

# A strategic reversal American's in Central Asia

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In the post-Cold War era, one of the problems facing the US foreign policy makers is how to strike a balance between Washington's strategic interests which sometimes require dealing with and appeasing authoritarian regimes and its desire to promote democratisation which requires pressuring these regimes to launch political reforms and criticising their violations of human rights.

It is such incertitude that has recently resulted in the United States losing its way in the Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan, where it has been pressing for democratic reforms while also wanting to maintain its military presence.

Late last month, Tashkent asked the United States to pull its troops out of Karshi-Khanabad, a key airbase used by the Americans to back its

military operations in neighbouring Afghanistan against Al Qaida and the Taliban. Starting from 1992, the base has been a symbol of US-Uzbek multi-dimensional cooperation.

Over the years, and especially after Uzbek President Islam Karimov's visit to Washington in 2002, the cooperation between the two countries has transformed into a strategic partnership. Justifying the move to withdraw American forces, Uzbek officials said that large-scale military operations against terrorism have come to an end in Afghanistan and, therefore, there was no sense in keeping American troops in the country.

They also accused the United States of neither paying the landing and takeoff fees for its flights, nor reimbursing Uzbekistan for the costs incurred in guarding and ser-

viceing the base, and not compensating the country for ecological damage. Observers, however, linked the move to Karimov's displeasure at Washington's criticism of his regime.

In recent months, the United States has joined other Western countries and groups in condemning the bloody repression of an uprising in the southern Uzbek town of Andijan in May that left several hundred dead and in calling for an independent investigation.

Another reason for the Uzbek action could be Karimov's fear that Washington might attempt to destabilise his government, especially with reports saying that the Americans were behind the wave of regime changes in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan and US President George

W. Bush praising these developments and describing them as "just the beginning" of the "march of freedom around the world". The loss of access to the Karshi-Khanabad base is unlikely to cause any setback to US military operations in Afghanistan. It can operate from its airbases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where the Americans have operational rights.

However, the Uzbek move has placed in doubt the future of the American influence in one of the region's most important countries. It could be seen as a strategic reversal for the United States and a victory for Russia and China both of which seem now to be overtly challenging Washington for dominance in energy-rich Central Asia.

Being confronted by Al

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Qaida-backed Muslim separatist movements, Moscow and Beijing had remained silent on the arrival of American troops in 2001 at their doorstep to fight Al Qaida and the Taliban.

That time, they perceived it as being in their interest. But now that they feel less threatened, they are pushing for an end to US military presence in the region. They are using all tools at their disposal and are saying that the American presence poses a challenge to either their countries' stability or energy security.

Nothing reflects this better than Russia and China using their influential positions in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to pressurise the other four members (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). At their July 5 summit in Astana, they urged

them to call on the United States to set a date for the withdrawal of American personnel from bases in their countries.

So far, only Uzbekistan has been enthusiastic to work in line with the SCO declaration. This suggests that the Karimov regime has decided to shift its foreign policy towards Russia and China, who are not expected to criticise its human rights record or support its opponents.

It has been said that Karimov, who received a warm welcome in Beijing soon after the Andijan massacre, was backed by promises of substantial Chinese aid and investment to make up for any economic loss resulting from dislodging the American forces from Uzbekistan.

He also seems to have the backing of the Russians, with whom he has already signed a pact for strategic cooperation.

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