

«If we however assume the scenario when this issue turns from a “regular” discussion into real action to open a military base, Kyrgyzstan will need to scrutinise the issue and ensuing consequences,» - notes Zamira Isakova, an expert in politics and security issues in Central Asia, wrote in the article specifically for CABAR.asia.

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Brief summary:

- Discussions around the opening of the military base have been regularly circulating since 2005;
 - The issue of military base opening is raised more to accommodate political trends, and as a regular, rather unnecessary favour to Moscow;
 - Objectively, the military base in the framework of CSTO could facilitate the solution of a wide range of issues;
 - The appearance of this base will put Kyrgyzstan at risk of losing a certain share of freedom in prioritising foreign political course, especially in terms of security and defence.
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During joint military antiterrorism exercise 'Peace Mission' in 2016 in Kyrgyzstan. Photo: sputnik.kg

Kyrgyzstan expects the state visit of the president of the Russian Federation scheduled for March 28 of this year. There's no doubt that it will be accompanied by a series of joint agreements and declarations, including the significant issue regarding the new military base under the aegis of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic. The topic of military base establishment is interesting due to ongoing outbreaks of violence in the border area of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, the history of Batken military actions^[1], and political debates around resumed discussions about the establishment of a military base in southern Kyrgyzstan. This article may not have a single answer and the article doesn't offer ready solutions, but provides a comprehensive review of historical facts of the issue and reflects the real discussion of the possible establishment of a military base of CSTO, in which Russia plays a key role.

Background

Discussions around the opening of the military base have been regularly circulating since 2005, when this issue was raised due to the bloody Andizhan events^[2]. Subsequent discussions didn't lead to serious measures because new priorities appeared in bilateral relations of the Kyrgyz Republic and Russia.

However, the issue was raised again in 2009 between the president of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiev and Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, and was captured in the bilateral memorandum of intent to create a training base or a military division[3]. But nearest neighbours, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, were strongly against[4] it. The leadership of Uzbekistan overreacted. In its statement, Tashkent declared that “the base can give impetus to various nationalistic conflicts”[5]. The reasons for such fears were caused by rather tense relations between the states of the Central Asian region. To compound that in May 2009 Uzbek towns of Andizhan and Khanabad bordering Kyrgyzstan were alerted by violent clashes. According to official sources, the alert was caused by “bandits,” and other sources said it was attacking by militants of Islamic Jihad extremist organisation, which split from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan[6]. Back then, the official authorities of Uzbekistan saw the “Kyrgyz footprint” implying the indirect support of “bandits” by Kyrgyzstan. Due to those events and because of “oriental” nuances around the situation, the establishing of the base under the CSTO, where Russia would be playing key role, was almost forgotten. In 2012, the popular issue regarding “military base” in the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic was brought to life again under the president of the Kyrgyz Republic Almazbek Atambaev. According to the initial plan, the military base could be deployed in the southern Kyrgyzstan and could have united all military facilities of Russia, but border troops of the Federal Security Service of Russia based in Osh, and could have a sonorous name of the “Joint Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan”[7]. Despite the fact that all discussions were about the establishing of the base in the south of the country, it ended up with the signing of an agreement in 2012, which came into force in early 2017 and envisaged integration of all military facilities of Russia in Kyrgyzstan in a single structure “for centralisation of control and more effective command.”[8]. In other words, the joint military base consisting of four military facilities (Kant airbase, radio seismic laboratory of the seismic service of Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, long-distance communication hub of the Navy of Russian Federation and test base on Lake Issyk Kul) was given a status of a legal entity, which doesn’t imply any changes in quantity or deployment. The integration of all Russian military facilities under one flag alarmed not only the expert community and media, but also the political arena and the people. And then followed political flirting and unjustified statements of representatives of relevant government agencies led by the president of the Kyrgyz Republic Almazbek Atambaev regarding possible forced withdrawal of military facilities upon the expiration of tenancy period [9]. Before coming into force of the integration process, in 2013 and in 2015 at the meetings of the CSTO the idea of establishment of the military base in the southern Kyrgyzstan also rose, but remained at the level discussion. Probably one of the most interesting moments in this story was that in 2017 Moscow stated it was not interested in creation of military bases in Kyrgyzstan, emphasising that “Russia, unlike some other well-known states, does not aim

at covering the world with its military bases” [10]. This somewhat unexpected gesture of Russia, given the fact that President Almazbek Atambaev tended to open another military base, generated two main insights [11].

