



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENSE ANALYSES

U.S. Bases in Central Asia

Susan L. Clark-Sestak

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PREFACE

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SUMMARY

This paper explores the changing relationships between the United States and the five Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as a result of the global war on terrorism. These nations have rendered varying degrees of support to the U.S. campaign, including agreements to allow the stationing of U.S. troops at air bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Key questions for the future are what U.S. intentions in the region might be for the longer term, and what implications these plans might have for the regional balance of power, for U.S. bilateral relations with these nations as well as with Russia and China, and for domestic developments within these countries.

It seems likely that Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and possibly Tajikistan will figure in the new U.S. global basing posture for creating forward operating bases and locations with a minimal (if any) permanent U.S. military presence. When deciding such issues, it is vital that the U.S. government balance the benefits that such basing opportunities afford with potential drawbacks. Such drawbacks could include: negative effects on U.S.-Russian relations, fueling local opposition to the United States and thereby fostering the growth of anti-terrorism elements in the region, and creating at least the perception that we are willing to sacrifice our principles of promoting democratic freedoms in exchange for basing rights.

U.S. BASING IN CENTRAL ASIA

A. INTRODUCTION

The Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have offered varying degrees of assistance to the U.S. global war on terrorism (GWOT), launched in the wake of September 11th. This paper outlines the nature of their responses to the U.S. campaign and details the specifics of military bases currently being used by U.S. forces in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. It also describes potential basing options in Tajikistan, as well as Russian basing plans in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. All of these bases are highlighted in Figure 1.

The paper then turns to an examination of new U.S. global military basing plans, how the Central Asian states appear to be fitting into these plans, and their broader implications. Indeed, such plans raise a host of strategic issues as they could potentially affect: regional power balances among the Central Asian states; domestic stability in these countries (to include an increase in terrorist activities there—the very threat we seek to eliminate); the effectiveness of existing multilateral security arrangements between the Central Asian states and Russia (and China); and bilateral relations between the United States and Russia, especially as regards our shared interests in the GWOT.

The United States faces a difficult challenge in trying to balance the need for access to these strategically important areas in the GWOT with our interest in standing as a vanguard of liberalization, since such access requires dealing with and supporting repressive and/or autocratic regimes. In the eyes of many observers and U.S. critics, such security relationships could even be seen as another example of the United States propping up repressive, secular regimes that seek to quash the legitimate political aspirations of their Muslim populations. A greater emphasis on relations with Tajikistan, which has allowed opposition representation into its government and open operation of Islamic parties, would help the U.S. counter such arguments. Ultimately, given the nature of the likely basing arrangements in this region and the need to maintain operational security, it still remains unclear whether these relationships will have a positive or negative impact on perceptions of the United States and its strategic objectives in these Central Asian states and in the Muslim world more generally.



Figure 1. Highlighted Military Bases in Central Asia

B. CENTRAL ASIAN AND RUSSIAN RESPONSES TO OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM

The war on terrorism has brought the Central Asian nations front and center in U.S. foreign policy priorities, as evidenced by such activities as a constant parade of U.S. military, diplomatic, and congressional visits to the countries since September 2001, the creation of a Subcommittee on Central Asia and the Caucasus within the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and a more than doubling of U.S. aid to the five nations combined compared with 2001 levels. In addition, President George Bush's linkage of Osama bin Laden with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in his speech on 20 September 2001 demonstrated U.S. willingness to raise the level of awareness about a security concern of the Central Asian states in exchange for their support.¹

U.S. administration officials have emphasized that each of these nations has been a cooperative partner in the GWOT. Indeed, all the Central Asian states quite quickly offered overflight rights (Turkmenistan having limited this to civilian aircraft) in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. However, the nature of support beyond overflight rights and the rapidity with which support was given understandably differ amongst the countries, according to their perception of domestic and regional threats and the nature of their relationship with Russia.

