

## U.S.-KYRGYZSTAN: PARTNERS IN DIFFERENT WEIGHT DIVISIONS

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### The Military-Political Sphere

As soon as Kyrgyzstan became an independent state, its relations with the United States in the military-political sphere moved ahead at a slack pace mainly because the “island of democracy,” as the country was perceived in Central Asia, was too small and too poor economically to be contemplated as a strategic partner first by the Clinton and later by the George W. Bush Administration.

However, the Kyrgyz Republic’s consistent and positive foreign policy with respect to the U.S. contributed to the positive dynamics of their bilateral relations in all spheres. Thus, in the military-political sphere, all related government structures, the Defense Ministry in particular, invariably took part (with Washington’s support) in all of the West’s military-political events and profited from all types of military-technical aid extended by the U.S. and/or the EU.

Bilateral military-political contacts developed within NATO as well: as soon as Kyrgyzstan and NATO signed the Partnership for Peace Program with the White House’s direct support on 1 June, 1994, Kyrgyzstan had the opportunity to take part in NATO’s other important programs. The U.S. strengthened its position across the post-Soviet expanse when Kyrgyzstan (in December 1997), as well as other CIS countries, joined the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). This was highly conducive to its effective cooperation with NATO members, the U.S. in particular, in the international and regional security sphere. America pays the lion’s share to the two countries’ joint military planning and Kyrgyzstan’s defense budget. By the end of 2005, annual foreign military aid to Kyrgyzstan’s security system topped \$8 million.

NATO and the United States as its member initiated other measures within the Partnership for Peace Program. A peacekeeping battalion Centrazbat was set up; its activities included annual training exercises and multi-national non-military projects. The latter included the Virtual Silk Highway, which would give all academic and educational establishments Internet access, and Coping with Ecological Problems for the Sake of the Central Asian Countries Sustainable Development. Since 1999, the Defense Ministry of the Kyrgyz Republic has been involved in two purely American programs (Military Activities in Mountains and Special Purpose Forces) implemented outside NATO.

The 9/11 events began another phase of American foreign policy and military activities in relation to the Taliban, which Washington accused of being directly involved in the terrorist act. Central Asia found itself in the center of new developments which launched another and probably qualitatively new stage of political relations between Central Asia and the United States. In other words,

9/11 and the counterterrorist operation of the international coalition forced the George W. Bush Administration to revise its former foreign policy ideas about Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors. They became part of America's geopolitical priorities.

This changed the balance of power in the region, which previously had been the sphere of Russian and Chinese political interests. Kyrgyzstan, which in the past was much more willing than its neighbors to embrace Western democratic standards, became one of the most likely candidates for the role of America's regional outpost.

In the wake of 9/11, the military component came to the fore in the relations between the two countries. On 14 December, 2001, the coalition forces set up an auxiliary military base to support its counterterrorist operation—one of the most important factors in this sphere. Under the original agreement signed in December 2001, the annual rent the United States paid for the territory used for military purposes was about \$52 million. Prolongation and ratification by Bishkek and Washington of the agreements on the Ganshi military base stationed at Manas civilian airport aroused a lot of concern in Moscow and Beijing and triggered a series of practical military-political measures in Central Asia within the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the SCO.

Several years later, on 5 July, 2005 at the Astana SCO summit, the rest of the members of the Shanghai Six staunchly demanded that Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan should set precise dates for the withdrawal of U.S. military bases from their territories. This meant an end to America's military presence in the region. The demands were prompted by the end of the active phase of the counterterrorist operation.

To counterbalance the political pressure on Kyrgyzstan, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld came to Bishkek on 25 July, twenty days after the Astana summit. The sides signed an agreement under which Kyrgyzstan received another \$200 million in nonrefundable aid from the United States; in February 2006, Bishkek offered new conditions for use of the Ganshi airbase and raised the rent.

Today, Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy, based on the principles of multi-vector diplomacy, has acquired special importance in the Kyrgyzstan-U.S.-SCO triangle.

