

# US-Uzbekistan pact sheds light on Washington's war aims in Central Asia

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The United States and Uzbekistan issued a joint statement October 12 confirming an agreement in which US forces will be based in Uzbekistan during the current conflict with Afghanistan, and for an indefinite period thereafter. In return, the Bush administration is committed to support the security and territorial integrity of the former Soviet republic.

The agreement was signed October 7, the day US bombing of Afghanistan began. It followed the visit by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to the Uzbek capital of Tashkent, part of his four-nation tour to shore up support for the US military intervention in Central Asia. Standing beside President Islam Karimov, Rumsfeld declared, "The interest of the United States is in a long-standing relationship with this country."

More than 1,000 US troops are already in Uzbekistan, elements of the 10th Mountain Division, a specialized anti-guerrilla combat unit which is expected to spearhead a ground assault on alleged strongholds of Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization in Afghanistan. Another 1,000 US troops are expected.

US warplanes have also been deployed to Uzbek airfields and have free access to Uzbek airspace, although none have as yet taken part in the bombing campaign—at least officially. An unknown number of US Special Forces are also reported in the country, in tightly guarded camps surrounded by a triple cordon of troops.

Rustam Jumayev, spokesman for Uzbek President Karimov, said that Uzbekistan was not a member of an "anti-terrorist alliance" established by the United States, and claimed the country's facilities would be used "in the first instance" for humanitarian purposes (i.e., rescuing hostages or pilots whose planes were shot down over Afghanistan). Uzbekistan's humanitarian pretences are belied by the fact that it has closed its

borders to Afghan refugees fleeing the Taliban government and the US bombing.

The joint statement of the two governments announced the establishment of "a qualitatively new relationship based on a long-term commitment to advance security and regional stability." While not providing a formal US guarantee of Uzbekistan's borders, the pact stipulates "the need to consult on an urgent basis about appropriate steps to address the situation in the event of a direct threat to the security or territorial integrity of the Republic of Uzbekistan."

This alliance is extraordinary in a number of ways. It is the first time that the United States has cemented military ties with any of the constituent republics of the former Soviet Union, let alone committed itself to the defense of borders first laid down in 1922, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution.

As a practical matter, US support for the territorial integrity of Uzbekistan is a major development in the geopolitical strategy of American imperialism. Uzbekistan is geographically isolated, without a coastline even on an inland sea. It is situated literally on the other side of the world from the United States.

One peculiarity unique to Uzbekistan is the fact that it is not only landlocked, but surrounded by countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan—that are either landlocked or lie along the Caspian, an inland sea. The 10th Mountain Division troops had to fly across Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to reach their destination.

Given these realities, the US-Uzbekistan pact cannot be an isolated arrangement, but must be part of a more sweeping reorientation of many of the Central Asian countries, details of which have not yet been made public.

It is well known that the US has been engaged in a

diplomatic offensive in Central Asia throughout the decade since the dissolution of the USSR, driven especially by the prospect of controlling the huge oil resources in the Caspian basin.

Uzbekistan may be difficult for American troops to reach, but once they have been deployed they are in position to dominate some of the most strategic and resource-rich territories on the globe. Just to the north of Uzbekistan are the huge Tenghiz oil fields in Kazakhstan. Just to the south, in Turkmenistan, lie enormous gas resources. Directly west, across the Caspian Sea, is Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan and the center of the Caspian offshore oil industry. The immediate target of the US troops may be Afghanistan, but in any long-term operation it is the energy resources of the region that will be of greatest concern.

The US is particularly concerned with dictating the route of pipelines that will bring these resources to the world market. In April, President Bush and Secretary of State Powell met with the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan to discuss their decade-long border dispute, part of an effort to clear the way for an oil pipeline from Baku through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean Sea. A month later a consortium of oil companies gave preliminary approval to the \$3 billion project. (The lead company in the consortium is British Petroleum, a fact that sheds light on Prime Minister Tony Blair's ardent support for the US military intervention in Central Asia.)

Russian influence is waning throughout Central Asia, with Russian troops withdrawn from all of the republics except Tajikistan, where they patrol the border with Afghanistan. Earlier this year the presidents of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan canceled a planned summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

According to recent reports in the American and Indian press, cooperation between American and Uzbeki military officials and intelligence agencies began in earnest in 1998, triggered by two events: a Taliban offensive in February 1998, routing the Uzbek-backed General Dostum, which brought Taliban troops to the 85-mile-long border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan; and the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August of that year.

The first public hint of the secret relationship came in President Bush's speech to Congress September 20, when he unexpectedly named the Islamic Movement of

Uzbekistan, an Islamic fundamentalist opposition group, as a US target. It is doubtful that Bush could have pronounced the country's name properly, let alone located Uzbekistan on a map, if it were not for that fact that US policy-makers have long had their eye on this country of 25 million, the most populous of the five former Soviet republics in Central Asia.

According to a report in the *Washington Post*, "[T]he Uzbek military has sent officers and senior members to American military schools for leadership and tactical training. American Special Forces units have visited the country as often as four times a year to train Uzbek troops."

This relationship has developed even as the Uzbek government has cracked down on domestic opposition, jailing as many as 7,000 people, a large number of them Islamic fundamentalists. Many of those arrested have been tortured and beaten by government security forces. The Karimov government maintains severe press censorship and other restrictions on democratic rights.

The Pentagon has seized on the largely closed character of Uzbek society as a positive advantage for its military operations. One Air Force officer gloated to the press that there would be no CNN footage of US warplanes taking off from Uzbek airfields. Uzbek government spokesman Jumaev confirmed this, saying that the ban "is not just because of our Ministry of Defense. This is what the Pentagon wants as well."

Only a few weeks before the September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the *New York Times* published an editorial condemning political and religious repression in Uzbekistan and warning that the Karimov government, like Iran under the Shah, was creating the conditions for a fundamentalist-led revolt. Fears for the stability of the pro-US regime are undoubtedly part of the economic and political equation that underlies the present war in neighboring Afghanistan, which is being undertaken to establish American hegemony in the oil-rich region.



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