

**Written Statement
of
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to
The House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs
April 22, 2010**

"Crisis in Kyrgyzstan: Fuel, Contractors, and Revolution along the Afghan Supply Chain"

Thank you Mister Chairman, Ranking Member Flake, and Subcommittee Members for the opportunity to speak about US-Kyrgyz relations and the country of Kyrgyzstan, which I have been studying for the last two decades. My testimony is based in part on interviews that I conducted with three dozen members of the Kyrgyz opposition during the last two years. Many of those interviewees have now assumed prominent posts in the new government, and I have spent time with all of the members of the new six-person collective leadership except General Isakov.

Kyrgyzstan: Country Background

Kyrgyzstan is a small, mountainous country in Central Asia with a population of just over 5 million people. There are several ethnic groups indigenous to the country, the largest of which are the Kyrgyz (65 percent), and the Uzbeks (14 percent). Russians and other Slavic groups moved into the region in the late 19th century with the tsarist conquest of the territory, and a large influx of Russians occurred during the Soviet era, when Kyrgyzstan was one of the 15 republics of the USSR. However, the collapse of the USSR led to a significant exodus of Russians and other Slavs, and Russians now account for about 13 percent of the population.

Although there was considerable inter-ethnic tension in the period of transition from communist to post-communist rule, the most serious conflict in recent years has been between ethnic Kyrgyz living in the north and the south. Separated by towering mountains that are impassable for part of the year, these two regions have developed somewhat different cultures, with the North more heavily

influenced by Russia and the West and the South by Uzbekistan and the Islamic world.

During the first 14 years of the post-communist era, Kyrgyzstan was ruled by a northern president, Askar Akaev, but he was overthrown in the Tulip Revolution of March 2005, an event that was led by southerners who believed that they had been excluded from political and economic power. For the first year and half after the Tulip Revolution of 2005, the country was governed by a "tandem," with a president from the south, Kurmanbek Bakiev, and a prime minister from the south, Felix Kulov. This arrangement broke down, however, at the end of 2006, and the period that followed witnessed a dramatic concentration of power in the hands of Bakiev's family members and other southerners and an unprecedented reliance on repression as a method of rule.

The Enabling Role of the United States in the Bakiev Dictatorship

We are here today because the United States tried to please a dictator. Difficult decisions have to be made in wartime, but our embrace of the Bakiev regime in Kyrgyzstan was far tighter than it needed to be in order to retain our basing rights in the country. This became clear to me when I began interviewing opposition leaders in Kyrgyzstan in July 2008. They complained that for the first time in the post-communist era, they had been cut off from contact with the US Embassy in Bishkek. In late April 2009, the opposition candidate for president, Almaz Atambaev, told me that neither he nor other opposition politicians had been able to arrange a meeting with the US ambassador, even though she had been in her post for over a year. Atambaev was by no means a radical politician; he was a former prime minister who had a successful career in business. He is now one of the leaders of the interim government.

I heard the same refrain of isolation from the heads of NGOs in Bishkek: they had become untouchables in the eyes of the United States Government. These NGO leaders were smart, energetic, and anxious to take their country in a liberalizing direction. With the US Embassy out of the picture, the Russian Embassy in Bishkek began to step into the breach, and for the first time Russian diplomats started to cultivate contacts in the Western-oriented NGO community.

The Manas airbase granted President Bakiev a kind of get-out-of-jail free card with the US. Not only did the United States help to enrich his family with lucrative contracts from the base, but in most cases we were willing to overlook the brutality that had driven the opposition and the broader population to the point of desperation. To be sure, the State Department continued to publish its annual human rights report, which contained evidence of wrongdoing by the regime, but this document seemed to go unnoticed in Washington. For Bakiev, the most welcome international reaction to last summer's deeply flawed presidential election in Kyrgyzstan was the muted and delayed response of the US government. It's important to remember that the elections in Iran were far more competitive last year than those in Kyrgyzstan.

The Manas Airbase and Russian-American Competition over Kyrgyzstan

In February 2009 President Bakiev received a pledge of over \$2 billion in aid from Russia in exchange for a promise to expel Western forces from the Manas airbase. The Russian Government denies that there was a quid pro quo, but Bakiev announced his intent to expel Western forces while he was in Moscow, having just received the grant from President Medvedev. However, American acquiescence to the consolidation of authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan brought its desired reward a few weeks before the Kyrgyz presidential election of July 2009. In an about-face, the government of Kyrgyzstan agreed to extend the lease on the NATO base for another year. In exchange for this staging point for operations in Afghanistan, it appeared that the United States would pay handsomely. The annual fees for leasing rights were tripled, and the Russians, who already had a military base near the Kyrgyz capital, were promised a new facility, this one an "anti-terrorist center" near the southern city of Osh in the Ferghana Valley region. This center was to operate within the framework of the Shanghai Co-operation Agreement, to which Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, and other Central Asian states were signatories.

