

INTERNATIONAL ORDERING AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION: LESSONS FROM CENTRAL ASIA

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Executive summary

Renewed strategic competition among the great powers is challenging and transforming the U.S.-led liberal international order. And this has important implications for the standing of U.S. bases abroad. Basing agreements in regions that are of acute interest may be undermined by revisionist powers, particularly China and Russia, as they further develop their regional security architectures, allocate and distribute rival nonmilitary public goods, and promote domestic political norms that are more aligned with the values and governance practices of often autocratic host country regimes. In Central Asia, revisionist efforts are already challenging regional U.S. leadership and undermining its capacity to establish overseas bases and access.

Introduction

Overseas U.S. basing agreements and their underlying bargains are embedded in a broader ecology of “international orders” and emerging counterorders. In the initial post-Cold War period, when the U.S.-led

liberal international order was dominant, the United States was able to secure overseas basing rights by integrating host countries within its security network and offering various economic and political goods. Today, the rise of China and Russia as influential revisionist powers across several regions is complicating and challenging U.S. leadership and its potential basing access in three critical ways.

First, revisionist competitors can politicize and target the overall security framework of a U.S. overseas basing agreement, such as an alliance (NATO), a common defense treaty (the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security), or a regional security organization (The Australia, New Zealand United States Security Treaty). Revisionist competitors can employ either “brokering” or “wedging” strategies or a combination of both.¹ Brokering involves trying to embed the target country in a new framework of bilateral or regional security cooperation that is controlled by the revisionist power. For example, the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) presents itself as a NATO-style body guarding against transnational and territorial threats in Eurasia, but the treaty also includes a clause prohibiting members from stationing foreign military troops in the region without the consent of the other

treaty members. Wedging involves undermining support in the target country for security cooperation with the United States by, for example, supporting anti-U.S. political factions, anti-base movements, or base-related disinformation campaigns. Both Russia and China have disseminated anti-U.S. disinformation via social media in an attempt to delegitimize the U.S. overseas bases among local populations — especially the U.S. Black Sea bases hosted by Romania and Bulgaria and the U.S. bases hosted by Japan’s island of Okinawa, respectively.

Second, revisionist competitors can outcompete the United States in providing a wide array of goods associated with basing agreements. Hosting countries often demand nonsecurity-related goods and assets — including club goods or private payoffs to regimes — as a partial quid pro quo for establishing and maintaining basing rights. Thus, to undermine the status of an existing basing deal or offer new incentives to establish their own bases, competing great powers may use the counterordering mechanism of “goods substitution” by offering goods of comparable quality (for example, development aid packages, debt relief, infrastructure upgrades) and/or providing goods with less intrusive political conditions (for example, no human rights clauses or anti-corruption oversight).²

Third, revisionist powers can capitalize on changes in prevailing great power political norms, which are generally reflected and advanced in basing agreements. Deals between the sending and hosting countries usually represent a common understanding of what constitutes legitimate forms of governance and social practices. In the case of the U.S.-led hegemonic system, political liberalism — which prescribes that governments protect a minimal set of rights among their citizens — has been a major but not exclusive political ordering principle. During the Cold War, non-democratic U.S.-allied regimes and security clients received U.S. assistance and goods by burnishing their anti-communist commitments, just as the former Soviet Union tried to advance socialism in the Global South by aiding the rise of self-identifying Marxist-Leninist regimes and integrating them into networks of communist military assistance, development, and technical expertise.

In the immediate post-Cold War era, the importance of political liberalism and liberal values as the main basis for security partnership and basing relationships was magnified. But then the events of 9/11 and the onset of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) created a new normative framework: combating Islamic radicalism. Base hosts began to advocate the protection of regime security and to justify extra-constitutional measures, such as the rendition of terrorist suspects, as part of counterterrorism responses.

International orders and foreign military bases in post-Cold War Central Asia

Illustrations of these international ordering dynamics and revisionist challenges are apparent in the evolving base politics of post-Cold War Central Asia, a region that includes the five former Soviet republics, turned independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Central Asia is an instructive region for observing the changing ordering dynamics and basing practices over four distinct phases: (1) post-Soviet independence and state building (1991-2001); (2) U.S. hegemony and broad acceptance of U.S. bases (2001-2004); (3) contestation of liberal ordering and competitive counter ordering projects (2004-2014); and (4) ascendant revisionism by China and Russia, intensification of regional engagement, and active blocking of new U.S. basing requests (2014-2021).

