

Tajik Tilt Towards US Unnerves Moscow

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Russia's influence in Central Asia may be further undermined if Dushanbe strengthens ties with the US.

Time is running out for Tajikistan to choose which big power it wants as its principal ally.

The choice is to strengthen ties with the United States, which may bring great benefits, or stick with Russia, its strategic partner for many years and until recently the paramount influence.

Recently, Dushanbe has tilted markedly in the direction of the US amid much official talk of increasing collaboration with Washington and putting ties on a new level.

While the US has an obvious strategic interest in the country in the aftermath of the Afghan conflict, Tajik leaders fear a burgeoning partnership with America will anger Moscow, which for years has militarily underpinned the rule of President Emomali Rakhmonov.

Tajikistan was the only country in Central Asia where Russia had a military presence - a 19,000-strong contingent stationed here to help to guard the country's border with Afghanistan.

The issue has become pressing since officials went public on the likelihood of allowing US military bases on Tajik territory. Early this month, the defence minister Sherali Khairullaev created a sensation when he announced the imminent handover to the US military of Kulyab airport, in the south of the country. He refused to say how many soldiers would be based there.

The shock was all the greater as Tajikistan did not allow its territory to be used for military action in Afghanistan, although reports about possible use of Tajik bases has been in circulation since the beginning of the US-led operation in Afghanistan at the end of last year.

American experts have already visited Tajikistan to examine the airport's facilities. They believe it is in poor condition, but are still interested, as the deficiencies can be solved with a little investment.

The US strategic interest is clear. Tajikistan has a 1,300 km border with Afghanistan and the frontier lands have proved a breeding ground for extreme religious and even terrorist groups.

These include the United Tajik Opposition, which waged a five-year war against the Tajik government in the Nineties, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has fought an insurgency campaign in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Tajikistan also has a 500 km border with China which, like Russia, is a rival to US influence in the world arena.

The Americans do not conceal their intention to remain in the region for the long term. "The world has changed after September 11," Senator Joseph Lieberman said in Dushanbe on January 7. "We have to increase our participation in the Central Asian region and prolong our cooperation even after the war in

Afghanistan is over."

Such words are highly displeasing to the Russians, who hoped the US would withdraw militarily from the area after the Afghan operation was complete.

The speaker of the Russian Duma, Gennady Seleznyov, visited the region from January 10-12, precisely to examine the extent of America's military penetration.

"We wouldn't want various American and NATO bases to appear in Central Asia for the long-term," he said in Dushanbe.

Observers say Seleznyov used the two-day visit to persuade the Tajik president not to allow the US to set up bases, or to place strict time limits on their deployment.

"Geopolitically, Russia's presence in Central Asia is important and now we have to do everything to make it more considerable and, most importantly, effective," Seleznyov said. "The Americans are a greedy people."

If Tajikistan does succumb to the Americans' embrace, it will be a grave setback for Russia, which has already effectively ceded pride of place in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Americans now have 1,500 troops deployed at Khanabad airport in Uzbekistan and are expected to set up a second base in the next few weeks in Kyrgyzstan for 3,000 military personnel.

Russia's high-ranking visitor admitted the Kremlin is having to work hard to shore up its influence in the region through its allies in the Agreement on Collective Security for the Countries of the CIS, which groups Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Experts believe that while Uzbekistan is a lost cause as far as Russia is concerned, it may still retain some influence in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Seleznyov has not lost hope, however. "We have to do everything possible in order that the Central Asian region becomes a zone of interest of Russia and not the US," he said.

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