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Kyrgyzstan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests

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Summary

This report examines faltering reforms and other challenges to Kyrgyzstan's independence that have raised U.S. concerns. It discusses U.S. policy and assistance for democratization and other programs. Basic facts and biographical information are provided. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Issue Brief IB93108, *Central Asia*, updated regularly.

U.S. Policy¹

According to the Bush Administration, the United States seeks to help Kyrgyzstan enhance its sovereignty and territorial integrity, increase democratic participation and civil society, support economic reform and development, improve observance of human rights protections, prevent weapons proliferation, and more effectively combat transnational terrorism and criminal activities including trafficking in persons and narcotics (State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations for FY2006*).



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (08/02 M.Chin)

Cumulative U.S. humanitarian and technical budgeted assistance to Kyrgyzstan for FY1992-FY2004 was \$749.0 million (FREEDOM Support Act and other agency funds), with Kyrgyzstan ranking third in such aid per capita among the new independent states of the former Soviet Union (by comparison, EU grants and loans amounted to about \$250 million). Estimated aid for FY2005 (FREEDOM Support Act and other foreign aid, excluding Defense and Energy Department aid) was \$36.4 million. The Bush Administra-

¹ Sources include Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: Central Eurasia*; *RFE/RL Newswire*; *Eurasia Insight*; International Monetary Fund (IMF); the State Department's *Washington File*; and Reuters and Associated Press (AP) newswires.

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tion's FY2006 request for \$35.7 million in foreign aid for Kyrgyzstan is planned primarily for local and national democratization, judicial reform, and law enforcement equipment and training to combat drug trafficking, organized crime, and terrorist financing. Funding will be provided to assist a newly established Kyrgyz Drug Control Agency. Since Akayev has stated that he will abide by constitutional term limits and not run for re-election, the Administration hopes that the 2005 presidential race will become "a model for peaceful, democratic transfer of executive power in the region" (*Congressional Budget Justification*).

Contributions to the Campaign Against Terrorism

The Kyrgyz government declared its support for the war on terrorism almost immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. President Akayev in late September announced that he had approved a U.S. request to use Kyrgyz airspace for counter-terrorist operations in Afghanistan, in part because the terrorist threat to Central Asia emanating from that country had intensified. In November 2001, it was reported that U.S. combat aircraft were to be deployed in Kyrgyzstan. Reportedly, Uzbekistan's restrictions on flights from its airbases were a major spur to this U.S. decision. The U.S. military repaired and upgraded the air field at the Manas international airport (the U.S. facilities were named after the late New York firefighter Peter J. Ganci), and war support to Afghanistan began in March 2002. The Defense Department reported in late 2003 that the airbase at that time was the "primary hub" for trans-shipping personnel, equipment, and supplies to Afghanistan. In early 2005, the airbase hosted about 1,200 troops from the United States and Spain, as well as local support personnel. New troop barracks are being built to replace tents. According to a March 2005 report by Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Ministry, the government had received requests from the United States and NATO regarding the possibility of deploying airborne warning and control systems planes (AWACS) at Ganci. It denied the requests, however, because of Kyrgyzstan's commitments to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (see below) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (composed of China, Russia, and the Central Asian states).

Just after U.S.-led coalition forces began ground operations in Iraq in March 2003, Kyrgyzstan's Legislative Assembly (lower chamber) issued a statement calling for the United States to cease "gross violations" of international law. Although Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Aytmatov told Vice President Cheney during a June 2003 U.S. visit that

Kyrgyzstan: Basic Facts

Area and Population: Land area is 77,415 sq. mi.; about the size of South Dakota. Population is 5.1 million (*Commonwealth of Independent States Statistics Committee*, 2004 est.).

Ethnicity: 65.7% Kyrgyz; 11.7% Russians; 13.9% Uzbeks, 1% Uighurs; 0.4% Germans, and others (*Kyrgyz Statistics Committee*, 2001 est.). Ethnic Uzbeks are a majority in southern Kyrgyzstan. About 420,000 ethnic Kyrgyz reside elsewhere in the former Soviet Union and 170,000 in China.