The first insight is that this unambiguous declaration can be seen as a unique attempt to position Russia as the “peaceful” ally of neighbouring states, especially amid the political events happening globally. The second and more reasonable insight reflects the attempt to indirectly influence the domestic affairs of Kyrgyzstan amid the hype about the then forthcoming presidential election in the country.

The mention of a military base by the current leader of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbay Zheenbekov in 2018 partially proves the decisive role of Russia in this matter. Particularly, last year Sooronbay Zheenbekov emphasised that despite the fact that the second base issue was raised before him, Russia is a part that will make final decision. [12]. In general, this issue has been long and consistently raised on the agenda of bilateral relations of the Kyrgyz Republic and Russian Federation.

On the one hand, it speaks of firm intention to create the military base, on the other hand, it suggests that the issue is raised more to accommodate political trends[13], and as a regular, rather unnecessary favour to Moscow, given the rather obvious pro-Russian direction of the Kyrgyzstan politics.

To be continued... military base in 2019: on the agenda of bilateral relations

In early February this year, the issue was again raised on the agenda. In his detailed interview, the Kyrgyz ambassador to the Russian Federation, Alikbek Dzhekshenkulov stated that the issue of military base would be discussed at the bilateral meeting of the leaders of the Kyrgyz Republic and Russian Federation in March 2019. This statement by Dzhekshenkulov gave impetus to the topic of military base opening under the aegis of CSTO. Many have taken this resumption of discussion and the readiness of the Kyrgyz administration to deploy the military forces in the south of the country as a demonstration of its extreme commitment to Moscow and as a gesture of geopolitical support [14]. Others have seen a reason for the base opening amid more frequent statements in Russian and Tajik media regarding the impending danger from armed gangs from Afghanistan.

The year of 2019 is the most appropriate time to discuss the issue of base opening given the three key factors. First of all, due to the chairmanship of Kyrgyzstan in CSTO this year [15], when, according to Zheenbekov, there is every opportunity to “strengthen the image of the country in the international field and to promote national interests”[16]. Second, by virtue of openness and constructiveness of the new administration of Uzbekistan headed by Shavkat Mirziyoyev towards neighbours. Third, due to the 20th anniversary of Batken events, when the country faced the real threat from outside, and when Russia provided technical support to the military forces of Kyrgyzstan[17]. Stars seem to align for the creation of this base.

Российские военные объекты в Центральной Азии



Russian military facilities in Central Asia. Photo: kommersant.ru

However, due to their nature, the Russian party represented by foreign minister Sergei Lavrov claimed they heard this idea for the first time [18]. Thus, the issue initiated by the Kyrgyz party needs to be studied in detail, yet Russia is ready for discussion. Given this context, Russian media unanimously said that the base will be more beneficial to Kyrgyzstan and is not a priority for Russia because it's more profitable to strengthen the military power of already existing military facilities in Central Asia rather than create a new base [19], emphasising the improper alliance in bilateral relations between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Russian Federation.

Discussing the need for additional military base

The background and inclusion of the issue on the 2019 agenda cause a reasonable question - is there pressing need for the opening of additional military base in the Kyrgyz Republic, even under the aegis of CSTO? In addition to the above-mentioned official stance of Russia, we can refer to opinions of the parties, which would make the events clear.

Thus, according to Dzhekshenkulov, as a representative of the official authorities of the Kyrgyz Republic, the issue is rather urgent due to security threats from armed groups in Afghanistan. Although Kyrgyzstan doesn't share borders with Afghanistan, the situation in

neighbouring Tajikistan and Afghanistan remains difficult [20]. The base could impede the militants' attack. Some uncertainty is associated with the relocation of remaining ISIS and "returnees" from the ISIS camps (who, in most cases, pose no threat because their recruiting and roles on the ground remain questionable). But even if the people in power deem such "returnees" pose a regional threat, certain nuances appear in relation to a possible base in the framework of CSTO that could address domestic security issues. According to advisor to CSTO, Aleksei Nikiforov, "if groups made mainly of former citizens break into Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan...CSTO is unlikely to send its units to help"[21]. All these moments can arise in the long-term, but currently we should understand whether it's rational and necessary to open this base.

Objectively, the military base in the framework of CSTO could facilitate the solution of a wide range of issues, from build-up of military forces in the country, military capacity building, drug trafficking control, improvement of technical equipment, to obvious enforcement of security not only in Kyrgyzstan, and being an outpost at the southern borders of CIS.

Addressing this issue, Russian expert Andrei Grozin noted that the base was useful for Russia not only in practical terms of ensuring security in Fergana Valley, which is fairly deemed hazardous, but also in terms of geopolitics[22]. Ex-deputy Alisher Mamasaliev also spoke in favour the deployment of the military base in the south of the country due to the threats coming from Afghanistan[23].

