
US AND RUSSIAN AIRBASES IN CENTRAL ASIA

VIVEK KAPUR

BACKGROUND

The Central Asian region comprises the former Soviet Socialist Republics that are since 1991 the newly independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and lie between the Caspian Sea and western China. This region occupies a central position in world geography. The region lay at the heart of the great Asian empires of the Mongols, Omayyads, Abbasids, Samanids, and Saljuquid Turks and was the base of Timur the Lame or Tamerlane who forayed into northern India also. Babur emerged from this region to invade India and establish the Mogul Empire.¹ Geo-politically the power that is able to control Central Asia is in a position to access all other parts of Asia as well as Eastern Europe and the Middle East with relative ease; this makes this area a hotbed of competition between the major global powers.

The ancient Silk trade route from China to Europe passed through Central Asia and led to the establishment of several important cities along its path. Some of these exist even today. This area was initially populated primarily by nomadic tribes which later settled into the cities as the benefits of this method of social organisation became apparent, with the trade routes between China, and other parts of East Asia, and Europe

Group Captain **Vivek Kapur** is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

1. Devendra Kaushik, *Central Asia in Modern Times*, (New Delhi: Prince Art Printers, 2011): p 5-22

XXX

getting established.² The nature of the land did not generate great agricultural systems here for lack of water among other reasons. By the 15th and 16th century, however, advances in irrigation had led to fairly well developed agricultural systems in Central Asia; and other crafts, sciences and literature also developed. Near constant wars and conflict between different political bodies embodied by the local Khanates led to decay in almost all cultural fields and agriculture over the 16th to mid-19th centuries.³

Imperial Russia slowly expanded eastwards, in search of new markets and resources to supplement its power. The expansion was facilitated by the fractured nature of the political entities in internally warring Central Asia. After several battles and wars, by the close of the 19th century and early 20th century, most of current Central Asia came to be occupied by Imperial Tsarist Russia.⁴ The Central Asian region was treated predominantly as a market for Russian goods, especially in view of British goods of superior quality / price crowding out Russian manufactures in most other markets, and a supplier of resources for Russian industries.

Over time, apart from Russian military personnel and the ruling classes ordinary Russian citizens, who moved to the Central Asian region in search of jobs, also came into contact with the indigenous people of Central Asia. This led to a fusion of cultures and greater understanding of each other.⁵ Basic development of the region, however, was apparently not of importance to Tsarist Russia at the time.

PASSAGE INTO UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS (USSR)'S CONTROL

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid pp 23-25.

4. Devendra Kaushik, *Central Asia in Modern Times*, (New Delhi: Prince Art Printers, 2011): p 26-48

5. Ibid. pp 65-76.

XXX

The Bolshevik revolution in Russia ushered in the formation of the Soviet Union. The Soviets expanded their power into Central Asia in a piecemeal manner with regions coming under their sway one by one. This process involved infiltration of Bolshevik thought and organisers into the regions. These infiltrators then established grassroots support for joining the Soviet Union amongst the local populations.⁶ Attempts by a few local ruling elites to stem the ingress of Bolshevik thought and ideology through political control was supported by the other great imperial power of the time, Great Britain. However, this contest was won by the Bolsheviks, in some part due to the close mingling of Russian and local ethnic groups coupled with the exploitative nature of the primarily feudal ruling system in vogue in the area, and Central Asia came under the sway of the then newly constituted Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).⁷

The Soviets formed separate republics in the Central Asian region, in three stages. The borders of these new republics were drawn apparently without too much thought about local considerations. Language and ethnicity appeared to be the two main drivers of the demarcation of the borders of the new Soviet Republics in Central Asia, -- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The demarcation of the borders was done in three stages in 1920, 1924 and 1930.⁸ Due to the ad hoc nature of border determination, several territories and populations that had traditionally been part of one political entity, ended up being placed in another.

Once the region was incorporated into the USSR, the Soviet leadership embarked upon its attempt to build a Soviet man as against people owing

6. A similar process is claimed by NATO and the West, supported government in Kiev, to be in progress at the current time with respect to the Russian annexation of the Crimea peninsula and allegations about the pro-Russian movement in parts of East and South Ukraine.

