

Kyrgyzstan Falls Between Stools

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A lack of direction in Kyrgyz foreign policy leaves the country bereft of allies

During a visit to Moscow in early May, Uzbek president Islam Karimov signed off on several agreements which sent shivers through Kyrgyz foreign policy circles.

In a move unprecedented in Uzbekistan's ten years of independence, Karimov recognised Russia's right to pursue its interests in Central Asia, signed a treaty on border cooperation and another giving the go-ahead for Russian arms shipments to Uzbekistan.

Analysts opine that the Kyrgyz ruling elite has every reason to be concerned about this apparent Uzbek-Russian rapprochement. If the trend continues, Kyrgyzstan could be left with little hope of Russian backing in settling a wide range of bilateral issues with Tashkent, most notably several long-running territorial disputes.

Over the past ten years, Bishkek has felt compelled to make a series of concessions to Uzbekistan on territorial matters. Witness the rhetoric surrounding the so-called enclave issue.

In return for two Uzbek enclaves on its territory - the borders of which were drawn prior to independence - Kyrgyzstan mooted the idea of acquiring about 6,440 hectares of Uzbek-owned industrial facilities inside the Osh and Batken regions of Kyrgyzstan. After Uzbek security forces planted landmines around the facilities the areas acquired the label 'Uzbek enclaves'.

Most recently, a furore erupted in Kyrgyzstan when it became known Prime Minister Karimbek Bakiev had signed a secret memorandum in February 2001 agreeing to hand over to Tashkent a land corridor linking the enclaves to the Rishtan region of Uzbekistan. The government was forced to back-pedal on the commitments and Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations are now at a standstill.

Analysts suspect the rapprochement between Moscow and Tashkent reflects a resetting of Russian priorities in Central Asia. The strategic accords between Russia and Uzbekistan were signed just a few weeks before Putin was due to visit Kyrgyzstan. That trip now appears to be on indefinite hold.

"Akaev is daydreaming about welcoming the new Russian president to Kyrgyzstan," said Alexander Alyanchikov, head of the Department of World Cultures and Religions at the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University, "Putin's name is being used for promotional purposes. The idea is to have Putin mentioned in conjunction with Akaev as often as possible, boosting the Kyrgyz president's profile among the Russian and Kyrgyz communities."

According to the Russian press, Putin will not visit Bishkek until a Kyrgyz government delegation led by Bakiev visits Moscow - a trip that's already been rescheduled several times.

"With our limited means, any claims to any sort of clout in our diplomatic relations with Russia look ludicrous," said Alisher Abdimomunov, chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Kyrgyz Legislative Assembly. "Uzbekistan possesses tremendous economic resources that are of importance to Russia economically and politically. They have cotton and metal ore, as well as a good geopolitical location. Russia is betting heavily on Uzbekistan, and is right in doing so."

Abdimomunov points out that Kyrgyzstan's only "lever" in international affairs is its valuable water resources. "We could play a role in regional politics using our water as a way to solve bilateral disputes," he said. "But President Akaev doesn't have enough political willpower."

With Uzbekistan and Russia now moving closer together, Kyrgyzstan finds itself left without a powerful ally to fall back on in its disputes with Tashkent and no home grown solution to offer either.

Some analysts believe the problems between the two countries stems from a personal antipathy between Akaev and Karimov.

At least that's what Alyanchikov claims. The hostility between the two heads of state is why "Kyrgyzstan lacks Uzbek natural gas, while Uzbekistan experiences water shortages," he said.

Sabirov argues it's not so simple. He cites the 1996 Accord of Eternal Friendship between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as the root of all bilateral problems.

"Every head of state should be guided by international law, not his own prejudices, so Kyrgyzstan must emphasize equality," said Sabirov. "Whether big or small, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are sovereign nations. If Uzbekistan introduces visas for Kyrgyz citizens, we must reciprocate. If they restrict access for our motor traffic, we must respond with a matching move, even if it is not good for our economy."

It's no secret that Akaev has been courting neighbouring Kazakstan in a desperate search for an alternative "big brother". But the marriage of Akaev's son to the daughter of Kazak President Nursultan Nazarbaev has left Kyrgyzstan looking like an appendage of Kazakstan in the eyes of the international community. The "blood ties" strategy as a tool of international politics has prompted much criticism and pessimism.

"Can you name another head of state who has a residence outside his country?" asked Alyanchikov. "Nursultan Nazarbaev does. He's having a house built for him at Lake Issyk-Kul [in Kyrgyzstan]."

Analysts point out that military alliances only work between equal partners. Of the neighbouring countries Tajikistan would have been Kyrgyzstan's best bet.

Leonid Bondarets, a military expert at the Institute for Strategic Studies, believes that Kyrgyzstan would benefit from closer ties with Tajikistan as it is currently in a similar position and has the same issues with Uzbekistan. "The voices of two nations are more audible than one," he said. "In addition, we could both benefit from shared use of transportation routes and telecommunications facilities."

Other experts disagree and argue that forming alliances is an unrealistic option for Kyrgyzstan at present.

"You have to be able to bring something into an alliance," argued Abdimomunov, "You have, at the very least, to be a politically and economically stable nation headed by a leader with a vision and a clear understanding of what the nation wants from an alliance. Personally, I'm all for Kyrgyzstan acceding to the Union of Russia and Belarus, but will they have us?"

"In fact, President Akaev has not always viewed Russia as a strategic model to follow," reflected Nikolay

Bailo, chairman of the CIS committee in the Kyrgyz parliament. "He had tried every other economic and political option first: the 'Asian Dragons', Japan, Switzerland, China and the United States. When Akaev realised that his philosophy didn't fit in very well with reality, he saw that the only door still open to him was Russia's."

Bailo believes Kyrgyzstan is drifting back into Russia's embrace due to Akaev's "blundering" foreign policy and resultant "lost opportunities".

Why has Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy failed on both the regional and the global level? Most experts attribute it to inconsistency.

Alyanchikov believes the president has always wanted the "best of both worlds". "When the time came to make a choice it was already too late," he said. "We're empty-handed like we've always been."

A high-ranking Kyrgyz foreign ministry official who wished to remain anonymous noted that Kyrgyzstan has fallen victim to its inconsistent foreign policy. "Perennially sitting on the fence, Kyrgyzstan has undermined its relations with both the West and Russia," he concluded.

He said the ongoing impasse with Uzbekistan is a good indication of how ineffectual Kyrgyzstan's regional foreign policy really is. Unless it's revised, Bishkek will continue to struggle on the international stage.

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