Uzbekistan, under President Islam Karimov's leadership, consistently the most independent of the Central Asian nations vis-a-vis Russia, was the first to reach a basing agreement with the United States, pledging its support in early October 2001. It agreed to allow the stationing of ground troops, aircraft, and helicopters at an airbase to be used "in the first instance" for humanitarian and search and rescue operations; through such careful wording, offensive operations are not explicitly ruled out. The relationship was further solidified when, in March 2002, the U.S. and Uzbek governments signed a joint declaration in which the United States affirmed it would regard "with grave concern any external threat to the security and territorial integrity of the Republic of Uzbekistan."² In return, Uzbekistan pledged to undertake political and economic reforms, a pledge which has resulted in only limited, symbolic gestures to date. While the U.S. has been cautious not to offer explicit security guarantees, the Uzbek expectation certainly would be that

¹ The Clinton Administration officially recognized the IMU as a terrorist organization, but since the late 1990s, Uzbekistan had been unable to get any concrete assistance from the United States (or others) to combat the IMU threat. Evidence clearly supports the assertion that there are links between the Taliban and the IMU, but the U.S. did not explicitly state this until after September 11th.

² As cited in Elizabeth Wishnick, *Growing U.S. Security Interests in Central Asia* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, October 2002), p. 15.

the United States would come to its aid in the event of a security threat. Such thinking has been reinforced by U.S. administration statements, such as the one made by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in January 2002:

[I]f we ever saw things deteriorate again or to prevent them from deteriorating again, [a U.S. presence would]...send a message to everybody including importantly countries like Uzbekistan that we have a capacity to come back in and that we will come back in, and that most of all we remain interested. We're not just going to forget about them now that we've found them very useful.³

In mid-December 2001, Kyrgyzstan and the United States reached agreement on the use of Manas airbase (part of the international airport) just outside Bishkek, including—significantly—for combat and combat support operations. Manas has become an important base for not only U.S., but also other coalition personnel. In granting this access, President Askar Akaev faced a more difficult balancing act than Karimov, as Kyrgyzstan relies more on Russia for its security needs than does Uzbekistan (even though Russian protection has not always been effective or forthcoming).

The three remaining Central Asian states have offered more limited support to the U.S. campaign. In November 2001, President Imomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan, having coordinated closely with Moscow, allowed a U.S. team in to assess the suitability of three airbases for Operation Enduring Freedom. While a base there remains a possibility, the U.S. presence in Tajikistan has been limited to date to refueling operations. In the case of Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbaev stated as early as 25 September 2001 that his country was ready “to support an action against terrorism with all the means at its disposal” and to make military bases available to the United States.⁴ Still, no basing arrangements have been agreed upon, and the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the two countries in July 2002 simply allows for US military aircraft to land at the Almaty airport for refueling or in the event of an emergency.⁵ Assistance from Turkmenistan, with its official policy of neutrality, has remained limited to overflight and refueling rights in the context of humanitarian operations.

³ Interview with *New York Times*, 7 January 2002, as reported by U.S. Department of State, *International Information Programs*.

⁴ “Kazakhstan’s President Offers U.S. Use of Airfields,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Newswire*, Part I (hereafter RFE/RL), 25 September 2001.

⁵ US Ambassador Napper indicated that the United States might also receive permission to use two other airfields, in Djambyl and Shymkent, as reported in “Kazakhstan, U.S. Sign Airfield Agreement,” RFE/RL, 11 July 2002.

Notably, the United States was careful to coordinate its approach to the Central Asian states with Russia, and on 19 September 2001 Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov stated in a meeting with President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell that Russia would not object to U.S. efforts to ask the Central Asians for help in the GWOT. While admittedly seeking to avoid the risk of antagonizing Moscow, such an approach begs the question of whether the United States should not stand firm on the principle of recognizing the sovereignty of these nations to make their own decisions about their foreign and security policies. Elizabeth Jones, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs in the State Department, has explained that coordination with Russia has been in the interests of transparency and reinforcing common interests in the region;⁶ nevertheless, the fact remains that, at least initially, the U.S. sought Russia's approval before seeking Central Asian assistance.