7. Kanisk, pp.77-95.

8. Ibid. pp. 202-213.

allegiance to different parts of the vast reaches of the USSR. Steps in formation of the Soviet man included use of the Cyrillic script in place of earlier scripts, imposition of the Russian language as the official language, modern education which included indoctrination of the local people into a common Soviet identity. National services were open for all the local populations to join. The armed forces saw induction of the Central Asian people as from other parts of the USSR. Local politics was dominated by politicians with leanings towards Moscow.⁹

SOVIET THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND DEPLOYMENTS OF FORCES

The main threat faced by the USSR, since the end of World War II came from the West comprising capitalist America and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). NATO had been formed specifically to check or even reverse the spread of Communism in Europe. Thus USSR's military might was oriented towards the West into Europe where NATO was located. The regions in the centre of the USSR were seen to be at relatively little risk. To the south, USSR faced a collection of third world countries with little military or economic might and these came into prominence for security reasons primarily when, established Western 'client states' such as Iran under the shahs of the Pahlavi dynasty, were set up with Western connivance¹⁰. To the east lay Communist China which was initially (at least till the early 1960s when a rift developed between the leadership of the two communist States)¹¹ seen as a client state or a sympathetic fellow Communist nation. The Far East saw some major military deployment due to the presence of US forces in Japan and unresolved territorial disagreements with Japan itself. The USSR's territorial disputes with Communist China were at that time less problematic.

Hence, the Central Asian region at the peak of Soviet power saw relatively

9. Ibid. pp 245-250. and Prof. K Warikoo Lectures on Central Asia, as part of the course SA639, during January and February 2014 at the Centre for Inner Asian Studies/ school of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University .

10. "Rise of Reza Khan", <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293359/Iran/32184/Rise-of-Reza-Khan>

11. "The Great Debate Documents of the Sino-Soviet Split", <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sino-soviet-split/>, accessed on March 15, 2014.

little military deployments by the Red Army and Red Air Force. In contrast, the portions of the USSR facing Western Europe were heavily militarised. The Soviets treated the region as a source of raw materials to feed industry in other parts of the USSR. Some light industry was, however, developed in the region. The USSR also set up its first and largest space launch and space training complex at Baikonur in current day Kazakhstan. New military equipment, including even submarines, were often tested in the Central Asian region due to its location deep within the USSR, far from the active western borders.¹² During World War II when the Nazi invasion threatened the western parts of the USSR, some military industries were shifted to the Central Asian region. Prominent in this shift is the relocation of Plant 85, which was earlier located outside Moscow and engaged in building civil aircraft, to Tashkent in Uzbekistan, where it came to be known as the Tashkent Aircraft Production Organisation (TAPO) or the Chkalov Plant.¹³

In Soviet times, the Central Asian region was seen as essential for overall security, especially as the region was considered to be the USSR's soft underbelly. The Central Asian Military District of the USSR was an important and powerful military region that sought to ensure stability of the USSR's borders and to provide security to the Soviet heartland while keeping a check on potentially hostile forces across the border in China and in the Muslim countries to the South and South West And South East.¹⁴ The Soviet Union's Afghan intervention in 1979 increased the importance of the region exponentially. The Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan provided the US with an opportunity to make this the Soviets' 'Vietnam' and, seizing upon this opportunity to put down its archrival in the Cold War, the US actively supported, armed and trained local warlords and extremist elements in Afghanistan. The Soviet intervention, thus, became a long drawn out 10-year-long war for the Soviet forces against insurgents who followed

12. Prof. K Warikoo, " Ethnicity and Politics in Central Asia", (Lecture in Room 237, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, February 11, 2014).

13. "Uzbek Plane Maker to Take Off Again", http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/2013/12/02/feature-01, accessed on 11 Feb 2014.

14. Igor Torbakov, "The West, Russia and China in Central Asia: What Kind of Game is Being Played in the Region?", <http://www.turkishweekly.net/article/204/the-west-russia-and-china-in-central-asia-what-kind-of-game-is-being-played-in-the-region.html>, accessed on March 17, 2014.

quasi-guerrilla tactics.¹⁵ Sustaining the war in Afghanistan required heavy use of the Soviet Central Asian Republics bordering Afghanistan.

SITUATION POST THE SOVIET UNION'S DEMISE

While the demise of the USSR, a mere two years after cessation of its active military involvement in Afghanistan led to a temporary fall in the importance of the region for Russia, the USSR's successor state, events after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US which led to America's declaration of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) have increased its importance in Russia's world view.¹⁶ When the USSR broke up, giving the Central Asian states independence, the military facilities located within the borders of these new states were handed over to them. Russia, however, still leased some of these erstwhile Soviet facilities such as the Baikonur cosmodrome located in Southern Kazakhstan. The US' and NATO's intervention in Afghanistan led to these Western countries seeking alternative routes of access to Afghanistan apart from the route through Pakistan as the latter has been beset by problems from the very start.¹⁷ The West's troubled relations with Iran did not allow for an Iran based access route. As an alternative to the Pakistan-based access routes to landlocked Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the UN sanctioned United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the US military forces' "Operation Enduring Freedom," hence, set up the Northern Distribution Network (NDN).¹⁸ The NDN was operationalised in 2010-11 and comprises a series of marine, rail and road lines of communication that join the Baltic and Caspian Seas to Afghanistan through Russia, the Caucasus and the

15. "Milestones: 1977–1980 The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978–1980", <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan>, accessed on March 30, 2014

16. Andrew Feickert, "U.S. Military Operations in the Global War on Terrorism: Afghanistan, Africa, the Philippines, and Colombia August 26, 2005", <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32758.pdf>, accessed on March 31, 2014.

