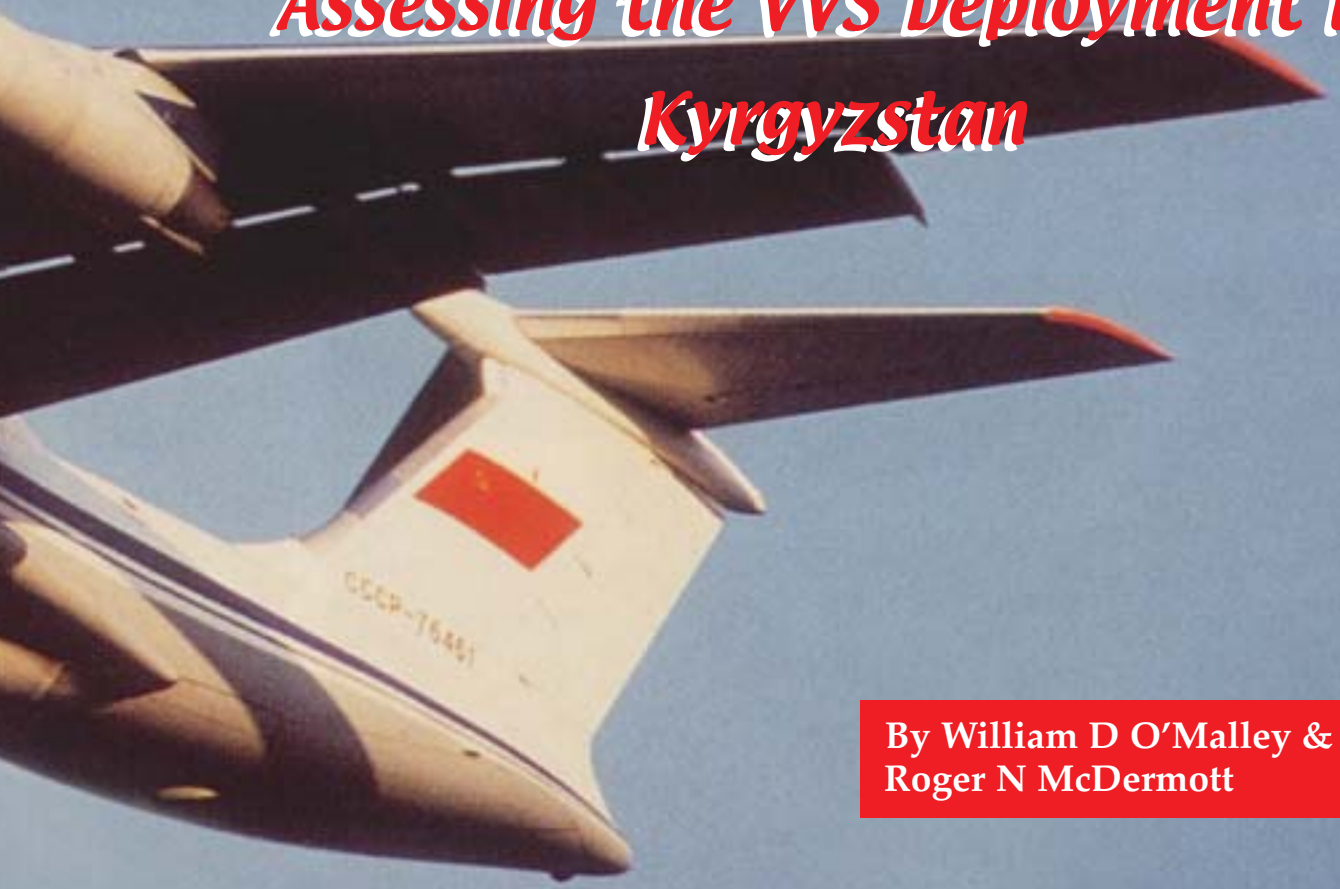
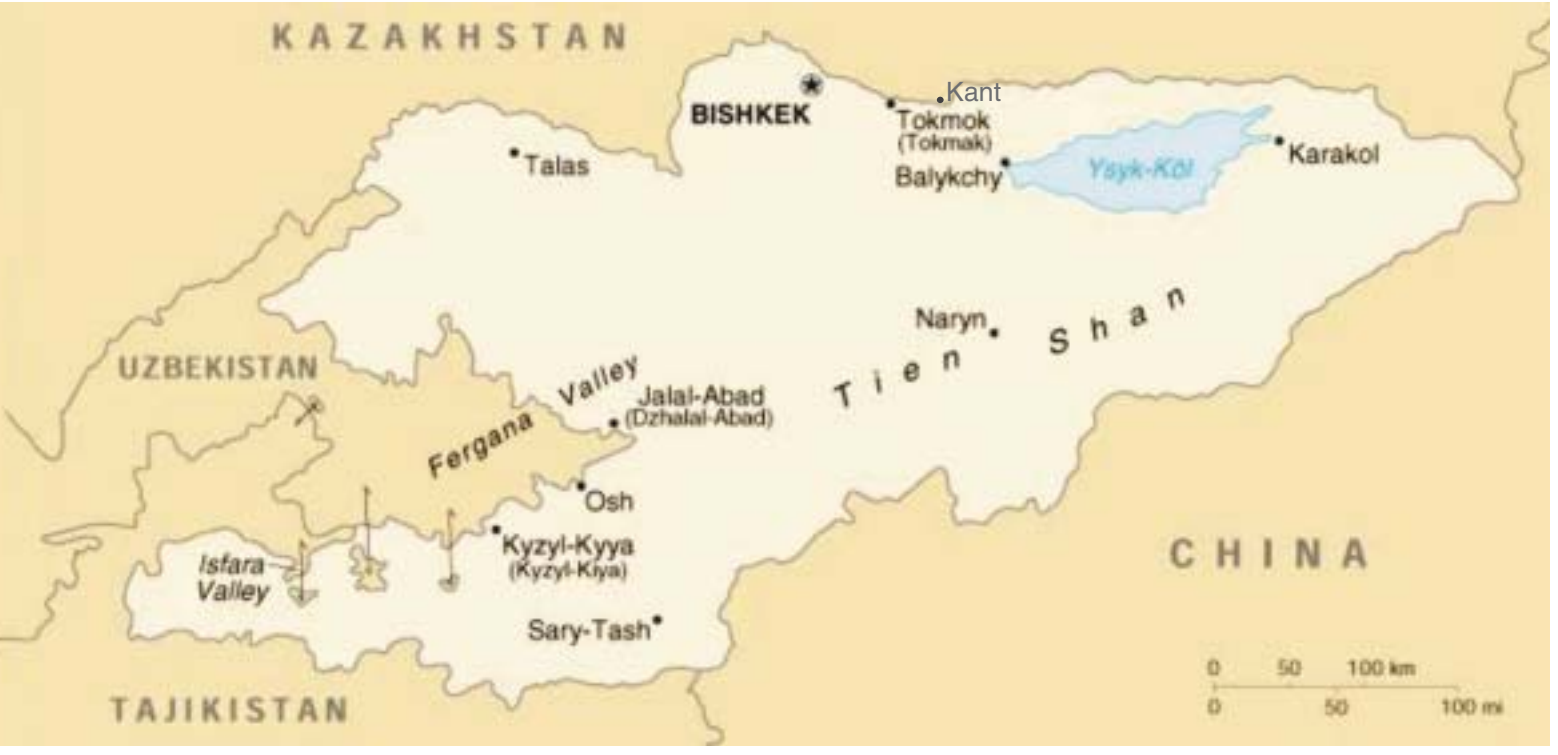
Russian Air Power in Central Asia:

