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**Sabina Nováková**

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**Manas Air Base and U.S.-Kyrgyz Relations**

*Bakalářská práce*

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Autor práce: **Sabina Nováková**

Vedoucí práce: **Mgr. Jana Sehnálková**

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## **Bibliografický záznam**

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## **Abstrakt**

Bakalářská práce představuje případovou studii americké vojenské základny Manas v Kyrgyzstánu. Věnuje se významu základny v kontextu americko-kyrgyzských vztahů po roce 2001. Zaměřuje se na analýzu bilaterálních jednání mezi USA a Kyrgyzstánem ve spojitosti se zřízením, fungováním a uzavřením základny v roce 2014. Práce hledá odpověď na otázku, v čem spočívaly pozice obou zemí, jaká byla motivace jejich kroků a jaké další faktory vstupovaly do procesu vyjednávání. Dospívá k závěru, že snaha Spojených států získat a udržet přístup k základně byla vedena potřebou zajistit opěrný bod pro zásobování ozbrojených sil v Afghánistánu. Oproti tomu Kyrgyzstán byl primárně zaujat vidinou finančního prospěchu plynoucího z přítomnosti americké základny na svém území. Spojené státy poskytly místním elitám možnost obohacení díky příjmům spojeným s provozem základny. Důležitý dopad na postoj Kyrgyzstánu k zahraničněpolitickým otázkám včetně základny Manas měla rovněž nestabilita vnitropolitických poměrů. Spojené státy se nezdálo ocitly ve vleku vnitropolitického dění v Kyrgyzstánu, přestože byly v tomto asymetrickém vztahu silnějším hráčem. Biškek dlouhodobě postrádal ucelenou zahraničněpolitickou strategii. Jeho kroky, vyznačující se častými obraty a náhlými zvraty, zpochybňovaly z pohledu Spojených států reputaci Kyrgyzstánu coby spolehlivého a důvěryhodného partnera.

## **Abstract**

The following thesis is a case study of the U.S. Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan. It addresses the significance of the base in the context of mutual U.S.-Kyrgyz relations after 2001. It aims to analyze the bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and the Kyrgyz on establishing the air base, its functioning, and eventually its closure in 2014. Among the research questions, it seeks to explain the respective positions of both parties, the motives behind their actions, and factors that influenced this negotiation process. The analysis shows that the extensive U.S. efforts to get and maintain access to the facility

were driven by the necessity to secure transportation corridors to and from Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, was primarily interested in financial benefits stemming from having an American base on its territory. The U.S. let local elites enrich themselves in connection with the air base revenues. Kyrgyzstan's internal instability also had a major impact on its stance towards foreign policy matters and the issue of the Manas air base in particular. The U.S. was a stronger player in this asymmetric relationship, but Washington often got into situations where it was being pulled by Kyrgyzstan's domestic developments, which effectively determined mutual relations. The analysis concludes that Bishkek lacked a coherent long-term foreign policy strategy and Kyrgyz behavior, marked by frequent turnarounds and uncertainty, cast doubt on the country's reputation as a credible and trustworthy partner for the United States.

### **Klíčová slova**

Spojené státy, USA, Kyrgyzstán, Střední Asie, Manas, vojenství, bezpečnost, vnější vztahy, bilaterální vztahy

### **Keywords**

United States, U.S., Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, Manas, military, security, external relations, bilateral relations

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**INSTITUT MEZINÁRODNÍCH STUDIÍ  
PROJEKT BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE**

**Jméno:**

**Sabina Nováková**

**E-mail:**

**Semestr:**

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**Marek Pečenka**

**Vedoucí práce (povinné):**

**Jana Sehnálková**

**Zdůvodnění výběru tématu práce (5 řádek):**

**Volba tématu je motivována více okolnostmi. První je jeho nesporná aktuálnost, s ohledem na probíhající snižování mezinárodního angažmá v sousedním Afghánistánu. Druhou je pak jeho mimořádná společenská závažnost (v souvislosti s válkou proti terorismu, kvůli které byla tato základna zřízena). Za třetí je toto téma doposud v odborné literatuře jen málo zpracované. Současně se jedná o problematiku a téma, o které se v rámci svého studia dlouhodobě zajímám.**

**Předpokládaný cíl (5 řádek):**

**Práce zkoumá roli základny Manas v americko-kyrgyzských vztazích po roce 2001. Klade si za cíl prostřednictvím pohledu na toto specifické téma analyzovat geopolitickou situaci ve Střední Asii, přiblížit význam základny pro kyrgyzskou vnitřní i zahraniční politiku a také vysvětlit její význam pro americké vojensko-strategické plánování a zahraniční politiku v regionu.**

**Základní charakteristika tématu (10 řádek):**

**Základna Manas nedaleko kyrgyzského hlavního města Biškeku vznikla v reakci na teroristické útoky z 11. září 2001. Její poloha je klíčová zejména pro podporu a zásobování jednotek ISAF v Afghánistánu. Strategický význam základny se dále zvýšil poté, co byla v roce 2005 uzavřena základna Karší-Chanabád v sousedním Uzbekistánu a Manas zůstal pro americké síly jediným opěrným bodem na sever od afghánských hranic. Existence této vojenské základny na území Kyrgyzstánu je navíc (vedle jejího primárně vojensko-strategického významu) také praktickým výrazem snahy Spojených států o upevnění vlastní pozice ve středoasijském regionu. To vzhledem k tamní komplikované geopolitické situaci způsobuje další problémy. Tenze vznikají nejen mezi USA a Kyrgyzstánem, ale také s hlavními velmocemi zainteresovanými v regionu, zejména Ruskem a Čínou, ale také Íránem.**

**Předpokládaná struktura práce (10 řádek):**

- 1. Úvod (vymezení tématu a cílů práce, výzkumná otázka a teze, rozbor pramenů a literatury)**
- 2. Geopolitika Střední Asie**
- 3. Americká zahraniční politika vůči Střední Asii po roce 1991**
- 4. Založení americké vojenské základny v Kyrgyzstánu**
- 5. Základna Manas za Akajeva**
- 6. Základna Manas za Bakijeva**
- 7. Přeměna základny v tranzitní centrum**

**8. Základna Manas a dočasná vláda**

**9. Uzavření základny Manas**

**10. Závěr**

**Základní literatura (10 nejdůležitějších titulů):**

**Baktybek Abdrisaev, Kyrgyzstan's voice in Washington: Reflections of the Kyrgyz Ambassador on Bilateral Relations during the Transitions Years (New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2005)**

**Alexander Cooley, "U.S. Bases and Democratization in Central Asia," Orbis 52, No. 1 (2008)**

**Slavomír Horák, Rusko a Střední Asie po rozpadu SSSR (Praha: Karolinum, 2008)**

**Deborah E. Klepp, The U.S. Needs a Base Where?: How the U.S. Established an Air Base in the Kyrgyz Republic (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2004)**

**Jeffrey Mankoff, U.S. and Central Asia after 2014 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2013)**

**Erica Marat, The Military and the State in Central Asia: From Red Army to Independence (New York: Routledge, 2009)**

**Martha Brill Olcott, Central Asia's Second Chance (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005)**

**Olga Oliker and David A. Shlapak, U.S. Interests in Central Asia: Policy Priorities and Military Roles (Santa Monica: RAND, 2005)**

**Sebastien Peyrouse and Marlène Laruelle, Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2012)**

**S. Frederick Starr et al., Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia (Washington, D.C.: The Atlantic Council of the United States and Central Asia — Caucasus Institute, SAIS, 2001)**

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## **Introduction**

The air base at Manas near Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan, was established in reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Washington declared the War on Terror and a military invasion into Afghanistan was subsequently launched in fall 2001. The U.S. military needed to provide support and secure supply of the Coalition forces in Afghanistan. As a result, several new military bases were set up in Afghanistan's vicinity, Manas air base being one of them. The U.S. used Manas for deployment of a small portion of its forces, and, most importantly, as a refueling hub for aircraft bound to and from Afghanistan. Apart from delivering military cargo, Manas was a central transit point for bringing troops into theater. Its strategic importance further increased following closure of Karshi-Khanabad air base in neighboring Uzbekistan in 2005, as it since then remained the only U.S. foothold north of the Afghan border. Apart from its primary military-strategic role, the mere presence of a U.S. military base on the territory of Kyrgyzstan was a practical manifestation of the U.S. efforts to strengthen its position in Central Asia. Despite Kyrgyzstan being an independent country since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. military presence in the country brought along other problems and friction due to complex geopolitical situation in Central Asia. Tensions caused by the existence of the Manas air base arise between the United States and Kyrgyzstan, but also through interaction with other major powers with vested interests in the region. These are, most notably, Russia, China, and Iran.

The following thesis addresses the significance of the U.S. Manas air base in the context of mutual U.S.-Kyrgyz relations after 2001. It aims to analyze the bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and the Kyrgyz on establishing the air base, its functioning, and eventually its closure in 2014. Among the research questions, it seeks to explain the respective positions of both parties, the motives behind their actions, and factors that influenced this negotiation process. In terms of methodology, the overall research design is one of a case study. Given the study's topical focus on the changing role of the Manas air base in the U.S.-Kyrgyz relations in time, the body of the text rests on process tracing as the primary method of analysis.

In terms of structure, the thesis is comprised of Introduction, the body of eight chapters, and Conclusion. The opening part provides brief introduction into the topic and the overall analytical framework. After this, the text proceeds as follows. Chapter I

provides a contextual overview of the geopolitical situation in Central Asia, focusing on the major players and factors that have shaped the changing regional security environment following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Chapter II then traces the early formation of the U.S. foreign policy towards Central Asia after 1991. Chapters III and IV outline, respectively, the founding of the U.S. air base in Kyrgyzstan following the tragic events of 9/11, and the ensuing military cooperation between the United States and Kyrgyzstan under President Akayev. Chapters V and VI cover the base-related developments following the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the subsequent events under President Bakiyev that eventually led to formal transformation of the Manas air base into a Transit Center. Chapter VII is dedicated to the regime change in the course of the Second Kyrgyz Revolution in 2010 and its repercussions for the fate of the U.S. air base. Finally, Chapter VIII explores eventual closure of the base during the term of President Atambayev. The Conclusion summarizes my main findings pertaining to the analysis.

My motivation for choosing the topic was threefold. First of all, the subject matter is highly relevant to the present due to the strategic importance of Central Asia and its ever-growing role in international affairs. Next, as demonstrated by the war in Afghanistan for which the Manas air base was originally established, security is exceptionally important for our society. It is no exaggeration to say that it is the key aspect impacting life in the West, and hence worth further analyzing. At last, the issue of Manas and U.S.-Kyrgyz relations is very recent. The following literature review also proves that it is insufficiently elaborated in academic literature. To my best knowledge no comprehensive study of the Manas air base exists as of today; works dealing with U.S.-Kyrgyz relations are also very rare. Therefore, it was a particular challenge for me.

Wide range of sources were used for writing this thesis. The topic itself is still largely under-researched in the academic literature, and my analysis therefore relied heavily on primary sources. These sources included official documents, most notably bilateral international treaties, which are accessible through U.S. open legal collections and databases. I also used data from various documents, such as official fact sheets, available on-line at the websites of the U.S. Embassy Bishkek or individual U.S. military bases abroad. At the same time, I used some official documents of Kyrgyz origin. Along with Kyrgyz, which is the state language, Russian still has the status of the official language in Kyrgyzstan. Knowledge of Russian is therefore an advantage for acquiring local sources. However, since military and politics are often sensitive issues in

Central Asia, access to and the range of official documents from Kyrgyzstan that could be used for this thesis was rather limited.

A second large group of consulted sources consists of daily press news and media reports from the period of time under scrutiny. News reports compiled by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) proved particularly useful in this respect. The RFE/RL is the world's leading news service focusing, among other regions, on Central Asia. It runs a Kyrgyz service and offers access to comprehensive news archives focusing on Kyrgyzstan. Hence, I was able to make the most of the archive materials provided by RFE/RL. Other news agencies and services consulted for the purpose of the thesis, both in English and Russian languages, included Reuters, the New York Times, BBC News, EurasiaNet, and FerganaNews.

Secondary sources used for this study can be roughly divided into monographs, reports, and articles published in academic journals. For an introduction into the geopolitics of Central Asia, I drew mostly on an earlier publication by Frederick Starr et al. titled *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia*. I also found useful the monographs *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development* by Sebastien Peyrouse and Marlène Laruelle, *Central Asia's Second Chance* by Martha Brill Olcott, and Slavomír Horák's *Střední Asie mezi východem a západem*, which was published in Czech. For U.S. involvement in Central Asia, I have used the publication by Olga Olikier and David Shlapak *U.S. Interests in Central Asia: Policy Priorities and Military Roles*.

Furthermore, I made great use of Erica Marat's works on security developments in Central Asia, and Kyrgyzstan in particular, most notably her monograph *The Military and the State in Central Asia: From Red Army to Independence*. Marat herself is from Kyrgyzstan, but lives and works in the United States. She has published extensively on post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, changing strategic setting in Central Asia, and the region's military and security.

