

The Logic of Kyrgyzstan's Base Policy

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Kyrgyzstan's February 2009 decision to close the U.S. military base at the country's Manas airfield caught many by surprise. The decision was not preceded by domestic debate about a possible closure, nor had such an issue been raised bilaterally in formal Kyrgyz-U.S. discussions. Moreover, the 2006 renegotiation of the original 2002 agreement had seemed to put an end to any new challenges to the U.S.-leased base.

Indeed, despite the announcement, a new Kyrgyz-U.S. agreement was concluded in June, establishing a so-called "Transit Center" on the premises of the Manas airbase. The agreement was widely seen as a reversal of the February decision, with the renaming of the base as a public relations move. Soon after, Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev and Russian president Dmitri Medvedev signed a memorandum stipulating the possible stationing of additional Russian troops on Kyrgyz territory, a move rumored to presage a second Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan.

The timing, sequence, and nature of these events caused observers to wonder again about the source of such decisions in Kyrgyzstan and the trajectory of Kyrgyz policy on foreign basing. The formal explanations of Kyrgyz, U.S., and Russian authorities are of little help in explaining (to borrow from political scientist Alexander Cooley) the "base politics" that have surrounded Manas.

Two conventional approaches to Kyrgyzstan's base politics exist. One has been to link the entire episode to high-level geopolitics, in which the involvement of Kyrgyz authorities is just a formality. According to this view, the decision to close the Manas airbase was largely Moscow's decision, while the creation of the Transit Center was the result of a U.S.-Russian agreement. An alternative view stresses the autonomy of Kyrgyzstan's leadership and its cash-oriented pragmatism. Proponents of this approach

generally applaud the Kyrgyz authorities' success in taking advantage of the situation for their own benefit.

Both views have merit, but observers and decisionmakers at all levels ought to be wary of focusing exclusively on one or the other explanation at the risk of missing the ways in which they interrelate. A closer examination of the two approaches reveals that both are relevant; they complement each other, rather than conflict. Kyrgyzstan is bound to make choices from a very limited set of options. However, an important question remains: what factors have enabled Kyrgyzstan's leadership to successfully raise the price for the base without compromising its position with Russia or the United States, at least for now?

This memo suggests two possible answers. First, the way that the United States, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan approached the issue turned the base into a source of rent, with all the consequences that typically accrue to a "rentier state," a country that relies on profits earned through the sale or lease of natural resources (including, potentially, strategically located bases) to external actors. Second, the fluidity of the international order in Central Asia generated more options for Kyrgyzstan despite narrow and externally-imposed constraints.

From Base to Center: External Sources of Foreign Policy?

The idea that Kyrgyz foreign policy decisions are made outside the country and rubber-stamped in Bishkek has long been conventional wisdom. Indeed, the first rumors about a possible decision to close the Manas airbase surfaced in Russian media outlets in January 2009, with the first formal confirmation of this decision made by President Bakiev in Moscow on February 3, 2009. On the same day, Bakiev and Medvedev signed a memorandum on economic and financial cooperation. The document specified a Russian grant of \$150 million to support Kyrgyzstan's state budget, an additional \$300 million loan, and an investment of \$1.7 billion into a joint Kyrgyz-Russian company to construct a major hydropower plant.

Two days after the announcement, an anonymous source in the Russian Air Force suggested that the Americans might stay at Manas but under revised conditions. This prediction came true on June 22, 2009, when a new Kyrgyz-U.S. agreement was signed, creating a transit center on the premises of Manas. Interestingly, some top Kyrgyz officials, including Prime Minister Igor Chudinov, continued to deny as late as April that Kyrgyzstan was continuing any talks with the United States on the basing issue, despite repeated comments from the U.S. Department of Defense suggesting the contrary. Russian leaders quickly reacted to the new Kyrgyz-U.S. agreement, saying it was Kyrgyzstan's "sovereign right" to make such a deal with the United States. For many analysts, it seemed evident that Moscow was an invisible part of this new agreement, especially as its signing came a couple of weeks before the first state visit of U.S. President Barack Obama to Moscow.

Both the substance of the decisions and the form in which they were presented caused many to see the Kyrgyz government as just a formal player. Recent news about a planned Russian base in southern Kyrgyzstan appeared to support this view. The rumors of the new Russian base first emerged after a quick and underpublicized visit

by Russian deputy prime minister Igor Sechin and defense minister Anatoli Serdyukov to Bishkek on July 7, 2009; the trip occurred as President Obama was in the middle of his three-day visit to Moscow. Sechin, a man reportedly very close to Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin, paid a similarly quick and low profile visit to Bishkek on January 28, 2009, days before the Kyrgyz president announced the closure of the Manas airbase.

Money Matters: Commercial Foreign Policy?

Observers who credit the Kyrgyz leadership with some role in these decisions squarely link Kyrgyzstan's foreign basing policy to the short-term goal of cash generation. Unlike their references to the situation in Afghanistan or the struggle against terror, the statements of Kyrgyz officials regarding the economics of the basing issue have been consistent. In February 2006, a newly-elected Bakiev claimed that he planned to increase the rent a hundredfold, from \$2 million to \$200 million. His challenge to the existing contract appeared well-timed, as the U.S.-utilized Karshi-Khanabad base in Uzbekistan had been closed in July 2005. Revelations concerning former Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev's corrupt links to Manas-related revenues provided additional support for the Kyrgyz leadership's position.