For its part, the Russian reaction to the U.S. presence in Central Asia has been mixed. At least initially, President Vladimir Putin sought to coordinate any response by the Central Asian nations through the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and he strongly advocated resolution through United Nations channels. However, shortly thereafter and since then, Putin has publicly supported these nations' rights to make their own decisions on a bilateral basis with the United States, and has affirmed that the U.S. presence is not a threat to Russian interests in the region. Similarly, Foreign Minister Ivanov has said that each CIS member has the right to decide for itself whether to allow third parties or international alliances to use military bases on its territory.⁷ In contrast, many military and parliamentary leaders have not shared this perspective. For example, on 14 September 2001, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov bluntly stated, "I don't see any basis for even the hypothetical possibility of NATO military operations on the territory of Central Asian nations that belong to the Commonwealth of Independent States."⁸ His opposition was not strictly to a NATO operation, but to any U.S.-led effort. He subsequently came to toe the line, however, noting that "the presence of the U.S. and other members of the antiterrorist coalition on military bases in Central Asia is a positive factor for Russia. Without coordinated efforts by the participants in the international

⁶ See, for example, her statement of 11 February 2002 in an On-the-Record Briefing, as reported in U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Wants Engagement, Not Bases, in Central Asia," *International Information Programs*, 11 February 2002.

⁷ Statement made on 19 September 2001, as reported in "...Says Each CIS Country Can Decide Whether Others Can Use Its Bases," RFE/RL, 20 September 2001.

⁸ Ivanov as quoted in Avet Demourian, "Russian Defense Minister Denies Any Possibility of Anti-Terrorist Offensive Launched from Central Asia," *Associated Press Newswires*, 14 September 2001.

coalition, the Taliban threat could spill over Russia's borders."⁹ For his part, Speaker of the Duma Gennady Seleznev has remonstrated that "CIS countries...cannot take a single decision without consulting each other" and that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (still members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization) should not make a decision about foreign troop deployments on their soil "without Moscow's consent."¹⁰

Perhaps in part to address some of these criticisms, President Putin has lately invested considerable time and effort in "reenergizing" both the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)¹¹ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).¹² In the case of the CSTO, Russia is setting up a base at Kant, Kyrgyzstan, to provide air support to a CIS rapid deployment force. This force is designed to be available to operate under the aegis of the United Nations and, according to the CSTO General Secretary Nikolai Bordyuzha, is "ready to operate throughout the territory of all [the] Central Asian region."¹³ Undoubtedly, such an offer is premature and serious questions must remain about the potential for such a force to be an effective entity in the foreseeable future given resource constraints of all the member nations, but the effort does underscore Russia's interest in reasserting some influence in the region.

In a similar vein, the members of the SCO (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) confirmed plans at their September 2003 meeting in Tashkent to establish an antiterrorism center in that city. This center was originally to have been set up in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, but apparently in August 2003, at a meeting between Presidents Karimov and Putin, its location was moved to Tashkent, and the SCO endorsed this switch at its September meeting. Plans call for the center to be functioning in November 2003. Several questions about its future remain: Will any of the countries commit forces to it (since Russia is spearheading CSTO efforts in Central

⁹ Ivanov as reported in "Russian Defense Minister Sees U.S. Presence in Central Asia in Positive Light," RFE/RL, 13 February 2002.

¹⁰ "Duma Speaker Concerned About U.S. Bases in Central Asia, But Putin is Not," RFE/RL, 10 January 2002.

¹¹ In May 2002, the Collective Security Treaty of the CIS renamed itself the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), with the stated focus of preserving territorial integrity and seeking closer cooperation with other multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and NATO. Neither Uzbekistan nor Turkmenistan is party to the CSTO.

¹² The SCO, established in 1996 by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia, initially focused on confidence building measures and resolving border issues in the Central Asian region. It has since expanded to include Uzbekistan and broadened its mandate to include combating terrorism, extremism and separatism.

¹³ Bordyuzha as quoted in Sergei Blagov, "Rough Road to Russia-Tajik Cooperation," *Asia Times Online*, 1 August 2003.

Asia already, and China is reluctant to station troops abroad)?¹⁴ Will adequate resources be committed to it? How will it avoid duplication of efforts with other international efforts? Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov argued in January 2002 that the global antiterrorist campaign should rely on regional structures, and pointed to the SCO's plans for the regional antiterrorist center as a case in point. Clearly, Russia (and China) would hope to use the creation of this center as a vehicle for strengthening their influence in the region (and with international organizations), and as a counterweight to the increased influence of the United States in Central Asia.

