

Confrontation with Moscow? US still has its Kyrgyzstan base covered

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As the shock of Kyrgyzstan's announcement that the United States air base near the capital Bishkek is shutting down subsidies, some analysts are doubtful that a rapid withdrawal of [American forces](#) is imminent.

Opponents of President Kurmanbek Bakiev accuse him of trading the [US military](#) presence in return for financial support from Russia. However, others say the decision is nowhere near as clearcut as Bakiev's headline-making statement suggests.

Rumors of the closure were circulating since January, but the final announcement came while Bakiev was in Moscow on February 3, attending a joint summit of two post-Soviet blocs, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Community.

During his visit, Bakiev secured a US\$300 million loan to support Kyrgyzstan's hard-pressed government budget, plus a pledge of \$1.7 billion in investment in the country's energy industry.

In addition, Moscow agreed to write off \$180 million of Kyrgyz debt in return for a 48% stake in a defense industry factory plant that produces components for torpedoes, and offered additional financial assistance worth \$150 million.

The US-led coalition in [Afghanistan](#) acquired the lease of the base, located at Bishkek's Manas airport, in 2001 to provide logistical air support for its military operations. The base provides air refueling and other services for operations in Afghanistan, and is used as a stopping-off point for freight and personnel transporters. There are over 1,000 US personnel at the base, servicing nine [military](#) transport and refueling planes.

The Americans plan to double their troop commitment in Afghanistan to 60,000 this year, but land supply routes from Pakistan have increasingly come under attack from the Taliban. Many analysts suspect that the decision to close the base is closely linked to Kyrgyzstan's desire to seek economic support from Moscow, which has never been happy with a Western military presence in a region it regards as its own backyard. However, Bakiev's explanation focused on the persistent disagreements over how much the Americans should pay in rent and other fees.

"Eight years have now passed," the Kyrgyz leader said at a joint press conference with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. "We have had repeated discussions with the US on the question of economic compensation for the presence of the base in Kyrgyzstan, but we have failed to reach an understanding."

By contrast, the text of the bill submitted to parliament the following day suggested that the regional security concerns which originally made the base necessary had now receded.

“Over this period the threat has diminished,” said the bill, which also cited concerns raised by people living near the Manas facility about the environmental impact of frequent military flights and frictions caused by a number of incidents involving US military personnel, including one in which a Kyrgyzstan national working as a driver was shot dead at the base.

The Russian leadership immediately sought to distance itself from a decision that it insisted was a purely internal matter for Kyrgyzstan.

“Questions relating to the functioning of the coalition military base lie within the competence of the Kyrgyz republic,” Medvedev said during his press conference with Bakiev.

The Kyrgyz announcement appeared to take the US administration by surprise. Only last month, the top military commander for the region, General David Petraeus, visited Bishkek and indicated that the closure of the base was not imminent, and the rent payment issue would be the subject of further talks.

At the US [Embassy in](#) Bishkek, a spokesman said they were unaware of the Kyrgyz decision. An [embassy](#) statement on February 4 added, “We have been in discussions with Kyrgyz authorities on the future of Manas air base. These discussions will continue.”

Procedurally, the next step is for the Kyrgyz parliament to debate a government bill submitted on February 4 which proposes that the air base agreement should be annulled. The debate will take place in the next week or so, and the bill is more than likely to be passed since the legislature is dominated by the pro-Bakiev party Ak Jol.

Opposition [politicians](#) say closing the base is not in Kyrgyzstan’s best interests and the decision stems from a desire to please Moscow and secure financial support at a time when the government is beset with economic problems in the shape of an ongoing energy shortage and fallout from the international financial crisis.

Bakyt Beshimov of the Social Democrats, for example, gave an interview to the Bishkek Press Club in which he suggested that the current administration had “no option but to take this decision” because it was finding it increasingly impossible to cope with the economic crisis.

Political observers, meanwhile, remain divided over Bakiev’s motives and the wider geopolitical implications.

Miroslav Niazov, a former secretary of Kyrgyzstan’s Security Council, believes Moscow must have played a part in shaping the decision to get rid of the Americans by offering financial aid as an inducement.

“National interests have simply been traded away and the country has lost face,” he told the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. Niazov believes the Manas base was an important cog in a regional security mechanism given that Afghanistan still presents a threat, both because it is unstable and because it exports large volumes of narcotics.

“The presence of the air base meant Kyrgyzstan was playing a role in ensuring global security,” he said. “Accordingly, this decision [to close the base] will have a negative impact on its reputation.”

Arkady Dubnov, the Moscow-based journalist and Central Asia expert who first reported the imminent closure of the base last month, said there was a clear link between Bakiev’s announcement and the need for economic assistance.

“Moscow wanted to hear this kind of statement,” he said. “The fact that it came out in Moscow raises Russia’s geopolitical profile. Kyrgyzstan has made its choice in return for money.”

By contrast, Alexander Knyazev, a political analyst based in Bishkek, insists no pressure was exerted by Moscow, and there was no horse-trading over financial assistance.

Even though the end of the US presence has now been proclaimed at such a high level that it appears irreversible, analysts in Bishkek are asking themselves just how quickly it is likely to happen.

In formal terms, the Americans would have a grace period of six months to vacate the base from the moment they received an official request from the Kyrgyz government.

“A great deal of time will pass from the announcement that the air base is to be withdrawn and the point when that actually happens in practice,” Temir Sariev, head of the opposition party Ak Shumkar, told the Bishkek Press Club. “Anything could happen during that time, and new circumstances might arise.”

He concluded, “It’s too early to say the American air base is about to be removed from Kyrgyzstan in the near future. That’s all the more true given that this isn’t the first time Kurmanbek Bakiev has made a statement of this kind.”

Edil Baysalov, an opposition politician now living abroad, explained how the decision could be deferred almost indefinitely, especially if the security situation in Afghanistan meant the Americans still needed an air supply route.

“There are large numbers of conditions that have to be met. It can be assumed that the withdrawal deadline can be extended from six months to at least a year. After that, they can look at how successfully operations in Afghanistan are going,” he said.

Niazov, too, said it was possible that the decision could be reversed. “The US and Europe will do all they can to keep the air base here,” he said.

Dubnov suggested that the Americans might even be able to maintain some kind of military presence, under some kind of different arrangement or “new format”.

Anara Yusupova is a pseudonym used by a journalist based in Bishkek.

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