An interesting account of the outset of U.S.-Kyrgyz negotiations about the Manas air base is provided in the work titled *The U.S. Needs a Base Where?: How the U.S. Established an Air Base in the Kyrgyz Republic*. The author, Deborah Klepp, actually served as a diplomat with the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek during the establishment of the base. As such, her report provides a rich, factual insider view on the bilateral talks with the Kyrgyz. U.S.-Kyrgyz relations in the era of President Akayev are further covered in *U.S. Bases and Democratization in Central Asia* written by

Alexander Cooley. For his part, Gregory Gleason approached the topic of U.S. military presence in Central Asia and its wider implications in his article *The Uzbek Expulsion of U.S. Forces and Realignment in Central Asia*.

Jim Nichol analyzed the transformation of the Manas air base into a Transit Center in his U.S. Congressional Report *Kyrgyzstan's Closure of the Manas Airbase: Context and Implications*. However, this report ends with the analysis of events as of 2009. The very latest developments are yet to be further reflected in scholarly literature. This is why I had to rely mostly on shorter pieces in the subsequent parts of the thesis. There, I used analytical articles published in the *CACI Analyst* and various policy briefs, written, among others, by Erica Marat, Stephen Blank, and Marlène Laruelle. The most recent paper consulted was the *U.S. and Central Asia after 2014* by Jeffrey Mankoff, which deals with regional changes related to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Most academic literature used is of American provenience, because the world's leading research and analytical centers for the study of Central Asia are based in the United States. Books written by Kyrgyz authors, while offering the invaluable local perspective, are still rather rare. Moreover, they are often of poor quality and suffer from ideological or political bias. A great example of this bias is the publication titled *Kyrgyzstan's Voice in Washington: Reflections of the Kyrgyz Ambassador on Bilateral Relations during the Transitions Years*, written by the then ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic to the U.S. Baktybek Abdrisayev.

Here, I would also like to express my gratitude to all those who kindly assisted and supported me during the work on this thesis. In the first place, I am hugely indebted to my supervisor Jana Sehnálková for useful comments on the early draft of this study. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Gregory Gleason, who was my supervisor during my internship at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and allowed me to concentrate on my research. My stay in Germany was made possible thanks to the generous support from the Erasmus+ program.

## 1. Geopolitics of Central Asia

Central Asia opened up to the outside world and its influence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the region has since then become a place where several key powers' interests intersect. These powers, both global and regional, have their stakes in multiple fields, and different countries in the region are important for different major powers.

Most notably, Central Asia is perceived from the outside as a source of multiple threats to peace and stability, which might potentially grow into violent conflicts. Political and security situation in neighboring Afghanistan has direct implications for security of Central Asia. Old Soviet borders, which have often been drawn artificially irrespective of ethnic lines, resulted in presence of large ethnic minorities outside their titular nation states. There is not a single country in the region without sizable ethnic minority on its territory, which gives rise to ethnic tensions. Disintegration of the Soviet Union has not only brought independence for the region's five new nations, but also new social problems, some of which have been nonexistent under the Soviet rule, such as unemployment. Other critical issues, most notably poverty and corruption, have remained largely unaddressed across the region.

To a large extent all countries in the region have weak institutions, and were still in the process of state building in the early 2000s. Nowadays, Central Asia consists mostly of consolidated authoritarian regimes, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, which is rated as "partly free" by Freedom House.<sup>1</sup> As such, they might soon face deep succession crises, possibly combined with increased external pressure for democratization. Political Islam in the forms of Islamic extremism and fundamentalism, terrorism, and armed insurgencies are yet another threat particularly dangerous for local authoritarian rulers.

Unfinished border demarcation in Central Asia is a source of friction among individual countries and encourages smuggling and trade in narcotics. The extent of informal economy connected to drug smuggling mainly from Afghanistan is immense and the entire issue is extending far beyond the Afghan border. Scarcity of water is yet another problem which might become a major source of friction, particularly between upstream and downstream countries.

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<sup>1</sup> See relevant country reports in 2014 Nations in Transit (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/nations-transit>) and 2014 Freedom in the World (available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world>).

Overall, potential conflicts in Central Asia might take various forms, from conflicts with states located outside the region to inter-state or intra-state conflicts. Conflicts with external powers could take form of direct foreign invasion, ground or air attack, but also deniable internal destabilization. Conflicts between individual Central Asian states could range from conventional wars to cross-border strikes on rebels or militants similar to the Batken wars of 1999 and 2000.<sup>2</sup> Alternative conflict scenarios could include cross-border incursions or internal destabilization. Civil wars could emerge along ethnic, religious and sectarian, clan or kinship lines. Ideological divide between the current regime and opposition is also an option.<sup>3</sup>

According to Starr, leading US geostrategist, when it comes to American foreign policy in Central Asia, “[t]he interests that matter most to the United States are those of the other major powers.”<sup>4</sup> For this reason, it is crucial to understand the interests and positions of key regional powers – Russia, China, Iran and Turkey.

Russia still sees itself as the most important power, following more than a century when it had been ruling the entire Central Asian region and two decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Applying its concept of “near abroad,” Russia is striving to keep its own sphere of influence there, particularly in the political and military sense, but also in the oil and gas sector. Yet, Russian and other Slavic minorities, which had been traditional bureaucratic elites and one of the main Russian leverages over Central Asian states for decades, have mostly left for Russia or Europe since the early 1990s. Russia’s economic recession in the late 1990s further weakened ties with Central Asia. In recent years, Russia has been promoting its plans to create a Eurasian Economic Union, which is based on earlier Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia. This reflects Moscow’s view that Kazakhstan is of major political and economic importance for restored Russia. Since Vladimir Putin’s coming to power, the priority, according to Horák, is “not only military presence and political influence, but primarily support for Russian arms and oil corporations in their effort to return” to Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> Russia maintains direct military presence in the region, with military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Moscow-dominated regional security

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2 Armed incursions of Islamic militants from Tajikistan into the territory of Batken Province in southern Kyrgyzstan, which occurred in summer of 1999 and 2000 and triggered mutual response from both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, assisted by Russia.

3 S. Frederick Starr et al., *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia* (Washington, D.C.: The Atlantic Council of the United States and Central Asia — Caucasus Institute, SAIS, 2001), 12–24.

4 *Ibid.*, viii.

5 Slavomír Horák, *Střední Asie mezi východem a západem* (Praha: Karolinum, 2005), 24.

organizations, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), are important vehicles for Russia to exert influence over the region and also to help halt the spread of extremism and radicalism from Central Asia.<sup>6</sup>

China's interests somewhat differ, as it is making efforts to prevent any power to get to the position of a regional hegemony in Central Asia. In Beijing's view, peace and stability in the region are necessary for its own development of Xinjiang, as it is preventing any spill-over effect and thus keeping its own periphery safe. Chinese policy of not commenting on internal affairs or criticizing local authoritarian regimes reflects Beijing's resolve not to let anyone interfere in Xinjiang and its own internal matters. Economic cooperation is the key area of mutual relations. Central Asia is seen as a great new market for Chinese goods and an opportunity for trade and investment. China was very clear to voice its interest in the energy sector; gaining access to Central Asian oil and gas was very high on its agenda in order to secure diversification of both the Chinese energy imports portfolio and transportation routes. Central Asia is functioning as a source of various other resources vital for Chinese economy and industry, most notably cotton and minerals. Beijing is also focusing on investments in major infrastructure projects; it is building transportation corridors, oil and gas pipelines, roads and railroads. Its presence was initially most visible along Chinese borders in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Nowadays, the situation has changed, and China is rapidly becoming the primary trading partner for all Central Asian states.<sup>7</sup>

Iran is a country with substantial historical connections to Central Asia. Persian language was widely spoken in cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara, and for centuries it had been the main language of the upper classes of society. Contemporary Iran seeks to maintain good relations with neighboring countries, particularly Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, and to deepen mutual economic ties – mainly through trade – in order to escape international isolation. This is to a large part a result of Western economic sanctions which are still imposed on Iran. Apart from having a large say in the energy sector around the Caspian Sea, Iran is focusing on improving transportation links in and with Central Asia. It is building roads and railroads, such as the main Kyrgyz north-south highway connecting Bishkek and Osh. Iran's position as a transit country could

6 For the role of CSTO and SCO in Central Asia, see Erica Marat, *The Military and the State in Central Asia: From Red Army to Independence* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 81–103.

7 Martha Brill Olcott, "China's Unmatched Influence in Central Asia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/09/18/china-s-unmatched-influence-in-central-asia> (accessed October 31, 2014).



potentially provide Central Asia with access to the Persian Gulf, but this development is to a large extent hampered by complex geopolitical situation as well as various obstructions from Turkmenistan, Iran's only direct Central Asian neighbor.<sup>8</sup> Iranian regime is not content to see the US presence increasingly close to its borders and shows great fear of encirclement. To counterbalance the US presence in the region, Iran is maintaining close relations with Russia.

Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the newly independent states in Central Asia in 1991 and to establish embassies in most states in 1992.<sup>9</sup> It is most interested in trade and commerce, focusing on the energy sector, large construction projects and road transportation. Turks also own the largest bank in Kyrgyzstan and major shopping malls. Due to common language, culture and religious heritage,<sup>10</sup> Turkey is heavily promoting the idea of Turkic unity. Education has become a major soft power tool for Turkey, which is eagerly founding schools and universities, providing scholarships and funding educational exchanges in Turkey. As a result, increasingly more people from the region seek to obtain their higher education in Turkey rather than in Russia.<sup>11</sup> Geographical remoteness from Central Asia remains the main drawback for Turkey.

At last, the region has become a matter of interest also for the West, in particular for the United States.

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8 Sebastien Peyrouse and Marlène Laruelle, *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2012), 86.

9 Horák, *Střední Asie mezi východem a západem*, 28; and Starr et al., *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia*, 85.

10 Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek, Turkmen, Uyghur and other locally spoken languages belong to the group of Turkic languages. As such, they are to a certain extent mutually comprehensible. At the same time, most people in Central Asia and Turkey are Sunnite Muslims – in contrast to predominantly Shiite Iran.

11 Horák, *Střední Asie mezi východem a západem*, 28.

## 2. U.S. foreign policy towards Central Asia after 1991

The U.S. relations with Central Asia commenced in the early 1990s, entailing diplomatic recognition and opening embassies, but no military engagement. The U.S. recognized independence of all five Central Asian republics on December 25, 1991.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Washington did not consider Central Asia its policy priority and showed little interest in the region throughout the first decade. American foreign policy towards Central Asia before 2001 can be characterized as seeking balance between building ties with and at the same time staying away from local regimes.

The U.S. was mainly oriented towards promoting democracy and peace, supporting economic development, providing assistance and limiting revival of Russian imperialism. While most of the aforementioned objectives remained important even after 9/11, according to Laruelle the U.S. “objective of promoting a market economy was central in the 1990s, but has been downgraded” ever since.<sup>13</sup>

Another key area of interest was prevention of nuclear proliferation, an issue closely bound to old Soviet weapons of mass destruction that remained in Kazakhstan following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Other transnational threats, such as organized crime, drug trafficking or terrorism, received relatively little U.S. attention.<sup>14</sup>

Before 9/11, Washington did not seek to engage with Central Asia actively. As Starr noted in 2001, there were “no vital U.S. interests at stake [present] in the region” at that time.<sup>15</sup> First of all, the U.S. did not want to align itself with any of the local nondemocratic regimes or their authoritarian leaders as the entire region was notorious for human rights violations, unreformed Soviet-style economies and foreign policy orientation towards Moscow. Washington was also aware of local rivalries and careful not to get involved in any violent conflict in the region, thus avoiding any security commitments whatsoever. The effort to keep better mutual relations with Russia was yet another reason behind a reserved U.S. stance towards Central Asia.

Before 2001, the U.S. had only few economic interests in the region apart from energy. Legal and bureaucratic obstacles to foreign investment and the unfriendly

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12 “A Guide to the United States’ History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: Kyrgyzstan,” U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/countries/kyrgyzstan> (accessed October 14, 2014).

13 Marlène Laruelle, “US Central Asia policy: Still American Mars versus European Venus?,” *EUCAM Policy Brief*, No. 26 (September 2012): 3.

14 Olga Olikier and David Shlapak, *U.S. Interests in Central Asia: Policy Priorities and Military Roles* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005), 19.

15 Starr et al., *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia*, 96.

business environment were omnipresent and did not allow any strengthening of American influence. Kyrgyzstan was slightly more open and welcoming, but had little to offer.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the U.S. decided not to spend too much of its own resources in Central Asia. Washington rather preferred Turkey's efforts to create strong links with the region, as it centered around "linking Central Asia to the South Caucasus and establishing Turkey's role as the region's crossroads" in the early 1990s as a counterweight to Russia.<sup>17</sup>

American diplomatic relations with Kyrgyzstan were established on December 27, 1991.<sup>18</sup> In 1993, the first group of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers arrived to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>19</sup> They primarily focused on teaching English, sustainable development, and health promotion.<sup>20</sup> The United States also started building mutual military ties and contacts, albeit with only partial success, both bilaterally and through the NATO's Partnership for Peace, which Kyrgyzstan joined in 1994.

