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China plays it cool on Kyrgyzstan

By M K Bhadrakumar
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A terse Kremlin announcement said the Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov would be paying a two-day visit to Moscow starting on Monday. It brings [home](#) how much the geopolitics of Central Asia have changed since the color revolution in Kyrgyzstan that ousted Kurmanbek Bakiyev as president began unfolding this month.

Karimov is a shrewd observer of regional politics. Of late, Tashkent has been gravitating toward the West, but the turmoil in Bishkek underscores Moscow's unique role as the preserver of regional stability.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev drew attention to the great fluidity and political uncertainties when he said at a press briefing on Friday that the "dramatic situation" in Kyrgyzstan was "similar" to the "Tulip" revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Medvedev underscored that Russia was an interested party since "Kyrgyzstan remains our strategic partner and ... we are not indifferent to the fate of this country's people and the situation there".

He therefore justified the Russian intervention - getting the Kazakh leadership to persuade Bakiyev, who was holed up in his power base in southern Kyrgyzstan, to go into exile and thereby break the political deadlock; persuading the interim government to allow Bakiyev safe passage; and a Russian military aircraft eventually transporting the former president to Kazakhstan.

Moscow has since announced a US\$50 million [financial aid](#) package to enable the interim government in Bishkek to remain solvent.

The Russian leader said: "We wanted to intervene in a situation that is ultimately another country's sovereign affair, but in order to prevent bloodshed ... Various forces had to get involved in order to reach an agreement in this situation ... taking into [account](#) the tapestry of various interests in Kyrgyzstan and in the region as a whole."

Significantly, Medvedev held out a stern warning:

Now, as for whether this kind of situation could arise in other countries in the post-Soviet area, or elsewhere in the world ... Anything is possible. If people are unhappy with their leaders, if the authorities do not make the needed effort to support people and address their biggest problems, this kind of situation could repeat itself anywhere, in any country where the authorities are no longer in touch with the people ... Listening to some of the statements that followed these events [in Kyrgyzstan] it seems to me that these statements were dictated by fears that this conflict and its outcome stirred among the leaders in a number of countries. But the only way to avoid such fears is to govern one's own country in competent fashion.

Moscow's gamble

The past 10 days have rewritten the great game in Central Asia. Medvedev revealed he "won't hide the fact" that apart from Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, he had talked with US President Barack Obama on how to "settle this [Kyrgyzstan] matter" and that "we have all succeeded in preventing events from taking a more serious turn".

But, interestingly, Medvedev left out his Chinese counterpart, Hu Jintao, whom he met last week, as his interlocutor on crisis management in Bishkek. Nor has Moscow invoked any role for either the Collective Security Treaty Organization or the [Shanghai](#) Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The swiftness with which senior American officials began contesting for political space in Bishkek is also striking. Michael McFaul, the senior White [House](#) advisor on Russia, said on April 9, "This is not some anti-American coup. That we know for sure, and this is not a sponsored-by-the Russians coup." The Obama administration hurriedly dispatched Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake to Bishkek to consult Roza Otunbayeva, the chairperson of the interim government.

The US ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Tatiana Gfoeller, who was caught by surprise by the turn of events and was in the US, rushed back to Bishkek. Bakiyev's son, who was visiting Washington and scheduled to meet Blake, was brusquely told to get lost. Evidently, Washington was quick to realize the utter folly of its diplomacy of [investing](#) so heavily on Bakiyev and his family. In Central Asia, no one wagers with such abandon.

To quote Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the Russia section in Global Affairs magazine, "Kyrgyzstan is a tiny test case whether the US and Russia can find a way in Eurasia. There could

be a new deal ... Russia isn't categorically against a US presence in Manas. It just wants the future to be discussed with [Premier Vladimir] Putin and Medvedev."

Otunbayeva told the Washington Post on Friday that the current lease for Manas, which technically runs out in July, would be extended beyond that date as a new constitution had to be drafted and new elections held over the next six months. The Russians have about 400 service personnel at a base in Kant, north of Bishkek.

The Obama administration seems to estimate that holding onto Manas should be the top priority at the moment. Manas is a key link in the northern supply chain for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces in Afghanistan.

However, Russian experts expect the US to strike back. The head of the Central Asia section of the Institute for CIS Studies in Moscow, Andrei Grozin said:

America will try to keep its earlier foothold by trying to limit Russian influence ... Whatever may be said about a new relationship between Washington and Moscow, I think too many officials in both Russia and the US regard the situation in Central Asia as a continuation of certain options in a big geopolitical game.