17. Umar Hayat, "An Analysis of Logistic Support to the US and NATO in fghanistan: Is Pakistan Still Relevant?", <http://zameer36.com/an-analysis-of-logistic-support-to-the-us-and-nato-in-afghanistan-is-pakistan-still-relevant/>, accessed on April 1, 2014.

18. Northern Distribution Network (NDN)", <https://csis.org/program/northern-distribution-network-ndn>, accessed on 27 March 2014.

Central Asian states. This route, however, is as much as 3,500 km long and suffers from the need for frequent reloading of its throughput due to its multi-modal nature¹⁹, quite apart from the poor state of transport infrastructure along several major stretches.

The West, in the time immediately after the 9/11 attacks, looked at the newly independent Central Asian states as stepping stones into Afghanistan. The American push to make inroads into Central Asia while initially spurred by the imperative of maintaining open supply routes into Afghanistan in order to support the military and other operations, also aimed at establishing a presence in the strategically important areas in Russia's soft underbelly. The Afghanistan operations logistics issues extend to the planned withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan in 2014. This withdrawal involves moving out a large number of military and civilian personnel as well as substantial amounts of equipment. Substantial US inroads into Central Asia would also help ensure that the US is able to threaten Russia from both the south/ southeast as well as from the west. Such a situation would ensure that the US is in a position to retard, or even deny, any possibility of a Russian resurgence to be able to challenge the near absolute global hegemony exercised by the US since the demise of the Soviet Union.²⁰ The Central Asian region is also rich in important resources including oil and natural gas. This presence of important mineral resources is an additional factor in the US interest in establishing a presence in the region.²¹ This resulted in the US obtaining leases facilitating the use by Western forces of several air bases in the Central Asian region.

SITUATION AFTER THE 9/11 ATTACKS IN THE US: GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR (GWOT)

19. Equipment and stores need to be shifted from ships to railroad wagons and trucks based on the best means of transport available at different points along its length.

20. Su Huimin, "NATO a Dupe for Washington", <http://www.network54.com/Forum/155335/thread/1088528573/last-1088528573/NATO+a+dupe+for+Washington>, accessed on March 18, 2014.

21. Maj Paul J. Bellaire, "Back to the Future Thoughts on a Bipolar World Redux", *Aerospace Power Journal*, (Spring 2002), <http://www.au.af.mil/au/afri/aspj/airchronicles/apj/apj02/spr02/bellaire.html>, accessed on March 24, 2014.

XXX

Convinced that the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks resided in Afghanistan under the Taliban's protection, the US commenced military operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban and suspected Al Qaeda elements. To facilitate induction of forces, equipment and supplies to support military operations in Afghanistan, the USA obtained Pakistani cooperation to set up the NATO, ISAF, and US supply routes from the southern coast of Pakistan into Afghanistan. But, it also looked at obtaining access to airbases in Central Asia to support the Afghanistan operations. These requests met with initial success as the newly independent Central Asian states were interested in balancing Russia's influence in the area and trying to play one party against the other for their own benefit. Russia, however, expectedly viewed this development with concern, especially after having seen its earlier buffer in Europe having been incorporated into the European Union (EU) and NATO, thus, bringing potentially hostile forces up to the Russian border for the first time in over a century. This resulted in a struggle between the West and Russia. The former employed economic and political means to retain a foothold in Central Asia, while Russia tried through similar measures to get the West removed from the area. This undeclared struggle makes the progression of Russian and US bases in Central Asia a fascinating study.

RUSSIAN AIR-BASES IN CENTRAL ASIA

The demise of the USSR led to renewed interest in Central Asia by the Muslim states of the Middle East. Turkey, Iran and other Muslim states such as Pakistan saw an opportunity to increase their influence in this region based upon their common cultural and Islamic links. The leaderships of the central Asian states by and large rebuffed these advances in favour of maintaining close ties with Russia. The Radical Islamic regime established in Afghanistan by the Taliban led to the radical Islamic influence spreading into Central Asia across Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan. As radical

XXX

Islam spread into Central Asia, a need was felt by the states of the region for further means to increase their security. Russia also felt a need to bolster the security of these states for the sake of its own security interests threatened by the potential threat of radical Islam across its own borders. This was especially in view of Russia's experience in Chechnya²², as well as its geo-strategic interests in the region, which included forming and maintaining a buffer between itself and potentially hostile outside forces. Such a buffer that had existed in the past between Russia and the West. But, it had been eroded by the steady eastward expansion of the European Union (EU) and NATO. A similar push by the US, the West, and radical Islam was feared in Central Asia.