American involvement in Kyrgyzstan was rather limited throughout the 1990s, focusing mainly on economic reforms. The Kyrgyz government carried out Western-style economic reforms, for which the help of the U.S.-backed IMF and World Bank was instrumental. Kyrgyzstan was the first ex-Soviet state to carry out land privatization and enter the World Trade Organization in December 1998.<sup>21</sup> Since the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan benefited from Western interest as the "democratic laboratory" and "oasis of democracy" of Central Asia. The United States often hailed the country's "political progress,"<sup>22</sup> which was in contrast to other more authoritarian regimes in the region.

Yet, at some point, fostering relations with the West served mainly as the means of obtaining professional training, equipment, and economic aid on part of the Kyrgyz. This proved to be true especially during the Batken wars of 1999 and 2000, when Kyrgyzstan received significant security assistance and non-lethal military equipment from the U.S., Turkey and other Western countries.<sup>23</sup>

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16 Olikier and Shlapak, *U.S. Interests in Central Asia*, 7.

17 Laruelle, "US Central Asia policy," 3.

18 "Список государств, с которыми Кыргызстан имеет дипломатические отношения," Министерство иностранных дел Кыргызской Республики, <http://mfa.gov.kg/contents/view/id/98> (accessed October 14, 2014).

19 The Peace Corps is an independent federal agency under the U.S. government. Its volunteers generally work on development projects in various countries around the world.

20 "Projects," Official Site of the U.S. Peace Corps in the Kyrgyz Republic, <http://kyrgyz.peacecorps.gov/content/projects> (accessed May 11, 2015).

21 Starr et al., *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia*, 110.

22 Laruelle, "US Central Asia policy," 3.

23 Olikier and Shlapak, *U.S. Interests in Central Asia*, 9–10.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were a game-changer for Central Asia in that they brought in the presence of the West. They also caused a major shift in U.S. interests in Central Asia and resulted in a reversal from the 1990s soft policy to the 2000s hard policy. Before 9/11, the role of the United States in the region was rather minor, with Washington focusing on softer forms of engagement such as humanitarian support, development programs and private investment. American policymakers did not expect that Washington might ever need to cooperate militarily with the Central Asian states. However, this perception changed rapidly in fall 2001, when the U.S. government increased its cooperation with the Central Asian nations in order to prepare for launching Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in neighboring Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> After 9/11, the military interests thus came to the fore.

Securing safe and reliable access to Central Asia became of crucial importance to the Allied armed forces for the entire duration of the Afghan campaign. The U.S. and its allies started opening military bases and other installations across the region in late 2001 as part of solidifying their positions. Local bases and infrastructure were necessary for troop deployment and maintenance of the entire OEF mission and played a key role in supporting Allied operations in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan and subsequent U.S. presence in its wider neighborhood therefore led to intensification of mutual ties and increased contacts with local regimes, mainly Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, as the two countries permitted hosting U.S. military bases. Top American officials quickly followed suit and rushed to visit countries that had until recently been dismissed as “the Stans.”<sup>25</sup> Due to later developments in Uzbekistan, Manas airbase was to gain an increasingly prominent role in US-Central Asian relations.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>25</sup> S. Frederick Starr, “Central Asia’s sudden prominence,” *The World & I* 17, No. 4 (April 2002).

### 3. Establishing a U.S. base in Kyrgyzstan

The U.S. increased its presence in the region after 9/11. In early October 2001, the United States signed a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Uzbekistan. This step allowed the U.S. to use the base in Karshi-Khanabad (K2) and station up to 1,500 American troops there. The U.S. in return provided Uzbekistan with vague security assurances, agreed to provide considerable assistance and target IMU<sup>26</sup> fighters that joined Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>27</sup> Yet, Uzbekistan only agreed to limited basing and did not allow U.S. refuelers, bombers and combat aircraft to be openly based outside the Karshi-Khanabad base. The U.S. Central Command therefore started its search for another military base in Central Asia that could be used to support U.S. and Coalition forces' combat operations in Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup>

France was the first Coalition member to officially submit its request to use Kyrgyzstan's air bases and station troops on its territory during the Afghan campaign. The French inquired in late November 2001,<sup>29</sup> and while the Kyrgyz government was still considering its response, Canada and Italy submitted similar requests. On November 28, the Kyrgyz government gave its response to all three, having decided to offer them a base near the southern city of Osh and a base in Kant in the north, some 25 km east from Bishkek. Speaking to the press about the offer, the Kyrgyz Security Council Deputy Secretary-General Askarbek Mameyev pointed out that neither of the two bases had modern equipment, and that Manas airport near Bishkek "would not be made available."<sup>30</sup> Askar Aitmatov, foreign policy adviser to Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev, stated on November 30 that before making a final decision to grant use of its airbases, Kyrgyzstan will consult Russia and other members of the CIS.<sup>31</sup> Aitmatov also mentioned that "no Western military experts have yet inspected either the [Osh or Kant] airfield."<sup>32</sup>

26 The *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* was a terrorist group that organized armed incursions into Kyrgyzstan during the Batken wars.

27 Lora Lumpe, "A Timeline of U.S. Military Aid Cooperation with Uzbekistan," *Open Society Foundations Occasional Paper Series*, No. 2 (October 2010): 8.

28 Deborah E. Klepp, *The U.S. Needs a Base Where?: How the U.S. Established an Air Base in the Kyrgyz Republic* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2004), 4.

29 "French Minister Visits Tajikistan, Uzbekistan," *RFE/RL Newsline*, November 26, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142531.html> (accessed November 27, 2014).

30 "Kyrgyzstan Ready to Make Airfields Available to Antiterrorist Coalition," *RFE/RL Newsline*, November 29, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142568.html> (accessed November 27, 2014).

31 Without explaining why Moscow should decide how Kyrgyzstan uses its property.

32 "Kyrgyzstan to Consult with CIS States on Granting Antiterrorism Coalition Use of its Air Bases...," *RFE/RL Newsline*, December 3, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142571.html> (accessed

U.S. military experts reportedly inspected the former Soviet bomber base in Kant in late November and came to the conclusion that – due to its short runways, outdated infrastructure and navigation systems and swampy location – it was not suitable for large and heavy NATO military aircraft.<sup>33</sup> After having explored several Central Asian military airports, the survey team requested to assess Manas airport, Kyrgyzstan’s largest civilian international airport located some 30 km northwest of Bishkek. U.S. Ambassador in Bishkek John O’Keefe contacted the Kyrgyz Minister of Transport and Communications Ministry Kubanychbek Jumaliyev, who – after having checked with President Akayev – gave his permission for such evaluation.

Despite the fact that it lacked modern air traffic control systems and was relatively distant from Afghanistan, Manas airport was deemed the best option by the foreign military inspectors. It had a long (4,200 meters) concrete runway suitable for jet bombers as well as cargo planes and also recently went through some equipment upgrades.<sup>34</sup> Among Kyrgyzstan’s 52 airports, Manas was assessed to be the “only one [both] with a lengthy runway and [...] capable of supporting international flights.”<sup>35</sup> As Oliker and Shlapak noted, Manas also had the advantage of being located outside Uzbekistan. This was in line with the perception that the key American base in Central Asia should not be located in Uzbekistan due to its position of a regional power and various other regional political reasons.<sup>36</sup>

American Ambassador officially informed President Akayev about the U.S. interest in establishing an airbase at Kyrgyzstan’s Manas airport in early December 2001.<sup>37</sup> Akayev then held talks with U.S. and French military officials in Bishkek on December 3.<sup>38</sup> Klepp, herself a former employee of the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek, recalls four key issues connected to the SOFA negotiations with the Kyrgyz. These were a pledge of non-interference of military operations with the operation of the otherwise civilian airport; American consent to pay landing and parking fees for using the airport

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November 27, 2014).

33 “Kyrgyz Step Up Western Military Contacts but Dither over Air Bases,” *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, December 6, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342303.html> (accessed November 27, 2014). See also Klepp, *The U.S. Needs a Base Where?*, 4.

34 Klepp, *The U.S. Needs a Base Where?*, 4–5. “Kyrgyz Step Up Western Military Contacts but Dither over Air Bases,” *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, December 6, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342303.html> (accessed November 27, 2014).

35 John C. K. Daly, “Kyrgyzstan’s Manas Airbase: A Key Asset in the War on Terrorism,” *Terrorism Monitor* 5, No. 1 (February 2007).

36 Oliker and Shlapak, *U.S. Interests in Central Asia*, 45.

37 Klepp, *The U.S. Needs a Base Where?*, 8.

38 Akayev’s approval, U.S. Ambassador’s personal relationship with him and good personal relationships between other high-level U.S. and Kyrgyz officials proved to be crucial in the entire process.

(approximately \$7,000 for each takeoff or landing); openness and transparency of the base; and also assurances that it would only be used for the purposes of OEF in Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> Akayev's adviser Askar Aitmatov then told the media on December 4 that the Kyrgyz leadership agreed "in principle" to let the coalition forces use Manas airport – irrespective of the fact that Kyrgyz officials had completely ruled out this option earlier.<sup>40</sup> Russia made a similar move and requested to use the Osh air base on December 5, allegedly for humanitarian aid transports to northern Afghanistan, but with no success.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, in order to start using Kyrgyzstan's military facilities, foreign armed forces needed official permission approved by both chambers of the Kyrgyz parliament<sup>42</sup> and signed by the President. Parliament's lower chamber, the Legislative Assembly, passed the SOFA on December 6. Address the deputies before the vote, President Akayev said he believed "Kyrgyzstan does not have the [moral] right to reject the U.S. request, and that China has been consulted and has no objections."<sup>43</sup> This U.S.–Kyrgyz agreement referred solely to the U.S. military personnel. Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Ministry nevertheless stated that other Coalition members – namely Canada, France, Italy, Australia or South Korea – would be allowed to use Manas airport as well.<sup>44</sup> Parliament's upper chamber, the Assembly of People's Representatives, resolutely passed the SOFA in an emergency session on December 11. On this occasion, President Akayev praised the decision, saying it was a "wonderful chance for us [Kyrgyzstan] [...] to receive a new air-control system, modernize our technology, and turn Manas into a first-class, safe airport."<sup>45</sup>

Akayev himself signed the agreement allowing the U.S. to use Manas airport on December 14, and the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek received a diplomatic note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan that the SOFA had entered into force one day later. Commander of the 376<sup>th</sup> Air Expeditionary Wing hastily left for Bishkek to

39 *Ibid.*, 8–9.

40 "Kyrgyzstan Agrees to Grant Antiterrorism Coalition Use of International Airport," *RFE/RL Newsline*, December 5, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142573.html> (accessed November 27, 2014).

41 "Russia Requests Use of Kyrgyz Air Base for Humanitarian Purposes," *RFE/RL Newsline*, December 6, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142574.html> (accessed November 27, 2014).

42 Kyrgyzstan's Parliament was then still bicameral. This changed after the adoption of the 2007 Constitution.

43 "Kyrgyz Legislature Approves U.S. Use of Airfields," *RFE/RL Newsline*, December 7, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142575.html> (accessed November 27, 2014).

44 *Ibid.*

45 "Kyrgyz Parliament's Upper House Approves Use of Airport by Antiterrorist Coalition," *RFE/RL Newsline*, December 12, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142578.html> (accessed November 27, 2014).

establish the base and the 86<sup>th</sup> Contingency Response Group from Ramstein Air Base in Germany was sent to help set up security and air traffic control mechanisms.<sup>46</sup> On December 18, first American cargo planes landed at Manas.<sup>47</sup>

This was an extremely swift and smooth course of action, especially in the Central Asian conditions with omnipresent bureaucratic obstacles. On Kyrgyzstan's part, there were multiple reasons behind the decision to host a U.S. base. First and foremost, it was in Bishkek's interest – economically (financial benefits), politically (increased international attention to Kyrgyzstan) and also geopolitically (balance and leverage with other powers), not to mention the security aspects (reconstruction of Afghanistan, hopes for higher regional stability). Secondly, Russia and China, then both active in the international counter-terrorism efforts, did not directly oppose this idea at that time. Furthermore, the U.S.–Kyrgyz bilateral relations were strengthening in late 2001.<sup>48</sup> According to Marat, both the public and the government initially welcomed the U.S. base “as a form of external protection against the possible spread of Islamic extremism and terrorism.”<sup>49</sup> Still, the shared experience with terrorism never turned into unconditional Kyrgyz support for the U.S. actions and as the time passed, Kyrgyz public opinion became increasingly critical and divided over the whole U.S. base issue.

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46 Klepp, *The U.S. Needs a Base Where?*, 9; and John C. K. Daly, “Kyrgyzstan's Manas Airbase.”

47 “First U.S. Transport Planes Land in Kyrgyzstan...,” *RFE/RL Newslines*, December 19, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142583.html> (accessed November 27, 2014).

