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US strategic priorities

By Stephen Blank

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US strategic priorities are shifting in Central Asia, raising the likelihood that the United States will establish a long-term presence in the region. Under the Bush administration's still-developing plans, US military forces hope to maintain small-scale outposts in Uzbekistan, and possibly Kyrgyzstan. Uzbek officials seem receptive to such an arrangement, but any move by Washington to extend the American military's stay in the region could quickly become a source of friction with other regional powers.

When the United States established bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, US political and military leaders indicated that American forces would stay only as long as the

regional terrorism threat remained. In recent months, however, US officials have quietly voiced the possibility of making permanent what were supposed to be temporary Central Asian bases. Washington still won't admit this officially. Nevertheless, US officials increasingly speak about the need to retain an ability to rapidly project power around the globe.

American officials have extolled the value of existing US facilities in Central Asia - at Khanabad in Uzbekistan, and at Manas in Kyrgyzstan - for playing a key support role for ongoing US anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan. Now, it appears the United States is interested in expanding the existing infrastructure to be prepared for future strategic contingencies in Asia. In a search for more regional allies, the United States has begun talks with India on extending to it a missile defence umbrella. US officials also have hinted at exploring the formation of an Asian collective security organization, a so-called "Asian NATO." In addition, Washington has been steadily strengthening military ties with Japan, Southeast Asian states, and Australia. Thus, the

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determination to retain access to Central Asia meshes with Washington's overall strategy in Asia.

During a late February visit to Uzbekistan, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld provided insight into the Bush administration's strategic vision. Stressing that "no final decisions" had been made, Rumsfeld indicated that the US wanted to establish what he termed "operating sites" in Asia. The defence secretary went on to explain that such facilities would "not be permanent as a base would be permanent, but would be a place where the United States and coalition countries could periodically and intermittently have access and support."

Rumsfeld's rhetoric in Tashkent indicated that Uzbekistan was a prime candidate to host a potential US operating site. "We [the United States] have benefited greatly in our efforts in the global war on terror and in Afghanistan from the wonderful cooperation we've received

from the government of Uzbekistan," he told reporters.

Military planners place operating sites into two categories — forward operating bases (FOBs) and forward operating locations (FOLs). The latter would be situated closest to the theatre of operations, while the former would likely serve as logistical or command-and-control centres for those operations. Under peacetime circumstances, FOBs and possibly FOLs would be manned by small groups of forces. In the event of a crisis, however, these facilities would expand to accommodate a rapid influx of military personnel and equipment.

Uzbek officials have already voiced support for an ongoing strategic relationship with the United States. On the eve of Rumsfeld's visit, Uzbek Foreign Minister Sadiq Safayev "did not rule out the possibility that the US military base would be allowed to stay in Uzbekistan on a permanent basis," the Uzland web site reported. Kyrgyz officials have not demonstrated the same type of enthusiasm about the American military presence there.

The Pentagon's evident desire to retain access to facilities such as Khanabad is in keeping with its overall desire to dramatically increase the rapid deployment capabilities of

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the US military. In stressing that a potential long-term Central Asian presence does not necessarily mean a large-scale military deployment, US officials hope to keep Russian and Chinese opposition to their plans to a minimum.

China and Russia have only reluctantly tolerated the US strategic presence in Central Asia. They are clearly concerned that permanent American bases in the region would be primarily designed to limit Beijing's and Moscow's own influence in Central Asia. The US base issue appears to be an increasingly sensitive topic for Russian leaders. Moscow will accept US bases in Central Asia only for the duration of the Afghan anti-terrorism operation, "and for no longer," the Gazeta.ru web site quoted Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov as saying in late 2003.

It remains an open question as to whether the new US strategy will be fully implemented. Even if US military planners can overcome Chinese and Russian opposition, it is no sure thing that US taxpayers will be willing to sustain the financial burden of maintaining operating sites. —Courtesy EurasiaNet

The writer is a professor at the US Army War College