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A Russian-Uzbek challenge to the US

By M K Bhadrakumar

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Reports have appeared in the Russian media doubting the pedigree of the revolution in Kyrgyzstan. [Moscow](#) seems to be edging away from the interim administration head, Roza Otunbayeva, a former Kyrgyz ambassador to [London](#) and Washington.

The reports hint at covert United States backing for the uprising in Bishkek. They claim a drug mafia incited the latest regime change in Bishkek with covert US support - "the geostrategic interests of the US and the international narco-mafia happily merged ... It was only logical to use the services of narco-barons to overthrow [former president Kurmanbek] Bakiyev, who demanded from the US more and more payments for his loyalty".

A Russian commentator told Ekho Moscow radio, "The revolution in Kyrgyzstan was organized by the drug business." Kyrgyzstan is a hub of drug trafficking. The acreage of poppy cultivation in Kyrgyzstan has exponentially increased and is comparable today to Afghanistan.

There have been reports in the Russian (and Chinese) press linking the US base in Manas with drug barons. Iranian intelligence captured the Jundallah terrorist leader, Abdulmalik Rigi, when he was traveling in a Kyrgyz aircraft en route to an alleged rendezvous in Manas.

The Russian media leaks enjoy some degree of official blessing. They highlight circumstantial evidence questioning the nature of the revolt in Bishkek. Meanwhile, the influential think-tank Stratfor has rushed the interpretation alleging a Russian hand. Between these claims and counter-

claims, Moscow seems to be veering to the assessment that Washington has benefited from Otunbayeva's political consolidation in Bishkek.

As a Russian commentator put it, "There are further indications that Moscow is cautious about the new Kyrgyz administration ... The truth is that there are no 100% pro-Russian politicians in Kyrgyzstan's interim government ... and quite a few of them are definitely associated with the West."

Indeed, Otunbayeva told the Washington Post and Newsweek that the US lease on the Manas air base would be extended "automatically" and that "we will continue with such long-term relations" with the US.

US Assistant Secretary of State for [Central Asia](#) Robert Blake said in Bishkek after two days of consultations with Otunbayeva that her leadership offered "a unique and historic opportunity to create a democracy that could be a model for Central [Asia](#) and the wide region".

Blake hailed the regime change in Bishkek as a "democratic transition" and promised US aid to "find quick ways to improve the economic and social situation".

The sporadic attacks on ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan (estimated to number 700,000) have also set alarm bells ringing in Moscow. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev ordered the military to take necessary measures. A Kremlin spokesman said these would include increased security for "Russian interests" in Kyrgyzstan.

Moscow seems unsure whether the attacks on the Russians are isolated incidents. An overall slide toward anarchy is palpable with armed gangs taking the law into their hands and the clans in southern Kyrgyzstan rooting for Bakiyev's reinstatement. At any rate, Medvedev manifestly changed tack on Tuesday after talks with visiting [Uzbekistan](#) President Islam Karimov. He clearly distanced [Russia](#) from identifying with Otunbayeva's interim government. Medvedev said:

Essentially, we need to revive the state, the state does not exist at this time, it has been deposed. We are hoping that the interim administration will make all the necessary measures to achieve that, as anarchy will have a negative effect on the interests of the Kyrgyz people and also their neighbors. Legitimization of the authorities is extremely important, which means there need to be elections, not a de facto fulfillment of powers. Only in this case can [Russia's] economic cooperation be developed.

Russia has extended humanitarian assistance to Kyrgyzstan, but full-fledged economic cooperation will be possible only after the proper institutions of power have been created. Uzbekistan's president shares this view.

The joint Russian-Uzbek stance challenged the interim government not to regard itself as a legally constituted administration, no matter Washington's robust backing for it.

Clearly, Moscow and Tashkent are pushing Otunbayeva to not make any major policy decisions (such as over the US Manas base). She should instead focus on ordering fresh elections that form a newly elected government.