48 Klepp, *The U.S. Needs a Base Where?*, 5–8.

49 Erica Marat, “Two Decades of U.S.–Kyrgyz Relations,” *Rethink Paper*, No. 13 (November 2013): 6.



#### 4. Manas air base under Akayev

Kyrgyzstan received a wide variety of military and economic aid from the United States in return for its support to OEF.<sup>50</sup> American assistance included military communications equipment, night vision capability, various other systems and reportedly also helicopters, border control aid, military medical assistance, facility upgrades, education slots at the Marshall Center and training for non-commissioned officers.<sup>51</sup> Overall, U.S. military aid to Kyrgyzstan focused on three main areas, namely counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and border security.<sup>52</sup>

Diplomatic and military contacts between the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan increased sharply. American troops and Kyrgyz Special Forces border guards held joint military exercises aimed at counter-insurgency in February 2002.<sup>53</sup> There were also several important high-level visits, most notably the one of U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who visited Kyrgyzstan in April 2002. During his short stay in Bishkek, Rumsfeld met with Kyrgyz Minister of Defense Esen Topoyev as well as President Akayev to discuss the situation in Afghanistan and U.S.-Kyrgyz military and political cooperation.<sup>54</sup> Both Akayev and Rumsfeld agreed that the Manas airbase served three main functions – it supposedly “created a ‘security belt’ around Afghanistan, promoted regional stability and democratic processes in Kyrgyzstan, and [also] spurred its economy.”<sup>55</sup> In November 2002, during his visit to the U.S., Topoyev held fresh talks about bilateral military cooperation and regional security with Rumsfeld. An agreement on military cooperation between the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan was signed on this occasion.<sup>56</sup> Joint military exercises “Balanced Knife,” focusing on fighting in mountainous terrain and combat medicine, were held near Bishkek in mid-March 2003. American and Kyrgyz troops participated, along with a South Korean medical team.<sup>57</sup>

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50 Besides the airbase, Kyrgyzstan also granted overflight to coalition aircraft – including overflight clearances for combat missions.

51 Oliker and Shlapak, *U.S. Interests in Central Asia*, 12–13.

52 For a critical report on U.S. assistance, statistics and more information on this topic, see Joshua Kucera, “U.S. Military Aid to Central Asia: Who Benefits?,” *Open Society Foundations Occasional Paper Series*, No. 7 (September 2012).

53 Daly, “Kyrgyzstan’s Manas Airbase.”

54 “U.S. Defense Secretary Visits Kyrgyzstan...,” *RFE/RL Newslines*, April 29, 2002, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142665.html> (accessed December 21, 2014).

55 “...Commences in Kyrgyzstan,” *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, May 2, 2002, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342253.html> (accessed December 21, 2014).

56 “Kyrgyzstan, U.S. Sign Military-Cooperation Agreement,” *RFE/RL Newslines*, November 13, 2002, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142798.html> (accessed December 21, 2014).

57 “Joint U.S.-Kyrgyz Military Exercises Held near Bishkek,” *RFE/RL Newslines*, March 18, 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142877.html> (accessed December 21, 2014).

On March 20, 2003, the U.S.-led coalition launched the invasion of Iraq. The five Central Asian republics took various stances towards the Iraq war, ranging from Uzbekistan's loyal support to Turkmenistan's continued policy of permanent neutrality.<sup>58</sup> There were multiple factors that formed Kyrgyzstan's restrained position. First of all, Bishkek was deeply concerned about relations with both the United States and Russia. President Akayev himself was strongly in favor of UN mechanisms, and Kyrgyzstan finally decided to back peaceful resolution of the Iraqi crisis, as was proposed by France, Germany and Russia. Kyrgyz government was also worried about plausible negative effects of the Iraq war on Kyrgyzstan's economy, especially the possibility that foreign aid might soon be redirected from Central Asia to Iraq.<sup>59</sup> Escalation of the Iraq war could also give rise to militant Islamists and mobilize other regime opponents, and as such potentially threatened the Akayev regime itself. It was yet another destabilizing factor in an already unstable region.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, it is necessary to keep in mind that counter-terrorism measures often served as the regime's argument for crackdowns on virtually any opposition activity. According to Cooley, Akayev was eager to emphasize the Islamist threat, as it could strengthen his partnership with the United States; Kyrgyz officials reportedly "exaggerated and even fabricated terrorist plots" in order to reinforce the government's position.<sup>61</sup> Kyrgyzstan's National Security Service allegedly foiled one terrorist attack on Manas airbase in November 2003.<sup>62</sup> In July 2004, the Kyrgyz security services informed that two other terrorist attacks on the base have been prevented.<sup>63</sup>

The Iraq war also further unsettled Russia and China. American military presence in Central Asia already concerned both powers for some time and, as Klepp notes, their negative stance "soon turned into behind-the-scenes pressure on the Kyrgyz."<sup>64</sup> Russian deployment to Kyrgyzstan, initially only temporary, was first discussed in April 2002. Several Russian jets, fighters and cargo planes were present at

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58 For more information on this topic, see "Five Degrees of Separation: The Central Asia States' Positions towards War in Iraq," *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, March 21, 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342205.html> (accessed December 21, 2014).

59 At that time, foreign aid accounted for approximately 17 % of Kyrgyzstan's GDP.

60 "Five Degrees of Separation: The Central Asia States' Positions towards War in Iraq," *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, March 21, 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342205.html> (accessed December 21, 2014).

61 Alexander Cooley, "U.S. Bases and Democratization in Central Asia," *Orbis* 52, No. 1 (2008), 74.

62 "Bomb Attack on Coalition Air Base Reported Foiled by Kyrgyz Security," *RFE/RL Newslines*, November 5, 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143036.html> (accessed December 21, 2014).

63 "...And Confirms Foiled Terror Plots," *RFE/RL Newslines*, July 9, 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143196.html> (accessed December 21, 2014).

64 Klepp, *The U.S. Needs a Base Where?*, 12.

Kant from late November 2002.<sup>65</sup> A permanent Russian airbase, officially part of the CSTO rapid reaction forces, was finally established in Kant on October 23, 2003.<sup>66</sup> As a result, Kyrgyzstan became the first country in the world to simultaneously host U.S. and Russian military bases. Kyrgyzstan's decision to host both Manas and Kant airbases was completely in line with its intensive efforts to maintain good relations with both the U.S. and Russia and thus continue receiving various assistance from both powers.<sup>67</sup>

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, two Central Asian countries where American military was present, wanted different benefits in exchange for their support and U.S. base access. Economic profit from the Manas airbase, the largest American investment in Kyrgyzstan so far, was a key issue for Akayev.

Given the extensive corruption, nepotism and clientelistic networks in Kyrgyzstan, it is not surprising that instead of boosting the national budget, most base-related revenues were embezzled and went to private companies with close ties to the Akayev regime. The company that was running Manas International Airport collected annual lease payment, landing, take-off and various other fees and also received most base-related contracts. These revenues were not taxed by the Kyrgyz government and went directly to the airport company, which was partly owned by Akayev's son Aydar Akayev. Fuel contracts, yet another lucrative business, were assigned to Manas International Services Ltd. and Aalam Services Ltd., which were owned by Akayev's son-in-law Adil Toiganbayev.<sup>68</sup>

U.S. Ambassador O'Keefe said that if asked to do so, "the Kyrgyz side [...] might have forced the airport to forego the [generous airport] fees" that Americans paid for using Manas. However, the U.S. quickly realized that such payments could work as an important lever, making the Kyrgyz government more committed to the U.S. base presence in case of any future complications.<sup>69</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Defense and State Department officials, everything was legally right, because the

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65 Steven Lee Myers, "Russia to Deploy Air Squadron in Kyrgyzstan, Where U.S. Has Base," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/04/international/asia/04RUSS.html> (accessed December 21, 2014). For more information on establishing Kant airbase, see William D. O'Malley and Roger N. McDermott, "Kyrgyzstan's Security Tightrope: Balancing its Relations With Moscow and Washington," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 16, No. 3 (September 2003).

66 "Kyrgyz and Russian Presidents Open Air Base near Bishkek," *RFE/RL Newsline*, October 23, 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143028.html> (accessed December 21, 2014).

67 Oliker and Shlapak, *U.S. Interests in Central Asia*, 35.

68 Cooley, "U.S. Bases and Democratization in Central Asia," 74–5. For the respective contracts, see David S. Cloud, "Pentagon's Fuel Deal Is Lesson in Risks of Graft-Prone Regions," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/15/international/asia/15fuel.html> (accessed December 21, 2014).

69 Klepp, *The U.S. Needs a Base Where?*, 8–9.

contracts did not violate any American laws or tender procedures. Nevertheless, it is clear that the U.S. military presence in Kyrgyzstan did not moderate or improve the political situation within the country, but in essence rather supported the existing regime.<sup>70</sup>

The whole U.S. base issue was “depoliticized” under Akayev. Kyrgyz politicians were reluctant to question or criticize the bilateral basing agreement’s terms and the topic was not reported in Kyrgyz media, which were silent about the financial connections between Akayev’s family and U.S. armed forces.<sup>71</sup> Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq and opening of the Kant airbase, which was widely (and rightfully) perceived as Russian response to increasing Western military presence in Central Asia, the public opinion in Kyrgyzstan nevertheless started viewing the American base with growing discontent.<sup>72</sup> According to Klepp, this negative stance of the local public was, to a significant extent, caused by negative coverage in the Russian media and by “the Russian Embassy’s attempts to generate negative publicity” about the base in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>73</sup> Collapse of the Akayev regime during the March 2005 Tulip Revolution “politicized” the Manas air base once again, and the base agreement’s legitimacy started being questioned.<sup>74</sup>

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70 Cooley, “U.S. Bases and Democratization in Central Asia,” 71, 75.

71 *Ibid.*, 75.

72 Marat, “Two Decades of U.S.–Kyrgyz Relations,” 7.

73 Klepp, *The U.S. Needs a Base Where?*, 11.

74 Cooley, “U.S. Bases and Democratization in Central Asia,” 75–6.

## 5. Manas air base under Bakiyev

There have been multiple underlying causes and processes that fueled the Tulip Revolution, a tumultuous series of events which finally led to the ouster of President Akayev in March 2005.<sup>75</sup> As a result, new political leadership headed by acting president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, himself a former Akayev ally, took power.<sup>76</sup>

Apart from that Bakiyev ordered a criminal investigation of assets that allegedly belonged to Akayev, his close relatives, and associates to be launched in mid-March 2005, the U.S. air base at Manas airport did not initially seem to rank high on the new government's agenda. This, however, changed following the July 2005 SCO summit held in Astana. In their final declaration dated 5 July, the SCO countries' leaders stated that the "member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization deem necessary that corresponding participant countries of the counter-terrorist coalition [in Afghanistan] specify the final deadlines for their temporary use of the aforementioned infrastructure objects and the stay of their military contingents on the territories of SCO member states."<sup>77</sup> This request for coalition forces' withdrawal dates was soon followed with Bakiyev, winner of the July 10 presidential elections, suggesting in mid-July 2005, for the first time, that Kyrgyzstan's stance towards U.S. presence may be reviewed.

In late July 2005, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld arrived to Bishkek to meet with his Kyrgyz counterpart, Ismail Isakov. There, they both agreed that American withdrawal from Manas was not a pressing issue and could only be discussed when the situation in Afghanistan stabilized and improved,<sup>78</sup> a development rather far from taking place any time soon. During this visit, Bakiyev also proposed a new base agreement to be signed, and set up a special Presidential Administration working group tasked with developing the new agreement's terms.<sup>79</sup>

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75 For an analytical account of the Tulip Revolution, see Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese, *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics: Successes and Failures* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010), 45–61. For a concise report of the events, including subsequent developments, see Erica Marat, *The Tulip Revolution: Kyrgyzstan One Year After* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2006).

76 Bakiyev held the post of the Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan between December 2000 and May 2002.

77 "Декларация глав государств-членов Шанхайской организации сотрудничества," Official Site of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, <http://www.sectsco.org/RU123/show.asp?id=98> (accessed April 15, 2015). Author's translation.

78 "Kyrgyzstan Agrees to Host U.S. Base until Afghanistan 'Normalizes,'" *RFE/RL Newslines*, July 26, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143446.html> (accessed April 15, 2015).

79 Joldosh Osmonov, "The U.S.-Kyrgyz Military Base Negotiations," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst Bi-Weekly Briefing* 8, No. 17 (6 September 2006): 21.

But things got complicated once again on July 29, 2005, when Uzbekistan issued an eviction notice regarding the coalition base in Karshi-Khanabad and informed the U.S. that it had 180 days to vacate the facility. Most accounts attribute this decision to Washington's harsh criticism of Tashkent following the May 13 Andijan massacre.<sup>80</sup> However, according to Gleason, rather than being caused by a single incident, the Uzbek decision was the "result of a cumulative series of events that culminated in the spring of 2005."<sup>81</sup> As for the Kyrgyz, they soon realized that the U.S. loss of access to K2 substantially improved their own negotiating position, and started using this for their advantage.