The 2005-2006 round of Kyrgyz-U.S. negotiations ended with an increase in the rent paid by the United States for use of the base from \$2 million to roughly \$17 million. As Alexander Cooley of Barnard College correctly noted in 2006, however, this new agreement would not be the end of the story. The June 2009 agreement established a \$60 million annual rent for the renamed Transit Center at Manas and a grant of over \$60 million to improve Manas' airport infrastructure. If the Russian decision to disburse, quickly and without conditionality, \$450 million in grants and loans to Kyrgyzstan was linked to the announcement of the Manas closure, one could see the validity in labeling Kyrgyz foreign policy as very pragmatic, a view long advocated by political scientist Thomas Wood.

Right Place, Right Time?

These two views highlight differing interpretations of the real center of decisionmaking in Kyrgyzstan. The first approach posits the view that Kyrgyzstan is a stage upon which various international actors play out their schemes. Such an approach presupposes that the outcomes of these games are a reflection of the interests of relevant external actors (in this case the United States and Russia), with any shifts in the game indicating changing dynamics in their relations. The second view suggests that credit is due to the Kyrgyz leadership, which has skillfully used its territory to bargain, extract, and increase financial dividends without markedly changing the status quo.

In fact, these two interpretations coexist and even complement each other. There is no doubt that poor, weak, and vulnerable Kyrgyzstan faces the challenge of adjusting to an environment established by external actors and is not in the position to ignore messages from its main foreign partners. The dependence of Kyrgyzstan on external actors and circumstances is deep and multifaceted. Yet, the current confluence of events and interests in this part of the world have provided the right moment for the Kyrgyz

leadership to pursue a vital cash generation campaign, despite these severe systemic constraints.

Two particular conditions have allowed Kyrgyzstan to maneuver within these largely external constraints. First, Kyrgyzstan's understanding and use of its bases has reflected the familiar autonomy of a rentier state. Military bases cost Kyrgyzstan nearly nothing, while its foreign partners value them greatly. Rents go directly to the government, often in a rather opaque fashion. The Kyrgyz government feels almost no pressure from domestic groups about its decisions on foreign basing, particularly ones that expand its international "win-set" (to use political scientist Robert Putnam's term).

Like in a typical rentier state, Manas has also proved to be a much-needed shield against external pressure for democratization. It is telling that the United States was among the last, and one of the quietest, states to react to Kyrgyzstan's July 2009 presidential election, which the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe assessed as a "disappointment." The linkage of the base to the fight against terrorism has provided an extra bargaining chip for Kyrgyzstan, while dulling the U.S. State Department's responsiveness to the country's domestic politics.

The second factor contributing to the maintenance of the current equilibrium is the inherently unstable and fluid international order in Central Asia. As political scientist Robert Rothstein argued long ago, small states are severely disadvantaged in international relations by default, yet they manage to find expanded space for maneuvering during periods of competitive international order.

It is now conventional to see Central Asia as a focal point of competition between major powers. Eugene Huskey has postulated that Kyrgyzstan could serve as an "indicator of relations" among the United States, Europe, Russia, and China, comparable to the status of Berlin during the Cold War. None of the relevant major powers has established a hegemonic influence in the region, and the struggle for influence remains dynamic. This recent round of base politics suggests that Kyrgyz leaders do not see a trend toward a unipolar order in Central Asia anytime soon.

Volatility in the international order is also a problem within Central Asia. For example, Uzbekistan's neighbors are constantly pressured by Tashkent on matters linked to water, energy, and borders. In May 2009, following an explosion and reports of an attack against a police station, Uzbek authorities moved tanks into the town of Khanabad, several kilometers from the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border. Regardless of Tashkent's intent, Kyrgyzstan could not fail to perceive this move as hostile, especially given recent tensions between the two states over water sharing and Kyrgyzstan's construction of new dams on the Naryn river, a tributary of the Syr Darya river extending into Uzbekistan.

In this context, it is clear to see why Kyrgyzstan agreed to Russian assistance to construct the Kambarata-1 hydropower plant and why it is negotiating the stationing of additional Russian troops along its southern border with Uzbekistan. Russian-Uzbek relations have rarely been smooth, and having a Russian base would serve as a useful backdrop in Kyrgyz dealings with Uzbekistan, similar to the role of the Manas airbase in Kyrgyz-Russian relations.

An important question, then, is how long such volatility will persist. Bishkek-based analyst Aleksandr Knyazev recently claimed that Kyrgyzstan's multivector policy will have to be abandoned soon given a "changing geopolitical situation," marked by a declining U.S. and a rising Russian and Chinese presence. Others argue that the increasing, and substantively unpredictable, role of China in Central Asia (and the world) will prevent the long-term establishment of a stable and predictable order in Central Asia.

Conclusion

The latest series of Kyrgyz decisions on the U.S. presence at Manas, in conjunction with talks on Russia's military presence in Kyrgyzstan, again revealed how challenging it is to explain a seemingly straightforward phenomenon. One approach suggests that talk of a specifically "Kyrgyz" base policy is not that useful, as the major sources of decisions are located in foreign capitals, not Bishkek. The second approach, by contrast, points to the ability of the Kyrgyz leadership to exploit the interests of greater powers for its own benefit.

Both views highlight essential features of the politics of foreign basing in Kyrgyzstan. Observers should not try to single out one explanation, but instead appreciate the complexity of the country's base politics. This involves better understanding how the base issue has influenced the substance of Bishkek's relations with Washington and Moscow, with close attention to the dynamics of rentier state behavior. The nature and dynamics of the international order within which Kyrgyz base politics evolves also deserve scrutiny, with the international power configuration in Central Asia evolving away from or toward competition as an important dimension to follow.

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