

Kyrgyzstan to shut down NATO's air base

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, February 04, 2009

[Russia Today](#) 3 February 2009

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

Kyrgyzstan has decided to shut down the Manas Air Base used by NATO to supply its troops in Afghanistan. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has been insisting on its closure since 2005.

Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev explained the decision was made due to economic considerations and the negative public attitude.

"When there were hostilities in progress in Afghanistan with the use of combat aircraft, Kyrgyzstan made its territory available for fighting international terrorism. But at that time, it was one or two years that were being talked about. Eight years have passed. We have repeatedly raised with the United States the matter of economic compensation for the existence of the base in Kyrgyzstan, but we have not been understood," he said.

Still, Russia and Kyrgyzstan will continue cooperating with the United States on Afghanistan after the closure of the U.S. airbase in the ex-Soviet Central Asian state, the Russian president said on Tuesday.

"We could join our efforts to promote stability in the region, our countries will help the operations underway in the region. We are ready for coordinated action," said Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, adding that the decision to close the Manas base was up to Kyrgyzstan.

Manas airport in Bishkek has been home to a thousand-strong American airbase since 2001, the year Kyrgyzstan joined the anti-terror coalition set up after 9/11. The US base used to be the main hub for moving men, equipment and supplies to US and allied forces operating in nearby Afghanistan because of its 90-minute flying time to the war, instead of seven hours from other launching areas.

US march towards Asia

The September 11 attacks made Central Asia a region of high importance for the US Department of Defense. The United States found the Manas base to be useful for Afghan operations. It was named after Chief Peter Ganci Jr. of the New York City Fire Department, who died in the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center carried out by al-Qaeda.

The annual rent paid to the Kyrgyz government was \$150 million.

In September 2003 three Kyrgyz citizens were convicted for an attempt to organise an attack on the base. On July 8, 2004 the attempt was repeated by militants believed to belong to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

2005's Tulip Revolution followed, and President Askar Akayev's exile from the country made US Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld visit Bishkek to support the continued US presence at Manas. But the new Bakiyev administration demanded an increase in the rent for the Pentagon's use of Manas. Due to the December 4, 2001 agreement the price was a little over \$2 million a year, and the new amount was increased to \$100-200 million annually. The sum was clearly drawn out of a hat and after prolonged 12-month negotiations the price was agreed at \$17.5 million per year.

Back to 2005

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev signed a joint statement October 11 in Bishkek expressing support for the presence of coalition forces in the Kyrgyz Republic "until the mission of fighting terrorism in Afghanistan is completed."

The Kyrgyz Republic "recognises the important contribution of the international anti-terrorist Coalition, located at the Ganci Airbase, in strengthening regional stability.

Kyrgyzstan – U.S. relations chilled after incidents between locals and military personnel. In one, a Kyrgyz citizen was shot dead by a US soldier – who escaped prosecution due to immunity enjoyed by US military at the base. Some think that if more soldiers arrive, there'll be more trouble.

"I think President Bakiyev is concerned that if a conflict starts in Iran, then this base will be used for transporting military personnel, and this may cause social disturbances," says Leonid Gusev, political expert.

Around half the Kyrgyz population lives below the poverty line. Political protests flare up sometimes, making the country one of the most politically volatile in Central Asia.

Water is the major domestic source of energy for Kyrgyzstan. But the nation doesn't have enough hydro-electric facilities, and the country has to pay market prices for oil and gas from neighbouring Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan, along with China and other members of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization was urging Bishkek to kick the Americans out. Analysts say Russia's view, however, was driven by differing considerations.

"On the one hand Russia is interested in continuing the operation in Afghanistan, which threatens security in the south. But on the other hand, having the US in Central Asia irritates Moscow, which encourages its Central Asian colleagues to curb this presence," Arkady Dubnov, an international correspondent, says.

For the withdrawal of the US forces from the base Kyrgyzstan expects to have its debts (about \$180 million) written off by Russia in return. Manas turned out to be a burden for Askar Akayev, the toppled Kyrgyz President. Current President Kurmanbek Bakiyev promised Shanghai Cooperation Organisation members to close the air base; and has now fulfilled his promise.

In 2006 Kyrgyzstan pretended to play hardball with its American guests, demanding they pay \$50 million more or quit. The Americans did neither.

With the U.S. vowing to increase the war effort in Afghanistan, this step of Kyrgyzstan makes the task harder for the coalition forces.

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