

Kyrgyzstan as a Geopolitical Pivot in Great Power Rivalries

Washington, Moscow, Beijing and the Geopolitics of Central Asia

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Part I: Kyrgyzstan as a Geopolitical Pivot

The remote Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan is what Britain's Halford Mackinder might call a geopolitical 'pivot'—a land that, owing to its geographical characteristics, holds a pivotal position in Great Power rivalries.

Today the tiny remote country is being shaken by what appears to be an extremely well-planned popular uprising to topple US-backed president Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Preliminary analysts suggested that Moscow had more than a passing interest in promoting regime change there and that the events unfolding might be Moscow's attempt to stage its own 'reverse' version of Washington's 'Color Revolutions' — Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003 or Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004, as well as the 2005 Tulip Revolution that brought the pro-US Bakiyev to power. In the midst of this ongoing power shift in Kyrgyzstan, however, who is doing what to whom, is far from clear.

At the very least, what is playing out has huge strategic implications for military security throughout the Eurasian Heartland — from China to Russia and beyond. It therefore has staggering implications for the future of the United States in Afghanistan and Central Asia and by extension in all Eurasia.

Political tinderbox

The protests against the US-backed Bakiyev began in March over allegations of extreme corruption on the part of the President and his family members. In 2009, Bakiyev began amending an article in the country's constitution regulating presidential succession in case of death or unexpected resignation, a move widely seen as an attempt to introduce a "dynastical system" of power transfer in the country, one factor which fuelled the recent nationwide protests in Kyrgyzstan. He placed his son and other relatives in key posts where they raked in huge sums for the US airbase rights at Manas – reportedly as much as \$80 million a year — and other enterprises. [1]

Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries in Central Asia with more than 40% living below the official poverty line. Bakiyev named his son, Maxim — who also managed to find time and funds to buy part ownership of a UK football club — to be head of the country's Central Agency for Development, Investment and Innovation, where he gained control over the country's richest assets, including the Kumtor gold mine.[2]

Late in 2009 Bakiyev sharply hiked taxes on small and medium businesses and early this year imposed new taxes on telecoms. He privatized the country's largest electricity company and in January the private company, rumored to have been sold to friends of the family for less than 3% of its estimated worth, doubled electricity prices. The price of heating gas was raised by up to 1000%. Kyrgyzstan's winters are extremely cold.

The opposition charged that Maxim Bakiyev had arranged a sweetheart privatisation of the state telecom to a friend domiciled in an offshore company in the Canary Islands. In short, popular rage against Bakiyev and company existed for good reason. The key issue was how efficiently that rage was channelled and by whom.

The protests erupted following the decision by the government in March to dramatically raise prices of energy and telecommunications by fourfold and more, in an extremely poor country. During early March protests, Otunbayeva was named spokesperson for a united front of all opposition groups. She appealed at that time to the US government to take a more active interest in Kyrgyzstan's Bakiyev regime and its lack of democratic standards, obviously with no result.[3]

According to informed Russian sources, at that point Roza Otunbayeva spoke with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to discuss the deteriorating situation. Immediately on its formation of an Interim Government under Otunbayeva, Moscow was the first to recognize the acting government and made an offer of \$300 million in immediate stabilization aid, transferring a portion of a 2009 Russian loan of \$2.15 billion that was promised Bakiyev's regime for construction of a hydropower plant on the Naryn river.

The \$2.15 billion was originally announced just after Bakiyev declared he would close the US base at Manas, a decision that American dollars managed to reverse some weeks later. Clearly in Moscow's eyes, the Russian aid and Bakiyev's announced closing of the US base at Manas were linked.

The latest \$300 million tranche of the pledged \$2.15 billion from Moscow, re-opened after the ouster of Bakiyev, will reportedly go directly to the Kyrgyz National Bank.[4]

According to a report in Moscow's RIA Novosti, ousted Prime Minister, Daniyar Usenov, told Russia's ambassador in Bishkek that Russian media outlets, which enjoy a major influence within the former Soviet state—whose official language is still Russian—had been biased against the Bakiyev-Usenov government. [5]

Bakiyev government security forces, reportedly including Special Forces sharpshooters on rooftops, killed some 81 opposition demonstrators, leading to a dramatic escalation of the protests in the first week of April.

What is remarkable about the events and suggests that there is more going on behind the curtains, is the fact that the full-blown popular uprising exploded onto the scene with little pre-warning in the international media.

There had been protest demonstrations repeatedly since Bakiyev took control in the Washington-financed 2005 Tulip Revolution. [6] That Washington-financed regime change of 2005 had involved the usual list of US NGO's including Freedom House, The Albert Einstein Institution, The National Endowment for Democracy and USAID.[7] None of the previous protests until this April, however, had the obvious thoroughness and sophistication of the

latest one. Events seem to have caught everyone by surprise, not the least the corrupt Bakiyev family and his Washington backers.

The smoothness with which allegiance of the army, police and border security was gained within the first hours of protest suggests very sophisticated pre-planning and masterful coordination. Not clear at this point is whether that came from operative s from abroad, and if so, whether from Russia's FSB or CIA or whomever.

