

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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The Debate over the U.S. Military Base in Kyrgyzstan: Political Dynamics and Future Scenarios

On Thursday, February 19, the day when the Kyrgyz parliament voted to close down the U.S. military base, the Harriman Institute hosted an event titled “The Debate over the U.S. Military Base in Kyrgyzstan: Political Dynamics and Future Scenarios.” The distinguished panel of speakers included Professor Alex Cooley, Barnard College; Professor Kimberly Marten, Barnard College; Professor Stephen Sestanovich, SIPA, and former U.S. Ambassador at Large for the Secretary of State on the Newly Independent States; and Ravshan Djeenbekov, deputy chairman of the Kyrgyz opposition party Ata Meken. Gordon Bardos, the Harriman Institute’s Assistant Director, moderated the event.

Professor Sestanovich approached the issue from the perspective of Russia-U.S. relations, recounting his recent visit to Moscow. While the Kyrgyz are understandably wary of creating an impression that they were pressured into making the decision and are thus motivated to claim full ownership of the initiative, the Russians have been less than circumspect about their influence on the process, some officials going as far as to claim that Moscow “told Bishkek” to kick the Americans out. Neither account is fully accurate, according to Sestanovich. Rather, a combination of factors was at play leading up to the decision to shut down the Manas base, including recent developments in Kyrgyzstan’s internal politics (namely, the approaching March presidential elections), coupled with the presidential transition in Washington, which opened a window of opportunity for Moscow. Clearly, Russia treats Central Asia as its legitimate sphere of influence, thus making the region a tinderbox of competing geostrategic demands. On the other hand, Russia is clearly not happy with Taliban’s advance in Afghanistan, and so can be expected to cooperate with Washington and NATO. For example, having outbid Americans on the Manas base, Moscow is

nevertheless allowing NATO to transport non-military shipments through its territory.

Professor Cooley started by providing helpful historical background of the Manas airbase, the second U.S. site in the region, which was opened in 2001 to supplement the base at Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan (known as “K-2”). Though technically legal, the agreement with the then government of President Akayev was a de-facto “buy-in” of local elites, with plenty of opportunity for corruption. Following the events of the so-called “Tulip Revolution,” newly elected President Bakiev engaged in intense efforts to increase the rent from 2 to 200 million USD. As a result, the amount was increased from 2 to 18 million USD in base-related “expenses” (a more correct term, as the U.S. policy does not allow for strict rent payments), while the rest of the package (150 million USD) came in different forms of assistance, including democracy assistance and poverty reduction projects.

The Kyrgyz government became increasingly unhappy with this arrangement, as it was not able to “monetize” a large part of the announced package. Consequently, it took care to fan the flames of popular discontent through media when a number of base-related incidents occurred, including the shooting death of a Kyrgyz driver. Although not necessarily the Americans’ fault, as Cooley put it, Washington handled these incidents poorly, including when it offered a thousand dollars to the family of the slain driver, leading to an outcry in the local media.

In short, the U.S. was “outbid” on the deal: in trouble at home with increasing accusations of corruption and the economy in shambles, and facing elections in March, Bakiev took advantage of the political transition in Washington to negotiate a better deal with Moscow. Though most experts are skeptical about Moscow’s promise of a total of \$2 billion to be injected into the Kyrgyz economy, Bakiev got what appears to be a new lease on life: \$150 million as a “stand-by” loan and

a further \$300 million as a subsidized loan. Now that Bakiev “has thrown in his lot” with Russia, the upcoming elections will thus be a referendum on this strategic choice. Although, as Cooley believes, Bakiev may want to keep the door open to the U.S. in the long run, in the short run this is a “done deal.” Washington may soon need to consider ways of engaging with the opposition. Going through a list of economic data comparing pre- and post-Tulip periods, **Ravshan Djeenbekov** painted a grim and continuously deteriorating economic reality in Kyrgyzstan today: GDP at 4.3 billion USD; foreign debt at 2.3 billion USD; annual inflation at 22.5 % inflation and a 130-dollar average monthly salary. Following the Tulip Revolution, Kyrgyzstan has seen a steady slide on Transparency International’s Corruption index: from 130th place in 2005 to 143rd in 2006, to 157th in 2007, to 166th in 2008. According to leading Kyrgyz economists, the government will have to spend at least 150 million USD to keep the population quiet and at peace in the run-up to the March presidential elections. Today, according to Djeenbekov, Bakiev’s popularity stands at a dismal 20%, due to pervasive corruption and nepotism in government ranks and by members of Bakiev’s large family (including, most notably, his son), increasing social problems and the emergence of viable opposition. Djeenbekov claimed that Bakiev is insecure about his power, and will try to keep it by “all means at his disposal.” As an illustration of this insecurity, and in an ironic twist of fate, Bakiev recently ordered the closure of the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – the very outlet which helped publicize his plight as the leading Tulip revolutionary in March 2005. The opposition activist ended his presentation by stating that the

Kyrgyz opposition was “100%” against the closure of the base.

Professor Marten concentrated on the logistical aspects of the U.S.-led anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As a “mobility hub” used to airlift NATO personnel in and out of Afghanistan, the Manas base has played a crucial role in the campaign. Additionally, the base has been used for refueling purposes and cargo deliveries – not just by American, but also French and Spanish planes. The base’s importance has grown with the recent closure of the Khyber Pass in Afghanistan due to Taliban’s resurgence. Although the conduct of the campaign will be made more difficult without Manas, Marten is optimistic about alternatives, including a possible deal with Tajikistan, Turkey or even one of Gulf states. Finding a workable alternative, though, will be fraught with complications, such as the need to apply for overflight rights to reach the new base. And in any case, it will hard to match the proximity convenience of Manas, which has acted as a safety valve for American and NATO troops in the unlikely (though not improbable) case of an emergency necessitating a complete and speedy withdrawal of the troops, should an emergency (such as a war with Iran, a conflagration on the Korean peninsula, or a major disaster elsewhere in the world) arise. All this explains the U.S. government’s intense lobbying to keep the base.

Reported by Peter Zalmayev