

Kyrgyzstan Upheaval May Be Blow to Pursuit of Afghan War

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Global Research, April 15, 2010

[The National UAE](#) 14 April 2010

Region: [Asia](#)

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KABUL — Political upheaval in the Central Asian state of Kyrgyzstan has only added to the sense of uncertainty and fear that clouds the future of nearby Afghanistan.

Although the two countries do not share a border, their fates are connected in a region that has long been the scene of intrigue and competition between major powers.

The US military has suspended troop flights from Kyrgyzstan because of a coup there last week.

Alexander Neill, the head of the Asia Security Programme at the UK-based Royal United Services Institute, warned that any permanent cancellation could be damaging.

“One of the core concerns for the United States and Nato forces is to maintain supply routes into Afghanistan and the northern route has traditionally been viewed as one which is more secure,” he said.

“This uprising in Kyrgyzstan could cause a real headache for that particular air corridor. There are options for the United States to use other bases in the Middle East or elsewhere but Central Asian neighbours are the preferred choice.”

The US deal to use the Manas airbase expires in July and, although Kyrgyzstan’s interim government has indicated the lease will be renewed, transport flights for soldiers are currently suspended.

Should the temporary halt become more entrenched, it would be a blow to the war effort. About 50,000 troops moved through there in March and the US defence secretary, Robert Gates, has acknowledged that none of the alternatives routes are ideal. At present, aircraft are being diverted to Kuwait and then coming into Afghanistan.

“If after this upheaval in Kyrgyzstan, the opposition takes a dim view of the US presence on Kyrgyz soil, then that will clearly mean having a major rethink for Nato, but it will also increase costs once again,” Mr Neill said.

Some observers also suspect that Russia was heavily involved in events in Kyrgyzstan, helping to topple a government that had been a key ally of Washington, despite being accused of repressing its own people.

Afghanistan is no stranger to feeling the effect, directly and indirectly, of such power

struggles. As locals here always point out, this country is frequently the victim of a series of bitter rivalries that have afflicted the region for decades.

Most notably, there is the spill-over of tensions between India and Pakistan. Islamabad once supported the Taliban for the strategic depth Afghanistan would provide during a potential war with India, and there is a widespread belief that those old links now extend to the insurgency against US and Nato forces.

Indian interests in Afghanistan have been attacked numerous times in recent years, but Pakistan denies involvement. Both claim the other is trying to gain a stronghold here.

And to the west lies Iran. An opponent of the former Taliban government, it has since been accused by Washington of arming the rebels in their fight against occupation.

Afghanistan also shares a border with China, which is generally regarded as a long-term challenger to global US hegemony.

“Iran, Pakistan, China and the Central Asian states don’t view the endgame in the same way as being promulgated by Nato,” Mr Neill said. “I am sure that most of these big powers have thought out scenarios of an Afghanistan without Nato or a US presence.”

Historically, Afghanistan was at the centre of the Great Game, the long and bloody struggle that pitted the British and Russian empires against each other for dominance in the region. Later came the Cold War rivalry that eventually resulted in the US backing of the mujaheddin after the Soviet invasion of 1979.

The past is not lost on people here. Waheed Mozhdah, a former member of the Taliban government and now a political analyst, likened events in Afghanistan since 2001 to a wrestling match. However, Mr Mozhdah said that it was not only foreign governments that are keen to ensure they have an influence in the region surrounding Afghanistan.

He claimed the network of the insurgent commander, Jalaluddin Haqqani, was tasked with ensuring the Taliban continued to have ties with militants whose goals went beyond the country’s borders.

“They have left all the international issues to al Qa’eda, but they still want to have a hand in them.”

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