

**Depoliticizing Manas:
The Domestic Consequences of the U.S. Military Presence in
Kyrgyzstan**
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Introduction

Over three years since the United States established military bases in Central Asia to support Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the military installation at Manas airport continues to define many aspects of the U.S.-Kyrgyz relationship. Much has passed in Kyrgyzstan since fall 2001, and several informative accounts have analyzed the dynamics of the evolving U.S.-led coalition presence. This analysis, based on a recent research trip to Kyrgyzstan, seeks to complement existing accounts by offering additional comparative insights regarding the impact of the U.S. base on domestic Kyrgyz politics. The political dynamics generated by the Manas base are analogous to Kyrgyzstan's previous post-Soviet experience with Western actors. In particular, many of the political and economic consequences of the U.S. base presence also occurred in Kyrgyzstan in the mid- to late-1990s when it was awash with Western foreign aid, technical assistance programs, and NGO projects. This article draws analytical parallels and lessons from these experiences to assess Manas-related politics.

The overall argument of this paper is that through a combination of U.S. decisions about the base and the dynamics of Kyrgyzstan's patrimonial domestic institutions, the U.S. presence at Manas has become "depoliticized." Currently, Manas is not an object of political debate or contestation in the Kyrgyz political system or in Kyrgyz public opinion. However, there are some signs that this state of affairs may not last in the medium to long term. Changes in Kyrgyzstan's domestic balance of power, increasing press freedoms, and a series of upcoming national elections all have the potential to unleash political dynamics that may alter the current political equilibrium.

State of Affairs at Manas

The U.S. need to establish a supporting base for its post-9/11 OEF activities dramatically altered the course of the U.S.-Kyrgyz relationship. Prior to the U.S. military presence, U.S.-Kyrgyz relations were at a low point due to concerns about democratic backsliding and overall donor fatigue with the speed and conviction with which the Kyrgyz

government was implementing reforms. OEF suddenly thrust Kyrgyzstan into a strategic role as an antiterrorism coalition member and, of the 1,900 military personnel on base during 2002, about half were nationals or non-U.S. coalition partners.

Despite its enduring legal status as a coalition base, Ganci has now lost much of its initial multinational composition. The withdrawal of the French, Australians, Norwegians, Dutch, Italians, South Koreans, and Danes has left just a handful of Spanish transport crewmen to join the roughly 1,000 Americans now deployed on three-month rotations. Like its K-2 counterpart in Uzbekistan, Manas-Ganci is now very much a U.S. facility.

The base itself is undergoing some noticeable physical transformations. New prefabricated buildings are replacing the old tents that housed U.S. airmen and ground crews, and facilities are being upgraded at a cost of about \$60 million. Observers seem to be split on whether the upgrade, in and of itself, is evidence of plans for a more permanent stay. But the improvements in security and facilities suggest the installation will likely outlive its current three-year lease renewal that is scheduled to expire in summer 2006.

There are also geopolitical reasons to believe that the United States will not leave anytime soon. Given periodic instability in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan's position within Russia's periphery, and its strategic location on China's western border, Manas is a facility that can clearly serve many U.S. strategic purposes for some time to come. Moreover, while many aspects of Kyrgyzstan's respect for human rights and political openness are troubling, they are qualitatively better than in neighboring Uzbekistan, where the establishment of U.S. bases and U.S. support for President Karimov's police state creates a severe political problem for the United States. In short, few factors point to a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Kyrgyzstan any time soon. Accordingly, analytically assessing the economic, political, and social impact of the base is all the more important if we are to make projections about likely future trends.

Economic Impact: Jobs, Patronage, and Rent-Seeking

The most important domestic impact of Manas at the moment is economic, with the installation providing various types of base-related economic benefits. Much like the foreign aid boom of the previous decade, revenues from the base are helping very specific segments of Kyrgyz society. On the positive side, the base has generated some noticeable employment in the Bishkek area. Manas employs a steady stream of interpreters, drivers, kitchen workers, and service contractors for various base-related jobs. These positions—about 400 to 500—pay well by Kyrgyz standards and a Kyrgyz citizen that makes a few hundred dollars a month can support his or her extended family. Concurrently, the service sector in Bishkek that caters to expats, including many contractors that live off base, appears to be flourishing.

