

Official: US, Kyrgyz reach deal on using air base

By [Global Research](#)

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A parliamentary committee on Tuesday backed a deal that allows the United States to ship non-lethal military supplies through a Kyrgyz air base to Afghanistan — four months after the Central Asian nation ordered the eviction of U.S. troops from the base.

The accord to use Manas airport as “center of transit shipments” falls short of U.S. hopes of maintaining the facility as a full-fledged military air base. But it would provide a much-needed logistical support base as the U.S.-led coalition ramps up operations against the increasingly bold Taliban and al-Qaida fighters in Afghanistan.

The deal was backed by the Kyrgyz parliament’s defense committee and now goes to the full parliament for a vote — expected later this week.

Foreign Minister Kadyrbek Sarbaev told the committee that under the new agreement, rent for the base will increase to \$60 million per year from the current \$17 million.

U.S. officials at the embassy in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, said they were unable to provide immediate comment on the deal.

President Kurmanbek Bakiyev stunned Washington in February by announcing that U.S. forces would be evicted from Manas, saying Washington wasn’t paying enough and citing other concerns.

In addition to the annual rent, the base also contributes \$150 million to the local economy every year through service contracts and aid packages and around 600 locals are employed there, according to U.S. officials.

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates had said that Washington would be willing to pay more for use of the base, within reason.

With the Aug. 18 eviction date looming, however, Kyrgyz officials have suggested in recent weeks they might reconsider the decision.

The base’s outgoing commander said that the past year has been the busiest year for the base because of the situation in Afghanistan. Col. Christopher Bence said last week that 189,000 personnel had been sent to and from Afghanistan through Manas in the past year. There were 6,370 flights from the base and it refueled aircraft with 204 million pounds (92 million kilograms) of fuel, he said.

At the same time, militants have stepped up attacks on the main route for U.S. military supplies to Afghanistan through Pakistan — although the military maintains this has little

impact on its operations.

Strictly offensive missions out of Manas may be phased out under the new agreement, though observers doubt that the United States would wholly agree with that.

“At the moment, they are only talking about a transshipment of nonmilitary goods,” said Paul Quinn-Judge of the International Crisis Group. “But I would not be surprised ... if there was eventually a cosmetic agreement that allowed the U.S. to fly its tankers out of there,”

Earlier this month, Afghan President Hamid Karzai appealed to Kyrgyzstan to let coalition forces continue using Manas.

U.S. forces have had access to Manas outside Bishkek since 2001. The base became even more important to the Afghan war effort after neighboring Uzbekistan evicted U.S. troops from a base there.

Bakiyev’s announcement in February came hours after Moscow, which has long been wary of the U.S. presence in Central Asia, pledged more than \$2 billion in aid, loans and investment for Kyrgyzstan. That led U.S. officials to suggest that Moscow pressured Bakiyev to kick out the Americans.

Russia also has an air base in Kyrgyzstan.

Analysts and opposition politicians have said in recent weeks that Russia might be linking its backing for the U.S. in Kyrgyzstan to other nettlesome issues in US-Russian relations, such as NATO expansion into former Soviet republics or U.S. plans for placing a missile defense shield in Central Europe.

“This decision tells us that the Kyrgyz government is not in charge of its own foreign policy, but is just a plaything in the hands of the Kremlin,” Bakyt Beshimov, leader of the opposition Social Democrat party faction, told The Associated Press Tuesday.

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