The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Is There a Place for a U.S. Military Base in Central Asia?

Even if a U.S. military base does eventually open in Central Asia, it won't change the balance of power on the ground.

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June 07, 2021



Getty Images

U.S. President Joe Biden has promised there will be no U.S. troops left in Afghanistan by the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks this year. But Washington is determined to keep supporting the Afghan government in its fight against the Taliban, and this is unlikely to be achievable without the establishment of U.S. military bases in Afghanistan's neighboring countries. The U.S. military command's preferred option reportedly would be Central Asia.

This is certainly the most obvious option: U.S. troops were, after all, based in the region from 2001 to 2014. Since then, however, much has changed. Most importantly, the U.S. relationships with Central Asia's two main external partners — Russia and China — have

sharply deteriorated, and they will clearly not welcome a U.S. return to the region. Washington, therefore, will have to prove to the Central Asian states that the financial and political benefits of cooperating with it would outweigh the inevitable losses that the host countries would sustain as a result of Moscow and Beijing's displeasure. That won't be easy, because during the last decade, people in Central Asia have conclusively stopped believing that the United States is prepared to act as a counterbalance to Russia and China in the region.

In Search of Allies

There was a time when the young, newly independent countries of Central Asia put a high value on any U.S. attention, and when the United States was actively promoting the principles of democracy and a market economy in the region. Now Afghanistan is one of the few issues upon which Washington still cooperates with the Central Asian nations.

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Afghanistan borders six other nations, none of which currently house any U.S. bases or can be described as close U.S. allies: Iran, Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Iran and China can be ruled out straight away, and Pakistan is too dependent on China now to embark on such a step. It's unlikely that Turkmenistan has any intention of departing from its isolationist course, and nor does Kazakhstan fit the bill, not just because of its distance from Afghanistan, but also because of its close ties to Russia.

That only leaves two options: Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Leaks in U.S. media suggest that the Pentagon is indeed eyeing those two countries as potential candidates for new bases. Although it has not been mentioned in U.S. publications, another potential candidate is Kyrgyzstan, given its proximity to Afghanistan.

Tajikistan

At first glance, it's hard to imagine U.S. troops in Tajikistan: a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) that already hosts a Russian military base on its territory. Yet this hasn't stopped President Emomali Rahmon from allowing China to build a border post on the border with Afghanistan, and — according to rumors — letting India take over the Farkhor air base.

The Tajik economy, however, depends heavily on remittances from Tajik nationals working in Russia (22 percent of GDP in 2020, and usually over 30 percent before the pandemic), and Chinese loans (52 percent of all external borrowing and more than 20 percent of GDP). In addition, of all the countries in Central Asia, Tajikistan has the frostiest relations with the United States: Rahmon is the only regional leader who has never made an official visit to the United States.

Tajikistan does, however, have some experience of military cooperation with the Americans. After 9/11, U.S. air force planes were given permission to refuel at the Ayni air base near the capital Dushanbe. Today, Tajik special forces undergo training in the United States, and border guards study at centers built using U.S. funding.

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In spring 2021, Washington embarked on a path of rapprochement with Dushanbe on Afghanistan. In March, online trilateral talks were held among Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and the United States. Then, Secretary of State Antony Blinken held an online meeting with his Central Asian counterparts in the C5+1 format, focusing on Afghanistan. And at the start of May, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, visited Tajikistan.

The U.S. interest in Tajikistan has not gone unnoticed in Moscow. At the end of April, Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke by phone to Rahmon, and discussed strengthening bilateral relations. This was followed by three CSTO events in Dushanbe, which led to agreements on creating a unified regional air defense system for the two countries and strengthening parts of the Tajik-Afghan border, and a promise to restart regular flights between Moscow and Dushanbe. In addition, Rahmon was the only foreign leader invited to the Victory Day parade on May 9 in Moscow.

Right now — with Rahmon preparing to hand over power to his son, the economy in crisis following the pandemic, and concerns over Afghanistan's future after the U.S. withdrawal — the Tajik regime is in desperate need of Russian support.

Kyrgyzstan

Like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan is heavily dependent on China and Russia. Remittances from migrant workers in Russia make up about a third of GDP, and Kyrgyzstan's debt to China is bigger than a quarter of GDP. Kyrgyzstan is also part of the CSTO—and a member of the Eurasian Economic Union—and is home to a Russian military base.

