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The Kyrgyz Great Game

by Robert Dreyfuss

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The Great Game for influence in Central Asia, pitting the United States against Russia (with China as a more-than-just-interested observer) has taken a sharp turn in Russia's favor, in the wake of the Russian-induced regime change in Kyrgyzstan.

That small, out-of-the-way nation, a former member of the USSR, has assumed importance because of its role as facilitator for the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan's Manas air base, which Centcom says is critical for the war effort, is up for grabs under the new regime, which says it will continue to allow the United States access to the air field until the current contract expires this summer. What happens after that isn't clear.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Ariel Cohen of the Heritage Foundation notes glumly that Russia is [scoring points in Central Asia](#) and the Caucasus region:

"In the last couple of years, Russia has scored some points in its 'roll-back' of George W. Bush's Eurasian advances. First, the Georgian war and the European reaction to it all but froze Georgia's chances for NATO membership. Second, Mr. Yanukovich's victory in the Ukrainian presidential elections moved Kiev from a pro-Western orientation to neutrality. Now, the U.S. presence in Central Asia, and in Eurasia as a whole, may be at stake."

Despite its seeming neutrality, it's clear that Moscow largely orchestrated the palace coup that ousted President Bakiyev last week. Last year, Russia offered Bakiyev \$2 billion in aid on the

apparent condition that he close the U.S. base at Manas, but after Bakiyev collected more than \$400 million in Russian aid he decided to accept a U.S. offer to triple the Manas rent, angering Prime Minister Putin of Russia. The Russian media carried out a well-orchestrated campaign attacking Bakiyev, accurately, as a thieving kleptocrat, and they compared him to Genghis Khan. (In some countries that would be taken as a compliment, but it wasn't meant that way.) Then Moscow used its economic muscle to build momentum for popular opposition to Bakiyev. [According to the Washington Post:](#)

"After the opposition announced plans for nationwide protests, Putin provided a final spark by signing a decree March 29 eliminating subsidies on gasoline exports to Kyrgyzstan and other former Soviet republics that had not joined a new customs union.

"When the tariffs kicked in April 1, Russian fuel shipments to Kyrgyzstan were suspended, said Bazarbai Mambetov, president of a Kyrgyz oil traders association. Within days, gas prices in Bishkek began to climb, enraging residents already angry about sharp increases in utility fees.

"As the Kremlin leaned on Bakiyev, it also consulted the opposition, hosting its leaders on visits to Moscow, including in the days before the protests."

Rather hyperbolically, Russia's President Medvedev, speaking at the Brookings Institution in Washington, warned that Kyrgyzstan is facing civil war and could become a "second Afghanistan":

"As I understand it, Kyrgyzstan is on the verge of civil war now. ... All the forces in Kyrgyzstan should realize their responsibilities towards the Kyrgyz nation, the Kyrgyz people and the future of the Kyrgyz state."

In fact, it appears that the situation is not nearly as risky as that. The new government seems to be establishing its writ in most of the country, and the ousted president is reportedly negotiating a deal to leave the country with his person (and his bank accounts) intact. The United States, making the best of a bad situation, is making nice to the new regime and crossing its fingers that it can hold on to Manas later this year. The new president, Rosa Otunbayeva, has suggested that the U.S. lease on Manas will be extended automatically for a year beyond its current term, but no doubt both Russia and Kyrgyzstan will want to keep the U.S. presence in the country on a short leash.

Kyrgyz opposition leaders, no doubt encouraged by Moscow, accuse the United States of turning a blind eye (or worse) to the blatant corruption of the former regime, as long as it allowed Washington to use the facility. A few years ago, the United States lost access to another important air facility in Uzbekistan, whose leaders also were not exactly paragons in defense of human rights. According to the *Times*, the [new leaders of Kyrgyzstan have joined in:](#)

"They accuse the United States of having used that system [of corruption] to curry favor with the ousted president in order to hold onto the air base, the only remaining American military refueling site in Central Asia after Uzbekistan closed a base in a dispute with the United States over human rights."

