

# THE NEXT STEP IS US-RUSSIAN COOPERATION IN EURASIA

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The overturn of the Kyrgyz government is being used by Russia and America as an occasion for improving their relations and for breaking the old habits of mutual opposition in CIS territory.

In such a fast moving situation, with new developments daily, innovative options, if put forward, should be used. This article discusses the role of these options.

## Background

There has already been an innovation. In spite of the usual suspicions that Russia is 'behind' the Kyrgyz overturn, American reaction has remained unusually calm.

To a certain extent, Russia is indeed 'behind' the events, since contact between the nations is inevitable, as are attempts for smoothing out the situation and

obtaining favorable developments; to not attempt to do so would, in fact, be abnormal. Moreover, in recent days, Russian media has acted as a 'Radio Free Central Asia' for Kyrgyzstan. The role of the Russian media in the developments in Kyrgyzstan has been reported at length by the Washington Post, which seemed to be trying to put its usual anti-Russian spin on the matter. Perhaps this time, as Westerners notice this positive media role, more logical conclusions will be drawn.

**Political influence is something natural and inevitable and should not be viewed as a fearful omnipotent Imperialist threat.** When the U.S. is involved in various events in different parts of the world, it is viewed as natural and not as an all-controlling evil empire.

Furthermore, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, Russia deserves congratulation for its influence, as long as it does not try to pressure the new Kyrgyz government to polarize in an anti-Western direction.

**The phrase 'Russia is behind it' is a reflection of the old habit of thinking that there is some omnipotent influence of the KGB behind everything that happens.** Today, this view is as outdated as the phrase 'America is behind it.' Indeed, the very wording 'x is behind it' intrinsically suggests clinically paranoid aspects.

Today, it is possible to recover a rational approach, on which to build

clearly is not the case in Ukraine, where there is a Russia-friendly majority; and it proves to be even less so in Belarus, where Russia-friendly sentiments have a huge preponderance. Presumably, Russia has noticed that these same 'interfering' Western observers, far from vindicating Russia's accusations of using democracy in a hypocritical manner, equating this with anti-Russianism, actually supported Yanukovich's electoral victory and helped squelch Tymoshenko's efforts to contest the result. The logical conclusion is that Russia made a mistake in opposing free elections in Ukraine some years ago.

However, Russia is likely to become consistent in making constructive unilateral moves only in a context where the West also acts reciprocally, since the nation still has bad memories of taking unilateral step after unilateral step from 1987 to 1993. The cumulative absence of reciprocation had a large effect in exacerbating any natural imbalances.

### *What can the West do?*

I will have to leave it to the Russians to suggest some unilateral steps that they think the West should take. They might come up with suggestions like: more proactive support for the rights of Russians in the Baltics, or encouraging a replace-

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lasting new relationships.

### *Further steps*

#### *What can Russia do?*

**It is time for Russia to realize that honest elections and free media do not have to mean that the nation is ruled by anti-Russian forces.** This

ment of Saakashvili with a more democratic and sober figure. Regardless of what happens, if it happens without the help of the West, Russia will ultimately be accused of masterminding everything.

#### *What can Russia and the West do*

together?

There are reports that America and Russia are beginning to cooperate and discuss how best to proceed in Kyrgyzstan. It is how they ought to proceed in other CIS countries as well.

In the future, when there is a need to facilitate the exit of an unstable or troublesome regime in the CIS, there is no good reason why Russia and the West should not be able to cooperate. It would be an important change from the mutual jostling that has predominated in the past.

Such jostling destabilizes the CIS countries, tearing at them from both sides, preventing their cumulative democratic-reformist development. It also severely damages Russian-Western relations, which leads to global consequences that are harmful to everyone. Both sides undoubtedly have a large amount of influence in each CIS country, but the only question is whether this influence will be exercised harmoniously for stability or used antagonistically against one another.

It should be obvious that cooperation would be the more useful approach.

Cases where such cooperation will be needed in one or another CIS country will inevitably arise again. To avoid being caught unprepared, Russia and the U.S. should consult one another, comparing their respective clienteles and contacts in the CIS countries, and work out which political figures in each country are mutually acceptable.

Nonetheless, agreeing on when a regime has become troublesome enough to replace it is a difficult task, but adequate progress is feasible if the issue is thoroughly discussed. Full

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consensus does not need to be reached; partial consensus is enough. This would at least make it possible for either the coordination of influence, or establishing times of relative calm rather than hostility and unilateral influence.

The point is to consult one another

and to do it in a creative and practical way rather than engage one another in the form of a polemical fencing match; to focus on coordinating inevitable influences, not preventing them; to stop rehearsing old demands on each other and to end this pseudo-utopian call for non-interference that can only ensure more mutual accusations; moreover, to discuss power and the political clienteles in these countries and not just provide technical assistance.

There have, in fact, already been U.S.-Russia consultations on the CIS countries, which started under the Bush and Putin presidencies. While they did not achieve their full potential, they were not entirely futile either. The mere act of discussing the subject has laid the first bit of groundwork necessary for a calmer spirit in regards to the CIS, a spirit we have recently witnessed from both sides in regards to Kyrgyzstan.

More can be done now with consultation, now that the spirit has become more rational.

### *Kyrgyz Bases*

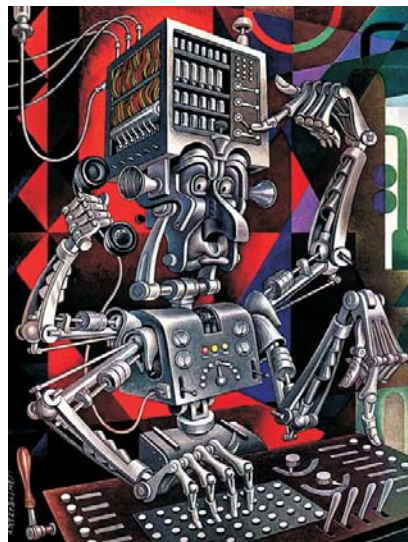
The interim leader of Kyrgyzstan used to be the Ambassador to the U.S. When I spoke with her, she defended the U.S. base with vigor. However, she was also open to former Kyrgyz President Akayev's idea that the American and Russian bases ought to be combined into a joint base.

**Advantages of a joint base are considerable and the drawbacks secondary.**

Drawbacks: getting in the way of one another; difficulty maintaining technical secrets, which might be

managed by having some secured separate sub-facilities.

Advantages: costs savings; efficient access to one another's technical and logistical support; fostering cooperation between Russia and America; more communications on plans; more joint planning; encouragement



for the two powers to exercise their influence jointly in Kyrgyzstan, rather than competitively.

Nevertheless, with separate bureaucracies in Russia and the West, each pursuing its own agendas, and the old antagonistic habits of both bureaucracies, both nations went ahead with separate bases during President Akayev's last years.

In the aftermath of the Orange and Tulip revolutions, Russia and the West were not in the mood for cooperation. The reality is that **American and Russian attitudes to the Tulip revolution had been similarly cautious and stand-offish**, but this was often overlooked.

At the present time, Akayev's dual-base proposal could be revived and it would be a plus for both external powers, as well as for Kyrgyzstan's stability and development.

Discussion of a joint base would provide a favorable context for the introduction of any Russian peacekeeping forces in Kyrgyzstan, which may happen in the near future. Otherwise, both Russian and Western media and analysts will criticize the peacekeepers.

If these steps are taken, it will bring the Reset initiative to a new level: from polite to profound. Moreover, it makes more effective cooperation possible on very important geopolitical challenges, such as Afghanistan, Iran, China, and on the larger structural issues of European security. ■

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