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Panetta in Kyrgyzstan for Air Base Talks

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U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta meeting with Kyrgyz officials in Bishkek on Tuesday to discuss Manas. **Scott Olson**

BISHKEK — U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta arrived in Kyrgyzstan on Tuesday seeking to flag the importance of an air base the Kyrgyz president wants the U.S. military to vacate when its lease expires in mid-2014.

The United States uses the Manas transit center as a gateway for troops heading to Afghanistan and to stage aerial refueling. The base is adjacent to Kyrgyzstan's main international airport, also called Manas, just outside the capital of Bishkek.

But President Almazbek Atambayev, elected last year to lead the republic of 5.5 million people, says he has no intention of renewing the U.S. lease on the base when it expires just over two years from now.

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said there were no negotiations to keep Manas past 2014.

Still, the official suggested that the Pentagon wasn't taking Atambayev's position on Manas

as the final word on the matter, saying there may be some "wiggle room."

Panetta, speaking to reporters en route to Bishkek, said he would stress the importance of the base during his talks in Kyrgyzstan, where he will meet the defense minister.

"I want to thank them for their cooperation and ensure that relationship can continue into the future," Panetta said.

The trip comes as Panetta and U.S. military officials seek to contain a firestorm in Afghanistan following the massacre of 16 civilians at the hands of an American soldier that has posed a severe threat to the NATO mission there.

Panetta said Monday that the death penalty could be sought in the U.S. military justice system against the soldier but portrayed the shooting as an isolated event that would not alter withdrawal plans.

U.S. combat troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan through the end of 2014, the same year the Manas lease expires. But the drawdown calendar is still unclear and it's possible that tens of thousands of American forces may be moving out of Afghanistan in the final months of the year, when the lease would have already terminated.

Losing Manas could complicate the logistics of the drawdown.

The closure of the U.S. base would be sure to please the Kremlin, which views former Soviet Central Asia as its sphere of influence.

Former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, ousted in an April 2010 revolution, promised to close the base after receiving a financial assistance package from Moscow in 2009. He reversed this decision after securing higher U.S. payments, which rose from $17.5 million to $60 million annually.

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