Moreover, Russia needed to check the fast paced moves of China that already treated Central Asia as a buffer for its western regions as it sought to fight religious extremism in Xingjian province. China was seen to be steadily encroaching into Central Asia through trade, building of infrastructure and entering into bilateral deals with individual Central Asian states to exploit the region's natural resources. Russia also sought to control resources, including strategic Uranium reserves, other important minerals and water and energy resources in the region. Thus a mixture of economic and security concerns drive Russia's interest in modern day Central Asia.

Several academics have opined that a new 'Great Game', the name given to Russo-British contest for ascendancy in Central Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries is unfolding again in Central Asia the difference being that this time the main players are Russia, the US, European Union (EU) and China. Russia has used economic incentives as well as the formation of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), documents for which were signed on May 15, 1992, in Tashkent by Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Subsequently, Azerbaijan, Georgia and

22. Mariya Yevsyukova, "The Conflict Between Russia and Chechnya", http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/full_text_search/AllCRCDOcs/95-5.htm, accessed on March 20, 2014.

Belarus joined CSTO.²³ The treaty came into force on April 20, 1994. In April 1999, the Protocol on prolongation of the treaty was signed by all of them, except for Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan. The main aims of CSTO are to combine efforts to curb terrorism and 'other security threats' in the region. But it also seeks to achieve closely coordinated military and technical co-operation and integration for collective security while also combating international crime, drug trafficking, and cyber threats.²⁴ The military component of the CSTO includes Russian military forces located in Central Asia to train local forces as well as to carry out necessary operations alongside local military forces. The Russian army's 201st Motorised infantry division has been based in Tajikistan since the demise of the USSR. As part of the CSTO it was used to combat the spill over of Islasmist forces from Afghanistan into Tajikistan.

In fact, Tajikistan was the first Central Asian state to formally request deployment of Russian troops on its territory. This division played an important role in controlling the path of the Tajik civil war in the mid 1990s. In 2004, the 201st Motorised Rifle Division started to hand over responsibility for the Afghan-Tajik border to Tajik forces, a process completed by 2005. Negotiations commenced in 1999 to transform the Russian 201st Motorised Rifle Division into a permanent Russian military base and these were completed in 2004. In return for this permanent military base, Russia has offered not payments but preferential treatment to Tajikistan in arms purchases, such as the Tajiks paying prices charged to Russian forces for weapons, etc. The erstwhile 201st Motorised Rifle Division now is part of the Rapid Collective Deployment Force and is based at Dushanbe. It also undertakes training of Tajik forces. It has shared access to the Tajik airbase of Ayni, about 10 km South West of Dushanbe, where Russian helicopters are based. In 2012 Russia won a deal on extending the tenure of its military base in Tajikistan by 30 years till 2042, but at the compromise of declaring a willingness to place Russian forces under fire if required in defence of Tajik

23. "Collective Security Treaty Organization", <http://mfa.gov.by/en/organizations/membership/list/cddd96a3f70190b1.html>, accessed on March 17, 2014.

24. Ibid.

interests and security.²⁵

In Kyrgyzstan, Russia maintains its only air base in Central Asia at the Kant air base, about 20 kilometres east of the capital Bishkek. Kant air base houses about 10 Sukhoi fighters in addition to helicopter and transport assets. This air base was originally set up as a Soviet Air Force base in 1941 with a pilot training task. On the break-up of the USSR, the base was handed over to Kyrgyzstan. In October 2003, it became Russia's first and only foreign air base when it became a part of the CSTO's Rapid Deployment Force. Russia and Kyrgyzstan agreed in 2012 to extend the lease for Kant air base by 49 years with an automatic extension every 25 years.²⁶ As part of this deal, the number of aircraft at Kant air base are to be increased and greater emphasis to be given to train Kyrgyz personnel.²⁷ Some disagreements between Russia and Kyrgyzstan over the lease of the base and the benefits the lease was to deliver to the host government appear to have been resolved satisfactorily and Russia has obtained an extension of the lease till at least 2032.²⁸ At the same time, it has stated that it is likely to double its aviation assets at Kant airbase and will proceed to use its equipment and personnel at the air base to help train and establish Kyrgyzstan's air force. With this agreement Russia has strengthened its position considerably in the Central Asia region especially across from the Chinese border. The lease extension of Kant air base and the increase in strength of aircraft assets there should enable a robust Russian or CSTO response to any contingency in the area.

