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At the Geopolitical Crossroads of China and Russia: Kyrgyzstan And The Battle For Central Asia

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Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was deposed five years after and in the same manner as he came to power, in a bloody uprising.

Elected president two months after the so-called Tulip Revolution of 2005 he helped engineer, he was since then head of state of the main transit nation for the U.S. and NATO war in Afghanistan.

The Pentagon secured the Manas Air Base (as of last year known as the Transit Center at Manas) in Kyrgyzstan shortly after its invasion of Afghanistan in October of 2001 and in the interim, according to a U.S. armed forces publication last June, "More than 170,000 coalition personnel passed through the base on their way in or out of Afghanistan, and Manas was the transit point for 5,000 tons of cargo, including spare parts and equipment, uniforms and various items to support personnel and mission needs.

"Currently, around 1,000 U.S. troops, along with a few hundred from Spain and France, are assigned to the base." [1]



The White House's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke paid his first visit in his current position to Kyrgyzstan - and the three other former Soviet Central Asian republics which border it, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan - in February and said "35,000 US troops were transiting each month on their way in and out of Afghanistan." [2] At the rate he mentioned, 420,000 troops annually.

The U.S. and NATO also established military bases in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan for the war in South Asia, but on a smaller scale. (U.S. military forces were ordered out of the second country following what the government claimed was a Tulip Revolution-type armed uprising in its province of Andijan less than two months after the Kyrgyz precedent. Germany maintains a base near the Uzbek city of Termez to transit troops and military equipment to Afghanistan's Kunduz province where the bulk of its 4,300 forces is concentrated.)

In February of 2009 the Kyrgyz government announced that it was also evicting U.S. and NATO forces from its country, but relented in June when Washington offered it \$60 million to reverse its decision.

Kyrgyzstan borders China.

It not only borders China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but is only separated from Russia by a single nation, Kazakhstan. To gain an appreciation of Russian and Chinese concerns over hundreds of thousands of U.S. and NATO troops passing through Kyrgyzstan, imagine a comparable amount of Chinese and Russian soldiers regularly passing through Mexico and Guatemala, respectively. For almost nine years and at an accelerating rate.

It is not only a military "hard power" but also a "soft power" threat that the Western role in Kyrgyzstan poses to Russia and China.

The nation is a member of the post-Soviet Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) along with Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan - seen by many as the only counterpart to NATO on former Soviet space - and of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with China, Russia and the three above-mentioned Central Asian nations.

According to U.S. officials, during and after the Tulip Revolution of 2005 not a single U.S. or NATO flight into the Manas Air Base was cancelled or even delayed. But a six-nation CSTO exercise scheduled for days afterward was cancelled.

The uprising and the deposing of standing president Askar Akayev in March of 2005 was the third self-styled "color revolution" in the former Soviet Union in sixteen months, following the Rose Revolution in Georgia in late 2003 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in late 2004 and early 2005.

As the Kyrgyz version was underway Western news media were asking the question "Who's next?" Candidates included other former Soviet states like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Uzbekistan. And Russia. Along with Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan those nations accounted for ten of the twelve members of the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

As Agence France-Presse detailed in early April of 2005: "The CIS was founded in December 1991 on the very day the Soviet Union disappeared....But over the past year and a half, three faithful Kremlin allies were toppled in...revolutions: Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia, Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine, and, last week, Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan....Even though Kyrgyzstan's new interim leaders have vowed to continue their deposed predecessor's Moscow-friendly policies, the lightning toppling of the government there has spawned speculation that the CIS would soon collapse." [3]

The leader of the "color revolution" prototype, Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili, gloated over the Kyrgyz "regime change," attributing the "brave" actions of the opposition in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan "to the Georgia factor," and added, "We are not waiting for the development of events, but are doing our best to destroy the empire in the CIS." [4]

Shortly after the uprising former Indian diplomat and political analyst M.K. Bhadrakumar wrote of the then seemingly inexorable momentum of "color" revolts in the former Soviet Union:

"[A]ll the three countries [Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan] are strategically placed in the post-Soviet space. They comprise Russia's 'near abroad.'

"Washington has been expanding its influence in the arc of former Soviet republics — in the Baltics...the Caucasus, and Central Asia — in recent years with a tenacity that worries Moscow.

"Ever since 2003 when Mr. Akayev decided on allowing Russia to establish a full-fledged military base in Kant he knew he was on the American 'watch list.' The political temperature within Kyrgyzstan began to rise.

"The Americans made it clear in many ways that they desired a regime change in Bishkek....The 'revolution' in the Central Asian state of Kyrgyzstan has already thrown up surprises. A comparison with the two earlier 'colour revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine will be a good starting point.

"First, the striking similarities between the three 'revolutions' must be duly noted. All three are meant to signify the unstoppable spread of the fire of liberty lit by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of 9/11.

"But behind the rhetoric, the truth is that the U.S. wanted regime change in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan because of difficulties with the incumbent leadership. The leaders of all the three countries — Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia, Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine, and Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan — had enjoyed the support of the U.S. during most of their rule.

"Washington had cited them repeatedly as the beacons of hope for democracy and globalisation in the territories of the former Soviet Union.

"Their trouble began when they incrementally began to edge towards a resurgent Russia under Vladimir Putin." [5]

Seven weeks after Bhadrakumar's column appeared his analysis would be confirmed by no less an authority on the matter than U.S. President George W. Bush.

Visiting the capital of Georgia a year and a half after its "Rose Revolution," he was hosted by his counterpart Mikheil Saakashvili, former State Department fellowship recipient and U.S. resident, who seized power in what can only be described as a putsch but nevertheless said:

"Georgia will become the main partner of the United States in spreading democracy and freedom in the post-Soviet space. This is our proposal. We will always be with you in protecting freedom and democracy."