C. ABOUT THE BASES

1. Kyrgyzstan

A multinational coalition force of some 1,500 military personnel is currently stationed at Manas International Airport,¹⁵ just outside Bishkek and about 300 kilometers from the Chinese border and 400 kilometers from the Afghan border. The base covers 37 acres, has a 13,800-foot runway, and can handle about 30 military aircraft, including cargo planes, refueling aircraft, and fighters such as U.S. F/A-18s and French Mirage 2000s. While the airport was judged to be in fairly good condition (certainly compared with other alternatives) when coalition forces began using it in December 2001, all parties knew significant improvements would be needed. As President Akaev saw it, the agreement offered "a wonderful chance for us...to receive a new air-control system, modernize our technology, and turn Manas into a first-class, safe airport."¹⁶ The U.S. alone has reportedly invested more than \$16 million to improve the base.¹⁷ In 2003, it has leased additional land for housing and administrative support, fueling speculation about a larger and more prolonged U.S. stay at the facility. Over the last 2 years, reports frequently have referred to plans for as many as 3,000 coalition personnel to be stationed there.

The original Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed between the United States and Kyrgyzstan in December 2001 allowed for a U.S. military presence at Manas for 1 year, but even then President Akaev noted that there might be a need to extend the agreement. Indeed, in June 2003, Foreign Minister Askar Aitmatov announced during a

¹⁴ Matthew Oresman, "Day of Reckoning for China-Central Asia Group," *Asia Times Online*, 24 May 2003.

¹⁵ Coalition members who have used Manas come from Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, and the United States.

¹⁶ Akaev as quoted in "Kyrgyz Parliament's Upper House Approves Use of Airport by Antiterrorist Coalition," RFE/RL, 12 December 2001.

¹⁷ "Stopping the Rot," *Economist*, 2 May 2002.

visit in the United States that the agreement had been extended for 3 years, although an extension of 1 year is more likely.¹⁸ Statements from both governments have consistently stressed that, while the U.S. presence would not be a permanent one, these forces would remain as long as the Afghanistan campaign continues, and no one can yet identify a date when that campaign will be complete. The SOFA also gives the U.S. military “broad authority to use the airport for ‘combat and combat support for operations in support of Operation Enduring Freedom,’”¹⁹ in exchange for which it pays \$7,000 per aircraft landing as well as rent, fuel purchases, etc. This ability to conduct combat operations from Kyrgyzstan contrasts sharply with the mandate that other Central Asian countries have granted U.S. forces, whence U.S. activities have been restricted to humanitarian support and search and rescue operations. (Uzbekistan, as noted earlier, has carefully straddled that issue, and combat operations are not *explicitly* ruled out.)

Just 1 year after the United States and Kyrgyzstan reached agreement on the use of Manas in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Russia stepped up its efforts to establish a long-term military presence at the Kant airbase, also just outside Bishkek and less than 30 kilometers from Manas. Plans call for the stationing of some 300 Russian troops and civilians and about 20 aircraft²⁰ in the context of providing air support for the Collective Security Treaty Organization’s new rapid reaction force (of up to 5,000 men) for the region and air support to the 201st Motorized Rifle Division stationed in Tajikistan. Russia has been renovating the facilities and expects the base to be operational by the end of 2003, although delays in meeting earlier operational deadlines (beginning in April 2003) have created speculation that the U.S. has raised objections to these plans. There are certainly basic issues, such as control of airspace, that still need to be resolved for the two bases to operate so close to each other under very different commands, but for the same purpose: anti-terrorism.

¹⁸ There seems some uncertainty on this point; at a minimum, it has been extended another year. A U.S. spokesman at Manas indicated that the lease had been extended for another year (rather than 3 years), and Kyrgyz Prime Minister Tanaev said in September 2003 that the agreement is automatically renewable on a yearly basis unless one of the parties indicates it wishes to withdraw 180 days prior to its expiration.

¹⁹ Vernon Loeb, “Footprints in Steppes of Central Asia; New Bases Indicate U.S. Presence Will Be Felt After Afghan War,” *Washington Post*, 9 February 2002, p. A1.

²⁰ Early reports indicated the aircraft are to include: five Su-25 attack jets, five Su-27 fighters, two An-26 transports, two Il-76 transports, five L-39 training jets, and two Mi-8 helicopters (Sergei Blagov, “Russia Strengthens Its Military Shield,” *Asia Times Online*, 11 June 2003). At the signing of the case agreement in September 2003, reports noted plans for 15 Su-25 and Su-27 fighter jets as well as the need to lengthen the runway to be able to handle transport aircraft (“Agreement Signed on Russian Air Base in Kyrgyzstan,” RFE/RL, 23 September 2003).

