

A NEW RUSSIAN BASE IN SOUTHERN KYRGYZSTAN: CONTAINING UZBEKISTAN?¹

On July 7, Igor Sechin, Russia's Deputy Prime Minister supervising law enforcement agencies and a close ally of Prime Minister Putin along with Anatoly Serdyukov, Defense Minister, met Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, to discuss, as officials of both countries confirmed, the possibility of establishing a new Russian military base which will formally serve as the base for Collective Operational Response Forces [CORF] under the Collective Security Treaty Organization auspice (in Russian: Коллективные силы оперативного реагирования ОДКБ).

The location for a new contingent of Russia's increasing military presence, if the plan is materialized, is as an old Soviet military base in the outskirts of the Kyrgyz southern capital, Osh, situated in the heart of the volatile Ferghana Valley and bordering China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.



In June, the leaders of CSTO (member-states include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) met in Moscow at their regular summit and signed an agreement on the creation of the Collective Operational Response Forces under CSTO. The idea to create a new joint forces agreement, under Russian command, to combat terrorism and other security challenges in the region was earlier discussed at the February CSTO extraordinary summit. The June summit transformed the decision into a functioning document that Russia conveniently used to minimize American political and military presence in Central Asia.

Containing disobedient leaders of former Russian colonies is another purpose of the CSTO. Uzbekistan, always suspicious of Russian neo-imperialistic intentions, did not sign the agreement. Uzbekistan viewed the Russian controlled forces as capable of launching conventional wars and CSTO was a means towards legitimizing the Kremlin's

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² http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/45081000/gif/_45081003_kyrgyz_osh_0908.gif

ambitions to intervene in the internal affairs of sovereign states, particularly if Russia's interests in the "near abroad" are jeopardized.³

The Russian government is concerned with Tashkent's refusal to follow Moscow's political orbit. Frequent visits of dignitaries from Washington are viewed in Moscow as Tashkent re-rapprochement towards close relations with the United States. The Russian authorities are worried that improving relations between Tashkent and Washington may lead to re-opening of K-2 (Khanabad) Base in Qarshi, Qashqadarya province.

The tensions between Russia and the West amid Georgian-Russian conflict pushed Moscow to reassert its influence in, as Russians regard the Central Asian region, its "backyard." The new political, economic, security and military cooperation discussions have been under way between Russia and the five states in her former southern flank.

Russia's efforts to put pressure on Uzbekistan come at an ideal time for Moscow due to tense relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The relations between the two have a significant impact on Kyrgyzstan's economic development and security. Several important issues impede healthy relations between the neighbors: water distribution, hydro-electric stations, border demarcation, and water supply.⁴

Another suitable circumstance for advancing Russia's security interests is Kyrgyzstan's incapability of defending the territory from external threats. Kyrgyzstan heavily relies on security and military aid from Russia, China and the United States. Incursions of Central Asian Islamist groups linked with Taliban and Al-Qaida into Kyrgyzstan and other states of the region might intensify due to military operations against those organizations in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Authorities of Kyrgyzstan claimed on June 23, 2009 that the units of Kyrgyz National Security Committee clashed with and killed 5 well trained and equipped fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in a private house full of explosives and ammunition in Tashbulak settlement of Suzak District of Jalal-Abad province neighboring with Uzbekistan – the prime target of IMU and IJU.⁵ The Kyrgyz officials identified the militants but refused to announce the names but admitted they are citizens of Uzbekistan and belong to IMU.⁶ Although the Kyrgyz officials believe the Islamist group linked with Taliban was IMU it is possible that the five-member group identified in Ferghana Valley was a cell of Islamic Jihad Union fighters, which launched an attack on law-enforcement in Andijan province of Uzbekistan on May 26.

