



Feature Article
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Kyrgyzstan and the Changing Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus

Shairbek Dzhuraev

Ever since 1991, Kyrgyzstan's international relations have focused on balancing its relations with Russia with developing new international partnerships. In the past decades, the task has become increasingly difficult, as exposed by the war in Ukraine. In the meantime, China has become a critical actor holding the keys to multiple economic issues in the region. Cooperation remains the narrative of Kyrgyzstan's relations with its Central Asian neighbors, although developments on the ground feature a fair share of unresolved conflicts. The paper reviews key developments in Kyrgyzstan's international relations and concludes by highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the country's foreign policy approach.

Three characteristics of Kyrgyzstan, a newly independent state as of 1991, determined its foreign policy priorities for years to come.

First, it was an economically and militarily small state in its neighborhood, making the pursuit of security relationships the most significant task in international relations. Second, Kyrgyzstan was a resource-poor country, and this turned foreign policy into a quest for securing external aid. Third, as of 1991, Kyrgyzstan was the only Central Asian state where the Soviet-time communist party leadership was in the opposition, not in power, paving

the way for more genuine liberalization reforms in the 1990s.

Combined, the three factors above shaped the contours of Kyrgyzstan's international engagement, best described in President Askar Akaev's favorite phrase: "small states need big friends."¹ Russia emerged as the country's main political and military ally, particularly valued in the context of unfamiliar China and taciturn Uzbekistan. In the meantime, Kyrgyzstan's liberal policies attracted much-needed support from the U.S. and Europe. For most of the 1990s, Bishkek's "Russia first" policy sat well

¹ Askar Akaev, 'Speech at the United Nations', September 28, 2004. (<https://www.un.org/ru/ga/59/plenary/kyrgyz.pdf>).

with building relations with the rest of the world. Kyrgyzstan's economic and political reforms largely followed those of Russia, where President Boris Yeltsin, like Akaev, enjoyed the backing of the West against their biggest internal rivals, the communists.

Balancing became more difficult as Russia's relations with the West deteriorated in the late 1990s. In the wake of

the "war on terror" following 9/11, the U.S. set up an airbase at Manas airport. A year later, Russia followed suit, placing a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) airbase at Kant, also near Bishkek. Kyrgyzstan's "multi-vector" foreign policy came under increasing criticism in Russia, with commentators likening it to attempts to sit between two chairs. Acknowledging the pressure, President Akaev felt compelled to argue in writing that Kyrgyzstan's special relations with Russia allowed a "corridor of opportunities" to develop relations with "third countries."² However, the color revolutions in 2003-05 and the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 did not leave space for such a corridor.

Growing Pressures and Shrinking Options

The foreign policy priorities of small states, such as Kyrgyzstan, rarely change. Due to external



Sadyr Japarov. (Photo from Government.ru)

vulnerabilities, their primary interest is to adapt to any situation to minimize risks and maximize benefits. That said, the international environment

has grown volatile over the past decade, making "adaptation" an increasingly risky undertaking.

First, Kyrgyzstan's strategy of securing "big friends" became increasingly untenable.

Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who succeeded Akaev following the 2005 revolt, learned this the hard way. Seeking financial gains, he launched a "bidding war" between Russia and the U.S. over the Manas airbase. The infamous gamble left Russia feeling cheated, a factor that helped opposition protests oust Bakiev's regime in 2010.

Keen to restore credibility in the eyes of Moscow, Kyrgyzstan's next president, Almazbek Atambaev, closed the U.S. airbase at Manas in 2014 and canceled the cooperation framework agreement with the U.S. in 2015. In the same year, Kyrgyzstan joined the Moscow-initiated Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The appeasing moves produced little benefit. The accession to EAEU emerged as a non-choice option, with the risks of not joining overwhelming the benefits of joining.³ In 2015,

² Askar Akaev, "Kuda Idet Tsentral'naya Aziya? (Where is Central Asia Heading?)," *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 4, 2003 (http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_2126).

