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U.S. Advised Not to Keep Afghan Bases

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Russia urged the United States on Friday not to establish "long-term" military bases in Afghanistan, suggesting that even discussing such deployments could undermine peacemaking efforts and anger neighbors.

The Russian Foreign Ministry used a commentary on what it said were media reports about U.S.-Afghan talks on the potential deployment of long-term bases to register its opposition.

"This information makes one think and raises questions," the ministry said in a statement. "Why will U.S. military bases be needed if the terrorist threat in ... Afghanistan is ended?"

"Will Kabul be able to combine negotiations on a long-term American military presence with the reconciliation process? How will Afghanistan's neighbors view the deployment of a foreign country's military bases near their territory?"

The remarks came amid efforts by Russia to increase its clout in Afghanistan, where Moscow fought a disastrous Cold War conflict that contributed to the Soviet Union's 1991 collapse.

U.S. President Barack Obama has pledged to begin drawing down U.S. troops this year, with

the goal of passing lead security responsibility to Afghans by the end of 2014. But Washington has said the U.S. role in Afghanistan will continue past 2014.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Thursday that he would favor joint facilities in Afghanistan for training and counterterrorism operations.

Russia has helped the United States and NATO fight the Taliban-led insurgency by providing supply routes and weapons for Afghan forces, but has ruled out sending its own troops there and stresses that the campaign must not last forever.

The Kremlin has made clear that it wants the United States out of an airbase in the Central Asian ex-Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan once the mission is accomplished in Afghanistan.

The Soviet Union lost some 15,000 soldiers in its decade-long 1980s war with mujahedin fighters after invading to bolster Afghan communist allies. About 1 million Afghans died.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has hosted Afghan President Hamid Karzai twice in the past six months. Russia wants to bolster its role in Afghanistan's economy.

The possibility of the United States retaining long-term bases in Afghanistan could only be addressed once peace has been achieved and must take into account the country's neighbors, Karzai told a news conference Saturday.

"Some American officials have suggested that the U.S. government wants permanent bases in Afghanistan in the framework of enduring and strategic ties between the two countries," he said

"I have heard about Russian concern. We are not living in an island in which its surroundings are empty. We live in a restive region with major neighbors," Karzai said.

Karzai suggested any decision about long-term U.S. military bases would have to be discussed by parliament or a loya jirga, or traditional gathering of elders.

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