Moreover, active discussion of the topic of military base in southern Kyrgyzstan has been approved by ordinary people and strengthened popular passion for Moscow[24]. As some members of the Public Prevention Centre, composed of informal leaders and police officers of aiyl district of Samarkandek in Batken region, whose functions are to prevent local conflicts[25], noted in a private talk, "if the military base is deployed in Batken region, it could promote security at the border of Tajikistan and contribute to the control of tension with our neighbours"[26].

At the moment, there's no need in the deployment of military forces.

However, many would dispute the arguments in favour of the military base deployment. For example, political analyst Mars Sariev, who had earlier spoken in favour of the military base in southern Kyrgyzstan[27], believes that at the moment there's no need in the deployment of military forces, and Kyrgyzstan rather suffers from domestic clashes, than from external threats[28]. Representative of the defence sector, namely ex-minister of the like-named ministry, Ismail Isakov, also believes that the military base, even under the aegis of CSTO, is irrelevant now because the collective rapid reaction forces of CSTO are well developed[29] and existing military facilities are well-equipped in the country[30].

Deployment of foreign military forces

threatens the country's sovereignty.

Moreover, speaking of the geopolitical location of Central Asia in terms of security (including drug trafficking, terrorism and corruption), a prominent American geopolitical scientist, Frederick Starr, in his interview for CABAR.asia said that "...Central Asians themselves can address this better than any outside power can do" [31]. Starr emphasised that "major players" should support Central Asian states, but not intervene. The non-intervention policy is especially important for security issues. As political analyst Emil Dzhuraev commented on the topic of military base in the south of the country, in the world history deployment of foreign military forces threatens the country's sovereignty due to limited decision-making in terms of security [32]. Political analyst Medet Tyulegenov doesn't see the need for military base referring to the use of rhetoric about base creation rather than its actual opening [33].

Summarising the processes going around the military base

It should be clearly understood that discussions of foreign military forces deployment, even in the framework of "quasi-multilateral" platform of CSTO, are directly related to political issues and the leadership of Kyrgyzstan often recalls such issues to accommodate their political interests and to manipulate the mood of the people. However, in fairness it must be said that a certain pattern can be seen in discussions about base opening related to domestic and external threats to the security of Kyrgyzstan and the whole region, where Russia remains a major player. Just like any other strategic issue, the topic of military base opening in the south has divided the stakeholders into two groups. Some citizens, including representatives of state agencies and expert communities, *favour* the possible opening of the military base in southern Kyrgyzstan. *First of all*, because people believe that the enemy is approaching and they need to be protected from "extremists" [34]. *Second*, it's a certain status of "secure" state, which, as some experts think, could be ensured only with the participation of such countries as Russia [35]. *Third*, the base will create an illusion of participation of Central Asian states in big-league politics along with other global players.

The impression is that this process has more positive moments for the Kyrgyz Republic given the predicted threats coming from the southern borders of the region, and it's hard to find weaknesses in this hypothesis. However, some experts have *opposed* the deployment of one more base because there's no need for it, while possible threats are exaggerated. Moreover, some experts emphasise that Kyrgyzstan already has Russian military facilities in its area and their military capacity is deemed to be well-developed. However, it's important to note that the appearance of this base will put Kyrgyzstan at risk of losing a certain share of

freedom in prioritising foreign political course, especially in terms of security and defence.

In the last two years, Bishkek has been pursuing pro-Russian politics for many evident reasons, but despite that, it's strategically important for Russia, after all, to maintain its presence in the country. The background of this issue and "illusion" of Russian concern with the base creation make us suppose that the process strengthens the position of the Russian state in the region despite the fact that the military base opening is to be decided by CSTO member states. The lack of specific actions from the Kyrgyz Republic and Russia keeps the issue on ice and the base is unlikely to be opened. Because military presence is an expensive thing not only in terms of resources, but also in terms of energy and diplomacy. And such a major power with regional interests as Russia has other high-priority tasks and issues of more global nature, which require its strategic investment of resources.

If we however assume the scenario when this issue turns from a "regular" discussion into real action to open a military base, Kyrgyzstan will need to scrutinise the issue and ensuing consequences. It's not only the powers that be, but also the people of Kyrgyzstan who are the bearer of sovereignty and a source of state power and need to be aware of expected consequences of this scenario that might lead to the dependence of security policies of the host country. In other words, there's a risk that Kyrgyzstan can become bound by and directly dependent on the Russian position regarding defence policy, at a minimum.

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