Gross Domestic Product: \$2.2 billion; per capita GDP is about \$431 (*Kyrgyz Statistics Committee*, 2004 est., current prices).

Political Leaders: *President:* Askar Akayev; *Prime Minister:* Nikolay Tanayev; *Foreign Minister:* Askar Aytmatov; *Defense Minister:* Col. Gen. Esen Topoyev.

Biography: Akayev was born in 1944 and trained as a physicist. In 1987, he was elected vice president of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, later becoming its president. In 1990, he became a member of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee. In 1990, ethnic riots in Osh region led to demands for the ouster of the Kyrgyz Communist Party (KCP) head. When the Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet met in October 1990, it rebuffed the KCP head's bid to become president and elected Akayev. In October 1991, Akayev was reaffirmed as president in an uncontested popular vote, and was re-elected in 1995 and 2000.

Kyrgyzstan was ready to send peacekeepers to Iraq and Afghanistan, in April 2004 the presidential spokesman and the defense minister announced that Kyrgyzstan had no plans to send peacekeepers to either country.

Foreign Policy and Defense

Akayev's 1999 foreign policy concept called for close relations with ancient "silk road" route countries, including China, former Soviet republics, and Turkey, Iran, India, and Pakistan, including because landlocked Kyrgyzstan must rely on its neighbors for access to world markets. Kyrgyzstan has also pursued good relations with Western states in its search for aid. Cultivating good ties with China, Akayev joined leaders from Russia, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan in 1996 and 1997 in signing agreements with China on demarcating and demilitarizing the former Soviet-Chinese border. Kyrgyzstan's cession to China of a small mountainous border area fueled violent protests in Kyrgyzstan and calls that the government not make the same "mistake" in border talks with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Many in Kyrgyzstan are concerned that China's economic and population growth in bordering areas threatens the country. Kyrgyzstan's relations with Uzbekistan have been marked by trade, border, and other disputes.

Akayev has stressed close relations with Russia. Reasons include hoped-for economic and trade benefits and security ties to alleviate concerns about Chinese and Uzbek intentions. While relying on security ties with Russia, Kyrgyzstan has pursued ancillary (and perhaps partly countervailing) security ties with the United States, NATO, and China that Akayev in December 2003 hailed as creating "comprehensive" security. Kyrgyzstan and Russia concluded a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty in 1992, and Kyrgyzstan signed the Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS) Collective Security Treaty (CST) in 1992 and 1999. These and other agreements call for cooperation with Russia in training and defense.

Several hundred Russian border troops (most reportedly were Kyrgyz citizens) guarded the Chinese border until 1999, when Russia handed over control to Kyrgyzstan, citing costs and other reasons. However, Russia ramped up its security presence in September 2003 with the signing of a 15-year military basing accord with Kyrgyzstan for use of the Soviet-era Kant airfield near Kyrgyzstan's capital of Bishkek. Russian media report that the base hosts about 20 aircraft and 500 troops. These components ostensibly also form part of a CST rapid deployment force. The Kant airbase is a scant 20 miles from the Ganci airbase. Although the purpose of the base ostensibly is to combat regional terrorism and defend southern CIS borders, Putin stressed that the base "enshrines our military presence in Kyrgyzstan," appearing to underline that the base also counters U.S. and NATO security influence. In February 2005, Russia announced intentions to "double" its deployments at the base. The CIS Anti-Terrorist Center (ATC) — a body created largely at Putin's urging to facilitate cooperation between Russia's Federal Security Service and other CIS intelligence bodies — set up a regional branch in Bishkek after September 11, 2001.

Kyrgyzstan's armed forces numbered about 12,500 ground, air force, and air defense troops. There are also about 5,000 border guards (*The Military Balance 2004-2005*). Most of the troops are ethnic Kyrgyz conscripts, though some officers are Russians. A defense development plan approved in 2002 called for creating a small and mobile army trained in mountain warfare to combat terrorists. Kyrgyzstan joined NATO's Partnership

for Peace (PFP) in 1994 and has participated in many PFP exercises in the United States, Central Asia, and elsewhere.

