

Kazakhstan: US Military Deal

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Move to allow US military planes to land at Almaty airport triggers suspicions of an American army deployment in the country.

A memorandum of mutual understanding allowing the US to use Almaty airport for emergency landings by military planes may presage an American army presence here, analysts say.

The memorandum, signed on July 10, by Kairat Abuseitov the Kazak deputy minister of foreign affairs, and Larry Nepper, a senior US diplomat, allows for American aircraft engaged in "anti-terrorist activities" to use the airport.

Despite assurances from the minister for foreign affairs, Kasymzhomarat Tokaev, that the memorandum "does not mean that military bases will be created on the territory of Kazakhstan," a number of commentators believe the agreement is the thin end of a wedge.

Weekly newspaper *Novoye pokolenie*, or *New Generation*, reported that the US Senate has devised a bill to allow for an American military contingent to be stationed here. The proposed legislation, it is said, provides for a widening of the mandate for international forces on Kazak territory, said the newspaper, adding that US senators apparently believe that Central Asia will be subject to terrorist attacks in the future.

IWPR was unable to confirm whether the reported bill exists or not. The Kazak ministry of foreign affairs said they had no precise information. "But it seems logical that such a law will follow the signing of the memorandum. It is part of the development of bilateral relations between the US and Kazakhstan," said a spokesman.

The US embassy in Almaty was unable to confirm the existence of the reported bill.

An agreement over the use of Kazak airspace by the Americans was struck in December 2001, during a visit to Astana by US secretary of state Colin Powell.

In April, following a visit from US defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, Tokaev told the Kazak parliament that Kazakhstan might provide airports for use by the coalition against terrorism.

Washington also made a request for two reserve airports, for which Kazakhstan earmarked the airbases in Lugovoye and Shymkent. Unlike Almaty airport, neither have any significant infrastructure.

"This is probably part of a longer term geopolitical plan, in return for which Kazakhstan will receive military support from the US and NATO," said political scientist Sanat Kushkumbaev. "The US is now suddenly capitalising on the president's many earlier offers to provide airports for the anti-terrorist coalition."

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have hosted US military bases since the beginning of the war against terrorism, leading many analysts to conclude that Kazakhstan's agreement, coming so late in the day, is really prompted by other US interests.

"Kazakhstan has taken this step under pressure from the US, hoping that in return Americans will be less critical about the political situation in Kazakhstan," said Meirjan Mashan, director of the Strategy Centre of Analysis. In his view, the memorandum is the thinly-veiled beginning of a US military presence in the area.

Those who suspect a wider US agenda point to two major concerns, one economic the other geopolitical. "Washington wants to establish control over the Caspian basin, which is rich in hydrocarbons," said political scientist Andrei Chebotarev, pointing to the large number of American energy companies with investments in the area. "Geopolitically, Kazakhstan is a convenient base to ensure a foothold into China and Russia," he added. Kazakhstan is the only state in Central Asia to border both countries.

Those who fear further US presence in Kazakhstan were not comforted by Nepper's comment on the agreement that "at the moment it only concerns the use of the Almaty International Airport". By risking a negative reaction from Russia, China and Islamic states, Kazakhstan could be losing more than it gains, claim many commentators.

In what could be interpreted as a warning, the former Chinese ambassador to Russia, Li Fen Lin, said, "The US says that its presence in the Central Asian region is temporary and China is taking the US at its word."

The government is seeking to calm fears about future US intentions. A senior civil servant, who did not want to be named, told IWPR, "The official position is that the airport will be used as a transit base only, not a permanent one like in other Central Asian republics."

Nikolai Kuzmin, the director of the Centre for Internal Politics and Analysis at the foreign ministry, insisted that the agreement was technical in essence. "The US request to use the Almaty airport for emergency landings was made because the technical rules covering existing military airbases such as Manas in Kyrgyzstan, require two reserve airports. So there is nothing out of the ordinary here."

However, some Kazak commentators believe that Washington is now seeking an alternative to their airbase at Manas in Kyrgyzstan, prompted by political instability in that country and by the fact that Russian troops will soon be stationed nearby, following a Kyrgyz government decision to allow CIS's Collective Forces of Rapid Deployment to establish a base outside Bishkek.

"There will be no American military based here permanently," insisted Kuzmin. "This is not an attempt to infiltrate Central Asia or to strengthen the US position here. America already has a firm foothold in Kazakhstan, not through its military, but through its investment and through the dollar, the currency in which our citizens keep their savings."

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