

Kyrgyzstan's "Rose Revolution": Washington, Moscow, Beijing and the Geopolitics of Central Asia

Part II

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Global Research, May 28, 2010

25 May 2010

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Oil and Energy](#)

China's growing economic ties to the cash-strapped regime of former Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev was a major reason Washington decided to dump its erstwhile ally Akayev after almost a decade of support. In June 2001 China, along with Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, signed the Declaration creating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Three days later Beijing announced a large grant to Kyrgyzstan for military equipment.[1]

After 11 September 2001, the Pentagon began what has been called the greatest shake-up in America's overseas military deployments since the end of the Second World War. The goal was to position US forces along an 'arc of instability' going through the Mediterranean, Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia and southern Asia. [2]

Akayev at the time offered to lease to the Pentagon its largest military base in the region at Manas. China, which shares a border with Kyrgyzstan was alarmed and, together with Russia, steered the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to oppose it, and to call for ending US military bases in Central Asia.

According to the Wall Street Journal, China was also engaged in secret negotiations for its own base in Kyrgyzstan and for border changes that ignited a political storm against Akayev in March 2002.

The Journal's Philip Shishkin noted, "Akayev's moves to align Kyrgyzstan with China through 'Silk Road diplomacy' and suppression of the Uighur guerrillas — explained mainly by his desperate need of finances to stem the tail-spinning domestic economy — upset Washington, which saw Beijing as a thorn in its strategic expansion agenda." [3]

Shishkin added, "The American perspective on this dangerous development went as follows: 'Given the 1,100-kilometer border between Kyrgyzstan and China — and Washington's already considerable foothold in nearby Uzbekistan and Tajikistan — the fall of the China-friendly government of disgraced president Askar Akayev would be no small victory for the 'containment policy.'" [4]

At that point Washington launched massive financing via the National Endowment for Democracy and used the resources of the Albert Einstein Institute and Freedom House as well as the State Department and IMF to topple the now-unreliable Akayev regime in the 2005 Tulip Revolution.[5]

Understandably, one of the major interested parties in the political future of Kyrgyzstan today is China. Kyrgyzstan shares a 530 mile border with China, straddling the politically sensitive Xinjiang Province.

Xinjiang Province is where riots in July 2009 by ethnic Uighurs were supported by the US-financed World Uighur Congress of millionaire “ex-laundress” Rebiya Kadeer, and by Washington’s regime-changing NGO, the National Endowment for Democracy.

Xinjiang, also bordering the sensitive Chinese Tibet Autonomous Region, is a vital crossroads for energy pipelines into China from Kazakhstan and ultimately Russia, and is home to major domestic Chinese oil production.[6]

The borders between Kyrgyzstan and China’s Xinjiang are porous, and the flow of people between Xinjiang in China and Kyrgyzstan is considerable. There are an estimated 30,000 Chinese nationals, including Uighurs, living in Kyrgyzstan. Almost 100,000 ethnic Kyrgyz live in Xinjiang.

In short, US military outposts in Kyrgyzstan have far more significance to Chinese national security than the mere resupply of the Afghan war theatre. It is an ideal breeding ground for US intelligence agencies and for the Pentagon to run covert destabilizing operations into China’s strategically vital and politically fragile Xinjiang. The flow of people back and forth between the two countries provides excellent cover for US-run espionage and possible sabotage. [7]

According to retired Indian Ambassador, K. Gajendra Singh, now heading the Foundation for Indo-Turkic Studies in New Delhi, the Bakiyev regime permitted the US military to use its facilities at Manas Airbase, including highly sophisticated electronic devices, among other purposes, to also monitor key Chinese missile and military sites in Xinjiang. [8]

Further adding to concerns in Beijing over US actions inside Kyrgyzstan is the Pentagon’s new Northern Distribution Network (NDN), created ostensibly to supply the Afghanistan war.

The NDN runs through Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Many in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization region suspect that the NDN will be used by the Pentagon to encourage spread attacks by groups like the ‘Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan’ or the ‘Islamic Jihad Union’ and the murky Hizb ut-Tahrir movement – all of which are clustered within the Ferghana Valley between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. [9]

Beijing is no passive observer in the Kyrgyzstan events. It will clearly play its strongest card, the economic one, to secure closer and far more friendly relations with any new Kyrgyz government.

At the June 2009 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Ekaterinburg Russia, China’s President Hu Jintao pledged a fund of \$10 billion in future aid to the Central Asian member nations of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Nothing Washington has promised to Kyrgyzstan comes even close to those sums.

