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Kyrgyzstan and Russia: monitoring the Ferghana Valley

During a bilateral meeting held in Moscow at the end of June, Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev has changed its approach aimed to progressively reduce Russian military presence in the country, envisaging a potential closure of the Kant military airbase, which operates under the CSTO umbrella.

Even if Kyrgyz President expressed the need to modernize Kant airbase, but not its expansion, Atambayev has also invited Russia to establish a military training base in Southern Kyrgyzstan (Batken region), which appears more strategic to prevent the country from external threats such as transnational terrorist attacks.

Effectively, the idea to locate a military training base in Southern Kyrgyzstan could help the country to increase domestic security, given that this region is a portion of the Ferghana Valley, a transnational area shared with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan which is traditionally unstable and source of the main threats to the regional political stability, because it is affected by a combination of several problems.

Firstly, the hard competition over scarce resources (water and land) in an overpopulated area has frequently triggered tensions and clashes among different ethnic groups. Furthermore Ferghana Valley is the traditional hotbed of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia, where the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) – which was one of the most dangerous radical group in the region – moved its first steps. After 1991, some of the most relevant explosion of violence happened in Ferghana Valley (IMU's armed incursions in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 1999, Andijan 2005, interethnic clashes in Osh in 2010 between Kyrgyz and Uzbek-Kyrgyz)

We should observe that the proposal to establish military training centers in Southern Kyrgyzstan is not new: in 2011 the former Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbayeva invited both Russia and United States to realize military training bases, also considering that Moscow and Washington already held two military bases in the Kyrgyz soil, respectively Kant and Manas.

In addition to the traditional geopolitical rivalry between Russia and United States, the opposition of Uzbekistan was determinant to postpone the realization of these projects, mainly because the former Uzbek President Islam Karimov perceived these military training centers as a threat to the national sovereignty, given that their proximity to the Uzbek border.

Now the regional scenario has changed: the current Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev will not probably oppose to this evolution, even if it is necessary to solve tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan linked to border demarcation and land property.

Fabio Indeo - *PhD holder in Geopolitics at University of Trieste and non-resident fellow research at Center for Energy Governance and Security (EGS South Korea)*