

Kyrgyzstan's Undiplomatic Policy Shift

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Expulsion of US diplomats seen as a shift towards Moscow and away from democracy.

The expulsion of two American diplomats has created bewilderment in Kyrgyzstan, a country that has maintained good relations with both the United States and Russia for many years. But analysts suggest the move reflects a general trend towards aligning the country with its former Soviet allies, and away from the West.

Kyrgyzstan's foreign ministry issued a statement on July 12 saying the decision to expel the US diplomats was made on the basis of reliable evidence from the intelligence agency which indicated that the two had interfered in the country's domestic affairs in a manner incompatible with their status and with international law.

The previous day, when news of the expulsions was already in the air, the US embassy in Bishkek issued a formal denial, saying it was "disturbed" by the reports.

"Allegations that these official representatives have engaged in inappropriate activities are simply not true," said the statement.

The embassy noted that the two diplomats were said to have had "inappropriate contact" with leaders of Kyrgyz non-government organisations, NGOs, but said the mission would not now refrain from engaging with non-government as well as government actors.

"This can be seen as an attempt to intimidate embassies and silence the voice of civil society. The United States will continue to maintain contact with all sectors of Kyrgyz society, including government officials, opposition, and leaders of non-governmental and community organisations," said the statement.

An anonymous source in the National Security Service confirmed to IWPR that the agency believed it had "strong evidence" against the US officials.

"If this were not the case, we would not have caused this uproar," said the source. "The US embassy has reacted quite sensitively to these facts, as it's grown used to treating us as an under-developed country and ignoring our domestic interests."

The row has come as a surprise to many, since Kyrgyzstan has steered a careful diplomatic course between the US and Russia over the 15 years it has been independent. The policy was set by President Askar Akaev, who was in power throughout those years until he was ousted in the popular revolution of March 2005.

It seemed initially that Akaev's successor, Kurmanbek Bakiev, would not shift significantly from that course, as he was brought to power in a wave of pro-democracy protests similar to those seen earlier in Ukraine and Georgia, where the mood was positive towards the West and much less so towards Moscow.

But Bakiev soon indicated that he was seeking Russian backing, perhaps to demonstrate that his revolutionary administration was no threat to the Central Asian region, where Moscow's influence remains strong.

Last summer, Bakiev pressed the US to set a date for leaving the military airbase that Akaev had sanctioned to help the international "war on terror" coalition conduct operations in Afghanistan. The government later backtracked and simply demanded a lot more money in rent and other payments.

When Akaev was president, US and other international support kept the NGO sector in Kyrgyzstan more vibrant and active than anywhere else in Central Asia, and civil society groups were a major force in the protest movement that brought the current government to power.

Unsurprisingly, Kyrgyz NGOs reacted with outrage and concern at the idea that having contact with the US embassy was in some way suspicious.

"This is an ill-considered act by the authorities. It does serious damage to Kyrgyzstan's international relationships. Our country will lose out badly from this scandal," Tolekan Ismailova, head of the Civil Society Against Corruption group, told IWPR.

Asiya Sasykbaeva, who heads the Interbilim organisation, said, "All NGOs contact the embassies of various countries, and no one can forbid us from doing this, as we live in a free country. One gets the impression that the authorities are trying to intimidate civil society representatives to make us less critical of the leadership."

Edil Baisalov, the president of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, added, "This smacks of the Cold War and is clear proof that the current authorities are trying to build an authoritarian regime in our country."

Sasykbaeva's and Baisalov's group were among a number of NGOs that put out a joint statement on July 14 demanding that the authorities make public the accusations made against the two American diplomats, since no facts or evidence had been offered so far. They said the government was engaged in a "campaign to discredit the non-government sector, a barefaced attempt to portray us as fifth columnists".

The two main officials concerned with human rights sided with the NGOs.

Tursunbek Akunov, who chairs the Kyrgyz president's commission for human rights, told IWPR, "This is a short-sighted act by the Kyrgyz foreign ministry which threatens to disgrace our country among the international community. For 15 years, the US government has provided substantial material and moral support to the development of democracy in Kyrgyzstan. American diplomats have never done anything bad to Kyrgyzstan, and they supported the revolution of March 24 last year."

Ombudsman Tursunbai Bakir Uulu said, "Contacts with NGO leaders are not sufficient reason to expel diplomats from the country. If there is evidence that an NGO was preparing a coup or had openly received money for political actions, and this is proven, then it would be understandable."

Commentators interviewed by IWPR suggested that the Bakiev administration was using the expulsions

both to enhance its relationship with Moscow and to curb western support for NGOs which are now seen as troublesome. The overall outcome, they said, was an ill-advised lurch away from the US.

“This act was carried out with the knowledge of the Kyrgyzstan president, who finds it difficult to navigate between the US, China and Russia, and will probably now choose a close union with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation members,” said opposition deputy Melis Eshimkanov.

“The reason given for expelling the diplomats - inappropriate contacts with NGO leaders - shows that this regime is going to have new rules which are far removed from democracy.”

Political analyst Nur Omarov said the move was a “grave foreign policy mistake”.

“The Kyrgyzstan leadership should have used other means - a warning or note - but not immediate expulsion of diplomats. This is the first time this has happened in Kyrgyz diplomacy,” he said.

“It is a sure signal that the leadership is not ready to continue developing the democratic reforms to which they themselves committed after March 2005. This is an unfortunate decision which will undermine the regime’s standing at home and abroad.”

The shift in foreign policy is likely to become more apparent over coming months, but in the very short term, one irritant in Kyrgyz-US relations has been smoothed out. The two governments issued a statement on July 14 saying they had finally reached agreement on the continued use of the airbase, with the US planning to provide Kyrgyzstan with 150 million US dollars in total assistance and compensation over the next year.

Although the talks had been protracted, the diplomatic incident does not seem to have reflected a breakdown in negotiations.

If the initial US statement on the expulsions said “it is difficult to see how the expulsion of US diplomats without grounds would serve the long-term interest of Kyrgyzstan”, the joint document on the airbase deal concluded by underlining the strength of Kyrgyz-US relations. “The decision... should be viewed in the context of the larger, robust bilateral relationship,” it said.

There was no talk in the statement of when the US-led coalition might leave the base.

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