



Press Conference on the Multidimensional Relationship With Kyrgyzstan

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 Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
 April 18, 2007

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Good. Well, let me say something before we start. First, it's always a pleasure to meet the press in Kyrgyzstan. We've done this before. I always enjoy our conversations. But the real pleasure is to be back in Kyrgyzstan. It's my second trip in just five months. I am here because there is a really strong partnership between the United States and Kyrgyzstan. We are celebrating three anniversaries: The first is just over 15 years of independence for Kyrgyzstan. The second is 15 years of diplomatic relations between the United States and Kyrgyzstan. And the third is 15 years of the presence of the American Embassy here in Kyrgyzstan. If you step back and you think about it, 15 years is not a very long time, and so it is all the more remarkable how much we've accomplished in those 15 years. We've built a truly multidimensional relationship focused on security, economics and trade, political development, health, education, a whole variety of areas. We've done that together, working cooperatively as partners. Americans are very proud of our track record of success, and we hope that every Kyrgyz, whether it is the President, a Minister, a leader, a citizen, or a student, as I said to a group of students yesterday, shares our pride in this very robust relationship but also shares our enthusiasm for the future of the relationship. So that's why I am here. I am here to explore how we build the relationship further and I am in the midst of a series of meetings that I've had with a very wide range of people in Kyrgyz society. I've spent a lot of time with the Minister of Foreign Affairs talking about the future of the relationship but I've also tried to meet a wide range of political and civic leaders too. So I'm delighted to be here. I'm delighted we have a chance to talk and I'm looking forward to your questions. So, please....



QUESTION: You are in charge of Central Asian affairs and you just expressed your love for Kyrgyzstan. What do you think is the major problem here?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: I'm not sure I understand the question.

QUESTION: What is, in your opinion, the biggest challenge Kyrgyzstan has to face?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: For the United States, our policy towards Kyrgyzstan has been very consistent for 15 years. We've tried to work with the people of Kyrgyzstan as they try to build a strong, independent, prosperous, stable, democratic country. So the future of Kyrgyzstan is obviously for the people of Kyrgyzstan to decide, but we feel strongly that in trying to support the independence of the people of Kyrgyzstan, that we can play a useful role in working with them to build a better future. One obvious challenge is political development and we see that during the period that I am here. It is a challenge for all sides to ensure that development takes place in a way that's peaceful, legal, and constitutional. There are other challenges too, including economic development, and that's where we think we can also play a helpful role, working with our partners in Kyrgyzstan for instance, by promoting trade. And as I said, that is one of the reasons why I'm here, to try to explore how to do that.

QUESTION: As you know there are currently demonstrations by the Opposition. Have you been planning to meet with the leaders of the Opposition?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: As I said, I always try to meet a very wide range of people in society. On this trip, as on all my trips, I do try to meet with people who reflect every element of Kyrgyz political, economic, and civic life.

QUESTION: What does the U.S. think about the political situation in Kyrgyzstan and what ways out of the current crisis situation could you recommend?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: I'm glad you asked that question. Let me be very clear about American policy. As I said to your colleague, we feel very strongly that the future of Kyrgyzstan is something that only the people of Kyrgyzstan can decide. In 2005 the people of Kyrgyzstan elected President Bakiyev as their leader. Today there is a debate in the country about the future of Kyrgyzstan and our message to all sides of the political debate in Kyrgyzstan is the same: That message is that we hope all sides will conduct themselves in a way that is peaceful and nonviolent, legal, constitutional, and that both reflects and strengthens the rule of law. But only Kyrgyz can decide the future of this country. We and others around the world are watching with great interest to see what happens here.

QUESTION: What about the ways out of this crisis?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: As I said, that is something that Kyrgyz are going to have to resolve among themselves. I do think that it is important that whatever way out is found be done in a way that reflects legality and constitutionality. That's what happened in 2005 when the President was elected in an election which was monitored internationally and we hope Kyrgyz politics will continue to develop in a way that strengthens the rule of law here.

