

By Peter Zeihan

STRATFOR often discusses how Russia is on a bit of a roll. The U.S. distraction in the Middle East has offered Russia a golden opportunity to re-establish its spheres of influence in the region, steadily expanding the Russian zone of control into a shape that is eerily reminiscent of the old Soviet Union. Since 2005, when this process began, Russia has clearly reasserted itself as the dominant power in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Ukraine, and has intimidated places like Georgia and Turkmenistan into a sort of silent acquiescence.

But we have not spent a great amount of time explaining why this is the case. It is undeniable that Russia is a Great Power, but few things in geopolitics are immutable, and Russia is no exception.

Russian Geography, Strategy and Demographics

Russia's geography is extremely open, with few geographic barriers to hunker behind. There are no oceans, mountains or deserts to protect Russia from outside influences — or armies — and Russia's forests, which might provide some measure of protection, are on the wrong side of the country. The Russian taiga is in the north and, as such, can only provide refuge for Russians after the country's more economically useful parts have already fallen to invaders (as during the Mongol occupation).

Despite its poor geographic hand, Russia has managed to cope via a three-part strategy:

Lay claim to as large a piece of land as possible. Flood it with ethnic Russians to assert reliable control. Establish an internal intelligence presence that can monitor and, if need be, suppress the indigenous population.

Throughout Russian history, this strategy has been repeated until the Russian state reached an ocean, a mountain chain, a desert, or a foe that fought back too strongly. In many ways, the strategies of the Kremlin of 2010 are extremely similar to those of Catherine the Great, Ivan the Terrible or Joseph Stalin.

But it is no longer the 17th century, and this strategy does not necessarily play to Russia's strengths anymore. The second prong of the strategy — flooding the region with ethnic Russians — is no longer an option because of Russia's demographic profile. The Russian birth rate has been in decline for a century, and in the post-Cold War era, the youngest tranche of the Russian population simply collapsed. The situation transformed from an academic debate about Russia's future to a policy debate about Russia's present.

The bust in the birth rate in the 1990s and 2000s has generated the smallest population cohort

in Russian history, and in a very few years, those post-Cold War children will themselves be at the age where they will be having children. A small cohort will create an even smaller cohort, and Russia's population problems could well evolve from crushing to irrecoverable. Even if this cohort reproduces at a sub-Saharan African birthrate, even if the indications of high tuberculosis and HIV infections among this population cohort are all wrong, and even if Russia can provide a level of services for this group that it couldn't manage during the height of Soviet power, any demographic bounce would not occur until the 2050s — once the children of this cohort have sufficiently aged to raise their own children. Until 2050, Russia simply has to learn to work with less. A lot less. And this is the best-case scenario for Russia in the next generation.

Simply put, Russia does not have the population to sustain the country at its present boundaries. As time grinds on, Russia's capacity for doing so will decrease drastically. Moscow understands all this extremely well, and this is a leading rationale behind current Russian foreign policy: Russia's demographics will never again be as "positive" as they are now, and the Americans are unlikely to be any more distracted than they are now. So Russia is moving quickly and, more important, intelligently.

Russia is thus attempting to reach some natural anchor points, e.g., some geographic barriers that would limit the state's exposure to outside powers. The Russians hope they will be able to husband their strength from these anchor points. Moscow's long-term strategy consistently has been to trade space for time ahead of the beginning of the Russian twilight; if the Russians can expand to these anchor points, Moscow hopes it can trade less space for more time.

Unfortunately for Moscow, there are not many of these anchor points in Russia's neighborhood. One is the Baltic Sea, a fact that terrifies the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Another is the Carpathian Mountains. This necessitates the de facto absorption not only of Ukraine, but also of Moldova, something that makes Romania lose sleep at night. And then there are the Tien Shan Mountains of Central Asia — which brings us to the crisis of the moment.