For a long time, Kyrgyzstan was considered the main U.S. ally in the region, and an oasis of democracy in Central Asia. The U.S. base there lasted longer than all the others in the region: from 2001 to 2014, despite two revolutions and repeated attempts by Moscow to get it closed. It was only in 2013 that President Almazbek Atambayev revoked the agreement with Washington on the leasing of the transit center at Manas airport.

Since then, relations between Kyrgyzstan and the United States have not improved. In 2015, Atambayev ended a cooperation agreement with the United States after Washington conferred its Human Rights Defender Award on the Kyrgyz activist Azimjon Askarov (he died last year in a Kyrgyz jail).

It's difficult for the United States to build a long-term relationship with Kyrgyzstan, since the constant warring of the country's political elites leads to unpredictable consequences and even coups d'état. This instability would also make it hard for Washington to guarantee the security of its troops if it were able to open a base there.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is far less dependent on Russia and China than its neighbors, is not currently part of the CSTO, and does not have any foreign military bases on its territory. Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016, relations with Russia have become noticeably warmer,

albeit as part of a broader trend of improving external ties.

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Back in 2001, then president Islam Karimov leased the Karshi-Khanabad air base to the Americans. But in May 2005, after Washington strongly condemned the brutal suppression of protests in Andijan in which hundreds of Uzbeks were killed, the Uzbek government demanded the withdrawal of U.S. troops. From 2013 to 2016, Tashkent was home to the office of the NATO Liaison Officer in Central Asia.

Since Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016, military ties between Uzbekistan and the United States have been rekindled. In 2018, the Uzbek leader visited Washington, where he signed the first ever military cooperation plan with the United States. Since then, the number of joint military exercises has increased, and Uzbek officers now have the chance to train in the United States and NATO countries.

In 2018, Uzbekistan initiated a new format for ending the conflict in Afghanistan: a conference in Tashkent of over twenty countries and organizations. Uzbekistan is preparing to host a similar event this year. Washington encourages Uzbekistan's active position on Afghanistan, and in May 2020, Washington, Tashkent, and Kabul held their first trilateral dialogue.

But the issue of hosting U.S. troops in Uzbekistan will inevitably be met with resistance from Moscow and Beijing, and it's doubtful that Tashkent is prepared to pay that price. Moscow is already vocal in its criticism of many of Tashkent's initiatives, believing that Washington is behind them and that their ultimate aim is to weaken Central Asia's links with Russia. There is also likely to be major resistance from Uzbek society, given the outrage elicited by recent rumors of a Russian military base opening in the country: a U.S. base would be even less popular.

Prospects

Even if a U.S. military base does eventually open in Central Asia, it won't change the balance of power on the ground. There are no interests that require Washington to have a long-term policy on the region. Moscow and Beijing, on the other hand, have no choice but to closely follow regional developments, since their own security depends on them.

Furthermore, China is not just an important economic partner now, but is actively moving to institutionalize its relations with the Central Asian states. May 11 saw the second C+C5 meeting among the foreign ministers of China plus the Central Asian nations take place in Xi'an. The Chinese foreign minister, speaking on behalf of all of the countries, warned Washington of the need for the "responsible and orderly withdrawal of foreign troops" from Afghanistan.

Chinese criticism of the United States for interfering in other countries' internal affairs is likely to become routine now, as it already is from Russia. At the end of April, for example, Beijing accused Washington of interfering in Kyrgyzstan's domestic affairs by financing local NGOs and media.

China and Russia are also apprehensive of increased U.S. activity in the region because they are convinced that a U.S. base there would be used against them. Beijing believes that Washington plans to destabilize the situation in Xinjiang, while Moscow suspects that the United States will keep sowing chaos around Russia's borders. Russia and China will continue to fight against the U.S. presence—and will do so together and more actively than before.

In none of the three countries in Central Asia where the United States could in theory open a military base do the potential advantages for the host country outweigh the risks. In all likelihood, none of them will agree to house a base. This reflects both the United States' declining role in the region, and the intensifying rivalry between the global powers. It appears that Washington will have to look for other solutions, such as moving some of its troops to the Middle East and using an aircraft carrier for patrols.

This article was first published by the Carnegie

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