



IMAGE — Photo by Staff Sgt. Travis Edwards, U.S. Air Force/Released

US Transit Center at Manas

NATIONS INVOLVED: Kyrgyz Republic; Russian Federation;
the United States of America

TIME PERIOD: 2001 – 2014

THEMATIC AREA: Economic leverage

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2001, the United States established a strategic air base at the Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan to support its military operation in Afghanistan. In return, Kyrgyzstan received at least USD 318 million in direct investment and additional indirect financial and non-financial benefits from the US.

Russia, however, was wary of a long-term US military presence in the region, and tried to exert pressure on Kyrgyzstan to close the Transit Center. The Russian government made generous offers of financial and economic assistance, while simultaneously exerting diplomatic pressure on the Kyrgyz government. The Russian media focused extensively on supposed negative impacts of the Transit Center at Manas. Russian pressure on Kyrgyzstan would likely have been much stronger from the beginning, had it not been for the US-Russian dialogue in the wake of the Global War on Terror (2001) and the US-Russian grand ‘reset’ attempt (2009).

Kyrgyz public opinion grew increasingly critical of the US military presence in the country. Using increasing Russian pressure and growing anti-American public opinion in Kyrgyzstan as bargaining chips, the Kyrgyz government managed to considerably increase US payments. The Transit Center at Manas (TCM) was eventually closed in 2014.

KEY POINTS

- While Russia used primarily economic instruments as leverage, this was integrated with political, diplomatic measures and informational means to exert influence. Identifying and countering any threat vector requires the capability to assess adversarial activity across the **full spectrum of national instruments**.
- Economically vulnerable states should pursue **long-term strategies that minimise their economic vulnerabilities** or be prepared to accept risk on their national security interests. Earning “easy cash” without further positive implications can escalate into further economic and political dependence on external powers.
- It is highly likely that public opinion was a significant factor in the closure of the base. If a country is assessed to be vulnerable to outside influence, every effort should be made to **identify, understand and influence those key target audiences** who may hold the balance on domestic consent for any given national policy.

SUMMARY

In 2001, the US established an air base¹ at Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan as an air mobility hub to support Operation Enduring Freedom – Afghanistan (OEF-A). This base was of strategic importance to the US and its allies, with responsibility for the aerial refuelling of coalition aircraft, airlift of supplies and equipment, movement of coalition personnel and building partnerships with the Kyrgyz population.² More than 5.3 million US servicemen and other allied troops transiting through Manas to and from Afghanistan, and more than 33,000 refuelling missions were supported by the Transit Center before the facility was closed in 2014.

Kyrgyzstan received significant remuneration for the lease, securing USD 318 million in direct investment,³ as well as indirect financial and non-financial benefits. Russia, however, was actively pressuring Kyrgyzstan to close to the Manas Transit Center, wary of a long-term US military presence in the region. This pressure would have been much more severe had it not been for Russia's support of the US 'War on Terror' initiated in 2001 and the US - Russia 'reset' attempt under the Obama administration in 2009.

Russia used a range of means to exert pressure onto Kyrgyzstan, employing measures of both reward and punishment. Offers of financial and economic assistance were intertwined with verbal threats to restrict US-Kyrgyz relations, especially concerning economic cooperation. Russia also attempted to shift Kyrgyz public opinion against the US facility, in particular through Russian media channels, which focused extensively on accidents related to the base and frequently fabricated or exaggerated negative aspects of the Transit Center.

In 2009, the Kyrgyz government announced its intention to close the center, a decision which coincided with a generous Russian pledge of USD 2 billion credit and USD 150 million worth of financial assistance. However, Kyrgyzstan reversed this decision three months later after the US agreed to renegotiate the lease agreement. The annual lease price was tripled (from USD 17.4 million to USD 60 million), accompanied by additional pledges of US investment.⁴

Kyrgyzstan was thus caught in an apparent dilemma between US and Russian assistance. For over a decade, the Kyrgyz government balanced these opposing pressures with some success. Successive Kyrgyz Presidents used the increasing Russian pressure and growing anti-American public opinion in Kyrgyzstan as bargaining chips in their efforts to increase US payments. However, mostly as a result of rampant corruption prevalent in

¹ The facility was originally called Ganci Air Base, then Manas Air Base, and renamed Manas Transit Center in 2009.

² Transit Center at Manas (archived), "Library," 5 August 2012, accessed via <https://web.archive.org/web/20120805164645/http://www.manas.afcent.af.mil/library/index.asp>

³ As estimated by: Akbota Akylbayeva, "Military Cooperation between the United States and Kyrgyzstan: the Case of the Manas Airbase," Weekly E-Bulletin no. 51, Eurasian Research Institute, 19-25 January 2016, http://www.ayu.edu.tr/static/aae_haftalik/aae_bulten_en_51.pdf

⁴ 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, 13 May 2009, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/130490.pdf>

the national government, Kyrgyzstan failed to use this cash injection to minimise its economic vulnerabilities. In 2011, Almazbek Atambayev was elected President in Kyrgyzstan, and subsequently fulfilled his campaign promise to close the Manas Transit Center, which had grown increasingly unpopular among the Kyrgyz population.

The US tried to delay the closure of the center for as long as possible. Although the facility was costly, it provided much safer and more reliable access to Afghanistan than the routes available through Pakistan. However, this increase in funding, along with diplomatic efforts and direct engagement with the population, was not sufficient to counter intense Russian pressure on the Kyrgyz government. The closure in 2014 coincided with the loss of the Northern Distribution Network (the transit corridor passing through Russia and Central Asia to Afghanistan) and the decline of US – Russia relations in the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea and destabilisation of eastern Ukraine.



A US Navy F/A-18 Hornet Strikefighter receives fuel from a 22nd Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron KC-135 Stratotanker over Afghanistan in 2010. IMAGE – US Air Force photo/Senior Airman Nichelle Anderson/release.



Cargo reloading at the Transit Center at Manas in 2014. IMAGE – US Air Force: LtCol Max Despain.

CONTEXT

Kyrgyzstan: Recent History

After the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, Kyrgyzstan gained independence along with the other Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Unlike the majority of other territories controlled by the Soviet Union, it had no previous status as an independent nation prior to gaining independence in 1991. Kyrgyzstan's borders were drawn by the Soviet authorities' effort to match the ethnic lines (its current borders can be traced back to 1924 when the Kara-Kirgiz Autonomous Region was formed). There were no physical borders within the Soviet Union, allowing further territorial entanglement of various ethnic groups, particularly with Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. This was a key factor in the deadly ethnic conflicts in the independence period, including the 2010 clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the southern part of the country, which resulted in at least 200 deaths and the displacement of more than 400,000 people.⁵

Like all Soviet territories, Kyrgyzstan was subject to Soviet policies of collectivisation, Russification, and economic integration with the wider USSR. These policies left a legacy of Russian language and by extension, consumption of Russian-language mass media, as well as close political and economic links with Russia. As a result, Kyrgyzstan has traditionally been seen a "satellite-country" of Russia. It is a member of the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).



⁵ BBC, "Q&A: Kyrgyzstan's Ethnic Violence," 24 June 2010, <http://www.bbc.com/news/10313948>

Progress of Democratisation

Compared to other Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan has performed relatively well in terms of democracy and openness. Freedom House raised the country's status from "not free" to "partly free" in 2014.⁶ In the last two decades, two presidents were forced to leave their office amid public unrest – Askar Akayev in 2005 (the "Tulip Revolution") and Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010 ("The Second Kyrgyz Revolution").