It is too early to say whether the new leadership in Kyrgyzstan will be pro-Russian or pro-American because with even the most favorable course of events, the elite will be regrouping in the next two to three months.

Paradoxically, the leaders of the revolution in Bishkek are the very same people who led the abortive "Tulip" revolution in 2005 (which was usurped by Bakiyev) and Washington has worked closely with them in the past. Therefore, Moscow's empathy towards the new Kyrgyz leadership at this stage does not necessarily mean that the new dispensation in Bishkek will advance Russian interests. In any case, it is unlikely that the new leaders belonging to various clans will pull together for long.

As Kyrgyzstan's neighbor, Karimov knows the legacy of the revolution in Bishkek - indeed, its pedigree itself - remains unclear. Simply put, he dropped everything and decided to travel to Moscow to fathom the dark depths and probe the undercurrents. Karimov anticipates instability in Kyrgyzstan and will be anxious that the fire doesn't spread to the house he built nearby.

A hot summer lies ahead for Uzbekistan (and Tajikistan) as veteran Islamist warriors are trekking back from the battlefields in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas. Karimov would share Medvedev's unspoken fear that the next revolution could turn out to be green in color.

As a Russian commentator pointed out, "There are several players that may see the Kyrgyz revolt as a call to action ... The battle is unlikely to be difficult for Islamic revolutionaries ... If the attackers join forces and use both military and 'peaceful' resources, the local regimes will stand very little chance."

The most important militant Islamic organization gearing up for battle is Hizb ut-Tahrir (The Party of Liberation), which has an estimated cadre strength of 20,000 in the region. There are others, like Akromiya, an organization formed in the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan in 1996,

Hizb un-Nusrat (Party of Assistance) wedded to the "Islamic resistance", Tablighi Jamaat (Society for Spreading Faith), a transnational religious movement founded in India in the 1920s, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Movement and the militant groups of the United Opposition of Tajikistan.

Guarded optimism in Beijing

China will be watching the complicated Russian-American waltz in Bishkek with some amusement, but also with growing anxiety. Beijing has decided not to wade into the crisis, instead adopting a stance of non-interference, despite the high stakes for China's vital interests.

In a guarded reaction to the developments, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said China was "deeply concerned" and hoped that Kyrgyzstan "will restore peace soon and maintain stability ... China hopes that relevant issues will be settled in a lawful way."

Kyrgyzstan is a key component of Beijing's "go out" strategy towards Central Asia - and Eurasia in general. Two border crossings at the Irkestan and Torugart passes connect the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region with Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan has replaced Kazakhstan as the number one export market for Xinjiang - \$2.97 billion in 2009.

The government-owned China Daily analyzed that the regime change in Bishkek "will not hurt ties with China". Chinese experts insisted, "No matter which party is in power, it will value China-Kyrgyzstan relations." Bishkek needs Beijing's goodwill. China is a potential donor and is already surging as Kyrgyzstan's number one economic partner, with bilateral [trade](#) hitting the \$10 billion mark, which is huge for the impoverished country of five million people.

Chinese experts visualize that the new government in Bishkek won't in any way dilute the SCO's "anti-terror efforts". The ethnic Uyghur population in Kyrgyzstan is estimated to be anywhere up to a quarter of a million. Kyrgyzstan's stability is a core concern for Beijing.

An anti-terror expert at the China Institute of International Studies, Dong Manyuan, summed up, "Its geographically strategic location means that Kyrgyzstan needs to strike a balance between great powers. It doesn't want to offend Russia or the US and it wants to maintain friendship with China."

Manyuan added that the new government in Bishkek would have its hands full in tackling the grave [economic crisis](#) in the country, "which means the [Manas] military base issue will not be dealt with in a short time".

For the present, Beijing seems to be pragmatically taking the view that the Russian-American interventionist approach to stabilize the Kyrgyz situation serves China's interests. But then, everything is up in the air in the Tian Shan Mountains ("celestial mountains") separating Xinjiang from Kyrgyzstan.

Just as the Sino-Kyrgyz relationship was steadily climbing a promising upward graph of

friendship and cooperation based on a mutuality of hardcore interests, an air pocket has appeared. Things can be exasperating in the steppes.