

Small Steps for U.S. Security Interest in Kyrgyzstan

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The United States faces a dilemma in Kyrgyzstan because the two countries' short-term and long-term security interests may be in conflict with each other. For the next few years, the United States would like to maintain its military presence in Kyrgyzstan, especially its ability to use the Ganci air base at Manas airport outside the capital of Bishkek. To do this requires giving financial support to the Kyrgyz government led by President Askar Akaev, who has explicitly said that his country deserves payment for its loyal contributions in the war against terrorism. But in the long term, U.S. security interests require that disaffected Muslims in the Central Asian region not be lured into extremism as a response to domestic government repression. The problem is that the Akaev government seems to have grown more authoritarian and repressive as U.S. assistance to it has increased in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. The current U.S. presence in Kyrgyzstan may ironically contribute to an insecure environment for U.S. security interests there in the future. How can this dilemma be resolved?

Diplomatic Pressure Alone Is Not Enough

Akaev came to Washington in September to meet with President George W. Bush and other national leaders. According to White House spokesperson Sean McCormack, the Kyrgyz president was told in no uncertain terms that human rights in his country mattered to the United States and that he had to be careful not to undermine democracy. Akaev met with Secretary of State Colin Powell, who was said to have particularly stressed this topic in their discussions. Other U.S. political leaders, including Rep. Christopher H. Smith of New Jersey, cochairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, also spoke with Akaev about the importance of human rights and the Commission's concerns about his policies, especially in the area of free speech and the persecution of political opponents. These conversations appeared to have had some effect on Akaev's thinking, because the joint statement released by the two presidents at the close of his visit stressed the importance of democratic development in Kyrgyzstan. In a widely reported seminar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Akaev said that Kyrgyzstan "is a country of human rights."

Yet this stress on human rights questions did not make the cut, in terms of how the visit played out at home. Instead, official press sources in Bishkek lauded the pomp surrounding the visit, mentioning only that Akaev was an honored guest who was being thanked for his support of U.S. military action in Afghanistan. It needs to be kept in mind, too, that this was not the first time that the Bush administration attempted to influence Kyrgyz human rights policy. Under strong U.S. pressure, jailed opposition

figure Aimbek Beknazarov was released from prison in March 2002, after his detention sparked peaceful demonstrations, which were met with deadly violence by police. Yet, just before the Washington visit, Akaev's government announced a three-month ban (later rescinded) on all political rallies, arguing that they would lead to more unrest in the country. Leading Kyrgyz government figures who were known to be responsible for the police violence did resign from office, but were allowed to go free from prosecution, and the trial of six officers who were directly blamed for the shooting has become farcical. The defendants were first allowed to escape the courtroom during a mêlée and disappear for several weeks, and then later succeeded in getting their trials delayed with the excuse that they needed more time to look at the evidence because they had not been in town.

In mid-October, the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights also issued a statement deploring the treatment of another opposition figure who is widely considered a political prisoner, former vice president Feliks Kulov. Kulov was sentenced to ten years in prison for embezzlement based on what are believed to be trumped-up charges. The Kyrgyz Supreme Court denied Kulov's appeal of the verdict, and guards in the courtroom reportedly beat Kulov publicly when the new verdict was announced. In other words, even strong diplomatic pressure may not be enough to return Akaev to the more democratic path he seemed to be pursuing when Kyrgyzstan first gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1992.

Kyrgyzstan as a U.S. Security Partner

According to U.S. military analyst John Hendren, the Manas airport is particularly valuable for U.S. military operations in the Central Asian and Middle Eastern regions because of its extra-long runway, originally built to accommodate large Soviet transport planes. It has been used extensively for operations in Afghanistan, not only by U.S. forces but also by those from France and other coalition countries, to launch both air attacks and search-and-rescue missions. It is also a common refueling stop for cargo- and troop-carrying aircraft headed to major Afghan cities. It is possible that it would be used in an attack on Iraq as well, although in September 2002 Kyrgyz foreign minister Askar Aytmatov said that no official request to do so had yet been made by the United States.

Press reports indicate that reconstruction on the site is consistent with plans for a fairly long stay by U.S. forces. A concrete base has been set up under heavy tents that are heated for winter conditions. Although the current basing arrangement, according to the Pentagon, is centered on a one-year renewable contract, Pentagon press releases state that, "the coalition will stay until their work is done." Many observers believe that U.S. forces will likely stay for at least five years.

