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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Michael Zeller holds Master of Arts degree in Political Science from Corvinus University of Budapest. His bachelor's degree is in Political Science from the University of Louisville.

Erik Khzmalyan holds a B.A. in Political Science from Southwest Minnesota State University. His research interests include Middle East Politics, American Foreign Policy, and Political Philosophy.

Anna Kruglova holds M.Sc. in Security Studies from UCL and is completing M.A. in International Conflict Studies at King's College. She worked at MEC International, The Bow Group and Integrity UK.

Mariya Pak Feuer is an international policy consultant based in Washington, DC. She holds a PhD in human geography with a focus on international water management from Oregon State University.

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Battle for the Base: How the Manas Basing Crisis Illustrated Russian Behavior in the Conduct of Foreign Affairs

By Michael Zeller

A number of Russia's interests were confronted with a drastic change of circumstances in the wake of terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001. Among these, the introduction of an American military presence in Central Asia was perhaps foremost. An event far-removed from the control of or even expectation of the Kremlin prompted U.S. military deployment and operation in Russia's hinterland. The Russian government withheld any objections in the early years of the war in Afghanistan, but acted with increasing aggression to dislodge or at least to destabilize the U.S./NATO toehold in Central Asia, viewing their presence "as a challenge to Russian dominance in the region."^[1] The eviction in 2005 of forces from Uzbekistan's Karshi-Khanabad (also known as "K2"), for example, resulted in part from lobbying by Russia (as well as by China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization).^[2]

The highest stakes surrounded the U.S. base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan, the key staging ground for transit and operations into Afghanistan. In 2009, amid the early throes of the U.S.-led 'surge' of military operations, Manas was threatened with eviction. Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev announced on February 3rd the decision to close Manas to the U.S. and NATO. Then-President Dmitri Medvedev sat at his side and shortly afterward signed a two billion USD aid agreement, ostensibly as *quid pro quo* for Bakiyev's decision. The U.S., however, salvaged the base with a deal announced in June of 2009, to the dismay of the Kremlin. Now, nearly seven years later, the U.S. has vacated its military installations in Manas as part of its overall cessation of operations in Afghanistan. What were Russia's interests in Central Asia, as exhibited in the case of Kyrgyzstan, during the Afghanistan war; how were they manifest before, during, and after the 2009 base closure situation; and were the resultant actions effective in advancing Russia's short- and long-term interests? In confronting these questions, this paper will outline U.S. and Russian interests in Central Asia (and their expressions in Kyrgyzstan), detail the base closure crisis including its context and consequences, and pose a critical analysis of the Russian government's actions, ultimately concluding that the case of Manas reveals Russia's actual objectives (as opposed to

rhetorical), their prioritization, and, most importantly, its archetypal mode of pursuing them. Understanding this episode of Russia foreign policy may thereby provide broader understanding of the ongoing conduct of foreign affairs by the Putin regime.

A survey of Russian and American interests — especially as they pertain to each other — in Central Asia and in Kyrgyzstan is necessary before unfolding the specifics of the 2009 base closure crisis and undertaking analysis thereof. Even at the most fundamental levels a stark contrast appears between the interests of the two; whereas U.S. interests were temporary and limited (at least in the main), Russia's were and remain long-term and comprehensive. Following the terrorist attacks of 2001 and throughout the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan the United States government's overriding interest in Central Asia was the preservation of a stable basing configuration for operations. Low rents and high degrees of operational autonomy were sought. And while the U.S. may have preferred to negotiate directly and solely with the governments of Central Asian states and to repudiate the notion of Russia's sphere of influence, this principal was evidently not paramount; for the sake of higher priorities, the administration of President George W. Bush likely sighed in collective relief after President Vladimir Putin's early encouragement of Central Asian amenability to hosting American deployments.^[3] All other matters were of tertiary importance, typically arising only as a concomitant facet of America's foremost objective.