Otunbayeva had indicated her preference for far-reaching constitutional reforms to be worked out first that would transform Kyrgyzstan into a parliamentary democracy from the current presidential system of government. Moscow sees this as a ploy by the interim government to postpone elections and cling onto power with US backing.

Meanwhile, Bakiyev, who fled to Kazakhstan last weekend, has since shifted to Belarus. It is unclear whether Minsk acted on its own to give asylum to Bakiyev. Soon after reaching Minsk, Bakiyev announced that he hadn't yet resigned from office. "There is no power which will make me resign from the presidential post. Kyrgyzstan will not be anyone's colony," he said. Bakiyev called on world leaders not to recognize Otunbayeva's government.

Bakiyev's stance puts Washington in a bind. The US got along splendidly with Bakiyev and it is getting into stride equally splendidly with Otunbayeva. But it has no means of persuading Bakiyev to agree to a lawful, orderly transition of power to Otunbayeva.

Nor can Washington politically underwrite Otunbayeva's government if its legitimacy is doubted in the region (and within Kyrgyzstan itself). Besides, Otunbayeva is not acquitting herself well in stemming the country's slide toward clan struggle, fragmentation and anarchy.

During his two-day visit to Moscow, Karimov made it clear that Tashkent took a dim view of the regime change in Bishkek.

Using strong language, Karimov said, "There is a serious danger that what's happening in Kyrgyzstan will take on a permanent character. The illusion is created that it's easy to overthrow any lawfully elected government." He warned that instability in Kyrgyzstan may "infect" other Central Asian states.

Russia and Uzbekistan have found it expedient to join hands. Medvedev stressed that his talks with Karimov in Moscow were "trusting and engaging with regard to all aspects of our bilateral relations, international and regional affairs". Karimov reciprocated, "Uzbekistan sees Russia as a reliable, trusted partner, which shows that Russia plays a critical role in ensuring peace and stability throughout the world, but in Central Asia in particular."

"Our viewpoints coincided completely," Karimov asserted. He added, "What is going on today in Kyrgyzstan is in nobody's interests - and above all, it is not in the interests of countries bordering Kyrgyzstan."

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin also underscored the regional alignment. "Uzbekistan is the key country in Central Asia. We have special relations with Uzbekistan," he said.

Conceivably, Russia and Uzbekistan will now expect the Kyrgyz developments to be brought onto the agenda of the summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is scheduled to take place in Tashkent in June.

A semi-official Russian commentary said, "The summit may help to work out mechanisms to

ensure security in the country and in the whole region." The SCO secretary general (who is based in Beijing) visited Bishkek last week and met Otunbayeva.

Washington faces a potential diplomatic headache here. It needs to ensure the forthcoming SCO summit doesn't become a replay of the 2005 summit, which questioned the *raison d'être* of the American military presence in Central Asia.

If Washington forces the pace of the great game, a backlash may ensue, which could snowball into calls for the eviction of the US from the Manas base, as some influential sections of Kyrgyz opinion are already demanding.

If that were to happen, the big question would be whether Otunbayeva would be able to get the American chestnuts out of the fire. Hailing from the southern city of Osh but having lived her adult life in the capital, which is dominated by northern clans, she lacks a social or political base and is at a disadvantage.

The geopolitical reality is that Kyrgyzstan has to harmonize with the interests of the regional powers - Russia and Uzbekistan in particular - as should the US, in the larger interests of regional stability. The fact remains that Russian and Uzbek (and Kazakh) influence within Kyrgyz society and politics remains preponderant. And China too has legitimate interests.

The Kremlin will not fall into the same bear trap twice. In Georgia under somewhat similar circumstances the US took generous help from Russia in the stormy winter of 2003 to clear the debris of the "Rose" revolution and "stabilize" the ground situation before promptly installing Mikheil Saakashvili, who has been a thorn in the flesh for Moscow ever since.