However, the World Press Freedom Index rated Kyrgyzstan as "problematic" in 2002 and 2014.⁷ The Organisation for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) reported in 2012 that the majority of Kyrgyz media "violated core principles and standards of quality and ethical journalism," although these violations "are not always intentional, but [...] a result of incompetence, lack of a clear system of quality control in the editorial offices and lack of editorial policy. At the same time, a significant factor in the quality of information in the media was the fact that it belongs to a particular political group."⁸

Kyrgyz Economy

Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries in the region: its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was a mere USD 308 in 2001; in 2014 it grew to USD 1,279.⁹ A significant part of the economy is comprised of remittances from Kyrgyz workers working in Russia. Remittances constituted only 0.3 per cent of the GDP in 2001, but made up 30 per cent of the GDP in 2014.¹⁰

Kyrgyzstan has been heavily economically dependent on Russia, but Chinese economic influence has been growing in recent years. In 2014, the main export market was Switzerland (30.6 per cent of the total share; gold as the predominant export commodity), ahead of Kazakhstan (27.0 per cent), with Russia as 5th with 6.5 per cent, and the US 26th with 0.1 per cent. The trade balance has been constantly negative as imports were three times as high as exports. In terms of import partners, in 2014, Russia came first (31.0 per cent), China second (19.2 per cent) and Kazakhstan third (13.5 per cent), whereas the US ranked 10th with (1.9 per cent).¹¹

The global financial crisis of 2008 and the resulting economic downturn had a significant negative effect on Kyrgyzstan: many Kyrgyz migrant workers were forced to return home, and the country suffered from energy shortages for several winters.¹² Public discontent over economic difficulties, as well as growing frustration with the corrupt elite, led to an uprising against the government in 2010.¹³

⁶ Freedom House, "Kyrgyzstan," 2015, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/kyrgyzstan>

⁷ Reporters without Borders, "Reporters Without Borders Publishes the First Worldwide Press Freedom Index (October 2002)," <https://rsf.org/en/reporters-without-borders-publishes-first-worldwide-press-freedom-index-october-2002>; Reporters Without Borders, "World Press Freedom Index 2014," <https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index-2014>

⁸ Bakyt Orunbekov, Kubat Cherkov, and Elmira Toktogulova, "Monitoring and Content Analysis of Ethical Standards in Print and Online Media of Kyrgyzstan," Bishkek: OSCE, 2012, 3, <http://www.osce.org/bishkek/98786?download=true>

⁹ The World Bank Group, "GDP per Capita (current US\$)," 2017, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=KG>

¹⁰ The World Bank Group, "Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)," 2017, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=KG>

¹¹ Национальный статистический комитет Кыргызской Республики, "Внешняя торговля Кыргызской Республики 2011-2015: статистический сборник," 2017, <http://stat.kg/media/publicationarchive/43b7c0ce-f35a-41ea-b40a-ec254bfb57c7.pdf>

¹² Jim Nichol, "Kyrgyzstan and the Status of the US Manas Airbase: Context and Implications," Congressional Research Service, 1 July 2009, 7, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40564.pdf>

¹³ Deidre Tyn an Kadyr Toktogulov, Kadyr Toktogulov, and Yochi J. Dreazen, "Violent Revolt Ousts Kyrgyz President," The Wall Street Journal, 8 April 2010, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304505204575169273901877794?mod=WSJ_latestheadlines

Kyrgyzstan

Population	4.95 million (2001 estimate) ¹⁴ 5.78 million (2014 estimate)
Ethnic Groups	Kyrgyz (4.19 million or 72.6 per cent) Uzbeks (0.84 million or 14.47 per cent) Russians (0.37 million or 6.4 per cent) Dungans (65.000 or 1.12 per cent) Uighurs (53.000 or 0.91 per cent) Tajiks (50.000 or 0.87 per cent) Turks and other nationalities (41.000 or 0.71 per cent) ¹⁵
Official Languages	Kyrgyz (the “state language”; Kyrgyz is a Turkic language, although the Cyrillic alphabet is used in its writing) Russian (official language; the country is generally bilingual, as Russian is widespread in the public)
Neighbouring States	China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (relations with Uzbekistan are distrustful, leading to occasional border disputes).
Kyrgyz Presidents (since independence)	Askar Akayev (1990-2005), Independent Kurmanbek Bakiyev (2005-2010), People’s Movement of Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambayev (2011-2017), Social Democratic Party

Transit Center Mission

The Transit Center was located at the Manas International Airport, a civilian installation located 20 km north of the capital, Bishkek. The US base shared the airport’s 4,200 metre runway, which had been designed to accommodate Soviet bombers.¹⁶ Temporary accommodation for 2,000 personnel was built next to the airport, which was later replaced by more substantial, permanent structures and complemented by recreational facilities such as gyms, cafes and a library.¹⁷

The base was created in order to support the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan; its primary operating unit was the 376th Air Expeditionary Wing.¹⁸ In addition to the US, several other troop contributing nations to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) signed agreements with Kyrgyzstan in order to use the base. The Transit Center at Manas became one of the busiest US Air Force installations worldwide, with nearly all US personnel entering or exiting Afghanistan transiting through Kyrgyzstan. On average, 1,200 to 3,500 coalition troops passed through Manas every day, and between 6 and 13 million pounds of cargo passed through the base every single month.¹⁹

¹⁴ The World Bank Group, “Population, Total,” 2017, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=KG>

¹⁵ National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, “Total Population by Nationality (Assessment at the Beginning of the Year, People),” 2017, <http://www.stat.kg/en/.opendata/category/312/>

¹⁶ Kemel Toktomushev, “Regime Security, Base Politics and Rent-Seeking: the Local and Global Political Economies of the American Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, 2001-2010,” *Central American Survey* 34, no. 1 (2015): 59.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Hays, “Manas Air Base and the U.S. Military in Kyrgyzstan,” *Facts and Details*, last updated 2016, http://factsanddetails.com/central-asia/Kyrgyzstan/sub8_5d/entry-4793.html

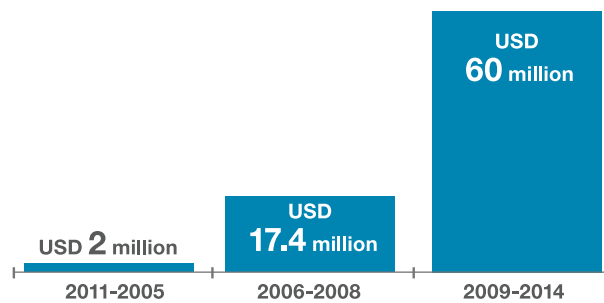
¹⁸ The 376th Air Expeditionary Wing was responsible for providing air combat power projection, including tactical airlift and air refuelling, principally in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. The wing also served as a hub for strategic airlift operations and as an immediate staging base for transiting personnel and equipment in support of operations in Afghanistan.

¹⁹ Kemel Toktomushev, “Regime Security, Base Politics and Rent-Seeking: the Local and Global Political Economies of the American Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, 2001-2010,” *Central American Survey* 34, no. 1 (2015): 58.

Although the route via Kyrgyzstan was considerably longer and more expensive than the supply routes through Pakistan, it was safer and more reliable. The US was keen to reduce its dependence on ground lines of communication through Pakistan, as these routes were frequently attacked by militant groups and were temporarily suspended by the Pakistani government on several occasions. The base in Kyrgyzstan became especially important to the US after it was forced to vacate its Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base in Uzbekistan in 2005. These circumstances considerably increased the Kyrgyz government's bargaining power.