³ Pavel Dyatlenko, "Kyrgyzstan Gets Soft Terms for Customs Union Entry," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, June 6, 2014. (<https://iwpr.net/global->

Russia walked away from one of its biggest commitments to President Atambaev, to invest about \$3 billion in constructing hydropower plants in Kyrgyzstan. Thus, the benefits of having “one big friend” proved flimsy.

The Kyrgyz-Chinese relations provide another example. Between 2010 and 2017, Beijing’s share of Kyrgyzstan’s external debt increased from 5.7% to 41.6%.⁴ However, the growing debt overlapped with cracks emerging in China’s long-nourished image of a “benevolent neighbor.” In 2016, following a blast at its embassy in Bishkek, China stopped issuing visas to Kyrgyz citizens, forcing many to seek Kazakh citizenship to continue business with China. In 2018, two prime ministers were jailed for embezzling a \$400 million Chinese loan. The case was primarily that of internal political infighting. However, it also exposed China’s approach to lending, as the loan was provided and fully controlled by a Chinese corporation and not by the Kyrgyz government.

Second, recent years brought significant changes in Kyrgyzstan’s immediate neighborhood in Central Asia. On the positive side, the 2016 political transition in Uzbekistan transformed the latter from the biggest source of concern for Kyrgyzstan into an amicable neighbor. Under Islam Karimov,

Uzbekistan exerted power in many ways, ranging from shutting off natural gas during the coldest months of the year to the unilateral deployment of landmines and military posturing at the border. The new Uzbek leader, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, became a relief for Bishkek as he declared openness to discuss long-standing problems with neighboring countries, such as border delimitation and reopening border crossings.

However, the thaw in relations with Uzbekistan coincided with a dramatic deterioration in Kyrgyzstan’s relations with Tajikistan. For most of the post-1991 period, this southern neighbor was a natural ally. Small, poor, and upstream, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had many shared challenges. While the two countries have plenty of border and water disputes, in the past, the governments found ways to keep such issues under wraps. However, since the early 2010s, the dynamics have worsened. If issues in the past revolved around summer-time skirmishes over water among border area residents, recent years saw a militarization of the conflict. The use of heavy weaponry, including mortar shells and grenade launchers, became a norm.⁵ In April and May 2021, clashes over a water facility led to a large-scale exchange of fire in multiple non-adjacent border areas, leaving more than 50 dead.⁶

[voices/kyrgyzstan-gets-soft-terms-customs-union-entry](#)).

⁴ Azattyk, “Ne otkazyvayet. Kak Kitay za 7 let stal osnovnym kreditorom Kyrgyzstana” [No refusal. How China has become the main creditor of Kyrgyzstan in 7 years], *Azattyk*, September 13, 2018. (<https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-debt-china/29486035.html>)

⁵ Timur Toktonaliev, Lola Olimova, and Nazarali Pirnazarov, “Kyrgyz-Tajik Row After Border Clash,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, January 15, 2014.

(<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyz-tajik-row-after-border-clash>).

⁶ Shairbek Juraev and Eric McGlinchey, “What Drives Border Conflicts in Central Asia? Roots of the Deadly Violence on the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border,” *Ponars Eurasia*, January 17, 2022. (<https://www.ponarseurasia.org/what-drives-border-conflicts-in-central-asia-roots-of-the-deadly-violence-on-the-kyrgyz-tajik-border/>).

Reports of regular casualties from border shootings make the two countries, fellow members of the CSTO security alliance look like warring parties. Tellingly, in a recent summit of Central Asian leaders, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan refused to immediately sign a proposed Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation.

New Pressures for New Leaders: Afghanistan and Ukraine

In October 2020, post-electoral protests forced the sitting president Sooronbay Jeenbekov to vacate his post. The new leader, Sadyr Japarov, announced major changes, from reinstating a strong presidential system to reclaiming national ownership over Kumtor, the country's largest gold mine. The latter move earned Japarov a reputation as a nationalist and populist. However, as dramatic events unfolded in Afghanistan and Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan's new president proved no different from his predecessors, staying true to the strategy of minimizing risks and sticking with the crowd.

The collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 was a more straightforward case. Kyrgyzstan does not border Afghanistan and has thus been spared the need for precautionary military preparations. Kyrgyzstan's biggest issue with Afghanistan remains the incursions of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) fighters back in 1999 and 2000, during the Taliban's previous spell in Kabul. The risk of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for Central Asian militants remains. However, like most Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan decided that rejecting or criticizing the Taliban is unlikely to help.

As Afghan towns started falling to the Taliban in the summer of 2021, Sadyr Japarov appointed Talatbek Masadykov, a regional security expert with

experience in UN missions, as deputy chairman of the country's security council. The move aimed to fill the competence gap in the government on regional security issues. As dramatic events unfolded in August 2021, Bishkek took a reserved stance, joining its neighbors Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in establishing informal contacts with the Taliban. While Tajikistan has taken a more belligerent stance towards the Taliban, the Central Asian governments appear to have "agreed to disagree" on this topic.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 posed a much bigger challenge. For many reasons, Bishkek could not afford to express support to Ukraine. Kyrgyzstan's multi-level dependence on Russia and a web of formal and informal connections make it one of Russia's few allies. It is part of Russia-led security and economic alliances (CSTO and EAEU), and remittances from Kyrgyz labor migrants in Russia make up about one-third of the country's GDP. Further, the Kyrgyz elite is well aware of Russia's ability to influence the domestic political situation in Kyrgyzstan and thus, does not see alienating Russia as an option.

At the same time, like other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan is concerned about Russia's aggression. For all Moscow's talk about the threat of NATO or "de-nazification," Ukraine is, first of all, a fellow former Soviet republic whose right to existence Russian leaders have denied. This does not bode well for Central Asian states, none of which existed in their present shape before 1991. Russia's Putin has spoken on this more than once, most recently on June 17, 2022, when he called the territory of the Soviet Union "historic Russian lands." Furthermore, the unprecedented U.S. and European sanctions against Russia and the uncertainty of

scenarios for the end of the war make taking a position a precarious venture.

In light of the above, Kyrgyzstan focused on minimizing the risks. President Japarov was one of the first leaders to offer, albeit in social media and using convoluted language, an understanding of Russia's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk. As Russia invaded Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan has maintained the language of neutrality, helped not least by the similar but more explicit stances of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Wary of sending a wrong message, the Kyrgyz government showed little tolerance for public expressions of support for Russia or Ukraine, going as far as to arrest those who "misrepresented" Kyrgyzstan's position on the subject.⁷

Priority Partners and Priority Policies

In a recent interview, President Japarov succinctly described his understanding of foreign policy, saying that "[as a] small country, we must have respectful relations with all countries." The statement resonates with both Akaev's references to the country's size and scholars' description of Kyrgyz foreign policy as a "policy of non-contradiction and friendly relations with all."⁸ In practice, the list of Kyrgyzstan's foreign partners is short.

Russia remains the primary foreign policy partner for at least three reasons. First, it is the biggest trade partner for Kyrgyzstan, particularly as a) the primary destination for Kyrgyzstan's exports other than gold, b) the single supplier of gasoline and

natural gas to Kyrgyzstan, and c) the rule-setter within the Eurasian Economic Union.



Second, Russia hosts about one million Kyrgyz labor migrants. Finally, Russia's political clout remains massive, owing to the above-listed economic roles and the solid public support it enjoys in Kyrgyzstan. The latter is critical, allowing Moscow to influence Kyrgyzstan's policies and politics from within. Bishkek's uneasiness with the above has not yet translated into specific measures.

In the early 1990s, post-Soviet Central Asian states appeared to be natural allies, sharing the challenges of unexpected independence. However, today these states make a diverse group. Kazakhstan has long been the closest nation for cultural/linguistic roots but also for its prominent economic role. Large chunks of private business in Kyrgyzstan belong to Kazakh corporations (including two of the three largest mobile operators). But more importantly, the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border is a critical transport bottleneck, controlling the movement of goods to

⁷ Azattyk, "Direktor Next TV zaklyuchen pod strazhu na dva mesyatsa," [Next TV director jailed for two months], March 5, 2022. (<https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31737444.html>).