Assessing the VVS Deployment in Kyrgyzstan



By William D O'Malley & Roger N McDermott

In late November and early December 2002 the Russian Air Force (Voyenno-Vozdushnyye Sily — VVS) deployed Frontal Aviation and Military Transport Aviation aircraft to Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan. The purpose of the trial deployment was ostensibly not to create a Russian base in Kyrgyzstan, but to develop a joint Russian-Kyrgyz operational military airbase to support the multinational Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (CRDF) that is established under the Collective Security Treaty (CST).1 One battalion from each member state (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) are committed to the CRDF. In the following analysis we will examine the nature of the deployment and assess its military and geopolitical significance. First, it is essential to understand the main elements of the background to Kyrgyzstan's security challenges.



Deployment at Kant airbase

In April 2002, a meeting of the CST Security Council Secretaries first discussed the possibility of deploying Russian air power in support of the CRDF. The heads of the CST member countries agreed in October 2002 to approve a charter and agreement on the legal basis of the collective security treaty organisation, signalling a serious attempt to transform the regional body into an international security organisation. In due course, a decision on the CRDF was taken during a Moscow meeting of CST Defence Ministers on 20 November. Although the initial deployment was temporary in nature, plans have been proposed to form a permanent base at Kant in 2003. The timescale from first consideration to full implementation may take more than one year.[2]

US and other coalition air forces had been operating out of the Kyrgyz airfield at Manas into Afghanistan for several months, when Esen Topoyev, Kyrgyz Defence Minister, announced in late June 2002 that Kant would be made available for the CRDF; Kommersant in Moscow reported that it signalled the intention of the Kyrgyz government to re-enter the fold, reorienting its security needs toward Moscow as a prelude to asking the western forces to leave Manas.[3] Of course, it did no such thing, but the action demonstrated that Bishkek looks for multiple security partners, including the West, to support its own fragile security.

Initial Russian deployment

On 30 November 2002, components of Russia's VVS began arriving at Kant airfield in Kyrgyzstan. Initially two Su-25 fighters and two IL-76 cargo planes arrived at the military airfield.[4] Further air movements soon followed this high profile deployment that took place ahead of a meeting between Presidents Putin and Akayev in Bishkek. Between 30 November and 4 December 2002, three Su-27 fighters from Lipetsk,[5] two Su-25 attack planes from Dushanbe and two Il-76 military cargo planes constituted the total Russian deployment at Kant.[6]

Kant airfield

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian air force rapidly withdrew from its bases in Central Asia, leaving very little of value in Kyrgyzstan. Since the US deployment at Manas airbase in 2001 in support of Operation Enduring

Can Moscow find no other way of enhancing the anti-terrorist capabilities of its Central Asian allies other than committing itself to an experiment in the use of airpower?

Freedom, the choice of location for the CRDF airbase was limited to Bishkek, Dzhalal Abad, Isfar, Kant, Kyzyl-Kiya, Naryn, Osh, Przhevalsk and Tokmak.[7] The airfield at Kant was a former Soviet training base that was used to train foreign pilots. Throughout the 1990s, it stood as a stark reminder of the soviet era and fell into a poor state of repair. Nevertheless, since 2001 the Kyrgyz government has given priority to renovating the airfield,[8] which included renovation of the air traffic control building, construction of a new administrative building and putting the airstrip and main antenna in working order.[9] This airfield is ideally situated 20 km east of Bishkek, in a rural setting away from densely populated areas.