Lease Payments

The US paid substantial amounts of money for the Transit Center. The Kyrgyz government negotiated with the US to increase payments from the agreed annual payment of USD 2 million to USD 17.4 million in 2006, increasing to USD 60 million annually from 2009.²⁰ In addition to these lease payments, the airport company collected a fee of USD 7,000 for every take-off and landing, and all of the fuel had to be bought locally. In addition to these direct payments for the Transit Center, the US also provided various forms of assistance to Kyrgyzstan. During the 2009 negotiations, this additional assistance totalled USD 150 million, including infrastructure improvements, economic development, and counter-terrorism initiatives.²¹ Overall, the Transit Center at Manas contributed about USD 40 million per year to the Kyrgyz economy from its first year, and employed around 500 Kyrgyz nationals in various supporting roles.²²



Annual US Lease Payments to Kyrgyzstan

Corruption

Corruption remains one of the most pervasive domestic problems in Kyrgyzstan.²³ The US payments for the Transit Center were no exception – most of the money was siphoned off by the regime and never reached the Kyrgyz population. The majority of funding related to the base did not go to national agencies, but instead flowed to private companies with close links to the Kyrgyz government. Manas International Airport, which collected the lease payments and the landing fees, was owned by President Akayev's son Aydar. Moreover, Akayev's son-in-law Adil Toiganbayev was the owner of Aalam Services Ltd., one of the two main companies subcontracted to provide fuel to the Transit Center.^{24,25} A subsequent investigation by the FBI discovered that the Akayev clan had embezzled tens of millions of dollars of these US payments through a network of offshore accounts.²⁶ Sim-

²⁰ Scott Radnitz, "Memories of Manas: What Central Asia Taught America about Geopolitics," *The National Interest*, 30 June 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/memories-manas-what-central-asia-taught-america-about-10782>

²¹ Jim Nichol, "Kyrgyzstan and the Status of the US Manas Airbase: Context and Implications," *Congressional Research Service*, 1 July 2009, 1, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40564.pdf>

²² Alexander Cooley, "Manas Matters: The Changing Politics of the U.S. Military Base in Kyrgyzstan," *CSIS*, 8 December 2006, 2, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ponars-policy-memo-423-manas-matters-changing-politics-us-military-base-kyrgyzstan>

²³ International Republican Institute, "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Kyrgyzstan," conducted on 4-21 February 2014 by Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization. <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2014%20May%2014%20Public%20Opinion%20Survey%20Residents%20of%20Kyrgyzstan%2C%20February%204-21%2C%202014.pdf>

²⁴ Alexander Cooley, "Manas Matters: The Changing Politics of the U.S. Military Base in Kyrgyzstan," *CSIS*, 8 December 2006, 2.

²⁵ Reed Livergood, "Afghanistan Conundrum: Logistical Support Options after the Manas Airbase Closing," *American Diplomacy*, May 2009, http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2009/0406/comm/livergood_afghanistan.html

²⁶ Alexander Cooley, "Manas Matters: The Changing Politics of the U.S. Military Base in Kyrgyzstan," *CSIS*, 8 December 2006, 2.

ilarly, President Bakiyev's regime managed to secure the lucrative base-related payments as a source of rent.²⁷ Technically, these contracts did not violate any US laws or procedures,²⁸ but the lack of transparency in these financial transactions had a significant impact on domestic political discourse. Ultimately, these incidents contributed to public frustration with corruption, which was a key factor in the uprisings of 2005 and 2010 that saw the removal of Presidents Akayev and Bakiyev from office.

Negative Media Reporting

In addition to the corruption scandals, the Transit Center at Manas received negative media coverage on a number of other occasions. In December 2006, an American soldier shot and killed a Kyrgyz truck driver at a checkpoint at the air base, claiming he was threatened with a knife. Statements of a US spokesperson and the soldier involved were unconvincing to local civil rights activists – the knife was found 20 metres from the shooting scene, and observers suggested further investigation was required.²⁹ However, the US government transferred the soldier out of the country, preventing Kyrgyzstan from bringing him to trial. This incident, which provoked outrage among the population, was widely covered by both Kyrgyz and Russian media.³⁰

Occasional accidents, including the collision of an American Stratotanker with the presidential airliner³¹ and concerns about pollution, in particular rumours of US jets dumping surplus fuel over Kyrgyz territory,³² added to public scrutiny. Furthermore, there were reports of illegal drug smuggling from Afghanistan to Europe via Manas, as well as accusations of wire-tapping linked to the Transit Center.³³

²⁷ Kemel Toktomushev, "Regime Security, Base Politics and Rent-Seeking: the Local and Global Political Economies of the American Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, 2001-2010," *Central American Survey* 34, no. 1 (2015): 57.

²⁸ Alexander Cooley, "Manas Matters: The Changing Politics of the U.S. Military Base in Kyrgyzstan," *CSIS*, 8 December 2006, 2.

²⁹ Kemel Toktomushev, "Regime Security, Base Politics and Rent-Seeking: the Local and Global Political Economies of the American Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, 2001-2010," *Central American Survey* 34, no. 1 (2015): 59.

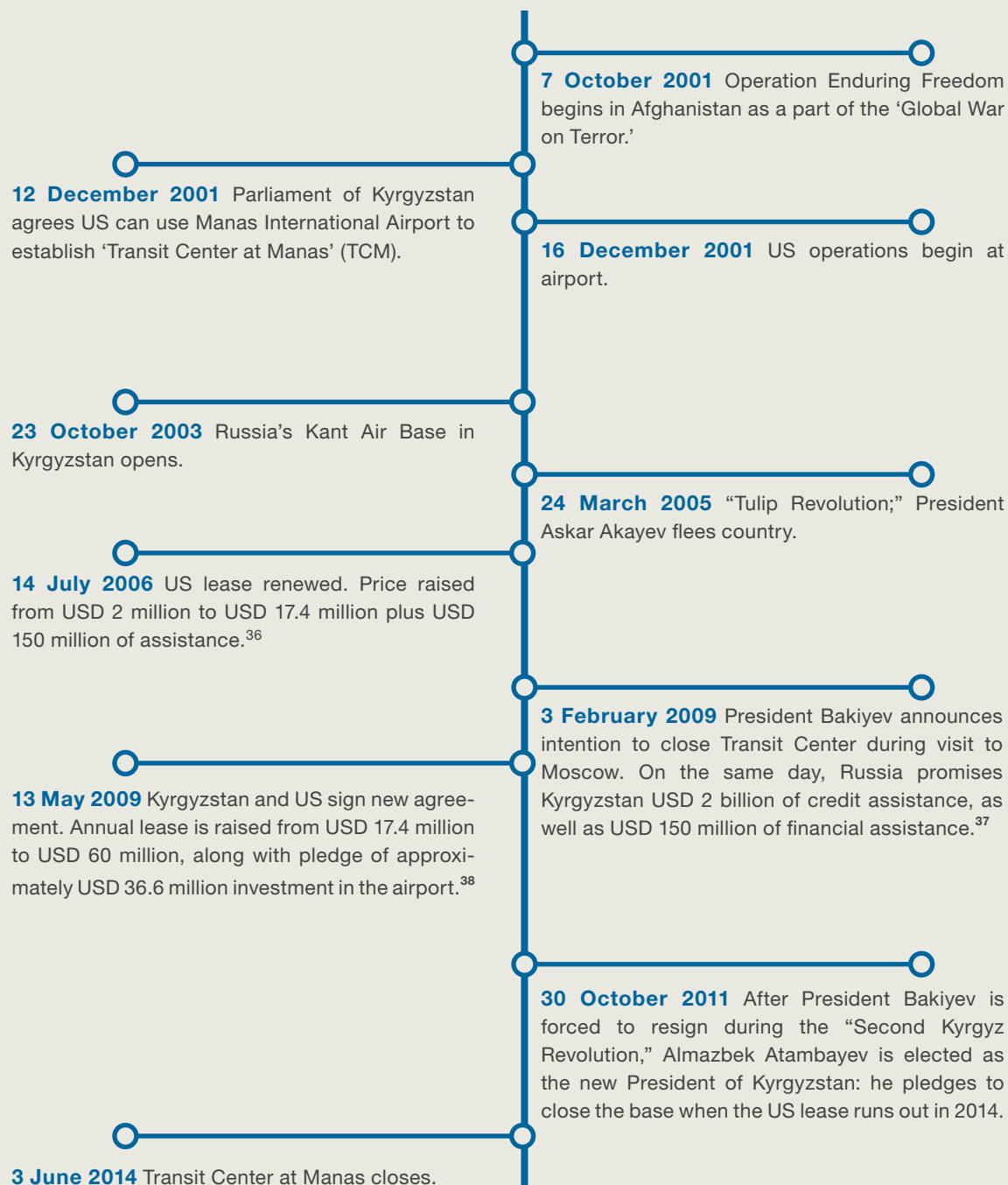
³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Scott Radnitz, "Memories of Manas: What Central Asia Taught America about Geopolitics," *The National Interest*, 30 June 2014.