⁸ Andrew Kuchins, Jeffrey Mankoff, and Oliver Backes, *Central Asia in a Reconnecting Eurasia: Kyrgyzstan's Evolving Foreign Economic and Security Interests*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, p. 4.

and from Russia, Europe, and Turkey. Although there are other vital issues on the bilateral agenda (such as transboundary water and grain), Kazakhstan's control over transport routes has increasingly posed a policy headache for Bishkek.

Two other bordering nations, China and Uzbekistan, are critical to Bishkek's prioritization of transport diversification. In 2022, President Japarov declared that the decades-long project of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad was about to get launched this year. In his words, Kyrgyzstan needed this project like "air and water."⁹ The railroad would make goods cheaper and relieve the pressure of strong dependence on Kyrgyzstan's northern neighbor. While very attractive, the project is costly, and it remains to be seen whether construction indeed kicks off in 2022. That said, China is already one of the biggest economic players for Kyrgyzstan due to the massive trade volume between the two and large-scale loans to the Kyrgyz government. Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations remain relatively small in scope. However, Tashkent's central location for transport routes and openness for widening cooperation make it one of Kyrgyzstan's most attractive foreign policy partners.

Finally, the 2021 conflict at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border transformed Tajikistan into the top external threat and turned military preparedness into a strategic priority. Although border disputes are nothing new in the region, the 2021 clashes set a record for being the deadliest and involved, for the first time, physical occupation of several Kyrgyz border villages by Tajik troops. To their credit, the countries' leaders refrained from hostile rhetoric. However, with no

explicit high-level commitment to the non-use of force, further militarization of the border areas appears to be the highest risk.

Against the background of border clashes, calls grew in Kyrgyzstan for more security cooperation, with Turkey often singled out as a potential partner. The latter has already stepped up its engagement in Central Asia both on a bilateral basis and through the symbolic transformation of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States into the Organization of Turkic States. Kyrgyzstan's new leaders appear ready for closer ties with Ankara, at least to overcome the post-2015 conflict between the two over the Gülen movement's continued activity in Kyrgyzstan. The leaders of Kyrgyzstan recently announced the purchase of two Turkish drones, but it remains to be seen whether this is a harbinger of broader bilateral relations.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Policy

A relatively stable set of factors, such as the country's size or geographic location, defines the basic parameters of Kyrgyzstan's international relations. That said, over the past decades, the country's foreign policy has developed a few recognizable characteristics. At the risk of simplifying, three aspects could be highlighted.

The single biggest strength, or advantage, of Kyrgyz foreign policy is its commitment to developing relations with all its partners. This sounds like a routine description of the foreign policy of any country. However, in the regional context, such a

⁹ Sadyr Japarov, "Interview to Kabar News Agency," Kabar, May 30, 2022. (<http://kg.kabar.kg/news/magabailyktyn-keregi-zhok-prezident-sadyr-zhaporovdun-kezektegi-maegi/>).

[bailyktyn-keregi-zhok-prezident-sadyr-zhaporovdun-kezektegi-maegi/](http://kg.kabar.kg/news/magabailyktyn-keregi-zhok-prezident-sadyr-zhaporovdun-kezektegi-maegi/)).

narrative is essential to exclude the “one patron” strategy. Kyrgyzstan’s external dependence is disproportionately tied to a few foreign policy partners. If in the early 1990s such dependence was an acceptable price to pay for overcoming existential insecurity, today it has become an obstacle to more sustainable development.

Once known as a “multi-vector” foreign policy, the approach to widening the map of international engagement is not free of risk. Politicized comments warning about the risks of “milking two cows” are not uncommon in Kyrgyzstan. However, switching to a single cow should not be the only alternative. Kyrgyzstan’s needs in transport corridors, energy supply, and external trade demand diversification. Combined with adequate planning and communication to mitigate risks, the efforts to diversify the country’s international partnerships, if sustained, will serve Kyrgyzstan’s needs well.

