



Kyrgyzstan and the Status of the U.S. Manas Airbase: Context and Implications

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Summary

In February 2009, Kyrgyzstan announced that it was terminating an agreement permitting U.S. forces to upgrade and use portions of the Manas international airport near the capital of Bishkek to support coalition military operations in Afghanistan. U.S. forces faced leaving the airbase by late August 2009. Major U.S. concerns included working out alternative logistics routes and support functions for a surge in U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan and possibly cooler security ties with Kyrgyzstan that could set back U.S. counter-terrorism efforts and other U.S. interests in Central Asia. After reportedly intense negotiations, the United States and Kyrgyzstan reached agreement in June 2009 on modalities for maintaining U.S. and NATO transit operations at Manas. For more on Central Asia, see CRS Report RL33458, *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, by Jim Nichol.

Contents

Most Recent Developments	1
Background	1
The U.S. Basing Agreement with Kyrgyzstan	2
The Termination of the SOFA.....	5
Implications for Kyrgyzstan and Regional Security	6
Implications for U.S. Interests	8
U.S. Policy.....	8
Congressional Concerns	10

Figures

Figure 1. Manas Airbase and Possible Alternative Land Routes	3
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Contacts

Author Contact Information	11
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Most Recent Developments

The Defense Department announced on June 24, 2009, that an agreement of “mutual benefit” had been concluded with the Kyrgyz government “to continu[e] to work, with them, to supply our troops in Afghanistan, so that we can help with the overall security situation in the region.”¹ According to Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Kadyrbek Sarbayev, the government decided to conclude the annually renewable “intergovernmental agreement with the United States on cooperation and the formation of a transit center at Manas airport,” because of growing alarm about “the worrying situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” The agreement permits the transit of personnel and non-lethal cargoes, although Kyrgyzstan is not permitted to inspect the cargoes, he stated. A yearly rent payment for use of land and facilities at the Manas airport would be increased from \$17.4 million to \$60 million per year and the United States had pledged more than \$36 million for infrastructure improvements and \$30 million for air traffic control system upgrades for the airport. Sarbayev also stated that the United States had pledged \$20 million dollars for economic development, \$21 million for counter-narcotics efforts, and \$10 million for counter-terrorism efforts.² All except the increased rent have already been appropriated or requested (see below, *Congressional Concerns*). The agreement also reportedly includes stricter host-country conditions on U.S. military personnel. One Kyrgyz legislator claimed that the agreement was not a *volte-face* for Kyrgyzstan because Russia and other Central Asian states had signed agreements with NATO to permit the transit of supplies to Afghanistan.

Prior to the signing of the new agreement on June 22, 2009, President Obama reportedly had sent a letter to Kyrgyz President Bakiyev that stated that a high level delegation was ready to travel to Kyrgyzstan to discuss the status of the airbase and enhanced cooperation between the two countries. In mid-June, Afghan President Hamed Karzai met Bakiyev at a conference in Moscow and reportedly urged him to keep the airbase open.

Background

In February 2009, Kyrgyzstan announced that it was terminating an agreement permitting U.S. forces to use portions of the Manas International Airport and adjoining areas near the capital of Bishkek to support coalition military operations in Afghanistan. According to the U.S. Air Force, the airbase provides major refueling and air mobility capabilities in support of operations in Afghanistan. U.S. forces faced leaving the airbase by late August 2009. Major U.S. concerns raised by the Kyrgyz announcement included working out alternative logistics routes and support functions for the Obama Administration’s planned surge in U.S. troops deployed to Afghanistan and possibly cooler security ties with Kyrgyzstan that would set back U.S. counter-terrorism efforts and other U.S. interests in Central Asia. U.S. and NATO relations with Russia also might have suffered if the airbase closure and other Russian actions in Central Asia came to be viewed as non-supportive of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operations in Afghanistan. The United States intensified talks with Kyrgyzstan after the announcement with the goal of persuading the country to reverse its decision.

¹ U.S. Department of Defense. *DoD News Briefing*, June 24, 2009. See also U.S. Department of State. *Daily Press Briefing*, June 25, 2009.

