

# The US clashes with Russia and China: Kyrgyzstan And The Great Game For Central Asia

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Kyrgyzstan's Rosa at the heart of the matter

For those who held a perennial grievance that the United States paid scant attention to the Central Asian region, Friday presents an extraordinary sight. President Barack Obama has scheduled a meeting with Kyrgyz leader Rosa Otunbayeva in New York.

Not a “walk-in” or a “pull-aside” or a chance encounter, but a “stand-alone” event, structured well in advance, with the customary media briefing by the concerned assistant secretary of state, et al.

Make no mistake about the meaning of Obama's personal intervention in US diplomacy with an unelected leader of a small, remote country of 5 million people in the middle of nowhere. Obama will be signaling how central Kyrgyzstan has become for US foreign policy.

There has been a paradigm shift in Central Asia this past week. A visit by the Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov to the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek on Friday has been abruptly canceled and the signing of a major Russian-Kyrgyz military agreement by him on Friday has been inexplicably put off to March next year.

A question mark looms large on the Kremlin's choices ahead. It has to do with Otunbayeva plus Obama from now on. Anything involving Obama even remotely makes the business highly sensitive for the Kremlin, which pins such high hopes on the reset with the US.

But the Kremlin also has its job cut out in the post-Soviet space, no matter what Obama may think of it. A major terrorist strike on Tajikistan last Sunday raises the specter of the flame of the brutal five-year civil war that ended in 1997 rekindling. A convoy of Tajik troops was ambushed in the remote Rasht Valley, some 180 kilometers from the capital, Dushanbe. The valley had had been a traditional stronghold of Islamist guerillas during the civil war.

All eyes are on Russia's role as the protector of the Tajik nation when danger lies ahead. But if Russia is unready to perform its role, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) could be waiting in the wings. The alliance's Central Asia envoy, Robert Simmons, is on record after recent talks in Dushanbe with President Emomali Rahmon that NATO hoped to establish a military base in Tajikistan. The French already have an air base in Tajikistan.

Ironically, the terrorist strike in Tajikistan coincided with the Peace Mission-2010 anti-terror exercises of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) currently underway in Kazakhstan. It becomes yet another strategic challenge to Moscow to demonstrate the relevance of the two security organizations of SCO and the Collective Security Treaty

Organization (CSTO) for regional security in Central Asia.

US snubs Moscow

Thus, the Obama-Otunbayeva meeting will be held against a backdrop of big shifts in the power dynamics in Central Asia. Despite the Russian rebuff to the US's plan to introduce the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as the principal provider of security in Kyrgyzstan, Washington is not only not backing off but on the contrary is pressing ahead.

The great beauty of the US diplomatic thrust is that Washington is staging an assault on Russia's traditional dominance in Kyrgyzstan while insisting all the time that it is working in tandem with Moscow.

This is a first-rate vignette of the Great Game harking back to the 19th century when Czarist Russia and Imperial Britain constantly strove to project an impression of kinship in Central Asia while bitterly undercutting each other. Moscow is maintaining a stony silence, and neither confirms nor disputes Washington's claims of camaraderie and coordination over the issues of Central Asian security and stability.

During a briefing in New York on Wednesday ahead of the Obama-Otunbayeva meeting, US Assistant Secretary of State for Central Asia Robert Blake insisted that the US policy was significantly predicated on the "improved cooperation with Russia ... And from our standpoint, we've been very pleased with the recent progress and cooperation that we've had with the government of Russia, particularly on Kyrgyzstan, which has been a very high priority for both our governments."

Blake recalled that Russian cooperation had been "at all levels of our government", it has been "quite extraordinary", and "we [the US] want to not only build on that progress with respect to our relations in Kyrgyzstan, but also to look at other ways that the US and Russia can cooperate in the region."

Even as Blake spoke, Moscow found itself abruptly stranded at the penultimate stage of signing a major military agreement with Kyrgyzstan. What emerges is that Bishkek changed its mind under US pressure and Moscow has suffered an embarrassing rebuff.

It has been an open secret for the past few weeks that the Kremlin was on the verge of staging a major coup by following up on its military pacts with Ukraine and Armenia in recent months with a similar long-term agreement with Kyrgyzstan that would put the Russian military presence on a virtually long-term footing and might allow Moscow to open another brand new military base in the south of the country.

Reporting from Moscow only 10 days ago, Britain's Daily Telegraph described the impending development as a "significant geopolitical breakthrough that would allow it [Russia] to consolidate and expand its military presence in the former Soviet Union as a bulwark against encroaching US and Chinese influence."

Quoting Defense Ministry sources in Moscow, Russian daily Kommersant gave details of the military pact - that Bishkek was ready to give Russia a lease of 49 years "with the possibility of extension", and in exchange Kyrgyzstan "expects to get Russian arms - as rent payment". The report further mentioned that the proposed pact would "integrate" Russia's existing military facilities in Kyrgyzstan into one military command - Kant airbase, the

Russian navy's telecommunications center No 338 in the village of Kara-Balta, Koisary anti-submarine equipment test base No 954 in Karakol on Lake Issyk Kul, and a military seismic station in Maily-Suu.

