The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Karimov Says Russia Provides Stabilizing Presence in Central Asia

April 14, 2013



Karimov watching honor guards pass by after a wreath-laying ceremony near the Kremlin walls on Monday. **Grigory Dukor**

Uzbek President Islam Karimov said Monday that next year's planned exit of NATO troops from Afghanistan will create dangerous conditions in Central Asia, and Russia's presence will help maintain peace in the region.

Speaking at a meeting in Moscow with President Vladimir Putin, Karimov said he was particularly concerned with the possible expansion of religious militant groups and with the threat of terrorism.

"The prospect of allied forces leaving Afghanistan makes the situation unpredictable, so we need consultations on these issues," Karimov said, Interfax reported. "Proactive measures need to be developed to preserve stability in the region."

The trip by Karimov, 75, comes a few weeks after rumors emerged of the strongman leader's ill health. In Moscow, he participated in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the

Unknown Soldier and in talks with Putin and senior officials that were open to the media.

Russia and Uzbekistan have had a bumpy relationship in recent years, with Uzbekistan quitting the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a regional security group, in June. But Russia retains close ties in the fellow former Soviet republic, and Putin sounded an optimistic note Monday about the future of bilateral relations.

"Russia is pleased with the stable and confident growth of Uzbekistan," he said. "Trade between the countries is growing and international cooperation is developing."

Agreements were signed Monday between the countries in the areas of culture, science, and economic cooperation.

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