² Tolkun Namatbayeva, “Kyrgyzstan Allows U.S. to Keep Using Base,” *Agence France Presse*, June 23, 2009.

The 111th Congress was faced with issues associated with either raising security and foreign assistance appropriations for Kyrgyzstan if the airbase remained open, or with re-evaluating U.S.-Kyrgyz relations if the airbase was closed.

The U.S. Basing Agreement with Kyrgyzstan

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States negotiated status of forces agreements (SOFA) and other security accords with several Central Asian states in order to use their airstrips for what became the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. The SOFA with Kyrgyzstan was finalized and an airbase was opened at the Manas International Airport (north of the capital of Bishkek) on December 11, 2001.³ Subsequently, several coalition countries also signed agreements with Kyrgyzstan and deployed troops and aircraft. U.S. military engineers upgraded runways and built an encampment next to the airport, unofficially naming it the Peter J. Ganci airbase, in honor of a U.S. fireman killed in New York on September 11, 2001. By mid-2002, the Manas airbase hosted over 2,000 troops from nine countries.⁴ In 2003, Kyrgyzstan agreed to also host a small Russian airbase at Kant, east of Bishkek, ostensibly as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO; members include Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). The Kant airbase is close to the Manas airbase.

³ According to some reports, the problems in negotiating a SOFA with Uzbekistan spurred the United States to seek additional airfield access at the Manas International Airport. Deborah E. Klepp. *The U.S. Needs a Base Where? How the U.S. Established an Air Base in the Kyrgyz Republic*, National Defense University, 2004.

⁴ Praising Kyrgyzstan, former Assistant Secretary of Defense J.D. Crouch testified in 2002 that it is “a critical regional partner in the War on Terrorism.... Prior to the onset of operations we needed rapid parliamentary action approving a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which was granted. Further, the Kyrgyz Republic has approved all U.S. requests to date in relation to OEF issues, to include basing of combat and combat support units at Manas.” U.S. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. Subcommittee on Central Asia and the South Caucasus. *Testimony of J. D. Crouch II*, June 27, 2002.

Figure I. Manas Airbase and Possible Alternative Land Routes



Source: CRS Graphics

Note: Route lines are approximate.

On July 5, 2005, the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and China signed a declaration at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO; a regional economic and security grouping) that called on OEF coalition members to decide when they would end their use of airbases and other facilities in Central Asia.⁵ Later that month,

⁵ Open Source Center. *Central Eurasia: Daily Report*, (hereafter *CEDR*), July 5, 2005, Doc. No. CPP-249.

Uzbekistan announced that it was ending a basing agreement with the United States, after the United States had criticized the Uzbek government for repressive actions against civilians. Some of the functions of this airbase were moved to Manas. In October 2005, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev demanded either that the United States greatly increase fees paid for use of the Manas airbase or close it. After protracted negotiations, agreement was reached in July 2006 on an increase from \$2 million per year for leasing the base to \$17.4 million for a five-year period. In a joint statement, the United States pledged to provide various forms of assistance to Kyrgyzstan totaling \$150 million over the next year, pending Congressional approval.⁶

U.S. assistance totaling \$150 million was provided to Kyrgyzstan in FY2007, according to the State Department. There is controversy, however, over whether a similar amount was to be provided in subsequent years. During a January 2009 visit to Kyrgyzstan, Gen. David Petraeus, Commander of U.S. Central Command, stated that “the United States provides, both direct and indirect, [aid that] adds up to about \$150 million per year in various programs.” He also announced “our desire to increase the benefits that accrue to your country from Manas and the other activities.”⁷ According to a recent factsheet from the U.S. Air Force, the Manas airbase contributed more than \$64 million to the local Kyrgyz economy in FY2008.⁸ Of this amount, \$17.4 million was a lease payment, \$22.5 was for airport operations and other land lease fees, nearly \$500,000 for upgrading Kyrgyz air control systems, and about \$24 million on local contracts and charity work. Besides the \$64 million, U.S. foreign operations appropriations for Kyrgyzstan for FY2008 were an estimated \$32.6 million, resulting in total assistance of about \$96 million.⁹