A reported 800 guerrillas belonging to the terrorist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and to rogue groups from Tajikistan invaded Kyrgyzstan in July-August 1999, taking Japanese geologists and others as hostages and occupying several Kyrgyz villages. They allegedly aimed to create an Islamic state in south Kyrgyzstan as a springboard for jihad in Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan received urgent air support from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and expelled the invaders in October 1999. The incursion illustrated ties between terrorists in Central Asia, Russia (Chechnya), and Afghanistan, and the need for Kyrgyzstan to bolster its defenses. A reported 500 IMU and other insurgents again invaded southern Kyrgyzstan (others invaded Uzbekistan) in August 2000, taking U.S. tourists as hostages and causing thousands of Kyrgyz to flee. Uzbekistan provided air and other support, but Kyrgyz forces were largely responsible for defeating the insurgents by late October 2000.

The State Department designated the IMU as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in September 2000. According to the State Department, the IMU did not invade Central Asia in 2001, in part because Al Qaeda had secured IMU aid for Taliban fighting against the Afghan Northern Alliance. Although much of the IMU was decimated by U.S.-led coalition operations in Afghanistan, the IMU has restored some of its presence in Kyrgyzstan. In 2002 and 2003, the IMU set off bombs in Bishkek and Osh. Kyrgyzstan arrested the bombers in May 2003, allegedly before they were able to carry out a plan to bomb the U.S. Embassy. Kyrgyzstan reportedly has arrested others who allegedly have targeted U.S. interests (*Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003*). Kyrgyzstan has jailed dozens of members of the Hizb ut-Tahrir Islamic extremist group and of the Eastern Turkestan Liberation Organization, which calls for independence for China's Xinjiang region.

Political and Economic Developments

President Akayev has orchestrated frequent constitutional changes to preserve and enhance his powers. A new constitution approved in 1993 established a presidential system with separation of powers and expansive human rights guarantees. Akayev held an October 1994 referendum (an illegitimate process under the constitution) to approve constitutional amendments to weaken the legislature. He argued that the constitution was too "idealistic" since "people are not prepared for democracy," and that a "transitional period" was needed. The amendments created a bicameral legislature called the Jogorku Kenesh (Supreme Assembly), consisting of a Legislative Assembly that served continuously and represented "all people," and an Assembly of People's Representatives that met in regular sessions and represented regional interests. Only after the referendum were detailed constitutional provisions published.

Akayev spearheaded another constitutional referendum in February 1996 to give him greater powers to veto legislation, dissolve the legislature, and appoint all but the prime minister without legislative confirmation, while making impeachment more difficult, along the lines of Russia's Constitution. According to the State Department, the referendum was marked by fraudulent voting. Despite these restrictions on its powers, the legislature increasingly asserted itself in law-making and oversight. Moving to further weaken it, Akayev held a referendum in October 1998 to restrict its influence over bills

involving the budget or other expenditures, limit a legislator's immunity from removal and prosecution, increase the size of the Legislative Assembly to 60, and decrease the size of the Assembly of People's Representatives to 45. Despite these successive limitations on its powers, the legislature continued to display a degree of independence by overriding presidential vetoes, criticizing government policies, and voting on confidence in the prime minister and cabinet.

Akayev in 2002 formed a Constitutional Council composed of government and civil society representatives to propose amendments, which were then passed on to an Expert Group of officials and scholars to finalize. As occurred in Kazakhstan, the government-led group axed many Council suggestions and added many others without public input, according to the State Department. The February 2003 referendum on the amendments was deemed "highly flawed" by the State Department, because of multiple voting, manipulated ballot counting, and forged results. The amended constitution boosts presidential powers at the expense of legislative powers. Also as in Kazakhstan, former presidents now have immunity from prosecution and cannot be detained, searched, or interrogated. The amendments create a 75-member unicameral legislature (Jogorku Kenesh) after its next election in 2005 and eliminate party list voting, a provision many of the 43 registered parties feared would threaten their ability to gain seats and hence to survive politically. Also of potential harm to democratization, a new election code was signed into law in January 2004 that the OSCE assessed as not ensuring that electoral commissions are impartial, that monitoring is permitted at all stages of the electoral process, and that voting and tabulation are transparent.