The November deployment of a small number of Russian aircraft to Kant, months ahead of the scheduled permanent deployment, was to evaluate the status and operational standards of the airfield. Lieutenant-General Alexander Zelin, Deputy Commander of the VVS, led a group of 70 air force experts to inspect the airbase infrastructure and barracks areas.[10] They reported to Moscow on the exact condition of the airfield and, given the airfields current shortcomings, there can be little doubt that Moscow will have to invest further money into upgrading its condition, if it is to house a permanent or even long-term Russian presence.

Kant was one of the deployment airfields offered to the US in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001. An Air Force Survey Team inspected Kant along with the other proposed sites, preferring Manas. The Survey Team reportedly found that Kant airfield, which had been originally designed to support training operations and use by light training aircraft, was in poor condition and did not meet the US military's specific operational needs or safety standards.[11] For example, the runway slabs there are only 18 cm thick limiting the operational capabilities of the base; whilst it is ideal for the deployment of light fighters and transport planes of the kind envisaged by the Russian and Kyrgyz militaries — this runway could not support heavy, outsized strategic airlift or tanker aircraft like the C-5 or the KC-10/135.[12] It is currently able to support planes weighing a maximum of 200 tonnes.[13] Even beyond the runway further work is needed to bring this airfield up to operational standard, especially improvements in the navigation equipment necessary to aid the landing of Russian aircraft and the facilities to house its troops and equipment.

Sergei Ivanov, Russian Defence Minister, during his visit to Bishkek in early December 2002, dismissed as 'absolute rubbish' reports that the cost of renovating Kant could reach $300 million. Clearly, the exact figure and the cost to Russia will be the subject of bilateral negotiation. However, it is interesting to note that in the spring of 2002 the international coalition was considering expanding their use of Kyrgyz airfields in support of operations in Afghanistan. Western commanders considered using Tokmak airfield, 60 km east of Bishkek, but they rapidly dismissed it since it had fallen into disuse and disrepair following the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Muratbek Imanaliyev, Kyrgyz Foreign Minister, told parliament in April 2002 that Kant was also dismissed on the basis that its renovation would take a very long time at an estimated cost of $300 million.[14] Ivanov's reaction to the large cost figure [likely] reveals differences between Russian and Western standards in carrying out such work. Further modernisation of the infrastructure and technical features of the base will be required, though Moscow will attempt, no doubt, to minimise costs.[15]

The planned test deployment of the VVS assets to Kant was only partly successful, as the projected number of aircraft did not arrive, partly due to poor weather conditions. When the base is fully operational for the CRDF in 2003, plans are to station more than 20 Russian aircraft and 700 servicemen and civilian personnel there, for an unspecified time.[16] It is estimated that the cost of

Twelve years, generally poor maintenance practices, and limited access to critical spare parts calls into question the serviceability of many, if not most, of the airframes still in their inventory

The Kyrgyz air force operates 12 Hind attack helicopters

maintaining the airbase at Kant will reach $50 million per annum.[17] Such commitment necessarily demands analysis of the cost-benefit relationship. Can Moscow find no other way of enhancing the anti-terrorist capabilities of its Central Asian allies other than committing itself to an experiment in the use of airpower?

Kyrgyz Air Force

The Kyrgyz Air Force is the smallest of the country's armed services, with 2,400 personnel and a small number of operational aircraft. They inherited a fairly large fleet of older fixed- and rotor-winged aircraft from the Soviet Air Force units and the flight training school that were located in the Republic at transition. Twelve years, generally poor maintenance practices, and limited access to critical spare parts calls into question the serviceability of many, if not most, of the airframes still in their inventory.[18] Moreover, the avionic, electronic, navigation, communications and weapons packages on board most of these aircraft are now obsolete and in need of modernisation, if they are expected to perform just about any of the mission requirements routinely tasked to current generation aircraft. The L-39 and the helicopters are the principal ground attack assets remaining in the force. The air force reports that it has a total of 52 combat aircraft and nine attack helicopters assigned to operational units. Given the age and original design of these airframes, they do not have the targeting systems, communication packages, or the capability to deliver the precision munitions that Russian pilots are using in Chechnya and clearly nothing equivalent to what the USAF is using in Afghanistan. Moreover, the Kyrgyz pilots do not have either the training opportunity or the combat experience necessary to refine their ground support techniques. They also do not have access to the timely intelligence and targeting information needed to effectively support these types of closely coordinated operations. Nor do they have the trained forward air controllers and equipment necessary to maintain communications with troops on the ground and to effectively control the final approach to target.

Reported structure and aircraft holdings of the Kyrgyz Air Force

Unit Type	Equipment
Fighter regiment (1)	4 L-39 and 48 MiG-21
Composite aviation regiment (1)	2 An-12 and 2 An-26
Helicopter regiment (1)	9 Mi-24 and 23 Mi-8
Aircraft in storage	2 Mi-23, 24 L-39 and 24 MiG-21

Source: *The Military Balance: 2002-2003*

Implications of the Russian Air Force deployment in Kyrgyzstan

Planned structure of the CRDF aviation group
Following the test deployment to Kant, the Russian and Kyrgyz governments are expected to conclude an agreement in 2003 on the permanent basing of a combined aviation group that will be used to support CRDF anti-terrorist or counter-insurgent operations.[19] Kyrgyz Defence Minister, Esen Topoyev, more clearly defined what he saw as the group's missions when he stated that the aviation group will have two tasks: 'One is purely on the united air-defence system, which includes Su-27 aircraft, and the other is on supporting land forces. These are army aviation, or attack planes, as we call them, which are Su-25s, and they will be deployed here starting next year'.[20] Unspoken, but hopefully included as third and fourth mission requirements of the Russian air force element will be: expanding the training level and operational experience of the Kyrgyz pilots and providing a base facility for repairing and/or upgrading the readiness and capabilities of the Kyrgyz air force's aircraft. These latter two missions are extremely important, if the Russians are indeed looking to improve the Kyrgyz military's combat capability.