The U.S. Air Force stated in February 2009 that “Manas airbase currently serves as the premier air mobility hub for the International Security Assistance Force and coalition military forces operating in Afghanistan.... Currently, 1,000 personnel from Spain, France and the United States are assigned to the base, along with 650 U.S. and host-nation contractor personnel.” It reported that in 2008, the 376th Air Expeditionary Wing based at the Manas airbase flew 3,294 refueling missions over Afghanistan, about 20% of all such missions flown in the theater. The Air Force also reported that most NATO and coalition troops entering or leaving Afghanistan transit through Manas, more than 170,000 in 2008. The airbase is an important landing strip for C-17 Globemaster transports to off-load supplies bound for Bagram airbase in Afghanistan, although the total weight of such cargoes is much less than provided to forces in Afghanistan via other air or land routes. Under the SOFA, the airbase has a significant capability to serve as a possible alternative route for lethal supplies entering Afghanistan if needed. C-17 Globemasters assigned

⁶ U.S. Embassy, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. *Joint Statement the United States and the Kyrgyz Republic on Coalition Airbase*, July 14, 2006, at http://bishkek.usembassy.gov/july_14_joint_statement_on_coalition_airbase.html. While before the talks Bakiyev had suggested that Afghanistan was becoming stable, so that the need for the Manas airbase had lessened, after the talks he averred that Afghanistan had not yet become stable enough to consider closing the base. *CEDR*, July 17, 2005, Doc. No. CEP-29010; August 31, 2006, Doc. No. CEP-950076.

⁷ U.S. Embassy, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. *Remarks to the Press By General David H. Petraeus, Commander, USCENTCOM*, January 19, 2009.

⁸ U.S. Air Force. *Fact Sheet: Manas Air Base, Kyrgyzstan*, 376th Air Expeditionary Wing, February 2009, at <http://preview.afnews.af.mil/manas/library/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=12682>.

⁹ Includes budgeted FREEDOM Support Act funding, Foreign Military Financing, International Military Education and Training programs, Non-proliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related programs, Child Survival and Health, and Peace Corps funding. U.S. Department of State. *Foreign Operations Appropriated Assistance: Kyrgyz Republic Fact Sheet*, January 20, 2009. In addition to the \$32.6 million, the Millennium Challenge Corporation signed an agreement with Kyrgyzstan in March 2008 to provide \$16 million to promote judicial, criminal justice, and law enforcement reforms, but most funds have not yet been disbursed.

to the airbase are used for rapid airlift of troops and cargoes as well as emergency medical evacuation and airdrops. The 376th Air Expeditionary Wing's KC-135 Stratotankers carry out refueling missions over Afghanistan, and also serve as communications hubs while loitering. The Spanish detachment and their C-130 aircraft provide airlift for medical evacuations and other coalition support. The French detachment provides aerial refueling for coalition aircraft with the French version of the KC-135, the C135FR.¹⁰

The Termination of the SOFA

While Russia joined other SCO members in the mid-2005 call for a decision on closing coalition bases, the Russian government appeared to intensify its efforts to convince Kyrgyzstan to close the Manas airbase a few months after the United States and Kyrgyzstan had agreed on expanded rent payments. Russian and pro-Russian Kyrgyz media appeared increasingly to allege that airbase operations contributed to environmental damage by polluting the air and soil and that U.S. personnel were a threat to the safety of civilians and were involved in illicit activities (see also below). At the same time, Russian media praised the benefits of Russia's Kant airbase. Among other leverage, the pro-Moscow Party of Communists of Kyrgyzstan was prominent in anti-American demonstrations. A new Russian law on migrant workers went into effect at the beginning of 2007, leading to concerns in Kyrgyzstan, a major source of migrant workers in Russia. Kyrgyz legislative speaker Marat Sultanov visited Russia in May 2007 and reportedly urged Moscow to facilitate the inflow of Kyrgyz migrant workers, including by granting them dual citizenship, in exchange for agreeing to a major boost in the Russian military presence in Kyrgyzstan and to close the Manas airbase.¹¹