Analysis of public statements made by Kyrgyzstan's top officials shows that from 2005 onwards, they followed a basic pattern – emphasizing the uncertainty of Manas air base's future was very often combined with remarks implying the U.S. increase lease payments. The recurring circle of first confirming the bilateral basing agreements and then suggesting their cancellation is characteristic of the entire Bakiyev era in U.S.-Kyrgyz relations. And as Abdyldaev pointed out, this lack of decision-making predictability and consistency on part of the country's leadership resulted in Kyrgyzstan rightfully getting an "image of an unstable state in the eyes of foreign partners."<sup>82</sup>

These constant changes of mind and reversals on part of Bishkek can be best explained through the bargaining diplomacy approach. It is necessary to stress that Bakiyev's visits to Moscow and Russian promises of military aid, loans, investments and other financial assistance often played a key role in the Kyrgyz President's decisions on shifting allegiances. As a result, an increased number of top-level U.S. officials started visiting Kyrgyzstan with the aim of deepening mutual relations, offering Bishkek various alternative partnership or assistance programs.

Robert Simmons, NATO Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, arrived to Bishkek in October 2005 to announce expansion of Manas air base.<sup>83</sup> A

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80 The term *Andijan massacre* refers to violent suppression of anti-government protests that took place in Andijan, a town in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley close to the border with Kyrgyzstan, on May 13, and which left several hundred protesters dead. For a detailed account of this deadly event, see Shirin Akiner, *Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia — Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2005).

81 Gregory Gleason, "The Uzbek Expulsion of U.S. Forces and Realignment in Central Asia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 53, No. 2 (March/April 2006): 50.

82 Erlan Abdyldaev, "Certain Aspects of Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Policy in 2006," *IPP Kyrgyzstan Brief*, No. 7 (November/December 2006): 25.

83 "NATO Official Announces Expansion of Base in Kyrgyzstan," *RFE/RL Newslines*, October 4, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143493.html> (accessed April 15, 2015).

week later, he was followed by the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. For her part, Rice stressed that the U.S. sought greater bilateral cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, and not only in the field of security, but also regarding democracy-building, anti-corruption, political and economic reforms, or agriculture.<sup>84</sup> These initiatives, however, were not a priority for the Kyrgyz government, and most cooperation efforts continued to focus on the Manas air base, as was the case before.

Most importantly, there was the question of rent and other base-related payments. In November 2005, a representative of the U.S. Central Command met with Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Minister Alikbek Jekshenkulov to discuss plausible revisions of the basing agreement.<sup>85</sup> At first, Bishkek was unsuccessfully trying to secure "back payments" from the Americans, supporting its claims with evidence of large-scale misappropriation of funds that took place under Akayev.<sup>86</sup>

Having seen very limited progress in payment negotiations, President Bakiyev decided to step in again in April 2006, before his visit to Moscow. He established June 1 as a negotiations deadline for reaching a new base agreement with the U.S. and added that "Kyrgyzstan retains the right to consider the possibility of terminating the [December 4, 2001] bilateral agreement" if they fail to agree on a new one by the beginning of June.<sup>87</sup> The Americans resented this pressure and instead started looking for possible alternative and cheaper basing sites in other countries, such as Tajikistan or Mongolia.<sup>88</sup>

The U.S.-Kyrgyz bilateral talks on the base issue only commenced on May 31, 2006, and continued further past the deadline. A new agreement was finally reached one day later, on July 14, 2006. A joint statement published by the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek did not specify how much would be paid in terms of rent; it only stated that both parties agreed that Kyrgyzstan was going to receive "more than \$150 million in total assistance

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84 Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Kyrgyzstan: U.S. Secretary of State Calls for Closer Ties," *RFE/RL*, October 11, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1062032.html> (accessed April 15, 2015).

85 "Kyrgyzstan, U.S. Agree to Rethink Base Agreement, Payments," *RFE/RL Newslines*, November 9, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143517.html> (accessed April 15, 2015).

86 "Kyrgyzstan, U.S. in Payments Tiff over Base," *RFE/RL Newslines*, November 16, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143521.html> (accessed April 15, 2015).

87 "Kyrgyz President Gives U.S. until June 1 for New Agreement on Base," *RFE/RL Newslines*, April 20, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143618.html> (accessed April 16, 2015).

88 Alexander Cooley, "U.S. Bases and Democratization in Central Asia," 79.

and compensation over the next year.”<sup>89</sup> It was later revealed that the rent increased from \$2 million to \$17.4 million annually.<sup>90</sup>

However, the bilateral relations gradually deteriorated in the second half of 2006. In July, two U.S. diplomats were expelled by the Kyrgyz. In early August 2006, the United States expelled two Kyrgyz diplomats in response to Bishkek’s July actions. Furthermore, on September 26, a collision between a U.S. Air Force Boeing KC-135R Stratotanker and a civilian Kyrgyz Tupolev Tu-154 aircraft occurred on a runway at Manas airport.<sup>91</sup> Despite multiple factors contributing to the collision, Kyrgyz officials blamed the incident on the Americans entirely and demanded compensation for aircraft damages.<sup>92</sup>

On December 6, 2006, American soldier Zachary Hatfield shot dead Alexandr Ivanov, a Kyrgyz civilian employee, at a checkpoint at Manas air base. This incident sparked outrage in the country, particularly because local law enforcement could not prosecute Hatfield, since U.S. personnel were under U.S. and not Kyrgyz jurisdiction according to the 2001 Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). As a result, President Bakiyev started suggesting the 2001 SOFA be reviewed and the U.S. troops’ diplomatic immunity terminated.<sup>93</sup> A resolution calling on the government for a wide review of continued U.S. military presence in Kyrgyzstan was also passed in the Kyrgyz Parliament in mid-December 2006.<sup>94</sup> As Marat noted, the killing of Ivanov, an ethnic Russian, further fueled anti-American sentiments in Kyrgyzstan, and “both [local] political officials and civil society activists began to actively discuss the need to expel U.S. troops from the country” for the first time.<sup>95</sup>

In 2007, several recurring topics were making the headlines in Kyrgyzstan, among them inadequacy of rent payments for Manas air base, possible extradition of

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89 “U.S., Kyrgyz Republic Reach Deal on Manas Coalition Airbase,” Official Site of the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP Digital), <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2006/07/200607181303541cjsamoht0.1731989.html> (accessed April 17, 2015).

90 Yasar Sari, “Foreign Policy of Kyrgyzstan under Askar Akayev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev,” *Perceptions* 17, No. 3 (Autumn 2012): 143.

91 “ASN Aircraft Accident Boeing KC-135R Stratotanker 63-8886 Bishkek Airport (FRU),” Aviation Safety Network, <http://aviation-safety.net/database/record.php?id=20060926-1> (accessed April 17, 2015).

92 “Kyrgyz Officials Blame Aircraft Collision on U.S. Crew,” *RFE/RL Newslines*, November 15, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143757.html> (accessed April 16, 2015).

93 “Kyrgyz President Calls for End to U.S. Troop Immunity after Fatal Shooting,” *RFE/RL Newslines*, December 8, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143771.html> (accessed April 16, 2015).

94 “Kyrgyz Parliament Seeks Review of U.S. Military Presence,” *RFE/RL Newslines*, December 18, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143777.html> (accessed April 16, 2015).

95 Erica Marat, “Two Decades of U.S.–Kyrgyz Relations,” 7.



Hatfield to the country or lifting of diplomatic immunity of U.S. soldiers. Kyrgyz politicians also continued engaging in heated debates on American military presence. On the other hand, several completely new issues have arisen, among other things occasional scaremongering with “forthcoming” U.S.-Iran war and the possibility of U.S. strikes on Iran being conducted from Manas in the spring of 2007. Several minor anti-base demonstrations, often organized by a newly formed anti-American activist group called “Movement for the withdrawal of the American military air base from the territory of Kyrgyzstan,”<sup>96</sup> have taken place in Bishkek in June and July 2007. It seems symptomatic that the movement was led by an ethnic Russian, with members of the Kyrgyz Communist party comprising the bulk of active protesters.<sup>97</sup>

Several high-level visits have taken place in 2007, in an effort to improve bilateral relations between Washington and Bishkek and presumably also in a bid to reach a new deal on the air base. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, his Kyrgyz counterpart Ismail Isakov and President Bakiyev held talks in the latter capital on June 5, 2007. Ednan Karabayev, Kyrgyzstan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, conducted talks with senior U.S. State and Defense Departments officials in Washington in late September. A U.S. Defense Department delegation met with Isakov in Bishkek in mid-October 2007. And Admiral William Fallon, Commander of the U.S. Central Command, arrived to Bishkek to conduct separate talks with both Isakov and Karabayev on November 5, 2007. Such plentiful high-level military visits are illustrative of the emphasis that the Americans put on security, defense and bilateral military cooperation in U.S.-Kyrgyz relations. In this context, Manas figured high on the bilateral agenda.

There has been no significant development regarding Manas air base per se in 2008. Yet, mutual relations between Washington and Bishkek did not seem to improve, and new disputes between the two, sometimes rather bizarre, have arisen. For example, in July 2008, Bishkek municipal authorities destroyed part of a fence surrounding Hyatt Regency Bishkek, a luxury Western hotel in the city center, citing the need to open a public passage to the statue of a famous Kyrgyz ballerina. The U.S. Embassy promptly responded with a formal note of complaint to Kyrgyzstan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, saying that “actions of the Mayor’s Office are inconsistent with both [...] [rule of law

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96 “Движение за вывод американской военно-воздушной базы с территории Кыргызстана.”  
Author’s translation.

97 Ташманбет Кененсариев, “Американская база ‘Ганси’ - ‘за’ и ‘против,’” *CentrAsia.ru*, June 4, 2007, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1180900920> (accessed April 17, 2015).

and contract sanctity] principles.”<sup>98</sup> In early August, Kyrgyz police raided a U.S. officials’ apartment and seized “illegally possessed” weapons, only to later find out that the U.S. personnel had in fact been training local national security forces and secret services.<sup>99</sup> Finally, in a step confirming the Bakiyev regime’s further inclination towards authoritarianism, Kyrgyz authorities decided to fully suspend broadcasts of U.S. Congress-sponsored Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) on October 8, 2008.

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98 “U.S. Criticizes Kyrgyzstan in Hotel Fence Row,” *Reuters*, July 30, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/07/30/us-usa-kyrgyzstan-idUSL966618520080730> (accessed April 20, 2015).

99 “Kyrgyz Police Seize Weapons from U.S. Officials,” *Reuters*, August 5, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/08/05/us-usa-kyrgyzstan-idUSL555417220080805> (accessed April 20, 2015).

## 6. Reopening as a Transit Center

New reports about possible Kyrgyz decision to evict U.S. forces from Manas air base, albeit not officially confirmed, started appearing in the media again since January 2009. Russian media reported that Bakiyev was planning to make the announcement public before his Moscow visit, which was scheduled for February.<sup>100</sup>

General David Petraeus, U.S. Central Command Commander, visited Bishkek on January 19, 2009, as part of his Central Asian tour. Following a meeting with Kyrgyz Prime Minister Igor Chudinov and Minister of Defense Bakytbek Kalyev, Petraeus stated that Kyrgyz officials denied any plans to close Manas.<sup>101</sup> Shortly afterwards, Petraeus also announced that the U.S. reached new transit agreements with several Central Asian states and Russia. Since the main Afghan supply route leading through Pakistan was getting increasingly unsafe and vulnerable to insurgent attacks, the newly established Northern Distribution Network (NDN) was intended as a key supplement route.<sup>102</sup> This way, goods bound for ISAF forces deployed in Afghanistan could be safely delivered through Central Asia.

Following bilateral talks with Russian President Medvedev on February 3, 2009, President Bakiyev announced that “Kyrgyzstan will close the U.S. military base in Manas after Washington refused [Bishkek’s requests] to negotiate better compensation.”<sup>103</sup> Bakiyev’s Moscow statement was a direct result of the talks, in which Russia pledged to give Kyrgyzstan \$2.15 billion in credits and financial aid, with bulk of the money intended to fund construction of the Kambarata-1 dam and power plant.<sup>104</sup> While Washington focused on its military goals, kept investing in military projects and practically gave up on other forms of cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, Moscow was

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100 “U.S. Says Not Closing Its Military Base in Kyrgyzstan,” *Reuters*, January 17, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/01/17/us-usa-kyrgyzstan-base-idUSTRE50G1A220090117> (accessed April 27, 2015).

101 “Petraeus Says Kyrgyzstan Not Planning to Close U.S. Air Base,” *RFE/RL*, January 19, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Petraeus\\_Says\\_Kyrgyzstan\\_Not\\_Planning\\_To\\_Close\\_US\\_Air\\_Base/1371904.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Petraeus_Says_Kyrgyzstan_Not_Planning_To_Close_US_Air_Base/1371904.html) (accessed April 27, 2015).

102 “Petraeus Says New Routes Agreed for Afghan Supplies,” *Reuters*, January 20, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/01/20/pakistan-usa-kyrgystan-idINISL41004420090120> (accessed April 27, 2015).

