

US-Russia tensions escalate over closure of Afghan supply base

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The threatened closure of a key Pentagon supply base in the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan, with serious implications for the Obama administration's planned escalation of the US-led war in Afghanistan, has deepened tensions between Washington and Moscow.

The Manas air base, located near the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, is the major air link between the US military and American occupation forces in Afghanistan. Last year, at least 170,000 US military personnel passed through the base on their way to or from Afghanistan, together with 5,000 tons of military equipment. Approximately 1,000 US troops are stationed at the base, together with smaller contingents from France and Spain.

After initially dismissing Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev's announcement Tuesday that his government intended to close the Manas base as a mere bargaining ploy (Kyrgyzstan made a similar threat in 2006 but relented after the US increased its rent for the facility), official Washington appeared by Thursday to be treating the matter with deadly seriousness.

"Frankly, we thought it was a negotiating tactic, and we were ready to call their bluff," an unnamed military official told the *Wall Street Journal* Thursday. "But it's becoming clearer that, no kidding, they want us out."

The strategic importance of the base has become even greater with the Obama administration's announced plan to send an additional 30,000 US troops into Afghanistan over the next 18 months in an attempt to quell the growing popular resistance to the American occupation. The escalation would nearly double the size of the US military force in the country, which now numbers 36,000. Another 32,000 troops from other NATO countries are also participating in the occupation.

The critical role played by the base has also been underscored by the mounting crisis Washington confronts in relation to its principal overland supply route to Afghanistan from Pakistan—the Khyber Pass—which accounts for some three-quarters of the supplies for US forces. On Monday, resistance fighters blew up a 90-foot iron bridge in the Khyber Pass, severing the route and at least temporarily halting all supplies for US and NATO troops. The attack follows a series of increasingly bold ambushes that have left supply trucks in flames and military vehicles in the hands of the guerrillas battling the occupation.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs Thursday described the base in Kyrgyzstan as "vital" to the US war in Afghanistan and declared that the White House was searching for ways to "remedy" the situation.

"This is something that the US government continues to discuss with Kyrgyzstan officials,"

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman told reporters Thursday. "That doesn't mean that we don't have other means and other options that we can pursue."

Asked about the threatened closure of the Manas base, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Thursday that it was "regrettable that this is under consideration by the government of Kyrgyzstan," but insisted that the action would not block Washington from escalating its colonial-style war in Afghanistan.

"We hope to have further discussions with them," she told reporters at a State Department press conference. "But we will proceed in a very effective manner no matter what the outcome of the Kyrgyzstan government's deliberations might be."

Clinton added that the Pentagon was "conducting an examination as to how else we would proceed" given the loss of the Kyrgyz base.

According to unnamed Pentagon officials quoted Thursday by the Associated Press, in the scramble to find replacement facilities Washington is considering reviving its strained relations with Uzbekistan, where the US previously enjoyed the use of a former Soviet air base to supply its operations in Afghanistan. US forces were kicked out, however, after Washington was compelled to cut off military aid to Uzbekistan following a 2005 bloodbath in the eastern town of Andijan, where government troops killed several hundred civilians. Regaining use of the base would entail a rapprochement with Uzbekistan's dictator Islam Karimov.

Kyrgyz President Bakiyev's announcement of his intention to shut down the US base followed a meeting in Moscow Tuesday with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in which Moscow promised an aid package to Kyrgyzstan worth over \$2 billion.

The package includes \$150 million as a direct grant—an amount equal to the total annual US funding for the country, including money for the Manas base—another \$300 million in the form of a loan granted with nominal interest and \$1.7 billion pledged for the construction of a hydroelectric plant. In addition, the Kremlin pledged to cancel \$180 million in Kyrgyz debt owed to Russia.

The proposed Russian aid package is the equivalent of roughly twice the annual budget and half the total gross domestic product of Kyrgyzstan, whose impoverished population has confronted increasing hardship in the wake of the worldwide financial meltdown.

"At a time of economic crisis, this is serious and important support from Russia [that] will help underpin economic growth in Kyrgyzstan," declared Bakiyev.

Kyrgyz Prime Minister Igor Chudinov insisted at a press conference Thursday that the timing of the president's call for the base's closure, on the heels of the Russian aid offer, was "a mere coincidence."

"The Russian decision to grant a major loan has nothing to do with the pullout of the US air base from Kyrgyz territory," declared Chudinov.