In August 2007, Russia's then-President Vladimir Putin offered to invest up to \$2 billion in Kyrgyzstan's economy if "good projects" could be located. The two governments worked on identifying such projects, particularly investments in hydro-electricity production. Inter-governmental accords reportedly were being prepared for signing in late 2008, and talks had expanded to include a \$300 million loan to support Kyrgyzstan's budget in the face of the global economic downturn. Around this time, some Kyrgyz and Russian media alleged that Kyrgyz President Bakiyev had acquiesced to a Russian condition that the assistance would be provided if the Manas airbase was closed, and that Bakiyev would announce the base closure when he visited Moscow in early 2009.¹² Most Russian and Kyrgyz officials have denied that the aid was explicitly conditioned on the airbase closure.¹³

On February 3, 2009, President Bakiyev announced during his Moscow meeting with Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev that the Manas airbase would be closed. Reasons for closing the base, Bakiyev claimed, included inadequate U.S. compensation for its continued use and strong

¹⁰ Maj. Damien Pickart, "Manas KC-135s Revolutionize Combat Operations," *Air Force News Service*, March 20, 2009; Maj. Damien Pickart, "Manas Air Base Continues To Support Operations In Afghanistan," *Air Force Print News Today*, February 5, 2009; *Fact Sheet: Manas Air Base, Kyrgyzstan*.

¹¹ *CEDR*, May 24, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-18001.

¹² *CEDR*, December 19, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-358010; January 21, 2009, Doc. No. CEP-358025. In an interview with Russian media in late December 2008, Bakiyev stopped short of calling for the closure of the airbase, although he raised several grievances. *CEDR*, December 28, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950085.

¹³ However, Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to the United States reportedly acknowledged that the Russian assistance offered in early February influenced the government's decision to close the airbase. Desmond Butler, "Kyrgyz Envoy Says Russia Influenced Base Closure," *Associated Press*, March 12, 2009.

Kyrgyz public opinion against its continued operation. He also asserted that counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan had been concluded, which had been the main reason for keeping the airbase open.¹⁴ At their meeting, Medvedev announced that \$1.7 billion would be invested in Kyrgyzstan for building a dam and hydroelectric power station and another \$450 million would be provided for budget stabilization. Russia also agreed to cancel a \$180 million debt owed by Kyrgyzstan in exchange for some properties. The next day, Medvedev suggested that the member-countries of the Russia-led CSTO could compensate for the airbase closure by offering land transit for non-lethal supplies for NATO forces in Afghanistan.¹⁵

The Kyrgyz legislature, dominated by the president's Ak Zhol Party, voted overwhelmingly on February 19, 2009, to close the airbase, and the president signed the bill into law the next day. Under the SOFA, the United States is to turn over the airbase facilities within six months of notification, or by late August 2009. On April 2, 2009, Bakiyev signed similar legislation annulling airbase access agreements with Australia, Denmark, France, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, South Korea, Spain, and Turkey.

Among the few legislators who opposed closing the airbase, Bakyt Beshimov, the leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party, argued that "both the Manas Airbase and the Russian base at Kant ... were opened with the aim of countering terrorism and religious extremism.... Guided exclusively by the national interests of Kyrgyzstan, [we] believe that the decision on the closure of the US airbase is premature."¹⁶ Outside the legislature, prominent human rights advocate Topchubek Turgunaliyev similarly criticized the decision to close the airbase, warning that "our relations will get worse not only with the United States, but with many Western countries." He and some other Kyrgyz citizens argued that by hosting both the U.S. airbase and the Russian Kant airbase, Kyrgyzstan maintained a balanced foreign policy, and that if one airbase was closed, the other also should be closed.¹⁷

Implications for Kyrgyzstan and Regional Security

Many observers warned that the closure of the Manas airbase might well set back Kyrgyzstan's security relations with the United States and increase Bishkek's dependence on such ties with Russia and China. Seeming to indicate such a tightening security grip, Russia's CSTO head, Nikolay Bordyuzho, announced on April 20, 2009, that "the Russian government plans to enlarge the number of warplanes stationed in Kant. That would correspond to the current situation in Central Asia and Afghanistan." He also stated that the upgraded airbase would support the CSTO rapid reaction forces. Railroad repair work was reported at Kant in February 2009, presumably in advance of a major influx of weaponry and personnel.

