

**AMERICAN MILITARY PRESENCE  
IN KYRGYZSTAN:  
PROBLEMS AND  
POSSIBLE REPERCUSSIONS**  
*(as of June 2007)*

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**1. The U.S. Military Presence  
in Kyrgyzstan in the Context of  
Washington's Foreign Policy**

**T**he Manas airbase was set up in Kyrgyzstan in December 2001 on a temporary basis in connection with the counterterrorist operation launched by the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan. America's powerful information impact presented the terrorist attacks of 9/11 on New York and

Washington as a challenge to the entire civilized world. Osama bin-Laden and al-Qa'eda based on the Taliban-controlled territories of Afghanistan were appointed as the main culprits, which was accepted as a matter of fact even though there has never been and is still no convincing evidence of their involvement. Part of the expert community doubts that this terrorist structure was strong enough to carry out such a large-scale act of terror.

The American side presented a note to the government of Kyrgyzstan on the status of the base and the American military deployed in the country, which was pushed through the parliament by the active efforts of those in the upper echelons of power who supported the project. From that time on, the military was to be treated as administrative and technical personnel of the U.S. embassy in full conformity with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 18 April, 1961. American aircraft and transportation means were exempt from control; the U.S. government, as well as military and civilian personnel, could move personal property, equipment, supplies, materiel, and technology in and out of the republic without inspection or control. They were exempt from customs dues, taxes, and any other types of payment. The U.S. authorities were allowed to use their own telecommunication systems and entire range of supporting radio frequencies.

The Kyrgyz side preferred to keep away from conducting an in-depth legal analysis of the document or reviewing any possible political, economic, strategic, and other repercussions. This meant that from the very beginning the country's leaders and the public were kept in the dark about the American military base and its activities.

Washington skillfully exploited the Kyrgyz leaders' tractability, lack of political will, and pragmatism, as well as the haste with which it decided to allow a foreign country to deploy its military contingent in the republic. Under the guise of the "counterterrorist" operation, the United States raised the issue of deploying its AWACS (airborne warning and control system) E-3 Sentry planes. The plans have not yet been buried: in 2005, NATO Early Warning and Control Force Commander Major General Harry Winterberger publicly announced that in the near future NATO would have to either fly its AWACS planes from afar with refueling or set up bases nearby.<sup>1</sup>

In 2004, the base commanders and the republic's Defense Ministry acting in strict secrecy signed an agreement on renting another stretch of land that extended the base area and its potential.

The loss of its base in Uzbekistan spurred on America's activities in Kyrgyzstan. President Bakiev, who came to power in 2005, seemed to accept America's stronger military presence. His meetings with top American officials (one of them with the State Secretary behind closed doors), who made a habit of visiting the Kyrgyz Republic, ended in an agreement on the continued use of the Manas airbase signed by Condoleezza Rice and Kurmanbek Bakiev.<sup>2</sup> This meant that the president of Kyrgyzstan unilaterally disavowed the Astana SCO Declaration that demanded that the "counterterrorist" coalition should specify the time period within which its military contingents would remain on the territories of SCO members.

## 2. America's New Designs

Late in March 2007, the U.S. embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic presented a note to the Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry and asked for permission to allow all types of aircraft, including fighters and bombers, take off and land at the Manas airbase between April and July within the Enduring Freedom Operation, and *for other purposes*. The Defense Ministry and the National Security State Committee

<sup>1</sup> [<http://www.analitik.kg/politics/2005/08/01/895.htm>], 28 December, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> [<http://www.lenta.ru/news/2005/10/12/base/>], 13 November, 2005.

recommended limiting the use of the base to the 2001 agreement. This time, too, a very narrow circle of officials was informed about America's request and the Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry's answer.