In one of its first statements, the provisional Kyrgyz Deputy Head, Omurbek Tekebayev, told Russian media that they regarded China among the country’s strategic partners: “The foreign policy will change...Russia, Kazakhstan and other neighbors including China will remain our strategic partners.” [10]

One project that that Chinese strategic partner is likely to accelerate in order to weld a closer strategic partnership with its Kyrgyz neighbor is Beijing's announced plan to build a vast high-speed Eurasian rail grid.

China's Ministry of Railways has unveiled one of the world's most ambitious infrastructure projects. The rail link will connect Xinjiang via Kyrgyzstan, ultimately to Germany and even on to London by 2025.

China's plans include linking the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway into the Eurasian high-speed rail corridor.

China is also building twelve new highways to economically tie Kyrgyzstan and its neighbors by modern roadways with Xinjiang. At some point US militarization of Kyrgyzstan becomes a Chinese national security threat. An economic counter move by China to increase its presence in the country is now clearly on the table. [11]

As further indication of Beijing's concern to have stability in its neighborhood, China has recently stepped up its economic activities in Afghanistan.

As friction increases between Afghan President Karzai and the Obama Administration, relations are clearly warming with Karzai and Beijing. On March 24, Hamid Karzai and Chinese President Hu Jintao signed new economic agreements in Beijing on trade and investment, while agreeing to strengthen triangular cooperation with Pakistan, which traditionally has had close ties to China.

The March 24 agreements reportedly cover China's investments in Afghanistan's hydroelectric, mining, railway, construction, and energy projects.

China is already the largest investor in the Afghan economy. Its Metallurgical Group Corporation won a bid in 2007 to invest \$3.5 billion in Afghanistan's Aynak copper mine—one of the largest in the world. [12]

And another prize plum is the possibility for Chinese companies to develop Afghanistan's estimated 1.6 billion barrels of oil and 440 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas, as well as large deposits of ferrous and non-ferrous metals, iron ore and gold. [13]

For China, both Afghanistan and Pakistan are part of its key transportation and trade links to Iran. Beijing has completed a port at Gwadar in Pakistan, allowing it to import 60 percent of its oil coming from the Middle East. China now plans to connect the Gwadar Port with Xinjiang through Afghanistan to secure a more efficient delivery of energy resources to fuel its booming economy. Stability in Kyrgyzstan is essential to China in this broader context. [14]

In our next part we examine the essential geopolitical importance of Kyrgyzstan for Russia, the second geopolitical player in the new three-dimensional chess game for control of Eurasia's land space and its economic and political future.

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Notes

[1] John C. K. Daly, Sino-Kyrgyz relations after the Tulip Revolution, Washington, The Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, June 7, 2005 accessed in <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:HO72dbRF7HkJ:www.asianresearch.org/articles/2614.html+behind+tulip+revolution&cd=26&hl=en&ct=clnk>

[2] Philip Shishkin, In Putin's Backyard, Democracy Stirs - With U.S. Help, The Wall Street Journal, February 25, 2005.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] F. William Engdahl, Washington is Playing a Deeper Game with China, July 11, 2009, Global Research, accessed in <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=14327>

[7] K. Gajendra Singh, Geopolitical Battle in Kyrgyzstan over US Military Lilypond in Central Asia, New Delhi, April 11, 2010, accessed in <http://tarafits.blogspot.com/>

[8] Ibid.

[9] Cornelius Graubner, Implications of the Northern Distribution Network in Central Asia, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University, September 1, 2009, accessed in <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5169>

[10] John C.K. Daly, op. cit.

[11] Roman Muzalevsky, The Implications of China's High-Speed Eurasian Railway Strategy for Central Asia, Eurasian Daily Monitor, Vol. 7, issue 64, April 2, 2010.

[12] Afghanistan Ministry of Mines, Aynak Copper Project is Inaugurated in a Glorious Ceremony, July 9, 2009, accessed in http://mom.gov.af/index.php?page_id=87

[13] Roman Muzalevsky, The Economic Underpinnings of China's Regional Security Strategy in Afghanistan, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. 7 Issue 75, April 19, 2010, accessed in [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[swords\]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews\[any_of_the_words\]=afghanistan&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=36285&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=436692a068](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[swords]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews[any_of_the_words]=afghanistan&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=36285&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=436692a068)

[14] Ibid.

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