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The Manas Base and Challenges to the U.S. Presence in Kyrgyzstan

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Winning in Afghanistan is a vital U.S. national interest, and since 2001, Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan has been critical to this effort. Manas moves some 500 tons of cargo and 15,000 people per month into and out of Afghanistan.¹ In addition, there are reports that the United States and Russia may negotiate a deal that would make Russia the primary supplier of jet fuel for Manas refueling operations.² This policy is misguided and may jeopardize U.S. war efforts. The base is also a key node of America's aerial effort over Afghanistan, refueling aircraft engaged in combat operations there. Thus, independence and stability in Kyrgyzstan—and reliability of Manas—are strategic factors that U.S. policymakers should take into account.

Kyrgyzstan has seen unrest in the last few months that threatens the U.S. presence there. Ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan last month were the worst in Central Asia since 1990. The massacres resulted in hundreds dead and over 250,000 refugees. Kyrgyzstan's internal strife, coupled with Russia's growing influence in the region, should be of concern to U.S. policymakers, especially with regard to the war in Afghanistan.

Fergana Valley: Poverty, Instability, and Islamism. Kyrgyzstan is the second most impoverished country in post-Soviet Central Asia—and the least stable one. Osh and Jelalabad, where the pogroms took place, are in the Fergana Valley, which spans parts of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and southern Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyzstan population of the valley is roughly split between the two Turkic Sunni Muslim

peoples, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, and is rife with political instability and poverty. The region has porous borders, rampant drug trafficking, and growing Islamist extremism.

The Fergana-based terrorist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has worked with the Taliban and al-Qaeda to traffic Afghan drugs through Central Asia into Russia and, eventually, to the West. The IMU staged violent incursions into southern Kyrgyzstan. While Uzbekistan has proven its will to suppress Islamists with considerable force in Andijan in 2005 and beyond, Kyrgyzstan, with a substantial Uzbek population in the Fergana region, fails to deal with alienated and impoverished populations, some of whom have connections to the Islamists, drug lords, and the deposed Bakiyev clan.

Russia Opposes U.S. Presence. The United States and governments of Central Asia have a critical common interest in denying Russia increased presence and influence in the region, as well as denying terrorists and drug lords sanctuaries in Central Asia. This has to come as part of a comprehensive, long-term strategy. The current U.S. \$32 million humanitarian relief package, while laudable, is not sufficient for a long-term commitment.

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Russia played a crucial role in overthrowing the corrupt Bakiyev regime last April. Last year, Moscow promised the Kyrgyz government \$2 billion to coax Bakiyev into expelling the U.S. from Manas. When Bakiyev reneged on his promises, Russia used economic warfare, information, and covert operations to instigate anti-Bakiyev demonstrations. Russia was also concerned about Bakiyev's growing ties with China.

In April, rioting mobs brought the opposition, led by Roza Otunbayeva, to power. In June, during the Fergana Valley violence, over 260 people died, with thousands more wounded and over 250,000 refugees fleeing into Uzbekistan. The rioting illustrated the weakness of the new Kyrgyz administration, which asked for American and then Russian military assistance to put down the pogroms.³ Both refused.

President Obama put off the Kyrgyz government's call for security assistance and punted the issue to the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization. This strengthened Moscow's hand and revived a discussion about a second Russian military base in Osh, Kyrgyzstan—at the heart of the recent unrest.⁴ Nor did the Obama Administration object to the announced Russian plans for expanding its military presence in the volatile Fergana Valley.

Now, Russia once again demands a second base in Osh, which would allow Moscow to project power into the Fergana Valley and all three neighboring countries. It is an open question whether the base would help fight drug trafficking and Islamism in the region. Such a base could serve intelligence-gathering purposes, but it could also become an irritant that would attract Islamist extremists. It would certainly afford Moscow an inordinate amount of influence in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian republics.

U.S.–Russia Cooperation and Competition in Kyrgyzstan. Moscow's ultimate objective is to shore up a sphere of influence over Central Asia, keeping the U.S. there on its terms—or keeping it out altogether. The possibility of a U.S.–Russia fuel deal for Manas that make Moscow the chief fuel supplier to Manas causes particular concerns. Such a deal would allow Moscow to hold a lifeline for the important U.S. supply operation for the war effort.

In the wake of the “reset,” the Obama Administration appears eager to put aside Russia's geo-political agenda and put faith in Russia's goodwill supplying fuel to the Manas Transit Center. For years, however, Russia and China have pressured Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to remove the U.S. military presence. Their efforts came to fruition in 2005 when Uzbekistan kicked the U.S. out from the Karshi-Khanabad air base.

What the U.S. Should Do. The U.S. should continue its 18-year-old bipartisan U.S. policy to advance independence, sovereignty, and democratic development of the Eurasian states. Assisting in addressing the inter-ethnic tensions in southern Kyrgyzstan and neutralizing transnational drug-trafficking terrorist networks will help Kyrgyzstan develop credible democratic institutions and preserve U.S. presence in Manas.

The Pentagon, the State Department, and the intelligence community should bolster U.S. military, law enforcement, and government reform assistance in Kyrgyzstan and prevent Russia from controlling Manas. Thus, the U.S. should:

- Work with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to deploy police monitors to Osh and surrounding communities to oversee the restoration of law and order.

1. Army Staff Sergeant Michael J. Carden, “Manas Air Base ‘Not Irreplaceable,’ Official Says,” American Forces Press Service, February 19, 2009, at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=53156> (July 26, 2010).
2. Deirdre Tynan, “US, Russia Discussing Groundbreaking Manas Fuel-Supply Deal,” Eurasianet, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61361> (July 19, 2010).
3. Steve LeVine, “Why Isn't Anyone Taking Kyrgyzstan's Calls?,” The Oil and the Glory, June 18, 2010, at <http://oilandglory.foreignpolicy.com/?page=1> (July 26, 2010).
4. RIA Novosti, “New Russian Military Base in Kyrgyzstan Could Hamper Drugs Flow—Official,” June 24, 2010, at <http://en.rian.ru/exsoviet/20100624/159564390.html> (July 15, 2010).

- Allocate additional funds to USAID and the State Department for continued humanitarian relief and long-term assistance programs, including using market forces to rebuild housing and infrastructure.
- Coordinate assistance programs—including OSCE, the EU, the United Nations Development Program, and USAID—to reduce waste and redundancy.
- Prevent dependence on the Russian government as a dominant source of fuel supply to Manas while working with the interim administration to address concerns about transparency of the future procurement.
- Engage Black Sea and Caspian littoral states—particularly Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan—to further develop reliable and accessible routes to resupply Afghanistan. To this end, the Senate should quickly confirm Matthew Bryza as the Ambassador to Azerbaijan, while the State Department should finally designate an ambassador to Turkmenistan, a post that has been unfilled for over three years.

- Balance the reliance on Russian transit for Afghanistan with developing Northern Distribution Network supply transit alternatives in Eurasia, including Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

An Important Counterbalance. America's beneficial presence in Central Asia balances the Chinese and Russian hegemonic ambitions and prevents radical Islamists from overwhelming weak states in the region. The U.S. should improve its relationships with the Kyrgyz government, opinion makers, and the general population for the sake of helping Kyrgyzstan develop its fledging democratic institutions, improve the well-being of its citizens, prevent further ethnic violence, and support U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.

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