

Russia Strengthens Its Strategic Position In Central Asia

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Russia has consolidated its strategic positions in Central Asia by extending the long-term lease on its military facilities in Kyrgyzstan and securing the shutdown of a United States base in the former Soviet republic.

In exchange, Russia agreed to write off nearly \$500 million in Kyrgyzstan's debt and pledged to uplift its near bankrupt economy.

Under an agreement signed during Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Kyrgyzstan on Thursday, the lease of the Russian airbase in Kant and a number of other facilities has been extended from 2017 for a further 15 years with an option for a further five-year extension.

"Russian military presence in the region, both in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, is a significant factor in stability," Mr. Putin said at a joint news conference with Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev.

A political declaration signed by the two sides reaffirmed Kyrgyzstan's intention to evict the U.S. airbase at the Manas international airport near the capital Bishkek. Russia "welcomed" the pledge and promised to help turn the Manas airport into a cargo transit hub between Asia and Europe.

Under another deal, Russia will help Kyrgyzstan build and operate hydroelectric power stations in Kyrgyzstan at an estimated cost of \$5 billion.

The deal will give Russia power to mediate in the acrimonious disputes between Central Asian states over scarce water resources.

Moscow has also promised to help Bishkek develop its mining industry and agriculture and to open Russian markets for Kyrgyzstan by granting it membership in the newly set up Customs Union of some former Soviet states.

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