Since the Kyrgyz air force is comparatively weak and its personnel poorly trained, the majority of the aviation group will consist of VVS fighters and transport planes. Current reporting indicates that the aviation group will include only Russian and Kyrgyz assets and be configured as outlined below.

CRDF aviation group[21]

Russian Air Force

Type	Role	Quantity
Su-25	Attack	5
Su-27	Fighter	5
An-26	Transport	2
IL-76	Transport	2
L-39	Trainer	5
Mi-8	Support	2

Kyryz Air Force

Type	Role	Quantity
L-39	Trainer	4
Mi-8	Support	2
An-26	Transport	1

Source: Sokut, 'We Will Threaten Terrorists'.

Major-General Vladimir Varfolomeyev, Russian Defence Attaché in Bishkek, expects the Su-27 (NATO designation Flanker) and Su-25 (Frogfoot) aircraft to be deployed to Kant from neighbouring Dushanbe.[22] The only Kyrgyz combat aircraft reportedly assigned to the CRDF Aviation Group to this point are the L-39 retrofitted trainer and multi-role Mi-8 helicopters.

Role and capabilities of designated aircraft
The Su-27 fighter, like the US F-15 and F-14, is designed for gaining air supremacy and supporting air operations. It is also capable of operating up to 1,600 km from its base, allowing it to operate from bases further from the target and crisis zone than the other deployed aircraft. The Kyrgyz have no comparable aircraft and its role likely would be to protect Bishkek from aerial attack, intercepting separate targets in Kyrgyz and Tajik airspace and escorting cargo or passenger planes.[23] In Chechnya, the Su-27 is more frequently used to attack ground targets with special and precision munitions and

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would likely perform a similar role with the CRDF.

Like the US A-10, the Su-25 was specifically designed as a ground attack aircraft, getting its first combat exposure in Soviet operations in Afghanistan. The lessons from this conflict against guerrilla forces like the Mujahadin and the Chechens resulted in many improvements in both this aircraft that has played a principal role in both Chechnya I and II and the tactics for its employment. Both the Soviet and Russian air forces have found that it is ideal for direct troop support because of its relatively low-speed (sub-sonic), armoured underbelly, weapons mix and load, and day/night capabilities.[24] It is highly manoeuvrable and able to attack when there is limited space over the target. The Su-25 appears to be well suited to attack targets in the rugged and mountainous parts of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where the insurgent bands generally operate.

An-26 transport aircraft is designed for moving airborne assault forces and Special Forces, as well as carrying conventional troops and delivering weapons and supplies to the theatre of operations. Il-76 and An-26 will carry out theatre and tactical transportation duties, with the Mi-8 handling most of the tactical transportation, medevac and search and rescue operations.[25] Furthermore, the Mi-8 can be used effectively to enhance the mobility of ground subunits in addition to supplying battle-field firepower. The Mi-8 can also be configured as an airborne communication relay station to boost the communications range of the units in the field or in the critical role as a forward air controller platform, providing final targeting instructions to attacking aircraft.

The L-39 is used as a basic pilot training aircraft. It can, however, be re-equipped for use as a strike aircraft or light bomber, although it was not designed for combat missions and has only limited operational capabilities and nominal effectiveness in such a role.[26] Like the Mi-8, the L-39 can also be used as a forward air control aircraft.

If necessary, once the base is fully operational, further reinforcement could enhance Russian air-power. Clearly, these reinforcements [or others] can be either generated by changing operational needs or for political purposes, when a particular message is being conveyed.

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Anti-terrorist capabilities of the aviation group

An assessment of the anti-terrorist function of the aviation group must also be based upon what the respective governments believe its purpose to be in addition to considering Russia's operational and tactical use of airpower in a similar operational context, i.e., Chechnya and earlier Afghanistan. First, the view of the Russian government could not be more clear: the aviation group is a lifeline for the CRDF, providing essential support for ground forces in combat operations against groups of international or regional terrorists operating within Central Asia. Politically it is intended to strengthen bilateral ties between Russia and Kyrgyzstan, promote stability through the Collective Security Treaty, demonstrate Russia's proactive military role in combating the region's terrorist threat, and reinvigorate Russia's security links with the Central Asian Republics. Sergei Ivanov made clear that the military purpose of the aviation component in the CRDF, in comments before a meeting between Putin and Akayev. In Ivanov's view 'In case of aggression against Kyrgyzstan or any member of the Collective Security Treaty,[27] the air force unit will be employed for its direct purpose — to bomb and wipe out the enemy — this is what the air force unit is being set up for'.[28] Indeed the security situation in Central Asia directly influences Russian security, thus the deployment meets Russia's own security needs as well.

Vladimir Putin shared this view, believing that by creating the aviation group it would add new capabilities to the CRDF, since its individual parts have been based in their respective territories and have thus been unable to rapidly deploy to a trouble spot during a crisis: the aviation group is intended to rectify that problem. Putin went on to say: 'Therefore the creation of an aviation group for the rapid-deployment forces of the Collective Security treaty with a permanent base at a Kyrgyz airfield puts a completely different complexion on these rapid-deployment forces. This means that, first, these rapid-deployment forces have powerful aviation support and, secondly, this means — our pilots have already landed and that these rapid-deployment forces have been provided with the capacities of transport aviation and the possibility of fast delivery of forces and cargoes to a specific region, including Bishkek, if needed'.[29] This is remarkable in as much as Putin implicitly admitted that until the deployment of Russian airpower the CRDF were far from mobile or able to respond rapidly to an emergency situation.

