Putin’s Visit to Central Asia

Russian President Vladimir Putin made a quick visit to Central Asia. In Astana, he discussed the future of integration with his Customs Union counterparts — the plans to launch the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. In Bishkek a day earlier, he discussed regional security in light of the withdrawal of foreign coalition forces from Afghanistan in 2014. While in Kyrgyzstan’s capital, Putin also held bilateral talks with Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon.

Russian Presidential aide Yury Ushakov said Moscow expects Tajikistan to ratify an agreement in the near future on terms for the Russian military’s Base 201 to remain in that country. He said, “Some requests of a practical nature were discussed during the talks between the heads of state, and they will be considered.” The issue apparently was the air base at Ayni, which Dushanbe essentially promised simultaneously to Russia, United States and India. Another option — a less likely one — would be to transfer it to India, which would sublet it to the Pentagon and/or NATO. That could not help but worry Russia. Especially considering the threats from Afghanistan, which are growing more acute with the withdrawal of Western coalition forces. The problem with Ayni might be solved in a way that meets Russia’s needs, of course — Tajikistan is holding its presidential election in November, the situation in the Republic is complex, and Rahmon needs Russia’s support to avoid the Arab scenario. However, that concern could just as easily cause Dushanbe to decide in favor of the United States. Putin’s meeting with Atambayev took place on a positive note. As the summit’s host, Atambayev invited his Russian counterpart to his residence Ak-Sai, which is located in the Ala-Archa Mountains. After a walk through a canyon, the two heads of states discussed a “wide range of bilateral issues,” construction of the Kambarata hydroelectric power plant, the establishment of a joint Russian military base and Kyrgyzstan’s accession to the Customs Union. The result was an invitation for Atambayev to the three-party Customs Union summit in Astana. Kyrgyzstan will become a full-fledged member of the Union by 2015. However, Tajikistan, whose desire to join is based more on the need to maintain the flow of capital into the country’s economy from individual migrants, will have to wait. Experts believe, however, that expanding the Customs Union to include these countries could entail considerable risks from shady imports of textiles (and not just textiles) into the customs zone from China, which could adversely affect the already soft economy of the future Union. Expansion of the Customs Union to the West is a more promising prospect for Russia. The inclusion of Ukraine in the alliance is both an economic and, especially, a political objective. “On the one hand, involving Kiev would be a significant geopolitical bonus for Moscow. On the other — there would be an opportunity to get access to industrial assets belonging to complete industrial complexes (for example, the aviation industry, the metal industry and the chemical industry),” noted Alexander Karavayev, deputy general director at Moscow State University’s Center for CIS Studies. Putin met with Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovich prior to the three-party meeting in Astana. The negotiations were difficult. They concerned Ukrainian membership in the Customs Union. Yanukovich refused to budge. He has to make a hard choice between European integration and the Customs Union. In the end, the two presidents were able to reach a compromise. Ukraine was offered Customs Union observer status in the Common Economic Space of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan (that status currently does not exist in the Customs Union agreements, but the experts believe that the document can be amended), and Yanukovich became the guest of honor in Astana. Following
the talks, he said that Ukraine would receive official observer status at the Customs Union in the fall, and a
document to that effect will be signed in Minsk on May 31. As though responding to Kiev’s concerns and the West’s
unconcealed irritation with the alliance in the post-Soviet space, President Nursultan Nazarbayev said that the
Eurasian integration process is purely economic in nature and has nothing to do with politics. “The main thing we all
want is further consolidation,” Kazakhstan’s leader said. Integration should benefit all involved: What we can’t do
alone will do together,” he said, paraphrasing the motto of the Eurasian Economic Union. “We need to combine our
efforts, find common ground and do it by stages,” he concluded. However, Nazarbayev’s statement about separating
economics and politics was unlikely to reassure Western forces who perceive a threat of a resurgent Soviet Union in
the establishment of a Eurasian Economic Space. The Western political centers note that the economic summit is
taking place in conjunction with a CSTO summit. And the explanation that CSTO will concern itself with the security
of Central Asian integration does not seem especially unreasonable. Meanwhile, however, at the informal summit in
Bishkek, the heads of the CSTO states discussed the challenges arising from the planned withdrawal of international
forces from Afghanistan CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha said after the talks that the presidents
discussed the actions needed to minimize the negative impacts following the withdrawal of international forces from
Afghanistan, which should be complete by the end of 2014. Analysts believe the CSTO can do that partially in only
one part of the regional space, along the line stretching from Afghanistan through Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan.
Neighboring Uzbekistan left the organization last year and is providing for its own security. Or to be more precise, it
is doing so jointly with the United States and NATO. Incidentally, NATO will open a regional office in Tashkent on
June 3. On the whole, a close study of the attitude of the CSTO countries towards the Afghan issue could give the
impression that, except for Kazakhstan, they have no clear position; they are in the process of developing one. At
least, they are talking about Afghanistan in generalities. Astana’s approach is more specific. Kazakhstan has been
involved in Afghanistan’s economic rehabilitation for several years, and that could be important to strengthening
regional security. Astana’s policy towards Kabul is quite clear. It emerged after the Taliban government was
overthrown: Kazakhstan’s diplomatic mission was converted into an embassy; then Kazakhstan businesses went into
Afghanistan, and Kazakhstan ratified an agreement on principles governing relations and mutual cooperation
between the two countries. Kazakhstan has been pursuing a consistent regional policy and supporting Kabul in
various ways. Afghan students are studying in Kazakh universities, and Kazakhstan periodically provides
humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Russia’s role has been less conspicuous. Rafik Tairov, director of the Military and
Strategic Studies Department of Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Defense told Nezavisimaya Gazeta that “the environment
in Afghanistan after the war could reprise the Iraqi scenario.” He said, “That means serious efforts and spending are
needed to maintain stability in the region, primarily by the CSTO and the SCO.” He believes the SCO and the CSTO
should work together to develop an instrument to help provide security in Central Asia. They could work on border
security for alliance members or assist Afghan leaders in improving their national legal base, providing training for
law enforcement agencies and strengthening the Afghan armed forces. “Further development of the situation in
Afghanistan will depend on how engaged the neighboring states and the region as a whole are in the country’s
reconstruction process,” Tairov believes. In that light, the project to build a rail line connecting Russia, Kazakhstan,
Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and extend it to Afghanistan, Turkmenistain, Iran and the Persian Gulf is noteworthy. The
presidents discussed it at the summit, and there is definite interest in seeing it implemented. Tajikistan and
Kyrgyzstan need it even without the Afghan problem, if only to end their dependence for shipping on Uzbekistan,
which could block travel to those countries at any time. When this artery is put into operation, Russia would bind
these two countries, which are not entirely reliable allies, to itself for a long time to come. And this binding should be
viewed with all of the geopolitical consequences — the Afghan problem from the South, and China from the East.
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