103 “Kyrgyzstan to Close Key U.S. Military Base,” *Reuters*, February 3, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/02/03/us-kyrgyzstan-usa-base-idUSTRE5124ZT20090203> (accessed April 27, 2015).

104 John C. K. Daly, “The Manas Disillusionment,” *ISN Security Watch*, February 13, 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?lang=en&id=96478> (accessed April 29, 2015).

offering to develop key local infrastructure.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, as Blank noted, Russian financial support came “with strings attached, particularly as regards the [Kyrgyz] sovereignty.”<sup>106</sup> According to some scholars, the money was promised specifically in return for expelling the U.S. from Manas.<sup>107</sup>

Bakiyev’s decision was undoubtedly influenced by serious challenges he was facing at the time. First and foremost, global economic crisis hit Kyrgyzstan greatly in 2008. Foreign debt reached high levels and prices were rising, too. The country was coping with an energy crisis and electricity shortages. Kyrgyz leadership was aware of the need to prevent public protests, anti-regime demonstrations, and rise of the opposition – especially under such circumstances. Russian loans could be used for budget stabilization and large infrastructure projects, but also for bribing the citizenry to keep the country calm and peaceful.

Kyrgyz government sent the draft eviction legislation to the parliament for approval next day, on February 4, because its official authorization was needed in order to close the base. Kyrgyz parliament then approved the government eviction proposal on February 19, 2009. Overwhelming majority of 78 deputies backed the decision; only one was against. Given that the parliament was then dominated by Bakiyev supporters from the Ak-Jol Party and functioned as a mere rubber-stamp, this move was widely expected and considered a formality.<sup>108</sup> President Bakiyev signed the bill into law one day later. To conclude the formal procedure, official diplomatic note was sent to the U.S. Embassy. According to the bilateral agreement, the U.S. had 180 days upon receiving the eviction notice to conclude its operations and leave the facility. Overall, Bakiyev’s slide towards Moscow effectively signaled an end to Kyrgyzstan’s multi-vector foreign policy, which was based on international cooperation in Afghanistan and balanced relations with all major players.<sup>109</sup>

For the new Obama administration, closure of Manas air base was a serious problem with potentially dire consequences. The U.S. just planned a fresh surge in

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Stephen Blank, “Beyond Manas: Russia’s Game in Afghanistan,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 11, No. 3 (11 February 2009): 6.

<sup>107</sup> Erica Marat, “Bakiyev Wins New Geopolitical Game Over Manas Base,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 11, No. 13 (1 July 2009): 12.

<sup>108</sup> “Kyrgyzstan Parliament Approves U.S. Air Base Closure,” *RFE/RL*, February 19, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstan\\_Set\\_To\\_Approve\\_US\\_Air\\_Base\\_Closure/1495639.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstan_Set_To_Approve_US_Air_Base_Closure/1495639.html) (accessed April 27, 2015).

<sup>109</sup> Gregory Gleason, “Kyrgyzstan’s Multivector Policy Unravels,” *RFE/RL*, February 11, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstans\\_Multivector\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_Unravels/1491581.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstans_Multivector_Foreign_Policy_Unravels/1491581.html) (accessed April 29, 2015).

operations in Afghanistan, which included boosting the number of American soldiers present on the ground. The U.S. forces claimed that they were not dependent on a single supply route, but at the same time immediately started searching for alternative Afghanistan supply routes, assessing viability of transportation links through, i.a., Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>110</sup> However, staying at Manas was preferred since these alternative options were generally longer, less efficient or costlier. Manas air base was a “premier air mobility hub” for airlift of troops and refueling, it had a fine runway and furthermore could be used for delivering lethal supplies if necessary.<sup>111</sup> Without access to Manas, U.S. military operations, logistics and transport were in risk of getting into trouble. That is why the U.S. tried to save the base in Kyrgyzstan and prevent its closure as much as possible, significantly more than was the case with K2 in 2005.

Despite Bishkek’s resolute statements about its final decision on closing Manas, there have been continuous reports of ongoing talks between the U.S. and Kyrgyz to keep the base open. Hours after the Kyrgyz parliament’s 19 February decision, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted that he considered talks on Manas and its rent payments still open.<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, Kyrgyz officials’ public statements did not seem to indicate any positive development. For example, in early March 2009, Bakiyev said that he was “ready for any new proposals from the U.S. government aimed at stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan,” but simultaneously assured that Kyrgyzstan would not change its decision to close Manas air base.<sup>113</sup>

On March 6, 2009, Kyrgyz parliament canceled its remaining base agreements with eleven countries that have also been using Manas airport during the mission in Afghanistan.<sup>114</sup> President Bakiyev approved this legislation concerning Australia,

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110 Farangis Najibullah and Ron Synovitz, “Kyrgyz Threat Sends U.S. Scrambling for Alternative Supply Routes,” *RFE/RL*, February 6, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyz\\_Threat\\_Sends\\_US\\_Scrambling\\_For\\_Alternative\\_Supply\\_Routes/1380483.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyz_Threat_Sends_US_Scrambling_For_Alternative_Supply_Routes/1380483.html) (accessed April 27, 2015).

111 Jim Nichol, *Kyrgyzstan’s Closure of the Manas Airbase: Context and Implications* (CRS Report No. R40564) (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009), 3–4.

112 “Gates Says U.S. Would Pay More for Kyrgyz Base,” *RFE/RL*, February 19, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Gates\\_Says\\_US\\_Would\\_Pay\\_More\\_For\\_Kyrgyz\\_Base/1496171.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Gates_Says_US_Would_Pay_More_For_Kyrgyz_Base/1496171.html) (accessed April 27, 2015).

113 “Kyrgyzstan Says U.S. Base Closure Is Final,” *RFE/RL*, March 5, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstan\\_Says\\_US\\_Base\\_Closure\\_Is\\_Final/1504578.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstan_Says_US_Base_Closure_Is_Final/1504578.html) (accessed April 27, 2015).

114 “Kyrgyzstan Cancels Remaining Air-Base Agreements,” *RFE/RL*, March 6, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstan\\_Cancels\\_Remaining\\_Air\\_Base\\_Agreements/1505406.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstan_Cancels_Remaining_Air_Base_Agreements/1505406.html) (accessed April 30, 2015).

Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, South Korea, Spain and Turkey on April 2.<sup>115</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Russia was particularly interested in seeing Manas air base closed. Moscow was pushing Kyrgyzstan to evict the U.S. forces, but at the same time kept denying its involvement, a rather schizophrenic stance. This caused rising concern in the West, and also jeopardized mutual Russian-U.S. relations. As usual, the Russians maintained a low profile and did not comment through official channels, while simultaneously pushing for closure of the base through pressure in state-controlled media. In April 2009, Russian state-owned TV channel “Rossiya” accused the U.S. of conducting large-scale spying and intelligence operations from Manas air base.<sup>116</sup>

Nevertheless, new reports of continuing U.S.-Kyrgyz negotiations on Manas started emerging again. In late April 2009, a spokesman for the U.S. Defense Department said that there had been “progress in dealing with the Kyrgyz on Manas” and reason to hope that the U.S. could secure an extension (or renewal) of the base lease.<sup>117</sup> Some Kyrgyz politicians, including Prime Minister Igor Chudinov, reacted by denying any talks on Manas.<sup>118</sup> Yet, despite the Kyrgyz officials’ statements, there is strong evidence for believing that the Kyrgyz were in fact fully engaged in such bilateral talks with the Americans. Several media reports in February, March, April and May 2009 referred to U.S. officials mentioning such talks.

In June 2009, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and later also U.S. President Barack Obama wrote letters to the Kyrgyz leadership, asking Bishkek to reconsider its position and lobbying to keep the base open. Despite U.S. officials’ statements confirming that the air base at Manas “has started to shut down” in mid-June 2009 and will close soon,<sup>119</sup> on June 22 it was announced that a new agreement had been reached.<sup>120</sup> The Kyrgyz parliament voted overwhelmingly to support the new bilateral

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115 Nichol, *Kyrgyzstan’s Closure of the Manas Airbase*, 5.

116 “Russian TV Says U.S. Spying at Kyrgyz Base,” *RFE/RL*, April 4, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Russian\\_TV\\_Says\\_US\\_Spying\\_At\\_Kyrgyz\\_Air\\_Base/1602107.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Russian_TV_Says_US_Spying_At_Kyrgyz_Air_Base/1602107.html) (accessed April 28, 2015).

117 “U.S. Says Talks on Extending Manas Lease Progressing,” *RFE/RL*, April 29, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/US\\_Says\\_Talks\\_On\\_Extending\\_Manass\\_Lease\\_Progressing/1618105.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/US_Says_Talks_On_Extending_Manass_Lease_Progressing/1618105.html) (accessed April 28, 2015).

118 *Ibid.* Chudinov said that “Not a single government official has been authorized to hold such negotiations. [...] No one. I have no information about any such negotiations.”

119 “U.S. Air Base in Kyrgyzstan Says Starts to Close,” *Reuters*, June 15, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/06/15/us-usa-kyrgyzstan-base-sb-idUKTRE55E14S20090615> (accessed April 29, 2015).

120 There seems to be some discrepancy regarding the dates (based on different sources). The new base deal was officially announced and reported in the media on June 22, 2009. However, both respective agreements, which were later published, are dated and signed May 13, 2009. According to the U.S.

agreement and ratified it on June 25, 2009.<sup>121</sup> President Bakiyev signed both documents into law on July 2, 2009.

As a result, the U.S. were allowed to continue using Manas air base, albeit under a different name – as the “Transit Center at Manas International Airport.” Analysis of the new bilateral agreements suggests no significant changes in access to and use of the base. However, Nichol notes that according to the Kyrgyz officials, the new center was restricted to non-lethal cargo only.<sup>122</sup> Other important changes covered in the agreement included higher rent payments, which were raised to \$60 million annually, and a pledge to invest further \$36 million in the airport’s infrastructure development.<sup>123</sup>

Interestingly, as Marat pointed out, the Kyrgyz “used the same facts against and in favor of Manas [in February and June, respectively], but interpreted them differently.”<sup>124</sup> These included security situation in Afghanistan (allegedly improving in February and deteriorating in June) and threat of terrorism (considered low in February and serious in June). In fact, Bakiyev himself was most interested in staying at power and keeping access to foreign funds.<sup>125</sup> At the cost of higher rent payments, Kyrgyzstan gained an increasingly negative reputation on the international scene. Bishkek’s double U-turn on Manas thus effectively resulted in its zero credibility abroad.

At last, Russia did not secure its military and geopolitical dominance in a region it often considers its sphere of influence. Also for this reason, Russia stopped short of releasing promised money. As of February 2010, only \$450 million out of promised \$2.15 billion had been provided to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>126</sup>

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Embassy in Bishkek’s website, the agreement was concluded in May 2009 and entered into force on July 14, 2009. “Transit Center at Manas: Mission and Activities,” Official Site of the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek, <http://bishkek.usembassy.gov/topic-of-interest.html> (accessed April 29, 2015).

121 “Kyrgyz Parliament Ratifies U.S. Base Agreement,” *RFE/RL*, June 25, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyz\\_Parliament\\_Approves\\_US\\_Base\\_Deal/1762378.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyz_Parliament_Approves_US_Base_Deal/1762378.html) (accessed April 29, 2015).

122 Jim Nichol, *Kyrgyzstan and the Status of the U.S. Manas Airbase: Context and Implications* (CRS Report No. R40564) (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009), 1.

123 *Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic Regarding the Transit Center at Manas International Airport and Any Related Facilities/Real Estate*.

124 Marat, “Bakiyev Wins New Geopolitical Game Over Manas Base,” 12.

125 *Ibid.*, 13–4.

126 “Kyrgyzstan: Moscow Withholding Promised Aid to Bishkek,” *EurasiaNet.org*, February 15, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav021610.shtml> (accessed May 3, 2015).

## 7. Manas air base and Otunbayeva's interim government

With the basing rights at Manas secured, the U.S. started formulating and implementing new policies towards Central Asia in late 2009 and early 2010. In contrast to Washington's previous AfPak strategy,<sup>127</sup> Blank described the new U.S. approach to Central Asia as multi-dimensional, more comprehensive and thus stronger.<sup>128</sup> As for Kyrgyzstan, the U.S. planned to deepen mutual security cooperation and open a new U.S.-funded anti-terrorist training center in Batken.<sup>129</sup> This idea emerged already in September 2009; General Petraeus then visited Kyrgyzstan in March 2010 to further discuss the plan with local authorities, including President Bakiyev. Nevertheless, another Kyrgyz revolution thwarted the entire project, and it was eventually canceled.