Exact figures on the net economic contribution of base-related activities and transfer payments were not available for 2004, but different informed observers estimate the net

impact of all base-related exchanges at \$150,000 to 200,000 a day. This is broadly consistent with the figure of a net \$40 million-a-year impact on the Kyrgyz economy reported by U.S. authorities in 2002, and it amounts to about 5 percent of Kyrgyzstan's small real GDP. Such numbers do not include the significantly increased economic and military assistance packages that Kyrgyzstan has received from the United States since 2002 as a tacit *quid pro quo* for accepting the basing presence and securing future cooperation.

On the more negative side, just like the influx of Western aid when the country was liberalizing a decade ago, base-related income streams are also feeding established patronage networks and supporting President Akayev and his close family circle. The Manas Airport Consortium, technically an independent joint-stock company but whose Kyrgyz component maintains close links with the Akayev regime, is one of the biggest beneficiaries of the U.S. presence and receives a payment of \$7,000 in landing fees (charged by weight) anytime a U.S. plane lifts off from the facility. These fees are collected on top of the lease payments for the airport land and parking fees for which U.S. and Kyrgyz officials refuse to give detailed numbers. The fuel contract for the base—estimated at over \$25 million annually—was initially awarded to Alaam-Servis, a company headed by Akayev's son-in-law Adil Toigonbayev, and exempted from domestic taxation. The president's son, Aidar Akayev, has also been reportedly involved in facilitating a number of base-related deals and contracts. Such insider dealings are typical in Kyrgyzstan.

Bargaining with the Manas Airport Authority also appears to be a difficult process for base officials. Despite official proclamations that describe base-airport relations as "cooperative," inside observers, base contractors, and previously stationed officers have described dealing with Kyrgyz representatives at the Airport Authority, Kyrgyz Airlines, and the Ministry of Defense as a "frustrating," "painful," and "slow" process that frequently involves dealing with institutionalized corruption. It is common practice for Airport Authority members to demand increased payments from U.S. commanders, especially from newly rotated officials, and even to ask for personal gifts, favors, and/or bribes. Of course, such behavior is well known to Western investors, NGOs, and aid professionals who have dealt with Kyrgyz government officials in a variety of money-related issues and negotiations.

When asked about the lack of transparency and cronyism in base-related contracting and revenue streams, each side blames the legal norms and procedures of the other country. The official line from Kyrgyz government representatives is that all of the procurement and contracting related to the base is done under the formal guidelines established by the Pentagon and that current arrangements are very much consistent with those guidelines. The U.S. side argues that having a more competitive contracting process is difficult given that the Kyrgyz themselves only tend to put forward one company when bidding for the more lucrative contracts. Some U.S. officials also concede that some of the goods and services contracts that were signed quickly and out of necessity when setting up the base were inflated and have subsequently been adjusted

and/or re-bid. Nevertheless, they maintain that planes must be fueled and that needs must be met with the available options.

In terms of its political economy, then, the base appears to be merely a new external source of income that is supporting old political practices, patronage networks, and clan-based ties. Much like the Kumtor gold concession (which was awarded to the Canadian company Cameco without an international tender) or the influx of Western developmental assistance and foreign aid in the 1990s, base-related cash flows are lining the pockets of connected elites, but they are not having any broader transformative effect, and they are certainly not helping Kyrgyzstan's market-reform process within the sectors that continue to be controlled by connected Kyrgyz officials. Indeed, base-related revenue streams are probably pushing Kyrgyz authorities in quite the opposite direction from current Western-sponsored reform projects on issues relating to transparency and corruption, enterprise restructuring, fiscal reform, tax collection, and good governance promotion. This is a trade-off that USAID and the U.S. government should at least acknowledge. It may also have more damaging political ramifications in the event of a change of government.

The Political Dimensions

The patronage dynamics associated with the base's economic impact are one source of its depoliticization. But even in the realm of pure politics, the base does not seem to be attracting much attention in this important electoral year.