Putin's statement, however upbeat about the prospects for the CRDF and further cooperation with Bishkek, betrayed recognition of the imperfection of the CRDF. More than one year after its creation Vladimir Rushailo, Secretary of the Russian Security Council, removed all doubt. During a meeting with President Akayev, he confirmed the need to bolster the CST and strengthen security cooperation between the two states, yet he went further than Putin in stating that the deployment of the VVS to Kyrgyzstan marked the creation of the CRDF — a military body first set up in 2001.[30] In reality of course, the CRDF remained a largely paper force even after its much publicised creation in 2001, as it still lacked a credible military capability. Given the geographical problems of deploying ground forces in the mountainous Central Asian region, especially in areas such as the Ferghana Valley, where the overland transport routes are underdeveloped, the CRDF lacked any teeth without the air assets necessary to move troops, supplies and firepower where needed quickly. Each of the Central Asian signatories to the CST CRDF (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), with few viable security alternatives, were forced to publicly support the CRDF as both a deterrence and an effective anti-terrorist force, much in the style of the 'Emperors New Clothes': no one dared to point out the obvious failings of the security structure. It is inexplicable as to why Moscow refused to deploy an air component in support of the CRDF at an earlier stage, particularly as Rushailo has suggested that there is an impotent preventative dimension to the force.[31]

Tactics

During the first Chechen campaign (1994-96), the VVS is generally recognized to have performed poorly. It inflicted a great deal of collateral damage (on both the civilian population and its own troops), largely due to the absence of reliable target identification, the heavy use of free fall and unguided munitions, and the very limited use of precision weapons. Precision-guided munitions

In reality, airpower has a limited and predominantly supporting role to play in anti-terrorist operations

were only utilised during 2.3% of sorties flown.[32] Whilst Russia does not possess all-weather precision weapons, the weather also hampered operations, masking the target and restricting the effective employment of earlier generation precision munitions. Although the second Chechen campaign (1999-present) witnessed an improvement in Russia's use of airpower, problems persisted based on the underlying ailments of the VVS; most air operations were conducted in daylight and were again dependent on the weather, 'dumb bombs' continued to be the principal type of munitions used, and as the pockets of Chechen fighters reduced, so too did the combat effectiveness of airpower — as it was relegated more and more to the support role.[33]

The Russian military has used airpower in both Chechen conflicts without achieving a convincing demonstration of its utility against terrorists. In reality, airpower has a limited and predominantly supporting role to play in anti-terrorist operations. It has utility but it is most effective when used in concert with ground troops that concentrate enemy forces, provide clear target data/ID, and vector in the air, as demonstrated by the US Air Force in Afghanistan.[34]

The tactics employed by the VVS did change in the second Chechen campaign, and this provides some insight into the type of aircraft and possible tactics in mind for the air group deployed in support of the CRDF. Helicopter aviation provided critical support, particularly Mi-8 and Mi-24 helicopters that were used to move troops around the battlefield, provide fire support to the operation, and ensure the flow of supplies to the troops in the field. Based on operations both in Afghanistan and Chechnya, the military soon learned that helicopter lift decreases and fuel consumption increases when operating in a mountainous environment, a fact that was all too often overlooked in the planing phase.[35]

Aviation tactical groups (ATG) operating in the second Chechen campaign used Mi-8 (one or two) and Mi-24 (two to four) in support of company, battalion and regimental tactical groups. Within the ATGs, Mi-8s would direct Mi-24s to their targets. Mi-24s were also used in 'free hunt' operations, going after rebel formations and suppressing rebel positions. Su-25 ground attack aircraft and Mi-24 attack helicopters provided cover for the Mi-8 whilst the latter transported ground forces, or supplied stores, including food, water, fuel and ammunition, to the units operating in the mountains.[36]

During the Second Chechen Campaign, problems relating to the condition of the VVS continued to affect operations. Amongst these was the poor readiness of many of its units and their aircraft;

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inadequate intelligence preparation of the battlefield; shortcomings of reconnaissance in monitoring the build up of rebels and accurately reporting damage assessments of attacks on them; leading to the development of generally poor and/or outdated target lists. Pilots navigated visually and used non-secure radios permitting Chechen rebels to monitor their frequencies. Such failings help to explain the accidental bombing of the Georgian town of Zelo-Omalo by a Su-25.[37]

The Mi-24, used so frequently in the Chechen conflict, is notably absent from the planned deployment to Kant. Since the Chechen model has only limited application in the Central Asian region, one can only suggest that the aviation group would be primarily used for supporting ground forces, moving them to where they are urgently needed, as well as psychological operations (harassing the enemy). In the absence of the Mi-24, the supporting cover for the Mi-8s tactical transport missions would be from the Su-25. Russian experience with the Mi-24 helicopter and the Su-25 ground-attack aircraft in both Afghanistan and Chechnya indicates that the fixed-wing aircraft is nearly as efficient in the low intensity combat environment and is less vulnerable than the helicopter. Moreover, the Su-25 does not signal its approach like the heavy attack helicopter does and can effectively pass over enemy troops at 200 feet before they have an opportunity to react.[38] The Su-25 can also operate with the subsonic Kyrgyz L-39 fixed-wing aircraft much better than can the Mi-24. The success of any air operations will depend upon good to excellent intelligence (especially tactical intelligence), which is not something that the Kyrgyz are reputed to possess. Topoyev has said that the two Kyrgyz Mi-8 helicopters would be used for search and rescue (and medevac) operations. The Kyrgyz aviation is also expected to perform reconnaissance, and carry out transport duties.[39]

Future concerns

Statements made by the Russian leadership betrayed two things most clearly. First, despite the official denials, the CRDF was not an effective anti-terrorist body from its inception to the time of the deployment of Russian airpower in support of the force. Secondly, the actual deployment of the aviation group in 2003 demonstrates that Moscow has qualitatively raised its expectations of the anti-terrorist purpose of the CRDF and suggests that it intends to make good its commitment to the security of the southern CIS region, which it views as an intrinsic part of its own security interests.