The story did not end there: on 2 May, the Moscow Interfax Information Agency supplied unexpected information received from an employee of one of Kyrgyzstan's special services about the Americans' use of the base for storing low-yield nuclear weapons. The Agency reminded everyone that some time earlier Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, President of Russia's Academy of Geopolitical Problems, had warned that America might use such weapons against Iran.<sup>3</sup>

U.S. Ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic Marie Yovanovitch hastened to dissipate the rumors that nuclear weapons allegedly designed for strikes on Iran were already being stored at the airbase. She insisted that the base was being used as a transshipment point for humanitarian deliveries to Afghanistan. Murat Ashirbekov, who heads the press service of the Defense Ministry of Kyrgyzstan, assured the public that "if even one American aircraft with weapons on board leaves for Iran, this would be discussed in parliament and place the airbase's continued deployment in the republic in jeopardy." "The Americans are fully aware of this," he added.<sup>4</sup>

On 8 May in an interview with Al Arabia, a Dubai satellite TV channel, U.S. Secretary of State Rice, however, confirmed once more that the Bush Administration was not excluding the use of force against the IRI. Two days later, on 10 May, the Middle East News Line referred to diplomatic sources to inform its readers that the American military was in favor of the U.S.'s continued military presence in Kyrgyzstan, which may prove useful during the preparatory stage of air strikes against Iran. The agency also pointed out that the American Air Force had stepped up its activities, "especially at the Manas base."

On 17 May, Associated Press reported that the House of Representatives of the U.S. Congress had declined the bills that banned an attack on Iran without the parliament's consent. On 23 May, Reuters reported that on that day nine American warships (including two aircraft carriers) entered the Persian Gulf for military exercises.

This information pressure stirred up the public of the Kyrgyz Republic.

### 3. Response to the Developments

The Kyrgyz public responded with indignation to information about the possibility of using the Manas airbase to launch a strike against Iran and revived issues connected with previous incidents caused by the American military in Kyrgyzstan.

**The Parliament.** The Zhogorku Kenesh Committee for Defense, Security, Law and Order, and Information Policy chaired by Rashid Tagaev decided to discuss the question of the continued deployment of the American airbase in the republic. This step was prompted by the incident of 6 December, 2006 when an American serviceman, Zachary Hatfield, killed Kyrgyz driver Alexander Ivanov. The Americans ignored the demands of the Kyrgyz authorities and removed Hatfield from the country. Rashid Tagaev declared: "I have no doubts that if hostilities start, the United States will bomb Iran from the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan. We have only one landmark—the Collective Security Treaty Organization—and we should adjust our political course accordingly."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Interfax, 2 May, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> "Minoborony KR: SShA ne namereny ispol'zovat aviabazu 'Manas' dlia nanesenia udarov po Iranu," available at [<http://www.pr.kg/n/detail.php?id=16874>], 11 June, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Here and elsewhere information supplied by the information-analytical agencies of Kyrgyzstan Kabar, Obshchestvenny reiting, AKIpress, 24 kg, and others is used if not stated otherwise.

At an extended sitting attended by the heads of four parliamentary committees, the Zhogorku Kenesh members referred to the Declaration of the Heads of SCO Member States of 5 July, 2005 when they recommended that the parliament “ask the U.S. Congress and Government to specify the date of withdrawal of the American military contingent in the shortest time possible.”

During his Moscow visit, Speaker M. Sultanov invited Russia to return its border guards to Kyrgyzstan and extend the base in Kant.<sup>6</sup> Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee for Interparliamentary Ties and International Relations Karganbeka Samakova called on the parliament to explain to the people of Iran that the forces of the counterterrorist coalition were deployed in the republic in connection with its mission in Afghanistan, and not with operations in other countries.

**Executive Power.** The recent events compelled the executive power to try and revise the conditions of the U.S. continued military presence in Kyrgyzstan.

American Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch was summoned to the Foreign Ministry and asked to complete the investigation of the murder of Kyrgyz citizen A. Ivanov by an American serviceman and of an incident in which an American air servicing vehicle was involved. On the eve of the aforementioned extended sitting, the Foreign Ministry issued a statement that said in part: “Any use of the Manas airbase for purposes outside the Enduring Freedom Operation is unacceptable and will be interpreted as a violation of the relevant agreements.”

The State Agency for Environmental Protection and Forestry under the Kyrgyz Government demanded 20,640,000 soms as compensation for environmental pollution caused by fuel discharged into the air. The Agency insisted that between 2003 and September 2005 there were 12 cases of emergency fuel discharge by American air servicing vehicles totaling approximately 345 tons.

