



View Point

Base Politics in Kyrgyzstan intensifies

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Kyrgyzstan is the only country in the world to host both U.S. and Russian bases. These bases play a vital role in shaping Kyrgyzstan's relations with the respective countries. Recent controversies regarding the bases reflect the complexity of the 'base politics' in the region.

The Transit Centre at Manas, about 30km from Bishkek set up in December 2001, is a logistic hub for the U.S. coalition forces stationed in Afghanistan. The base assumed greater significance for the U.S after the K2 base in Uzbekistan was shut down. The U.S. base at Manas has often run into controversy leading to tensions between U.S. and Kyrgyzstan.

The recent crisis took place after Almazbek Atambayev, the new President of Kyrgyzstan, in December 2011 announced that all foreign troops must vacate Manas base after 2014 and that the U.S. lease for the base will not be renewed beyond 2014. After series of negotiations, the situation seems to be normalizing between the two. Atambayev recently, announced that the base would be converted to a civilian transit facility, which is seen by many analysts as a way for Kyrgyzstan to bargain for a rent hike. During U.S. Central Command Commander, General James Mattis's April visit to Kyrgyzstan, the Secretary of Kyrgyzstan's Defence Council, Busurmankul Tabaldiyev had also told that Kyrgyzstan is willing to cooperate with the U.S. after 2014 depending on the country's national interest, security and public opinion. Tough

bargaining is on and news reports suggest that Kyrgyzstan has also requested the US to donate its drones after it withdraws its troops from Afghanistan, which the U.S. has agreed to consider.

Earlier too the base had run into trouble. In 2010, U.S. renewing the contract of Mina Corporation, a U.S. Company supplying jet fuels to the base alleged to be involved in corruption did not go well with the Kyrgyz government. In 2009, the former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev had also warned to close down the base. The impasse was resolved after U.S agreed to increase the annual rent for the base and enhanced U.S. assistance to Kyrgyzstan. Back in 2006, the U.S. refusal to take actions against a U.S. soldier at the base, who killed a Kyrgyz national had created rift between the two countries.

The other foreign base in the country is the Russian base at Kant, located about 25 km from Bishkek, which was established in 2003. The base hosts the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Rapid Deployment Force's Air Force Division. Atambayev during his February visit to Russia had accused Russia for not paying rent amounting to US\$15 million accumulated over the last four years. Kyrgyzstan had warned that it would close down the base in case rent was not paid, which resulted in tensions between the two sides.

Russia, on the other hand argued that the lease agreement between the two countries does not mention about payment for the use of the base. Instead Russia had agreed to train Kyrgyz military personnel and provide equipment to the Armed forces of Kyrgyzstan in return for the use of the base. Russia accepted that it had stopped providing these assistances to Kyrgyzstan since 2008 and also acknowledged that there were outstanding dues for using other military facilities in Kyrgyzstan leased by Russia. Later, Russia agreed to pay the outstanding dues, thereby easing tensions between the two sides.

Politics over the bases in Kyrgyzstan suggest that neither Russia nor U.S. would like to lose foothold, which is of strategic significance to the respective countries; besides the loss of the base would be a blow to their image in the region. For Kyrgyzstan, the bases are source of revenue and an important tool to manoeuvre

its relationship with the two influential players in the region. So far, Kyrgyzstan has been successful in bargaining favourably with both U.S. and Russia. However, it remains to be seen if it will be able to pressurise both in future too.

Past experiences and recent incidents highlight that politics over the bases in Kyrgyzstan will intensify. Politics surrounding the bases is an indication of the prevailing competition between U.S. and Russia in Kyrgyzstan as also in the region. Both U.S. and Russia are concerned over the other's base in Kyrgyzstan. The recent announcement made by CSTO, a Russian stronghold, at its December 2011 summit that no non-member country will be able to establish a military base in the territory of the CSTO member countries without the official approval of all the member states will put the future of the US base in jeopardy. If the base is closed, U.S.-Kyrgyzstan relationship will suffer.

Given the multiple challenges like fragile democracy, ethnic tensions, poor economy, etc, it would not be an easy task for Kyrgyzstan to keep a balance while dealing with Russia and U.S. Kyrgyzstan for its own stability and development will have to prudently manage its relationship with the two important countries engaged in the region. Stability in Kyrgyzstan is essential for regional peace and security. Rivalry among external players will further complicate the situation in Kyrgyzstan, which is going through a difficult time, especially since 2010.

Instability in Kyrgyzstan could easily spread over to other countries in the region, which is a concern for India too. India cannot afford a weak and unstable 'extended neighbourhood.'

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