Russia and Kyrgyzstan: New Stage in Relations

On 28 March 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin paid an official visit to Kyrgyzstan. His Kyrgyz counterpart, President Sooronbay Jeenbekov, called the trip historical. Media outlets have primarily focused on agreements, reached via negotiations between the two leaders, on the expansion of the territory of Russia’s operational Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan, and on other aspects of military cooperation between the Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan. This is, after all, one of the most pressing subjects considering threat levels from terrorism in the entire Central Asia. Besides security challenges, Presidents of Russia and Kyrgyzstan also discussed many other issues in various spheres involving close and multifaceted cooperation between the two countries.

It is worth reminding our readers that the Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan have been strategic partners for a long time. In 2000, the Declaration on Eternal Friendship, Alliance and Partnership, signed by the two countries, came into effect. The two nations share views on many issues concerning world and regional politics, including the role of Eurasia on global stage and the need for integration among Eurasian nations. The Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In order to help Kyrgyzstan fully integrate into the EAEU, which the nation joined in August 2015, the Russian-Kyrgyz Development Fund was established, with active support from the Russian Federation. So far more than $300 million have been invested in the Kyrgyz economy via this fund.

Russia is one of Kyrgyzstan’s key trade and economic partners. For many years now, the Russian Federation has supplied Kyrgyzstan with oil and petroleum products on favorable terms and conditions for the Kyrgyz budget. The
Russian Federation does not charge export duties on these goods, supplied in volumes required for the nation’s own needs (more than 1 million tons a year). According to Vladimir Putin, by March 2018, this arrangement had resulted in a direct economic benefit to Kyrgyzstan of $2 billion.

In 2018, bilateral trade between the two countries reached $1.56 billion, and Russia’s direct investment in the Kyrgyz economy exceeded $123 million, which puts Russia in second place after China, in terms of investment volumes.

In February 2018, Vladimir Putin confirmed that Kyrgyz debt, in the amount of $240 million, would be written off, before his visit to the country in March 2019. The government of the Russian Federation also announced that it intended to provide Kyrgyzstan with non-repayable aid of $30 million.

Activities that Russia’s energy company Gazprom has engaged in, in Kyrgyzstan, have generated quite a bit of interest. In July 2013, Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed an Agreement on Cooperation in the spheres of transportation, distribution and sale of natural gas in Kyrgyzstan. At the time, Gazprom undertook to supply Kyrgyzstan with this energy resource. In January 2015, the General Scheme of Gas Supply to and Gas Infrastructure Expansion in the Kyrgyz Republic until 2030 was adopted. As part of this scheme, Gazprom plans to supply almost 400 settlements and more than 845,000 apartments and houses with gas by the previously mentioned deadline. To achieve this aim, more than 7,000 km of gas pipelines will need to be installed. Gazprom promised to put in 100 billion rubles into this project, and, by the end of March 2019, more than 16 billion of it had already been invested.

Opportunities provided by the Russian Federation to labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan are also worth a mention. It is well known that money transferred from Kyrgyz citizens working abroad constitutes one third of the nation’s entire budget. In 2018, more than $2.68 billion were transferred to the country, with more than $2.63 of the amount coming from Russia. According to data from August 2018, more than 800,000 Kyrgyz citizens were registered with the Federal Migration Service (FMS) of Russia.

As mentioned earlier, the Russian Federation helped Kyrgyzstan join the EAEU in 2015, which allowed Kyrgyz citizens to work in member-states of the union without the need to obtain work permits. During Vladimir Putin’s visit to Kyrgyzstan, he mentioned that much had been done for Kyrgyz migrants in Russia, and also talked about the migration amnesty, which was granted to citizens of Kyrgyzstan at the end of 2018 on request from Sooronbay Jeenbekov. As a result, thousands of Kyrgyz citizens who violated, for one reason or another, Russia’s migration legislation were able to return to Kyrgyzstan. They were then able to come back to Russia (without facing administrative punishment) and complete all the necessary paperwork for their stay, in accordance with Russia’s laws and regulations. In addition, Vladimir Putin said that, on account of the special relationship between the Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan, the amnesty period would be extended until the end of April 2019.

It is no surprise then that Vladimir Putin’s visit was a truly vital event for Kyrgyzstan’s leadership, and it ended with the signing of 17 important documents. The ones on military cooperation included the Protocol on the previously mentioned mutually beneficial changes to the agreement on the presence of Russia’s Kant military base in Kyrgyzstan, and the agreement on cooperation in the sphere of postal and courier communications. The Russian President stated that the Kant base made a significant contribution to Kyrgyzstan’s security by strengthening its defense capabilities, and that it also played an important role in ensuring safety and stability in the entire Central Asian region. He added that the Russian Federation would continue to develop military cooperation with Kyrgyzstan by supplying it with military equipment and training Kyrgyz citizens in Russia’s military academies.

In addition, it has been reported that the Russian Federation respects Kyrgyzstan’s right to collaborate with other countries and will not interfere with the nation’s military-to-military contacts with China, the United States and NATO.

The other documents concerned cooperation in civilian spheres, such as the Protocol on changes to the agreement between Russia and Kyrgyzstan on oil and petroleum product supplies; Memorandum on Cooperation between the Ministry of Transport of the Russian Federation, the Russian Railways company and Kyrgyz counterparts tasked with developing railroads in Kyrgyzstan; the road map for Gazprom’s investments in the Kyrgyz oil and gas industry; the agreement on cooperation between the Russian Direct Investment Fund and the Russian-Kyrgyz Development Fund; the road map on cooperation between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Eurasian Development Bank for the period of 2019 to 2021, etc.

The two sides agreed to promote all aspects of their trade and economic cooperation, to develop collaboration among banks, and to work together in the spheres of science, education, medicine, culture, sports, etc.
Russia intends to continue supporting Kyrgyzstan in every possible way. The Kyrgyz economy will need substantial investments before it reaches a stage of stable growth. Hence, in the nearest future, Russian companies are planning on investing $1.6 billion in the Kyrgyz economy. These outlays are bound to be rewarded, as Kyrgyzstan transforms into a peaceful, stable nation, grateful to Russia for its support, in Central Asia, which is one of the most turbulent regions in the world where truly destructive forces of global terrorism are competing for influence just as the Russian Federation, China and the West are. Security and socio-economic development of Kyrgyzstan, and that of other Central Asian nations also contributes, in large degree, to security in Russia itself.

*Dmitry Bokarev, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”*