

Russia and Former Soviet Republics plan new security stronghold in Central Asia

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New security stronghold planned in Central Asia

Seven former Soviet states are discussing the creation of a joint security stronghold in Kyrgyzstan at an informal meeting of the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

The presidents of Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are meeting in the Kyrgyz resort town of Cholpon-Ata on Lake Issyk-Kul.

The creation of a joint-CSTO [Rapid Reaction Force](#) military base in the Central Asian country is on the agenda. Earlier, Russia suggested deploying its rapid reaction force battalion in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan.

"The base is necessary in case of certain decisions in the CSTO framework. It is not intended for any of our issues," said Kremlin foreign policy aide Sergey Prikhodko.

Kyrgyzstan's newly re-elected president, Kurmanbek Bakiev suggested it might be a training center for the Russian and Kyrgyz military, rather than a standard military base.

Kyrgyzstan has become a key location for fighting terrorism in the region, and an American military base there has already courted controversy.

It is said that every close relationship has to have spice, and in the case of Russia and Kyrgyzstan – the Manas air base is the jalapeno.

"Some members of Russia's political elite think that by using this base to satisfy its geo-political interests in Afghanistan, Washington is creating a threat to Russia's national security," said Aleksandr Knyazev from the Institute of CIS Studies.

The Manas base has been used by the US and coalition forces since 2001 to support operations in Afghanistan.

Over the years, it has become a source of controversy with many locals wanting it closed after an American soldier shot dead a Kyrgyz citizen on December 6, 2006.

This February, the country's authorities denounced the agreement for coalition forces to use the base. But a new deal was signed, under which the US would pay three times more than it did before – or US\$170 million in rent for it to become a transit point for the US air force.

US military planes can be seen coming and leaving almost every hour at the Manas base. But after nearly a decade of operations in Afghanistan, not much progress has been made in terms of either fighting terror or drug trafficking in the country.

Opinion is split over whether the Manas base is likely to be removed in the near future.

"I don't think the Americans will leave anytime soon," said Tabyldy Orozaliyev, MP and Vice Chairman of the ruling Ak Jol People's party. "I think they will stay – it's difficult to say when this is going to end."

Moscow has stressed that as long as Manas only remains a transit point, it has no problem with its activities.

Russia also has military links with Kyrgyzstan both being members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization – a security bloc of seven CIS states.

Kant is one air base within the framework of the CSTO, and talks with Moscow on a second one are underway. Both are meant to host a joint team of commandos from the member states of the organization.

Agreements on the new base are planned to be signed in the nearest future, with Southern Kyrgyzstan chosen as the location for security reasons.

"Religious extremism is a problem for the whole region," said Aleksandr Knyazev. "We see its signs in the neighboring states of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and I think it's caused by the situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan and US policies there."

Kyrgyzstan is a small country in the heart of Central Asia, but its location makes it attractive for the big players in global politics.

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