³ For detailed explanation of Uzbekistan's refusal to sign the agreement read Press Releases of Uzbek Foreign Ministry on the results of President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov's participation at the OCSE summit in Moscow available in Russian at:

http://mfa.uz/rus/pressa_i_media_servis/press_relizi/180609r_7.mgr

⁴ For more details on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek tensions see Kyrgyzstan Executive summary available at http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/Central_Asia_index.html

⁵ "Kyrgyzstan says killed five Islamist militants," Reuters news Agency, June 24, 2009, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSLO876210>

⁶ "Kyrgyzstan Says Slain Militants Were Uzbek Nationals," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 25, 2009, available at:

http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstan_Says_Slain_Militants_Were_Uzbek_Nationals_/1762715.html

Uzbekistan strongly opposes the idea of establishing the Russian/CSTO bases around its borders. Tashkent sees a Russian base as a direct threat to Uzbekistan if Karimov continues his distancing from Moscow.

U.S. Under Secretary of State William Burns who was visiting Central Asian states in mid-July said Washington wants to repair the relations between United State and Uzbekistan⁷ but also claimed that Washington does not oppose Russia's intention to open a new base in Kyrgyzstan and Bishkek has a sovereign right to decide if the country should accept a new military contingent controlled by Moscow.

Kazakh Foreign Ministry stated that "Kazakhstan is not opposed to the possible opening of a new Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan and welcomes measures to strengthen security in the region."⁸

Washington's positive reaction to a potential Russia-Kyrgyz deal put Islam Karimov in difficult situation: The Georgia-Russia war proved United States will not help Uzbekistan and Tashkent's "stay away from Russia" policy is under threat. Whether United States will succeed in restoring close relations with Uzbekistan will depend on how Washington can secure Uzbekistan's position in the region. If the Russian base is established in Osh Karimov will either give-in to Russian President Medvedev or enter confrontation with Moscow. A generous offer to Americans to re-open the U.S. K-2 base in Qarshi can be Tashkent's retaliation. The United States also will be caught in a difficult situation when they seek to build close ties with Uzbekistan and at the same time not spoil relations with Russia.

China carefully watches Russian political and security activities in the region where Beijing has many of its interests in the balance. A Russian controlled base in close proximity to the Chinese border will further increase mutual mistrust between China and Russia.

Kyrgyzstan has recently gained experience in negotiating profits from the Manas base and will likely hold a series of negotiations with Russia over her proposal, but obvious pros and cons in establishing a base in the south for Kyrgyzstan are the following:

The benefits:

- security against the IMU and IJU incursions;
- defense against Uzbekistan's aggressive border security operations;

⁷ Press Conference by Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William J. Burns, July 13,2009, available at: <http://uzbekistan.usembassy.gov/petr071309.html>

⁸ "Kazakhstan not against 2nd Russian base opening in Kyrgyzstan," July 13, 2009, available at: <http://en.rian.ru/world/20090713/155515709.html>

- Russia's protection of Kyrgyz territory from Uzbekistan's possible aggression if Bishkek pursues its hydro-electric stations projects;
- monetary and technical assistance from Russia;
- international leverage;

The negative effects:

- souring of Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations;
- further loss of political sovereignty;
- the base can become a target for attacks by IMU, IJU and their supporters in the region

Further discussions between Russia and Kyrgyzstan will likely resume after the presidential election scheduled for July 23. Russian meetings with President Bakiev in Bishkek at this particular time were aimed at seeking Bakiev's support of Russian proposal in return for Russia's support of Bakiev. If the election will turn into a bloody confrontation between the security forces and opposition supporters, as many observers predict, the election will fraudulently guarantee the current President's victory.

Russia's plan to enlarge her military presence is aimed at increasing the political influence over the region in order to ensure America's concessions on issues of bilateral relations. United States realizes that some countries cannot make decisions on geo-strategic issues and they must obtain Moscow's approval. Russia will continue flexing her muscles in the region, aiming towards the United States. Despite Moscow's formal support of Washington's efforts in Afghanistan the Kremlin will always be wary of American presence in the region.