The Crisis in Kyrgyzstan

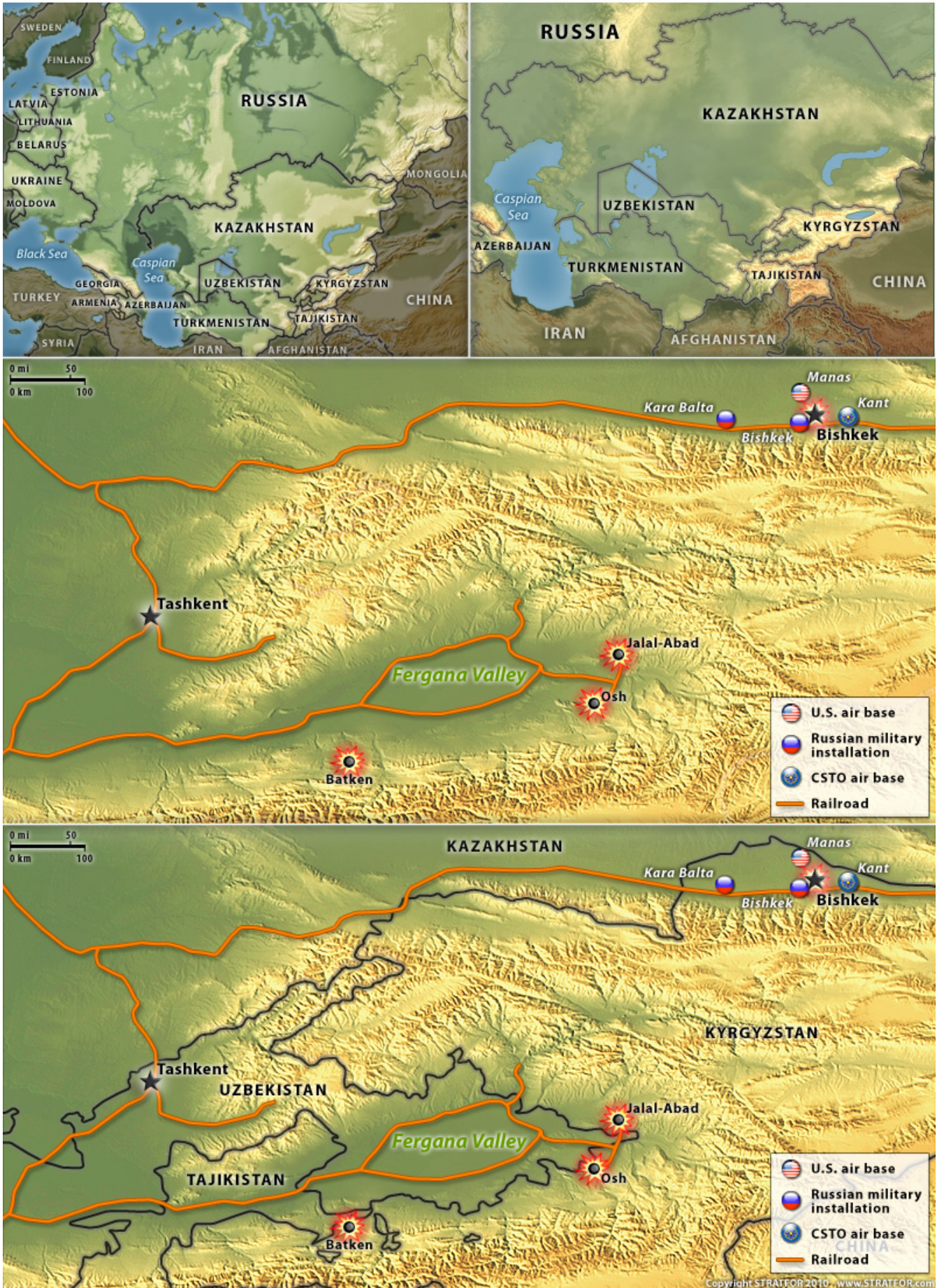
The former Soviet Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan is not a particularly nice piece of real estate. While it is in one of those mountainous regions that could be used to anchor Russian power, it is on the far side of the Eurasian steppe from the Russian core, more than 3,000 kilometers (1,800 miles) removed from the Russian heartland. The geography of Kyrgyzstan itself also leaves a great deal to be desired. Kyrgyzstan is an artificial construct created by none other than Stalin, who rearranged internal Soviet borders in the region to maximize the chances of dislocation, dispute and disruption among the indigenous populations in case the Soviet provinces ever gained independence.

Stalin drew his lines well: Central Asia's only meaningful population center is the Fergana Valley. Kyrgyzstan obtained the region's foothills and highlands, which provide the region's water; Uzbekistan gained the fertile floor of the valley; and Tajikistan walked away with the only decent access to the valley as a whole. As such, the three states continuously are jockeying

for control over the only decent real estate in the region.

Arguably, Kyrgyzstan has the least to work with of any of the region's states. Nearly all of its territory is mountainous; what flat patches of land it does have on which to build cities are scattered about. There is, accordingly, no real Kyrgyz core. Consequently, the country suffers from sharp internal differences: Individual clans hold dominion over tiny patches of land separated from each other by rugged tracts of mountains. In nearly all cases, those clans have tighter economic and security relationships with foreigners than they do with each other.

CENTRAL ASIA AND THE FERGANA VALLEY



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