Kyrgyz Defense Minister Colonel General Esen Topoev has taken pains to stress the different functions of Manas and Kant: “The Manas base exclusively supports coalition operations in Afghanistan, while the Kant air base is intended to protect the security of the Central Asian signatories of the CIS Collective Security Treaty, by serving as the base of the air component of the CIS rapid-reaction force,”²¹ and by focusing on potential threats on Central Asian territory.²²

In addition to command and control difficulties presented by Kant’s proximity to Manas, there are broader political implications of this arrangement: it provides Russia with an important opportunity to reassert its military influence in the region, and can make President Akaev less motivated to yield to U.S. pressure on topics such as enhancing democracy and freedom of speech in his nation. He now has an alternate source of support, although admittedly Russia has previously demonstrated its unwillingness and/or inability to provide economic or military assistance when Kyrgyzstan has needed it to combat terrorist threats on its soil.

2. Uzbekistan

Immediately after the signing in October 2001 of the U.S.-Uzbek SOFA that allows for the U.S. use of several bases in the country, U.S. military forces began arriving at Karshi-Khanabad airbase, located about 100 miles north of the Afghan border. About 1,500 U.S. troops have been stationed there, primarily from the 10th Mountain Division. As with Manas, the U.S. has funded upgrades to the facilities at Khanabad, including refurbishing the runway, building other facilities, and erecting a security fence around the base. The fence, however, has had the negative effect of inconveniencing and angering much of the local population.

In contrast to the lease with Kyrgyzstan (which is renewable on a year-to-year basis), the agreement with Uzbekistan does not specify the duration of the U.S. presence, and President Karimov has pointedly left open the door for a long-term stay: “We have had no negotiations with the Americans on...how many years they will use the Khanabad [air] base.”²³ Also, as noted earlier, the SOFA with Uzbekistan carefully states that use of Uzbek airspace and airfield(s) will be humanitarian and search and rescue operations

²¹ As quoted in “Kyrgyz Defense Minister Asks That Bases of Antiterrorism Coalition and Russia Not Be Seen as Rivals,” RFE/RL, 10 July 2003.

²² As quoted in Sergei Blagov, “Renovation of Russian Base in Kyrgyzstan Nears Completion,” *Eurasia Insight*, 24 July 2003.

²³ Karimov statement from 28 December 2001, as quoted in “Uzbek President Says U.S. Military Presence Open Ended,” RFE/RL, 3 January 2002.

“in the first instance,” leaving open the option for launching combat operations, such as by U.S. special forces, but without drawing overt attention to such operations.

Uzbekistan also hosts German forces at Termez airbase, supporting the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan, which as of February 2003 is headed by Germany and the Netherlands. Following German renovations to Termez, the airbase is now capable of handling up to nine large transport aircraft. In August 2003, the Uzbek government agreed to a German request for stationing more troops at Termez for peacekeeping and humanitarian operations.

3. Tajikistan

In November 2001, following close consultations with Russia, President Rakhmonov gave permission for U.S. engineers to evaluate the possible use of three Tajik air bases: Kulyab and Kurgan-Tyube in the southern part of the country and Khujand in northwestern Tajikistan. He stated that the U.S. would be able to use any of those three, or perhaps even two of the three.²⁴ There were reports that Tajikistan also planned to offer the use of an airbase in the capital of Dushanbe, but this was rejected by the Russians before it could be offered to the United States. In the end, the U.S. (as well as France and the U.K.) has stationed a small military presence at Dushanbe for refueling operations, but the other airfields were judged to be unsuitable for U.S. use. Kulyab was in such poor condition that it was not suitable for frequent takeoffs and landings, nor could it handle heavy aircraft (such as bombers and transport planes). Kurgan-Tyube was suitable only for light aircraft and helicopters. Similarly, France determined that the cost to renovate the base at Ayni (about 15 kilometers southwest of Dushanbe) would be prohibitive given its state of disrepair; for instance, the runway has not been repaired since 1985.²⁵

It seems that use of the facilities is being reconsidered, as in 2003 the U.S. Department of Defense reportedly resumed discussions with the Tajik government about leasing three airbases.²⁶ If anything comes of these discussions, the benefits would be several: it would allow greater dispersal of U.S. assets in the region (i.e., less reliance on Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan), U.S. economic assistance to the poorest of the Central Asian nations would increase, and political support would be underscored for a government that has managed to establish itself through cooperation with former

²⁴ Quoted in “Central Asia Leaders Taking Stock of Regional Situation,” *Monitor Jamestown Foundation*, 21 November 2001.

