



The American Transit Center at Manas: What Drives Kyrgyz Policy?

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Author Background

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Introduction by Ray Finch, FMSO

After 9-11, the US decided to attack al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan and remove the Taliban from government. In order to help supply US forces in the region, the US constructed a military installation at the Manas International Airport, near Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. The Transit Center at Manas has been invaluable supporting Operation Enduring Freedom, but these successes have come with some cost to the local Kyrgyz population. In this brief monograph, CREES-FMSO Research Assistant, Vincent Artman examines the US military base at Manas from a Kyrgyz perspective. He considers which factors have been instrumental in shaping Kyrgyz public opinion toward this US military installation. Ray Finch, FMSO



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According to Alexander Cooley, a noted policy analyst, since 2005 the U.S. military has begun to effect “a fundamental restructuring of its overseas basing network” (Cooley, 2008, p. 217). The purpose of this restructuring is, in part, to build up a network of smaller, more flexible bases which, according to Cooley, “will host fewer permanent troops, rely more on contractors for their maintenance, and because of their small size, leave a much smaller social ‘footprint’ in their host country than the large bases of the cold war era” (217).

Two of these so-called “lily-pad” bases were located in Central Asia – one at Karshi-Khanabad, in Uzbekistan, and the other near Bishkek, in Kyrgyzstan. The Uzbek base, called K2, was closed in 2005 after the Bush Administration criticized the Uzbek government in the wake of the violence in the city of Andijon, where numerous protesters were killed. By contrast, the base in Kyrgyzstan, called the American Transit Center at Manas, continues to operate, at least for the time being. However, regardless of the U.S.’s intentions, the base’s presence has not been uncontroversial, and Kyrgyz public opinion has been divided with regards to it almost since the beginning. As Cooley notes, “[f]ar from stabilizing the domestic political situation through its lily-pad presence, the United States became embroiled in the internal politics and regime survival strategies of [its] Central Asian hosts” (Cooley, 2008, pp. 218-219).

What follows is a discussion of some of the drivers of Kyrgyz public opinion vis-à-vis the base at Manas.

Named after the eponymous hero of the *Manas Epos*, the Kyrgyz national epic, the American Transit Center at the Manas Airport near Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, was originally opened through an agreement with Kyrgyzstan’s former President, Askar Akaev, in December of 2001 to support operations in Afghanistan. The siting of the base in Kyrgyzstan was a political coup for Akaev – the government of Tajikistan had also hoped to negotiate a deal to open an airbase, but Manas was ultimately chosen instead (Kucera, 2013c) – and brought much-needed money into the sagging Kyrgyz economy, factors that both helped to shore up Akaev’s legitimacy during a period in which his government was becoming increasingly unpopular. Akaev hoped that warmer relations with the United States and active participation in the War on Terrorism

might pay dividends in the long term, particularly since the country was under threat from renewed violence from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which had invaded southern Kyrgyzstan in 1999-2000. Akaev wrote that

Kyrgyzstan immediately expressed its principled support to the purposes and tasks of the coalition. Appropriate practical measures, which corresponded to the national interests of the country, were undertaken immediately by allowing the deployment of airplanes and coalition military forces on our Territory. We had no right to be merely observers. We came to these decisions consciously, and they fully reflect our principles and beliefs. (Akaev, 2003, p. 194)

From the very beginning, however, the Transit Center has been controversial among particular sectors of the Kyrgyz population. During the Akaev era, for example, it was alleged that much of the money that was flowing into Kyrgyzstan through Manas ended up in the hands of corrupt government insiders, including members of Akaev’s family. As Alexander Cooley has argued, “[t]he lion’s share of base-related funds flowed not to national agencies... but to private Kyrgyz entities closely tied to the ruling regime” (Cooley, 2006, p. 2). In this case, the U.S. “small footprint” strategy, which increased reliance upon local contractors, helped to contribute to the perception among some that the base was merely an opportunity for local elites to enrich themselves, particularly since Aydar Akaev, the President’s son, as well as Adil Toiganbaev, his son-in-law, were among the major beneficiaries of the new arrangement. In other circumstances this fact in and of itself, might not be cause for comment. However, in the fraught political atmosphere of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, the seemingly-cozy relationship between the Akaev clan and the base worked to bolster the claims of anti-Akaev elements in Kyrgyz society. Indeed, as Alexander Cooley argues:

Pentagon and State Department officials contend – and they are legally correct – that none of these payments or contracts clearly violated any U.S. laws or DOD tender procedures. But such claims do not change the fact that these payments played a highly political role within the Kyrgyz political system. These base-related revenues supported the Akaev regime and its political clients, who regarded them as the unstated quid pro quo for granting basing rights to the United States and its coalition partners. (Cooley, 2006, p. 2)

When Akaev was ousted in the 2005 Tulip Revolution, his successor, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, took a harder line on the base. Shortly after his election he began to demand more money from the U.S. government in return for permission to continue operating the base. This change in stance may have been partly driven by the fact that the Uzbek government had recently de-

manded the departure of the U.S. military from Karshi-Khanabad, potentially prompting the new government to seek a more lucrative deal.