³³ Kemel Toktomushev, "Regime Security, Base Politics and Rent-Seeking: the Local and Global Political Economies of the American Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, 2001-2010," *Central American Survey* 34, no. 1 (2015): 59.

Timeline of Key Events³⁴



³⁴ A more detailed timeline can be found in the Appendix.

³⁵ US Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, "Joint Statement by the United States and the Kyrgyz Republic on Coalition Airbase," 14 July 2006, http://bishkek.usembassy.gov/july_14_joint_statement_on_coalition_airbase.html

³⁶ РИА Новости, "Президент Киргизии благодарен России за кредит и финансовую помощь," 3 February 2009, <https://ria.ru/politics/20090203/160884247.html>

³⁷ 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, 13 May 2009, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/130490.pdf>

Kyrgyz Government Narratives

- **Kyrgyzstan receives substantive economic advantages from allowing the US to use the Manas facilities (since 2001).**
- **The US needs to provide more economic incentives if it wants to continue using the Manas facility (since 2006).**
- **Kyrgyzstan needs Russia politically and economically, therefore Russia’s interests have to be respected (since 2011).**

Askar Akayev, President (1991-2005), in power when the US base at Manas was opened

12 December 2001: The decision to approve the US request is “a wonderful chance for us [...] to receive a new air-control system, modernize our technology, and turn Manas into a first-class, safe airport.”³⁸



Kurmanbek Bakiyev, President (2005-2010), announced the closure of the US base while visiting Moscow in 2009 (the decision was later reverted)

3 February 2009: “Kyrgyzstan will close the US military base in Manas after Washington refused to negotiate better compensation.”³⁹



Almazbek Atambayev, President (2011-2017), fulfilled his campaign promise to close the US base

21 May 2013: “I am absolutely convinced that in a civilian airport there should be no military base.”⁴⁰



Bakyt Beshimov, leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party, opposed the closing of the Transit Center

February 2009: “Both the Manas Airbase and the Russian base in 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.”⁴¹



Topchubek Turgunaliyev, prominent human rights advocate

February 2009: “Our relations will get worse not only with the United States, but with many Western countries” He further argued that Kyrgyzstan maintained a balanced foreign policy by hosting both the US airbase and the Russian Kant airbase, and that if one of these airbases was closed, so should the other.⁴²



³⁸ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Newslines – December 12, 2001,” 12 December 2001, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1142578.html>

³⁹ Reuters, “Kyrgyzstan to Close Key U.S. Mile,” 3 February 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-usa-base/kyrgyzstan-to-close-key-u-s-military-base-idUSTRE5124ZT20090203>

⁴⁰ Шералиева Мадина, K-News, “Алмазбек Атамбаев: По выводу ЦТП из аэропорта “Манас” парламенту осталось только принять закон,” 21 May 2013, <http://knews.kg/2013/05/almazbek-atambaev-po-vyvodu-tstp-iz-aeroporta-manas-parlamentu-ostalos-tolko-prinyat-zakon/>

⁴¹ Jim Nichol, “Kyrgyzstan and the Status of the US Manas Airbase: Context and Implications,” *Congressional Research Service*, 1 July 2009, 6, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40564.pdf>

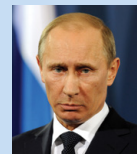
⁴² Ibid.

Russian Government Narratives

- The base at Manas is destabilising regional security.
- The US has hidden and hostile intentions concerning the base.
- For Kyrgyzstan, closer cooperation with the US will not outperform economic cooperation with Russia.
- Kyrgyzstan needs to choose between the US and Russia.

Vladimir Putin, President (2000-2008, 2012-incumbent), Prime Minister (1999-2000, 2008-2012)

23 October 2003: “We support the efforts of the international community in the war on terrorism, in this case in Afghanistan, and support the efforts of our American partners. [...] But the base at Manas was designed to solve tasks in Afghanistan, and the Russian base in Kant to ensure security for Kyrgyzstan itself and the Kyrgyz people, to ensure the interests of CST countries in the zone of their responsibility, including Russia.”⁴³



Dmitry Medvedev, President (2008-2012), Prime Minister (since 2012)

2 March 2009: “The base existed for eight years. That was not [initially] really agreed. But in the end, it is their [Kyrgyzstan’s] competence, and they made this decision.”⁴⁴



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

22 February 2012: “It cannot be excluded that this facility [Manas Transit Center] could be used in a potential conflict with Iran [...]. Concerns related to a danger being dragged into an armed conflict are not felt only in Kyrgyzstan, where polemics about a possible retaliatory strike from Iran on the US base in Manas have unfolded, but also in other Central Asian countries.”⁴⁵



Russian State Media

5 April 2009: Россия (*Rossiya*) broadcasts a documentary entitled, “Special Correspondent. Base. Film of Arkadiy Mamontov,” which presents:



- Americans as “colonizers”;
- Killing a local in 2006;
- Americans supposedly dumping fuel into the air;
- Large-scale international electronic spying from Manas;
- Impudence of American personnel;
- Drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Europe via the base.⁴⁶

Независимая газета (Nezavisimaya gazeta)

5 June 2014: “...twelve-and-a-half years of foreign troops presence, painful incidents, corruption scandals and ‘strengthening of American-Kyrgyz friendship’.”⁴⁷



⁴³ Vladimir Putin, “Press Statement on the Results of the Visit to Kyrgyzstan,” Kremlin, 23 October 2003, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22170>

⁴⁴ Лымарь Антон, 24.kg, “Дмитрий Медведев: Надо уважать решение кыргызских властей о закрытии авиабазы “Манас”,” 2 March 2009, <https://24.kg/archive/ru/politic/47020-2009/03/02/107701.html/>

⁴⁵ Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, “Брифинг официального представителя МИД России А.К.Лукашевича, 22 февраля 2012 года,” 22 February 2012, http://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/796740

⁴⁶ Россия, Специальный корреспондент. База. Фильм Аркадия Мамонтова, 5 April 2009, https://player.vgtrk.com/iframe/video/id/1344953/start_zoom/true/showZoomBtn/false/sid/vesti/isPlay/true/?acc_video_id=202844

⁴⁷ Коммерсантъ, “Американской авиабазе объявили невылет,” 24 June 2009, http://www.ng.ru/editorial/2014-06-05/2_red.html

US Government Narratives

- **The Manas facility is crucial for the US and its mission in Afghanistan, therefore for the stability of Kyrgyzstan itself.**
- **The Manas facility is used solely for the support of the mission in Afghanistan, and has no negative impact on Kyrgyzstan.**
- **Kyrgyzstan receives meaningful economic aid in exchange for allowing the use of the Manas facilities.**

Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense (2006-2011)

19 February 2009: “Manas is important, but it is not irreplaceable [...]. We are going to continue to work with the Kyrgyz. [...] I think we are prepared to look at the fees and see if there is justification for a somewhat larger payment, but we’re not going to be ridiculous about it. [...] Like I said, it’s an important base, but not so important that we will waste taxpayer dollars.”⁴⁸



Hillary R. Clinton, Secretary of State (2009-2013)