¹⁴ Bakiyev also complained that he had received an unsatisfactory response from the United States regarding a December 2006 shooting incident at the airbase that resulted in the death of a Kyrgyz citizen. He appeared to argue that drug trafficking in Afghanistan was now a more pressing problem for Central Asia than combating terrorism in Afghanistan. Daniyar Karimov, "Kurmanbek Bakiyev: Manas Airbase to be Shut Down," *Bishkek News Agency Twenty-Four*, February 4, 2009; *CEDR*, February 4, 2009, Doc. No. CEP-950347; December 28, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950085.

¹⁵ *CEDR*, February 3, 2009, Doc. No. CEP-950352 and Doc. No. CEP-25001; *ITAR-TASS*, February 3, 2009; Nick Coleman, "Assertive Russia Boosts Security Ties With Neighbors," *Agence France Presse*, February 4, 2009.

¹⁶ Sergey Rasov: "Yankee, Go Home!" *BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit*, February 25, 2009; *CEDR*, February 23, 2009, Doc. No. CEP-358002.

¹⁷ *CEDR*, February 24, 2009, Doc. No. CEP-950366.

Some observers maintained that Russia's push for closing the Manas airbase was aimed more to minimize U.S. influence in Central Asia rather than to harm U.S. and ISAF operations in Afghanistan. With President Obama's commitment to increase the size of the U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan, these observers argued, Russia became more concerned that the Manas airbase would become a permanent U.S. presence in the region and would remain even if Afghanistan became more stable. These observers pointed to Russia's readiness to facilitate cargo shipments to Afghanistan and other offers of assistance as indications that Russia supported ongoing U.S. and ISAF operations in Afghanistan. Other observers took a less sanguine view and argued that Russia desired control over access routes in order to gain substantial influence over U.S. and ISAF operations in Afghanistan. They also pointed out that the alternative access proffered by Russia was only for non-lethal shipments and could be restricted or rescinded at any time (see also below).

The Russian head of the CSTO, Nicholas Bordyuzho, in late April 2009 reportedly downplayed the significance of the Manas airbase in supporting operations in Afghanistan and instead claimed that by granting transit rights for NATO supplies, Russia and the Central Asian countries had rendered the airbase moot. He also asserted that CSTO efforts were more significant in ensuring stability in Afghanistan and Central Asia and announced that Russia would send more warplanes to the Kant airbase.¹⁸ Also in April 2009, the SCO held a military exercise in Tajikistan to simulate the repulsion of a terrorist incursion from Afghanistan.

Disagreeing with such views, Pierre Morel, the EU's Special Representative for Georgia and Central Asia, reportedly emphasized during a visit to Kyrgyzstan that the country would suffer the effects of a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan if NATO operations there were hindered. He also rejected the view that the airbase closure would not affect EU ties with Kyrgyzstan, since EU citizens were among those fighting in Afghanistan.¹⁹

A presidential election is to be held in Kyrgyzstan in July 2009. Some observers suggested that President Bakiyev faced rising public discontent from the shocks of the global economic downturn, which have led many Kyrgyz migrant workers to return home. Energy shortages during the past two winters also have heightened discontent. To gain electoral support, these observers suggest, Bakiyev raised criticism of the airbase and ordered its closure. Some pro-Moscow opposition parties hailed Bakiyev's decision to close the base, but other parties and groups in Kyrgyzstan raised concerns that Bakiyev's "embrace of Russia" could herald rising Russian-style authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan. In the end, however, Bakiyev reversed his decision on closing the airbase, perhaps viewing the economic boost provided by keeping the airbase open—at higher rent payments he had negotiated—as enhancing his ability to retain office. At a campaign stop in a small town in southwestern Kyrgyzstan on June 29, Bakiyev stated that "the transit center [the Manas airbase] is the Kyrgyzstan's contribution to ensuring regional security." He reportedly stressed that the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan was worsening and had at least indirectly influenced Kyrgyzstan, where a terrorist attack had recently taken place. He also reportedly stated that Presidents Obama and Karzai had urged him to continue to support NATO operations in Afghanistan.²⁰

¹⁸ *ITAR-TASS*, April 20, 2009.