Public opinion on the base is difficult to gauge with precision. One of the few opinion polls conducted in September 2002 by the Bishkek-based Informational Support Fund reported that 18 percent of those polled supported the Kyrgyz government's decision to host the base, 34 percent opposed it, while a 45 percent plurality of respondents had a "neutral opinion." These numbers have probably not changed much. In the two years since the survey, the base's economic impact may have swayed some toward supporting the U.S. presence, but the considerable opposition in Kyrgyz society to the Iraq War has probably moved some public opinion the other way. Such a "neutral" attitude typifies the degree to which many Kyrgyz simply feel disengaged from foreign policy matters that they perceive as not affecting them directly. It is also another indication of the general demobilization of the Kyrgyz public on what should be an important political issue.

A number of commentators and Western newspaper reports have suggested that the U.S. military presence may be having an adverse impact on Kyrgyzstan's democratization and human rights situation. One prominent Kyrgyz NGO leader felt that U.S. Embassy officials had become less responsive to democracy-related concerns after the establishment of the base. Although the observation regarding the deteriorating domestic political situation is correct, causally connecting this regression to the U.S. military presence may be unfair given that Kyrgyzstan's slippage on these issues predates the base's establishment. For example, Kyrgyzstan's Freedom House scores on political freedoms started to decline in 2000 after its flawed presidential reelection. However, it is

also reasonable to argue that the presence of the base over the last three years has not improved the domestic political situation either.

Despite public ambivalence, some perceptions about human rights problems, and base-related cronyism, the base itself has avoided significant political criticism from Kyrgyz opposition politicians. Some Kyrgyz deputies criticized the rushed procedural handling of the U.S. basing request and Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in fall 2001, and a few deputies remain skeptical of the base's overall purpose now that OEF is winding down. But overall, the basing issue is not currently on the national political agenda. Government and opposition officials uniformly praise the base's contribution to securing regional stability and deterring terrorist activity of the type that took place in southern Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 1999 and 2000. President Akayev's pomp-filled visit to the base on January 17, 2005, in the middle of a parliamentary election campaign, underscored the public link made by the president between the presence of the base and the Kyrgyz government's strong international commitment to fighting terrorism.

Not entirely consistent with the deterrence argument, however, the Kyrgyz government also appears to have learned that emphasizing the domestic threat surrounding the base can also be politically fruitful. Concerns about terrorism rally Kyrgyz citizens domestically around the government and encourage appeals to the United States to provide new military equipment and surveillance technologies to the Kyrgyz security services. It was especially striking in our interviews that Kyrgyz, U.S., and European observers suggested that base-related threats were either exaggerated or fabricated by the Kyrgyz National Security Services for political purposes. For example, the government's suggestion that three individuals allegedly caught in November 2003 with explosives and a map of the base were members of the Islamic organization Hizb ut-Tahir and were preparing an attack remain fairly sketchy, despite their subsequent trial and conviction.

The political opposition is also avoiding taking a critical stand on the base in the run-up to the 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections. For a certain segment of the opposition, such pro-U.S. feelings are undoubtedly genuine. Strategically, however, the stance is also good politics. Drawing upon the models of Georgia and Ukraine, the opposition coalition is trying to outflank the Akayev regime by presenting itself as more "pro-Western" than he is and advocating "change," "reform," and an anticorruption platform. As if following the same script, it increasingly seems as if the Akayev-led government, not the opposition, is becoming the main source of anti-U.S. rhetoric. In an attempt to solidify his already strong support among Russian-speaking minorities and to ensure the backing of Moscow, Akayev is accusing the West of conspiring to promote an external revolution in Kyrgyz politics. Currently, the base itself is not a topic for discussion in the current parliamentary campaign.

But U.S. officials should also bear in mind that Kyrgyz civil society and the independent media have yet to significantly develop into vehicles of effective political criticism. In South Korea, for example, the country's mobilized NGOs and technologically savvy media outlets engage in a continuous information war against the

presence of U.S. bases. Beyond the negative stories by the Moscow-based Russian press, the Kyrgyz media currently carries very few antibase and fewer still antigovernment stories. Summarizing the state of critical analysis in Bishkek's current mainstream newspapers, the English-language *Vechernii Bishkek* splashed onto its final issue of 2004 the challenging headline "President Akayev Deserves Our Heartiest Congratulations." But as the press becomes more critical and enmeshed in the contested parliamentary and presidential elections of 2005, political partisanship is likely to increase. In the near future, base-related stories will provide likely targets for scoops and for scandal-related stories, whether they are grounded in fact or not. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan's network of NGOs will undoubtedly become more active in the economic, social, and environmental issues surrounding the base as opportunities to do so arise and as they familiarize themselves with base-related issues.

