

Superpowers Compete in Kyrgyzstan

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Russia, China and the US are building relationships with Kyrgyzstan - but can it survive their threefold embrace?

In recent months Kyrgyzstan has seen a stream of high-level diplomatic visits from Russian officials. The latest one - the arrival of the director of the foreign intelligence service, Sergei Lebedov, in Bishkek on April 15 - was particularly intriguing. The subject of his meetings with the Kyrgyz leadership was kept secret, but it's likely that he stressed the benefits of close security cooperation with Russia rather than the United States or China.

Over the past year, the US military presence in Kyrgyzstan has radically altered the international profile of this Central Asian republic, once the undisputed domain of Moscow. Russia is now trying to regain its former influence in Kyrgyzstan. Add to this China's increasing interest in securing its own interests there, and Bishkek finds itself in the unusual position of having three major powers trying to gain influence at the same time.

The Americans and their coalition partners have been flying fighter jets out of Manas airport, close Bishkek, since the beginning of 2002, as part of their operations in Afghanistan. As well as injecting substantial sums into the economy through the running costs of the air base, Washington has been giving direct assistance to the impoverished military.

IWPR was told by Bolot Januzakov, deputy head of the defence office in the president's administration, that America has handed over 3 million US dollars in high technology such as communications systems and night vision equipment.

On April 8, the Kyrgyz foreign minister, Askar Aitmatov, went out of his way to thank Washington for helping bolster his country's national security. And at a press conference the same day, security council secretary Misir Ashirkulov told IWPR that "the communication equipment given by the Americans is extremely useful for the army in guarding the country's borders".

Although this military cooperation is new, the US has a track-record of supporting development in Kyrgyzstan. Since the early 1990s, it has been a major donor to non-government organisations and independent media, and education.

The American presence has not gone unnoticed by Russia. Once the unquestioned boss in the region, Moscow was forced to accept - grudgingly - the stationing of US forces for the duration of the Afghan campaign. But it will get more concerned if it looks like the Americans are planning to stay on indefinitely.

As a way of regaining its influence, Russia is in the process of setting up its own airbase in the small town of Kant, about 20 kilometres from the capital. The first planes arrived there in December although a formal agreement has not yet been signed.

The base will officially be part of a rapid deployment force for Russia and its partners in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Some of the jets stationed there will be ground-attack planes, and the signs are that they are intended for use against possible insurgencies by Islamic guerrillas. At the same time, the Russians are providing training for Kyrgyz frontier troops.

China, too, is worried by the American presence in Kyrgyzstan, with which it shares a 1,100 km border. It is doing what it can to strengthen its own position. While there are no plans for a Chinese military presence, Beijing is likely to exert a significant role through the anti-terrorism centre, which the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation - a regional grouping in which it is a leading player, with Russia and four Central Asian states - intends to open in Bishkek.

China will play an even more direct role through an aid package it signed for the Kyrgyz military on April 1. The Chinese embassy and Bishkek defence ministry officials declined to comment on the nature of the aid that would be provided. During the signing ceremony, the Chinese ambassador, Hong Jiuyin, said his country had given 10 million dollars to the Kyrgyz defence and law-enforcement since 1991.

Reactions to all this vary from welcoming to suspicious. Some people here - ordinary people as well as politicians - are in favour of developing security relationships with all three superpowers. Others fear that rivalries between Russia, the US and China could end up being played out in Kyrgyzstan.

Karybek Baybosunov, director of the Centre for Globalisation Research, sees little danger in the country becoming a focus for external interests. "One needs to view the situation in light of the fact that the world is rapidly changing and the internationalisation of superpower interests is taking place everywhere," he told IWPR. "For a developing country, this kind of approach is the best."

The chairman of parliament's international affairs committees, Alisher Abdimomunov, is less optimistic. He told IWPR that the three countries are pursuing radically different goals in the region, and in future their interests may clash in Kyrgyzstan. "Because of backstage deals made by these nuclear giants, our territory may turn into an epicentre of tension in the region," he said.

Alexander Kim, a commentator on political and military affairs for the newspaper Moya Stolitsa-Novosti, thinks the three powers cannot go on manoeuvring around each other indefinitely because of what he says is the long-standing state of "covert confrontation" between them.

"We should now choose a partner, as neighbouring Uzbekistan has done," he said, referring to the Uzbek government's pro-American policy.

But there are drawbacks to picking any one of the three superpowers as sole partner. Choosing the Americans would be unacceptable to Russia or China, and in any case no one knows how long US interest will last.

Beijing is too new a player to be a comfortable choice, and the presence in Kyrgyzstan of thousands of ethnic Uighurs from western China creates a potential flashpoint in the relationship.

Some of the Uighurs here are political exiles whom the Chinese government accuses of fomenting unrest in Xinjiang province. Their activities give China a powerful lever with which to pressure the Kyrgyz government.

Other Uighurs are itinerant traders who bring cheap goods from China to trade in Kyrgyz markets. They are seen by some here as a fifth column spearheading a broader Chinese economic advance. Rightly or wrongly, this suspicion of Beijing's intentions are not uncommon among people in Kyrgyzstan.

Others are simply concerned that the Uighur issue might be played up by any of the superpowers as part of a "great game". "The strong Uighur diaspora in Kyrgyzstan... may be used by someone to destabilise the situation in the region," Alisher Abdimomunov told IWPR.

Russia is the strongest contender to be a sole partner. It has the benefits of proximity, cultural ties and above all a shared Soviet past. The Kyrgyz military use Kalashnikovs and other Russian equipment. And ties with Russia offer a measure of protection against pressure exerted by Kyrgyzstan's two neighbours, Uzbekistan and Kazakstan.

Moscow still has considerable economic clout, and can exercise great influence through TV and radio. Most people in Kyrgyzstan watch Russian-made TV programmes and listen to Russian radio. Within the last month, two Moscow newspapers - Parlamentskaya Gazeta and Rossiyskaya Gazeta - have started up locally-printed editions specially for Kyrgyzstan.

While Kyrgyzstan shows no sign of making a definitive choice between its suitors, the Russians appear intent on making sure they lose no further ground to their rivals.

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