In the end, Bakiyev was able to extract only limited concessions from the United States. However, he was nevertheless successful in exploiting and capitalizing upon the association of the Manas Transit Center with the corruption of the Akaev regime in order to gain leverage against pro-Akaev oppositionists. In this context, the reality of the day-to-day operation of the Transit Center at Manas was largely relegated to a peripheral status vis-à-vis the base's symbolic and instrumental value in the service of the Bakiyev regime's political agenda. Evidence to this effect can be found in the regime's signals that it was willing to bargain with Russia for a better deal, indicating that the new government was far more open to Russian influence than the previous one (Marat, 2009). Bakiyev's gamesmanship and occasional demagoguery with regards to the Manas base doubtlessly contributed to the persistence of negative views about the Transit Center.

These views have not subsided, in large part due to the perception among some vocal elements of Kyrgyz society that successive governments have continued to enrich themselves through Manas. Indeed, one analyst has written, cynically, that Manas "has become a milling method for the ruling elite" (Dudka, 2013). In a bizarre twist, some local businessmen, moreover, have recently complained that lobster, cuts of meat, and other gourmet food are being smuggled off the base by figures associated with organized crime and being sold at below-market prices in Bishkek, effectively undercutting their business (Eurasianet.org, 2013). It is, of course, difficult to ascertain the truth of such reports, but the perception, going back to the Akaev years, that the base is associated with corruption and criminal activity has bred some resentment towards its presence.

Another factor that contributes to bitterness vis-à-vis Manas is the perception among some that the United States is an arrogant imperialist power. Noise from the airbase, as well as jettisoning of fuel by American aircraft, has reportedly enraged some locals, as have incidents, such as a 2006 collision involving an American KC-135 Stratotanker and a civilian Tu-154 (Leonard, 2009; RIA Novosti, 2006). The handling of the tragic shooting of a Kyrgyz driver who worked as a contractor on the base by an Air Force serviceman, although investigated and handled according to U.S. procedures, has, for some, added to this perception. *Harpers magazine notes that* "[t]he American management of the incident was totally bungled, leaving the local population with the idea that the Americans on the base were arrogant and not accountable to the law. The public's view of Americans underwent a radical and sudden transformation. A nation once seen as generous benefactors now were seen as arrogant bullies" (Horton, 2009).

In the wake of the May 2013 crash of another KC-135 at Manas, similar concerns are once again being voiced (Juraev, 2013). However, although there were supposedly complaints that

the Americans were "obstructing" the examination by Kyrgyz authorities of the bodies of the servicemen killed in the crash, these allegations were strenuously denied by both the U.S. State Department and the Kyrgyz government (K-News, 2013), perhaps pointing to the fact that many of the allegations that have been leveled against Manas are either inaccurate or exaggerated, and promoted by particular factions within Kyrgyz society.

In early May one such faction, a youth group called Zhon Ele, which has previously called for investigations (Russia Today, 2013) into supposed human rights violations, human trafficking, and drug smuggling at Manas, as well as into wild allegations that nuclear weapons targeting Iran were located there – allegations, it should be noted, that have been categorically denied as "ridiculous" (McDermott, 2007) – held a protest against the base in Bishkek (Fabula, 2013). Protesters shouted slogans like "Yankees, get out of Kyrgyzstan," "Yankees, go home," and "No to transit of NATO weapons" (Marchenko, 2013). They argued that military equipment had "no place adjacent to a civilian and international airport" and warned of the possibility that a fuel-laden tanker jet could crash into a nearby city. Such concerns have alarmed others in the Kyrgyz government as well. Echoing the warnings of Zhon Ele, Nikolai Kravtsov, a member of the Supervisory Board of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Energy and Industry, raised the specter of American military aircraft crashing into the Chavlodar power plant, which is close to the Manas base (Turgaev, 2013).

