

## **Afghan Troop Withdrawal Poses Risks to Uzbekistan**

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As Central Asian states face up to the prospect of NATO combat troops withdrawing from Afghanistan in 2014, NBCentralAsia asked a leading expert on the region, Bruce Pannier of RFE/RL, to comment on the risks emerging for Uzbekistan, and what the likely response will be.

**NBCentralAsia:** How will Uzbekistan adapt ahead of the troop pullout from Afghanistan?

**Bruce Pannier:** From one perspective, Uzbekistan's international role will increase, as the West will focus more on cooperation with it. So the future looks a lot more complex than things are at present.

Once the coalition troops leave, the West will build stronger diplomatic, political and economical ties with Uzbekistan, an important strategic and transit point in Central Asia.

Washington's cooling political relations with Islamabad mean the anti-terrorism coalition needs a new transit route into Afghanistan. For the United States and NATO, Uzbekistan serves this purpose, for a number of reasons. It is located at the very heart of Central Asia, and it has a land border with Afghanistan, making it several times cheaper to transport military freight and supplies through Uzbekistan than it is through Pakistan or Kyrgyzstan.

At the present time, the US has already launched a policy of rapprochement with Uzbekistan. In mid-September, Congress approved a bill lifting restrictions on aid to Uzbekistan, put in place in 2004 because of concerns about human rights observance.

**NBCentralAsia:** What risks does the troop withdrawal pose to Uzbekistan, and what are the authorities there going to do about it?

**Pannier:** Tashkent will have to shoulder the heavy burden of protecting its border, and it will live in constant fear of infiltration by militant fighters.

A similar situation developed in the late 1990s, when the Taleban moved close to the Uzbek border, and simultaneously, fighters of the hitherto unknown Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, made their first appearance.

I'm sure Tashkent is currently thinking hard how about how it can curb the IMU's scope for action – or even destroy it altogether – ahead of the troop withdrawal.

Simultaneously, Tashkent is going to be looking for new allies in Afghanistan, who might form a buffer zone between the insurgents and the Uzbek border. It's more than likely that role will be assigned to General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a well-known commander... [whom] Tashkent has always seen as an ally. That alliance will only strengthen once the coalition troops go. It's likely the first Taleban and IMU attacks will target Dostum's forces, and that will be a heads-up to Tashkent that frontier clashes are imminent.

It's worth recalling that [prior to being ousted in 2001] the Taleban movement accused Tashkent of attacking its forces inside Afghanistan.

**NBCentralAsia:** How would you expect Uzbekistan's foreign partners to respond?

**Pannier:** Russia will boost supplies of arms and military hardware to Uzbekistan. Russia is currently the only country supplying Tashkent with weapons.

Assistance from the US and China will probably take the form of supplies of modern border-surveillance equipment. The US may also provide Tashkent with funding to buy Russian arms. European Union support will consist of advice.

Given Uzbekistan's strained relationships with its Central Asian neighbours, it is hard to predict how they will respond under such circumstances.

**NBCentralAsia:** In a scenario like this, what is President Islam Karimov likely to do in terms of domestic policy?

**Pannier:** Karimov understands that it's crucial for him to increase the economic prosperity of ordinary people. He will therefore give them something – perhaps better welfare policies – so as to defuse social tensions and unhappiness, since he will need to secure people's trust and support.

Another step the Uzbek leader will take will be to support religious activity through the officially-registered mosques and clerics who are close to the regime and who enjoy some authority among the population.

At the same time, there will be greater repression of independent Muslims and illegal religious groups, so as to root out domestic “enemies”. The authorities will want to be certain the IMU has no domestic support, so they will seek to “purge” the country ahead of the Afghan troop withdrawal.

In addition, the Uzbek authorities will attempt to turn the evolving situation to their own advantage. Tashkent will start crying out that it’s on the front line of the war against international terrorism, and it will keep on repeating this until it gets the assistance it wants.

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