An examination of open source satellite imagery of Kant Air base helps understand the capability that this base can enable from the fixed infrastructure point of view. The base has two parallel primary landing surfaces. The longer runway measures 2.67 km and appears to comprise relatively recently laid concrete. Orientation is Runway 29 L (left) and Runway 11R (Right). This primary runway has a 220-metre long under-

25. Operational Group of Russian Forces in Tajikistan", <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/ogrv-tajikistan.htm>, accessed on March 20, 2014.

26. "Russian Govt. Approves Kyrgyz Airbase Lease Extension to 49 Years", <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20090529/155119256.html>, accessed on March 21, 2014.

27. "Russia to Expand Kyrgyzstan Military Base", <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/103443>, accessed on 22 March 2014.

28. Ibid.

overrun towards the eastern end and a 183-metre long under/ over run towards the western end. The other runway to the north of this runway measures 2.67 km also but lacks prepared underruns or overruns. This second runway appears to be of much older and weathered concrete construction or to be partially of blacktop material. There are no runway markings visible on this surface. The two parallel runways are joined by two link taxi ways at their ends. There is a 2.58-km-long parallel taxi track to the north of the runways. This taxi track connects to the northern runway through four link taxi tracks. Four link taxi tracks connect the parallel taxi track to a 1.1 km long tarmac or aircraft parking apron. This size of apron should be able to accommodate as many as 50 to 60 large fighter aircraft such as the Sukhoi-Su-27/Su-30 in addition to up to 100 to 120 smaller aircraft such as MiG-21s, MiG-29s, or Su-25s. further north of these aircraft operating surfaces adjoining the apron lie buildings including air traffic services etc. in a google earth image dated October 20, 2013, what appear to be 32 MiG-21 variant aircraft along with four Su-25 fighters and two An-24/ 26 class of Medium transport aircraft are visible on the apron. From an examination of the runway markings, the newer concrete runway appears to be in current use while the next runway appears to be out of use at the time of the imagery as it lacks standard runway markings. Close examination of the google earth satellite images indicate that the aircraft apron and the second runway surfaces are in fairly bad condition and require urgent repair or resurfacing as wide cracks and breaks are clearly visible on these surfaces. Such condition of aircraft operating surfaces can cause damage to aircraft using these surfaces through loose fragments of the surface being sucked up in by jet engines and causing engine failure or being flung at high speeds by the jet exhaust and causing damage to aircraft in the vicinity. This indicates that despite the number of years that the airbase has been in use considerable refurbishment work still requires to be carried out. The Russian delay in carrying out this work could be a contributory factor in the reported Kyrgyz unhappiness with Russia's

presence at Kant air base.²⁹ The airbase has structures that correspond to typical locations for instrument landing systems, precision approach radar installations and airfield lighting facilities. From this, it can be concluded that the airbase is capable of sustaining all weather day and night operations. No revetments or hardened aircraft shelters can be discerned in the satellite image of the airfield. This leads to the implication that in a conventional war an attacking enemy air raid could destroy aircraft on the ground at Kant air base relatively easily as the airfield lacks hardened aircraft shelters.

The other air base, to which Russia has access in Central Asia, as mentioned earlier, is the Ayni air base outside Dushanbe in Tajikistan. Russian helicopters operate from this airbase as part of the Russian component of the CSTO's rapid reaction force. This Russian land component of this CSTO force was earlier known as the 201st Motorised Rifle Division. This air base had fallen into a state of disrepair in the years after the demise of the USSR and was rebuilt by India at a cost of \$70 million.³⁰ The air base has one main runway of 2.76 km length with overruns of 270 to 300 meters at each end. Runway orientation is 08/26. A 2.58-km-long parallel taxi track lies north of the runway and this is connected to the runway by five link taxi tracks. Small about 50-60-metre wide aprons exist at the ends of the runways and parallel taxi track to facilitate aircraft ground manoeuvres and turnaround. There is one large aircraft parking apron of dimensions 117metres x 460 metres. A small loop taxi track is positioned to the north east of the apron. Along this loop taxi track and along the Western half of the parallel taxi track there are several Hardened Aircraft Shelters (HAS) and open revetments for aircraft and equipment. Along the shoulders of the runway can be seen installations for instrument landing systems, precision approach radar and airfield lighting to facilitate night operations. Other revetments along the shoulders of the aircraft operating surfaces are in all likelihood locations of airfield defence missile systems and air

29. Bakyt Baimatov, "Growing Uncertainty In Kyrgyz-Russian Relations", <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5784>, accessed on March 23, 2014.

