



## **DO NOT PAY YOUR RENT WITH A BLANK CHECK: AN OVERVIEW OF EXTERNAL RUSSIAN MILITARY BASES**

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With the world's political scenarios changing, Russia's foreign military "footholds" might be changing in the near future. This is an analysis of the bases, their purposes and the relationship between Russia and hosting countries. Using the tenant-landlord analogy to explain, many of these bases differ in importance. For some of these bases no rent is paid. In some much rent is paid and in all the cases there exists a 'flirting politics' between the landlord host countries and their Russian tenant.

Arguably the strangest, most puzzling relationship in Central Asia is between Russia and Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan hosts air bases of two powers at the same time. U.S. and Russian military bases have for years been the subject of bargaining between Bishkek, Moscow and Washington. U.S military base "Manas" in Bishkek for instance has been an irritating subject for Moscow for approximately five years. In 2009, the second President of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiev balanced this subject between Moscow and Washington and in the end tricked both. On one hand, he promised to Moscow that he would close down the U.S military air base in exchange for a \$2 billion loan while in the other hand he still received \$150 million in rent from Washington. This was justified because Manas was renamed a 'Transit Hub' instead of a base on paper<sup>1</sup>.

Last year's newly elected President, Almazbek Atambaev developed plans of his own. He became convinced that both bases should be withdrawn by 2014. The excuse for the Russian air base to be withdrawn is that Russia did not pay the rent for last four years, which totals about \$15 million. As a Former Soviet Republic, Kyrgyzstan remains important to Russia due to its proximity to China. It further serves as the linkage between other Russian bases in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. While the United States never failed in paying its rent to Kyrgyzstan, the relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan remained nonetheless uncomfortable. For the U.S., the base is essential because of its operations in Afghanistan, a former war zone for the Former Soviet Union.

Russia also faces an equally difficult task in reaching a final deal with Azerbaijan. The rent for the Gabala Radar Station is still under negotiations. Azerbaijan's position is that rent should be increased from \$7 million to \$300 million.<sup>ii</sup> While the Gabala Radar Station may not play an operational role for deployed troops, it is certainly valued for its intelligence value given its strategic location. Initially the station was launched in 1985 because of Iran and Turkey but its location enables it to monitor Central Africa to the Indian Ocean. Given Russia's concern over the U.S.-proposed Missile Shield for Central Europe, Russia countered with the idea of Russia and NATO establishing joint air and missile defenses in Europe,<sup>iii</sup> a plan that included Gabala.

Aside from the possible increase of rent and complicated negotiations, Russia as well as Iran, is concerned about the increasing close defense relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel. The Azerbaijani- Israel Defense deal is a precedent in the region. Even though there were attempts of Central Asian states to buy surveillance equipment from Israel before, such large-scale arms deals never took place. There was always a prevalent fear in Israel that Russia as major arms exporter might retaliate by selling arms to Iran and Syria. What also makes this different is that Azerbaijan has funds to afford such a multimillion deal.

Nonetheless, the recent arms deal between Azerbaijan and Israel brought hysteria to Iran as well. In recent months, tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran escalated over alleged cyber warfare between the two. The attack on the Israeli ambassador in Baku and the murder of journalist Rafiq Tagi was seen as "orchestrated acts" by Iran. Although there have been no public statement supporting embargo or attack against Iran, official Baku is becoming more pro-Western.<sup>iv</sup> This means that the range of influence in the region is narrowing for Russia. Like Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan is another link in a chain for Russia, this time given its military presence in South Ossetia and Armenia.

Bases are not only significant for land movement but along the seas and oceans as well. Such a struggle has been in existence since imperial times. Russia has four ways of access into the open ocean: the Baltic Sea, Arctic Ocean, Black Sea and Pacific Ocean. None of these however are either absolutely secure or convenient in geographical or strategic terms. All of these "open ocean accesses" are located on the peripheries of vast space occupied by Russia. In order to pass from one sea to another, Russia needs to crook around the continent of Europe or Asia where they have no military bases along the route.

In the Far East for example, Japanese Islands form a ring or "blocking curtain" around its largest and only Pacific port – Vladivostok. Along the northern shores towards

Alaska and the Arctic, direct access to the Pacific Ocean leaves no stable lines of communication. Access through the Baltic Sea is equally problematic. With Germany having access to the Danish passages, England's position in the North Sea can lock any Russian attempts to maneuver or exit in Northern Europe.

