



US policy toward Kyrgyzstan and the closing of Manas transit center

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For years, the United States has stated that leaving the Manas transit center would be detrimental to its security mission in Afghanistan. Now that the transit center is closed, can we assess any strategic loss for the US in relation to Afghanistan? Or was that mostly a tool to secure a direct channel of communication with Kyrgyz authorities?

Emil Joroev

The transit center at Manas Airport was an important asset for the US in carrying out operations in Afghanistan, and its closure is certainly a net loss for US forces. It remains difficult to assess the significance of this loss more precisely, given that many aspects are involved: from the downsizing of the American presence in Afghanistan, to the greater costs of logistics between Afghanistan and the nearest US bases in the region, to financial gains and losses from the center closing down. With the crucial year of 2014 closing, it is now clear that the US will continue a non-trivial presence in Afghanistan, and thus holding on to the base at Manas would be a desirable asset, had it been possible.

However, the meaning of the center at Manas is said to be broader than simply supporting Western operations in Afghanistan. Another important part of the equation is the fact that, the Manas center was a channel of direct communication to authorities in Kyrgyzstan, and more importantly, provided a physical presence for the US in a region that was traditionally claimed by Russia as part of its sphere of influence.. However, this notion is even more speculative and bound to remain matter of guesses and unfounded assertions.

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Roger Kangas

The Manas Transit Center was a critical transportation and supply node for the US Department of Defense during the later period of the ISAF mission, especially after the ground lines of communication via Pakistan became less reliable. In 2011, when there were over 100,000 US troops in Afghanistan (and over 150,000 total coalition troops), Manas played a critical role. Were it to have been closed at that time, it would most likely have been detrimental to the overall security mission. However, as forces started to depart from 2011-onward, accelerating in 2013 and 2014, the necessity of Manas naturally decreased. When the handover of the transit center took place in June 2014, the US/ISAF forces remaining in Afghanistan could state that their supply and transit needs were being sufficiently managed by other routes.

Interestingly, the Manas Transit Center became a channel of communication with the Kyrgyz authorities over time, but that was not its initial intent. The US embassy in Bishkek generally has had good ties with the government of Kyrgyzstan—from the Akayev presidency to the present—and prior to 2001, relations focused largely on non-security matters. The establishment of the Ganci Air Base (shortly thereafter renamed the Manas Air Base) in December 2001, became a way in which the Kyrgyz government could support the US missions in Afghanistan—Operation Enduring Freedom and the ISAF mission. Over time, as this particular link strengthened and the facility expanded, it became a more important component of the US-Kyrgyz relationship.

This had both positive and negative aspects. It created jobs for locals and infused a significant amount of money into the local economy and also enhanced a US security presence in the country. On the other hand, from 2005-onward, the government in Bishkek endured intense pressure from fellow Collective Security Treaty Organization and Shanghai Cooperation Organization members—especially Russia and China—to close the base for geopolitical reasons. Controversies surrounding the base fuel con-

tracts and rumors of the base's true purpose only added to the tensions.

These unintended consequences of the base's presence had an adverse effect on US-Kyrgyz relations and the embassy found itself having to focus more on those matters than it otherwise would have liked. In June 2009, the Manas Air Base was renamed the "Manas Transit Center" to diminish any concern that the facility was permanent and to focus on its' primary function: the supply and support of the missions in Afghanistan. In spite of that, the facility's presence remained a point of contention with the Kyrgyz leadership and population and consequently a less effective means of communication between the two governments.

Erica Marat

As the United States made it clear in negotiating the 2014 contract on the Manas base, its strategic value was its proximity to Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of US and NATO troops passed through the base each month. The base also served as a refueling site for military aircraft. Withdrawal of the base complicated transit and refueling procedures for coalition troops.

Given the change of strategic paradigm linked to the Ukrainian crisis, does the closure of the Manas transit center endanger Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty and its strategic room of manoeuvre toward Russia and China?

Emil Joroev

Had the transit center not been closed, it would most likely have contributed to the anxiety and a high level of perceived risks in Kyrgyzstan vis-à-vis Moscow. The Ukrainian crisis has, for a moment, accentuated that potential and brought real negative "consequences" related to non-compliance with Russian regional interests. The Kyrgyzstan government initially voiced support for Ukrainian self-determination and state integrity, only to learn that such free expression was not welcomed by their "strategic partners." The continued presence of the

Manas transit center would not have significantly changed the path of recent developments for Kyrgyzstan. The consequences could affect Kyrgyzstan in either negative or positive ways; as a bulwark for Kyrgyzstan's independence, but also as a particular irritant for Moscow, thereby leading to real diversionary action from Kremlin.

