By Lauren Goodrich

This past week saw another key success in Russia's resurgence in former Soviet territory when pro-Russian forces took control of Kyrgyzstan.

The Kyrgyz revolution was quick and intense. Within 24 hours, protests that had been simmering for months spun into countrywide riots as the president fled and a replacement government took control. The manner in which every piece necessary to exchange one government for another fell into place in such a short period discredits arguments that this was a spontaneous uprising of the people in response to unsatisfactory economic conditions. Instead, this revolution appears prearranged.

A Prearranged Revolution

Opposition forces in Kyrgyzstan have long held protests, especially since the Tulip Revolution in 2005 that brought recently ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiyev to power. But various opposition groupings never were capable of pulling off such a full revolution — until Russia became involved.

In the weeks before the revolution, select Kyrgyz opposition members visited Moscow to meet with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. STRATFOR sources in Kyrgyzstan reported the pervasive, noticeable presence of Russia's Federal Security Service on the ground during the crisis, and Moscow readied 150 elite Russian paratroopers the day after the revolution to fly into Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan. As the dust began to settle, Russia endorsed the still-coalescing government.

There are quite a few reasons why Russia would target a country nearly 600 miles from its borders (and nearly 1,900 miles from capital to capital), though Kyrgyzstan itself is not much of a prize. The country has no economy or strategic resources to speak of and is highly dependent on all its neighbours for foodstuffs and energy. But it does have a valuable geographic location.

Central Asia largely comprises a massive steppe of more than a million square miles, making the region easy to invade. The one major geographic feature other than the steppe are the Tien Shan mountains, a range that divides Central Asia from South Asia and China. Nestled within these mountains is the Fergana Valley, home to most of Central Asia's population due to its arable land and the protection afforded by the mountains. The Fergana Valley is the core of Central Asia.

To prevent this core from consolidating into the power centre of the region, the Soviets sliced up the Fergana Valley between three countries. Uzbekistan holds the valley floor, Tajikistan the entrance to the valley and Kyrgyzstan the highlands surrounding the valley. Kyrgyzstan lacks

the economically valuable parts of the valley, but it does benefit from encircling it. Control of Kyrgyzstan equals control of the valley, and hence of Central Asia's core.

Moreover, the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek is only 120 miles from Kazakhstan's largest city (and historic and economic capital), Almaty. The Kyrgyz location in the Tien Shan also gives Kyrgyzstan the ability to monitor Chinese moves in the region. And its highlands also overlook China's Tarim Basin, part of the contentious Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

Given its strategic location, control of Kyrgyzstan offers the ability to pressure Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. Kyrgyzstan is thus a critical piece in Russia's overall plan to resurge into its former Soviet sphere.

The Russian Resurgence

Russia's resurgence is a function of its extreme geographic vulnerability. Russia lacks definable geographic barriers between it and other regional powers. The Russian core is the swath of land from Moscow down into the breadbasket of the Volga region. In medieval days, this area was known as Muscovy. It has no rivers, oceans or mountains demarcating its borders. Its only real domestic defences are its inhospitable weather and dense forests. This led to a history of endless invasions, including depredations by everyone from Mongol hordes to Teutonic knights to the Nazis.

To counter this inherent indefensibility, Russia historically has adopted the principle of expansion. Russia thus has continually sought to expand far enough to anchor its power in a definable geographic barrier — like a mountain chain — or to expand far enough to create a buffer between itself and other regional powers. This objective of expansion has been the key to Russia's national security and its ability to survive. Each Russian leader has understood this. Ivan the Terrible expanded southwest into the Ukrainian marshlands, Catherine the Great into the Central Asian steppe and the Tien Shan and the Soviet Union into much of Eastern and Central Europe.

Russia's expansion has been in four strategic directions. The first is to the north and northeast to hold the protection offered by the Ural Mountains. This strategy is more of a "just-in-case" expansion. Thus, in the event Moscow should ever fall, Russia can take refuge in the Urals and prepare for a future resurgence. Stalin used this strategy in World War II when he relocated many of Russia's industrial towns to Ural territory to protect them from the Nazi invasion.

The second is to the west toward the Carpathians and across the North European Plain. Holding the land up to the Carpathians — traditionally including Ukraine, Moldova and parts of Romania — creates an anchor in Europe with which to protect Russia from the southwest. Meanwhile, the North European Plain is the one of the most indefensible routes into Russia, offering Russia no buffer. Russia's objective has been to penetrate as deep into the plain as possible, making the sheer distance needed to travel across it toward Russia a challenge for potential invaders.