Bakiyev's regime was overthrown – with implicit Russian support and help – in April 2010.<sup>130</sup> Moscow skilfully used its economic and media leverage, retracting preferential tariffs on energy imports and simultaneously launching a negative campaign against the Kyrgyz President in the influential Russian media.<sup>131</sup> As utility costs increased, widespread public demonstrations emerged. Bakiyev ultimately fled Bishkek and a new caretaker government led by Roza Otunbayeva was formed.<sup>132</sup> The new Kyrgyz leadership consisted mostly of Bakiyev's political opponents and was backed by Russia, its key ally. After all, Russian Prime Minister Putin was the first foreign statesman to call Otunbayeva, and one of the new government's first steps in office included sending a delegation headed by Almazbek Atambayev to talks in Moscow in order to seek financial assistance.<sup>133</sup>

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127 The term AfPak was often used by the U.S. to describe Afghanistan and Pakistan (especially between 2008 and 2010). The two countries were regarded as interconnected, making up a unified theater of anti-terrorist military operations. U.S. Central Asian policies were usually linked to the war in Afghanistan.

128 Stephen Blank, "Is a U.S. Strategy for Central Asia Emerging?," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 12, No. 5 (17 March 2010): 3.

129 For an analysis of the proposed military center's implication on Kyrgyz foreign policy, see Roman Muzalevsky, "The US-Kyrgyz Military Center and Kyrgyzstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 12, No. 5 (17 March 2010): 12–14.

130 Stephen Blank, "Moscow's Fingerprints in Kyrgyzstan's Storm," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 12, No. 7 (14 April 2010): 10.

131 *Ibid.*, 11–12.

132 Otunbayeva had background in diplomacy. She held the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan in 1992. She was subsequently appointed Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to the U.S. and Canada and then to the United Kingdom and Ireland. She once again shortly held the post of acting Minister of Foreign Affairs from March until July 2005.

133 "Kyrgyz 'Interim Leader' Rebuffs Bakiev on Talks," *RFE/RL*, April 9, 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia\\_Moves\\_Toward\\_Recognizing\\_New\\_Kyrgyz\\_Authorities\\_US\\_Says\\_Undecided/2007091.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia_Moves_Toward_Recognizing_New_Kyrgyz_Authorities_US_Says_Undecided/2007091.html) (accessed May 10, 2015).



Due to security concerns, Manas transit center temporarily curbed some of its operations until mid-April 2010, but otherwise remained open and functional. Radio Azattyk, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz service, was allowed back on air in the country. But apart from that, the U.S. largely missed its opportunity in Kyrgyzstan. In contrast to Moscow, the United States was initially trying to avoid comments on the revolutionary events, seemingly unwilling to take a clear stance and side with either Bakiyev or Otunbayeva. Washington took its time to observe the new development and kept a safe distance, which was, however, widely perceived as tacit support of Bakiyev among the Kyrgyz public.

The first high-rank U.S. official to visit Kyrgyzstan was Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake on April 14, one week after Bakiyev's ouster. Blake met with Otunbayeva and held talks with the interim government. He supported the cabinet's steps towards establishing a more pluralistic system and added that Washington was ready to further help the interim government.<sup>134</sup> Blake and Otunbayeva reportedly did not discuss the U.S. air base at Manas, future of which was seen as an indicator of the new government's foreign policy orientation. In fact, Kyrgyz signals regarding the fate of Manas were somewhat unclear. While Otunbayeva was eager to assure the U.S. that Kyrgyzstan would honor its July 2009 base agreements, several other prominent politicians disagreed with her stance and suggested Bishkek might shorten the lease period. The transitional administration finally decided that the issue be solved after the October parliamentary elections.<sup>135</sup>

The interim government acted quickly to launch investigation of the role of law enforcement and armed forces in the April unrest. Criminal cases were subsequently opened against Kurmanbek Bakiyev, his brother Janysh, and the former President's son Maksim.<sup>136</sup> Another key area of interest for the new leadership was widespread corruption, and the scale of embezzlement of funds and clientelistic networks around the Bakiyev family started revealing soon after his overthrow.<sup>137</sup>

134 "Kyrgyz Interim Government Receives Offers of Help, as Situation Still Tense," *RFE/RL*, April 14, 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/US\\_Official\\_Heads\\_To\\_Kyrgyzstan/2011589.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/US_Official_Heads_To_Kyrgyzstan/2011589.html) (accessed May 10, 2015).

135 "Kyrgyz Government to Delay Decision on U.S. Military Base," *RFE/RL*, April 23, 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyz\\_Government\\_To\\_Delay\\_Decision\\_On\\_US\\_Military\\_Base/2021920.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyz_Government_To_Delay_Decision_On_US_Military_Base/2021920.html) (accessed May 10, 2015).

136 "Kyrgyz President Sets Conditions for Resignation," *RFE/RL*, April 13, 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Interim\\_Leaders\\_Order\\_Kyrgyz\\_President\\_To\\_Surrender/2010846.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Interim_Leaders_Order_Kyrgyz_President_To_Surrender/2010846.html) (accessed May 10, 2015).

137 Kyrgyz authorities were seeking extradition of Bakiyev family members to Kyrgyzstan several times. In May 2010, Kyrgyzstan asked Latvia to detain Maksim Bakiyev. Bishkek also tried to reach extradition deals with the United Kingdom and the U.S. in October 2012. All these attempts were

Washington was widely criticized in Kyrgyzstan for its previous support of corrupt and authoritarian Bakiyev, and a concurrent Congressional investigation of the financial deals surrounding Manas air base was launched in the United States. Shady contracts with offshore companies supplying the base with aviation fuel and related allegations of indirect bribing of the ruling family were of particular concern. It was also revealed that the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek largely ignored anti-Bakiyev opposition and local NGOs, further damaging the desired image of the U.S. as a proponent of democracy, rule of law and transparency in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>138</sup> Testimonies by experts on Central Asia, including Huskey's statement that the U.S. "embrace of the Bakiyev regime [...] was far tighter than it needed to be in order to retain our basing rights," clearly concerned the lawmakers in Congress.<sup>139</sup>

Bilateral talks on renegotiation of the fuel contract started in June 2010. They were, however, soon overshadowed by deadly ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan<sup>140</sup> and the constitutional referendum held on June 27, 2010. The base lease was automatically extended for another year according to the terms of the existing bilateral agreement. The fuel deals again appeared on the agenda following the parliamentary elections held in October and during the U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's visit to Kyrgyzstan in December 2010. Kyrgyz authorities then set up a new state-run fuel company. In February 2011, Bishkek reached a new fuel acquisition agreement with the U.S., under which it could directly supply Manas transit center with a portion of its fuel needs.<sup>141</sup> According to media reports, 50 % of fuel supplies were to be delivered by "GazPromNeft-Aero-Kyrgyzstan," a new Kyrgyz-Russian joint venture.<sup>142</sup>

In March 2011, Otubayeva held talks with U.S. President Barack Obama. Obama reportedly thanked her for supporting the American base in Kyrgyzstan and also hailed

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ultimately unsuccessful.

- 138 "Congressional Panel Told Corruption Allegations at Kyrgyz Air Base Hurt U.S. Image," *RFE/RL*, April 24, 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Congressional\\_Panel\\_Told\\_Corruption\\_At\\_Kyrgyz\\_Air\\_Base\\_Hurt\\_US\\_Image/2023292.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Congressional_Panel_Told_Corruption_At_Kyrgyz_Air_Base_Hurt_US_Image/2023292.html) (accessed May 10, 2015).
- 139 John C. K. Daly, "Militarily Defining Post-Soviet Space," *ISN Security Watch*, May 3, 2010, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?lng=en&id=115693> (accessed May 10, 2015).
- 140 For more information on the events, see Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Events in Southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010*, [http://www.cmi.fi/images/stories/activities/blacksea/kic/kic\\_report\\_english\\_final.pdf](http://www.cmi.fi/images/stories/activities/blacksea/kic/kic_report_english_final.pdf).
- 141 *Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic Regarding Acquisition of Fuel for Operations at the Transit Center*.
- 142 "Kyrgyz-Russian Firm to Supply U.S. Transit Center with Fuel," *RFE/RL*, February 18, 2011, [http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyz-russian\\_firm\\_to\\_supply\\_us\\_fuel/2314058.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyz-russian_firm_to_supply_us_fuel/2314058.html) (accessed May 10, 2015). Russian share amounted to 51 % , with Kyrgyzstan owning remaining 49 % of the assets.

the country's transition to democracy.<sup>143</sup> While in Washington, Otunbayeva also received the U.S. Department of State's "International Women of Courage" award, becoming the first head of state to obtain this honor.<sup>144</sup>

In the meantime, Russia continued seeking further assets in Kyrgyzstan. Bishkek attempted to use this to its advantage and secure as much Russian money as possible. Kyrgyz authorities initially tried to reach a rent increase for Russian military objects on its territory.<sup>145</sup> However, as Russian media began publishing reports about dubious business links surrounding some members of the new Kyrgyz government, they later gave up and withdrew this request.<sup>146</sup> Bishkek's attempt to once again "play foreign actors against each other so as to extract maximum profit from external engagement" thus did not bring the anticipated results.<sup>147</sup> As a matter of fact, this was not very surprising, since Russia always had significantly broader range of tools it could use as a lever to influence situation in the region to its own benefit.

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143 "Obama Meets Kyrgyz President Otunbaeva at White House," *RFE/RL*, March 8, 2011, [http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan\\_obama\\_otunbaeva\\_white\\_house\\_talks/2331024.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan_obama_otunbaeva_white_house_talks/2331024.html) (accessed May 10, 2015).

144 Heather Maher, "U.S. State Department Honors 'International Women of Courage,'" *RFE/RL*, March 9, 2011, [http://www.rferl.org/content/us\\_state\\_department\\_international\\_women\\_of\\_courage/2332256.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/us_state_department_international_women_of_courage/2332256.html) (accessed May 10, 2015).

145 Altogether, there are four Russian military objects in Kyrgyzstan: air base at Kant, torpedo-testing facility in lake Issyk Kol near Karakol, Navy communications center near Kara-Balta, and a seismological station in Jalal-Abad Province.

146 Bruce Pannier, "Russia's Star on Rise Again in Kyrgyzstan," *RFE/RL*, April 8, 2011, [http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan\\_back\\_in\\_russian\\_embrace/3551508.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan_back_in_russian_embrace/3551508.html) (accessed May 10, 2015).

147 Jos Boonstra and Marlène Laruelle, "EU-US Cooperation in Central Asia: Parallel Lines Meet in Infinity?," *EUCAM Policy Brief*, No. 31 (July 2013): 1.

## 8. Closure of Manas air base

Almazbek Atambayev, winner of the October 30, 2011, Kyrgyz presidential elections, openly stated he personally opposed the military use of the Manas transit center and would prefer if there was only a civilian airport.<sup>148</sup> He used the “Iranian threat” of retaliatory strike on Bishkek as a justification, a rather bizarre argument. Atambayev also announced that the de-facto base should be shut down by mid-2014, when the lease agreement signed by Bakiyev in July 2009 expires.<sup>149</sup>

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta visited Kyrgyzstan in March 2012. He met high-level Kyrgyz officials including the Minister of Defense, and they discussed the issue of continued U.S. use of Manas. Washington later declared both its willingness and readiness to negotiate possible extension of the Manas agreement, and reach a new deal with Kyrgyzstan that would allow the U.S. to keep the base even after mid-2014.<sup>150</sup> In May 2012, Atambayev commented that such a thing depends on Washington’s will to pay increased rent for the base.

In June 2012, NATO reached agreements with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan on transport of American equipment from Afghanistan. The reverse transit route would pass through Central Asia, and then go overland via Russia to Europe.<sup>151</sup> Thus, it effectively bypassed Pakistan, which suspended its NATO supply lines in November 2011, following deadly Coalition drone strikes in Pakistan’s tribal areas. According to Pakistan, the drone attacks on its territory were illegal and violated its sovereignty.<sup>152</sup> The supply line through Pakistan, which was comparatively shorter and cheaper, later reopened in July 2012, after formal apology by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton.<sup>153</sup>

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148 “Kyrgyz Presidential Election Winner Against U.S. Military Presence,” *RFE/RL*, October 31, 2011, [http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyz\\_presidential\\_election\\_winner\\_against\\_us\\_military\\_presence/24377281.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyz_presidential_election_winner_against_us_military_presence/24377281.html) (accessed May 8, 2015).

149 Farangis Najibullah, “Atambaev Wants to Close U.S. Air Base, But Can He?” *RFE/RL*, November 2, 2011, [http://www.rferl.org/content/atambaev\\_wants\\_to\\_close\\_us\\_airbase\\_but/24379557.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/atambaev_wants_to_close_us_airbase_but/24379557.html) (accessed May 8, 2015).

150 “U.S. Looks to Extend Use of Kyrgyz Base,” *RFE/RL*, March 27, 2012, [http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan\\_united\\_states\\_manas\\_blake/24529392.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan_united_states_manas_blake/24529392.html) (accessed May 8, 2015).

151 Transport agreement with Russia had already been signed.

152 “NATO Strikes Overland Central Asia Transport Deals,” *RFE/RL*, June 4, 2012, <http://www.rferl.org/content/nato-strikes-afghan-overland-pullout-deals/24603619.html> (accessed May 8, 2015).

153 “Pakistan to Reopen Supply Lines to NATO Afghan Forces,” *BBC News*, July 3, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18691691> (accessed May 8, 2015).