30. "Ayni Air Force Base also Known as Gissar Air Base", <http://www.healthcare.reachinformation.com/Ayni%20Air%20Base.aspx>, accessed on March 22, 2014.

XXX

defence artillery guns. This air base corresponds to a full-fledged frontline airfield configured for war, with adequate protection for assets as well as defensive and offensive firepower. This is not surprising as the airfield was rebuilt as a front line military airfield by Indian personnel under Indian Air Force guidance. In its current use it houses only helicopters that belong to Tajikistan as well as those that are a part of Russia's contribution to the CSTO's Rapid Collective Deployment Force.

In Google earth imagery dated November 09, 2013, in addition to 10 utility helicopters of the Mi-8/17 class there are 10 light straight wing aircraft and two medium transport aircraft visible at the airfield. While capable from the infrastructure point of view there seem to be no combat airpower deployed at Ayni airfield at least in early November 2013.

US AIRBASES IN CENTRAL ASIA

As stated earlier, after the 9/11 attacks, in addition to the land routes that the US put in place to facilitate operations in Afghanistan, it also sought air bases on lease from the Central Asian countries. At the time the US gained access to the Kashi-Khanabad (called K2 by the Americans) airbase in Southern Uzbekistan. In addition, the US also obtained the Manas airbase located 23 km north of the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek on lease before its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.³¹ Each of these airbases housed about 1,000 American soldiers most of whom were part of the US Air Force's (USAF)'s Expeditionary Air base Units. These bases provide refuelling and other transit facilities to troops moving to and from Afghanistan. In addition some quantities of equipment are housed here for onward shipment to Afghanistan based forces.

Establishment of US air bases was viewed with concern by both Russia and China, in addition the members of the Shanghai Cooperation

31. Lionel Beehner, "ASIA: U.S. Military Bases in Central Asia", <http://www.cfr.org/russia-and-central-asia/asia-uzsz-military-bases-central-asia/p8440?breadcrumb=%2Fregion%2F269%2Fuzbekistan>, accessed on March 23, 2014.

XXX

Organisation (SCO), of which both Russia and China are founder members, took a poor view of an American presence in the area. In 2005 the US took issue with Uzbekistan on human rights issues.³² After being censured by the US on its human rights record by America, Uzbekistan retaliated by denying the US use of the K2 air base and going back to rejoin the CSTO which it had earlier shunned in favour of building relations with the US.³³ This left the US with just the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan as its sole air base in Central Asia. K2 air base has one runway orientated 07/25 and a long discontinuous taxi track with 30 open revetments able to house one large fighter of the F-15 or Su-27 class each.³⁴ There are also four large aircraft parking aprons and all other facilities expected at a frontline airbase. Thus with the sheer space and facilities offered by K2, not to mention the relative proximity of this air base to Afghanistan, its loss is a major blow to US interests.

The remaining US air base at Manas lies 20km north of Bishkek. This air base has a 4-km long main runway with orientation 08/26. A parallel taxi track, of length 2.66 km, extends about two thirds of the way from the 08 end of the runway. Five link taxi tracks join the parallel taxi track to the runway. There are six large aircraft aprons for parking of aircraft and each of these is able to park more than four large transport aircraft. Space measuring 1.5 km x 650 metres exists towards the southwest side of the airfield complex for the US transit facility linked ground infrastructure. Thus, this air base is ideally suited to the transit transport aircraft operations required by US led forces in Afghanistan. As a matter of interest the US leased Manas air base lies a mere 38 km, as the crow flies, from the Russian Kant air base. This is probably the closest non-belligerent deployment ever of the two sides'

32. Ibid.

33. Robin Wright and Ann Scott Tyson, "U.S. Evicted From Air Base In Uzbekistan", <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/29/AR2005072902038.html>, accessed on March 23, 2014.

34. Careful examination of Google Earth imagery of K2 air base.

military air forces. However, indications are that Kyrgyzstan will follow through with its demand for the US to vacate Manas air base by July 2014 when the US and NATO deployment in Afghanistan ceases.³⁵ The US still is likely to require a transit airbase to facilitate smooth withdrawal of its own and allied forces. In preparation for moving out of Manas air base, the West, led by the US, is already reported to be using an air base in Romania as an alternative to Manas.³⁶ This Romanian air base is in eastern Romania and is called "Forward Operating Site Mihail Kogalniceanu", or "MK" for short.³⁷