In fact, there is near-unanimity in Moscow and Bishkek concerning the implications of the aviation support for the CRDF. President Akayev, after signing a new security cooperation agreement with President Putin in Bishkek on 5 December 2002, commented on the implications of Russian air support for the CRDF:

We believe this is exactly the specific realisation of the aims of the collective rapid-deployment forces. This will also be a certain, powerful security umbrella for Kyrgyzstan. We are now happy that our military airport in Kant has revived and very modern Russian fighters are flying over it.[40]

Nevertheless, there remain open questions as to exactly what role Russian airpower will play and whether it will have an impact upon the regional terrorist groups. Is the Russian package too small, especially in the number of ground support aircraft, to meet probable security needs? Moscow must demonstrate a willingness to expand the air package in response to evolving threat demands. The military thinking that underpins the creation of the CRDF and its support by aviation seems linked to the conviction that conventional military power is an effective anti-terrorist force. Russia's experience confronting the Chechen guerrillas has provided some experience in both the use and limits of airpower. Similarly, the Kyrgyz memory of the Batken campaigns highlight their own shortfalls and the need for improved combat capabilities, as noted earlier. But whilst airpower can be effectively utilised in destroying armed formations, such as the pockets of Chechen or Taliban guerrillas, it cannot be used to effectively pursue terrorists into urban areas where they can hide

As an anti-terrorist force aviation is of limited value as has been demonstrated in the history of recent conflict. After the initial use of the US air force in Afghanistan it required the follow up of Special Forces on the ground

amongst the civilian population. The most likely use of the air component of the CRDF is to move troops and supplies quickly to the theatre of operations or from place to place within it, which is best done by helicopter.

Rather than using the VVS to destroy bridges, mine roads and cut off supply and retreat routes to armed terrorists, it makes more sense to go after them directly using Special Forces — supported by aviation — not aviation alone. What kind of anti-terrorist operation is the VVS intended to support? If it is aimed against the IMU, making an incursion similar to those of 1999 and 2000 in the Batken, then conceivably the use of airpower could play a critical part. However, the initiative lies in the hands of the sub-state groups: they will determine the course and purpose of their own actions and may not conform to past practices. Furthermore, Rushailo's belief in the preventative dimension of the force ignores the Kyrgyz experience of the Batken when they drew back from using airpower because the terrorists had seized hostages.

Russian airpower and its performance in anti-terrorist operations is also open to question. Similar problems afflicting the Russian military, such as indiscipline, low morale and personnel problems plague the VVS. Crucially, the VVS is undermined by lack of finance and its combat readiness is further lowered by fuel shortages and the lack of flight training of its pilots, averaging 20 hours' flying time per annum, in stark contrast to the 150 hours more common in the Soviet air force or the NATO standard of 180 hours. These conditions are not expected by analysts to markedly improve within the next decade.[41]

Possible weaknesses that would require rectifying, if the aviation group is to prove effective in Central Asia:

- Altered operational tactics to suit the Central Asian region.
- Enhanced intelligence-gathering, a more responsive targeting process, and speed of implementation.
- Well trained pilots that are able to operate at night.
- Defence countermeasures against shoulder launched AAMs.
- A lack of trained Kyrgyz Forward Air Controllers and their support equipment for deployment with ground units or to operate in the air.

For many Russians and their allies, Putin's action was in contravention of one of Russian military doctrine's key principles by allowing an outside party to establish military presence in or an alliance with a member of CIS, especially the US

As an anti-terrorist force, aviation operating alone is of limited value, as has been demonstrated in the history of recent conflict. After the initial use of the US air force in Afghanistan it required the follow up of Special Forces on the ground. Terrorist tactics can also influence the decision on whether the use of airpower is appropriate, as witnessed during the Batken campaign in 1999; militants were avoiding being brought to battle and timing their operations to coincide with poor weather conditions or nightfall.

Bishkek's security tightrope

Clearly, the security environment has changed markedly following the chain of tragic events that brought US troops into Kyrgyzstan and resulted in the defeat of the Taliban and occupation of Afghanistan, and damage to the infrastructure of several terrorist organisations, including the IMU. But the war itself did not stabilise Bishkek's security environment, nor did it 'alter many basic long-term trends in the region' that will affect the role of the major players, especially the outsider — the US. The political and security environment will continue to both complicate US activities and colour Kyrgyz and broader regional perceptions of US moves and intentions.[42] Key players such as Russia and China, despite common desires for regional stability, undoubtedly will interpret US activity as an effort to gain hegemony in what they consider their backyard.

For Russia, the situation is much different, as it has long been a provider of markets and assistance, including security assistance, to Bishkek. But the nature and level of that support has been far below expectations. During the latter part of the Yeltsin presidency, the Central Asian states virtually fell off Moscow's foreign policy agenda and it was President Putin that scrambled to re-establish fruitful relations with these states, building on their common concern over the spread of fundamentalist-bred terrorism. Following 9/11, Putin offered Russian support for the war on terrorism, but more importantly for Bishkek, he raised no public opposition to the establishment of a US military presence in Central Asia. For many Russians and their allies, Putin's action was in contravention of one of Russian military doctrine's key principles by allowing an outside party to establish military presence in or an alliance with a member of CIS, especially the US.