The February 27, 2005, legislative election in Kyrgyzstan resulted in wins in 32 districts with run-offs held on March 13 in most of the remaining districts where no one candidate received over 50% of the votes cast (in three districts, voters rejected all the candidates approved to run). On March 22, the Central Electoral Commission announced that results for 71 districts were valid. Less than 10% of seats were won by opposition candidates, although there reportedly were many close races where they "lost" only by a few votes. Opening the new legislative session that same day, Akayev condemned religious and other extremists he blamed for the demonstrations in the south. His spokesman was more specific, alleging that the unrest marked efforts by drug lords and terrorists to take over.

In the wake of the election, the U.S. State Department stated that the race marked some progress from previous elections but still fell seriously short of democratic standards. According to the OSCE, serious irregularities included the questionable exclusion of several opposition candidates from running, biased state-controlled media, and heavy government use of other administrative resources and even alleged vote-buying. Opposition party-led demonstrations in support of holding a new election and calling for Akayev's resignation took place throughout the country in March 2005, with protestors occupying several regional or district government buildings, including in the southern city of Osh, and blocking the main highway linking the northern and southern regions. Some counter-demonstrations in support of the government also were reported. The U.S. Administration has called on Akayev to abide by a constitutional provision permitting only two presidential terms and to step down and facilitate a democratic presidential election scheduled for October 30, 2005.

Kyrgyzstan's human rights record was poor, although there were some improvements during 2004, according to the State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2004*. However, compared to other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan has a less objectionable record, some observers argue. Security personnel at times beat or otherwise mistreated persons with impunity, and prison conditions remained poor. There were cases of arbitrary arrest or detention. There were several independent newspapers and television and radio stations. Government control over publishing and distribution at times was used to harass print media. Reporters suffered fewer instances of physical harassment or libel suits for violating the "honor and dignity" of officials (a criminal offense). The government permitted a private printing press supported by the U.S. Administration and Congress to begin operating in November 2003 (however, the government cut off its electrical power in the run-up to February 2005 legislative election). Human rights groups were generally allowed to work freely, and a government Ombudsman's Office advocated for individual rights. The government sometimes harassed Christian groups or Islamic groups viewed as extremist. Kyrgyzstan continued to have problems with trafficking for prostitution and labor, but the government took some moves to discourage such trafficking, such as legislating criminal penalties and setting up an anti-trafficking police unit in May 2004.

Foreign assistance has been a significant factor in Kyrgyzstan's budget, contributing by 2004 to public foreign debts of \$1.77 billion. The Paris Club of government lenders eased Kyrgyzstan's debt payment burden in 2002 and may do so again in 2005. The IMF in early 2005 praised Kyrgyzstan for solid economic growth in recent years, low inflation, accumulating foreign reserves, and a significant decline in poverty levels from about one-half of the population to about one-third. It called on the government to reduce foreign debts and continue to constrain budget expenditures. Kyrgyz GDP stopped declining in 1995 and grew 5.5% in 2004, led by gains in mining (particularly coal and oil extraction), agriculture (cotton growing and animal husbandry), and forestry. Inflation in 2004 was 4.5%. Gold production still is the most significant industrial source of GDP and export earnings. Production at the Kumtor gold mine is declining, but others are being developed. In March 2005, Akayev stressed the need to boost stagnating industrial production, particularly the need to establish and modernize small- and medium-sized firms. Agriculture accounts for the largest portion of GDP and employs much of the workforce. Crime and endemic corruption stifle economic growth and private foreign investment. Kyrgyzstan leads Central Asia in the privatization of most farms, industries, housing, and retail outlets. Kyrgyzstan has surplus hydroelectric energy, rare earth mineral reserves, and tourism potential that could aid its development and is a major wool producer. U.S. technical assistance contributed to Kyrgyzstan's admission into the World Trade Organization in late 1998.