A Russian Defense Ministry delegation headed by the deputy chief of staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, arrived in Bishkek on Monday as the advance party ahead of Defense Minister Serdyukov to give the final touches to the proposed military pact, which was discussed in Moscow by Kyrgyz Defense Minister Abibulla Kudaiberdiev on September 13.

From all accounts, Bishkek seemed anxious to strengthen its Russian security cover, as the Kyrgyz situation remains fragile. Evidently, the US prompted the Kyrgyz to do a rethink when it came to be known that the Kremlin was wrapping up a historic military pact in Central Asia.

It appears the Kyrgyz began insisting at the last minute that Moscow should make a decent payment for leasing its military facilities. The US media have been ridiculing Moscow publicly that it pays a paltry amount of US\$4.5 million to Bishkek as leasing charges whereas for the US transit center in Manas, the Pentagon has been footing a \$60 million bill annually as rent alone.

In effect, the score is now 1-1. Moscow recently scotched Washington's attempt to get an OSCE police force deployed in Kyrgyzstan and now in turn has been halted in its tracks as it aspired to sign a long-term military pact with Bishkek.

Power game in Bishkek

What lies ahead? Everything seems to hang by a thin thread - the outcome of the parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan in October. Behind the scenes, both the US and Russia are hoping that their respective favorite Kyrgyz parties will lead the next government, which is bound to be a coalition.

Russia's ruling party, United Russia, openly signed an "agreement of cooperation" on Wednesday with the Party of Dignity, headed by the former Kyrgyz prime minister (and Soviet-era KGB general) Felix Kulov. In a demonstrative gesture, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev received Kulov and said, "We watch closely the life in your country and the political processes there."

But Washington is not to be outdone. Blake virtually followed up on Medvedev's sentiment when he said in New York, "Obama wants to meet with President Otunbayeva first to show support to the Kyrgyz people and to the Kyrgyz government ... to reaffirm the important opportunity that now exists for the Kyrgyz people to establish the first parliamentary democracy in Central Asia. ... President [Obama] looks forward to a very full discussion on all of those issues when he sees the [Kyrgyz] president. ... I think the [US] president is going to focus mostly on, again, the democratic possibilities that are now before us in Kyrgyzstan. And that's certainly our highest priority there."

Blake stressed that the US expected the elections to be free and fair and that it was going to be the "most important" template of US diplomacy in the weeks ahead. Washington seems confident that it is going to get a democratically elected government in Bishkek that is positive towards strategic ties with the US. Washington's estimation is that a parliamentary

system is easy to influence, especially a coalition government, whereas Moscow would have preferred a strong man at the apex of the presidential system in Bishkek who would invariably have a Soviet past.

Moscow seems somewhat less sure about the shape of things to come in Bishkek. As things stand, Washington is comfortable with Otunbayeva's leadership, and Obama's decision to receive her underscores the US comfort level with the prevailing political dispensation in Bishkek. As Blake put it, Otunbayeva is "supportive" of the US base in Manas and "we're very pleased with the cooperation that we have" – so much so that Manas is not even going to be a "significant part of the conversation" between the two presidents on Friday.

The US diplomacy seems confident of having effectively quarantined the growing Russian discomfort with the American presence in Manas. The US's upper hand in the lively strategic rivalry over military bases in Kyrgyzstan in a way shows that its Central Asian policy is becoming sufficiently resilient to absorb setbacks and to move forward. Russia and China cannot easily match this nimbleness.

But a big issue still remains: all said, democracy is a dicey game full of unpredictability and booby traps. What happens if the Kyrgyz elections produce another Viktor Yanukovich as in Ukraine? Kulov, in fact, can foot the bill, and he is slated to perform well in the October elections. One can never quite underestimate the depth and extent of Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan – not only among the elites but also at the popular level. Most adults in Kyrgyzstan speak Russian. The Russian media, especially television, provide their window to life, politics and the world at large. One-fifth of the Kyrgyz workforce are gainfully employed in Russia and their remittances are a lifeline for the Kyrgyz economy.

This is what makes the US-Russian struggle for dominance in Kyrgyzstan so absorbing to watch. Quite clearly, the US cannot do without Kyrgyzstan in its overall Central Asia strategy. To quote the US commander in Manas, Dwight Sones, recently, "Kyrgyzstan in itself is really the crown jewel of Central Asia, in terms of its location, its sphere of influence with the surrounding countries."

#### Enter China

Russia and China are feeling the pressure of the US thrust into Kyrgyzstan, and both seem intensely aware that the US is digging in for a long-term military presence in Afghanistan, as in Iraq.