Growing security concerns

Clearly the war in Afghanistan dealt a serious blow to the leadership of the IMU, but it did not entirely eliminate the threat, as drugs and other contraband from Afghanistan is still seeking an outlet to markets and transit through Kyrgyzstan, which remains a preferred option. Moreover, the tension between Kyrgyzstan and its neighbours, especially Uzbekistan, over border issues continues to escalate, with a battle over precious water resources not far removed. These developments are causing anxiety in Bishkek and prompted even President Akayev's strongest opponents to 'sup-

port his policy on broadening cooperation with Russia' and not placing too much dependence on the US to resolve the country's growing security concerns.[43] Ishenbal Kadyrbekov, leader of the opposition group in Parliament, underscored a concern for the unfamiliar ally, stating 'Recent events have convinced us that neither the US, China, nor any state other than Russia can become Kyrgyzstan's strategic partner. A range of historic, economic and other factors means only Russia can protect us from an external threat.'[44] Could this be construed as a call to evict US troops or does it reflect Bishkek's awareness of its own military limitations and its need to seek help wherever possible?

Notes:

1 'Russia Does Not Have an Aviation Base in Kyrgyzstan', Vremya Novostei, 26 December 2002, p5.

2 'US Ready to be "Junior Partner" in Central Asia', Izvestia, Moscow, 5 December 2002; 'Russian Aircraft Group in Kyrgyzstan to Repel "Terrorist" Attacks', Interfax, Moscow, 1607 GMT, 4 December 2002; Sergei Sokut, 'We Will Threaten Terrorists from Bishkek', Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozrenie, 6 December 2002, pp1, 3.

3 Dmitry Glumskov, 'Kyrgyzstan Will Shelter CIS Collective Forces', Kommersant, 2 July 2002, p 6.

4 'Russia Deploys Combat Aircraft in Kyrgyzstan', Interfax, Moscow, 0940 GMT, 30 November 2002.

5 Lipetsk Air Base is home to the 968th Research Training Mixed Air Regiment in Russia.

6 Sergei Sokut, 'We Will Threaten Terrorists'.

7 Amongst these airfields, only Bishkek has a runway of 9,000 feet or greater.

8 The Soviet Air Force literally stripped Kant Air Base clean when they withdrew. The Kyrgyz Armed Forces maintained a caretaker team at the airfield after the transfer of control to preclude any further damage. Their contingent to the Central Asian Peacekeeping Battalion was also stationed for a while at the airbase and assisted in its cleanup. The Kyrgyz were for many years trying to entice the Russian Air Force to lease the base and use it once again as a training facility.

9 'Kyrgyz Airfield Said Ready for Deployment of Collective Forces', Vecherniy Bishkek, 9 December 2002.

10 'Kyrgyz Defence Minister: Military Airfield Fully Meets Russia's Requirements', Interfax-AVN, Moscow, 0919 GMT, 9 December 2002.

11 One of the principal concerns about using Kant AB was that the airstrip would not hold up to the anticipated operational tempo (OPTEMPO), especially given the size and weight of many of the key support aircraft being deployed. Manas was selected for a number of reasons, to include: (1) it was up and operating as the country's international airport and it could effectively support an immediate deployment; (2) as an international airport, its runway, navigation, and communication systems were readily compatible with the deploying air units; (3) U.S. strategic lifters and tankers would be necessary to support the deployment and sustainment of Western air assets and runways in excess of 10,000 feet are preferred – only Manas among the proposed sites had the preferred runway length; (4) cargo aircraft require hard surface ramp space to unload and load, be serviced, and park – Manas is one of the few airfields in country that had sufficient square feet of ramp space to meet anticipated needs. For details on Air Force deployment planning factors see Chapter One, William D. O'Malley, Evaluating Possible Airfield Deployment Options: Middle East Contingencies, Santa Monica: RAND, 2001.

12 There are three sections to the airstrip at Kant. One is paved with asphalt, another is unpaved and the third with 500 concrete slabs, recently replaced as part of the Kyrgyz 'reconstruction' of the base; Yekaterina Grigoryeva & Dmitry Litovkin, 'Security Council Secretaries Determine Preventative Measures', Izvestia, 11 December 2002, p2.

13 'Russian Facility in Kyrgyzstan Not an Airbase, Military Attaché Says', Interfax, Moscow, 1212 GMT, 25 December 2002.

14 'Russian Planes in Kyrgyzstan Attached to Collective Security Treaty', Interfax, Moscow, 1151 GMT, 2 December 2002; 'Kyrgyzstan: Anti-terrorist Force Commanders Consider Using Other Kyrgyz Airfields', ITAR-TASS, Moscow, 1235 GMT, FBIS-SOV-2002-0401, 1 April 2002.

15 The relative costs for renovation should be different because the U.S. and Russia were looking at the installation to fulfil very dissimilar missions, house a very different mix of aircraft, and support operational tempo(s) that are miles apart. U.S. requirements require much more from the airfield and would require more time to upgrade accordingly and at a higher cost.

16 According to Kyrgyz Defence Minister, Esen Topoyev, 'the Russian airbase at Kant will be permanent and will be gradually expanded'. Zamira Eshanova, 'Central Asia: Diplomatic Visits Highlight U.S., Russian Competition,' RFE/RL Newsline, 3 December 2002, www.rferl.org/nca/features/2002/12/03122002190915.asp.

17 'Kyrgyz Airbase Seen as "Counterweight" to NATOs Manas', Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 5 December 2002; 'Russia Deploys Combat Aircraft'; 'Russian Warplanes Arrive at Kyrgyz Base', TVS, Moscow, 1200 GMT, BBC Monitoring Service, 1 December 2002.