In general, possibly due to the weakness of Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy circles, the transit center was never a serious asset in the country's relationship with others. The history of the Kyrgyz-US partnership over the base suggests that Bishkek always wished the base to be a little-noticed, quiet cash source; instead, it persisted—especially since 2005—in being one of the top issues with Bishkek-Washington and especially Bishkek-Moscow relations. Regardless of the the transit center, Bishkek never thought of America as a committed partner for Kyrgyzstan's difficulties with either Beijing or Moscow.

Roger Kangas

Kyrgyzstan has experienced pressure from Russia and China for much of the past decade—especially because of the Transit Center's presence. With the US no longer militarily present in the country, these pressures remain, albeit now focused on the need of Kyrgyzstan to remain within the security and economic orbits of these larger countries. At present, it is unclear as to whether Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the crisis between those two countries will be repeated in Central Asia.

Ukraine, and Georgia before it, expressed interests in establishing stronger ties with Western economic and security organizations. The countries of Central Asia have much different relations with Russia and it would seem at present that there is little danger in these countries, including Kyrgyzstan, which would raise similar concerns for Russia. Interestingly, any concern that Russia had with the Manas Transit Center was counter-balanced with the enhancement of the Kant Air Base, located not far from Bishkek. This facility, which is technically a contribution of the Kyrgyz government to

the CSTO, remained a perceived rival to Manas, although the missions were fundamentally different. The US-supported Transit Center would not have been a factor to Kyrgyzstan becoming further engaged with Russia, militarily or through other organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union.

Erica Marat

By ending US military presence, Kyrgyzstan significantly decreased its space to maneuver among other regional powers. Bishkek is now faced with the challenge of balancing between Russia and China, with the Kremlin often taking a more aggressive posture towards achieving its goals, as seen in Ukraine and Crimea. For the foreseeable future, Russia's political influence will overshadow China's economic pull. Over the next decade, however, China's economic presence in Kyrgyzstan might translate into political influence as well.

The closure of the Manas transit center is also, and maybe above all, an economic loss for Kyrgyzstan. Do you think this financial aspect is a 'push factor', for the Kyrgyz authorities, to favor their country's membership in the Eurasian Union?

Emil Joroev

There have not been any studies that tried to assess the direct implications of the transit center closure for Kyrgyzstan's aspirations to join the Eurasian Union. Financially, the closure of the center was certainly a major fallout in Kyrgyzstan's budget—something that the government should have known long in advance and prepared for but generally did not. Cash-strapped, Kyrgyzstan's leadership looked out for sources to compensate the hole, and Moscow has come out generally as the default address. Moscow's support, however, has been tied to Kyrgyzstan's staying the course toward joining the Customs and then the Eurasian Economic unions.

Thus, in a situation lacking viable alternatives, the closure of the base was of course one of "push factors" for Kyrgyzstan toward

the Eurasian union integration. However, it would be too strong to suggest this as the decisive or otherwise commanding factor for Kyrgyzstan's ever-growing pivot toward Moscow. Had Kyrgyzstan had a serious and realistic option of staying out of these integration processes, it possibly would choose so. However, for many eminent reasons (all generally revolving around the many "buttons" that Kremlin holds for hurting Kyrgyzstan), that is not viewed as a viable option by the Kyrgyz leadership.

Roger Kangas

The economic loss experienced by the closure of the Manas Transit Center is two-fold. First, there are the direct revenues acquired by the base itself. These range from the payments to the government of Kyrgyzstan for the usage of the actual Manas Airport runways, payments for the property and other in-kind remunerations, as well as the salaries for the hundreds of locals who worked on the base. Even the money spent by US and other personnel during their stay in the country itself will be a real loss.

There is a second form of "economic loss" to the country: a few years ago, the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) conducted a study that showed when US troops leave a country following a mission, the amount of total US support for that country declines by 30-60 percent. Now, that report focused on countries at war, or where there was a peace-keeping mission following a conflict. Kyrgyzstan does not fit that category, but because the Manas Transit Center function was combat-related, there could very well be residual effects for the country in terms of how the US government proceeds to engage with Kyrgyzstan.

Policy officials and analysts note how "deseccuritizing" US engagement in Central Asia broadly will result in less government assistance going to the region. Indeed, the FY15 budget and the anticipated FY16 budgets show a decline in funding to the region. Moreover, one could even see an element of punitive behavior with respect to Kyrgyz-

stan: a desire to cut off military assistance, programs, engagement, and other forms of bilateral activity simply as a reaction to the transit center being closed down.