1990S: POST-SOVIET EXTRICATION AND SOVIET BASING LEGACIES

Until the events of 9/11, the post-Soviet Central Asian states were relatively removed from major conflicts or geopolitical turmoil. Throughout the 1990s, all of the Central Asian states attempted to strengthen their sovereignty and independence by

developing a range of external ties to both Western and Asian partners, while still remaining deferential to Russia on most security-related matters. Regional cooperation and integration were limited, constrained by patrimonial politics and concerns about regime autonomy and security. In terms of basing posture, Russia initially retained a monopoly on the region's Soviet-era legacy bases – the most significant of which was in Tajikistan's capital of Dushanbe, where Moscow maintained 5,000 troops of the 201st Motorized Rifle Division. This division represented Moscow's largest military base outside of the territory of the Russian Federation, which had intervened decisively in 1992 on behalf of the nascent Tajik government during the Tajik Civil War. Russia also maintained a network of missile testing facilities at Kapustin Yar in northern Kazakhstan and operated the space-launch facility at Baikonur in Kazakhstan via an initial 20-year lease that was agreed upon in 1994. The Russian bases generated little political attention or controversy during the 1990s.

2001-2005: U.S. INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

The post-Cold War period of relative tranquility virtually changed overnight following the events of 9/11, as Central Asia became the front line of the GWOT and a logistical key to Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. U.S. planners concluded an agreement in October 2001 with the government of Uzbekistan to use a Soviet-era air base for noncombat support missions; the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (known as “K2”) was located near the city of Khanabad in the south of the country, close to the Afghan border. A few weeks later, the United States reached an agreement with the Kyrgyzstan government to use a portion of the civilian Manas International Airport near the capital of Bishkek for refueling and staging flights into Afghanistan. Along with these basing deals, the United States signed a number of agreements with all of the Central Asian states to allow overflights, emergency landings, and refueling, though many of these agreements were kept secret. In addition, two other NATO powers concluded enduring bilateral basing arrangements with Central Asian hosts. Germany contracted with the Uzbekistan government to use a facility in the city of Termez on the Afghan border; it was the first time Germany had established an overseas military base since World War II. And France reached an agreement with the Tajikistan government to use a portion of Dushanbe International Airport (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Map of major NATO and Russian military bases and facilities in Central Asia, c. 2003



Source: Adapted from Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Critically, during this initial GWOT phase, both China and Russia supported – or at least did not publicly object to – the U.S. and allied basing deals. Russian President Vladimir Putin even downplayed the prospect of geopolitical competition with the United States and affirmed the sovereign rights of the Central Asian states to conclude such security arrangements.³ However, this accommodating position changed within 18 months of the 9/11 attacks, as Russian analysts and security officials began to publicly speculate that the United States was going to maintain its basing presence in Central Asia despite the end of major combat operations in Afghanistan. Moscow established its own air base in

Kant, Kyrgyzstan, in October 2003, just a few kilometers away from Manas, under the auspices of the Russian-led CSTO.

2005-2014: CONTESTED REGIONAL ORDERS – COMPETING SECURITY COMMUNITIES AND COUNTERORDERING EFFORTS

In the mid-2000s, geopolitical tensions over the U.S. presence in Central Asia intensified while the United States struggled to reconcile its promotion of democracy and liberal ordering principles with the growth of authoritarianism and cronyism in Central

Asian governments. Russia, in a bid to weaken U.S. regional influence, exploited these tensions by denouncing liberal political norms and supporting the authoritarian practices of these governments.

The war in Iraq and former U.S. President George W. Bush's pursuit of the administration's "Freedom Agenda" — which endorsed regime change for the purposes of democratization — added to these tensions and alarmed the Central Asian governments. So did the onset of the Color Revolutions, which brought street protests following flawed national elections. While the governments in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) were eventually toppled and replaced by self-styled reformers who publicly expressed the wish to orient more toward the West and away from Russia, tensions with Uzbekistan became increasingly strained as President Islam Karimov's rule grew more and more repressive. In May 2005, the Uzbek security services fired upon a crowd of protesters that had assembled in the eastern city of Andijon, killing hundreds in what became known as the "Andijon massacre."⁴ The Uzbek government insisted that the victims were members of a militant Islamic group, while international human rights organizations insisted that these protesters were ordinary citizens demonstrating against government policies.