At a closed sitting, the government discussed whether the country was profiting from the continued American presence at the Manas airbase. On the president’s instructions, the government set up an interdepartmental commission to revise some of the clauses of the agreement with the United States in order to take into account Kyrgyzstan’s national interests. The commission analyzed the events and the situation around the military base and elaborated several scenarios for future talks on compensations.

The parliamentarians did not like this. Deputy Iskhak Masaliev told the commission that it “should stop thinking about higher rent, since it could be interpreted as a bribe, a bribe asked by the state.”

The Foreign Ministry’s State Secretary Taalaybek Kydyrov said that the Manas airbase should remain in the country as a facility used by the “counterterrorist” coalition supported by the U.N. Security Council; the country should help the coalition forces to ensure security in Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan in view of narco-threats from certain “extremist religious organizations,” among other things.

Security Council Secretary Tokon Mamytov was of a similar opinion: “The Gansi [now Manas] airbase was set up in the Kyrgyz Republic (in accordance with a U.N. mandate) for the purposes of the counterterrorist struggle in Afghanistan. I should say that since this country is part of the SCO zone of interest, our interests coincide with the U.N.’s interests.”<sup>7</sup> Prime Minister Almazbek Atambaev, in turn, informed journalists that the Manas agreement “is very skillfully drawn up and can essentially not be annulled.”<sup>8</sup>

**The Public.** The Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan started a Movement for Withdrawal of the American Airbase from the Territory of Kyrgyzstan with the self-appointed duty to inform the people

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<sup>6</sup> See: S. Fedorova, I. Plugatarev, “Bishkek otdaet Moskve granitsu,” available at [[http://www.ng.ru/cis/2007-05-23/1\\_bishkek.html?sublist](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2007-05-23/1_bishkek.html?sublist)], 11 June, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> “Tokon Mamytov: Vo vremia zasedania sekretarey Sovbeza ShOS vopros o vyvode aviabazy Gansi iz Kyrgyzstana ne obsuzhdalsia,” available at [<http://www.press-uz.info/ru/content.scm?topicId=2803&contentId=67504>], 11 June, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> “Atambaev: Soglashenie po aviabaze ‘Manas’ prakticheski nevozmozhno rastorgnut,” available at [<http://www.kyrgyznews.kg/news/real/3196>], 11 June, 2007.

about the negative consequences of its deployment in the country; start a joint Kyrgyz-American investigation of all the incidents that had taken place at the base; insist on complete compensation of moral damage and punishment of the person guilty of killing Kyrgyz citizen A. Ivanov; and take all sorts of measures conducive to removing the base from the country. The Movement intended to insist on the above in all ways, including a referendum. The Coordinating Council opened negotiations on concerted actions with the Green, Zhany Kyrgyzstan, and Ata Meken parties, the Movement for Preservation of Kyrgyzstan, and others. Early in May, the Movement joined forces with the Liberal-Progressive Party, the Party of the Communists of Kyrgyzstan and the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan to stage a protest action outside the American embassy.

The Sodruzhestvo Party shared this platform: it announced that the Manas agreement should be annulled because, Deputy Alisher Sabirov argued, the country could stand up to any aggression with the help of its border guards, law-enforcement bodies and the army. Political scientist Toktogul Kakcheev reminded everyone that the country belonged to the CSTO, an organization set up to fight terrorism, extremism, and other threats in the territories of its members.

Alisher Mamasaliev, however, who headed the Civil Platform, accused those politicians who favored immediate removal of the American airbase from the country of sham patriotism. He was convinced that Moscow was stirring up the issue. "The information campaign designed to create a negative image of the Manas airbase," said he, "is Moscow's attempt to retaliate to America's plans to deploy ABM systems in the Czech Republic and Poland."

Tolekan Ismailova, leader of the human rights center Citizens against Corruption, showed more restraint. On the one hand, she sided with the Zhogorku Kenesh committees, on the other, she called for a dialog between the two countries.