2 December 2010, during a meeting with troops at the Manas Transit Center: “[This] air base, Manas, is the gateway to our operations. [...] We know that you are extraordinary warriors, but you are also extraordinary ambassadors. I got a briefing about some of what you’ve done to help the people of Kyrgyzstan: winter coats handed out in a school in Koi-Tosh; 10 tons of coal delivered to a kindergarten in Grodz so that they can stay open and heated during the winter; more than USD 4 million in humanitarian assistance that has been provided over the last two years. Whether you helped with one of those projects or in some other way – raising money for children’s heart surgeries or visiting cancer centers, renovating local schools and community centers – you are representing the best that our country has to offer.”⁴⁹



Leon Panetta, Secretary of Defense (2011-2013)

12 March 2012: “The purpose [of my visit to Kyrgyzstan] is to confirm our relationship with Kyrgyzstan, particularly with the transit center and the importance of that transit center to our whole northern distribution network. And it’s been obviously extremely important in recent months, so since our LOCs have closed in Pakistan.”⁵⁰



Wendy Sherman, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (2011-2015)

30 November 2012, press availability with Kyrgyz media: “[We] are very grateful that Kyrgyzstan has supported an agreement for this transit center to continue to operate through the 2014 length of the agreement. Not only has it been critical to our effort in Afghanistan, but it has also I believe brought benefit to the people of Kyrgyzstan, both in the fees we pay, the jobs it provides, and the acquisition of local products to operate the center. We have helped to build infrastructure that will belong to Kyrgyzstan for years to come.”⁵¹



⁴⁸ Quoted in Jim Garamone, “Gates Encouraged by NATO Discussions on Afghanistan,” *U.S. Department of Defense Archive*, 20 February 2009, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=53159>

⁴⁹ Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Meeting with Troops at Manas Transit Center,” *U.S. Department of State Archive*, 2 December 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/12/152282.htm>

⁵⁰ Leon Panetta, “Media Availability with Secretary Panetta en route to Manas Transit Facility, Kyrgyzstan,” *U.S. Department of Defense Archive*, 12 March 2012, <http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4992>

⁵¹ Wendy Sherman, “Press Availability with Kyrgyz Republic Media,” *U.S. Department of State Archive*, 30 November 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/us/rm/2012/201585.htm>

MEASURES

Strategic Logic

Over the years, Russia used a number of different tools in attempts to pressure Kyrgyzstan to close the US base at Manas. It employed both “carrots” and “sticks” – financial and economic assistance intertwined with hostile rhetoric to limit the engagement between both countries, especially concerning economic cooperation. Russia also attempted to influence Kyrgyz public opinion against the US base through Russian-language media.

For ten years, the Kyrgyz government (under Presidents Akayev and Bakiyev) used gradually increasing Russian pressure and growing anti-American sentiment in Kyrgyzstan as bargaining chips to increase US payments. After President Atambayev was elected in 2011 the unpopular Transit Center was closed in line with one of his campaign pledges.

Diplomatic. Kyrgyzstan is closely aligned with Russia politically and diplomatically. It is a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), as well as the Russian-Chinese led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Russia routinely uses its diplomatic corps and other officials of various ranks to wield influence on decision-making processes in Kyrgyzstan in pursuit of its interests. Significant decisions were announced preceding or following visits of Russian officials and even during Kyrgyz visits to Russia (e.g. President Bakiyev’s announcement of the closure of the Manas facility while visiting Moscow in 2009). Moreover, Russian officials and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicly criticised Kyrgyz decisions that contradicted Russian positions.

Information. Russians are the third largest ethnic group in Kyrgyzstan, although their number has been steadily declining since a peak in the 1960s (6.4 per cent of the population, as of 2014).⁵² Russian is one of Kyrgyzstan’s two official languages, dominating the sphere of public administration. Consequently, Russian state and private media is widespread in Kyrgyzstan.

Closure of the Transit Center at Manas was a popular topic in the most popular Russian media channels, which have – particularly since the second term of President Putin – actively promoted a world view sympathetic to Russia. In 2014, Russian media channels were significantly more interested in the closure of the US Manas facility than the Kyrgyz media.⁵³ Russian and Russian-language media often fabricated or exaggerated the negative

⁵² National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, “Total Population by Nationality (Assessment at the Beginning of the Year, People),” 2017, <http://www.stat.kg/en/opendata/category/312/>

⁵³ E.g., see Akhilesh Pillalamarri, “The United States Just Closed Its Last Base in Central Asia,” *The Diplomat*, 10 June 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/the-united-states-just-closed-its-last-base-in-central-asia/>; Joshua Kucera, “Manas: Farewell, Or Good Riddance?” *EurasiaNet.org*, 8 June 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68461>

aspects of the US Manas facility, emphasising accidents, the negative impact on the environment, American spying, and drug-trafficking as being allegedly connected to the Transit Center.⁵⁴

There were also reports of possible Russian cyber attacks against Kyrgyzstan on 18 January 2009.⁵⁵ DDoS traffic directed at Kyrgyzstan's government, banks and newspaper websites was found to lead back to servers located in Russia, and there was speculation that the Russian Business Network (RBM) of hackers had been paid by the Russian government to undertake attacks. However, linkage to the Transit Center at Manas would be purely speculative, for several reasons: first, given the very low internet penetration and digitalisation of Kyrgyzstan at the time, the attacks would not have had any major effect on governmental thinking and decision-making (especially compared to other tools of influence in Russia's possession). Second, one rather convincing version explained those attacks as an internal Kyrgyz issue. Third, the timeframe did not correspond to the most critical points of Manas negotiations.

Military. In 2003, Russia established its own air base, the Kant Air Base, in Kyrgyzstan, making Kyrgyzstan the first country where US and Russian troops were stationed simultaneously. Russia reported that the base would host 10 to 15 fighter jets, military transport airplanes and helicopters, along with up to 500 military personnel.⁵⁶ The base was primarily a symbolic counterbalance to the US facility.⁵⁷

Economic and Financial. Economic and financial instruments were central elements of Russian influence. Kyrgyzstan was particularly vulnerable given its close links to Russia in trade, investment, ownership of assets, and workplaces for Kyrgyz expats.

Decisions relating to a possible closure of the US Manas facility were preceded or succeeded by announcements of Russian financial or economic assistance, particularly in 2009 when Russia agreed to provide a USD 2 billion credit, and financial assistance of USD 150 million,⁵⁸ and in 2012 when Russia agreed to write off Kyrgyzstan's USD 489 million debt.⁵⁹

Russia also pressured Kyrgyzstan to join the EEU,⁶⁰ a single market with free movement of goods, services, capital, and labour,⁶¹ which would compensate for the loss of US financial aid and further integrate Kyrgyzstan into the economic space around Russia. If Kyrgyzstan did not to join the EEU there would be significant impediments for Kyrgyz companies and citizens attempting to function in EEU member markets (Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan). This would be problematic as remittances, mainly from Russia, constituted 30 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP in 2014.⁶²

⁵⁴ One of the boldest manifestations came from the Russian State Television Channel Rossiya, which broadcasted the documentary "Special Correspondent. Base. Film of Arkadiy Mamontov": Россия, Специальный корреспондент. База. Фильм Аркадия Мамонтова, 5 April 2009, https://player.vgtrk.com/iframe/video/id/1344953/start_zoom/true/showZoomBtn/false/sid/vesti/isPlay/true/?acc_video_id=202844

⁵⁵ Andrzej Kozłowski, "Comparative Analysis of Cyberattacks on Estonia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan," *European Scientific Journal* 3 (February 2014): 241-2, <https://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/view/2941/2770>

⁵⁶ Президент России, "Президенты России и Киргизии приняли участие в открытии российской военной авиабазы вблизи киргизского города Кант," 22 October 2003, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/29600>

⁵⁷ Lena Jonson, Vladimir Putin and Central Asia: *The Shaping of Russian Foreign Policy* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2004), 104.

