

## **A Great Game playboard**

Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin moved quickly today to recognise the new powers-that-be in Kyrgyzstan while disavowing any role in the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev's regime.

But if Moscow were found to have had a hand in this latest upheaval, it would hardly come as a shock. Competition with China and the US for control of strategically important energy resources and transit routes is one key motivator. More fundamentally, Moscow still unfashionably insists on regarding this vast region as falling within its sphere of influence.

Evidence of Russian meddling in Kyrgyzstan is not hard to find. Financial and commercial blandishments dangled by Putin during a visit to Moscow by Bakiyev last year, including a \$2bn loan, preceded a decision by the then president to evict the US from its Manas air base, a key staging and supply route to Afghanistan. Only some nifty footwork by the Obama administration, and a sudden Bakiyev volte-face, allowed the US to hang on to Manas.

The US has good reason to take stock, too. Otunbayeva, a former foreign minister who fell out with Bakiyev, gave assurances today that the deal on the Manas base would be honoured. But Washington's self-interestedly insouciant disregard for the regime's egregious human rights abuses and disregard of democratic norms earned the US few friends among the opposition groups that now wield power.

What happens next in vulnerable, impoverished Kyrgyzstan depends on whether its new and not-so-new leaders, representing in effect the country's third attempt at a post-Soviet fresh start, prove to be any more enlightened and trustworthy than their predecessors. It would certainly help if Russia and the US, and regional powers like China and Kazakhstan, do not try to exploit the power vacuum, confine themselves to constructive advice and assistance, and stop using the country as a Great Game playboard.

*Guardian, 8/4/10*

## **Kyrgyzstan government overthrown**

Large-scale protests appeared to overthrow the government of Kyrgyzstan on Wednesday and its president fled before an outbreak of mayhem and violence in the capital of Bishkek and elsewhere in the country, an important American ally in Central

Asia. Government officials said at least 41 people had been killed in fighting between riot police officers and demonstrators.

The upheaval raised questions about the future of an important American air base that operates in Kyrgyzstan in support of the NATO mission in nearby Afghanistan. American officials said that as of Wednesday evening the base was functioning normally.

It also posed a potential embarrassment for the Obama administration, which angered the Kyrgyz opposition last summer by courting Mr. Bakiyev in an ultimately successful attempt to reverse his decision to close the base, angering the opposition.

Tensions had been growing in Kyrgyzstan over what human rights groups contended were the increasingly repressive policies of President Bakiyev, but it appeared that the immediate catalyst for the violence was anger over a reported quadrupling in the prices for utilities.

Mr. Bakiyev easily won another term as president as president last year over Mr. Atambaev in an election that independent monitors said was tainted by massive fraud.

Mr. Bakiyev first took office in 2005 after the Tulip Revolution, the third in what was seen at the time as a series of so-called colour revolutions that offered hope of more democratic governments in former Soviet republics.

But since then, he has consolidated power, cracking down on the opposition and independent news outlets.

*New York Times, 7/4/10*

## **Obama issues secret directive on India-Pakistan tensions**

President Barack Obama issued a secret directive in December to intensify American diplomacy aimed at easing tensions between India and Pakistan, asserting that without détente between the two rivals, the administration's efforts to win Pakistani cooperation in Afghanistan would suffer.

The directive concluded that India must make resolving its tensions with Pakistan a priority for progress to be made on U.S. goals in the region, according to people familiar with its contents.

A debate continues within the administration over how hard to push India, which has long resisted outside intervention in the conflict with its neighbour. The Pentagon, in particular, has sought more pressure on New Delhi, according to U.S. and

Indian officials. Current and former U.S. officials said the discussion in Washington over how to approach India has intensified as Pakistan ratchets up requests that the U.S. intercede in a series of continuing disputes.

Pakistan has long regarded Afghanistan as providing "strategic depth"—essentially, a buffer zone—in a potential conflict with India. Some U.S. officials believe Islamabad will remain reluctant to wholeheartedly fight the Islamic militants based on its Afghan border unless the sense of threat from India is reduced.

U.S. and Indian officials say the Obama administration has so far made few concrete demands of New Delhi. According to U.S. officials, the only specific request has been to discourage India from getting more involved in training the Afghan military, to ease Pakistani concerns about getting squeezed by India on two borders.

*Wall Street Journal, 5/4/10*

### **India's eager courtship of Afghanistan**

Along a rugged stretch of road in the shadow of the snow-covered Hindu Kush mountains, villagers in mud-brick huts praised the newest addition to their vista: a series of massive steel towers that reach into the clouds.

The towers, part of a \$1.3 billion aid package from India, carry electricity to a crippled region that has long gone without. They also represent an intense competition between India and arch-rival Pakistan for influence in whatever kind of Afghanistan emerges from the U.S.-led war.

To blunt India's eager courtship of Afghanistan, Pakistan is pouring \$300 million of its own money and resources into a nation it also views as key to the stability of volatile South Asia, as well as a potentially lucrative business partner.

The economic stakes are especially enormous for India, the far richer nation, as it seeks energy to fuel its rise as a global economic power. Afghanistan is a bridge to Central Asia's vast gas and oil reserves, which are coveted by India and Pakistan, both of which have nuclear weapons but barely enough electricity.

Washington is feeling pressure from Pakistan to limit India's role in Afghanistan. Each nation fears that an Afghanistan allied with the other would be a threat to its security. Pakistan considers Afghanistan, another majority-Muslim nation, a natural ally and is deeply suspicious of India's efforts there.

The competition between the two nations can seem silly at times: When India donated a fleet of buses in the western city of Herat, Pakistan began

donating buses decorated with painted Pakistani flags.

But the rivalry also has serious implications for the U.S.-led war. Karzai favours attempts to negotiate a settlement with the Taliban, an idea supported by Pakistan. Indian leaders fear that any Afghan settlement with the Taliban would give Pakistan more influence in Kabul, which they view with alarm.

*Washington Post, 3/3/10*

### **UK sells fighters to Oman...**

The government of Oman wants to buy a number of fighter jets from the UK, according to Downing Street. Number 10 said at this stage it was unable to confirm the number of Eurofighter planes - known in the UK as Typhoons - being bought.

The aircraft are partly being built by BAE systems. The company, which makes the aircraft with European partners, said: "Oman is a country with which we have a long and valued relationship and we stand ready and willing to support any requirement it has."

*BBC News, 2/4/10*

### **...but French sales to Pakistan on hold**

France's plan to sell 1.2 billion euro (\$1.6 billion) worth of military equipment for Pakistan's JF-17 combat aircraft has been held up, a source at President Nicolas Sarkozy's office said on Friday.

Newspaper Le Monde had reported earlier that France decided to suspend the sale of electronics and missiles -- the first section of a 6 billion euro contract -- under pressure from India and uncertainty over Pakistan's finances.

*Reuters, 2/4/10*

### **Lib Dems call for including Trident in defence review**

Britain's Trident nuclear missile system must be debated in the forthcoming strategic defence review, the Liberal Democrats said today.

Given that the defence budget faces up to a £36bn shortfall over the next 10 years, all parties agree that a review must be set up before the summer. But Labour and Tory leaders say the need for a Trident-based nuclear weapons system is absolute and must be excluded from the review.

But Lib Dem defence spokesman Nick Harvey said: "Omitting the single largest procurement project from the strategic defence review makes a complete mockery of the whole exercise."

Under the government's plans, Britain would be committing itself to spending more than £100bn on nuclear weapons over the next 50 years, he added.

*Guardian, 3/4/10*