Interestingly, former President of Kyrgyzstan Roza Otunbayeva claimed in a *Eurasianet* interview that the "whole [Kyrgyz] nation" worries of the possibility that the military base could become a target for terrorists. She argued that the base's proximity to Bishkek is thus a concern from a security standpoint (Kucera, 2012). Ironically, Otunbayeva's logic represents a complete reversal from that of former President Askar Akaev, who, it must be remembered, explicitly justified the presence of Manas on the grounds that it would benefit the Kyrgyz Republic's security interests, likening Kyrgyzstan's cooperation with the United States in the fight against terrorism with "the formation of the anti-Nazi coalition during World War II in terms of its noble purposes and the magnitude of its tasks" (Akaev, 2003, p. 201).

Despite the frequently negative portrayals of the Transit Center at Manas in the Russian and Kyrgyz press, Akaev's favorable view of the Manas base and, more broadly, Kyrgyzstan's cooperation with the United States is, in fact, shared by a broad segment of Kyrgyz society (Trilling, 2009). Many people see the base as a net positive, citing the large numbers of jobs provided by the base, as well as other benefits, both direct and indirect, such as the much-needed boost to the Kyrgyz economy and state coffers.

The base, moreover, engages in numerous charitable and outreach programs, such as train-

ing Kyrgyz firefighters and donating to programs aimed at making heart surgery available to Kyrgyz children (Martinez, 2013b; Viss, 2010). Perhaps in recognition of the need for more openness in the wake of the corruption scandals that have tarnished the base's reputation in the minds of some Kyrgyz, the base recently offered tours to members of the American Chamber of Commerce in the Kyrgyz Republic, whose board of directors is made up of prominent Kyrgyz businesspeople ("AmCham KR Board of Directors"; Martinez, 2013a). Such tours are intended to reassure local business and civic leaders about the how the base works and to promote better knowledge about its contributions to the Kyrgyz Republic.

Despite such outreach programs, however, nearly 50% of the Kyrgyz population, including current President Almazbek Atambayev, who appears to value a close relationship with Russia more than did some of his predecessors, remains opposed to a continued American military presence at Manas. Along with close cultural connections with Russia, economic and political pressure from Moscow is likely a major factor in determining Kyrgyzstan's orientation toward the Transit Center at Manas. Russian involvement, of course, is not an entirely new development. Russia has been an important factor in Kyrgyz policy toward Manas since the Bakiyev era. Kyrgyzstan, moreover, is part of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, and a Russian airbase in the city of Kant was established shortly after the U.S. began operating out of Manas, only a few kilometers away. In fact, despite its proximity to Manas, and the fact that many of the same concerns about the American Transit Center could also be raised vis-à-vis the Russian airbase at Kant, the Kyrgyz government has decided to allow the Russian military to continue operating the base until at least 2032. Moreover, there have been indications that the Russian presence at Kant is set to expand, since reports have emerged that Russian strategic bombers may soon be stationed there (RIA Novosti, 2012). In fact, although President Atambayev has declared that there will be "no military equipment" at Manas after 2014 (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2013), there have nevertheless been some discussions regarding the potential for developing a "joint Kyrgyzstan-Russian logistics center" at the base (Kucera, 2013b). This apparent contradiction points to the continuing primacy of Russia in the Kyrgyz foreign policy calculus.

The current government in Bishkek puts a premium on keeping Moscow happy. Kyrgyzstan, after all, remains, to a large degree, dependent on Russia for its military, economic, and energy needs, and so cannot afford to completely flout Russian pressure. In her interview with *Eurasianet*, for instance, Roza Otunbayeva admitted as much, saying that "[w]e're used to using Russian weaponry, and we can't expect [anything] from anyone else around the region. Russia is our only partner in this regard" (Kucera, 2012). Indeed, as Josh Kucera at *Eurasianet* has pointed out, "the Kremlin has offered a huge military aid package to Kyrgyzstan, which Russian officials have said is intended to shore up their geopolitical position in Central Asia, at the expense of the

U.S.'s." (Kucera, 2013b).

Russia, moreover, has promised to invest heavily in the Kyrgyz Republic's nascent hydroelectric industry (Trilling, 2012). Previous Russian investment in Kyrgyzstan's energy sector has been predicated on the assumption that the Kyrgyz government would evict the United States from Manas, a promise that Bishkek, until recently, did not keep (Sieff, 2010). However, Kyrgyzstan's hydropower ambitions have foundered on lack of funding and stiff resistance from downstream water users, particularly Uzbekistan, whose lucrative cotton industry depends on ready access to scarce water resources. Without Russian support, further development of Kyrgyzstan's potentially huge hydroelectric resources looks questionable.