The aftermath of Andijon soon took a geopolitical turn as well; China and Russia both publicly supported Karimov's actions, while the European Union and the United States imposed sanctions on Uzbek government officials and called for an international investigation into the events. With relations between the United States and Uzbekistan rapidly deteriorating in the wake of Andijon, Beijing and Moscow used the annual meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to call for greater non-Western influence in the region's security and, adopting China's security agenda, to combat the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism.⁵ At its annual summit in July 2005, the SCO issued a now infamous communique that noted that the situation in Afghanistan had been stabilized and that the "international coalition" military contingent in member states should be put on a timetable for withdrawal.⁶ It was implicitly understood that "inter-

national" largely meant "American." Just days later, after the United States backed a United Nations plan to not repatriate some Uzbek refugees from Andijon who had fled to neighboring Kyrgyzstan, the government of Uzbekistan notified the United States that it was terminating the base lease and effectively evicting U.S. forces from K2.⁷ A few months later, Uzbekistan formally joined the Russian-led CSTO.

MANAS AND THE BARGAINING POLITICS OF COMPENSATION AND PUBLIC GOODS

As the U.S. base in Uzbekistan became a lightning rod of tensions over Central Asian authoritarianism and Chinese and Russian security initiatives, the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan became embroiled in a series of attempts by corrupt Kyrgyz regimes to increase the quid pro quos and private goods provided by the United States.

The status of the Mana base became highly charged after the ousting of Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev in March 2005 by interim Acting President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Bakiyev demanded that the United States increase its rental payment from \$2 million to \$200 million annually.⁸ A deal in July 2006 extended the U.S. lease at Manas until 2010, raising base rent to \$17 million annually, with the U.S. side also committing to provide a total of annual \$150 million in aid and assistance to Kyrgyzstan as a tacit quid pro quo. But, of course, Bakiyev was dissatisfied with the agreement, and, hence, a dramatic bidding war ensued in early 2009 as Russia attempted to bribe the Kyrgyz president to close the base by offering an emergency \$2 billion economic relief package. The announcement set off a frenzied response, and while the U.S. side was able to secure another a new deal to keep the base open until 2014, Manas was labeled a "transit center" and the annual rent was raised from \$17 to \$63 million.⁹ Bakiyev's regime collapsed in 2010, but Acting President Roza Otunbayeva announced that she would honor the basing agreement despite popular perceptions that its operations — and especially the lucrative fuel contracts — had served to line the pockets of the Bakiyev family. On this point, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates referred to the government of Bakiyev as

“amazingly corrupt” and Manas as a site of “grand extortion.”¹⁰ The Kyrgyz government maintained its commitment until 2014 but did ¹¹not agree to extend the lease.

2014-2021: GREATER EURASIA AND COUNTERLIBERAL ORDER

Knowing that the lease for the Manas base would not be renewed, the last U.S. forces departed well in advance of the July 2014 deadline, marking the end of the U.S. basing presence in Central Asia. The year also marked a significant shift in the geopolitical orientation of the region, with China and Russia intensifying their regional economic and security engagement. Russia bolstered its relations with the Central Asian states following its annexation of Crimea, including accelerating the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, while China prioritized investing in Central Asia through its Belt and Road Initiative (three of six routes pass through Central Asia).

Indeed, recent Chinese security initiatives appear to have made China the new basing power in the region. According to a pair of investigative stories, the Tajikistan government has, since 2016, allowed China to maintain a small group of Chinese paramilitary forces at a remote facility near the Afghan border.¹² Under the reported terms of the agreement, China is allowed to station personnel at the facility and to patrol broad swaths of the Tajik-Afghan border. Along with Chinese upgrades of Tajik border posts, these Chinese units appear to be focused on controlling border crossings and possible infiltration into China. In October 2021, the Tajik Parliament transferred full control of the facility to China and approved the construction of a second Chinese-funded facility.¹³ Chinese economic engagement in Tajikistan also increased, with 80 percent of the Central Asian country’s new debt from 2007 to 2018 originating from Chinese state creditors.¹⁴ In 2016, China established a new regional security organization, the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), that includes itself, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. The organization’s purpose is to enhance regional security cooperation on counterterrorism, joint training, and border

management issues. Russia did not oppose the Chinese facility, suggesting that earlier predictions that Moscow and Beijing’s jockeying for influence in Central Asia might undermine their so-called “axis of convenience” appear unwarranted.¹⁵