The opening of a base in Osh had the potential to destabilize further the fertile Ferghana Valley, one of the world's most densely populated and explosive regions. Divided among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, the Ferghana Valley has long been an incubator of political and religious radicalism, and it is now a breeding ground for clandestine organizations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation). Where the IMU seeks

to trigger a popular uprising through armed attacks directed at the government of Uzbekistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir has developed in southern Kyrgyzstan a mass underground party whose alleged commitment to non-violence does not square with its religious intolerance.

Bakiev seemed to believe that a base in the south would serve as a shield for Kyrgyzstan against these militant groups and against Kyrgyzstan's larger neighbor, Uzbekistan, which had shown little respect for Kyrgyz sovereignty over the years. However, before negotiations with Russia could be finalized on the new base, the United States intervened to acquire its own "anti-terrorist center" in the Kyrgyz south. In early March 2010, Bishkek and Washington reached agreement on the opening of an American anti-terrorist facility in the south, near the city of Batken. Within weeks, Russia had thrown in its lot with the opposition. The president of one of Eurasia's smallest countries had played two of the world's great powers off each other, and he paid the price.

The Causes of the April 2010 Revolution

A normally fragmented political opposition in Kyrgyzstan began to unite in 2008 for purposes of self-preservation. Politically-inspired murders, arrests, and physical intimidation encouraged the members of the opposition to advance a unity candidate for president in the July 2009 election and to plan the overthrow of President Bakiev on election day. It was their expectation that the population, frustrated by the harshness of Bakiev's rule and the fraudulent character of elections, would rise up against the leader. Although there were a few demonstrations in northern cities in July 2009, the election passed without serious incident.

Barely nine months later, in April 2010, the opposition planned a similar uprising, this one to coincide with the holding of traditional Kyrgyz assemblies (*kurultai*) in the country's major cities. In the Western city of Talas, the organizers of the kurultai began their meeting a day early, and at this point the authorities stepped in to try to break up the assembly. A battle then ensued between demonstrators and police, with the governor's office in the region changing hands between demonstrators and the authorities over the course of the evening. This event prompted the Bakiev administration to begin rounding up leaders of the opposition in the capital of Bishkek.

The news of these arrests spread to Bishkek and outraged the gathering crowds in the capital, whose numbers and boldness appeared to grow by the minute. As the crowds sought to break through the iron gates of the presidential palace, the president's brother, Janybek, reportedly gave troops the order to fire. Snipers located on rooftops surrounding Ala-Too Square began to pick off demonstrators, most of them young men with few prospects in life.

Remarkably, the crowds did not disperse. As one colleague relayed to me, young Kyrgyz men simply stared down the bullets like zombies as others were killed and wounded around them. With the dead now numbering in the dozens and the wounded in the hundreds, the crowd seized the less well-defended parliament building north of the main square, and then, after commandeering trucks and armored personnel carriers, began a final assault on the Kyrgyz White House.

Apparently fearful of holding the leaders of the opposition as the battle for the country reached a tipping point, the police released them into the maelstrom that was sweeping through the capital. With the White House burning in the distance, opposition leaders met in the looted parliament building to form a new, interim government led by Roza Otunbaeva, Almaz Atambaev, Ismail Isakov, Omurbek Tekebaev, Temir Sariyev, and Azimbek Beknazarov .

Name	Region of Origin	Professional Background	Portfolio
Roza Otunbaeva (Chair)	Talas (North)	Diplomat	General
Almazbek Atambaev	Chui (North)	Business	Economics
Azimbek Beknazarov	Jalal-Abad (South)	Prosecutor	Law
Ismail Isakov	Osh (South)	Military	Military
Temir Sariyev	Chui (North)	Business	Finance
Omurbek Tekebaev	Jalal-Abad (South)	Teacher/Party Work	Constitutional Drafting

Why did the planned uprising succeed in April 2010 where it had failed in July 2009? It was the same population, the same opposition, the same tactics, and there was not even a de-legitimizing election in April to mobilize the crowds. Certainly, economic conditions were harsher this year: tens if not hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers had returned home from Russia and Kazakhstan to no jobs; a brutal winter had just ended and given way to the spring demonstration season; and the government had imposed dramatic increases in

utility rates on a population that was already living at the margins. Moreover, President Bakiev had granted even more power to his son and seemed to be preparing a dynastic succession.

But the spark for this already volatile mixture was the decision of Russia to destabilize the Bakiev regime. The first overt signal of Russia's support for an insurrection came on March 23, when state-controlled television from Moscow, widely-watched in Kyrgyzstan, broadcast a report that was critical, for the first time, of the cronyism and nepotism of President Bakiev. A week later, Russia imposed a tariff on the export of petroleum products to Kyrgyzstan, which eroded further the already low living standards of the Kyrgyz. It is no surprise, then, that Prime Minister Putin was the first foreign leader to congratulate the Kyrgyz people on their successful revolution.

Putting the Manas Base Crisis in Context

In spite of our numerous concessions to the Bakiev regime, the recently-vented anger of Kyrgyz leaders and ordinary citizens over the airbase does not reflect an inherently anti-American sentiment in the country. It derives instead from a sense that the United States betrayed its own principles, and the forces of change in Kyrgyzstan, in order to curry favor with a despotic ruler who held the key to the airbase. It also reflects popular frustration with a decade-long history of Kyrgyz presidents selling or leasing pieces of the country's territory to the highest foreign bidder. These bidders have included Russia, Kazakhstan, China, Uzbekistan, and the US.