⁵⁸ РИА Новости, "Президент Киргизии благодарен России за кредит и финансовую помощь," 3 February 2009, <https://ria.ru/politics/20090203/160884247.html>

⁵⁹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Kyrgyz President Calls Cooperation with Russia Crucial," 20 September 2012, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-kyrgyzstan-putin-atambaev/24714151.html>

⁶⁰ See e.g. *The Economist*, "Remittance Man," 7 September 2013, <https://www.economist.com/news/asia/21584999-russia-attempts-draw-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan-back-its-orbit-remittance-man>

⁶¹ More information about the EEU is available at: Eurasian Economic Union, "About the Union," 2017, <http://www.eaeunion.org/?lang=en#about>

⁶² The World Bank Group, "Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)," 2017, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=KG>

NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS

Critical Functions

Kyrgyzstan's main national interests (in relation to this case study) can be extracted from the national security concepts of 2001,⁶³ 2009,⁶⁴ and 2012:⁶⁵

Political. Consolidation of democracy and the values associated with it.

Military. Peace and security in the country and surrounding region.

Economic. Economic sovereignty; economic sustainability and development.

Information. Sovereignty of the information space.

Vulnerabilities

Political. Corruption of political elites.

Military. Regional instability, terrorist activity in the wider region.

Economic. Weak national economy; economic dependence on Russia.

Information. Poor journalistic standards; strong presence of Russian-language mass media in Kyrgyzstan, which might decrease the reach of alternative points of view.

Threats

Political. Risk of democratic backsliding.

Economic. Closure of the Russian market to Kyrgyz companies and individuals; reduction or halting of economic and financial assistance from Russia; further dependence on Russia.

Information. Disinformation (either deliberate or due to lack of journalistic standards), which can significantly influence public opinion.

Effects

Political.

■ Democratic backsliding: Kyrgyzstan's participation in the War on Terror provided international legitimacy, and the international community noticeably muted concerns regarding Kyrgyz human rights practices and democratic deficiencies during Operation Enduring Freedom.⁶⁶

■ Increased bargaining power of the Kyrgyz government: growing pressure from Russia and the Kyrgyz public to

⁶³ Концепция национальной безопасности Кыргызской Республики (Утверждена Указом Президента КР от 13 июля 2001 года №221), 13 July 2001, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/3491?cl=ru-ru>

⁶⁴ Концепция национальной безопасности Кыргызской Республики утверждена Указом Президента Кыргызской Республики от 18 февраля 2009 года № 115, 18 February 2009, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/4797>

⁶⁵ Концепция о национальной безопасности Кыргызской Республики (Утверждена Указом Президента Кыргызской Республики от 9 июня 2012 года №120), 9 June 2012, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/61367?cl=ru-ru>

⁶⁶ Alexander Cooley, "Manas Matters: The Changing Politics of the U.S. Military Base in Kyrgyzstan," CSIS, 8 December 2006, 2.

close the Manas Transit Center, as well as the closure of several alternative supply routes to Afghanistan, enabled the Kyrgyz government to demand higher US payments.

■ **Cooling of US-Kyrgyz relations:** As a former Soviet state, Kyrgyzstan always had much closer relations to its Russian neighbour than to the US. Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan managed to balance both relationships quite successfully during the lifespan of the Transit Center. After the closure of the Transit Center, US-Kyrgyz relations cooled (coinciding with a deterioration in US-Russian relations). Kyrgyzstan has since re-approached Russia and is now firmly placed within the EEU.

Military. Closure of the Transit Center in 2014 (after a failed attempt in 2009). Since ex-Soviet states were off-limits on President Putin's orders, the US decided to use a Romanian air base in order to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan.

Economic. Loss of US lease payments and additional aid, but this loss was partly defrayed by Russian aid.

Social. Over the years, public opinion in Kyrgyzstan gradually tilted against the US. National opinion polls conducted by the International Republican Institute reflect that, while in 2011 only 33 per cent of the Kyrgyz population regarded the US as a threat, this number grew to 53 per cent in 2015.^{67,68} Although over two-thirds of the Kyrgyz population were well-disposed towards the Russian air base in Kant, positive opinion towards the US Transit Center at Manas declined from 30 per cent in 2013 to 18 per cent in 2014, with 59 per cent having a negative opinion on it.⁶⁹

The decline of public favour around the Manas Transit Center emerged from several factors, including a general dissatisfaction with government corruption related to the US payments, as well as a string of other negative incidents concerning the Transit Center, which were amplified and exaggerated by Russian-language media. The context of deteriorating US-Russian relations, as well as the growing unpopularity of the mission in Afghanistan, are also highly likely to have impacted public opinion.

The US government, realising the importance of securing a positive public opinion in Kyrgyzstan, made an effort to improve its image in the country. The Mission Support Group at Manas ran a village partnership programme where off-duty troops helped surrounding villages with small-scale development projects such as renovating schools, and encouraged US airmen to get involved in other volunteer activities, including visiting sick children at a hospital in Bishkek, or handing out toys and school supplies.⁷⁰ The US was also careful only to refer to the Manas facility as a transit center, not an air base.^{71,72} The facility was renamed following the 2009 negotiations to underline its function as a transportation and logistics hub, although most media outlets continued to refer to it as an air base. Ultimately, these counter-efforts were not enough to significantly improve public perception of the Manas Transit Center.

⁶⁷ International Republican Institute, "Kyrgyzstan National Opinion Poll," conducted by *Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization* from 25 April – 13 May 2011, <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2011%20July%2013%20Survey%20of%20Kyrgyzstan%20Public%20Opinion,%20April%2025-May%2013,%202011.pdf>

⁶⁸ International Republican Institute, "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Kyrgyzstan," conducted by *Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization* from 22-31 July 2015, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-09-25_survey_of_kyrgyz_public_opinion_july_22-31_2015.pdf

⁶⁹ International Republican Institute, "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Kyrgyzstan," conducted on 4-21 February 2014 by *Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization*.

⁷⁰ Joshua Kucera, "Kyrgyzstan: US Armed Forces Try to Win Hearts and Minds," *Eurasianet.org*, 3 December 2007, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav120407a.shtml>

⁷¹ Robert O. Blake, Jr., "Kyrgyzstan Parliamentary Elections," Interview with the *BBC World Service* on 10 October 2010, *US Department of State Archive*, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2010/149251.htm>

⁷² Robert O. Blake, Jr., "Current Situation in Kyrgyzstan and Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka," Interview with the *BBC* on 8 April 2010, *US Department of State Archive*, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2010/139922.htm>

Outreach Activities at Manas

The following list details outreach activities in the first months of 2012, to exemplify the amount of effort that was put into improving public perception of the Transit Center.⁷³

