, the effect of the global economic crisis may be influential concerning the Russian decision not to intervene.

Most likely, however, the RF was very much aware of how difficult it had been for the USSR army to control the ethnic dispute in Kyrgyzstan in 1990 and how much time it had taken back then, in a situation that was far easier than the situation today. In this context, the potential gains from an ethnic conflict for regional powers that oppose the planned referendum to change the political system in Kyrgyzstan from a presidential to a parliamentary system seem less likely.

The CSTO did however decide to send trucks, helicopters, and fuel, enabling Kyrgyz forces to act in the south. Furthermore, they stated that they would help the authorities to find the masterminds behind the ethnic clashes, and provided them with information on how to prevent ethnic clashes from flaring up once more. The organization further coordinated humanitarian efforts together with the International Organization for Migration and the International Committee of the Red Cross in the south of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In accordance with the above-mentioned CSTO decision, Tajikistan signed an agreement with the organization on the 2nd of July to provide emergency aid to Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies. The CSTO therefore discussed with Tajikistan what sort of arms needed to be delivered, and what kind of technical and specific equipment. Furthermore, on the 4th of August, the organization decided to send an advisory group to

⁶ From June 2009 onwards, however, the size and legalization of the renamed Collective Operational Reaction Force (CORF) was renewed, and the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev stated that the CORF could now also possibly perform other missions such as settling regional conflicts. CSTO Secretary General Nicolai Bordyuzha stated later on that there is no guarantee that the organization might not react more actively in a future domestic situation as in Kyrgyzstan. The organization can in principle now use CORF in each CSTO state, at any time, even without a UN mandate.

Kyrgyzstan to help local militia to investigate the violence of the last months. The organization, in principle, does not conduct Human Rights inquiries.

Although Moscow's interest coincides with Washington's in supporting a stronger Kyrgyz interim government that can curb the ethnic violence in the south as soon as possible, the Russian President Medvedev critically stated that he did not see how a parliamentary democracy would work for Kyrgyzstan. Different analysts point out that this remark can be attributed to Moscow's belief that a parliamentary democracy would be unable to maintain peace and stability in Kyrgyzstan, its opposition towards the toppling of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, or sheer frustration with its inability to cope with the destabilization in Kyrgyzstan. In another statement issued by the Russian MFA, however, Kyrgyzstan was modestly praised and hope was expressed that the referendum would facilitate political stability in the politically unstable Kyrgyzstan. The RF did not speak out against the deployment of an OSCE PAG, and it will participate therein. On an international commission investigating the ethnic clashes in June, the RF, as a state as well as through the CSTO, does not seem to support the initiative.

The main leverage of the Chinese influence in Kyrgyzstan is trade; Central Asia-wide it includes investment and energy projects, too. Especially during the last two years, Chinese trade in Kyrgyzstan became even more visible due to the negative effects of the global economic crisis on the RF. Bilateral trade started with a few hundred million US Dollars at the beginning of 2000, reaching a sum of 9.3 billion USD in 2008.

But, as a result of the events in April and the ethnic violence in the south of Kyrgyzstan, where the Chinese border is located, Chinese trade has diminished severely. Hardly anything crossed the Kyrgyz-Chinese border during those days, as opposed to the around 200 trucks carrying Chinese goods that entered the country on a daily base before the crisis. A specific project also negatively affected by the Kyrgyz crisis is a railway track connecting China with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. This railway would shorten the time needed to transport products to European markets, and it would be important for the transport of energy and mineral resources to China.

China perceived the April events in Kyrgyzstan as being unconstitutional, and the ethnic clashes in the south of that country as worrisome, not least because of the restless Uighur population in the bordering Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, and the presence of about a quarter of a million Uighur in Kyrgyzstan. China's reaction to the crisis has been to offer medicines, medical equipment, food, drinking water, blankets, and tents, adding up to an amount of 732,000 USD. Furthermore, an estimated 1300 Chinese nationals have been evacuated from the city of Osh.

The main Chinese influence in Kyrgyzstan, trade, has diminished severely as a result of both events. China, however, not aiming to have military leverage in Kyrgyzstan, could not stop this. If it would like to do so, it could try to do this through the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO). The SCO is an intergovernmental mutual security organization, founded in Shanghai during 2001. From 1996 to 2001, before Uzbekistan joined the organization, it was called the Shanghai Five. Originally, the SCO was a confidence-building measure between China and the four member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States which border China, reducing their military presence at the borders. Later on, the member states included trade and economics in the treaty. It is currently composed of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, the RF, and China, with the RF being more powerful and China being the most powerful of all.