²⁵ “Germany, Britain May Request Use of Tajik Air Bases,” RFE/RL, 24 January 2002.

²⁶ Reported in “U.S. Resumes Talks on Tajik Bases,” RFE/RL, 10 March 2003.

opposition groups and one that allows Islamic parties to operate openly—developments that have yet to be replicated in other Central Asian governments.

For its part, Russia continues in its negotiations with Tajikistan to raise the status of its 201st Motorized Rifle Division in Tajikistan from an installation to a base and to have the new base be the location for a Central Asian rapid deployment force of some 3,000-5,000 men. Bilateral discussions on the new base have been ongoing for the better part of 2 years. No agreement is yet in place, however, likely because of differences between the two sides on economic aspects of the agreement, although there have also been persistent rumors of U.S. opposition to the plan.

The question for the future remains: What might be U.S. intentions in the region for the longer term?

D. U.S. GLOBAL BASING PLANS AND CENTRAL ASIA'S ROLE

The Bush administration has announced plans to fundamentally reshape overseas basing of U.S. military personnel. Such changes are necessary due to the changes in the international security environment, the primary focus on the war on terrorism, and the determination to “deter forward in critical regions around the world.”²⁷ These critical regions generally correspond to an “arc of instability” that has been identified as extending through the Caribbean Rim, Africa, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, and North Korea. The new basing strategy emphasizes flexibility, forward access, rotating smaller numbers of troops for shorter periods of time, and using equipment that is already left in place. Concomitantly, the heavy presence of U.S. troops in Western Europe and Northeast Asia will be significantly reduced, and new forward operating bases and locations established in other areas of the world.

At forward operating bases, a small contingent of U.S. troops would be stationed to maintain them and the equipment pre-positioned there, for use by troops who would rotate in on an occasional basis for training (perhaps every 6 months or so). Forward operating locations would be even more bare-boned, without any consistent U.S. presence. These locations would be quickly available for use by U.S. troops in a crisis, based on previous arrangements with the host nation. It seems likely that U.S. facilities in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and perhaps subsequently in Tajikistan would fall into one of these two categories. As Secretary of State Powell testified to the House International

²⁷ Statement by the Honorable J.D. Crouch II, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Europe, 13 March 2003.

Relations Committee in February 2002, “America will have a continuing interest and presence in Central Asia of a kind that we could not have dreamed of before.”²⁸

The likelihood of such plans raises several issues. First, U.S. administration officials have taken pains to repeatedly state the mantra that the U.S. has no plans for “permanent military bases” in Central Asia. But as the United States has learned in numerous other cases (Europe after World War II, Korea, and Saudi Arabia), when it comes to military presence, the provisional has a tendency to slide into the permanent—it is often easier to get U.S. forces into a country than it is to get them out.

The first question thus is how to define “permanent”: Will troops remain only so long as military operations are being conducted in Afghanistan? Will they remain until Afghanistan is “stable” (and who would define what is stable)? At what point does the extension of current U.S. agreements with the host nation move from being a temporary arrangement to a more permanent one? In the case of Kyrgyzstan, one of the parties must indicate it wishes to terminate the arrangement 6 months prior to its expiration, or it is automatically extended. In the case of Uzbekistan, the duration of the U.S. presence appears to be open-ended. If troops are still there in 10 years, for example, does this begin to constitute a permanent presence or simply the extension of a temporary one?

Second, how is “military presence” defined: Is it the presence of *any* number of U.S. troops on the ground, or is there some small number (for maintaining a base) that would not be characterized as a “presence” per se? Alternatively, assuming the current bases are turned into “forward operating locations,” there would be no U.S. military presence on a *daily* basis, but there would still be a base from which the U.S. would (supposedly) be able to conduct military operations, on an as-needed basis.

The administration has asserted that it wants *access* to bases, including for the long term, rather than a permanent presence.²⁹ To many observers this would seem to be

²⁸ Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, Statement for the Record, House International Relations Committee, 6 February 2002.