Social Dimensions

Perhaps the greatest success of U.S. officials has been in managing the potentially negative social impact that often accompanies U.S. bases overseas. Bar and restaurant owners in Bishkek fondly recall the days when coalition forces would frequent their businesses on a daily basis. Relations between servicemen and local women were also common at that time, as 90 out of 250 French troops alone applied for fiancée visas before leaving the country. During that time, a couple of social incidents were reported, including in 2002 when a U.S. officer driving a jeep was involved in a late-night accident with two pedestrians. The accident attracted some media attention but was resolved expeditiously and in accordance with Kyrgyz law, the SOFA, and the cooperation of both parties.

Nevertheless, in order to prevent any other such incidents and in response to a growing threat-level, U.S. soldiers have not been allowed off base for the last year and a half, except for special escorted cultural excursions and to do community-relations volunteer work. The exact rules for social interactions are set by the base commander who is also minimizing drinking within the camp. These measures are strict, but they have been effective as officials have minimized the types of social incidents that usually give U.S. base personnel negative reputations elsewhere. They have also avoided the negative images of drunk and lewd expats that often characterize the behavior of Western aid workers and consultants and that are a source of resentment among the local population.

One interesting outstanding issue involves the actions and legal status of contractors that live off base and frequent Bishkek's social scene. The vast majority of locals do not distinguish between actual military personnel and civilian contractors. Thus, even though military personnel are not allowed off base, most Kyrgyz are not aware of these restrictions. Regardless, overall, the U.S. plan to "minimize the footprint" and negative social impact on Kyrgyz society has been quite effective.

Future Prognosis and Recommendations

The US seems to be in Manas for the long haul. Accordingly, this analysis suggests three lessons and recommendations for regional analysts and US policy officials.

First, previous Kyrgyz attitudes to Western foreign assistance offer an important guide to the likely future attitudes regarding the U.S. military presence. In the early years of Kyrgyzstan's independence, Western promises of aid, assistance, and support for civil society created real grounds for optimism. But as the years passed, this turned into disillusionment. Major reforms stalled and the Kyrgyz public became highly critical of Western consultants and contractors who seemed to achieve few real benefits for Kyrgyz society. The base seems to be fostering a similar type of cynicism. Even among the more pro-Western reformers that support the U.S. presence at Manas, there is a general attitude that the United States is in Kyrgyzstan to preserve its security interests and does not particularly care about promoting democracy and human rights. From the U.S. point of view, this is a dangerous sentiment to have festering as a conventional wisdom. One need only look at historical cases such as the Philippines, Korea, Greece, Portugal, and Spain to see that such perceptions of U.S. motives have the potential to quickly turn public opinion against the U.S. military presence.

Second, unlike in Okinawa or Korea where U.S. officials can marshal a number of prepared brochures, fact sheets, and information leaflets presenting their viewpoint, the short duration of the Manas base and the relative secrecy surrounding its activities have created an informational void. In addition, the frequent rotation of troops and officers for a few months ensures that institutional understandings of the domestic situation in Kyrgyzstan may be limited and concentrated in other forums. Therefore, U.S. authorities should make basic information concerning the impact of the base more readily available and accessible to the broader Kyrgyz public. While some Kyrgyz officials, especially airport officials, may protest against such greater transparency, they are hardly in a position to alter the basic dynamics of the Manas agreement and should be ignored. Kyrgyz society may be relatively depoliticized now, but NGOs, media outlets, and political opponents are likely to demand facts and hard numbers about the base, its activities, and its revenues sooner than later. Such requests are not unreasonable. Moreover, readily providing declassified base-related information and statistics will also shield the United States from future accusations that they are actively colluding with and hiding the corrupt activities of involved Kyrgyz officials.

Finally, the current social policy restricting leave time and off base outings for military personnel appears to be working and should be maintained.

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basing-related issues and all interviews were conducted in a “not for attribution” format. The views expressed in this report are my own and may not reflect the views of Dr. Marten. All comments are welcomed and can be sent to the author via email at: acooley@barnard.edu

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