Concerning the ousting of Bakiyev, on the 9th of April the SCO addressed the situation in Kyrgyzstan and requested peace. During its Tashkent meeting this year, the organization decided on the 11th of June to send observers to the Kyrgyz referendum on the 27th of the same month. It also wanted to find a solution by means of dialogue. On the 21st of July, the SCO stated that it would support Kyrgyzstan's government and its efforts to stabilize the country. With regard to the ethnic clashes, China called on the Russian lead CSTO to restore stability in Kyrgyzstan on the 15th of June. Within the SCO, unlike the RF, China as a rule opposes any political or military role for the SCO. Although the OSCE will investigate cooperation with the SCO concerning the international commission investigating the June events, the organization normally does not conduct Human Rights inquiries.

The UN, differing from the above-mentioned states and organizations in its structure, participating states, functioning, and the topics covered, played an important role during the crisis. Concerning the April 2010 events, the UN was actively involved in mediation. The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon sent Ján Kubiš, the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, as his Special Envoy to Kyrgyzstan on the 8th of April. He concentrated on the stand-off between the President and the self-declared interim government. After Kubiš lifted Bakiyev's presidential immunity, they threatened to arrest him. Bakiyev himself declared his willingness to resign subject to guarantees ensuring his and his family's safety. Two days later, Ban Ki-Moon looked positively on a deal between the interim government of Kyrgyzstan and its former president, who had left the country for Kazakhstan.

Ban Ki-Moon stated subsequently that the UN, with its international and regional partners, was ready to cooperate with Bishkek, while the Special Envoy pointed out that Kyrgyzstan now needs international help. Therefore, the UN analyzed the needs and problems, and how to adjust these problems, which included constitutional and legal issues, the election code, and free and fair elections within a specific time frame of six months which were internationally monitored. The Special Envoy stated that the UN and its partner organizations like the OSCE were ready to assist the provisional government in this. Furthermore, the UN would try to mobilize international donors and individual countries for financial contributions.

Concerning the ethnic clashes in the south, on the 13th of June Ban Ki-Moon called the OSCE Chairman in Office (CiO) to discuss the increased Kyrgyz tensions. Miroslav Jenča, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the Head of the Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA), was therefore in Osh on the 12th of June and continued to work for peace and stability in the country. The UN agreed with the OSCE that their Special Envoys would coordinate their actions: both were already in or on their way to Kyrgyzstan. Ban Ki-Moon frequently conferred with President Karimov of Uzbekistan to discuss how the latter was dealing with numbers of Kyrgyz fleeing towards the Uzbek border. After all, the UN suddenly appealed for 71 million USD. This was in order to provide aid to the 300,000 Internally Displaced Persons in southern Kyrgyzstan, and the 765,000 affected by the crisis.

At the same time, the UN stated that an international security force might be needed to prevent new eruptions of violence. Therefore, consultations on an international presence were being held involving the Kyrgyz Government, the countries in the region and the OSCE. Furthermore, the UN declared that the ethnic violence in the south was orchestrated, intended, and well planned. The UN Human Rights Council for its part adopted a resolution, by consensus, relating to the 7th of April, calling on Kyrgyzstan to conduct a full and transparent probe into the violence. Concerning the referendum, the UN pressed the interim government to go ahead with it, and it subsequently praised Kyrgyzstan for conducting a peaceful referendum.

Finally, the UN Security Council (SC), preceded by the RF in August, did not embark on any actions towards Kyrgyzstan. The RF stated that the Kyrgyz crisis is a regional matter, and that it should be addressed by organizations like the OSCE and the CSTO. The RF was against any SC briefings on Kyrgyzstan from the UNRCCA. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights sent a team to Osh separately. The High Commissioner, Navi Pillay, recommended an independent investigation into the June events in the south, separate from any other international investigation commission. However, normally the UN only conducts investigations to control standards.