Russia's interests, on the other hand, are glaringly distinct in their comparative breadth. As with most of the post-Soviet space, Kyrgyzstan is connected to Russia by the remnants of overlapping history: linguistically, ethnically (12.5 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population are ethnic Russians^[4]), economically, and politically. Several of its interests are rooted in these origins, including a status of regional hegemony underpinned by pro-Russian governments. Moreover, the Russian government seeks at least tacit recognition of this predominance from other foreign powers present in Central Asia. The more recent evolution of its interests include the suppression of ethnic violence, Islamic extremism, and separatist movements, each of which directly threatens the stability of the region that is crucial to Russia's dominance thereof.

The U.S. Air Force installation at Manas officially opened on 18 December 2001, as agreed upon by the government of the United States and of Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev, and publicly supported by President Putin. Over the next four years annual rent payments of two million USD and

government fuel contracts of untold amounts personally enriched President Akayev and his associates. Kurmanbek Bakiyev heralded Akayev's ouster in March 2005 and his own ascendancy to the presidency as a restoration of staunch protection of Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty.

Early in his presidential tenure Bakiyev criticized the low rental rates of the air base, as well as decrying silent American acquiescence to the embezzlement of funds by Akayev's government. Alexander Cooley summarized the strategic opportunity open to Kyrgyzstan: "In July 2005 in Astana, Bakiyev signed the [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation] declaration about removing foreign military bases from the region. The U.S. eviction from K2 [military base in Uzbekistan] just a few days later gave the Kyrgyz president the confidence that, having the only remaining official U.S. base in the region, he could demand a much greater *quid pro quo* for continuing to provide basing rights to the United States."^[5] Early in 2006, Bakiyev announced that he would seek new basing terms that included annual rent of 200 million USD and compensation for environmental damage caused by the base. The demanded terms compelled the U.S. Department of Defense to explore alternative basing configurations, particularly in Tajikistan.^[6] Bakiyev eventually agreed to renew the base lease for an overall package of 150 million USD. However, Bakiyev and his administration quickly grew embittered by the deal, which increased rent payments only to 17 million USD and dispersed much of the other funds through development aid and humanitarian programs like the Peace Corps. Several incidents* at the base "received large-scale media attention, especially in the Russian-language press," and intensified Bishkek's frustration.^[7]

The crisis resurfaced in 2009. In the middle of a chill in U.S.-Russia relations (driven by the 2008 war with Georgia and related disputes), "Central Asian diplomats themselves informed U.S. officials that Russia was plotting to evict the United States from Manas to punish it for its support of Georgia."^[8] Bakiyev too had reasons to seek a new arrangement—or ideally to initiate a bidding war—since Kyrgyzstan was beginning to feel the effects of the global economic recession. To gain victory in the forthcoming election, Bakiyev needed a fresh infusion of financial assets to appease key sections of his constituency.

The crisis began at a Moscow summit between Bakiyev and Medvedev. At a joint press conference in Moscow in early February 2009, President Bakiyev first announced in public that the small Central Asian state had taken the decision to close down the U.S. air base, citing its domestic

unpopularity. At the same event, Medvedev announced that Russia would be granting a special emergency assistance package to the Central Asian state, comprised of a \$150 million grant, a \$300 million soft loan, and \$1.7 billion in credits to invest in the Kambarata-2 hydroelectric plant project. As part of the deal, Russia also assumed control of a number of Kyrgyz defense industries, including a 48 percent controlling stake in the Dastan torpedo manufacturing plant near Lake Issyk-Kul.^[9]

Shortly after the announcement, the U.S. government expressed its recognition of Kyrgyzstan's sovereign right to allow or refuse tenancy on its soil — just as Medvedev had at that summit, with a proverbial wink and nod — but quickly dispatched negotiators to try and salvage the situation. Publicly, U.S. officials criticized Russia's role in the decision. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated that Russia was “trying to have it both ways with respect to Afghanistan, in terms of Manas...on one hand, [they're] making positive noises about working with us in Afghanistan, and on the other hand [they're] working against us in terms of that airfield, which is clearly important to us.”^[10]

