

Turmoil in Kyrgyzstan

Пише: Nikolas K. Gvosdev
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The situation in Kyrgyzstan is in considerable flux at this present moment. Has President Kurmanbek Bakiyev fled the capital, Bishkek, to rally support for his regime from his southern base of support in Osh? Is he going to try and retake control or will he follow his predecessor Askar Akayev and go into exile? Can the opposition leaders—Omurbek Tekebaev, the former parliament speaker and head of the Ata-Meken party, and former Prime Minister Almazbek Atambaev, the head of the Social Democrats, who were arrested but released after the protestors took control of Bishkek—be able to form an interim regime?

This matters a great deal to the United States because Kyrgyzstan is home to the “Transit Center at Manas”—the only air transport facility which Washington now has access to in Central Asia, which has vital strategic importance for the ongoing U.S. and NATO mission in Afghanistan, given the perilous nature of supply lines running through Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. Would a new regime keep the base open, if the U.S. is viewed as a supporter of the Bakiyev regime? If Washington immediately recognizes the new interim administration, and Bakiyev returns to power, would he once again terminate the U.S. lease on Manas, as he did last year?

One hopes, of course, that U.S. strategic planners have been working on alternates ever since it became clear that Kyrgyzstan was no longer a reliable basing partner. Sure, America kept the base open, by increasing its rental payments, but we should be prepared to activate alternatives immediately.

The political turmoil in Kyrgyzstan follows a well-established post-Soviet pattern in Eurasia. Poor economic performance and lack of development combines with a regime that favors particular clans and geographic regions of the country and is marked by pronounced authoritarian characteristics to produce a popular uprising that overthrows the leadership. This is what happened in Kyrgyzstan during its famed Tulip Revolution of March 2005. An interim government promised change, a coalition took over, and over time, Bakiyev edged out his former associates and shifted the balance of political power to favor his preferred clans and

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geographic regions of the country.

Ironically, the stability of Bakiyev's regime was undermined by Russia, not because of any deliberate policies pursued by the Kremlin, but rather, the reality of the global economic crisis. Kyrgyzstan is heavily dependent on remittances sent back by guest workers in Russia, and for years Bakiyev's government could be "tolerated" because there was always the ability to live and work in Russia. Bakiyev in turn was able to maintain sufficient control of the system to win elections and keep his political allies in power. The contraction of the Russian economy has meant a major decrease in revenues for Kyrgyzstan and has also meant that those disaffected by Bakiyev's government, who previously could relocate to find new opportunities in Russia, have returned to the country. The loss of the safety valve of the Russian economy ratcheted up the tensions inside Kyrgyzstan, until the boiling point was reached.

It is too early to tell whether this pattern will be broken. Would Bakiyev agree to genuine power-sharing in order to return to power? Would a post-Bakiyev government choose to break with the clan/geographic model of governance to produce a more inclusive regime?

And what should Washington be doing? First and foremost, it should insist that the base agreement is a legally-binding contract on any government in Kyrgyzstan—and that Washington is not going to back one horse or another in the murky world of Kyrgyz politics to try and curry favor to keep the base open. If the interim government proclaimed by the opposition can demonstrate that it is both the de facto government in Bishkek, and able to become the de jure government as well; fine. If Bakiyev and his associates can broker a power-sharing arrangement, fine. If either side threatens Washington with closure of Manas, then initiate the backup plans for moving the transit center elsewhere, and let the new Kyrgyz administration take the financial hit of losing U.S. rental payments and aid. Significantly, despite charges that the United States was "in the pocket" of Askar Akayev, the interim government in 2005 kept the U.S. base open.

Russia, Kazakhstan, China and the United States all have a vested interest in restoring stability in Kyrgyzstan quickly, to prevent continued unrest from destabilizing the region. This is an opportunity for cooperation, rather than trying to find particular Kyrgyz factions to support and promote. Certainly, this should be an area for immediate consultations in the working group co-chaired by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, especially since both Moscow and Washington maintain military facilities inside Kyrgyzstan.

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Finally, as Erica Marat of the Caucasus-Central Asia Institute at Johns Hopkins University has noted, what is happening in Kyrgyzstan is not a preferred model for political change in the region. To have two governments deposed by street protests within a space of a few years is not a pattern for regime transition that should be encouraged elsewhere. A corrupt government may have been brought down, but it does not help the overall, long-term goal of creating stable regimes that are capable of peaceful succession of power. The first Tulip revolution wilted a long time ago; let's hope that its second reiteration does not lead to a similar conclusion.

Update:

The Central Executive Committee of the Kyrgyz opposition has formed an interim government that will last until new elections are held "as soon as possible." Former-Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva is the chair; Tekebaev is a vice-premier. Another leading opposition figure, Temir Sariyev, head of the Ak Shumar party, joins Tekebaev as a vice-premier, and Ismail Iaskov, the former defense minister who was convicted of corruption charges and sentenced to an eight-year prison term in January 2010, has returned to his old position.

These political figures were all originally allies of Bakiyev in the 2005 Tulip Revolution who over time broke with the president over his policies.

Otunbayeva, when asked about the U.S. base at Manas, said "the status quo remains in place" and that there would be no rush to decide on renewing the lease, which expires this summer. On the one hand, some in the opposition had worried that the U.S. presence in Kyrgyzstan could be used to support possible military action against Iran; on the other hand, rental payments for use of the facility remain an important source of income for Kyrgyzstan's government.

Nikolas K. Gvosdev, a senior editor at *The National Interest*, is a professor of national-security studies at the U.S. Naval War College. The views expressed are entirely his own.