

Kazakhstan MPs Want To Raise Russia's Rent For Military Sites

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Members of Kazakhstan's parliament are pressing the government to get more money out of Russia for the rent it pays for its several military facilities, setting the stage for yet another negotiating battle between Russia and its ex-Soviet allies.

Last week, Deputy Defense Minister Okas Saparov testified in Kazakhstan's Senate, and got some criticism for the fact that Russia seems to be paying under market rates for the rent of its four military facilities in Kazakhstan. These include the Kapustin Yar test firing range, the Sary Shagan and Emba missile testing sites, and the 929th State Test Flight Center. For all that, Russia pays about \$24 million in rent, and in some MPs' opinion, that is too little.

"I think that price is very low. In theory, it should be no less than the price of the land that Kazakhs use for agriculture. Farmers pay 2,000 tenge per hectare to rent a plot, while Russia just 424 tenge. How is that possible? After all, in the current crisis Kazakhstan could be

getting tens of billions in profit for this rent," said MP Kuanysh Aitakhanov, television station KTK reported.

"The United States rents a tiny bit of land in Berlin and it costs them half a billion Euros. And the total rent for all American bases in Germany is about three billion," added MP Murat Bakhtiyaruly.

Saparov cautioned that it was early to try to renegotiate with Russia, but argued that in the future Kazakhstan will have better terms on which to bargain with Russia.

"We can't change anything until the term of the agreement concludes. After 2020 the land will return to us, and we will create a special bilateral commission which will study the damage [to the land] from the ecological and geological points of view. If something is found we will create a special act and Russia will compensate us for the harm caused," he said.

Kazakhstan is an interesting counterpoint to other post-Soviet states where Russia maintains Soviet-legacy military facilities. In Armenia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan the bargaining was drawn-out, well publicized, and politicized and the countries in most cases were able to gain significant concessions from Moscow, albeit at the cost of very long-term agreements (usually lasting into the 2040s). In Azerbaijan, the terms Baku demanded for the radar facility it hosted were onerous enough that Moscow just decided to abandon it.

In Kazakhstan, by contrast, the negotiations have been relatively quiet and the agreements relatively short-term, but not very lucrative for Astana. (It's also worth noting that the facilities that Kazakhstan hosts are mainly test sites and not as sensitive as full military bases as in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.) Astana has, in the last couple of years, started to play a little more hardball with Moscow. It has regained the use of most of one military test facility, and has been pushing harder for better terms on the Baikonur space launch facility.

This recent episode in Kazakhstan's Senate looks a little like a good-cop-bad-cop routine, and one wonders whether Astana is looking to up the pressure on Moscow for better terms next time negotiations start.

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