Transport was also the main idea behind the so-called “New Silk Road Initiative.” This project was based on the notion of beneficial effects of better infrastructure and cross-border networks on the wider Central Asian region, and on stability of Afghanistan after U.S. withdrawal in particular.<sup>154</sup>

At the same time, Bishkek was trying to improve its relations with Russia. These were negatively affected in the first half of 2012, mainly due to stalled work on hydro-power projects and protracted Kyrgyz reluctance to give Russia its arms factory at lake Issyk Kul, Dastan.<sup>155</sup> In September 2012, Russian President Putin visited Bishkek and met with his Kyrgyz counterpart. Putin and Atambayev agreed on writing off Kyrgyzstan’s debt; in exchange, Russia was to receive shares in various Kyrgyz enterprises. Furthermore, Putin promised to help Kyrgyzstan with its entry to two Moscow-led integration projects – CIS Customs Union and Common Economic Space.<sup>156</sup>

It is necessary to read between the lines to understand this promise correctly. Relationship between Moscow and Washington was overshadowed by deep Russian mistrust. Russia was irritated by active U.S. presence in Central Asia, and its military presence at Manas in particular. From Moscow’s perspective, U.S. bilateral dialogues with Central Asian republics demonstratively ignored Russia’s interests in the region, were a “new tool of infiltration” and a “method of strengthening the military [and] political influence of the United States” in Central Asia.<sup>157</sup>

There were fresh reports of continued bilateral talks on the future U.S. military use of Manas airport in January 2013, when Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake visited Bishkek. Blake confirmed that Washington is currently “engaged in discussions” with the Kyrgyz over the entire issue and pointed out to American expenditures in Kyrgyzstan, which amounted to some \$200 million for lease payments, taxes and fees at Manas in 2012 alone – not to mention U.S. aid,

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154 For a detailed account of the New Silk Road concept, see *Conference Report. Central Asia, Afghanistan and the New Silk Road: Political, Economic and Security Challenges* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2011).

155 Dastan was a manufacturer of naval weapons (in particular torpedoes) with a unique torpedo-testing facility.

156 “Kyrgyz President Calls Cooperation With Russia Crucial,” *RFE/RL*, September 20, 2012, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-kyrgyzstan-putin-atambaev/24714151.html> (accessed May 8, 2015).

157 Richard Solash, “Russia Said to Block U.S. Drug Plan Amid Wariness Over Central Asian Influence,” *RFE/RL*, February 17, 2012, [http://www.rferl.org/content/russia\\_reportedly\\_blocks\\_us\\_plan\\_central\\_asia\\_opium\\_drugs\\_narcotics\\_afghanistan/24488075.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/russia_reportedly_blocks_us_plan_central_asia_opium_drugs_narcotics_afghanistan/24488075.html) (accessed May 8, 2015).

assistance programs and other benefits.<sup>158</sup> Yet, Atambayev repeated his stance, saying there shall be no military equipment at Manas airport after 2014.<sup>159</sup>

After all, the negotiations proved to be fruitless. On May 21, 2013, the Kyrgyz government announced its decision to cancel the 2009 Manas transit center agreement with the U.S. as of July 11, 2014.<sup>160</sup> In line with the new constitution, this draft decision to evict U.S. from Manas had to be submitted to the legislature for approval. The U.S. military presence in Kyrgyzstan was for a long time seen as a good source of additional income for the impoverished state and a lever against political pressure by Russia and China; therefore it was initially expected that parliament would not approve Atambayev's plan to close the base at Manas.<sup>161</sup> This changed following May 2013, when the U.S. dropped criminal investigation of Maksim Bakiyev. New Russian promises to build two power plants on the Naryn River and write off a debt of \$500 million finally reversed the parliament's decision.<sup>162</sup> Kyrgyz lawmakers took the vote on June 20, 2013, and the parliament confirmed termination of the agreement as well as proposed closure date in July 2014.<sup>163</sup>

The closure date was rather unfavorable to the U.S., because the closure of Manas was scheduled ahead of the drawdown of military operations in Afghanistan, which was planned by the end of 2014. Nevertheless, Kyrgyz President Atambayev later signed the decision and it came into force. Since Atambayev himself was highly unlikely to financially benefit from the base presence, he rather perceived it as a destabilizing factor. According to Marat, eviction of the U.S. military effectively worked as a "political shield [protecting him] from another political uprising during his tenure."<sup>164</sup>

On the eve of final withdrawal from Afghanistan and with the closure of Manas transit center afoot, the U.S. needed another facility to transport troops and transfer military equipment out of Afghanistan. Finally, in October 2013, the U.S. reached a

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158 "U.S. Talks on Kyrgyzstan's Manas Continuing," *RFE/RL*, January 17, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/us-kyrgyzstan-manas-blake/24840757.html> (accessed May 9, 2015).

159 "Kyrgyz Leader: No Military Equipment at Manas after 2014," *RFE/RL*, January 16, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan-no-military-manas-2014/24830293.html> (accessed May 9, 2015).

160 "Kyrgyz to Cancel Manas Transit Center Deal with U.S.," *RFE/RL*, May 21, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan-manas-deal-us/24992711.html> (accessed May 9, 2015).

161 Erica Marat, "Kyrgyzstan's Decision to Renounce Manas Transit Center Favors Russia," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 15, No. 13 (26 June 2013): 11.

162 *Ibid.*, 11–12.

163 "Kyrgyz Parliament Sets Date for Manas Transit Center Closure," *RFE/RL*, June 20, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyz-end-us-transit/25022927.html> (accessed May 9, 2015).

164 Marat, "Kyrgyzstan's Decision to Renounce Manas Transit Center Favors Russia," 13.

much-needed agreement with Romania, which provided its Mihail Kogălniceanu air base near the Black Sea port of Constanța. Flight operations from Kyrgyzstan's Manas were gradually shifted to Romania's Mihail Kogălniceanu starting February 2014.<sup>165</sup>

On February 19, Kyrgyz and Russian authorities signed a preliminary agreement concerning ownership of Manas International Airport. As a result, Russian state-controlled oil giant Rosneft was to obtain a controlling stake of 51 % at the airport-operating company from the Kyrgyz government.<sup>166</sup> Commenting on the issue, President Atambayev said that Kyrgyz officials would like to transform Manas International Airport into a civil aviation hub, a progress only Rosneft could provide. He also noted there would be no other military base on the airport's territory following U.S. departure.<sup>167</sup>

At last, the U.S. officially closed its air base at Manas on June 3, 2014, albeit most equipment and personnel already left Kyrgyzstan before this date. During the closing ceremony, the base commander Colonel John Millard said that about 5.5 million troops had transited through Manas over more than 12 years of its operation.<sup>168</sup> According to latest official data from October 2013, the U.S. had spent some \$800 million in connection with its air base in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>169</sup>

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165 "21st TSC MK Air Base Fact Sheet," Official Site of the M.K. Air Base Passenger Transit Center, <http://www.eur.army.mil/21tsc/MKAB/MK.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2015).

166 "Bishkek May Cede Control of Manas Airport to Russia," *RFE/RL*, February 20, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan-russia-manas-deal/25270677.html> (accessed May 9, 2015).

167 "Атамбаев: На месте ЦТП в 'Манасе' не будет другой военной базы," *RFE/RL – Radio Azattyk*, March 28, 2014, [http://rus.azattyk.org/archive/ky\\_News\\_in\\_Russian\\_ru/20140328/4795/4795.html?id=25312873](http://rus.azattyk.org/archive/ky_News_in_Russian_ru/20140328/4795/4795.html?id=25312873) (accessed May 9, 2015).

168 "U.S. Base in Kyrgyzstan Officially Closes," *RFE/RL*, June 3, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/us-handing-over-key-to-kyrgyz-base/25408141.html> (accessed May 9, 2015).

169 "Financial Information: Recent U.S. Contributions to the Kyrgyz Government and Economy," Official Site of the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek, [http://bishkek.usembassy.gov/tc\\_recent\\_contributions.html](http://bishkek.usembassy.gov/tc_recent_contributions.html) (accessed May 11, 2015).

## Conclusion

This thesis addressed the importance of the U.S. Manas air base in the context of mutual relations between the United States and Kyrgyzstan after 2001. It aimed to analyze the bilateral U.S.-Kyrgyz negotiations on establishing the air base, its functioning, and its closure in 2014. It sought to explain the respective positions of both parties, underlying motives for their actions, and other factors that influenced the entire negotiation process.

The analysis shows that the U.S. position was driven by the outright necessity to secure functional, efficient and diversified transportation corridors to and from Afghanistan, where it was engaged in combat. As such, Manas had the advantage of safety, favorable location and proximity to the theater. Furthermore, Manas air base also provided for significant costs savings. It was this useful combination what motivated extensive U.S. efforts to get and maintain access to the facility. Yet, in order to achieve this goal, the U.S. had to adapt to local conditions. Among other things, the U.S. let local elites enrich themselves in connection with the air base revenues. Airport services and aviation fuel proved to be the Kyrgyz elite's main sources of financial gain; this was true for both Akayev and Bakiyev governments. This was no longer possible with the post-2010 government. Hence, the shift of Kyrgyzstan towards more democratic governance gradually contributed to the base's closure in 2014.

It was clear from the beginning that Kyrgyzstan could hardly be an equal partner for the United States given its overall weakness compared to the global superpower. Since the two countries had little in common and often had difficulty finding common ground, the Kyrgyz decided to focus primarily on prospective financial benefits stemming from having an American base on the Kyrgyz territory. As a rule, Bishkek devised an ad-hoc approach, taking advantage of all sorts of opportunities it could use in order to extract more money from the U.S. This approach, however, resulted also in Kyrgyzstan being discredited internationally. Kyrgyz behavior, marked by frequent turnarounds and uncertainty, cast doubt on the country's reputation as a credible and trustworthy partner for the United States.

U.S. presence in Kyrgyzstan was initially embraced in the early 2000s. It gave Bishkek an opportunity to diversify its external relations further beyond Russia and China, the two powers Kyrgyzstan was most dependent on. Nevertheless, the above analysis suggests that Kyrgyzstan lacked a coherent long-term foreign policy strategy.



Moreover, its internal instability had a major impact on its stance towards foreign policy matters and the issue of the Manas air base in particular. Frequent abrupt changes in domestic affairs, most notably in the form of public protests and violent upheavals as was the case of both the 2005 and 2010 revolutions, affected Kyrgyz foreign policy harshly. The United States was by all means a stronger player in this asymmetric relationship. Yet, Washington often got into a situation where it was being pulled by Kyrgyzstan's domestic developments, which effectively determined mutual relations.

Regional factors also played a significant role. Initially, Russia and China did not object to the creation of the U.S. military base on the Kyrgyz territory due to shared perception of terrorism as a key security threat and due to their own engagement in counter-terrorism. Yet, relations between the major powers in the region got increasingly complicated over the course of the next years. U.S. military presence in Central Asia became undesirable for both Moscow and Beijing, and external pressure on the Kyrgyz government to evict the U.S. increased accordingly. Given that, it was in general a success for the U.S. to have been able to keep its direct military presence in Kyrgyzstan for such a long time, between 2001 and 2014.

## Summary

The air base at Manas near Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan, was established in reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The U.S. military needed to provide support and secure supply of the Coalition forces in Afghanistan. As a result, several new military bases were set up in Afghanistan's vicinity, Manas air base being one of them. The U.S. used Manas for deployment of a small portion of its forces, and, most importantly, as a refueling hub for aircraft bound to and from Afghanistan. Apart from delivering military cargo, Manas was a central transit point for bringing troops into theater. Its strategic importance further increased following closure of Karshi-Khanabad air base in neighboring Uzbekistan in 2005, as it since then remained the only U.S. foothold north of the Afghan border. Apart from its primary military-strategic role, the mere presence of a U.S. military base on the territory of Kyrgyzstan was a practical manifestation of the U.S. efforts to strengthen its position in Central Asia. Despite Kyrgyzstan being an independent country since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. military presence in the country brought along other problems and friction due to complex geopolitical situation in Central Asia.

The thesis addresses the significance of the U.S. Manas air base in the context of mutual U.S.-Kyrgyz relations after 2001. It aims to analyze the bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and the Kyrgyz on establishing the air base, its functioning, and eventually its closure in 2014. Among the research questions, it seeks to explain the respective positions of both parties, the motives behind their actions, and factors that influenced this negotiation process. In terms of methodology, the overall research design is one of a case study. Given the study's topical focus on the changing role of the Manas air base in the U.S.-Kyrgyz relations in time, the body of the text rests on process tracing as the primary method of analysis.

The analysis shows that the U.S. position was driven by the outright necessity to secure functional, efficient and diversified transportation corridors to and from Afghanistan, where it was engaged in combat. As such, Manas had the advantage of safety, favorable location and proximity to the theater. Furthermore, Manas air base also provided for significant costs savings. It was this useful combination what motivated extensive U.S. efforts to get and maintain access to the facility. Yet, in order to achieve this goal, the U.S. had to adapt to local conditions. Among other things, the U.S. let local elites enrich themselves in connection with the air base revenues. Airport services

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