

Kyrgyzstan Sticks Close to Russia

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Bishkek cements its traditional alliance with Moscow with a new air base in Kant.

The opening of a Russian airbase in Kant underlines the importance of relations with Moscow despite the United States' presence in Central Asia over the past two years.

Russian president Vladimir Putin and his Kyrgyz counterpart Askar Akaev attended the October 23 ceremony at the base, situated around 20 kilometres from the capital Bishkek.

The official opening - which was delayed twice for unknown reasons - featured flag-waving schoolchildren and a display by the Russian air force.

President Putin told the crowds, "The Russian base in Kant is designed to ensure the security of Kyrgyzstan and its people, and to ensure the interests of the [former Soviet] Collective Security Treaty member countries, including Russia."

However, most local analysts pinpoint the rivalry between Moscow and Washington - highlighted by the establishment of a Kyrgyz airbase for the US-led coalition operating in Afghanistan - as the real reason why Moscow wanted to establish an air base on Kyrgyz soil.

Political scientist Nur Omarov told IWPR, "In recent years, Russia has lost much of its influence in Central Asia, so its return even in this form shows that it wants to consolidate its interests in the region. This became particularly necessary after the coalition forces stationed themselves at another Kyrgyz airport, Manas."

But Russian journalist Arkady Dubnov points out that Moscow's new military doctrine contains a strongly-worded statement of support for Washington's so-called war on terror.

Analysts believe that Russia is now trying to play by the same rules as the US - but only in the former Soviet Union, not on a global scale.

"For Russia, it has recently become very important to stress time and again that its views do not contradict those of the US," Dubnov told IWPR, adding that both Moscow and Bishkek have continually stated that there is no rivalry with Washington.

Bishkek's police chief Keneshbek Dushebaev sees the two bases as sharing the same security agenda. "You cannot contrast the airbases in Kant and Manas," he said. "They are two sides of the same coin, two powerful forces which will fight international terrorism."



Kyrgyz and Russian presidents at the opening ceremony



Russian army replays old tunes
Photos: Vyacheslav Oseledko

The head of the Russian air force, Colonel General Vladimir Mikhailov, agreed, "The American military are our aviation colleagues. We will not hinder each other in any way, as we both have our own tasks and areas of interest."

In spite of this public cordiality, there is a marked difference between the Russian and US-backed bases. The equipment and facilities at Kant are markedly inferior to those in Manas, which is rumoured to have been nearly 100 times more expensive.

Dubnov believes that the Kant airbase is a symbolic political gesture rather than a statement of Russian military intent in the region. "It has far greater significance for Russian-Kyrgyz relations, as Bishkek is one of Moscow's most loyal allies," he said.

"Good Russian-Kyrgyz relations have a centuries-old tradition, and the airbase in Kant is a continuation of this," agreed Bolot Januzakov, who is defence and security advisor to the Kyrgyz president.

While most agree that the base will benefit the former Soviet republic as a whole, it is the residents of the Kant area who are set for the biggest boost.

"With the appearance of the Russian military, residents have become more confident and secure, and make plans for their future," said Kant mayor Alexei Bondar. "Businessmen want to open cafes, shops and mini-markets here and with these new jobs, labour migration to Russia and Kazakstan should gradually decrease."

Not everyone is so delighted. One opposition figure, who wished to remain anonymous, warned that "the Russian presence will strengthen the regime of the current president of Kyrgyzstan, and may also extend his term".

Leila Saralaeva is an independent journalist in Bishkek. Ruslan Usatov is a pseudonym used by a Bishkek journalist.

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