On April 7, as Bakiyev was losing control, he reportedly rushed to the Americans, but as they saw the blood on the streets caused by Bakiyev's sharpshooters and the growing fury of the crowds against the government, they reportedly whisked the President and his family to his hometown of Osh, apparently hoping to bring him back after events had calmed.[8] That never happened.

Following the resignation of his entire government, including the heads of the army and national police and border guard, Bakiyev resigned on April 16 and fled to neighboring Kazakhstan. At latest report he is holed up in Belarus, having reportedly gained entry by bringing with him over \$200 million for cash-strapped Belarus President Lukashenko.[9]

Kyrgyzstan's new, interim opposition government, under the nominal leadership of former Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva, has declared it wants to set up an international investigation into alleged crimes committed by Bakiyev. Criminal charges have already been filed against him, his sons and brother and other relatives.

Bakiyev had little choice but to flee. The army and police had already sided with the Otunbayeva opposition days before he fled, in an indication that the events were at the very least extremely well planned by at least some parts of the opposition.

A geographical pivot

Kyrgyzstan today plays the role of a geographical pivot. The land-locked country shares a border with China's Xinjiang Province, a highly strategic point for Beijing. One of the smallest of the Central Asian states, it is also bordered to its north by oil-rich Kazakhstan, on the West by Uzbekistan and on the South by Tajikistan. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan overlaps the politically explosive resource-rich area known as the Ferghana Valley, a multinational ethnic and political friction zone located also in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.



Image source: US Central Intelligence Agency

The country itself is highly mountainous, with the Tian Shan and Pamir mountains taking some 65% of all land area. Approximately 90% of the country is more than 1500 meters above sea level.

In terms of natural resources — other than agriculture, which comprises a third of GDP — Kyrgyzstan has gold, uranium, coal and oil. In 1997 the Kumtor Gold Mine opened one of the largest gold deposits in the world.

Until recently the state agency, Kyrgyzaltyn, owned all the mines and operated many of them as joint ventures with foreign companies. The Kumtor Gold Mine, near the border of China, is 100% owned by Canada's Centerra Gold Inc. Until the ouster of President Bakiyev, his son, Maxim, head of the State Development Fund, ran Kyrgyzaltyn which is also the largest shareholder of Centerra Gold, the Canadian company that today owns Kumtor.

Significantly, even though he has not been formally elected by Kyrgyz voters, Centerra in Toronto, perhaps with a nudge from the US State Department, has already announced it has

named Maxim Bakiyev's "replacement," as head of Kyrgyzaltyn, Aleksei Eliseev, Deputy Director of the Kyrgyz State Development Agency, to the Board of Directors of Centerra.[10]

Kyrgyzstan also has significant reserves of uranium and antimony. Kyrgyzstan also has considerable remaining deposits of coal of an estimated at 2.5 billion tons, especially in the Kara-Keche deposit in northern Kyrgyzstan.

However, even more pivotal than the mineral riches is the major US Air Force base at Manas, Kyrgyzstan, opened within three months of the US declaration of a global 'War on Terror' in September 2001. Shortly thereafter, Russia established its own military airbase not far from Manas. Kyrgyzstan today is the only country that hosts both Russian and American military bases, an uneasy state of affairs to put it mildly.

In sum, Kyrgyzstan, sitting in the center of the world's most strategic landmass, Central Asia, is a geopolitical prize coveted by many.

Washington walks on political eggshells

The US State Department had tried to get Bakiyev to hold on in apparent hopes they could disperse the protestors, quell the street riots and keep their Tulip man in power. Hillary Clinton initially called on the Parliamentary opposition – government ministers who objected to Bakiyev's corruption and nepotism — to "negotiate" and "develop a dialogue" with the US-financed Basiyev Presidency. The State Department then issued statements that the government of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was still functioning, despite reports that his entire administration had resigned.[11]

On April 7, during the peak of the drama when the outcome was still unclear, US Assistant Secretary of State P. J. Crowley told reporters, "We want to see Kyrgyzstan evolve, just as we do other countries in...the region. But, that said, there is a sitting government. We work closely with that government. We are allied with that government in terms of its support, you know, for international operations in...Afghanistan." [12] George Orwell would have admired the exercise in diplomatic doublespeak.

On April 15, when it was clear Bakiyev had little support within the country, the US State Department declared that it will side with neither the country's ousted president nor the Parliamentary opposition. In a statement indicating Washington is walking on eggshells hoping not to crack any, especially affecting its Manas airbase rights, State Department spokesman Phillip Crowley declared, "We want to see the situation resolved peacefully. And we're not taking sides." [13] Since then, after talks with Foreign Minister Otunbayeva and her associates, the State Department and Obama have warmly backed the new political reality.