The Kyrgyz Republic also owes Russia hundreds of millions of dollars in loans, which the Russian government has promised to forgive in return for cooperation in Bishkek (Rickleton, 2013). Furthermore, the Russian energy behemoth Gazprom recently purchased the Kyrgyz company Kyrgyzgas for a mere \$1. Although, as Giorgio Fiacconi notes, the sale of Kyrgyzgas was, in part, intended to alleviate endemic problems with delivery of gas supplies through Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Fiacconi, 2013), it also signals Bishkek's deepening dependence on Moscow. These circumstances may shed light on the ongoing debates about whether to close Manas, which have puzzled many analysts and observers.

On 21 May 2013 Kyrgyzstan declared that the American Transit Center at Manas will indeed be closed by the end of 2014, as previously announced (Kucera, 2013a). Although some worry that the Americans' departure will leave a deep hole in the Kyrgyz economy, President Atambayev has assured the public that the roughly \$60 million dollars in rent money that will leave the country will be compensated by revenue from "other projects" (Sheralieva, 2013). Atambayev's statement may be a reference to Russia's promise to write off more of Kyrgyzstan's debt and invest in hydroelectric projects, both of which would seriously impact the country's limited budget.

Of course, the true amount paid to Kyrgyzstan related to operations at Manas far exceeds the \$60 million dollars mentioned by Atambayev. According to the Congressional Research Service, between 2009 and 2011 alone the United States paid Kyrgyzstan over \$390 million dollars "in direct, indirect, and charitable expenses in connection with the Manas Transit Center" (Nichol, 2012, p. 15). These figures, moreover, do not account for the cost of jet fuel, which annually runs into the hundreds of millions of dollars. It is unclear where, once the United States leaves Manas, this amount of money can be expected to come from, or what "other projects" will make up for it.

Given the push-and-pull between Russia and the United States in Kyrgyzstan, and given the

fraught state of Kyrgyz politics, Erica Marat has argued that President Atambayev's decision to support the base closure is also motivated in part by self-preservation. She writes:

Atambayev, who is unlikely to benefit personally from financial inflows associated with the base, sees the U.S. military presence as a destabilizing factor in the country. The president is wary of the negative repercussions the base might trigger in the future. For the president, the decision to expel the U.S. military seems to provide a political shield from another political uprising during his tenure. (Marat, 2013)

This fact, along with the heavy economic and political pressure that Moscow is applying in Bishkek, indicates that geopolitical factors, rather than monetary concerns or even public opinion, are the real drivers of the Kyrgyz government's policy vis-à-vis Manas.

Barring any major developments, then, it would appear that Manas will indeed close according to the schedule dictated by the Kyrgyz government. Kyrgyzstan's government appears to put a higher priority on its economic and geopolitical ties with Russia than on the benefits it believes it can reap from a continued American presence at Manas. As Alexander Cooley has argued,

U.S. military facilities in [Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan] were relatively small, yet they rapidly became major political issues... in Kyrgyzstan a democratizing backlash after the ouster of corrupt president Askar Akaev catapulted the Manas base agreement and compensation formula onto the national political agenda after their years of low-key, nonpolitical status. (Cooley, 2008, p. 247)

If Erica Marat is correct about President Atambayev's fear of the base's potential to serve as a focus for future domestic unrest, then it would appear that the political fallout from the Akaev era has still not yet receded, at least in the minds of some of Kyrgyzstan's political elites and among certain vocal factions in Kyrgyz society, such as the Zhon Ele youth movement.

From the preceding, it should be clear that the politics surrounding the American Transit Center at Manas are complex, at best. Although initially hailed by the Akaev government as a boon to Kyrgyzstan, one that would transform the country's relationship with the United States while injecting much-needed cash into the Kyrgyz economy, the base has become a political football. Successive governments have alternately tried to court the United States, use the base as leverage to extract rents, or demanded the U.S. military's eviction. In Kyrgyzstan, however, the political class does not always reflect the attitudes of the entire population. Although many in Kyrgyz society at large want to see the base closed, many others recognize the benefits it has brought to the country, particularly with regards to employment and the economy.

Regardless of this fact, however, Kyrgyzstan's leadership has decided that the base will close in 2014. Russian geopolitical pressure and the exigencies of domestic politics seem to be important factors in this calculus. Although the base's presence benefits Kyrgyzstan's economy both directly and indirectly, continued cooperation with Russia in the economic, political, and military spheres seemingly outweighs these benefits. Moreover, Russian promises to forgive Kyrgyzstan's debt and help to develop its hydroelectric resources would almost certainly be revoked were the Kyrgyz government to allow Manas to continue operating. For a country like Kyrgyzstan, such incentives are difficult to ignore.

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