The OSCE, as a regional UN organization under Chapter VIII, played the most paramount role of all with regard to the mentioned organizations. During April, it sent Adil Akhmetov of the OSCE PA as well as Zhanybek Karibzhanov, the OSCE Special Envoy for Kyrgyzstan of the Kazakh CiO. The latter, by means of on-site mediation efforts, was the most influential in facilitating the departure of Bakiyev from Kyrgyzstan. OSCE critics state, however, that it was that same Kazakh CiO that pleaded against international intervention in the conflict, that closed its border with Kyrgyzstan, and that is not in favour of an OSCE-sanctioned investigation into the June events in the south of Kyrgyzstan.

Concerning the ethnic clashes, the OSCE saw the situation as a threat to stability in the region. On the 24th of June, Kyrgyzstan requested international police assistance from the OSCE. The OSCE discussed this request on the 1st of July, leading to a planned international deployment of a PAG consisting of 52 police officers, headed by the Swiss diplomat and former OSCE Head of Mission in Bishkek, Markus Mueller. The three main tasks of the PAG would amount to monitoring, consultations according to a set of measures adopted by the OSCE Secretariat, and supervisory control. It would not set up checkpoints between Uzbek and Kyrgyz neighbourhoods, but it would train and monitor local police officers. The OSCE is currently hoping to deploy the police mission, which is in jeopardy, amongst other things because it is encountering fierce opposition by a certain part of the population of Kyrgyzstan after the elections have taken place. Although most ethnic Uzbek stress the need for an OSCE PAG, most ethnic Kyrgyz are against such a mission. According to them, its deployment would lead to the secession of the south from Kyrgyzstan, and the mission would be pro-Uzbek.

After the referendum, although having noted some irregularities, the OSCE praised Kyrgyzstan for peacefully conducting a largely transparent constitutional referendum. However, the OSCE did not directly monitor the referendum, although this was originally planned. This was because it was not able to guarantee the safety of its international staff.

Otunbayeva, herself a former member of the OSCE PA, requested the OSCE PA's Special Representative for Central Asia, Kimmo Kiljunen, to chair an international commission to investigate the ethnic clashes in the south during June. The commission was originally to include the OSCE, the European Union (EU), the UN and the Commonwealth of Independent States, while cooperation would be sought with organizations such as the CSTO and the SCO. However, the OSCE did not back up this initiative. Currently, it is an initiative of the Nordic states and it finds itself at a rather early stage.


Although obviously the USA, the RF, and China do not participate in the EU, one paragraph at least should be devoted to the role of the EU in the Kyrgyz crisis. The EU, by means of Pierre Morel, was involved in negotiations concerning the Kyrgyz crisis. Important, for example, is that the idea of the OSCE PAG stemming from the EU, and that several EU member states are willing to participate in a future international investigation

commission.

Conclusion

The most likely explanation for the April events in Kyrgyzstan is that they were rather an expression of anger and despair on the part of the people, due to additional demands by the Bakiyev administration. It was a socio-economic miscalculation by the regime for which the additional costs could in no way have been foreseen by the population, leading to the eventual overthrow of the Bakiyev administration. The question of how and why ethnic clashes in the south were sparked still remains unknown. However, several scenarios are possible, one of them including Bakiyev and his direct entourage. Backing up this version is the deal under which Bakiyev left the country in April 2010. Part of this deal was that Bakiyev would leave the country and sign a document declaring that he stepped down as president, but allegedly neither he nor his family members would be prosecuted internationally. Since the Otunbayeva administration did prosecute Bakiyev and some of his family members, however, Bakiyev subsequently annulled the deal and still claimed to be in conversation between persons loyal to Bakiyev discussing the possibilities of stirring ethnic clashes in the south of Kyrgyzstan. To find out what really happened will be the task of the commission formed by the Kyrgyz interim government.

Taking into consideration the shared priorities of the USA and the RF in a Central Asian and a wider context, neither state would gain substantially from active involvement in the Kyrgyz uprising. Neither the range of problems concerning the American and the Russian military bases, nor the alleged involvement of the Bakiyev administration in the drugs trade could justify such actions when viewed against the potential magnitude of problems possibly resulting from such interference. However, once started, some powers may indirectly have gained from the situation. Interesting is the position of the USA in Kyrgyzstan, mainly through the OSCE efforts to try to curb ethnic violence in the south, after an absence of Russian involvement in its near abroad. China principally chose not to become involved in the crisis.



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Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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