For his part, President Bakiyev linked the decision to popular opposition in Kyrgyzstan to the US presence, which was inflamed in 2006 when an American airman shot and killed a Kyrgyz truck driver. He also insisted that when the base first opened in 2001, as the US launched its

invasion of Afghanistan, it was seen as a temporary measure.

“Kyrgyzstan met the wishes of the United States and offered its territory for the antiterrorist struggle, which was a serious contribution to the struggle,” he said. “We talked about a year or two, but now it has been eight years. We have repeatedly discussed the questions of the economic compensation to Kyrgyzstan with our American partners, but have not been able to come to understanding at this point.”

Kyrgyz officials said that the US would have 180 days to close the base and withdraw all personnel once formal diplomatic notes were exchanged communicating the government’s decision. While the parliament was to have voted on the measure Friday, government officials announced Thursday that it would not take it up for at least another week.

The denials of the Kyrgyz government notwithstanding, it is clear that the decision to close the Manas base is driven by Moscow’s opposition to the US military presence in a region that it has for centuries regarded as its sphere of influence.

These tensions flared into the open last August, when the US-backed regime in the former Soviet republic of Georgia sent troops into the break-away region of South Ossetia, triggering a Russian military response that ejected Georgian forces from both South Ossetia and the Black Sea breakaway region of Abkhazia. Moscow subsequently recognized the independence of both territories.

Fueling the conflict is the US policy of incorporating Georgia and Ukraine into the NATO alliance, the drive to set up a missile-defense system on Russia’s borders, and the attempt to ring Russian territory with military bases in Central Asia and the Baltic states.

At issue is the growing rivalry between Moscow and Washington over control of the region’s strategic energy reserves, a key objective that underlies the US war in Afghanistan just as much as its intervention in Iraq.

For its part, the Russian ruling elite, despite the recent financial losses resulting from falling energy prices, clearly sees the reestablishment of Moscow’s influence in the former Soviet republics as decisive for its interests and worth significant investments.

The regimes in Central Asia have attempted to exploit this rivalry to their own advantage, tilting in one instance towards Russia and in another towards the US in an attempt to extract the most favorable deals.

The deal between Moscow and Kyrgyzstan is part of an increasingly aggressive challenge by the Kremlin to US interests.

The day after the announcements of the aid package and the intended base closure, Russian President Medvedev announced during a summit meeting of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) a plan to establish a 10,000-strong rapid reaction force composed primarily of Russian paratroopers to “rebuff military aggression” in the region and combat “terrorism.”

“These are going to be quite formidable units,” Medvedev stressed. “According to their combat potential, they must be no weaker than similar forces of the North Atlantic alliance.” The force would reportedly include token units from other former Soviet republics, including Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. There were indications that

Moscow sees the Manas base as a potential headquarters for the force, once it is evacuated by the Americans.

The Russian government has also indicated it intends to set up air and naval bases in Abkhazia, a plan that drew protests from the US State Department and NATO.

In addition to the aid to Kyrgyzstan, Moscow also this week signaled it would act favorably on a \$2.77 billion loan to neighboring Belarus, while Medvedev signed a deal with Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko to set up a joint air defense system, an apparent response to the US missile-shield scheme in Eastern Europe.

Finally, Cuban leader Raul Castro secured a \$354 million aid package during an eight-day visit to Moscow, the first high-level contact between Russia and Cuba since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, which ended decades of Soviet subsidies to Havana. It is evident that Moscow sees renewed ties with Cuba—90 miles off US shores—as a rebuke to Washington’s own interventions in the former Soviet republics.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin said that Moscow had several days earlier given a “positive response” to US requests to transport nonmilitary supplies across Russian territory to Afghanistan.

“We hope that we and the United States will hold special and professional talks on this issue in the near future,” said Karasin. “We will see how effectively we can cooperate.”

But this kind of “cooperation” is precisely what Washington has attempted to avoid. It has sought to preclude any Russian influence over the fate of Afghanistan and weaken Moscow’s power throughout the region.

The quest for non-Russian supply routes for the Afghanistan occupation is linked inexorably to the strategic goal of finding non-Russian routes for the transport of the oil and gas wealth of the Caspian Basin, thereby placing it under US domination.

Involved in this increasingly bitter dispute and in the Obama administration’s drive to escalate the US intervention in Afghanistan is the threat of a far wider and potentially catastrophic military conflict between the world’s two largest nuclear powers.

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