Two characteristics of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign policy stand to jeopardize the above priorities. The first is the impact of turbulent domestic political processes on foreign policy making. While not a model democracy, Kyrgyzstan has a relatively dynamic political system in which the ruling regimes are chronically insecure. Its impact on foreign relations has been detrimental. At various points, both the government and opposition proved to be prone to unnecessary nationalistic rhetoric, only damaging the country’s international credibility in the process. Also, using ambassadorial jobs to reward political allies or stifle vocal critics results in sidelining

professional diplomats and does not help the country’s international relations.

The second weakness of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign policy approach is its habitual reliance on external aid for every priority issue. In some ways, this is a legacy of the 1990s, when Kyrgyzstan lacked resources and its external partners were ready to help. However, the chronic need for external assistance reflects not only the country’s weak economy but also low levels of competence and high levels of corruption. Kyrgyzstan’s leaders should realize that domestic resource mobilization is critical to moving forward with any strategic foreign policy goal. Relying on the “other side” will only prolong the country’s dependence and vulnerability. There is a growing understanding of this problem in the country. The 2018 country development program mentioned the need to move away from the “dependency approach” (“izhdivencheskiy podkhod”). Recently, Prime Minister Akylbek Japarov claimed Kyrgyzstan was to “abandon the ‘poor’ country syndrome.”¹⁰ It remains to be seen whether Japarov meant what he said.

Looking Ahead

The dynamics of international relations in Central Asia in the near future will significantly depend on developments outside the region, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, relations between Russia and the West, and developments in Afghanistan, to name a few. Under the circumstances, Kyrgyzstan’s foreign policy will feature two priorities.

¹⁰ Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, “Akylbek Japarov: My otkazyvayemsya ot sindroma ‘bednoy’ strany,” [Akylbek Japarov: We are abandoning the “poor”

country syndrome]’, November 18, 2021. (<https://www.gov.kg/ru/post/s/20602-akylbek-zhaparov-biz-zhakyrlk-sindromunan-bash-tartuudabyz>).

First, Kyrgyzstan will stick to a risk-averse position on increasingly sensitive issues. One priority will be to have Moscow remain content with Bishkek's "impartial" position on Ukraine as well as on Kyrgyzstan's relations with other bigger powers. This task is not easy. Recent talk about Kyrgyzstan and the U.S. signing a new cooperation agreement have caused detailed and critical commentaries in Russian papers. On a different subject, Russia has long resisted the idea of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad. President Japarov recently reported that he had finally convinced Putin of the importance of the project for Kyrgyzstan's needs.¹¹

Second, addressing Kyrgyzstan's critical economic vulnerabilities will remain a longer-term priority. To the extent it succeeds in finding resources, Kyrgyzstan will move forward with large-scale projects on energy and transport. China and Uzbekistan appear to be strategic actors, offering East to West transport corridors, regardless of progress on the

railroad project. An increasingly difficult situation with electricity production means Kyrgyzstan will have to work on expanding production but also look for greater energy trade/transit cooperation with its neighbors, particularly Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

The scope and pace of Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy initiatives will also depend on domestic political dynamics. After three regime overthrows in fifteen years, the specter of a fourth continues to haunt the government. Politically insecure regimes tend to subordinate foreign policy tasks to priorities of political struggle. A solution is simple yet difficult: a government that is more legitimate, more competent, and less corrupt. The task repeatedly failed in the past, making the stakes even higher today.

Shairbek Dzhuraev is the co-founder and president of Crossroads Central Asia, and currently a Volkswagen Foundation postdoctoral research fellow at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.



¹¹ Azattyk, "'Yest' dva marshruta'. Kak budet stroit'sya zheleznaya doroga Kitay-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan," [There are two routes. How the China-Kyrgyzstan-

Uzbekistan railway will be built] (<https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31878609.html>).