The third direction is south to the Caucasus. This involves holding both the Greater and Lesser

Caucasus mountain ranges, creating a tough geographic barrier between Russia and regional powers Turkey and Iran. It also means controlling Russia's Muslim regions (like Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan), as well as Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The fourth is to the east and southeast into Siberia and Central Asia. The Tien Shan mountains are the only geographic barrier between the Russian core and Asia; the Central Asian steppe is, as its name implies, flat until it hits Kyrgyzstan's mountains.

With the exception of the North European Plain, Russia's expansion strategy focuses on the importance of mountains — the Carpathians, the Caucasus and Tien Shan — as geographic barriers. Holding the land up to these definable barriers is part of Russia's greater strategy, without which Russia is vulnerable and weak.

The Russia of the Soviet era attained these goals. It held the lands up to these mountain barriers and controlled the North European Plain all the way to the West German border. But its hold on these anchors faltered with the fall of the Soviet Union. This collapse began when Moscow lost control over the fourteen other states of the Soviet Union. The Soviet disintegration did not guarantee, of course, that Russia would not re-emerge in another form. The West — and the United States in particular — thus saw the end of the Cold War as an opportunity to ensure that Russia would never re-emerge as the great Eurasian hegemon.

To do this, the United States began poaching among the states between Russia and its geographic barriers, taking them out of the Russian sphere in a process that ultimately would see Russian influence contained inside the borders of Russia proper. To this end, Washington sought to expand its influence in the countries surrounding Russia. This began with the expansion of the U.S. military club, NATO, into the Baltic states in 2004. This literally put the West on Russia's doorstep (at their nearest point, the Baltics are less than 100 miles from St. Petersburg) on one of Russia's weakest points on the North European Plain.

Washington next encouraged pro-American and pro-Western democratic movements in the former Soviet republics. These were the so-called "colour revolutions," which began in Georgia in 2003 and moved on to Ukraine in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005. This amputated Russia's three mountain anchors.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine proved a breaking point in U.S.-Russian relations, however. At that point, Moscow recognized that the United States was seeking to cripple Russia permanently. After Ukraine turned orange, Russia began to organize a response.

The Window of Opportunity

Russia received a golden opportunity to push back on U.S. influence in the former Soviet republics and redefine the region thanks to the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the crisis with Iran. Its focus on the Islamic world has left Washington with a limited ability to continue picking away at the former Soviet space or to counter any Russian responses to Western influence. Moscow knows Washington won't stay fixated on the Islamic world for much longer, which is why Russia has accelerated its efforts to reverse Western influence in the former

Soviet sphere and guarantee Russian national security.

In the past few years, Russia has worked to roll back Western influence in the former Soviet sphere country by country. Moscow has scored a number of major successes in 2010. In January, Moscow signed a customs union agreement to economically reintegrate Russia with Kazakhstan and Belarus. Also in January, a pro-Russian government was elected in Ukraine. And now, a pro-Russian government has taken power in Kyrgyzstan.

The last of these countries is an important milestone for Moscow, given that Russia does not even border Kyrgyzstan. This indicates Moscow must be secure in its control of territory from the Russian core across the Central Asian Steppe.

As it seeks to roll back Western influence, Russia has tested a handful of tools in each of the former Soviet republics. These have included political pressure, social instability, economic weight, energy connections, security services and direct military intervention. Thus far, the pressure brought on by its energy connections — as seen in Ukraine and Lithuania — has proved most useful. Russia has used the cutoffs of supplies to hurt the countries and garner a reaction from Europe against these states. The use of direct military intervention — as seen in Georgia — also has proved successful, with Russia now holding a third of that country's land. Political pressure in Belarus and Kazakhstan has pushed the countries into signing the aforementioned customs union. And now with Kyrgyzstan, Russia has proved willing to take a page from the U.S. playbook and spark a revolution along the lines of the pro-Western colour revolutions. Russian strategy has been tailor-made for each country, taking into account their differences to put them into Moscow's pocket — or at least make them more pragmatic toward Russia.

Thus far, Russia has nearly returned to its mountain anchors on each side, though it has yet to sew up the North European Plain. And this leaves a much stronger Russia for the United States to contend with when Washington does return its gaze to Eurasia.

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