

# Basing Headaches: Why US Overseas Deployments Are Becoming Increasingly Contentious

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**by Dr. Alexander Cooley**

Kyrgyzstan's [Manas Transit Center](#) is one of the little-known logistics hubs that make operations in Afghanistan possible. Though critical to the US, it is a nation-wide controversy in Kyrgyzstan.

Anti-government protests toppled Kyrgyzstani President Bakiyev's government in April, and Manas' legal status has been thrown into doubt by the interim government. Members of the interim government have strongly criticized State Department and Pentagon officials for unnecessarily tolerating Bakiyev's political repression and corruption, including in base-related fuel and service contracts, in order to [maintain basing rights](#). Though they gave Manas a one-year extension, its status is likely to become even more hotly contested as we move into the campaign for national parliamentary election this October.

Frustration over this issue has even reached US shores. Over the last few weeks, the House Committee on Oversight, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs has held hearings on [possible corruption in the fuel contracts](#) at Manas.

Looking further east, [mass anti-base protests](#) have once again erupted on the Japanese island prefecture of Okinawa, host to most US military installations in Japan. The Democratic Party of Japan and now-downfallen Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama were swept into power last year promising to take a tougher stance on US-Japan security issues and to review existing US-Japan security accords. This includes a 2006 agreement to relocate the controversial Futenma Marine air station to Camp Schwab on the northern part of the island.

Hatoyama's aggressive campaign stance on the basing issue contrasted greatly with the position of the staunchly pro-US Liberal Democratic Party that ruled the country for most of the post World War II period. But he soon tried to walk back many of these campaign pledges, opening the Pandora's box of grievances that many Okinawa residents have both against the US military and, just as importantly, [against Tokyo authorities](#). Okinawan residents view Japan's central government as having actively colluded with the United States for decades to unfairly foist the

country's "base burden" onto Okinawa. Tokyo traditionally maintained Okinawans' tacit support by providing public investments and targeted base-related payments. Hatoyama lost even that support, though, and eventually resigned in early June as his popularity plummeted.

At first glance, the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Okinawa appear to have little in common aside from the fact that both are creating serious concerns for US defense and foreign policy planners. Yet the disputed US presence in both countries is part of a growing political charge carried by the US military around the world, even in areas in which the US has long enjoyed steady political support.

Over the last few years, we have seen significant protests against the US basing presence erupt worldwide, including in Ecuador, Italy, Korea and Puerto Rico. Anti-basing movements have been intimately tied to the rise of populist politicians within these countries and territories. This more strident political resistance to US bases has coincided with eroding popular support for them, a consequence of the fact that US military installations are smaller than they used to be and play a much diminished economic role in host countries.

Growing resistance also is matched by better means to resist. Recent years have seen the creation and networking of a global movement against US bases. This has allowed different domestic protest movements to diffuse their most effective tactics and mobilizing strategies among one another.

"Base politics" such as this are intimately connected to local political developments. US planners nevertheless can certainly draw some important lessons about how to minimize political disputes over current and future overseas facilities. First, and most obviously, US planners should strive to limit the size and scope of the overseas presence and the number of installations that need to be maintained.

The Kyrgyz case suggests that the relative small size of an overseas installation will not minimize its social and political importance, regardless of US intentions to keep such installations "out of sight and out of mind." So while these forward operating "lily pad" installations or cooperative security locations are cheaper to construct and maintain than traditional permanent "bases," they in fact remain far more politically vulnerable precisely because their presence does not engage a variety of local actors or contribute a substantial local economic benefit.

At least in Central Asia, however, expansion still appears to be the trend. The current solicitation of bids [to construct new complexes across Central Asia](#) suggests that CENTCOM is expanding its network of installations, training centers, and joint security complexes. Unfortunately, defense planners still don't seem to have grasped that the political and governance problems associated with such facilities, including the substantial graft and corruption that maintaining such facilities inevitably seems to require, will become an enduring and controversial aspect of the US presence. Ultimately, these facilities will become vulnerable to a future political backlash, just as is happening now in Kyrgyzstan or previously occurred in Uzbekistan.

Second, in cases where building new military installations is deemed indispensable,

policymakers need to broaden engagement and assistance to include a variety of domestic actors and sectors rather than narrowly focusing on military-to-military contacts and security assistance.

CENTCOM undoubtedly believed that it was solidifying contacts and support within the Kyrgyz security services by using its considerable discretionary funds last year to build a special forces training center in Akmola and announcing a plan to construct an anti-terrorist training center in southern Kyrgyzstan. Yet such cooperation merely reinforced the now widespread belief among the Kyrgyz public that the US was supporting the coercive apparatus and authoritarian excesses of the now-defunct Bakiyev regime. To be quite pointed, it indicated that the US was not interested in helping the country more broadly.

Even in cases where the only compelling national interest that the United States has is maintaining access to a military installation, US planners should broaden the range of contacts and engagement with the base host rather than focus narrowly on security cooperation. Incidentally, this is more or less the Chinese strategy when dealing with countries that host strategic assets such as oil fields or pipelines. They establish contacts with multiple actors to ensure continued cooperation in the case of a change of government.

The United States would do well to adopt a similar approach. Otherwise it will continue to increase its political precariousness with these new partners. On this note, the [announcement of Michael McFaul](#), Director for Eurasian Affairs at the NSC and President Obama's Special Representative, that the United States will broaden its engagement and cooperation with Kyrgyzstan beyond Manas is welcome, though it may still have come too late to stem the mounting anti-US backlash in the country.

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