Moscow might have given a mild warning to Washington to go easy when it was revealed on Wednesday that "joint training flights" by Russian and Chinese (and Kazakh) pilots were held at the Russian air base at Kant in Kyrgyzstan this week. The report by the Voice of Russia claimed that "the joint training is part of Peace Mission 2010" of the SCO.

This is an extremely significant development since the Kant base is also part of the CSTO for ensuring the security of air space in Central Asia. Actually, reflecting on the ongoing SCO exercises in Kazakhstan, a Moscow commentator on military affairs recently affirmed that the SCO and CSTO were destined to be two sides of the same coin. He wrote:

[The] SCO has no intention of turning into a military bloc. However, the military aspects of intra-SCO cooperation are crucial given the context of ongoing developments in Afghanistan and recent civil unrest in Kyrgyzstan. Current developments ... pose a serious test for both

the SCO and the CSTO. In effect, they also present a test for Russia, which considers the creation of these organizations and their operation to be its achievement, and with good reason.

Should the SCO and the CSTO manage to prevent the spread of conflicts and to stabilize the regional situation, it would be possible to draw optimistic conclusions about the prospects for cooperation between their member-states. However, much depends on the readiness to act promptly and resolutely, using all available means, including military force, to put an end to violence. Otherwise all these troop exercises will remain purely theoretical, designed to create a particular image, but devoid of any real content.

A degree of frustration is beginning to surface in Russian comments regarding China's perceived reluctance to get its toes wet in Central Asia despite the US's strategic challenge to its core interests in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere in the region.

Evidently, Russia cannot much longer take the heat of US pressure in Central Asia by itself. However, it is not that China isn't aware of the quintessence of the Afghan game. On Monday, in a rare commentary titled "Why are US forces bent on expanding military bases in Afghanistan?", the People's Daily took stock of the emerging trends.

The commentary assessed that the beefing up of the massive American airbases in Bagram, Kandahar and Mazar-i-Sharif revealed the US intention to maintain a permanent presence so as to "consolidate its global military network". It estimated that the US consistently kept this objective in view when it intervened in Afghanistan in 2001 and Obama was keeping up the course.

The commentary visualized that the US military presence was intended to "control" Afghanistan and to act as the "springboard to cope with the volatile situation in Iran". It could foresee that the US would find various excuses for somehow or other perpetuating its military presence in Afghanistan and it was conceivable that Washington and Kabul might soon enter into an agreement for this purpose.

Significantly, the commentary drew a comparison with the permanent US military bases in Japan and South Korea. It concluded, "Central Asia has much weight or bearing in the US global geopolitical and strategic interests and hence the maintenance of a long-term military presence in Afghanistan is a crucial component part of the vital US military chain around the world."

Unsurprisingly, the US will attempt to scuttle the prospect of any Russia-China security axis crystallizing in Central Asia. US spokesmen and officials effusively speak about US-Russian cooperation in Kyrgyzstan, but they studiously ignore China's role, if any, as a key player in Central Asia. In the seminar circuits, American experts constantly drill into the minds of their Russian interlocutors that the real challenge comes from China and it is a common challenge, which they will be prudent to counter together.

Recently, well-known American geostrategist and former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (who expounded famously on the "Eurasian chessboard") touched on China's role in the region. Interestingly, he said in the course of an interview with the Russian media:

"We [US and Russia] also now have a very important participant in this distribution of power across Eurasia. And that is China. So the future of, so to speak, the competition, the rivalry,

or the game has changed. It's much more now a question of maneuver, political accommodation, equilibrium, balancing to make certain that no one dominates this continent and particularly no one who is imbued with a global missionary zeal as the Soviet Union was.

“So I think the nature of relationships now on the Eurasian continent is fundamentally different. And it provides for much greater opportunity of some accommodation. We see this accommodation developing – still timidly, of course, between Russia and the United States, and that's an important development. We have a significant relationship with China.”

Was the grandmaster encouraging Moscow to come away from involvements with China and move closer to the US? Arguably, it is possible to interpret Obama's reset with Russia, too, from such a perspective in the medium term.

Without doubt, the summits of NATO (in Lisbon in November) and the CSTO (the following month in Moscow) are going to be watershed events for trans-Atlantic and Eurasian security. There is, clearly, a great deal of intellectual churning going on in Moscow, too. The Moscow think-tank associated with Medvedev has just come up with a stunning report counseling the Kremlin to seek NATO membership.

But before anything further happens on the fundamental alignments of great powers, Russia and China are blessed with an opportunity to have an in-depth exchange at the highest level of leadership regarding the impact of the US's regional strategies in Central Asia on their vital interests.

At the invitation of Chinese President Hu Jintao, Medvedev arrives in Beijing on Sunday for a three-day visit. All indications are that both Moscow and Beijing are preparing to take a great leap forward in their cooperation.

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