

Tiny Kyrgyzstan feels the heat from the Ukraine Crises

Financial Times, 14 May 2014.

By Ahmed Rashid.

The five central Asian republics, tied to [Russia's](#) overlordship through a welter of economic and social ties, are all feeling the heat from the [crisis in Ukraine](#).

However it is tiny [Kyrgyzstan](#) - landlocked between the mighty powers of Russia and China, and surrounded by unstable neighbours such as Afghanistan and Uzbekistan - that is feeling the heat most. America's military bases, and its enlarged diplomatic presence in the region will be wound up this year, along with its presence in Afghanistan. According to Kyrgyz historian Tynchtykbek Chorotegin, his people will be quickly forgotten and abandoned by the west.

President Vladimir Putin is desperate to enlarge Russia's much vaunted Eurasian customs union, answer to the EU. Yet despite unrelenting pressure, the only central Asian state to respond positively is oil-rich Kazakhstan from, which has joined along with Russia and Belarus. Russia is going full pelt to try and convince economically poor and strategically vulnerable Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to become members as soon as possible.

This is a make or break issue for Almazbek Atambayev, Kyrgyz President. Kyrgyzstan is the only parliamentary democracy in central Asia; its people enjoy freedoms that are incomparable to those in the dictatorships of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Mr Atambayev has a tough call. He has to protect internal democracy, balance Russia and the west, pacify his fractious neighbours, thwart the pressure from Islamic fundamentalists and provide an economic future that is not entirely dependent on Russia.

So he chooses his words carefully when he speaks to me at his forest dacha, with its sweeping vista of snow-covered mountains: "We will join the customs union if it accepts our terms, under conditionalities that we ask for." It must, he adds, be "purely an economic union, it must preserve our sovereignty, it must pursue the economic development of our country and our borders should be open". On Ukraine he is even more cautious, blaming everyone for the crisis : Russia, the EU, the US and Ukraine itself. But clearly the Russian annexation of Crimea has angered and upset the Kyrgyz liberals and social democrats who are ruling the country.

What seems clear is that Kyrgyzstan is no poodle that will just do Moscow's bidding, even though Russia has several critical cards to play.

With the closure of US bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan this year, a significant source of rental income for both countries will be lost. Russia is promising to fill the gap but little has been received. Both republics have tens of thousands of citizens working in Russia, and their remittances are a substantial part of both economies. More than 1m Kyrgyz work outside the country.

Then there is the danger of Russia exploiting the volatile ethnic mix. The Kyrgyz number only 6m people but 80 different nationalities. At independence 21 per cent of the population was of Russian origin - and although today that figure is down to 6.6 per cent its still large enough for Mr Putin to claim the right to be protecting the Russian minority, just as he did in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

However, the real heat that Kyrgyzstan - the only central Asian state that is a member of the World Trade Organization - fears from the customs union is an end to its duty-free status. It is the principle receiver of Chinese consumer goods coming across the border. The goods are then bought by traders in enormous bazaars in Kyrgyzstan and resold at home and in shops across central Asia and even Russia.

China's trade with central Asia was \$36bn in 2012 - a large part of it going through Kyrgyzstan, which generates incomes, jobs and brings in cheap consumer goods including cars. That status would end if Kyrgyzstan joined the customs union because then it would have to impose duties on all incoming Chinese goods.

So, as Mr Putin pushes Mr Atambayev to join his union, Kyrgyzstan is in no hurry. "If our terms are accepted we will join," says Kyrgyzstan's president.

The government is also feeling the dangers of potential fallout from Islamist extremists based in Afghanistan. "We are strengthening our borders, carrying out reforms in the army and helping neighbours defend their borders better," says the president. That is not an easy task with just a tiny army of 8,000 soldiers and a similar number of border guards. There is widespread disillusionment that, even as Kyrgyzstan tries to set a democratic example in an authoritarian region, the US and the west are more or less abandoning the country. Central Asia should be at the heart of the security commitments needed to stabilise a vast and unruly region still beset with Islamist extremism. Neither the west nor the Islamic world can afford to leave it out of the strategic picture or to help it economically.

The writer's most recent book is 'Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan'. He has written two books on central Asia

© The Financial Times Ltd 2014 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.