On the whole, the military-political relations between the Kyrgyz Republic and the United States are the best possible model of relations between partners in different weight divisions working together for regional security. Each of the sides pursues its own strategic interests. This is a system of disinterested material-technical, financial, consultative, information, educational, etc. aid extended to the junior partner. The United States, acting as Kyrgyzstan's donor, has voluntarily shouldered responsibility for the country's and region's security.

## Development of a Democratic Society

America's greater geopolitical involvement in Central Asia caused by the counterterrorist campaign in Afghanistan has forced the United States to more actively contribute to the domestic policies of the local states and the protection of democratic rights and freedoms in them. The U.S. Administration was especially concerned with authoritarianism and corruption, political and legal persecution of independent media and human rights organizations, obvious irregularities, and abuse of the administrative resource during election campaigns, in short, with everything that kept the local presidents in their posts for many years.

The U.S. is doing its best on a grand scale to plant and develop democratic standards in the new Central Asian states. Late in 2002, Washington expressed its profound displeasure, based on the

ports supplied by the OSCE Election Observation Mission, with the numerous flagrant violations of the election process initiated by the republican authorities during the parliamentary and presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan. The United States, together with other countries and international institutions, repeatedly spoke out in support of Kyrgyzstan's independent media as a victim of unjustified political and legal persecution. Starting in the mid-1990s, Kyrgyzstan gradually lost its prestige as "an island of democracy" in Central Asia.

On the whole, during the years of independence Kyrgyzstan has acquired considerable (most) aid from the United States in the form of easy loans, grants, and humanitarian goods. According to the U.S. Department of State, between 1992 and late 2005 the country received \$792.2 million in American aid; \$120.7 million in the form of grants for NGOs, and independent media were used to support the democratic changes in the republic. The White House mostly concentrated on NGOs engaged in the protection of human rights, the environment, and social aid to the disabled, pensioners, and children.

This aid is distributed by USAID through American NGOs which won tenders to carry out U.S. government programs. Today, there are over 40 American NGOs and business structures, some of them well known throughout the world (the Counterpart Consortium, the Eurasia Foundation, the National Democratic Institute, the National Republican Institute, the U.S. Embassy Democracy Commission), engaged in promoting democratic standards through grants to local NGOs. The Soros Foundation or, rather, Soros-Kyrgyzstan, its republican branch, is one of the largest and most efficient among all similar structures. It has done a lot to support the local educational system by publishing textbooks and teaching aids for schools and higher educational establishments, as well as definitive works by local academics.

The year 2005 marked the highest point in the country's domestic policies when massive power-inspired violations of the election procedure in February and March triggered serious conflicts between the opposition and the country's leaders. The international community, the American Embassy in particular, was forced to respond to the numerous incidents of unprecedented violations which came to light during the election campaign and on election day. Wide-scale falsifications of the election results everywhere caused an open conflict between the leaders of Kyrgyzstan and the United States.

It was then president of Kyrgyzstan Askar Akaev who initiated the conflict: on 2 February, speaking at the opening session of the pro-presidential youth action Men-Kyrgyzstan, he openly accused U.S. Ambassador Stephen Young of interfering in Kyrgyzstan's domestic affairs. The president accused the White House, without much evidence, of staging the Color Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. It was President Akaev's closest circle that published false, allegedly classified, information about the American Embassy's attempt to stage (and pay for) a Color Revolution in Kyrgyzstan.

Still, the United States allocated \$650,000 for the parliamentary election in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan to fund training programs for the local election commissions and finger marking equipment; about \$150,000 was spent on training independent observers. Between January and March 2005, NGOs and independent media received over \$1 million for these purposes; throughout 2005, the U.S. Department of State and other American agencies spent over \$2.5 million on supporting democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

In addition, the White House helped to publish the new Election Code, supply the Central Election Commission with new equipment, and extend its material and consultative support to other spheres of national legislation, such as human rights, including the rights of ethnic minorities, freedom of speech and the press, and freedom of conscience. More than 80 activists from Kyrgyz NGOs, headed by the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society NGO, went to Ukraine as international observers of the

presidential election in November-December 2004 on money supplied by the U.S. National Democratic Institute and the ENEMO.

