

Kyrgyzstan: Concerns Over New CIS Base

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Some Kyrgyz politicians express doubts over an agreement to allow a significant increase in Russia's military presence in the country.

Russian anxieties over creeping US interests in Central Asia are thought to lie behind the choice of Kyrgyzstan to host a new military airbase for the coalition of CIS armed forces that signed up for the Collective Security Agreement, CSA.

In an apparent bid to reassure the Americans, Kyrgyz defence minister Esen Topoev, speaking during the press conference on June 28, insisted that the base has a wholly different mandate from the US-led coalition against terrorism.

However, analysts point out it is no coincidence that Kyrgyzstan is the only member of the CSA - which also comprises Russia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kazakstan, Armenia - to already host a US airbase on its territory.

The US facility, which has been operating from the country's main civilian airport in Manas since last December, is used exclusively to pursue the military campaign in Afghanistan, said Topoev.

The base hosting the CIS military alliance, known as the Collective Forces of Rapid Deployment, CFRD, will be designed specifically to repel any attacks on the Central Asian region by hostile forces. "We face similar problems (to the Americans), on different scales - international and regional," the minister added.

Nevertheless, some Kyrgyz politicians are questioning the wisdom of allowing external forces to control two sizeable military facilities in the country.

"The Kyrgyzstan government is making one foreign policy error after another," said parliamentary deputy Alisher Abdimomunov. "First we provided the US coalition forces with Manas airport without taking into account the interests of Russia and China. Now to redress the balance in the region, we are forced to pacify the Kremlin by providing the Russian military with an airport."

"Before handing over territory for other states to use as military bases, we should have taken into account the interests of countries such as our neighbour China, or Islamic states led by Iran," said parliamentary deputy Apsamat Masaliev. "What will happen if Islamic forces put our republic on the list of enemies, and bombs start falling here?"

However, Viktor Chernomorets, chairman of the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan and a former military man, pointed out that Bishkek required Russian help to repel cross-border attacks by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000, so should welcome the troops.

"Kyrgyzstan, like other countries in the region, is striving to ensure its own security... I think that the arrival of CFRD units in our republic, will ensure our safety even further," he said.

The new base will be at Kant, 14 km north of Bishkek. The US military considered the site, but despite

establishing that the equipment and infrastructure conformed to international standards, chose Manas instead.

The decision to place CFRD troops in Kyrgyzstan was reached on June 14, during a CIS council of defence ministers in the city of Cholpon-Alta, in northern Kyrgyzstan. At the same meeting, the leases on land housing existing Russian military installations - the Ozero complex on the shore of Lake Issyk-Kul and a signal office centre near Bishkek - was extended from seven to 15 years.

The meeting followed a Russian foreign policy offensive in Central Asia. Moscow politicians were clearly rattled when Bishkek agreed to host US troops on her soil. Alexander Kim, military correspondent for the Kyrgyz Russian-language newspaper Moya stolitsa - Novosti, thinks the Kremlin also has long regretted the ground it yielded by removing its border guards from Kyrgyzstan three years ago.

"We can now see that decision was made too hurriedly," he said. "The resulting vacuum was immediately filled by the Americans.... the fact that military officials and deputies of the Russian Federation have repeatedly called on the Americans to close down their base and leave Kyrgyzstan shows that Russia believes it has a strategic interest in Kyrgyzstan."

While Russian president Vladimir Putin refrained from criticising the arrival of the US military to the region, the speaker of the State Duma Gennady Seleznyov was openly critical of the development. Bishkek was promptly reminded of the several million US dollars of outstanding debt it owed to Moscow.

Criticism and vague threats then gave way to high-level diplomacy. Defence minister Sergei Ivanov and secretary of the security council Vladimir Rushailo visited Kyrgyzstan in early June, for meetings which commentators say were instrumental in laying the groundwork for the new airbase at Kant.

The Kant facility will have the official status of a CFRD installation, which means that it will be wholly financed and controlled by members of the DSK. The Kyrgyz army does not have sufficient military aircraft or other hardware to supply the base, so the various CFRD forces will decide what equipment should be deployed there, according to Topoev.

When IWPR visited Kant, the airbase was surrounded by barbed wire and heavily patrolled by security forces. We were told that visitors could not be admitted without special permission from the ministry of defence. "The foreign military and arms have not yet arrived," said Major Chynarbek Amanbaev, from a Kyrgyz army unit at the base.

Whatever the reservations of some Kyrgyz deputies, CFRD troops can expect a warm welcome on the ground in Kant. "We heard that the Americans wanted the airbase, but we prefer to have Russians and Kyrgyz flying over our heads," said local resident Fyodor Ivanov. "The Russians built it in the first place, so they have every right to return."

"In recent years, planes have barely flown from here. I hope with the arrival of Russian soldiers, our former prosperity will return," said Alexei, another resident.

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