



Written by on February 5, 2009

## Fate of U.S. Base in Kyrgyzstan Uncertain

In the latest such incident, Taliban-backed militants blew up a 32-foot Khyber Pass bridge on February 2, temporarily cutting off that key supply route. In addition to the destruction of the bridge, the militants have in recent months shot at and hijacked supply convoys and have destroyed more than 300 trucks and Humvees in at least five attacks. The Khyber Pass bridge was made passable by the end of the day, but the U.S. and NATO are exploring alternate access routes by highway or railroad from the Ukraine through Turkmenistan to Afghanistan.



Bakiyev made his announcement at a news conference in Moscow, where he was engaged in talks with Russian President Dmitri A. Medvedev to secure Russian financial aid for his country.

The Kyrgyz Parliament was scheduled to decide the fate of the base in a vote on February 6, though the vote has been delayed until next week. The U.S. Embassy in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, issued a statement the day after the Bakiyev's announcement saying it had not received official word of the decision. Embassy officials said that discussions with the Kyrgyz government are continuing. If the Kyrgyz Parliament votes to close the base, the original treaty signed in 2001 provides for Kyrgyzstan to give the United States 180 days' notice to move out. The bases houses over 1,000 foreign troops, most of them American.

At the Moscow news conference, Bakiyev said that over the last eight years "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 also resurrected a complaint about the shooting of a Kyrgyz truck driver by a U.S. serviceman on the base in 2006 and said that Washington had ignored his requests for compensation.

The occasion of the announcement — Bakiyev's visit to Moscow to secure a promise of more than \$2 billion in credit and aid from Russia for his country — raises the spectre of Russian involvement. A top Russian government official denied Moscow had played a role in Bakiyev's decision. "This is the decision of the Kyrgyz leadership, not the Russian leadership," Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov said in an interview with Agence France Presse (AFP). "It is a sovereign state." However, AFP also quoted Iskhak Masaliyev, a man identified as a Communist Party member of the Kyrgyz Parliament, who asserted that closure of the base was tied to receiving Russian aid. "It has not been an easy decision and it's directly connected to cooperation with Russia," Masaliyev said. Reuters news service further quoted Masaliyev as saying: "Basically Kyrgyzstan had to make its choice. And it has now made its strategic choice."

Regardless of whether or not Moscow was behind Bakiyev's decision, the reaction at the U.S. State Department was to downplay the significance of the decision. "The United States and coalition forces will be able to continue operations in Afghanistan without the Manas base," U.S. State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid said. However, Robert Simmons, the NATO secretary general's special



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representative, sent a different message while in Kyrgyzstan on February 2, stating that the base was "a vital link in our fight against international terrorism."

Of course, if the United States is going to maintain a large military presence in Afghanistan, those troops have to be supplied somehow. As has historically been the case for centuries, the Khyber Pass between Pakistan and Afghanistan is a critically important supply route — one that the NATO command has relied heavily upon. The more effective the attacks in the Khyber Pass are at interrupting this supply line, the more important the airbase becomes for getting supplies into Afghanistan. And of course, if the U.S. military deployment is expanded in Afghanistan as the Obama administration wants, then keeping the air base open could become even more important.

But that's assuming that the U.S. military should be deployed in Afghanistan under NATO. Obviously, if the troops were brought home, the significance of the air base would diminish.

*Photo: AP Images*



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