¹⁹ Open Source Center Feature; "24.kg" News Service, April 6, 2009.

²⁰ *CEDR*, June 29, 2009, Doc. No. CEP-950305.

Implications for U.S. Interests

U.S. Policy

After signing cooperative security agreements with the Central Asian states, the former Bush Administration averred that the United States was not seeking “permanent” bases in the region. However, the previous Administration also argued that regional access would “be needed as long as conditions in Afghanistan require it,” as well as “for future contingencies and to be involved in training and joint exercises ... for the long term.”²¹ The Obama Administration has reaffirmed these U.S. interests in the region. On April 24, 2009, then-Assistant Secretary Boucher stressed while visiting Tajikistan the economic and security roles the Central Asian region could play in bolstering stability in Afghanistan. He stated that “President Obama and Secretary Clinton want to continue and expand [the U.S.] involvement in relations with Central Asia. We want to work more closely with the countries in this region. Together we can help bring stability to Afghanistan, and together we can try to open up new opportunities for the nations and especially the people of this region.”²²

Some unfortunate incidents at the Manas airbase over the years appeared to increase negative views of the airbase among the population. As mentioned above, such incidents were widely criticized in Russian and Russian-influenced Kyrgyz media and among pro-Moscow parties and groups, were used as weapons in political infighting, and played a role in Kyrgyz government demands for added lease payments. A major sore point in U.S.-Kyrgyz relations occurred after the shooting of an ethnic Russian truck driver by a U.S. serviceman at the Manas airbase in December 2006. Appearing to reflect the influence of Russian-orchestrated propaganda as well as other influences, a Kyrgyz opinion survey in late 2008 reported that 84% of respondents viewed Russia as friendly to Kyrgyzstan and almost 50% viewed the U.S. airbase at Manas negatively as a symbol of U.S. aspirations for global domination.²³

According to some observers, the U.S. military did not appear overly concerned about the status of the Manas airbase as late as October 2008, when the Army Corps of Engineers invited bids for construction of a concrete parking ramp to support strategic and refueling operations and a concrete hazardous cargo pad. However, by the time of the visit of Gen. David Petraeus in January 2009, such concerns appeared evident by his offer to consider boosting U.S. assistance.²⁴

Responding to Bakiyev’s announcement that the Manas airbase would be closed, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated that “Manas is important, but it’s not irreplaceable.... We have not resigned ourselves to this being the last, the last word.... I think we are prepared to look at the fees and see if there is justification for a somewhat larger payment.... We are prepared to do something

²¹ Former Deputy Assistant Secretary B. Lynn Pascoe, Presentation at the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, September 20, 2002.

²² U.S. Department of State. Assistant Secretary of State Richard A. Boucher, *Remarks: U.S.-Tajikistan Relations*, April 24, 2009.

²³ Open Source Center. *Open Source Center Feature*, April 15, 2009, Doc. No. FEA-844830.

²⁴ John Daly, “The Manas Disillusionment,” *ISN Security Watch*, February 13, 2009; Department of the Army. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. *Y-Strategic Ramp and Hot Cargo Pad, Manas Air Base, Kyrgyzstan*, Solicitation Number: W912ER-09-R-0004, October 9, 2008; U.S. Embassy, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. *Remarks to the Press By General David H. Petraeus, Commander, USCENTCOM*, January 19, 2009.

that we think is reasonable.... It is an important base, but it's not so important that we're going to waste taxpayer dollars paying something that's exorbitant."²⁵ Then-Assistant Secretary Boucher indicated on April 24 that talks with Kyrgyzstan are ongoing, and that in the meantime, operations have not been affected at the airbase. He also emphasized that the United States was not "in particular" seeking another airbase in Central Asia, and that the functions carried out at the Manas airbase might be parceled out to various locations rather than to one new airbase.

