The American Presence in Kyrgyzstan

At the beginning of June in Kyrgyzstan there was an official ceremony to mark the closing of the American military airbase where served as a major transportation point through which coalition forces in Afghanistan were supplied. The last American servicemen, according to the agreement, must leave the military base by July 10. So, quietly and with little fanfare, the American military presence in Central Asia has been withdrawn. However, experts believe that according to the “law of genre”, the American will never fully depart from Kyrgyzstan. As the expert on Central Asia and Middle Eastern affairs, Alexander Knyazev wrote on his Facebook page, in Bishkek “unofficially and without ceremony, working to its full capacity, a center for electronic intelligence gathering as part of the well-known system of “Echelon.”

It was situated in Bishkek at the intersection of Manas Prospekt and South Highway. That for which we congratulate Kyrgyzstan, to the neighbors of Kyrgyzstan, we offer our condolences”.

In response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2011 in New York and Washington, the U.S. began in Afghanistan operation “Enduring Freedom”. For logistical support they placed military bases in countries bordering Afghanistan; these included bases in Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, as well as enlisted the support and from other countries in Central Asia.

The American Air Force Base in Kyrgyzstan was located at the international airport in Bishkek, and was named after Peter Ganci. Ganci was an American firefighter killed responding to the fire at the World Trade Center in New York. Later in 2005, the base was renamed to “Manas”. Originally the base housed NATO military personnel from several different countries, but in recent years it served exclusively U.S. military requirements.

There was great importance attached to the American presence in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz authorities hoped that it could balance the interests between the U.S. and Russia, and from that that rivalry it could extract some economic benefits. Moscow insisted that the bases be closed, but the Americans were determined, by hook or by crook, to stay in the country. After all, “Manas”, was the final hook. Before that, for their support of the opposition in 2005, (the Andijan events) they lost their base in Uzbekistan, “Khanabad”.

The first scheme in the game to play off the competing interests of the U.S. and Russia in Kyrgyzstan by President Kurmanbek Bakiyev failed miserably. The geopolitical players each time raised the stakes on the closing of the bases. Bakiyev received from Moscow a two billion dollar loan to simply rename the base the “Manas” Transit Center. And he did it to his own advantage; he raised the rent from $ 20 billion to $ 60 billion and demanded from Washington more annual assistance in the sum of 150 million dollars. His son, Maxim was awarded the contract to supply the base with jet fuel. And according to various estimates, this netted the “family” business approximately 170 million dollars per year. However, another Kyrgyz revolution swept him from the presidency, forcing him to flee the country. Neither the U.S. nor Russia offered a helping hand.

Next President of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev, sided with Moscow, however, not without benefits for his country. In exchange for closing the base, Moscow forgave Kyrgyzstan's foreign debt of 500 million dollars and promised to offer military equipment to the value of 1.2 billion dollars (Kyrgyzstan has already received the first shipment of weapons), and in addition build a second hydro-electric station, Kambarata.
Kyrgyzstan also decided to join the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and later join the newly created Eurasian Economic Union. We can assume that this promise to Moscow has been fulfilled.

In early June, there was a ceremony marking the transfer by the Americans of the symbolic key to the military base back to Kyrgyz control. "The returning of these leased lands and leaving this beautiful Kyrgyz Government Center, we recall that Kyrgyzstan has played a strategic role in the international community by supporting transit hub. For more than 12 years, we stood at the gates of Afghanistan, holding the keys to freedom at this center", the base commander said, Colonel John Millard. Transiting through the base enroute to Afghanistan were 5.3 million soldiers and 98% military personnel. Aircraft carried out 33 thousand refueling missions in the skies over Afghanistan.

During the course of the closing ceremony, it was announced that the U.S. military will leave the Government of Kyrgyzstan different infrastructure and equipment for $ 30 million, including buildings, technical and medical equipment.

The page on "American military cooperation" with Kyrgyzstan can now be considered closed. Even more, the Americans themselves say that in connection with the termination of operation "Enduring Freedom", they no longer need the air force base. But they are being wholly disingenuous. By significantly investing in the development of military infrastructure in Central Asia, to be situated in Russia’s and China’s backyard, to have great position for “eavesdropping” and electronic intelligence gathering, to voluntarily quit and leave that, they naturally cannot. The bargaining for the base with President Atambayev was a rather drawn out affair. American emissaries travelled to the country constantly in an attempt to remain. The experts of non-governmental organizations pointed to the fact that withdrawing from the base would be premature, as the situation in Afghanistan remains complicated. The 10,000 military personnel that President Barack Obama plans to keep in the country until 2017 are unlikely to be able to stabilize the situation. The Washington Post in an editorial article called Barack Obama's decision as “self-sabotage” and a “fleeing from Afghanistan”. Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham criticized the State Department's plans, calling them “a monumental mistake,” triumph of politics over strategy” and a “gift to the activity of the Taliban”.