**Russia.** CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordiuzha announced that the organization was prepared to discuss Iran's membership.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Secretary of Russia's Security Council Igor Ivanov pointed out: "The very fact that none of the SCO members doubted Bishkek as the host site of the August summit proves that the states trust the president, the leaders, and the political forces of Kyrgyzstan."<sup>10</sup>

**Iran.** The country made no public statements, but on 3 May Ambassador of Iran Mohammad Reza Saburi met Foreign Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic Ednan Karabaev to discuss, according to information agencies, bilateral cooperation in all spheres. Tehran is closely following all American anti-Iranian steps, which means that information published on the eve of the meeting was not ignored.

It follows from the above that:

1. The position of the country's executive branch determined to wring dry the situation is different from that of the parliament which put the withdrawal issue on the agenda.
2. The issue split Kyrgyz society into two camps with a neutral group in-between.
3. Russia, the "main strategic partner," has no clear viewpoint on the American airbase issue and, more important, on its potential use for air strikes against Iran. The other SCO and CSTO partners preferred to ignore the problem and the possibility of its negative impact.

## 4. America's Response

The American embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic took staff members of the presidential and premier administrations, as well as the personnel of several ministries (Defense, Foreign Affairs, Trans-

<sup>9</sup> [<http://www.24news.ru>], 14 May, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Kabar Information Agency, 25 May, 2007.

port and Communications, Finance) and deputies, to the Manas airbase. Accompanied by Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch, they visited the passenger and cargo terminals and fitness center and watched the takeoff of servicing vehicle C-17 Globemaster III.

In numerous interviews, Ms. Yovanovitch diligently refuted information about the base's possible use against Iran. She never tired of listing the advantages Kyrgyzstan was reaping from the U.S.'s military presence on its territory; and made a point of drawing attention to the financial aid America had already rendered the republic. She was especially eloquent when talking about how the \$150 million the U.S. promised in 2006 had been allotted in full. She did not miss the chance to point out that the sum included not only the rent, but also funds intended for other programs being implemented in the republic with American assistance.

The American ambassador commented on the parliamentary discussions of the advisability of the airbase's continued deployment at the Manas Airport. Speaking on the eve of the decisive parliamentary sitting, she expressed her hope that the debates would be constructive and pointed out: "From the very first day of the airbase's existence, the number of terrorist attacks on Kyrgyzstan has diminished. This happened because the coalition has been carrying out activity to combat the terrorists in Afghanistan. Terrorists could no longer move to the Kyrgyz borders and cross over into the country. This means that the base primarily serves the republic's interests."

Ms. Yovanovitch made a brave attempt at vindicating the American side, which moved Zachary Hatfield, who killed a Kyrgyz citizen, back to the United States. She argued that this was done with the Kyrgyz side's consent: "We were in close contact with the government of Kyrgyzstan about Z. Hatfield's departure from the republic," said she. She went on to say that he had not been released from responsibility but should remain under U.S. jurisdiction. In an effort to reduce the tension, the U.S. Defense Secretary offered A. Ivanov's widow \$55,000 in compensation.

## 5. Summaries and Conclusions

The information that the Manas airbase might be used for launching air strikes against Iran, fanned by the media and encouraged by official sources, increased the country's conflict potential. The executive and legislative branches cannot agree on the issue; society is likewise split into two camps.

The anti-American wave rose too high for America's comfort: its state structures had to act promptly to neutralize the negative effects. An excursion to the airbase, which brought together bureaucrats and deputies, was one such step. The American ambassador did not spare words when describing the positive aspects of the base's continued deployment on Kyrgyz soil, while the widow of the murdered driver was offered compensation.

Much was done to strengthen America's position in the top echelons of power: problems were discussed with top bureaucrats, much was said about the bright prospects of bilateral cooperation and the "negative" consequences of withdrawal of the base, which would put the damper on bilateral cooperation.

Other levers were also used:

- The republic's financial and economic dependence on the World Bank and the IMF;
- The high corruption level in the country;
- The agencies of state and nongovernmental structures and other American organizations working unhampered in Kyrgyzstan;
- The wide network of U.S.-controlled NGOs.