Despite the understanding apparently established by Medvedev and Bakiyev, American negotiators successfully rescued the basing agreement. The U.S. concluded a new deal with the notable assistance of Maxim Bakiyev (the President's son) in early April—the reversal came shortly after Russia transferred its first development credit of 300 million USD to Kyrgyzstan. The new agreement with the U.S. amounted to 180 million USD *per annum*, including 60 million in rent payments alone.^{[11],[12]} Despite the cosmetic change of the facility's name to the ‘Manas Transit Center,’ the U.S. would continue to operate the base with full autonomy. In explaining the government's reversal, Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Kadyrbek Sarbayev said, “it is no secret that there is currently no alternative to the U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan.”^[13]

Shortly after the announcement, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin and Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov—both key figures in the Kremlin — traveled to Bishkek. They won permission for Russia to open another base in southern Kyrgyzstan, providing the Kremlin with a small consolation prize, but confirming the loss of its larger geopolitical victory. The comments of Russian Foreign Ministry personnel revealed the extent of Moscow's ire. Spokesman Andrei Nesterenko said, ‘the Kyrgyz authorities repeatedly declared that its decision to close the airbase was final and not subject to revision. We should proceed from that.’^[14] An anonymous Foreign Ministry

source went further, saying: ‘the news about the continuation of the base was a very unpleasant surprise for us — we did not expect such a betrayal...the base’s name change is superficial — the real nature of the U.S. military presence in Central Asia has not changed, and that is contrary to the interests of Russia, and to our agreements with the Kyrgyz authorities.’^[15] The source also promised that there would be an ‘adequate response.’^[16] Bolstered by the spoils of the bidding war, Bakiyev won a second presidential term in an election of dubious legitimacy. “Tellingly, U.S. officials remained quiet, issuing a tepid statement a few days after the poll, much to the dismay of the Kyrgyz political opposition.”^[17] Early in 2010, however, Bakiyev was forced to abandon the Presidency and eventually to flee for refuge in Belarus due to ethnic violence and internal opposition in Kyrgyzstan. It is widely thought that Russia spurred Bakiyev’s ouster through media pressure and other soft power means.

Russia has good relations with Kyrgyzstan’s current President, Almazbek Atambayev, who early in his term assured Moscow that the Manas base would close at the expiration of the presiding contract.^[18]

The great tripartite game in Central Asia ended with the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from Afghanistan (though some American companies remain in the region). The Manas closure crisis presents a revealing illustration of how Russia played this game, and thus a means of judging the efficacy of Russia’s behavior in foreign affairs.

The Kremlin successfully leveraged its position to disadvantage the United States. The key American military installation in the region was threatened, casting doubt on the immediate and long-term operational presence of the United States; the Department of Defense was compelled to pay higher rents and associated costs; and Russia’s actions obliged the U.S. to negotiate with Moscow to forestall any further pressure to close the base, thereby acknowledging Russia’s predominance in the region.

Yet the Russian government’s failures and departures from considered pragmatism are more striking than its victories in the case of Manas. The threat to the U.S. base endangered the war against extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan and the wider region which, were it to fail, would pose a vastly greater security risk to Russia than the United States. This, it would seem, indicates a prioritization of regional control over defense, the broader implication being that Russia is comfortable with responding to instability and terrorism around its borders, and contrastingly uncomfortable with a

stable American presence thereabouts. (This conclusion is consistent with Russian policy and action toward American encroachment in Eastern Europe and the Baltic.)

