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The fate of CSTO military airbase at Kant (Kyrgyzstan)

A potential closure of the Russian military airbase at Kant has been envisaged in a recent statement of Kyrgyzstan's President Atambayev: this evolution will represent a very delicate issue which will change the regional geopolitical and geostrategic scenario, opening to new military alliances and security cooperation framework.

Since 2003 Kant military base operates under the CSTO umbrella, after Russian significant pressures to obtain military concessions in Central Asia in order to balance US military presence in the post-Soviet space: as a matter of fact, since 2001 US and NATO troops stationed at the Manas (Kyrgyzstan) and at Karchi-Khanabad airbases (Uzbekistan) to support military operations in Afghanistan.

After the decision of Kyrgyz Parliament in 2013 to close the US military base at Manas, Russia has enhanced its role of key partner for Kyrgyz security. Until then, Kyrgyzstan benefited of a profitable strategic geopolitical role, hosting at the same a Russian and an American military base in its territory. In addition to military cooperation, Manas was an important economic source for the Kyrgyz national budget: Kyrgyzstan annually earned \$140 million from air base lease, taxes, and other payments. Moscow has engaged itself to compensate this loss helping Kyrgyzstan to modernize its armed forces and provided Bishkek with a \$1.2 billion military package. The Kyrgyzstan-Russia agreement on the use of the base was extended for 49 years in 2009 and this deal was signed by the former President Bakiyev.

Even if he is considered as a pro-Russian, Atambayev's orientation appears to be addressed to the domestic scenario, waiting for the Presidential elections scheduled in 2017. However, a closure of Kant airbase appears unrealistic in the near future, mainly because both Moscow and Bishkek benefit of this. For Kyrgyzstan, CSTO military presence in the Kant airbase is a guarantee of stability, given the national army could be not able to face security threats linked to Islamic terrorism. For Russia Kant is an air force component of the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Force: Russian military presence in Kyrgyzstan (and Tajikistan) aims to maintain stability on its southern borders.

Moreover Russia has long-term plans in the country, pushing to create a unified military base combining all of the various facilities (in addition to Kant, Russia holds a weapon test range in Karakol, a signals centre in Kara-Balt, a radio-seismic laboratory in Mayly-Suu).

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