In addition to the base itself, the defense relationship with Kyrgyzstan is valuable for the United States because of intelligence sharing about Islamic militant organizations in the area, and because it gives the United States a foothold in a key strategic region. Kyrgyzstan has seemed to play up the competitive element involved in what many are calling the new "great game" in Central Asia, a term previously associated with the clashes between the British and Russian empires in the region a century ago. For example, Bishkek is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, joining its neighbors from China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan in a regional

security grouping that has occasionally distanced itself publicly from the United States. In September 2002, according to Dmitrii Glumskov of the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, this organization met to discuss establishing both an anti-terrorism center and a rapid reaction joint force on Kyrgyz territory, at the Kant military airport just east of Bishkek. In October 2002, Kyrgyzstan held anti-terrorism, joint-border guards exercises with neighboring China; this marked the first time that Chinese troops have gone abroad for exercises.

In other words, it may not be the case that Kyrgyzstan needs the United States as much as the United States needs Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan has credible defense partner alternatives, and if the United States wants Kyrgyz support for its activities in the region, there may be limits to the pressure it can apply for political change.

The Importance of Foreign Money

U.S. payments that are directly related to the air base are significant. According to analyst John Hendren, the Air Force purchases locally the petroleum used for aircraft refueling at the Ganci base, and also pays hefty landing fees to airport authorities. Together these expenditures add up to around \$40 million per year. The U.S. government also gave the Kyrgyz military a donation of \$3.5 million in December 2001 to be used in repairing Kyrgyz aircraft. Furthermore, U.S. soldiers reportedly make daily so-called recreation patrols to local businesses around the base, helping to keep the local economy afloat.

Beyond this, according to the State Department, the U.S. government is providing assistance to the Kyrgyz government to help with everything from border security to improving basic and university education, healthcare, and environmental resource management. (Akaev is urging Washington to approve Kyrgyzstan for the new Millennium Assistance Fund for developing countries as well, which requires that its recipients meet a set of standards on political and economic reform trajectories.) The European Union (EU) has increased its assistance to the country, and individual European governments also provide aid. London alone gives about \$20 million per year in development assistance, ranging from encouragement for the founding of new non-governmental organizations to the provision of clean rural drinking water. Japan has given Kyrgyzstan around \$250 million over the past decade, including a \$55-million loan after September 11 to rebuild the Manas airport. And the International Monetary Fund, whose votes are dominated by the United States, the EU, and Japan, approved its first tranche of credit for Kyrgyz foreign debt repayment in December 2001, after having refused the tranche earlier because of Bishkek's stalled economic reforms and high-level government corruption.

All of these things help to create the impression in Kyrgyzstan that Akaev has foreign support for his policies, and that he is now being given free reign because of the war on terrorism. Of course, many of these things are also helping to rebuild the impoverished Kyrgyz economy and to encourage the development of civil society. In that sense, monetary support for Bishkek may foster better conditions for the democratic development that human rights activists would like to see. And with Akaev asking for even more international assistance, it is unlikely that the threat to cut off payment will have any effect on his performance.

Small Steps to Resolve the Dilemma

Because there are limits to the pressure that the United States can put on the Kyrgyz government and still get its immediate security interests in the region met, Washington must be creative in dealing with this problem. One set of tools it can use to make small inroads are the U.S. and international security forces already in the region.

The United States is currently involved in training Kyrgyzstan's military officers and border guards and, according to a September 2002 State Department report, it is now doing a "comprehensive assessment of Kyrgyzstan's law enforcement needs." Police training and joint patrols with international police officers, based on the kinds of programs typically carried out on United Nations peacekeeping missions in places ranging from Somalia to Kosovo, could make a vital contribution to improving Kyrgyzstan's human rights situation. Money could be offered to the Kyrgyz government in return for the establishment of internationally mentored police education programs that emphasize minimizing the use of force and respecting the human rights of detainees. This could be managed multilaterally through NATO's Partnership for Peace program, especially if it were done in a peacekeeping-training related context.

In addition, according to Pentagon sources there is a great deal of contact around the Manas airbase between U.S. military personnel and the local population. Daily recreational patrols by U.S. troops differ from the more traditional patrols that search for terrorist activity—and photographs show that they are not dressed in the full battle rattle that is standard in more dangerous locations like the Balkans. U.S. forces are also involved in distributing donated toys and food for humanitarian purposes. A conscious effort could be made to use this contact to help build civil society (broadly defined as group-oriented, self-help related activity) in Kyrgyzstan, as well as support for the international presence. This might involve anything from holding free veterinary extension school-type clinics for sheep farmers to encouraging the formation of local baseball teams to play games against the troops and providing them with donated equipment. U.S. civil affairs and psychological operations units from the Special Operations Forces are good at these kinds of activities, and Kyrgyzstan should be a high-priority base for their deployment.

Although these training and social activities will not solve Kyrgyzstan's problems, they are a low-cost way of communicating to the local population what it is that the United States and the democratic international community value. By focusing on building Kyrgyz society, rather than on using Kyrgyzstan for immediate U.S. goals, they may help make Kyrgyzstan a long-term U.S. ally.