

# US bases pave the way for long-term intervention in Central Asia

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Recent statements by US government officials and reports in the American and international press indicate that the Bush administration and the Pentagon are carrying out a military buildup in Central Asia whose object is not merely support for the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, but a permanent military presence in the oil-rich region.

The US government has acquired basing or transit rights for passage of warplanes and military supplies from nearly two dozen countries in Central Asia, the Middle East and their periphery, a projection of American power into the center of the Eurasian land mass that has no historical precedent.

On January 9, US military personnel showed off the latest acquisition, a huge air base being built in the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan, a landlocked country which borders China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and was once virtually inaccessible as far as American imperialism was concerned.

The new base, on 37 acres at the airport in Manas, 19 miles from the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, is to be a major military hub. It now has temporary barracks for 300 members of the 86th Rapid Deployment Unit, who are building facilities that will eventually house 3,000 military personnel. The Manas base will service fighter jets, C-130 cargo planes and KC-135 refueling planes. Last month the Kyrgyz parliament gave its approval to unrestricted American use of the facility, including combat missions in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Pentagon officials said the new base in Kyrgyzstan, only a few minutes flying time north of Kabul, would give them the flexibility to continue the war in Afghanistan even if the escalating conflict between India and Pakistan makes it more difficult to use the bases in the latter country, which are currently major staging areas for US operations.

Four KC-135s will arrive next week, along with a squadron of F-15E fighter jets by the end of January. A US officer working at Manas told the press, "In addition to the air force, there will be ground troops. This will be the first air base that will offer serious support to Operation Enduring

Freedom," the official name for the US war in Afghanistan. British, French and Danish forces will be stationed at Manas in addition to American troops.

New US base agreements have also been concluded with Pakistan and two other former Soviet republics, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. US warplanes are already deployed at Kandabad air base at Karshi, Uzbekistan, backed by 1,000 US ground troops, and a US military assessment team has visited three potential bases in Tajikistan, at Kulyab, Khojand and Turgan-Tiube. American forces are stationed at several locations in Pakistan, and combat engineers are improving runways and erecting housing and other facilities for what is clearly intended as a long-term stay.

Four other former Soviet republics—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan—have pledged various forms of direct military cooperation with the US attack on Afghanistan. Armenia and Azerbaijan granted overflight rights, which are critical for operations in landlocked Central Asia. They were rewarded December 19, when Congress, at the urging of the Bush administration, lifted a decade-long embargo on military aid to the two countries.

Kazakhstan, which holds the lion's share of the oil wealth of the Caspian basin, is reportedly offering several locations for possible US military bases. Turkmenistan is viewed as the prime location for the terminus of largely US-financed pipelines which would bring the oil and gas reserves of the region to the world market, possibly running across Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean.

Locations of other US bases in the region include Camp Bondsteel, the headquarters for US military forces in Kosovo, in the former Yugoslavia; Bulgaria, also regarded as a potential site for a pipeline to bypass the chokepoint of the Turkish straits; Turkey, where Incirlik Air Base has been used for a decade to carry out bombing attacks on Iraq; and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman in the Persian Gulf.

In Qatar the US has built, in virtual secrecy, a huge \$1.5 billion airbase at Al Adid whose 15,000-foot runway is one of the longest in the Gulf. Construction began after a visit by

Clinton's defense secretary William Cohen in April 2000. Qatar already hosts pre-positioned equipment for a US Army brigade.

While US forces were initially stationed at Qatar in conjunction with the war against Iraq in 1990-91, a top Pentagon official said last year that the Qatar base was "not focused at one particular country or another, but part of a system we would like to have in place."

Central Command spokesman Rear Adm. Craig R. Quigley told the press, "There is great value, for instance, in continuing to build airfields in a variety of locations on the perimeter of Afghanistan that over time can do a variety of functions, like combat operations, medical evacuation and delivering humanitarian assistance."

The Al Adid airbase has already begun to attract local hostility. Last November 7, an Arab man was shot to death by US and Qatari guards after he allegedly opened fire on them at the base perimeter.

General Tommy Franks, the head of Central Command, announced that the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines had all adopted policies of regular troop rotation in the Central Asian theater, a further sign that their presence will be open-ended in duration.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz discussed the bases in an interview with the *New York Times*. "Their function may be more political than actually military," he said. The new bases "send a message to everybody, including important countries like Uzbekistan, that we have a capacity to come back in and will come back in."

While supporting the Afghan war is the pretext for many of the base agreements, the American forces deployed in Central Asia will have a much broader strategic scope. The Manas base in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, is only 200 miles from the border with China's westernmost province of Sinkiang, putting that country's main nuclear testing facility at Lop Nor within easy reach of US air strikes. In the opposite direction, Manas is equally close to oilfields in Uzbekistan.

Both American and Russian combat forces are now stationed in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Russian President Vladimir Putin has publicly supported the deployment of American troops on the territory of the former Soviet Union, but there is reportedly deep concern in the Russian national security establishment over this prospect. Much of Russia's highest security military, nuclear and space infrastructure is located in northern Kazakhstan and western Siberia—areas which were once the furthest points on the globe from any US military facility, but are now easily reached even by short-range US jets.

Then there is Afghanistan itself, where the United States has deployed 1,000 Marines at a base at Kandahar airport,

now being replaced by an equivalent number of soldiers from the Army's 101st Airborne Division, whose mission is one of semi-permanent occupation. The US has taken over the Bagram air base outside of Kabul, the country's capital, which was once the center for Soviet military operations during the 1979-89 war.

These bases have been occupied in the course of the US-backed campaign to overthrow the Taliban regime. But they provide facilities that could well serve the American military in interventions deeper into the region, especially in the oil-rich area along the Caspian Sea coast, which includes Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

Summing up the strategic significance of the new base structure, *Los Angeles Times* special correspondent William Arkin wrote January 6: "Behind a veil of secret agreements, the United States is creating a ring of new and expanded military bases that encircle Afghanistan and enhance the armed forces' ability to strike targets throughout much of the Muslim world.

"Since Sept. 11, according to Pentagon sources, military tent cities have sprung up at 13 locations in nine countries neighboring Afghanistan, substantially extending the network of bases in the region. All together, from Bulgaria and Uzbekistan to Turkey, Kuwait and beyond, more than 60,000 U.S. military personnel now live and work at these forward bases. Hundreds of aircraft fly in and out of so-called 'expeditionary airfields.'"

Arkin noted that while US military arrangements with foreign countries during the Cold War were usually spelled out in public legal documents called "status of force agreements," many of the post-Cold War pacts are classified to protect the host governments from domestic opposition to military subordination to the United States. These include agreements with Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.



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