In 2021, China and Russia’s growing regional influence gave them the leverage to prevent the United States from securing contingency basing rights from the Central Asian states in support of withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan. In April, General Kenneth McKenzie, the head of U.S. Central Command at the time, publicly announced that the United States was exploring securing basing in Central Asia as part of its preparation to reposition troops and plan for contingencies.¹⁶ A subsequent report noted that U.S. defense officials were eager to secure bases for “troops, drones, bombers and artillery,” with administration officials preferring to negotiate a deal with the Uzbekistan or Tajikistan governments.¹⁷ An investigative story later stated that, at his first summit with U.S. President Joe Biden in June 2021, Putin rejected any role for U.S. military forces in Central Asia – undercutting the U.S. military’s options to base drones and counterterrorism forces to support the withdrawal – and reportedly asserted that “China would reject it [any role] as well.”¹⁸

As the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan accelerated, both China and Russia apparently increased their consultations with the Taliban and conducted border exercises with the Central Asian forces in an attempt to manage the border instability and regional uncertainty caused by the disintegrating Afghan National Army (hundreds of Afghan troops reportedly fled into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). Moscow and Beijing’s regional assertiveness underscores that Central Asia is no longer hospitable to a U.S. basing presence and no longer predominantly influenced by the U.S.-led international order. The relative efficacy and success of Chinese and Russian regional counterordering efforts are summarized in table 1.

TABLE 1

Scorecard of select counterordering efforts and status of U.S. bases in Central Asia

FEATURES OF THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER (AS LED BY THE U.S.)	REVISIONIST STATE ACTIONS AND CHALLENGES (CHINA AND RUSSIA)	ASSESSMENT OF EFFICACY (OF CHINESE AND RUSSIAN EFFORTS)
<p>Overseas bases and U.S.-led security organizations:</p> <p>U.S. bases in Uzbekistan (2001–2005) and Kyrgyzstan (2001–2014)</p> <p>Part of the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom coalition and the International Security Assistance Force mission</p>	<p>New alternative security organizations:</p> <p>CSTO (2002), SCO (2001), and QCCM (2016); support for Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan (2003–) and Tajikistan; and the Chinese base in Tajikistan (2016–)</p>	<p>Russian base in Tajikistan (1991–) and CSTO base in Kyrgyzstan (2003–) operate alongside U.S. bases (2001–2014); military cooperation deepened without a U.S. basing presence (2014–2021); Chinese facility in Tajikistan (2016–) and denied U.S. contingency basing requests in 2021</p>
<p>Regional public and club goods:</p> <p>U.S. economic and security assistance to Central Asia, and International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans</p>	<p>Goods substitution:</p> <p>Alternative sources of regional public goods, and comparable goods with fewer conditions</p> <p>Russia’s attempt to bribe Bakiyev to close Manas in 2009 with \$2 billion emergency assistance package</p>	<p>Unsuccessful 2009 Russian effort:</p> <p>Kyrgyzstan renegotiates the Manas base agreement with the United States for more rent and a name change</p> <p>Successful 2014 Russian effort:</p> <p>Kyrgyzstan terminates the Manas lease.</p>
<p>Political values:</p> <p>United States emphasizes joint commitment to the GWOT, opposition to the Taliban, and some liberal values</p>	<p>Alternative political values:</p> <p>China and Russia criticize the destabilizing consequences of political liberalism and U.S. support for democratization</p> <p>China and Russia back Karimov’s Andijan crackdown, while the United States and the European Union are critical of it</p>	<p>Successful effort:</p> <p>Uzbekistan evicts U.S. forces from K2 and joins the CSTO in 2006 (until 2012)</p>

Conclusions

The rise and decline of the U.S. basing presence in Central Asia and the expansion of the Russian and Chinese security footprint offer some insights into the broader question of how strategic competition might impact regions in which the United States once exerted considerable leverage (in part because of its legacy deployments). Although the U.S. military presence in Central Asia was significant for operations in Afghanistan in 2001, China and Russia have since increased their influence and leverage over Central Asian states by establishing new security organizations, providing more economic goods, and supporting the states' nondemocratic political practices. Simply put, China and Russia now wield

more levers of influence over Central Asian states than the United States does. The United States will find it increasingly difficult to compete or outbid competitors for basing access as states find regional alternatives to the security initiatives, public goods, and political norms of the liberal international order. Even small and relatively weak countries will be empowered to drive harder bargains to allow the United States access. In Central Asia, rather than attempt to sabotage China and Russia efforts in the region, U.S. officials would be better served to maintain nonbase-related security cooperation with Central Asian militaries and as well as increase their own investments in visible regional public goods that promote U.S. soft power, such as media, education, and public health.

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