Otunbayeva, a leading Communist Party member during the Soviet days, had served as the first Kyrgyz ambassador to the United States in the post-Soviet era, and later as a special assistant to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The interim government headed by Otunbayeva says they are going to write a new constitution within six months and prepare for a democratic election in the country. The opposition claims to be in control of the situation in Kyrgyztan though riots and looting outside Bishkek are still being reported.[14]

Whose coup?

While there is much speculation about an on-the-ground role by Russian intelligence in the

‘anti-tulip revolution,’ we must leave that as an open question.

In comments during his Washington visit on April 14, a week into the upheaval, Russia’s Medvedev expressed concern about the stability of the country: “The risk of Kyrgyzstan’s breakdown into two parts – north and south – really exists. This is why our task is to help our Kyrgyz partners to find the mildest way out of this situation.” He outlined a worst-case scenario where an unstable Kyrgyz government could be left powerless as extremists flood into the country, creating a second Afghanistan.[15]

US White House Adviser on Russia, Michael McFaul, speaking from the Prague arms control talks, referring to the unfolding events in Kyrgyzstan, stated, “This is not some anti-American coup. That we know for sure; and this is not a sponsored-by-the-Russians coup.” [16]

At least nominally, Washington might well have reason to believe they can “work” with the new Interim Kyrgyz leaders.

Roza Otunbayeva is well known in Washington since she served there as Ambassador during the 1990’s.

Her Number Two in the Interim Government, former Parliament Speaker and a key figure in Washington’s 2005 Tulip Revolution that brought Bakiyev to power, Omurbek Tekebayev, was brought to Washington back then by the State Department for one of their “visitors programs” — where emerging foreign political figures are presumably taught the beauties of the American way of life.

Tekebayev spoke openly at the time of that experience: “I found that the Americans know how to choose people, know how to make an accurate evaluation of what is happening and prognosticate the future development and political changes.” [17]

Thus there is evidence that the latest events in Kyrgyzstan could have been backed by Moscow as a “reverse” Color Revolution, one executed to control growing US military presence in Central Asia. And there is evidence it may also have been a second US-backed regime change, perhaps after the Obama Administration became alarmed that its man, Bakiyev, was getting too economically close to Beijing. The third and least likely version is that the events were executed by a rag-tag disorganized domestic opposition that never before managed to rally more than a few thousands to the streets to protest Bakiyev policies in the past five years.

Clear at this point is that both Moscow and Washington are going to considerable lengths to show some minimal unity on the emerging events in the country.

Kanat Saudabayev, head of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), on April 15 said the safe exit of Kyrgyzstan President Bakiyev from Kyrgyzstan was the result of joint efforts by Obama and Russian President Medvedev. [18]

Clearly both Washington and Moscow eagerly want to have a strong presence in whatever government emerges from the strife-torn Central Asian country of five million people. What is less well known but equally clear, is the vital stake China has in stable relations with Kyrgyzstan, a neighbor with whom it shares a long border. Most interesting from here is where events will go in the forlorn but geopolitically strategic country.

Manas Airbase future?

One of the most pressing questions for Washington is the future of the vital US airbase at Manas near the capitol, Bishkek. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed the “important role Kyrgyzstan plays in hosting the Transit Center at the Manas Airport,” according to an official State Department statement of April 11. She left little doubt what Washington’s priority is in the country. It’s not democracy nor is it economic development.[19]

Following the Washington declaration of the War on Terror in September 2001, the Pentagon got basing rights in several strategic Central Asian countries, ostensibly to help wage the war against Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. In addition to basing rights in Uzbekistan, Washington got the Manas concession in Kyrgyzstan as well.

Most extensive of course has been the US military presence in Afghanistan. In one of his first acts as President, Obama authorized the ‘surge’ — adding some 30,000 troops and approving construction of another 8 new ‘temporary’ US bases in Afghanistan, bringing the total bases there to an astonishing 22, including the huge airbases at Bagram and Kandahar.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates has refused to put a time limit on the duration of the US military presence in Afghanistan. That is not because of the Taliban, but clearly rather the long-term Washington strategy of spreading the ‘war on terror’ across all Central Asia including into the strategically vital Ferghana Valley bordering Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This is where the latest events in Kyrgyzstan become geopolitically more than interesting for Russia, for China and for Washington.

On April 14, Gates told the press that he was confident the US would retain rights to use Manas for what the Pentagon calls its Northern Distribution Network, flying supplies into the Afghanistan war theatre.[20] Just days before, interim government figures in Bishkek had indicated US rights to Manas were high on the list to be cancelled.

During a meeting with Russia’s Medvedev, President Obama agreed that the Kyrgyz events were definitely not a Russian counter coup. He extended immediate US recognition of the Interim regime of Roza Otunbayeva.

The question at this point is what role Kyrgyzstan will play in the high drama geopolitical chess game for control of Central Asia, and with it, control of the Eurasian Heartland as British geopolitician Halford Mackinder termed it. The key major actors outside Kyrgyzstan in this geopolitical high-stakes chess game across Central Asia are China, Russia, and the United States. In the next part we examine the geopolitical interest of China regarding fellow Shanghai Cooperation Organization member Kyrgyzstan.

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Notes

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