This leaves the Black Sea. Despite the blockage of the Bosphorus by Turkey, Russia successfully renegotiated a basing agreement with Ukraine for another 25 years. The issue of the Bosphorus has remained as the core of Russian policy in the Middle East for nearly 150 years. The Black Sea connects through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to the Mediterranean, where historically all the "great" powers of Europe (with Great Britain leading) closed and isolated the Russian navy.<sup>v</sup> For Bismarck, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles were "the keys of the house" that locked Russia's back door in the south, preventing it from venturing into the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean. From the moment of creation of Black Sea Fleet in 1881, the Anatolian coast has remained strategically important. This perceived weak point of Turkey could be used for landing troops into the rear and flank of the Turkish army should they move towards the Caucasus. The extreme northernmost point of the Bosphorus, Gulf Inada is convenient parking for the fleet. The extreme eastern point, the Bay of Ereğli can also serve as a basis for landing on the Anatolian coast.

Russia's involvement in the Mediterranean is essential not just because of historical Russian-Arab relations but also to counter Turkey's claims of an exclusive economic zone in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Again driven by desire to have full exit access to the ocean the naval base at Tartus, Syria was established in 1971 during the Soviet Union era. From 2010-2012, Russia carried out the modernization of the base thus enabling it to accommodate heavy ships including cruisers and aircraft carriers. As early as 2010, the Russian Defense Ministry planned additional bases, not only in Tartus but also on the island of Socotra (Yemen) and the port of Tripoli (Libya).<sup>vi</sup> However, the 'Arab Spring' may have placed those plans under a question mark. Due to possible foreign intervention in Syria, the base and its possible protection for Russia is particularly important in terms of geopolitical confrontation in the Middle East. If Bashar Assad's regime falls, the new government would not be eager to allow Russia to continue usage of the naval base in Tartus. This means that there is a danger for Russia to lose its only existing military port in the Mediterranean.

For now there are additional places that do not pose a problem for Russia at the moment. Such locations are Armenia, Tajikistan, Belarus and South Ossetia. Not only are they very secure, Russia inhabits them 'rent-free.' To keep itself in play strategically, Russia's Foreign Minister on Wednesday endorsed a proposal to allow NATO to use a southern Russian air base as a hub for transport of supplies to Afghanistan, suggesting it was "premature to withdraw troops from the war-torn country."<sup>vii</sup> Such an unprecedented offer may change the composition of Central Asia politically not to mention its traditional supply routes. Regardless, Russia still has to assure its continued military presence on its Southern and Eastern spheres of interest. Losing one-third of its military presence would not be strategically beneficial for Russia, especially considering rising tensions in the Middle East.

## Endnotes:

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- <sup>i</sup> Алмазбек хочет денег с России и США, Author: Alexander Artemiev. Published February 25, 2012. Available [online] at URL: [http://m.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/02/25\\_a\\_4012217.shtml](http://m.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/02/25_a_4012217.shtml) [accessed on March 11, 2012]
- <sup>ii</sup> *Азербайджан наносит ответный радар* Author: Владимир Соловьев Published February 29, 2012, Available [online] at URL: <http://www.kommersant.ru/pda/kommersant.html?id=1882955> , [accessed on March 11, 2012]
- <sup>iii</sup> Russia's position on missile defense in Europe Published at Ria Novosti , Available [online] at URL: <http://en.rian.ru/infographics/20110921/167000140.html> [accessed on March 20, 2012]
- <sup>iv</sup> Зафар Гулиев: Иран — Азербайджан: если завтра война... , Published February 3, 2012, Available [online] at URL: <http://news.rambler.ru/12678774/> [accessed on March 12, 2012]
- <sup>v</sup> *Краткий стратегический очерк Балтийского и Черноморского театров войны.* Available [online] at URL: [http://militera.lib.ru/h/petrov\\_ma/01.html](http://militera.lib.ru/h/petrov_ma/01.html) [accessed on March 22, 2012]
- <sup>vi</sup> *ВМФ России опроверг информацию о модернизации морской базы в Сирии* published January 13, 2010 Available [online] at URL: <http://lenta.ru/news/2010/01/13/tartus1/> [accessed on March 22, 2012]
- <sup>vii</sup> *Russia may give NATO a base for Afghan supply runs* Published at Reuters, Available [online] at URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/14/us-russia-afghanistan-idUSBRE82D16P20120314> [accessed on March 22, 2012]