QUESTION: The United States, at the time, welcomed the change of power in the Kyrgyz Republic and the question is did President Bakiyev justify the democratic expectations of the United States? The second question is if the United States planning to somehow mediate the dialogue between the government and Opposition like we recently heard that people were urging to seek mediation from the OSCE and other organizations?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: I'll take the second question first. We are not planning to mediate. As I said, the future of Kyrgyzstan is something for the people of Kyrgyzstan to decide. We do think we have an interest in sending a message to both sides that political development here will be conducted in a nonviolent, legal, and constitutional way. On the first question we very much hope that democracy continues to advance here. That means strengthened institutions, good governance, strengthened rule of law, opportunities for citizens to participate in political life, and opportunities for civil society. So the United States has tried to work closely with all kinds of people in Kyrgyzstan to try to promote these things in order to help strengthen democracy. You asked about what has happened since 2005. But in fact American policy toward these things has been consistent since 1991. So over the period from 1991 to the present we have watched very closely as the Kyrgyz people have sought to build democracy in this country. We think that some good things have happened here, including the relatively free and independent media which all of you represent. We've been encouraged by some recent decisions by President Bakiyev, for instance, to turn KTR into a public entity, and we look forward to seeing that implemented.

Are you from 24.Kg? You had a very funny article about me the other day. It said that every time Feigenbaum comes to Bishkek there seem to be "dramatic" events in this city. I thought it was very funny because there are always dramatic events in this city, whether I'm here or whether I'm not here. So, actually I laughed very hard when I saw it.

QUESTION: First question is [inaudible] United States always has been paying close attention to the religious extremism in Central Asia in general and Kyrgyzstan in particular and in regard to that do you think current instability may cause more active actions by the religious extremists and cause additional terrorist acts? The second question is with regard to the potential military actions in Iran, do you think that the Manas airbase might be involved in these military actions?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: I'll take the second question first. The United States is seeking a diplomatic solution to the challenge that Iran poses to the international community. We seek a good relationship with the people of Iran but the entire international community, not just the United States, has repeatedly expressed its concern about nuclear

development in Iran. The United Nations Security Council spoke unanimously, in one voice, on this question when it passed Resolution 1737. So we are seeking a diplomatic resolution and we the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, and the other members of the U.N. Security Council are looking to Iran to respond to the concerns of the international community. On your first question about extremism: Extremism is a concern for many countries, and so we are working with Kyrgyzstan very closely in a variety of ways. One way is to help strengthen your borders. We all remember what happened in southern Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000. And so the United States Government has worked closely with the government of Kyrgyzstan through a variety of programs to help build modern border posts that can help to protect Kyrgyz security. I went to visit one of those posts in Osh last October and it was a terrific experience because I met some of the Kyrgyz border guards and they were incredibly proud of their post. They were proud of what they were doing to protect Kyrgyz security. And they were proud of their cooperation with the United States. Another way to prevent extremism is through an open society that gives people a stake in their political future. When people don't have a way to express themselves they find other, sometimes less productive, means through which to express themselves. So that is why we in the United States feels so strongly that society should be open, give people a stake in their government, and give them opportunity. And we've already talked a little bit about some of the progress on democracy here in Kyrgyzstan.

QUESTION: On Sunday, on Channel 1 in Russia, there was information that these meetings (opposition demonstrations) in Kyrgyzstan are supported by America. Your comments?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I think it's ridiculous.

QUESTION: Means financial support.

DAS FEIGENBAUM: It's ridiculous.

QUESTION: Have you had a meeting with Felix Kulov during this visit?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: I did.

QUESTION: There were several occasions when journalists were attacked and some observers have noted that since the new government came to power the situation with the freedom of press and media has become worse. What do you think about the freedom of the press in Kyrgyzstan?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well, we think that freedom of the press is very important in every country not just in Kyrgyzstan. We also think that it's important that societies be governed by the rule of law. That, too, is true in every country around the world and not just in Kyrgyzstan. So we are concerned, always, whenever there is pressure or harassment against the media. But we do recognize the progress Kyrgyzstan has made over the years in developing a relatively free and independent media.