In the case of China and Kazakhstan, unequal treaties involving land transfers have helped to undermine the authority of the Kyrgyzstani regime itself. In 1999, Kyrgyzstan lost 250,000 acres to China in a new delimitation of the Sino-Kyrgyz border, a concession that was attributed by some members of the opposition to the acceptance of bribes from Beijing by President Akaev and a senior member of his cabinet. The outrage following this deal would ultimately lead to the jailing of a prominent critic, Azimbek Beknazarov, who is now a member of Kyrgyzstan's Interim Government. A subsequent attack by police on Beknazarov's supporters was one of the bloodiest confrontations in the post-communist era.

Only slightly less unpopular was the ceding of four tourist resorts on the northern shore of Lake Issyk-Kul', well inside Kyrgyzstani territory, to the government of Kazakhstan in order to pay off debts. There was also an attempt by the Kyrgyz government in the early 2000s to cede strategically important territory in the Ferghana Valley to neighboring Uzbekistan in order to reduce tension with its authoritarian leader, Islam Karimov. However, this concession, negotiated by Kurmanbek Bakiev when he was prime minister, had to be shelved because of a popular backlash. As noted earlier, Kyrgyzstan has also granted a long-term lease on a military base to Russia, which has troops near the city of Kant, on the other side of the capital from the Western base in Manas.

Thus, the granting of base privileges at Manas to Western forces must be seen in the framework of this unsavory tradition of Kyrgyz presidents selling and leasing territory to enrich themselves or to advance narrow foreign policy goals. From the perspective of many Kyrgyz leaders and citizens, this selling of the state, and auctioning off of Kyrgyz bases to the highest bidder, has led to a kind of "de-sovereignization" of the country. As a result, in a more democratic environment, one can expect very difficult negotiations over the future of the airbase at Manas.

The Future of US-Kyrgyz Relations and the Manas Airbase

The Interim Government in Kyrgyzstan faces numerous challenges, including the most basic one of restoring order to a country where power had been in the streets only two weeks ago. It is vital that the interim government consolidate its authority throughout the country. The airbase cannot function properly against the backdrop of sporadic civil unrest, never mind a civil war. The country remains deeply divided along north-south lines, and pockets of resistance to the revolution remain in the south. Because the revolution was made in the north by northerners, and because the former president is a southerner, there is great concern in the south that the interests of this historically disadvantaged region will not be fully represented in Bishkek. The 6-person interim government has made a good start by including three leaders from the south in its ranks.

Second, "who rules Kyrgyzstan and how" will be determined in the next six months by the enactment of a new constitution and the holding of new elections. The new constitution is likely to strip the presidency of much of its power and strengthen the parliament. This should make politics more competitive, but it

may also complicate future negotiations over the airbase. The US administration may need to gain the support of a coalition of parties instead of a single individual.

As elections grow closer, the tensions within the collective leadership will increase because the focus of the rulers will shift from governing to campaigning for their party (or for the presidency). It is at this point that the system is likely to be at its most fragile, and there will be the greatest temptation for certain Kyrgyz politicians to use the airbase at Manas as a whipping boy in order to advance their own electoral prospects. Already, Omurbek Tekebaev has harshly criticized the United States for its "double standards" in the Bakiev era with regard to human rights in its own country and in Kyrgyzstan. Another member of the Interim Government, Azimbek Beknazarov, stated on April 17 that he finds the stationing of Western forces on Kyrgyz territory "unjustified," though he noted a final decision about the airbase had not been taken.

It is in the interest of the United States to have a thorough and early airing of our misdeeds with regard to the base and the Bakiev regime. We do not want the next elections in Kyrgyzstan to be swayed by an October surprise that could reveal embarrassing details of our earlier policy toward the country. I welcome, therefore, the committee's efforts to investigate our policies toward the Bakiev regime. I also welcome the early signs from the administration that we will be pursuing a new strategy of engagement with governments **and** societies in Central Asia.

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Recent works by Eugene Huskey on Kyrgyzstan

"If You Want to Understand Kyrgyzstan, Read This," *Salon*, April 9, 2010 [5500 word essay on Kyrgyzstan's path to the April 2010 Revolution]

http://www.salon.com/news/kyrgyzstan/index.html?story=/news/feature/2010/04/09/guide_to_kyrgyzstan_uprising

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"Pushing the 'Reset' Button with Russia's Neighbors," *St. Petersburg [FL] Times*, July 23, 2009. <http://www.tampabay.com/opinion/essays/article1020813.ece>

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<http://www.chinaeurasia.org/images/stories/isdp-cefq/CEFQ200811/fpvskmegp2008115-18.pdf>

"Eurasian Semi-Presidentialism? The Development of Kyrgyzstan's Model of Government," in Robert Elgie (ed.), *Semi-Presidentialism Outside Europe* (Routledge, 2007).

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"Why Don't Opposition Elites Co-operate with Each Other in the Post-Communist World? The Evidence from Kyrgyzstan," *Post-Soviet Affairs* (forthcoming).