However, the United States has not completely withdrawn from Kyrgyzstan. As has already been mentioned above, the new American embassy in addition to a complex of buildings, mainly located underground at a depth of 28 m, now hosts part of the electronic equipment of the former military base. And according to Alexander Knyazev, about 200 U.S. military personnel have received diplomatic status and are enrolled as embassy staff.

The fact is that the TCH Manas has only “relocated”, says CEO of the analytical center “Strategy East-West”, Dmitry Orlov. “It should also be kept in mind that its intelligence component according to the law of genre is simply obliged to remain in the host country, along with its equipment and specialists. Otherwise one has to think that the U.S. is building the new embassy for the sake of sake of social events and children’s parties”, said Orlov.

"The withdrawal of American troops from Kyrgyzstan poses only one question to Russia now: Does it have enough capacity to protect the republic in the event it is attacked by elements of radical Islamists?"

Judging by some of last year's action, Russia is aware of this threat, otherwise it would have not supplied to Kyrgyzstan military aid. However, all these supplies are meaningful only in the event that they fit exactly the type of war that is now common: that is, all and with everybody. But if something were to occur in Kyrgyzstan similar to events currently unfolding in Ukraine, the resistance militia not stopped sooner in Donetsk and Luhansk. They, apparently, could be stopped only by being completely destroyed. They have nothing to lose”, said Orlov in an interview with Kyrgyz media.

With all this being actively discussed, the main center of the U.S. and NATO military presence was transferred to the south of Kyrgyzstan. “The U.S. and NATO’s primary place of interest is in the Batken Region. USAID funded in Batken the construction of two comfortable hotels (Altyn-Beshik and Altyn-Ordo) equipped with all the necessary means of communication, special-purpose gyms, etc. Officially, the hotels are intended for the promotion of tourism and will be managed by a Kyrgyz company, but they do not run operations and remain only the status of caretaker. In the Batken region there are approximately 50 Western NGOs currently active, mostly British and American. Only in Batken, the U.S. Peace Corps has more than 70 people, mostly American, British, Irish and Canadians … “The head of the Military Department of the OSCE Mission in Bishkek, Ross Brown (a career MI6 officer) in conversations with experts as to why the majority of OSCE activity is focused in the south, answers simply, in the north of Kyrgyzstan there is Russian influence which prevents us”, said Alexander Knyazev.

There is also a fallback position. The Americans are attempting to reverse the situation by actively supporting the
Kyrgyz opposition. In Bishkek in April for meetings with opposition leaders and civil society, the American Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Nisha Desai Bisval, attended. As Kyrgyz experts remark, dialog with local activists have been conducted almost in parallel with Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek promising full support “to strengthen democracy”. Washington would like to see the President of Kyrgyzstan be more loyal to the U.S. Bisval’s visit coincided with the opposition rally in the center of Bishkek, during which, according to rumors, the participants handed “American cookies” in the amount of 1.5 thousand soms (about 30 dollars). In total, the opposition rally cost half a million soms.

Meanwhile, Bishkek has begun think how to use the vacated place on infrastructure and maintenance, for which Bishkek doesn’t have the money. Atambayev has proposed to create on the American base a hub for civil aviation. Russia is interested in the proposal and in particular, the company, Rosneft. But after the Kyrgyz opposition demanded the stop in the sale of Kyrgyz companies to foreign countries, in particular to Russia, Rosneft, cooled on the project.

Turkey has expressed a desire to participate in the reconstruction of the airport, Manas. “We have plans to participate in the creation of a hub at the airport, Manas, and we will conduct appropriate negotiations”, the Turksii Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, remarked on June 4 in Ankara with reporters after talks with Kyrgyz President, Almazbek Atambayev. According to him, “it is the most desirable option for investors to participate in the project” and Turkey has a lot of experience in this field. “Very soon we will begin to build a third airport in Istanbul, and we could do in Manas”, said the Turkish prime minister.

In turn, the president of Kyrgyzstan stated: “American service personnel will leave Manas this week and after that it will truly become a civil airport. Which countries will come to the airport remains unclear, but we would welcome the participation from our partners for joint projects”. He expressed hope that in the near future issues of attracting investors to the development of the airport would be resolved.

All this appears to be somewhat contrived, as the question of who will come to replace the Americans was solved last year when reports surfaced of Turkish companies, Setur and Circo had begun work at the airport. In particular, the construction of a new air navigation complex, which, in addition to meeting the objectives of flight operations, will become a center for a single radar space. In addition to the Manas complex includes 26 radar stations scattered around the country (in areas such as Sary-Tash in the Alai Valley and the Kaji-Say Region in Issyk-Kul, Tokmak).

With this complex operational, it will be possible not only to carry out monitoring of the domestic airspace, but also adjacent areas of China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The date for the completion of construction of the aviation complex is, according to the agreement, scheduled in 2020.

Victoria Panfilova is a columnist for the Nezavisimaya Gazeta and especially for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".