Bush reflected Saakashvili's inflated estimate of himself: "You are making many important contributions to freedom's cause, but your most important contribution is your example. Hopeful changes are taking place from Baghdad to Beirut and Bishkek [Kyrgyzstan]. But before there was a Purple Revolution in Iraq or Orange Revolution in Ukraine or a Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, there was a Rose Revolution in Georgia." [6]

A few days after the Kyrgyz coup Bush welcomed Ukraine's "orange" president Viktor Yushchenko - who this January only received 5.45 per cent of the vote in his reelection bid - and applauded his U.S.-assisted ascent to power, saying it "may have looked like it was only a part of the history of Ukraine, but the Orange Revolution represented revolutions elsewhere as well.... We share a goal to spread freedom to other nations." [7]

Beyond the threat of the dissolution of the CIS and of the CSTO, in April of 2005 Der Spiegel featured a report with the title "Revolutions Speed Russia's Disintegration."

In part it revealed the prime movers behind the events in Kyrgyzstan. According to Der Spiegel, (April 4, 2005):

"As early as February," Roza Otunbayeva - now the apparent head of the provisional government - "pledged allegiance to a small group of partners and sponsors of the Kyrgyz revolution, to 'our American friends' at Freedom House (who donated a printing press in Bishkek to the opposition).

"Trying to help the democratic process, the Americans poured some \$12 million into Kyrgyzstan in the form of scholarships and donations - and that was last year alone. Washington's State Department even funded TV station equipment in the rebellious southern province town of Osh." [8] [9]

This process of geostrategic transformation, from the Balkans to the former Soviet Union and the Middle East was also supported by Freedom House, the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and other non-governmental organizations.

A week after the "tulip" takeover the project director for Freedom House, Mike Stone, summed up the role of his organization with two words: "Mission accomplished." [10]

A British newspaper that interviewed him added, "US involvement in the small, mountainous country is higher proportionally than it was for Georgia's 'rose' revolution or Ukraine's 'orange' uprising. [11]

Assistance also was provided by Western-funded and -trained "youth activists" modeled after and trained by those organized in Yugoslavia to topple the government of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000:

Compare the names:

Yugoslavia: Otpor! (Resistance!)

Ukraine: Pora! (It's Time!)

Georgia: Kmara (Enough)

Kyrgyzstan: KelKel (Stand Up and Go)

Behind them all, deposed Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev identified the true architects of his ouster. On April 2 he stated "There were international organisations who supported and financed the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan.

"A week before these events I saw a letter on the internet signed by the US ambassador to Kyrgyzstan. It contained a detailed plan for the revolution." [12]

The Kyrgyz Tulip (formerly Lemon, Pink and Daffodil) Revolution was as unconstitutional and as disruptive to the nation as its Georgian and Ukrainian predecessors were, but far more violent. Deaths and injuries occurred in the southern cities of Osh and Jalal Abad (Jalalabad, Jalal-Abad) and in the capital of Bishkek.

It was also the first "color" revolt in a nation bordering China. Not only did Russia and China voice grave concerns over the developments in Kyrgyzstan, Iran did also, seeing where the trajectory of "regime change" campaigns was headed.

In the four decades of the Cold War political changes through elections or otherwise in any nation in the world - no matter how small, impoverished, isolated and seemingly insignificant - assumed importance far exceeding their domestic effects. World political analysts and policy makers asked the key question: Which way would the new government align itself, with the U.S. or the Soviet Union?

In the post-Cold War period the question is no longer one of political philosophy or socio-economic orientation, but this: How will the new administration support or oppose U.S. plans for regional and global dominance?

With Roza Otunbayeva as chief spokesperson if not head of a new Kyrgyz "people's government," there is reason to believe that Washington will not be dissatisfied with the overthrow of her former "tulip" partner Bakiyev. She has already confirmed that the American base at Manas will not be closed.

Less than two months after the 2005 coup Otunbayeva, then acting foreign minister, met with her U.S. counterpart Condoleezza Rice in Washington during which the latter assured her that "the U.S. administration will continue to help the Kyrgyz government promote democratic processes in the country." [13]

Shortly after the March "democratic transformation," its patron saint, Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili, boasted that "Roza Otunbayeva worked in Tbilisi in recent years and was the head of UN office in Abkhazia. During the Rose Revolution she was in Georgia and knew everything that was happening...the Georgian factor was a catalyst of many things going on there [in Kyrgyzstan]." [14]

From the U.S. perspective she appears to have reliable bona fides.

Russia has put its air base in Kyrgyzstan on high alert, though comments from leading Russian government officials - Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in particular - indicate an acceptance of the uprising which has already caused 65 deaths and hundreds of injuries.

But Russia attempted to put the best face on the revolt five years ago also.

Which direction the next Kyrgyz government takes will have repercussions far beyond the nation's small size and population (slightly over five million).

It could affect U.S. and NATO plans for the largest military offensive of the Afghan war scheduled to begin in two months in Kandahar province.

It could determine the future of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization, the two major potential barriers to Western military penetration of vast tracts of Eurasia.

The stakes could hardly be higher.

Notes

- 1) Stars and Stripes, June 16, 2009
- 2) Agence France-Presse, March 4, 2010
- 3) Agence France-Presse, April 3, 2005
- 4) The Messenger, March 31, 2005
- 5) The Hindu, March 28, 2005
- 6) Civil Georgia, May 10, 2005
- 7) Associated Press, April 4, 2005
- 8) Der Spiegel, April 4, 2005
- 9) Russian Information Agency Novosti, June 16, 2005
- 10) The Telegraph, April 2, 2005
- 11) Ibid
- 12) Associated Press, April 2, 2005
- 13) Interfax, June 15, 2005
- 14) Civil Georgia, March 30, 2005