QUESTION: The first question is that, you probably know that the Parliament is now planning to consider the opportunity to nationalize some of the deposits in the Kyrgyz Republic which may mean a review of the investment agreements with some larger investors. Do you think that may somehow impact the investment climate in the Kyrgyz Republic? The second question is the United States has been lobbying the energy sector/developing in our country for a certain time but there have been no major changes. What is the reason for that?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well, the basic American policy, as I said toward Kyrgyzstan and toward every country in Central Asia is to support their independence and sovereignty. One way to do that is to help facilitate economic opportunities in every sector but also in every direction on the compass: north, west, east, and south. I'm glad you mentioned energy because this country has a lot of potential as an exporter of hydropower and there are a lot of opportunities to export hydropower, as I said, in every direction on the compass. And so we are working very closely with Kyrgyzstan, but also Tajikistan, the International Financial Institutions, and other partners, to try to explore the opportunities to do that, including, for instance, the export of Central Asian power to Afghanistan and South Asia. The economics of that are very appealing but the key to realizing that opportunity is to attract private sector investment. You know, when you put five economists in a room, they almost never agree on anything. But almost all economists agree on a few things, and one of them is that private sector involvement in an economy is crucial to growth and trade. So we in the United States government are promoting investment and trade with Kyrgyzstan, but we also think that it's important to work with our colleagues in the Kyrgyz government to try to help create the kind of investment climate that would make this country attractive to private sector companies from the United States and abroad. That means rule of law, judicial independence for contracts, struggle against corruption. And on all of these things we are trying to work closely with our Kyrgyz partners because we think that it is very much in common interest to promote investment here.

Last question.

QUESTION: As you said, you already had and will have meetings with the different people and civic organization in the Kyrgyz Republic and here is the question: Did the lawyer of the late Mr. Ivanov's family seek a meeting with you?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: You've raised the issue of the Base so let me say something about the Base. The Base has obviously been a very important part of the cooperation between the United States and Kyrgyzstan since 1991. We are very grateful to the government and people of Kyrgyzstan for being a strong partner in the international effort in Afghanistan but also for making the Base available to the United States in order to wage that struggle. Second, as your question implied, obviously some very regrettable incidents have happened at the Base. But third, Americans and Kyrgyz are working very closely together to make sure that the operations of the Base are as safe as possible for the people of Kyrgyzstan. Fourth, some of the measures that Americans and Kyrgyz have agreed upon are being implemented now. And as I said, they are being implemented on the basis of a joint effort to ensure that the Base serves our common strategic interests but also the interests of the people of Kyrgyzstan in a Base that operates safely. I think that it is important that everybody, whether American or Kyrgyz or from other countries, remember why the Base is here. There was a time in Central Asia not so very long ago when instability in Afghanistan and Taliban rule in Afghanistan were seen as the principal, or among the principal, security threats to Central Asia. So the international effort to bring stability and security to Afghanistan has made a lot of progress over the last few years. There is a new government, roads are being built, an Afghan army and an Afghan police force are being built, landmines are being cleared, there has been a lot of progress. But the struggle continues and the war is not over. And so as the United States and other international partners work closely with the Afghan government to bring stability, prosperity, democracy, and security to that country, we think it is tremendously important that the government of Kyrgyzstan, but other governments as well, have determined that it is in their national interest to be part of that effort. So the Base has a strategic impact, but it has an economic and social impact as well. The economic impact has been to create jobs for Kyrgyz who work at the Base and also to provide some contracts for Kyrgyz companies that help to support the Base. And there has been a social impact because Americans who work on the Base have contributed their time, and sometimes their own personal money out of their pockets, to try to help contribute to Kyrgyzstan, to give something back to the community, to support schools, build orphanages, and work with villages in the neighborhood around the community. So, while there is an important strategic impact of the Base, we also recognize the importance of an economic and social impact. And we'd like to do more of these things. So I know there is a lot of controversy here about the Base, but I hope people know that we are working closely with the Kyrgyz government and also that we continue to believe that the Base is in our common interest and in the interest of the international community. And as I said at the beginning it is not the only part of our relationship, but we are grateful to the government and people of Kyrgyzstan for supporting us.

Thanks very much. It is always fun to meet all of you. I hope to see you again on my next trip to Bishkek.

Released on April 20, 2007