Many observers raised concern that the Manas airbase closure could complicate President Obama's February 17, 2009, order for up to 17,000 additional troops to be deployed to Afghanistan by the end of the year. Over its lifetime, the Manas airbase has been the premier point of access to and from Afghanistan for most U.S. military and contract personnel. Although the airbase is currently not used to transport lethal cargoes into Afghanistan (lethal cargoes do exit Afghanistan through the airbase), its SOFA permits it to be used as an alternative secure way-station for the supply of lethal military supplies to Afghanistan. It may be difficult to find similarly convenient facilities for aerial refueling, data communications, and medical evacuation. Retired Gen. Richard Myers, the former chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, has warned that the closure of the Manas airbase could make maintaining the supply routes to Afghanistan more difficult and expensive. He has suggested that bases in Turkey or elsewhere in the Middle East could be used for refueling missions, but operational costs would be higher.²⁶

Some observers suggested that Russia was using the putative closure of the Manas airbase as a bargaining chip to force U.S. concessions on missile defense, NATO enlargement, and other issues. Analyst Stephen Blank argued that such a Russian strategy would prove fruitless because the United States would not recognize Russia's claims to a sphere of exclusive influence in Central Asia. He argued that Russia's apparent success in convincing Kyrgyzstan to close the Manas airbase demonstrated that the United States should provide more assistance to the Central Asian states so that they have "the ability to make their own unfettered decisions on security matters.... Washington must be prepared to invest heavily in Central Asian states."²⁷

Analysts such as Blank and others also raised concerns that a possible reduction of U.S. influence in Central Asia could jeopardize the security of alternative land supply routes to Afghanistan.²⁸ The need for such routes increased as a result of Taliban attacks on non-lethal U.S. and NATO shipments through Pakistan to Afghanistan. Recent agreements reached with Russia and Central Asian states permit overland transit of non-lethal and non-sensitive cargoes to Afghanistan. Land routes include one starting at the Latvian port of Riga and continuing by rail through Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Another route starts at the Georgian port of Poti, crosses the Caspian by ferry, and commences by rail through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Goods also can enter Tajikistan from Uzbekistan and be delivered by truck across a U.S.-built bridge to Afghanistan. According to some reports, U.S. planners calculate that about 20% of non-lethal supplies to Afghanistan could be sent along these routes (with much of the remainder continuing to be sent via Pakistan). The first shipment of U.S. non-lethal military supplies—reportedly

²⁵ U.S. Department of Defense. *Roundtable With Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Krakow, Poland*, February 20, 2009.

²⁶ Saban Kardas "Will the Closure of Manas Airbase Strengthen U.S.-Turkish Relations?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 23, 2009

²⁷ Stephen Blank, "Obama Administration Must Learn Lessons Of Manas," *Eurasia Insight*, March 15, 2009.

²⁸ Paul Quinn-Judge, "Afghanistan and Central Asia: The Risk to U.S. Supply Lines," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2009.

including camouflage, food, and civil engineering equipment—was loaded onto rail cars at the port of Riga, Latvia, and transited the Baltic states, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan to arrive in Afghanistan in late March 2009.

Some analysts point out that U.S.-led coalition actions in Afghanistan in 2001-2002 seriously degraded the capabilities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other terrorist groups harbored in Afghanistan that had periodically launched attacks in Central Asia. Russia and China, in contrast, had appeared unwilling, if not unable, to provide enough military support to Central Asia in the 1990s to halt these periodic attacks. These analysts question whether Russia and China would now prove able to provide enough military support to prevent the re-emergence of such attacks. Analysts Borut Grgic and Alexandros Petersen raise a related concern that terrorists could seek safe harbors in an insecure Central Asia and launch attacks into Afghanistan. They state that “weak borders between Central Asia and Afghanistan are a recipe for long-term failure for the United States and its NATO allies in Afghanistan. We see today how terrorists and other criminals move unbothered through the porous border with Pakistan. Why should it be any different on the Central Asian side?”²⁹