In discussing US air bases in Central Asia, mention should be made of a few more arrangements made by the US or / and its allies with Central Asian states. In May 2009, it was announced that Uzbekistan had given the US and its allies transport aircraft transit facilities at the cargo airport located close to the city of Novoi. The airport was renovated by South Korea which country also facilitated the lease agreement between the US and Uzbekistan despite the earlier falling out between the two over US criticism of Uzbekistan's human rights record. With a 4 km long runway and three large aircraft parking aprons, this base is well suited to the US and NATO's transit facilities requirements especially as the future of other facilities in the region is uncertain. Novoi takes some of the pressure off Manas air base and will provide a fall back once Manas airbase's transit facility is closed down later this year.³⁸ Even a cursory examination of this air base shows that it has limited military potential and so should not find too much disfavour with Russia and China as long as the use is not extended past the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Temez air base in Southern Uzbekistan has been used since at least between 2005 and 2009 by German and NATO

35. "Russian Ally Kyrgyzstan Sets US Air Base Closure Deadline", <http://www.voanews.com/content/russian-ally-kyrgyzstan-sets-us-airbase-closure-date/1686063.html>, accessed on March 22, 2014. March 2014

36. Agha Iqbal Haroon, "A US Journey to Romania from Kyrgyzstan", <http://www.eturbonews.com/39204/us-journey-romania-kyrgyzstan>.

37. Ibid.

38. Deirdre Tynan, "Uzbekistan: Karimov Gives Washington the Air Base it Needs for Afghan Operations", <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav051109a.shtml>, accessed on March 23, 2014.

forces for transit to and from Afghanistan.³⁹ Temez boasts of a 3-km-long runway and 3.5 km of taxi tracks along with two large aircraft aprons.⁴⁰ These features apart, it is the runway length that enables heavy transport aircraft to operate from here along with its proximity to Afghanistan that are its main advantages. These operational issues irrespective, in Germany protests were on regarding this German “cooperation” with an ‘oppressive regime’ in Uzbekistan in terms of payments to Uzbekistan for use of the Temez air base.⁴¹ Both Navoi and Temez provide the US and its allies some respite from the pressure they were under with regard to lack of airbases close to the Afghan theatre of operations.

Though not publicised as much, the US has obtained access to use almost all military airfields in Turkmenistan. These include the capital Ashkabat’s airport, the airfield at Nebit Dag and Mary-2. The goods transiting through these airfields comprise military equipment including ammunition while the agreement was for “non lethal” supplies to be allowed transit through Turkmenistan territory.⁴² Russian concern about this US presence in Turkmenistan has been much more muted possibly because Turkmenistan from the time of its independence has been furthest from Russia’s influence as compared to other Central Asian countries and its distance from Russia proper may be another factor in a lower threat perception from foreign forces on its territory.⁴³

INDIA’S MAIDEN AIR BASE EFFORT IN CENTRAL ASIA

In the late 1990s, at the time that India was negotiating with Russia for the major Sukhoi Su-30MKI deal and other military security issues, including

39. “Germany’s Payments For Military Base In Uzbekistan Unveiled”, http://www.rferl.org/content/germany_temez_uzbekistan_eu_sanctions/3538998.html, accessed on March 23, 2014.

40. Careful examination of Google Earth satellite images of Temez air base.

41. “Germany’s Payments For Military Base In Uzbekistan Unveiled”, http://www.rferl.org/content/germany_temez_uzbekistan_eu_sanctions/3538998.html, accessed on March 23, 2014.

42. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, “Turkmenistan: Secret U.S. Base For Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran Campaigns”, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/turkmenistan-secret-u-s-base-for-afghanistan-iraq-iran-campaigns/20411>, accessed on March 25, 2014.

43. Nikolai Sokov, “The Not-So-Great Game in Central Asia”, PONARS Policy Memo No. 403, Monterey Institute of International Studies December 2005

taking the old Soviet era aircraft carrier *Admiral Gorshkov* off Russia's hands and negotiating the 10 year lease of a nuclear powered Akula-II class submarine, India entered into negotiations with Tajikistan to refurbish the old Soviet era air base at Ayni which was in an acute state of disrepair. At the time, there appeared to be a tacit understanding between India, Tajikistan and Russia that after the air base had been refurbished it would be India's first foreign base and India would base a unit of Russian / Soviet origin fighter or helicopter aircraft there. After the base was refurbished at a cost of \$70 million by India, however, the earlier understanding fell apart and in the face of suspected Russian pressure Tajikistan backtracked on permitting Ayni to be an Indian base. After completion of the refurbishment of Ayni air base, India has had two Indian officers posted as commanders of the base before it was handed over to the Tajikistan government. No explanation for this has been found, at least in open sources.⁴⁴ In informal interactions with Russia specialists at think tanks level interactions, it has been gleaned that the slow movement of India towards a closer relationship with the West in general and the US in particular worried the Russians that India may be moving from being a friend of Russia to being a member of the American camp.⁴⁵ Events of that period, including the civil nuclear deal, contracts to purchase major weapons systems from the US and Europe instead of from Russia fuelled this impression in Russia. Already wary of a Western presence in Central Asia, Russia elected to play strategically safe and keep India out of the region at least in terms of an Indian military presence.⁴⁶

