

Manas Matters

The Changing Politics of the U.S. Military Base in Kyrgyzstan

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From July 2005 to July 2006 the status of the Manas (Ganci) U.S. military base in Kyrgyzstan became a central issue in U.S.-Kyrgyz relations and within Kyrgyz domestic politics. During this time, newly elected Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev demanded an exponential increase in U.S. compensation payments to the Kyrgyz Republic for use of the base and called for an investigation into how base-related revenues were accounted for during the regime of former president Askar Akayev. Most commentators have explained this sudden politicization of the U.S. base in Kyrgyzstan as a function of prevailing geopolitical changes, especially Russia's reassertion of influence in Central Asia and Uzbekistan's accompanying expulsion of the United States from the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) facility in July 2005.

However, a closer examination of the evolution of the new "base politics" of Manas suggests that the renewed Kyrgyz contestation of the U.S. basing accord has been primarily a function of domestic political developments, particularly Kyrgyzstan's ongoing volatile transition from Akayev's patrimonial authoritarian regime. This political challenge to the U.S.-Kyrgyz security contract is consistent with other historical cases of overseas base hosts that questioned the terms of prevailing U.S. basing agreements during their turbulent democratic transitions.

Establishing Manas: Base-Related Patronage and Regime Support

The coalition airbase at Manas was legally established in December 2001 to support

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. By May 2002, Manas hosted 2,000 coalition personnel from nine different countries and a variety of cargo and refueling aircraft; a year later it had evolved into a predominantly U.S. facility. The timing of the 2001 agreement could not have been better politically for the then-embattled Akayev. After a period of democratic backsliding and increasing authoritarianism, hosting a coalition base afforded the Kyrgyz president renewed international legitimacy and the opportunity to establish himself as an important partner in OEF and the broader war on terrorism. Not coincidentally, after the start of the OEF campaign the international community noticeably muted its concerns about Kyrgyzstan's deteriorating democratic institutions and human rights practices.

The Manas base also offered critical material support to the Kyrgyz president and his political clients. The base constituted the biggest U.S. economic investment in Kyrgyzstan. From its first year, it contributed about \$40 million annually to the small Kyrgyz economy and employed about 500 Kyrgyz nationals in a variety of positions.

The lion's share of base-related funds flowed not to national agencies, however, but to private Kyrgyz entities closely tied to the ruling regime. The Manas International Airport, a technically independent company partly owned by Aydar Akayev, the president's son, collected \$2 million annually in lease payments, plus additional landing fees of \$7,000 per takeoff. The airport company also was awarded most of the base-related service contracts. These revenues flowed directly to Manas Airport and were neither accounted for nor taxed by the Kyrgyz government. However, the most lucrative source of base-related payments were fuel contracts, secured by the airport-affiliated Manas International Services Ltd. and another legally independent fuel company, Aalam Services Ltd., owned by Adil Toiganbayev, Akayev's son-in-law. A *New York Times* investigative story revealed that out of a total of \$207 million spent by the U.S. Department of Defense on fuel contracts during the Akayev era, Manas International Services received \$87 million and Aalam Services received \$32 million in subcontracts. The amounts and structure of these payments were kept opaque and were not reported in the Kyrgyz media. A subsequent investigation by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation uncovered that the Akayev clan had embezzled tens of millions of dollars of these base-related revenues through a network of offshore accounts.

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 Akayev 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. Commenting specifically on the adoption of the seemingly generous landing rights formula, former U.S. ambassador to Kyrgyzstan John O'Keefe suggested that the fees could have been avoided but were viewed by the U.S. side as an important economic inducement that would secure the Kyrgyz government's commitment. Consequently, these private or selective incentives also served to “depoliticize” the base issue in Kyrgyz politics, as political parties, the Kyrgyz parliament, and the media neither publicized nor overtly criticized the terms of the basing agreement.

Challenging Manas: Regime Change and Democratization Dynamics

The ouster of Akayev in the March 2005 Tulip Revolution swept Bakiyev into power as provisional president as part of a national unity pact that simultaneously elevated his main political rival Feliks Kulov to the position of prime minister. Bakiyev was formally elected president on July 10. At his first press conference the following day, he declared that the purpose of the Manas base should be reviewed and that Kyrgyzstan should pursue a more independent foreign policy. The statement came just a week after the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), composed of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, called for setting a timetable for the removal of U.S. military bases in Central Asia. At the same time, U.S.-Uzbek relations were rapidly deteriorating and, on July 31, the government of Uzbekistan formally evicted the U.S. military from K2. Taken in their entirety, the events of July 2005 suggested to many regional analysts that renewed Russian pressure on the Central Asian countries was endangering the U.S. military presence in the region.

However, the major source of Bakiyev's open political questioning of the base was internal, not external. Bakiyev issued his first statement challenging the base only after he had secured his election, with the certification of the international community, conveniently hinting that he was now under severe Russian pressure in order to gain more bargaining leverage over the United States.