18 By 1997, the local press was reporting that the air force was on

the verge of collapse, as no training and few maintenance facilities were operating. Reporting further indicated that only a handful of the L-39 trainers they inherited were still operational in 1998 and the same was being said for less than 50 percent of their helicopters. Markus and Abasov, 'Kyrgyzstan: In Search of a Regional Security System', pp. 542-543.

19 'Russian Defence Minister on Plans to Base Russian Warplanes in Kyrgyzstan', Channel One TV, Moscow, 1200 GMT, BBC Monitoring Service, 5 December 2002.

20 Eshanova, 'Central Asia: Diplomatic Visits Highlight U.S., Russian Competition'.

21 Sokut, 'We Will Threaten Terrorists'.

22 'Russian Planes in Kyrgyzstan Attached to Collective Security Treaty', Interfax, Bishkek, 1151 GMT, FBIS-SOV-2002-1203, 3 December 2002. Before this proposed deployment to Kyrgyzstan, Russia retained its only permanent Central Asian military presence in Tajikistan. It is interesting to note that in September 2000, the aviation regiment that had been long stationed in Dushanbe was reduced to an aviation group similar in composition to that proposed for Kant. Michael Jasinski, Russian Military Capabilities in Central Asia, Monterey Institute of International Studies, 17 September 2001, cns.miis.edu/research/wtc01/rus-mil.htm.

23 Ibid; 'Russian Aircraft Arrive in Kyrgyzstan to Beef Up Collective Force', Slovo Kyrgyzstana, Bishkek, 5 December 2002.

24 The cockpit is almost surrounded by 17mm of titanium armour, which deflects small arms fire and even 20mm rounds. Timothy L. Thomas, 'Air Operations in Low Intensity Conflict: The Case of Chechnya,' originally published in Air Power Journal, Winter 1997, found on the Foreign Military Studies Office website: fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/fmsopubs/issues/chechnya.htm.

25 The initial Kyrgyz operations against the IMU suffered greatly from a lack of helicopter support for the movement of supplies to troops in the field, the medevac of the wounded, as well as the timely movement of troops and firepower from one area to another in response to operational needs.

26 Jasinski, Russian Military Capabilities in Central Asia and 'Russian Aircraft Arrive in Kyrgyzstan to Beef Up Collective Force', Slovo Kyrgyzstana.

27 Emphasis added by the authors.

28 'Russia: Air Force Unit in Kyrgyzstan to Serve Collective Security Treaty Members', Interfax, Bishkek, 5 December 2002.

29 'Russian President Comments on Military Cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, Role of CIS', Radio Mayak, Moscow, 1500 GMT, BBC Monitoring Service, 5 December 2002.

30 'Kyrgyzstan: Collective Security Treaty Meeting to Discuss Fighting Organised Crime', ITAR-TASS, Moscow, 1324 GMT, 10 December 2002.

31 Ella Taranova & Igor Shestakov, 'Vladimir Rushailo: Prevention at the Planning Stage', Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 25 December 2002, p. 9.

32 See: Stéphane Lefebvre, 'The Reform of the Russian Air Force', Roger N. McDermott & Anne C. Aldis (eds), Russian Military Reform 1992-2002, Frank Cass: London, 2003 (forthcoming).

33 Ibid.

34 It is important to have a man in the loop that has a sense of the battlefield, provide updated target information to the incoming combat aircraft, rapidly address emerging targets, and provide battle management support to the combat pilot during the critical approach to the target. See, Glenn W. Goodman, Jr., 'Close Air Support: Air Strikes on Enemy Troops Remain "Trump Card" for Ground Force Commanders', Armed Forces Journal International, January 2002, p. 57 and John G. Roos, 'Turning Up the Heat,' Armed Forces Journal International, February 2002, pp. 36-42.

35 L W Grau, 'Technology and the Second Chechen Campaign: Not All New and Not That Much', Anne C Aldis (ed), The Second Chechen War, P31, June 2000, p107.

36 M. J. Orr, 'Better or Just Not so Bad? An Evaluation of Russian Combat Effectiveness in the Second Chechen War', The Second Chechen War, p94; Marcel de Haas, 'The Use of Russian Airpower in the Second Chechen War', Conference Paper, BISA, London, 16 December 2002.

37 Few Russian attack helicopters are equipped with Global Position Systems (GPS), which forces the pilots in Chechnya to depend heavily on visual navigation over often unfamiliar terrain. Benjamin S. Lambeth, The Continuing Crisis of Russian Air Power, Conference Paper, Air Power Symposium, Trondheim, 6-8 February 2001, p18.

38 Thomas, 'Air Operations in Low Intensity Conflict: The Case of Chechnya.'

39 'Kyrgyz Minister Says Some Russian Fighters to be Deployed Next Year', Public Educational Radio and TV, Bishkek, 1300 GMT, BBC Monitoring Service, 2 December 2002; 'Russian Aircraft Arrive in Kyrgyzstan to Beef Up Collective Force', Slovo Kyrgyzstana, Bishkek, 5 December 2002.

40 'Kyrgyz, Russian Leaders Praise Inter-State Relations, Pledge Cooperation', Kyrgyz Radio First Programme, Bishkek, 1500 GMT, BBC Monitoring Service, 5 December 2002.

41 See: Lefebvre, 'The Reform of the Russian Air Force'.

42 Rumer, 'Flashman's Revenge: Central Asia after September 11'.

43 Sultan Jumagulov, 'Kyrgyzstan Courting Russia,' IWPR's Reporting Central Asia, No. 185, February 21, 2003.

44 Ibid.