



China's Reaction to Kyrgyzstan's 'Tulip Revolution' by Matthew Oresman

The surprisingly rapid opposition takeover of the Kyrgyz government has significant implications for nations across the region, including China, which have watched these developments closely. While Russia and the United States maintain military bases in Kyrgyzstan, China is the only outside power that actually borders Kyrgyzstan. China has developed strong ties with Kyrgyzstan since the Central Asian republic gained independence, and Beijing has used these ties to fulfill multiple foreign policy goals, particularly in the area of counterterrorism, domestic security, economic cooperation, and diplomatic and strategic positioning.

China has reacted to the Kyrgyz revolution with muted rhetoric. Beijing has let Russia take the lead in responding to developments and has refrained from asserting its desires publicly. Officially, the Foreign Ministry has merely stated "China hopes the situation in Kyrgyzstan turns stable at an early date... As a friendly neighbor of Kyrgyzstan, China is paying close attention to the development of the situation and wishes social order there restored to a normal state as soon as possible." Additionally, the border crossing to Kyrgyzstan that was closed at the start of the revolt has been reopened. While China has yet to exert significant influence on the evolving situation, other than telephone diplomacy and demarches to the new government to protect Chinese citizens in Kyrgyzstan, China may still assert itself if its interests are threatened. This was the subtext of SCO Secretary General Zhang Deguang's statement that he has "deep concern over the current complex situation" and that it is "important now that the course of further events in Kyrgyzstan develop in line with the Constitution, that law and order return to the society, and that national concord and peace be properly provided." As the new government takes shape, China will weigh several factors in deciding its next course of action, including the makeup of the new government, its position toward the Uyghur diaspora, security threats created by the new power vacuum, and the effect of a potentially democratic Kyrgyzstan on Beijing's regional strategic interests.

The first factor shaping China's reaction is the shape and makeup of the new Kyrgyz government. As of now, the majority of new leaders are former government officials, not grassroots activists. All these leaders, including acting President Kurmanbek Bakiev, former acting internal security coordinator and opposition leader Felix Kulov, acting Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva, and former Foreign Minister and current leader of the opposition Party for Justice Muratbek Imanaliev, have a long history of engaging China over the course of their careers [note: all of these titles and positions are subject to rapid change]. For now it seems that they have no interest in changing Kyrgyzstan's relationship with China.

Acting Foreign Minister Otunbayeva has stated publicly that Kyrgyzstan will continue to develop its foreign policy in line with the status quo and that China is an important friend and economic partner. Still, anti-China rhetoric is a large part of the opposition's base. The Asky riots in 2002, ostensibly a protest against the Kyrgyz government ceding too much territory to China in negotiations but at its heart an anti-Akayev protest, helped galvanize the opposition. The five deaths caused by government forces forced then Prime Minister and now acting President Kurmanbek Bakiev to resign. And while there has been little anti-China rhetoric by the opposition since the Asky riots, the political situation may restrain the new government's embrace of China, lest a rival opposition leader resurrect the old anti-government/anti-China chants.

Second, Beijing will keep a close eye on how the new government handles the Uyghur diaspora in Kyrgyzstan. With approximately 50,000 Uyghurs living in Kyrgyzstan, in addition to the thousands of shuttle traders going back and forth between Xinjiang, Kyrgyzstan represents one of the largest Uyghur populations outside China. Prior to the revolution, China did an efficient job of convincing the Kyrgyz government, as well as other Central Asian regimes, to do Beijing's "dirty work" when it came to the Uyghur populations. The former governments helped monitor Uyghur activities in their country, prevented many Uyghur associations from organizing fully as political groups, and arrested and extradited Uyghurs as needed. Under a new, more democratic government, Uyghur groups may be able to develop more politically. If allowed, they may aggressively seek to influence the situation in Xinjiang or organize the diaspora community more effectively. Both situations worry Beijing. If the Uyghurs of Kyrgyzstan are allowed to challenge Beijing more openly, or, alternatively, if democratic activists start penetrating China from Kyrgyzstan, Beijing may forcefully assert its interest to the Kyrgyz government and use all its influence, including ties to the as yet unreformed security branches, to make sure the situation does not get out of hand.

Third, Beijing, as always, is concerned about potential instability created by a power vacuum in Kyrgyzstan. While an interim government has taken power and new elections will be held in June, the unstable situation may allow radical Islamic groups to infiltrate more deeply into Kyrgyzstan and drug smuggling networks to more effectively establish their presence. Both situations create problems for Beijing, and not just because of the threat these groups could pose to stability in Xinjiang. China has come to recognize over the last decade that internal instability in Central Asian countries affects China's own national security, and a failed state on its borders requires a great deal of resources and attention, assets that China would rather focus on economic development and the

Taiwan situation. If China perceives a new threat, expect its leaders to exercise whatever influence and power they can before they have to consider new military and security options.

Finally, China is watching developments in Kyrgyzstan with an eye toward what it means for China's influence in the region. China has made impressive inroads into the region since the end of the Soviet Union both through bilateral engagement and the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Analysts and government officials in Beijing have voiced fears that the Kyrgyz revolution will provide an opportunity for the U.S. to more forcefully assert its presence there, as the new democratic government reaches out to new partners. China suspects that the U.S. was the hidden hand behind the revolution, and a new partnership between the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan could unravel many recent gains for China, especially in keeping the SCO an organization dominated by China. While this may be a knee-jerk reaction by Beijing, two recent *Xinhua* headlines highlight this concern: "U.S. Meddling in Central Asia Through Military, Economic Infiltration" and "US Influence in Central Asia To Rise After Change of Kyrgyzstan Government."

China is currently in "wait and see" mode when it comes to Kyrgyzstan. Beijing will likely continue to follow Russia's lead and not attempt to assert any strong influence on the new government until the Chinese leadership feels absolutely compelled. Only when the situation turns against China will Beijing decide to act, using a growing assortment of tools for influencing events in Central Asia. Until then, China may yet introduce a modicum of stability into the region and could be an important partner of the United States and Russia in helping to manage this rapidly changing situation.

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