

## **US Set for Long Stay in Central Asia**

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The US has said it won't contribute to the Afghan peacekeeping force, but it is stepping up military deployment elsewhere in the region.

The steady build up of US military muscle in Central Asia made Hamid Karzai's recent request for Washington to play a "continuous leading role in the region" seem rather superfluous.

The Afghan prime minister made his comments when he visited Washington earlier this week. Although his request for the US to contribute to the peacekeeping force was turned down, he can rest assured of an American military presence in bases inside and outside his country.

However, while Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics may welcome US army contingents on their territory, Moscow is growing concerned that the force, initially welcomed for its counter terrorism potential, will become a permanent fixture in its own back yard.

Inside Afghanistan, the US is offering to support and train a new Afghan army and national police force, while expanding its current capacity at Bagram airbase north of Kabul. Over the border, it is speedily building up military bases that look likely to stay there for the long term.

While there was initial hesitation in the Central Asian republics over inviting in the US for an extended stay, the prevalent mood now has swung in the opposite direction. America should remain in Kabul "for as long as the war against terrorism exists," Karzai has commented. Uzbek president Islam Karimov has likewise talked of its presence in his country as being "open-ended".

Senior figures in the US administration have now made similar comments. During a recent visit to Tashkent, the leader of the Democrats in the US Senate, Tom Daschle, said the American deployment in the region would be "long-term in character".

In the light of President Bush's State of the Union address in which Iran and Iraq were mentioned as potential targets of the US-led war against terrorism, it is likely that American military bases in Central Asia will be used as the launch pads for any regional military strikes.

Besides the airbase at Bagram, the US currently has 1500 troops stationed at Uzbekistan's Khanabad airbase where runways are currently being upgraded. There are plans to increase the number of American soldiers at Bishkek airport. And a deal has also been closed with Tajikistan to use government bases.

Although Moscow had welcomed the US presence as an anti-terrorist force, it is unlikely to continue to be as supportive if the bases prove to be permanent fixtures.

A Russian daily reporting on a visit to the region earlier this month by foreign minister Igor Ivanov ran the headline, "The Central Asia we have lost".

Iran, predictably, is also adamantly opposed to US intentions in the region and is already buttressing its support for its longstanding allies, the Shia Muslim community in western Afghanistan, in an apparent attempt to destabilise the country.

There are reports that Tehran is sending agents into the region, reportedly to lure locals away from Karzai's ruling coalition. Indeed, there's speculation that the US is teaming up with a 20,000-strong Pashtun tribal army keen to put a stop to Iran's interference in the country.

For the moment, the US can count on the support of Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics, as they have an interest in seeing a well-equipped western force in the region.

The American military presence helps their fight against Islamic groups based in Afghan territory, who have been a persistent thorn in their sides for several years now.

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**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
Turkmenistan  
Tajikistan

**Focus:** Central Asia

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