Congressional Concerns

Congress has supported the maintenance of the U.S. airbase at Manas by providing construction and other military assistance as well as enhanced U.S. foreign assistance. This Congressional support also has been prompted, in part, by some democratization progress in the country, although these reforms recently have appeared to lag.³⁰

Similar to the case in 2006—when the United States and Kyrgyzstan agreed on a revised rental agreement—current talks on keeping the airbase open, if successful, could result in an Administration request to Congress to approve added funding or other legislative action. For some Members, the issue at this time may include whether the advantages of keeping the airbase open outweigh Kyrgyzstan’s apparently declining democratization progress.

Among recent legislative action, Division E of the Consolidated Security, Disaster Assistance, and Continuing Appropriations Act for FY2009 (H.R. 2638; P.L. 110-329) provided \$6 million for constructing a hazardous cargo pad at the Manas airbase. Construction was originally planned to begin on April 9, 2009. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008 (H.R. 2764; P.L. 110-161) provided \$30.3 million for construction of a parking ramp at the airbase. Perhaps of some significance to possibly re-aligning some functions carried out at the Manas airbase, a parking ramp for wide-body strategic airlift is being built at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan. Strategic airlift currently must land at Manas and offload cargo for airlifting to Bagram, where cargo is again reloaded for airlift to forward operations bases.

At a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee in mid-March 2009, Senator John McCain raised concerns about the impact the possible closure of the Manas airbase would have on

²⁹ *Washington Times*, April 10, 2009.

³⁰ According to the non-governmental organization Freedom House, Kyrgyzstan ranks as “partly free” in terms of political rights and civil liberties and has been experiencing declines in rights and liberties since 2006. A further decline in 2008 was due in part to “new legislative constraints on the media and freedom of assembly, as well as moves by the authorities to enfeeble the political opposition and silence civil society.” Arch Puddington, *Freedom In The World 2009: Setbacks And Resilience*, January 12, 2009.

transportation and logistics risks associated with the shift of resources and personnel from Iraq to Afghanistan.³¹ At a hearing in late April 2009 on the President's request for supplemental appropriations for FY2009, Representative Chet Edwards asked about whether a new \$30 million request for air traffic control system upgrades at the Manas airbase was still warranted in light of Kyrgyzstan's demand for the closure of the airbase. He also noted that the previously appropriated \$36 million (the \$30.3 million ramp and the \$6 million pad mentioned above) had not yet been expended, and encouraged ongoing U.S.-Kyrgyz talks to keep the airbase open. Gen. David Petraeus, Commander of U.S. Central Command, responded that "if, of course, it came that we were to leave [the Manas airbase], obviously we would not invest in that particular air traffic control improvement. I don't want to get ahead of things, but we need to give this time.... it's our hope that actually all parties in the region, and this includes Russia, could [join in] a broad partnership against transnational extremism and the illegal narcotics activities."³² Supplemental appropriations for FY2009 (signed into law on June 24, 2009; P.L. 111-32) provided \$30 million for air traffic control system upgrades at the Manas airbase and \$21.52 million for drug interdiction and counter-drug activities in Kyrgyzstan.

The Obama Administration's FY2010 foreign assistance request calls for boosting aid for Kyrgyzstan from \$29.06 million in FY2009 to \$48.23 million in FY2010. The added request "represents a strategic shift to focus on programs that will stabilize and reform the Kyrgyz economy during turbulent times." The boost also reflects added foreign military financing (FMF), from \$800,000 for FY2009 to a requested \$2.9 million for FY2010.³³

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³¹ U.S. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. *Hearing on the U.S. Southern Command, U.S. Northern Command, U.S. Africa Command and the U.S. Transportation Command*, March 17, 2009.

³² U.S. House of Representatives. Committee on Appropriations. Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies. *Hearing on Base Posture and the Supplemental Request*, April 24, 2009.

³³ U.S. Department of State. *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY2010*, May 12, 2009.