In the following months, Bakiyev further delegitimized the existing basing agreement by linking the base to U.S. support of the corrupt practices of the Akayev regime and demanding a renegotiation of the Manas agreement that would be more favorable to Kyrgyzstan. These statements were issued during a period of growing internal political struggle between the Kyrgyz president and the Kyrgyz parliament, still dominated by Akayev supporters, as Bakiyev positioned himself as a reformer who would fight to change the corrupt practices of the Akayev era and defend Kyrgyz sovereignty.

During an October visit by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Bakiyev demanded a significant increase in U.S. payments for basing rights and called for a full accounting of base-related payments made during the Akayev era. In December 2005, he publicly demanded a hundredfold increase in U.S. lease payments – from \$2 million to \$200 million. The next April, unhappy with what he perceived as U.S. foot-dragging, Bakiyev issued a June 1, 2006 ultimatum for concluding negotiations on a new base deal. In response, U.S. negotiators refused to offer such a substantial and explicit quid pro quo and told Kyrgyz officials that they could secure alternate regional basing arrangements for well below the new \$200 million price tag. Indeed, that spring the United States explored possible alternate basing sites in the region, including in Tajikistan and Mongolia. In the end, the June 1 deadline was missed, but the two sides did reach an agreement in July 2006.

This hard bargaining on the Kyrgyz side reflected the internal democratization dynamics and political pressures in Kyrgyzstan. Bakiyev strategically sought to build public support for his fragile regime by politically discrediting the existing Manas

agreement and linking it with previous U.S. support for Akayev. The loss of K2 and Russia's perceived new political offensive into Central Asia strengthened Bakiyev's negotiating hand, but it did so in terms of increasing the price that the Kyrgyz Republic perceived as reasonable for the facility; it did not precipitate the initial demand for a renegotiation. Much like post-authoritarian governments in other U.S. base hosts such as Thailand, Philippines, Spain, Greece, Panama, and Turkey, Kyrgyz elites questioned the terms and legitimacy of a U.S. base deal by linking the issue to U.S. support of a previous nondemocratic regime. Thus, the contestation and renegotiation of the Manas deal by the Kyrgyz side was entirely consistent – and predictable – when viewed against the comparative history of other democratizing overseas U.S. base hosts.

The New Agreement

After months of prolonged negotiations and political brinkmanship, Kyrgyz and U.S. negotiators finally announced a deal on extending U.S. use of the base. The publicly released joint statement was a creative and carefully crafted document that satisfied the political needs of both sides. The statement states that the U.S. side “expects to provide over \$150 million in total assistance and compensation over the next year,” thereby allowing Bakiyev to claim that he extracted a great deal of the \$200 million that he demanded from the Americans. However, the actual lease payment for Manas only rose from \$2 million to \$20 million annually; the compensation package includes an array of various bilateral assistance programs (many of them already in place) as well as more general base-related economic contributions. To emphasize the point, the statement explicitly emphasizes that the base deal is part of a “larger, robust bilateral relationship” between the United States and the Kyrgyz Republic; it also points out that, since independence, the United States has provided more than \$850 million in total aid to the Central Asian state. Thus, the same document that seemingly acknowledges a total \$150 million quid pro quo for U.S. base rights reaffirms the broader framework and bilateral relationship. The statement does not set a formal duration for the lease. However, in a public statement made a few weeks later at Manas to commemorate the fifth anniversary of September 11, 2001, Bakiyev affirmed his commitment to allow the base to function until operations in Afghanistan are concluded.

Conclusion

The recent re-politicization of the Manas airbase and its governing agreements was not a function of geopolitical shifts but rather a result of the change of domestic environment in Kyrgyzstan created by the collapse of the Akayev regime. Bakiyev, his successor, accused the United States of supporting Akayev's authoritarian tendencies and feeding his corrupt regime through its base payments. Regardless of prevailing geopolitical developments and the SCO's declarations, the Manas agreement was bound to have been politicized and contested by Akayev's successor. The expulsion of the United States from K2 helped to set the new price level for a new base deal, but it did not actually cause this political challenge.

Accordingly, we should also expect that the U.S. basing presence will continue to be questioned and challenged in the future for domestic political reasons. Bakiyev is unlikely to demand another price increase, unless for some reason, such as inadequate

congressional funding, he can credibly claim that the Kyrgyz government did not receive the compensation package it was promised in July 2006. However, other base-related issues, such as the criminal jurisdiction provisions of the Status of Forces Agreement, the provision of access rights for a future military strike on Iran, and allegations of unauthorized flights transporting prisoners of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, are all issues that potentially could be used by various Kyrgyz political actors (including parliament, national elites opposing Bakiyev, domestic nongovernmental organizations, and Islamic movements such as Hizb ut-Tahrir) to challenge provisions of the new basing agreement and place them on the domestic political agenda. The U.S.-Kyrgyz base agreement will continue to be a major political issue within Kyrgyz domestic politics during this tumultuous period.