Russia has been in control of Central Asia since the time that Imperial Tsarist Russia expanded into this region in the 19th century. On formation of the USSR, this control was further consolidated. The Central Asian states are a construct of Soviet political engineering and gained independence and separate existence for the first time after the demise of the USSR in 1991. Russia sees itself as having genuine interests and rights in this region.

44. Joshua Kucera, "India Proposes Greater Cooperation With Russia In Central Asia", <http://www.eurasianet.org/taxonomy/term/2883>, accessed on March 17, 2014.

45. "ASIA: U.S. Military Bases in Central Asia", <http://www.cfr.org/russia-and-central-asia/asia-us-military-bases-central-asia/p8440>, accessed on March 12, 2014.

46. Informal discussions with academicians from Russia and Indian Russia experts in the Think tank Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS).

Similarly, Russia sees itself having similar and genuine security interests in Ukraine. The events unfolding in eastern Ukraine, especially after the absorption of Crimea by Russia are quite likely to breed insecurities amongst the Central Asia states. Such insecurity could have at the extremes two possible results. These states may elect to go in for closer ties with the US and the West or China in return for security guarantees against Russian attempts to annex their territories. Alternatively, given their history these states may elect to bind themselves closer to Russia and thus seek security akin to that enjoyed by them when they were part of the USSR. The fact that these states were the only parts of the erstwhile Soviet Union to overwhelmingly oppose dismemberment of the USSR could point towards the second of these two possibilities as being more likely.

However, whichever way the situation progresses, it is likely that other outside powers', such as China and India, attempts to gain a foothold in the region are likely to become more difficult in a situation of more open and intensive US and Russian jockeying for the upper hand in Central Asia. That said, given the fact that India enjoys good relations with both the US and Russia and is generally seen as a benign outside power with no inimical motivations India, through deft diplomacy could better its position in the region for mutual benefit by leveraging its experience in, setting up and maintaining required institutions of effective Governance, economic cooperation, especially in high technology, and trade. Through avoiding military aspects of the relationship except for sharing its experience in training for, and executing, internal security operations, India could maintain a posture that no party involved in the area finds threatening. In such an eventuality India may be able to succeed in gaining access to Central Asia.

CONCLUSION

Central Asia has been the stage for great power rivalry from as long ago as the 18th and 19th centuries. Central Asia's location at the heart of the Asian landmass led to its being at the center of the major trade routes from Asia to Europe. This location led to its importance rising. The great powers of the

age tried to gain control of this region while denying their opponents similar access. This happened earlier between Imperial Russia and Great Britain. Central Asia came under Russian control towards the end of the 19th century. Subsequently with formation of the USSR the Central Asian region became part of the USSR. In the Soviet time, the region saw some advancement and comprised an important place in the Soviet security viewpoint. The borders of the five Central Asian Socialist Republics were decided by Moscow for its own reasons in three stages starting from 1920 and going on till 1924 to 1930. On dissolution of the USSR, the five Central Asian Republics gained independence as sovereign states. Thereafter, these states readily accepted close cooperation with Russia for economic and security reasons. The CSTO is a manifestation of this cooperation. Events after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US led the US, NATO and ISAF to intervene militarily in Afghanistan. This intervention led to the need for the NDN as a back-up to the Afghanistan supply routes through Pakistan. Air base requirements were met initially by leasing the K2 airfield in Uzbekistan and Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan. Subsequently political issues led to loss of US access to K2 air base. In addition to Manas air base, the US and NATO have access to Novoi and Temez air bases in Uzbekistan and to most military airfields in Turkmenistan. Russia itself has a presence at Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan and partial control of Ayni air base in Tajikistan. US interest in establishing a presence in Central Asia stems from the Afghanistan resupply and logistics issue but also from a desire to encroach onto what was exclusively Russian strategic space. This encroachment has been viewed seriously by both Russia and China who have worked tirelessly to get the US and other western countries evicted from Central Asia. There is a viewpoint that there is a new great game in progress involving the US, Russia, China and the EU, that is, four players in place of two in the earlier edition of the great game. This is, of course, denied by all the supposed players in the new Great Game. India will need deft diplomacy to gain access to Central Asia, a task made more difficult by the lack of direct surface routes between the two.