

Call for US Retreat from Central Asia

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Prominent Washington analyst downplays Central Asia's strategic and geopolitical value.

The United States has little to gain by consolidating its presence in Central Asia in the wake of the September 11 attacks, a leading Washington-based defence analyst claimed recently.

The remarks are significant because they come as America appears to be expanding its influence in the area and Russia shows signs of trying to counter it.

"Americans had no choice but to come to the region to support their military infrastructure in Afghanistan," said Nikolai Zlobin, director of the Centre for Defence Information, while visiting Russia with President George Bush over a week ago. "(But) the (Central Asian) region does not have sufficient strategic or geopolitical value to the United States to make it stay."

Some analysts have speculated that the US may be trying to use the foothold gained in several Central Asian states amid its "war against terror" to exert political influence in the region and gain access to its huge gas and oil reserves.

The Russian president has never displayed any public concern over the American military build-up in Central Asia - although many lower-level Kremlin officials have voiced anxieties - but this is not to suggest that Russia is disinterested in the former Soviet states.

In fact, Moscow appears to be attempting to re-establish its authority over the region it once rules, with smaller states there no longer so fearful of a threat to their sovereignty after ten years of independence.

Some analysts have even accused the Kremlin of trying to revive the Warsaw Pact, citing moves apparently aimed at beefing up its status in the area and frustrating US efforts to expand its influence.

On May 13 and 14, Moscow hosted two CIS summits simultaneously. One was for the members of the Collective Defence Treaty, CDT, comprising Russia, Belarus, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia, and another for the Eurasian Economic Community, EurasEC, made up of the same nations minus Armenia.

The most significant outcome was the decision to transform the CDT into the Organisation of the Collective Defence Treaty, OCDT, and register it as a regional organisation under the UN Charter.

Those countries allying with Moscow in the OCDT are likely to be able to acquire military technology and training for military personnel relatively cheaply - alluring inducements for countries whose armies are equipped with Russian-made weaponry.

But a proposed condition for membership of the organisation is that OCDT states would not be able to allow outside countries military access to their territories without the approval of the governing body.

If the OCDT had been in existence last year under such conditions, and Kyrgyzstan had been a member,

Bishkek may not have been allowed to agree to the US military deployment at Manas airport - considered to be one of the largest and most well-equipped in Central Asia.

While the creation of such organisations could be seen as an attempt by Moscow to pre-empt similar US deployments in the future, Moscow would find it hard to insist that current OCDT members renege on any accords they might already have with outside states.

What Washington would make of such a flexing of Moscow muscle at a time the two nations are apparently forging closer ties remains to be seen.

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