

Manas Hysteria

Why the United States can't keep buying off Kyrgyz leaders to keep its vital air base open.

BY ALEXANDER COOLEY | APRIL 12, 2010

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As the dust settles in Bishkek and Kyrgyzstan's erstwhile opposition begins to assemble a new regime to replace ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, U.S. policymakers and international pundits remain preoccupied with Manas air base. This facility, located near Bishkek, has been an important hub supporting the war effort in Afghanistan since the U.S. military opened it in December 2001.

Since then, Manas's operations have been threatened by political instability more than once. Russia, never pleased to have U.S. forces on former Soviet territory, regularly pressures Kyrgyzstan to terminate the base's lease. Certainly, the Kremlin had something to do with Bakiyev's February 2009 [announcement](#), delivered in Moscow, that he would close Manas and accept more than \$2 billion in emergency assistance and investments from Russia.

But this explanation neglects how Kyrgyz elites, relatively weak and impoverished, still retain considerable ability to manipulate both the United States and Russia for their own local political agendas and personal gain. After all, last year the Kyrgyz government ended up double-crossing Moscow by accepting an initial \$300 million payment before it renegotiated a higher rent with the United States for the renamed "[Manas Transit Center](#)." As a result, relations between Moscow and Bishkek plummeted to an all-time low, while Bakiyev's government gleefully cashed in the new checks provided by both Moscow and Washington.

The root of these recurring basing headaches lies in the fact that the United States simply lacks the authority to establish a military presence in Central Asia. Unlike basing facilities in Japan, South Korea, and Germany, Manas didn't come to the United States in the aftermath of a wartime occupation or conflict. Nor do these bases serve the common defense or a security organization, like NATO bases in Italy and Turkey.

Rather, in Kyrgyzstan the United States has to rely on a quid pro quo, usually in the form of economic incentives, to secure the ongoing acquiescence of local governments. The United States perceives Manas as part of the Afghan theater of operations, and Kyrgyz officials typically cite this rationale for the base's existence as well. However, from the

outset they have also viewed the U.S. military presence as instrumental in securing a significant foreign revenue stream.

When the base was first established, U.S. officials agreed to pay takeoff and landing fees based on international civil aviation standards to the Manas Airport Authority, an entity tied to former President Askar Akayev's regime. This unusual arrangement was designed to provide Akayev's government with economic incentives to support the coalition effort in Afghanistan. Of these local revenue streams, by far the most lucrative remain the contracts to supply jet fuel. Indeed, an FBI investigation following Akayev's ouster in March 2005 revealed that he and his family members had [embezzled](#) funds from these fuel contracts and transferred them into overseas bank accounts.

After Bakiyev assumed office in the wake of the "Tulip Revolution," he criticized these Akayev-era arrangements and claimed that future base-related revenues would be used for the good of the Kyrgyz nation, not personal profit. They were not -- but Bakiyev nonetheless demanded even more rent from Washington. In 2006, he secured a [new agreement](#) that increased annual rental payments from \$2 million to \$17 million, within a total \$150 million annual package of U.S. payments and bilateral assistance. But even this did not satisfy the Kyrgyz president, who subsequently engineered the 2009 Russia-U.S. bidding war that resulted in the tripling of the annual rental payment to \$60 million and an additional \$117 million in aid.

For the Kyrgyz opposition, excluded from these base-related revenues, Manas became a daily reminder of the Bakiyev family's greed, corruption, and use of Kyrgyzstan's state assets for their [private purposes](#). Following their rise to power, members of the interim government have already signaled their intention to re-evaluate the deals surrounding the base. Roza Otunbayeva, the new government's head, stated in a recent news conference her intention to investigate the structure of fuel contracts. At issue might be ties between the Bakiyev family and the [Mina Corporation](#), which in July 2009 was awarded an annual fuel contract worth potentially more than \$200 million.

The Kyrgyz political opposition has also grown to resent Washington's single-minded focus on Manas at the expense of human rights issues. The opposition was stunned when President Barack Obama personally courted Bakiyev last year in an effort to rescind the decision to close Manas; [Obama was criticized](#) for jettisoning his democratic values in order to curry favor with the repressive Kyrgyz regime.

The conspicuous U.S. refusal to condemn Bakiyev's July 2009 presidential re-election, an election harshly criticized by international observers, further alienated Bakiyev's critics. Ironically, Washington's silence can be contrasted with the Russian media's denunciations of Bakiyev's corruption and nepotism. Of course, Russia's accusations come out of rivalry rather than genuine concern for human rights, but the attacks have nevertheless played well among the Kyrgyz public.

For now, Otunbayeva has indicated that status quo operational arrangements will remain in effect for the duration of the basing contract. However, as the base's lease comes up for

renegotiation this summer, it is now a certainty that Bishkek will demand to restructure the contracts and change the base's legal provisions, if only to demonstrate to a suspicious public that all is not "business as usual" at Manas.

In response, Washington might be tempted to throw even more money at Bishkek: After all, it worked in the past.

But paying off the Kyrgyz is a short-term solution that will backfire in the long term. Instead, to protect Manas further down the road, the United States must convince the Kyrgyz people that it is interested in more than a transactional relationship. For example, the United States can publicly encourage the Kyrgyz interim government to nationalize the distribution of fuel to the base, as it has announced it will do with Bakiyev's private banks, and to make more transparent base-related payments to the national budget, as opposed to paying out to opaque companies with offshore registrations. Of course, U.S. officials -- having just witnessed how chronic incompetence can generate the rapid collapse of a government -- would also do well to re-engage on issues of governance and democracy.

Simply put, putting an end to the cycle of confrontation over Manas will require that all interested parties approach the basing issue differently from before. At the Prague summit last week, U.S. and Russian officials [declared](#) their willingness to pursue some basic cooperation that might avert a new round of Manas-related bidding and competition. Such coordination should be encouraged.

But the United States must also act with greater sensitivity toward the complex role the base plays within Kyrgyzstan. For its part, the new Kyrgyz government would do well to not only clean up the corrupt flow of base-related funds, but, more importantly, work to hasten the day when a U.S. air base is no longer the focus of the country's foreign relations and domestic political maneuverings.