January-March	“Operation Warm and Dry”: The 376th Theatre Security Cooperation division purchases more than 12,000 coats and blankets from local Kyrgyz vendors, worth USD 300,000. These coats and blankets are distributed to the poor in villages across Kyrgyzstan. Extensive market research was conducted prior to the project, which was first initiated in 2009; every effort was made to purchase items in the respective distribution areas, to have the economic impact desired.
4 January	“Kyrgyz Bazaar Sales Reach Second Highest in Seven Years”: local Kyrgyz entrepreneurs sell their goods and share their Kyrgyz culture.
12 January	“Americans and Kyrgyz Teach One Another”: Language Exchange at the Transit Center at Manas, 22 people attend.
12 January	“Kyrgyz Republic and U.S. Citizens Attend Clinic Dedication”: The US Government, through the Transit Center at Manas, opens a health clinic in Lesnoye village in partnership the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health.
18 January	“MABOS Keeps Hearts Beating”: the Manas Area Benefit Outreach Society donates more than USD 5,000 worth of centrifuges to the National Cardiology and Therapy Center in Bishkek.
21 January	“Kyrgyz and Americans Compete in Volleyball”: game between the teams of Manas International Airport and the Transit Center.
28 January	“Americans Provide Comfort, Solace to Kyrgyz Cancer Patients”: members from the Manas Area Benefit Outreach Society travel to the Children’s Cancer Center in Bishkek to hand out toys and provide comfort to the children there. These visits happen twice a month.
28 January	“Learning Together”: Monthly language exchange between Kyrgyz Republic soldiers and American Airmen.
31 January	“Culture of Diversity Celebrated in Bishkek”: the American University of Central Asia invite Airmen from the Transit Center to celebrate Diversity Week at a concert.
2 February	“Kyrgyz Students Sing American Songs in Celebration of 20 Year Friendship”: American song contest involving a number of Kyrgyz schools.
2-7 February	“Afterburner Performs for Kyrgyz Teens”: The US Air Forces Central Command classic rock band “Afterburner” performs at five schools in Kyrgyzstan.
11 February	“Volunteer Airmen Help Local School”: volunteers install 13 chalkboards in the Kamys-hanovka Village School, and raise over USD 1,200 in donations.
13 February	“Airmen Distribute Books at Local Village School”: more than 1,000 educational books on math, geography and literature are given to the Manas Village School.
20 February	“Kyrgyz, Americans Participate in Cultural Exchange”: weekly Women’s Club meeting in Bishkek bringing Kyrgyz and American citizens together, to discuss various topics such as marriage, children, career goals and life decisions.
2 March	“Transit Center at Manas Dedicated \$295K School Renovation Project”: Ribbon cutting ceremony to reopen the Razdolnaya School in the village of Lesnoya, which had been under renovation since September 2011. With the help of volunteers from Manas, the building’s roofs and windows are replaced and electrical wiring is updated.

⁷³ Website of the Transit Center at Manas, <http://www.manas.afcent.af.mil/>, archived version via <https://web.archive.org/web/20130216130805/http://www.manas.afcent.af.mil/news/index.asp?startDate=3/1/2012&endDate=3/31/2012>

CONCLUSIONS

The tenure of the US Manas Transit Center from 2001 until 2014 highlighted the intrinsic problem of economically weak countries being exploited by external powers. During the period assessed, Kyrgyzstan was economically dependent on Russia – especially regarding bilateral trade, remittances of Kyrgyz workers in Russia, investment, loans and financial assistance. Russia used both “carrots” and “sticks,” i.e. financial assistance proposals and threats to limit the existing cooperation with the US. Kyrgyzstan's economic vulnerabilities were effectively converted into political vulnerabilities. Aside from these economic instruments, Russia also used political, diplomatic and media channels to exert its influence.

On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan managed the pressures of Russia and the offers of the US well, as the US facility survived several years longer than expected. Kyrgyzstan managed both to acquire additional resources provided by Russia (although it is not clear whether everything that was promised was actually delivered), and to considerably increase US payments over time. However in doing so, Kyrgyzstan used its advantageous situation (having a solid runway close to Afghanistan) to earn more “easy cash” instead of developing a sustainable and sovereign national economy. If the Kyrgyz government developed a long-term strategy for comprehensive geopolitical balancing, it could have invested these acquired financial resources into its economy



IMAGE – US Airmen from the Transit Center at Manas visit an orphanage in 2010. / US Air Force photo/Senior Airman Nichelle Anderson/released.

and requested further external assistance in order to develop its market economy, good governance, and civil society. In the end, instead of becoming more sovereign and resilient, Kyrgyzstan became even more dependent on Russia.

However, it is probable that Kyrgyzstan's balancing act would not have been successful if Russia had applied more pressure. Economic and diplomatic leverage from Russia probably would have been stronger if Russia had not provided support to the US War on Terror, and if Barack Obama's administration had not attempted to reset relations with Russia in 2009, which likely prevented the closure of the Manas facility that same year. The main motive behind Russia's attempts to close the Manas Transit Center was not to undermine US efforts in Afghanistan – rather, it was to prevent a permanent US presence in Central Asia.⁷⁴ This geopolitical reality was all too evident to the Kyrgyz government, especially as the US announced that it would reduce troop levels in Afghanistan. Central Asia is not high on the list of US priorities, making Russia the safer long-term choice.⁷⁵ Cash does not last as long as a Russian neighbour does.

Recommendations

Increased Russian pressure and public criticism led the Kyrgyz government to close the US Transit Center at Manas. President Atambayev made the closure of the Transit Center one of his key pledges during his election campaign. Although the US could not have done much to prevent the Russian government from exerting economic leverage and other pressure onto Kyrgyzstan, it could have made a greater effort to improve its standing in the eyes of the Kyrgyz population:

■ **Tackle corruption.** It would have been clear to the US government that the payments for the Manas facility would in all probability never reach the Kyrgyz population, but would benefit only the ruling elites. The population, frustrated with the pervasive corruption and the country's economic problems, ousted two presidents within five years. The US could have concentrated on anti-corruption efforts in the country and could have tied more strings to the sums it promised the Kyrgyz government, so that the payments would actually have led to economic development and perhaps even to the adoption of more democratic practices. In turn, this may have led to a higher standing of the US in the eyes of the population, which might have been more inclined to vote for a pro-Western government.

■ **Promote stronger and independent journalism.** Although much of the disinformation regarding the Manas Transit Center was due to Russian-language media efforts to discredit the US base, much of the misinformation was simply due to a lack of quality journalism in the Kyrgyz media landscape. Many media outlets repeated stories and rumours without providing any sources or supporting evidence, often caring little for precision, neutrality, or balanced reporting.⁷⁶ This is often a result of staff shortages in various media outlets, and especially a lack of qualitative staff – many editors are simply afraid to train their personnel, because then they immediately start looking for a higher-paid job.⁷⁷ Other problems include a lack of resources and knowledge, a lack of incentives to improve the quality of journalistic output, and pressure from the owners of media outlets, who are often politicians themselves.⁷⁸ The US should therefore focus on training journalists in Kyrgyzstan, and attempt to raise the ethical and professional

⁷⁴ Jim Nichol, "Kyrgyzstan and the Status of the US Manas Airbase: Context and Implications," *Congressional Research Service*, 1 July 2009, 7, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40564.pdf>

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Hays, "Manas Air Base and the U.S. Military in Kyrgyzstan," *Facts and Details*, last updated 2016, http://factsanddetails.com/central-asia/Kyrgyzstan/sub8_5d/entry-4793.html

⁷⁶ Bakyt Orunbekov, Kubat Cherkov, and Elmira Toktogulova, "Monitoring and Content Analysis of Ethical Standards in Print and Online Media of Kyrgyzstan," Bishkek: OSCE, 2012, <http://www.osce.org/bishkek/98786?download=true>

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

standards of the editorial offices.

■ **Highlight strategic benefits.** The US government primarily incentivised the Kyrgyz government with economic benefits. However, it could have attempted to bring the discussion onto a different level – not only in negotiations with the government, but also in public discourse – and worked to create appreciation of the strategic benefits of having a US military base in the country. The focus could have been more on how Kyrgyzstan’s international standing rose as a result of being part of the international fight against terrorism, how US aid and volunteer activities from soldiers had a positive impact on Kyrgyzstan, or how the presence of a US base contributed to both national and regional security. Each of these could have been used to better leverage influence with audiences.

■ **Tackle own problems.** The series of accidents related to the transit center, and especially how the US dealt with the consequences of these events, provided pro-Russian media outlets with ample opportunity to spread negative messages about the Transit Center. This reinforced the scepticism of the Kyrgyz population, which was largely predisposed towards Russia. Accusations such as illegal wire-tapping, drug-dealing, or fuel-dumping should never be ignored or waved aside. Instead, every effort should be made to effectively and unambiguously debunk and refute these accusations, and – should these claims contain an element of truth – the responsible authorities should immediately tackle these problems in a transparent manner, to pre-empt critical voices. For instance, there is sure to have been a more sensitive way of dealing with the US soldier who shot a Kyrgyz national. Rather than refusing to let the Kyrgyz government prosecute him and transferring the responsible soldier out of the country, the US could at least have allowed a further investigation of the event, in order to avoid the inevitable impression that the US was shielding a culprit and preventing the family of the victim from seeking justice.