The absence of a more or less clear response from the SCO and CSTO strengthened America's position; it continued to increase its influence on the republic's leaders and press for advantageous decisions.

The question is why did Washington start this "game" at all, and why did it strengthen its air group in the Kyrgyz Republic?

Indeed, the United States has airdromes in Kandahar, Kabul, and Bagram at its disposal with a more than ample number of bombers to deliver surgical strikes against the Taliban's scattered small units. In fact the Taliban has no aviation, therefore fighters are obviously not needed in Afghanistan. Iran, on the other hand, has aviation and enough identified targets to attract bombers, if we can trust the information leaking from the Pentagon.

Today, however, Washington can no longer use military force outside the U.N. SC (this happened in Afghanistan, Sudan in 1989, and Yugoslavia in 2000): neither Russia nor China (two states with the right of veto) would consent to this.

Second, not everyone in the United States agrees with the Administration's aggressive foreign policy.

Third, according to its military doctrine, the U.S. can be engaged in two local wars at the same time. It is already bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq. A strike on Iran would invite retaliation; this means another armed conflict for the United States that would exhaust its resources even more. Washington is fully aware of this.

From this it follows that the current demonstration of aggressive intentions is designed to put pressure on Tehran to force it to abandon its nuclear program and cut back its support of terrorists in Iraq and elsewhere.

The United States might imitate an attack on Iran to provoke a response and the use of force. The Iranian leaders have repeatedly stated that they will launch a retaliatory strike on the site from which the country is attacked. It is 1,500 km from the Iranian border to Bishkek as the crow flies, which means that the medium-range (2,000 km) solid-fuel Shehab-3 missiles used by the Iranian armed forces will easily reach Kyrgyzstan. "The missiles with sub-projectile warheads that use stealth technology to make them invisible and, therefore, impossible to intercept will upset the balance of forces in the region."<sup>11</sup>

Manas is the only U.S. base in Central Eurasia, which America uses for strategic purposes and to control the gas and oil flows in the region. A preliminary agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan about a new gas pipeline along the Caspian coast made the base especially important. The new project could reduce America's efforts to lay a gas pipeline across the Caspian, bypassing Russia, to naught. No wonder Samuel Bodman, U.S. Energy Secretary, called on the European states "to pay special attention to this agreement."<sup>12</sup>

A negative alternative cannot be excluded either. The American president is rapidly losing his popularity outside the United States and at home. According to the Novosti Information Agency, the latest public opinion poll, the results of which were published in Washington on 24 May, revealed that "in the last month the share of Americans who look at the war in Iraq as a failure increased by 10 percent to reach a record 76 percent."<sup>13</sup>

This means that the U.S. president might take rash steps to restore his low job approval rate.

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<sup>11</sup> "Iran ispytal kassetnuiu 'stealth' raketu," available at [<http://www.cnews.ru/news/line/index.shtml?2006/03/31/198886>], 12 June, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> *Vedomosti*, 15 May, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> "George Bush predskazyvaet 'krovavy avgust' v Irake," Kabar Information Agency, 25 May, 2007.

## 6. Possible Scenarios

The situation might develop according to three scenarios.

■ **Scenario 1. *The United States manages to extend the time of its deployment in Kyrgyzstan until completion of the “counterterrorist” operation in Afghanistan due to the following circumstances:***

- The president of Kyrgyzstan supports America’s military presence in the country;
- The Cabinet badly needs American aid to patch the budget holes with the help of American funding and grants, the larger part of which are intended for the country’s administrative structures;
- The pro-presidential majority in the parliament, which came to the fore during in the events of the winter and spring of 2007;
- Support of the United States by a large part of the politically active population that lives on American money anyway;
- A large state debt to international financial institutions patronized by the United States;
- No clear negative response to America’s military presence in Kyrgyzstan from allies in the regional organizations.