Complicating the questionable strategic objective of destabilizing the Manas basing arrangement, the Kremlin was drawn into a bidding war by President Bakiyev. And, angered by this deception, Russia sacrificed regional stability by contributing to the ferment that ultimately caused Bakiyev's ouster in 2010. While the ensuing chaos eventually brought Atambayev to the presidency, thus installing a regime favorably inclined to Russia (the evidently overriding priority for the Kremlin), it might have caused the elevation of a pro-Western figure like Roza Otunbayeva. This somewhat risky action displays simultaneously several features of contemporary Russian foreign policy: willingness to use varied diplomatic, political, and extra-political methods to achieve objectives, rhetorical posturing toward stability and regime continuity fronting a more fundamental allegiance to attaining and retaining control in its sphere of influence, inclination to risk producing chaos in order to seek a more advantageous political configuration.

While the Kremlin's forsaking of stability in the aftermath of Bakiyev's actions is illuminating, the approach to the U.S. is even more telling, specifically Russia's lack of appreciation for the internal political dynamics in America. Russia's drive to expel the U.S. from Kyrgyzstan in 2009 was likely motivated by the chill in Russo-American relations following the August 2008 war with Georgia. Moving against the Manas base could be a strong act of retribution against an American administration that was calling for increased international pressure on Russia. Here again is behavior consistent in Russia's conduct of foreign affairs: viewing relations with the U.S. holistically, all facets of connection and cooperation subject to changing conditions of each other at all times. That is, conflict over Georgia may provoke reaction against basing in Manas; missile shield development in Eastern Europe often corresponds to increased Kremlin cooperation with Tehran; a largely superficial punitive act against officials connected to the death of Sergei Magnitsky coincides with the expulsion of USAID; and so on. Yet often there appears a failure by Russia to appreciate dynamics of domestic American politics. (And of course, U.S. policy has been habitually short-sighted in terms of regard for or even anticipation of Russia's reaction.) In the case of Manas, the Bush administration had crafted the response to Russia's invasion of Georgia. By targeting Manas in February 2009 the Kremlin weakened the newly-elected Democratic President, Barack Obama, who, along with his party, had been more open to dialogue with Russia and

more amenable to the nuances of Russia's interests in Georgia, and strengthened the Republican Party whose defeated presidential nominee, John McCain, had called for a much stronger response to Russia's invasion than President Bush had given. Through the course of action pursued with Manas (and with several other international crises), the Putin regime has prompted greater public support in America for politicians that criticize Russia and characterize it as 'America's number one geopolitical foe,' as did 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney. The effects and implications of this trend — which continues to this day* — are difficult to identify, but are almost undoubtedly to Russia's detriment as they fortify antagonistic sentiment and forces in America. While American enmity may bolster Putin's domestic popularity (needlessly, it would seem, given his popularity and lack of serious political opposition) and insulate him from criticism by Russian or pan-Slavic nationalists, it limits Russia's capability to influence events outside of its existing sphere of influence.

Russia revealed the priority of its interests in the case of Manas: dominance of its sphere of influence above all else. Stability, which was sacrificed at several points in the basing conflict, regional security, which was undermined by imperiling military assets necessary to prosecute the war in Afghanistan, and all other considerations are subordinate to the supreme priority of regional control. This is *the* fountainhead of Russian foreign policy behavior. With its actions on Manas the Kremlin imperiled tenuous security architecture around the war in Afghanistan and the wider region.

In defending this chief interest, Russia revealed that it would destabilize a situation for the chance to elevate a more consistently pro-Russian (and thus, according to the Kremlin's operative paradigm, anti-American) regime, and that it is disposed to exact retribution and upset regional stability. With its actions on Manas the Kremlin imperiled tenuous security architecture around the war in Afghanistan and the wider region. Perversely, unchecked volatility in western Asia presents a far more immediate danger to Russia than the United States. Yet the adamant strategic posture toward ensuring control over its sphere of influence virtually necessitates discouraging any type of incursion (military, political, economic, or cultural) by other great powers. Medvedev's summit and economic aid agreement with Bakiyev in February 2009, increased Russian military industrial presence in Kyrgyzstan (ownership of the Dastan torpedo manufacturing plant and support for the Kambarata-2 hydroelectric station), pressure exerted by Russian media outlets and socio-political entities to support Bakiyev's ouster and the ascent of Atambayev—the Kremlin exercised its supreme influence on Kyrgyzstan

across seemingly all sectors and segments of society. And the timing of all those exertions links the Manas crisis with American responses to Russia's intervention in Georgia, marking the whole affair as partially retributive. Russian prioritization of regional control, and in some instances of *unopposed* control, as well as an often combative posture undoubtedly diminishes its potential for cooperation and activity outside of that sphere. Essentially, Russia confines itself to regional dominance rather than accept the alternative of closer great power presence and a wider reach of foreign affairs.