By late 2004, the conflict between the government and independent media had reached boiling point. President Akaev's personal efforts to close down or suspend publication of two independent newspapers, *Respublika* and *MSN*, printed in the print shop set up by Freedom House, a well-known American human rights organization, negatively affected the relations between the two countries.

In his interview, U.S. Ambassador S. Young said that the Tulip Revolution was openly welcomed. "What happened today (on 24 March.—*M.K.*) concerns the Kyrgyz people and their decisions, yet the United States is proud to have assisted the process."

Washington's efforts to plant democracy, promote the democratic changes, and bring to light violations in the countries to which it extended financial aid played an important yet indirect role in the regime change in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. Throughout the years of its independence, the republic has acquired over 6,000 NGOs actively contributing to the emergence of a civil society. On the other hand, they obviously depend on foreign, including American, money. There is the opinion that many of them are engaged in issues that have the promise of foreign grants, rather than in issues of national importance.

On 25 March, 2006, the U.S. Embassy issued a statement in which it expressed its serious concern over the internal developments in Kyrgyzstan, in particular, more active involvement of the criminal community in the political processes and the efforts of its members to legalize themselves by joining the power structures. The embassy pointed out that the president and the government should take urgent, but legal preventive measures.

## Humanitarian Initiatives and Support of the Economic Reforms

On the whole, by late 2005, the United States had extended a total of \$286.7 million in humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan.

Since mid-1992, Kyrgyzstan has been and remains one of the recipients of humanitarian aid within the Food for Progress and Government to Government programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This aid consists of grain (rice included), oil, and soybean deliveries. The money earned from selling them is spent on developing local agriculture. The same department is engaged in the Kohran Scholarship program designed to upgrade the skills of those engaged in agriculture.

The current humanitarian programs are realized through the Humanitarian Transportation Program of the U.S. government, while the U.S. Department of Agriculture is cooperating with *Merci Corps International* which distributes the foodstuff the department supplies to schools, hospitals, and orphanages.

USAID and the U.S. ambassador are working together within a program to support the economic reforms in Kyrgyzstan; since 1992, Washington, acting through USAID, endorsed and realized financial and economic aid and reform programs for a total of \$201.3 million.

It should be said though that bilateral relations have not reached the desired level because of Kyrgyzstan's geographic location and low export potential. America, in turn, sends food, medicine, grain produce, and processing equipment to Kyrgyzstan.

In May 2000, the U.S. Congress annulled the discriminatory Jackson-Vanik amendment of 1974; in 1998, Kyrgyzstan joined the WTO. This is expected to promote its bilateral trade contacts with the United States still further.

## *C o n c l u s i o n s*

Under the conditions of geopolitical rivalry between the United States, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other, Kyrgyzstan as participant with much less weight is out to preserve a common cooperation field both within the emerging Western security model in Central Asia and the SCO. American aid, which covers all spheres, is helping to maintain long-term military and political cooperation between Bishkek and Washington, in which the Gansi military base is the main compromise.

The United States greatly influenced the developments which reached their climax in March 2005 through its numerous grants to the local NGOs during the parliamentary election. It forced and will continue to force the elite to heed American initiatives and advice related to democratic standards. The NGOs and media, as well as American money will play an active role in the process.

At the same time, the republic's geographic location, the large distances that separate the two countries, as well as Kyrgyzstan's low economic potential will not promote bilateral trade or economic and humanitarian contacts, at least in the near future. At the same time, a better financial and credit infrastructure will undoubtedly attract more American investments, yet so far and in future this sphere will be dominated by humanitarian aid.