■ **Scenario 2. *Kyrgyzstan limits America’s military presence to a specific deadline.***

This can be realized if:

- The executive and legislative powers reach a compromise whereby those deputies who want to remove the base manage to build up a majority;
- The executive and legislative powers reach an agreement designed to prevent mass violence if society splits into irreconcilable friends and foes of America’s continued military presence;
- Third countries help Kyrgyzstan pay off its state debts;
- The SCO and CSTO allies demonstrate their negative attitude toward America’s military presence in the Kyrgyz Republic.

■ **Scenario 3. *Kyrgyzstan comes to the conclusion that it does not need military personnel and military facilities on its territory and annuls the agreement with the United States.***

This requires a radically changed position on the part of the president and the Cabinet; it can be realized if:

- The parliament becomes even more stringently opposed to America’s military presence and wins wide social support;
- The Movement for Withdrawal of the American Airbase from the Territory of Kyrgyzstan gains mass support;
- Interested states or organizations buy off Kyrgyzstan’s foreign debts;
- The SCO and CSTO allies build up their pressure.

Under Scenario 1, the U.S. will never relieve its pressure on Kyrgyzstan to achieve prompt qualitative and quantitative expansion of its military presence in the republic. The U.S. will use it as a factor of influence on the political and military-political situation in Central Eurasia and the contiguous regions. As the experience of siting AMB elements in the Czech Republic and Poland has shown,



the United States will move forward aggressively and resolutely, while inventing and applying any levers it might find useful to destroy the SCO and CSTO.

Consolidation of the interests of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan in the oil and gas sphere (when the main pipelines to China and the EU across Russia, not across the Caucasus, are commissioned) could jolt the United States into feverish efforts to draw the local countries into the sphere of its interests.

The United States could act “asymmetrically” in Central Eurasia, South Asia, and the Middle East to adjust the current situation to America’s interests. We should bear in mind that in the past the United States has frequently refused to fulfill its foreign policy obligations under the pretext that due to the changed circumstances its promises no longer fit its security interests.

The Iranian problem is not the White House’s only concern; in the near future it will busy itself with the regime change in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, two SCO and CSTO members. The United States will use this fact to “promote democracy” in these countries, build new political architecture, and achieve a new balance of forces. The documentary *Bringing Down a Dictator*, the bible of “color revolutionaries,” has been already translated into Uzbek.

More likely than not, Kyrgyzstan will become a target of all kinds of sanctions and embargoes imposed by its regional allies. There are the first signs of this.

China, very worried about America’s military presence in the Kyrgyz Republic, has been increasing its investments in Tajikistan, which have already become much larger than its economic help to Kyrgyzstan. America’s greater military presence in the Kyrgyz Republic might divert the Chinese commodity flows to other countries. We all know that a large part of the population survives by selling cheap Chinese commodities. It is no secret that there is a Kazakhstan reshipment point of Chinese consumer goods forty kilometers away from the similar Bishkek Dordoy market, which is idling.

Moscow is growing increasingly irritated by Washington’s strategic designs in the region. The Russian president is becoming more critical of the United States, especially of the deployment of ABM elements in Europe. The Russian Federation might take “asymmetric” measures to oust the United States from Central Eurasia; as one of the measures Russians might be advised not to employ labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan.

Kazakhstan, which has already posed itself as the regional leader, is unlikely to abandon China and Russia: they are mutually interested in one another, particularly in the oil and gas sphere.

This will inevitably force Kyrgyzstan to either become an American satellite completely dominated by its patron or remain a member of the regional organizations. Surrounded by SCO and CSTO members, Kyrgyzstan will be forced either to limit the time the American base will function in the country or close it down altogether. This may happen if the neighbors and their allies act concertedly and actively.

Under the second and third scenarios, the U.S. administration will use its military presence to put pressure on the Kyrgyz government to readjust the situation. The Americans know that the Manas airbase, with its current international legal status, is the only strategically advantageous military toe-hold in the region. They will use every available political and military-political tool, even going as far as a regime change if the leaders go against American interests, to remain in the country.

However, the two latter scenarios will help fortify Kyrgyzstan’s allied ties, which will ensure security, political stability, and economic development. To achieve this, the SCO and CSTO allies should extend real aid to the country, which means freedom from financial dependence on the IMF and the WB.