These factors, however, are most likely negligible in the range of issues that the Kyrgyz government has to evaluate when enhancing its ties to, and potentially within, the Eurasian Economic Union. Kyrgyz workers in Russia, energy transfers, broader regional trade, and other issues are more relevant to President Atambayev's decision to enhance his country's standing within the Eurasian Economic Union.

Erica Marat

The closure of the Manas base has had a significant impact on Kyrgyzstan's economy. Bishkek has lost roughly \$150 million in annual payments. But this will not be the main push factor affecting a decision by Kyrgyzstan's authorities about joining the Eurasian Union. Russia's constant demand to limit the US presence on Kyrgyzstan continues to be the main factor.

Can the US counterbalance the closure of Manas by a different type of engagement in Kyrgyzstan? Will the security focus be progressively replaced by an emphasis on economic development, human capital, or rule of law?

Emil Joroev

Does the United States have sufficient strategic or economic interests to try and save its relationship with Kyrgyzstan without the transit center? Generally, the answer has been negative, and for plausible reasons. Kyrgyzstan is too little, politically too fickle (especially in its promise of democratization), and increasingly under the spell of Russia. The cost that the US would incur to salvage the relationship do not seem worth it for the US to become a serious option for Kyrgyzstan's great-power friends. The US is not likely to match Russia's investments or interest in Kyrgyzstan..

If it were possible, the United States' close engagement with Kyrgyzstan would be desirable for both sides for various reasons. In the larger line of confrontation or differences with Russia, maintaining a positive and strong relationship with Bishkek would be an asset for US foreign policy. For Kyrgyzstan, such engagement would be one fledgling hope to withstand the tight hug of Russia. But as noted above, better/strong Bishkek-Washington links can cause more serious complications for Bishkek-Moscow relations, and officials in Bishkek certainly do not wish to have such complications.

In considering this question, it is also helpful to unpack Kyrgyzstan, which is not an internally coordinated actor, but a society, where the government is joined by a largely pro-Russian general population, the active civil society groups sharply divided along pro-Russian/anti-US and vice-versa positions, and pro-democracy groups for whom maintenance of active American presence in Kyrgyzstan's public life and development is an important. The balance of all these different quarters seems to tilt in favor of Russia, which further makes it difficult for the United States to break a new and more viable route to strong engagement with Kyrgyzstan.

Roger Kangas

This question gets to the very heart of what the United States should or can do in Central Asia now that the ISAF mission in Afghanistan is coming to an end. Since 2001, the US has viewed the Central Asian states largely through the lens of "security," specifically "Afghan security." Even though a US military presence will remain in Afghanistan for the near future, as part of the Resolute Support Mission, Central Asia will most likely be less relevant to US decision-making regarding it. Add to this changing dynamic the reduction in US foreign assistance overall, as noted earlier, one can logically conclude that there will not be a capacity to increase engagement in other non-security areas.

In the future, the Manas Transit Center may be seen as an aberration in terms of US

commitment to, and support of, the Kyrgyz government. Removing all expenditures related to that mission from the broader scope of US-Kyrgyz relations, shows a consistent, but modest engagement by the US government. In the 1990s, programs focusing on democratization, human rights and economic privatization were well-represented. Today, it is less likely that the Kyrgyz government would welcome such efforts. As with nearly all post-Soviet states, discussing political freedoms and human rights are less well-received today. The challenge for the US Embassy in Bishkek and the US officials who engage with Kyrgyzstan is how best to use the limited resources available to ensure that the US has an effective and positive presence in the country.

Erica Marat

Perhaps the United State's greatest strength is its soft power capability. The US can retain its influence in Kyrgyzstan by expanding educational exchange programs for high school and university students, as well as for mid-career professionals. The programs must focus on a wide variety of areas, including the humanities, economics, policy studies, security, media, health care, and the natural sciences. To date, some of the programs financed by US government agencies and NGOs have succeeded in building the capacity of local journalists, teachers, government employees and security experts.

Furthermore, the US can work with local entrepreneurs by sharing international experience with doing business in other developing economies. Specifically, the United States can help facilitate communication, introduce Kyrgyz entrepreneurs to their counterparts in neighboring countries, and provide education about investment strategies.

Finally, the US must help countries like Kyrgyzstan develop informational independence. That is, countries need outside assistance to establish and support media outlets that would offer alternatives to Kremlin-controlled coverage of current affairs. Today, the majority of the Kyrgyz public, in-

cluding top political leaders, is overwhelmingly under the influence of Russian media. Outlets like RFE/RL and Voice of America are good alternatives, but they are not sufficient. Because it relies on local independent reporting, RFE/RL in particular must be further expanded to include TV and radio broadcasts. It should broaden its coverage of regional and international affairs as well.

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