²⁹ See, for example, the statement by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: “Our basic interest is to have the ability to go into a country and have a relationship and have understandings about our ability to land or over-fly and to do things that are of mutual benefit to each of us. But we don’t have any particular plans for permanent bases.” Reported in Ken Coates, Paper presented at The Cordoba Seminar on Peace and Human Rights in Europe and the Middle East, 25-26 November 2002 and Mark Thompson, “Letter from Kyrgyzstan: The U.S. Moves In,” *Time*, 27 April 2002. Also, Elizabeth Jones on 11 February 2002 in On-the Record Briefing: “We don’t want U.S. bases in Central Asia.... But what we do want is access to the bases to which we have access now for as long as we need them.” And Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, B. Lynn Pascoe: “we will want access for future contingencies...” at Yale University conference on 20 September 2002, as reported in U.S. Department of State, *International Information Programs*, 20 September 2002.

tautological in that U.S. access to military bases in the region, even without a sizable U.S. presence, brings with it some of the same concerns that a permanent base would. What will be the reaction of the local population and governments? of Russia and China? Will the host nations, in fact, allow the use of these facilities when the U.S. deems it necessary? (For instance, it became clear in the case of the war against Iraq that such authorizations would not be allowed.) The very nature of relying on ad hoc coalitions, as is the case here, for specific threats means that the ability to count on access to these facilities is much more tenuous than has historically been the case when such access is essentially guaranteed as part of a formal alliance. In turn, a U.S. presence in one form or another will likely raise expectations among the Central Asian nations about a U.S. commitment to help them address their own regional threats. It is unclear whether the current U.S. administration would readily recognize a “localized” threat in the region as a threat to U.S. interests and therefore one meriting U.S. involvement. These, and a number of other considerations raised in the next section, all need to be put into perspective when considering reliance on some form of forward basing in the region.

E. IMPLICATIONS OF CENTRAL ASIAN BASING RIGHTS

It is widely understood that the access rights Central Asian states have offered the United States have come with a price tag: increased economic assistance in the form of, what has been termed by the Bush administration, “positive engagement.”³⁰ The argument is made that we continue to push for respect for human rights, democratic elections, freedom of the press, and other symbols of democracy, and we will pursue engagement so long as we see positive trends. Without such steps forward, it is argued, we will withdraw or reduce our level of engagement. The reality indicates that it is difficult to see any evidence of direct linkages between the level of aid offered and Central Asian governments’ attempts to reform their repressive practices and policies. Indeed, President Karimov of Uzbekistan has a long-standing reputation for dictatorship and repression, yet his government has received the largest share of the increased U.S. aid to the region.

Too often the U.S. government has set aside its stated principles of promoting greater democratic freedom for the sake of remaining engaged with nations of the former Soviet Union. As a result, few of the leaders there really believe we will ever follow up on threats of withdrawing economic or military assistance. Such an approach risks jeopardizing our role as a vanguard of liberalization, and raises serious questions about

³⁰ Pascoe at Yale University conference, 20 September 2002.

whether we are not undermining our moral authority. At a minimum, if our credibility is to be restored, it is vital that we draw specific linkages between assistance levels and host nation commitments to (and follow-through on) reforms. These linkages should understandably differentiate among the nations of Central Asia, as each regime differs in the progress it is (or is not) making to move toward press, electoral, speech, and economic freedom.

A common argument in support of such military presence is the value of military-to-military and military-to-society contacts in building and sustaining U.S. influence. However, new security concerns that dictate a more “quarantined” approach make such a “secondary” benefit unlikely, if not impossible. Fences have been erected around the bases where U.S. troops are stationed, contact with the local populace is kept to a minimum, and therefore the economic and political benefits to be obtained from a forward U.S. presence are largely lost. Most of the economic benefit is going to people affiliated in one way or another with the government leadership, not to the local community. In the case of Central Asian basing rights, this situation is further compounded by the likelihood that, in the longer term, the U.S. presence at these facilities will be only nominal.