The behavior in the case of Manas is consistent with Russian actions in subsequent crises, including Ukraine and Syria. Obstinate and overriding protection of spheres of influence (prominently including the post-Soviet space, Syria, and Iran), a rhetorical posture toward stability and regime continuity, and a style of geopolitical gamesmanship that employs diverse tactics and that are characterized by strategic flexibility in a chaotic situation. The Kremlin's strategic behavior is consistent, perhaps characterized chiefly, paradoxically by its comfort with instability (temporary, as in Kyrgyzstan during the 2010 regime change, or enduring, as in Syria) or tenuous stability (as in the simmering proxy conflict in eastern Ukraine, or in the so-called 'frozen conflicts' elsewhere in the post-Soviet space).

Quite evidently the Putin regime conducts its foreign affairs in the cast of a 'zero-sum game,' wherein the interests and presence of one foreign power cannot coexist with another (or at least not with the U.S.). Russia presents unambiguous and holistic resistance to any perceived encroachment in its 'near abroad' and established areas of influence—in Manas and Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine this fact is resoundingly confirmed. This outlook hinders the capacity of Russia to cooperate effectively with the United States and others, and consequently represents a great instability in the present international order, increasingly so as Russia decidedly, doggedly, and sometimes recklessly pursues aggressively defensive interests.

Endotes

[1] Robert H. Donaldson and Joseph L. Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 196.

[2] See Alexander Cooley, "Base Politics," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (2005): 79 – 92.

[3] Associate Press, The. “In Putin’s Words: ‘Ready to Contribute’.” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2001.

[4] “Kyrgyzstan.” Central Intelligence Agency.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kg.html>

[5] Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2012), 120.

[6] Dina R. Spechler and Martin C. Spechler, “Is Russia Succeeding in Central Asia?,” *Orbis* 54, no. 4 (2010): 619.

* Most notably: the September 2006 disappearance of U.S. Air Force Major Jill Metzger, who was abducted and escaped captors three days later (as Pentagon sources confirmed only in February of 2012); and, in December 2006 Zachary Hatfield, a U.S. serviceman on guard duty shot—purportedly in self-defense—Alexander Ivanov, a Kyrgyz citizen (and an ethnic Russian).

[7] Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 122.

[8] *Ibid*, 123 – 124.

[9] *Ibid*, 124.

[10] Levy, Clifford J.. “Poker-Faced, Russia Flaunts Its Afghan Card.” *The New York Times*, February 21, 2009.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/weekinreview/22levy.html?_r=0.

[11] “Kyrgyz parliament approves U.S. base deal.” Reuters.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/06/25/us-usa-kyrgyzstan-base-idUSTRE55O1DP20090625>.

[12] Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 125.

[13] “Kyrgyz parliament approves U.S. base deal.” Reuters.

[14] Габуев, Александр. “Американской авиабазе объявили невылет.” *Коммерсантъ*. <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1192106?isSearch=True>. (Translated by author).

[15] *Ibid*. (Translated by author).

[16] *Ibid*. (Translated by author).

[17] Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 127.

[18] Dzyubenko, Olga. “Mission accomplished for U.S. air base in pro-Moscow Kyrgyzstan.” Reuters. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/us-kyrgyzstan-usa-base-idUSBREA251SA20140306>.

* Numerous articles written and polls conducted in response to the crisis in Ukraine and the Syrian civil war indicate significant support for a harder, more combative approach to relations with Russia.