■ **Reach the local population.** The Mission Support Group at Manas Transit Center worked hard to improve the image of the US and the transit center among the local population, by promoting an active US-Kyrgyz cultural exchange, and demonstrating that the US was a well-disposed country. Specific efforts included a village partnership programme, the handing out clothes and books, the visiting of hospitals and other institutions, and the involvement of troops in various volunteer activities. Similarly, the humanitarian aid that the Manas Transit Center provided during the ethnic clashes of 2010 in the south of the country (together with the US State Department, the Transit Center bought and delivered 31,000 pounds of flour, oil, pasta, tea, yeast, and other basics to the affected areas, and organised medical supplies⁷⁹) supported the much-needed message that the US was a force of good in the country. Regular monitoring of effects ought to have disclosed whether these outreach efforts were actually reaching the right people.

⁷⁹ Fred W. Baker III, “Manas Transit Center Sends Relief to Southern Kyrgyzstan,” *US Department of Defense Archive*, 14 June 2014, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=59623>



IMAGE - Maintenance work at the Transit Center at Manas. US Air Force Photo by S/A George Goslin/Released.

APPENDIX

Detailed Timeline

9 November 2001 – 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US.

7 October 2001 – US led Operation Enduring Freedom starts in Afghanistan as a part of the War on Terror.

12 December 2001 – Parliament of Kyrgyzstan approves an agreement allowing the use of the Manas International Airport by the US

16 December 2001 – US military begins operations at the Manas International Airport.

5 December 2002 – Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, arrives in Kyrgyzstan.

22 September 2003 – Kyrgyzstan and Russia sign an agreement to open a Russian air base near Kant.

23 October 2003 – The Kant Air Base opens, Russian President Vladimir Putin is present.

24 March 2005 – Askar Akayev, President of Kyrgyzstan, flees the country amid the “Tulip Revolution.”

10 July 2005 – Kurmanbek Bakiyev is elected the new President of Kyrgyzstan.

26 July 2005 – Donald Rumsfeld, US Secretary of Defense, arrives in Kyrgyzstan, meets Kurmanbek Bakiyev, President of Kyrgyzstan.

11 October 2005 – Condoleezza Rice, US Secretary of Defense, arrives in Kyrgyzstan, meets Kurmanbek Bakiyev, President of Kyrgyzstan.

21 November 2005 – US air base at Karshi-Khanabad (K2), Uzbekistan, is closed following hosts’ request after US criticism of the Andijan massacre.

16 February 2006 – Kurmanbek Bakiyev, President of Kyrgyzstan, says the US was asked to increase the payments up to USD 207 million for the lease of Manas (compared to previous USD 2 million).⁸⁰

14 July 2006 – Kyrgyzstan and the US agree to extend the Manas lease; the price raised from USD 2 million to USD 17.4 million, with an additional USD 150 million of assistance.⁸¹

26 September 2006 – A US military aircraft collides with a civilian aircraft at Manas International Airport, no fatalities.

6 December 2006 – A US serviceman kills a Kyrgyz truck driver delivering fuel to the base.

28 January 2009 – Igor Sechin, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, visits Kyrgyzstan.

3 February 2009 – Dmitry Medvedev, President of Russia, and Kurmanbek Bakiyev, President of Kyrgyzstan,

⁸⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Newslines - February 16, 2006,” 16 February 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1143576.html>

⁸¹ US Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, “Joint Statement of the United States and the Kyrgyz Republic on Coalition Airbase,” 14 July 2006, http://bishkek.usembassy.gov/july_14_joint_statement_on_coalition_airbase.html

agree on Russian USD 2 billion credit assistance and USD 150 million of financial assistance.⁸²

3 February 2009 – While in Moscow, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev announces intentions to close the US Air Base at Manas.

19 February 2009 – The Parliament of Kyrgyzstan revokes the Manas lease agreement between the US and Kyrgyzstan.

6 March 2009 – Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State of the US, presents a “reset button” to Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, as a part of US-Russia relations reset attempt.

5 April 2009 – Russian state TV Rossiya broadcasts a strongly negative documentary “Special Correspondent. Base. Film of Arkadiy Mamontov”.

13 May 2009 – A new agreement is signed between Kyrgyzstan and the U.S; the “air base” is renamed “transit center,” annual lease price raised from USD 17.4 million to USD 60 million along with an additional pledge of approximately USD 36.6 million investment in the airport.⁸³

25 June 2009 – The new agreement with the US ratified by the Parliament of Kyrgyzstan.

6 July 2009 – Barack Obama, President of the US, arrives to Moscow.

7 July 2009 – Igor Sechin, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, and Anatoli Serdyukov, Defence Minister of Russia, visit Kyrgyzstan.

14 July 2009 – Manas Transit Center starts operations under its new name.

1 August 2009 – Dmitry Medvedev, President of Russia, and Kurmanbek Bakiyev, President of Kyrgyzstan, sign a memorandum on an additional Russian battalion (up to 1,500 people⁸⁴) and a military training centre to be established in Kyrgyzstan.

15 April 2010 – Kurmanbek Bakiyev, President of Kyrgyzstan, resigns and leaves country amid the “Second Kyrgyz Revolution,” a result of widespread dissatisfaction with the rule of Bakiyev. At least 200 people die amid the related ethical clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁵

30 October 2011 – Almazbek Atambayev is elected as the new president of Kyrgyzstan; soon afterwards he announces the closure of the Manas Transit Center after the lease terminates in 2014.

19 September 2012 – President Vladimir Putin visits Kyrgyzstan; among other agreements related to energy and military, Russia agrees to write off Kyrgyzstan’s debt of USD 489 million by 2016.⁸⁶

3 May 2013 – A US military aircraft crashes after taking off from Manas International Airport, killing the entire crew.

21 May 2013 – The Government of Kyrgyzstan announces that the agreement with the US on the use of Manas facilities will be cancelled on 11 July 2014.

28 May 2013 – Russian President Vladimir Putin arrives in Kyrgyzstan for CSTO informal summit.

⁸² РИА Новости, “Президент Киргизии благодарен России за кредит и финансовую помощь,” 3 February 2009, <https://ria.ru/politics/20090203/160884247.html>

⁸³ 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, 13 May 2009, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/130490.pdf>

⁸⁴ Kremlin, “Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed a Memorandum on Developing and Improving the Bilateral Legal Framework Governing the Stationing of Russian Troops on the Territory of Kyrgyzstan,” 01 August 2009, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/4993/print>

⁸⁵ BBC, “Q&A: Kyrgyzstan’s Ethnic Violence,” 24 June 2010, <http://www.bbc.com/news/10313948>

⁸⁶ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Kyrgyz President Calls Cooperation With Russia Crucial,” 20 September 2012, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-kyrgyzstan-putin-atambaev/24714151.html>

13 September 2013 – Russian President Vladimir Putin arrives in Kyrgyzstan for SCO summit.

19 February 2014 – A preliminary agreement is signed with Russia for approximately USD 1 billion investment in the Manas International Airport in exchange of the majority of its shares.⁸⁷

28 February 2014 – The US opens its facilities at the Romanian Mihail Kogălniceanu International Airport in order to gradually transition operations from the Manas Transit Center.

6 March 2014 – The US imposes sanctions on Russia due to Russian activities in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

3 June 2014 – The US facility at the Manas International Airport is closed.

⁸⁷ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Bishkek May Cede Control Of Manas Airport To Russia," 20 February 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-russia-manas-deal/25270677.html>