The lack of an economic boon to the local population, coupled with the lack of personal contact, will only raise more questions about “real” U.S. motivations and exacerbate the resentment that many have of the U.S. propping up corrupt, dictatorial regimes, thus undermining rather than enhancing U.S. influence at grassroots level. Indeed, by solidifying the positions of current government officials through frequent high-level contacts and economic support, the U.S. risks the threat of contributing to exactly what it hopes to eradicate: the rise of militant, anti-American/anti-Western movements and terrorist groups throughout the region. The Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan and bordering on Kyrgyzstan is one area ripe for such a reaction, with as much as 90 percent of the population unemployed³¹ and a large percentage of the population under the age of 18. In fact, this is one of the areas in which the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) already has had great appeal.

If the United States continues to place the greatest emphasis and reliance on its relations with Uzbekistan, we also risk potentially affecting the regional balance of power.³² Since becoming an independent state, Uzbekistan has made clear its desires to

³¹ Interview with Ahmed Rashid in *Asia Source*, 21 March 2002. In Uzbekistan as a whole, 35 percent of the population is under the age of 14, according to the *CIA World Factbook*, 2003.

³² This idea is also discussed in Wishnick, *Growing U.S. Security Interests in Central Asia*, p. 33.

become the regional leader, if not hegemon, especially in the military sphere. U.S. support for the Uzbek government and its security, as evidenced in the March 2002 agreement that raises expectations of U.S. security guarantees, could tilt the balance more in its favor. This is not a desired outcome for U.S. interests in the region: the current tenuous balance between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as the “big” players in the region, coupled with the roles of the smaller states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and to a lesser extent Turkmenistan, is one that should be encouraged, particularly through such venues as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Cooperation among the Central Asian nations, China, and Russia through the SCO can be a valuable tool for regional stability. While economic constraints and differences of opinion on some issues continue to present challenges to successful cooperation, Russia and China have been trying to breathe new life into the SCO and to transform this organization into one that can interact with other regional forums, such as NATO, and be offered for use under U.N. auspices. Such efforts should not be viewed as a negative development for U.S. interests. The SCO could help to keep regional power competitions among the member states in check. It is also an effort to foster greater regional cooperation and coordination, a principle that the U.S. has been advocating for a number of years.

U.S. long-term plans in Central Asia have implications for our future relationship with Russia as well. To date, cooperation between Presidents Putin and Bush has been quite constructive, but opposition within the Russian government to a more permanent U.S. presence in Russia’s traditional backyard should be expected to grow stronger the longer U.S. troops remain. Certainly, Russian plans to establish the Kant base so close to Manas in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the base in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, make clear the determination of Russia to maintain a visible presence in the region. Moreover, while the argument is made that Kant and Manas have different roles (the former for local and regional threats, the latter strictly for Operation Enduring Freedom), the key ultimate objective of both is the same: to eliminate the threat from international terrorist groups. The proximity of these bases raises important questions about sharing airspace rights, demands on local infrastructure, communication requirements, etc. Any number of factors can reduce or eliminate the current cooperative nature of the U.S.-Russian relationship on fighting terrorism, especially in this region.

Finally, there appear to be some expectations that training in such areas as Central Asia and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria and Romania are two frequently named future basing locations) will be easier in the sense of having fewer restrictions imposed by the host

nation governments on these training activities.³³ While environmental and other regulations may not be as strict in these countries as is currently the case in Germany, for example, it should be kept in mind that these nations either are European Union-aspirants and/or (as in the case of Central Asia) are very environmentally conscious, having suffered through a Soviet system that destroyed large parts of their ecosystems. Training restrictions might be more flexible at the moment, but such flexibility should not be assumed for the future.

F. CONCLUSIONS

The United States has a number of motivations for maintaining some form of military basing capability in the Central Asia region. In addition to the clearly articulated need to have locations closer to areas of future threats, there is no doubt that such a presence also offers opportunities to balance Russian influence in the region (which is particularly welcomed by Uzbekistan), to assert U.S. “claims” to valuable energy resources in these countries, and to diversify reliance on traditional basing partners in Western Europe and Asia.

When considering the Central Asian nations in future global basing plans, it will be vital to consider the balance of interests among the factors outlined above. A careful weighting of priorities may well result in a decision that basing access in these countries offers more benefits than drawbacks. If so, every effort must be made to perpetuate broader U.S. objectives in the region as well, and to make our presence and continued economic and security support conditional on reforms that will move these societies toward more open and free processes.

³³ See Vernon Loeb, “New Bases Reflect Shift in Military,” *Washington Post*, 9 June 2003, p. A1.

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