

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Uzbekistan's Closure of the Airbase at Karshi-Khanabad: Context and Implications

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Summary

In late July 2005, Uzbekistan terminated an agreement permitting U.S. forces to use the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) airbase in the southern part of the country to support coalition military operations in Afghanistan. U.S. forces are moving to other airstrips, including those in Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. Major concerns include whether cooler security ties with Uzbekistan will set back the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism and other U.S. interests in Central Asia. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Report RS22161, *Unrest in Uzbekistan*, by Jim Nichol.

Introduction: The U.S. Basing Agreement with Uzbekistan

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States negotiated status of forces agreements (SOFA) and other security accords with several Central Asian states in order to use their airstrips for what became the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. The negotiations with Uzbekistan reportedly were drawn out by a number of requests by the Uzbeks, including for U.S. security and assistance pledges and for a primary focus on humanitarian and search-and-rescue missions rather than air attack or air refueling (although the Uzbeks allowed some special operations missions). The U.S.-Uzbek SOFA was signed on October 7, and the air campaign against Afghanistan began an hour later.¹

The U.S.-Uzbek SOFA provided for use of Uzbek airspace and for up to 1,500 U.S. troops to use a Soviet-era airbase (termed Karshi-Khanabad or K2) 90 miles north of the Afghan border near the towns of Karshi and Khanabad. In exchange, the United States provided security guarantees and agreed that terrorists belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) who were fighting alongside Taliban and Al Qaeda forces would be

¹ The State Department. *Fact Sheet*, Nov. 27, 2002; *Supporting Air and Space Expeditionary Forces*, RAND, 2005. Some classified US-Uzbek cooperation against the Taliban and Al Qaeda had been carried out before Sept. 11, 2001.

targeted.² The duration of the SOFA was open-ended, but included a provision that it could be terminated by either party with a 180-day notice. According to some reports, the problems in negotiating the Uzbek SOFA further spurred the United States to seek airfield access at the Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan, which in early 2002 became the primary hub for operations in Afghanistan.³

Air Force Secretary James Roche has stated that K-2's missions were "special operations, combat search and rescue, and theater lift," and other sources have mentioned intelligence functions. The Air Force reported in early 2005 that C-130s flying out of K2 carried an average of about 60 passengers and about 50 tons of cargo per day to Bagram, Kandahar, and other locations in Afghanistan, and that about 1,000 Army and Air Force personnel were deployed there, excluding contractors. More than 40,000 U.S. Air Force flights have departed and landed at K2 since late 2001, according to the U.S. Embassy.⁴

Emerging Strains in U.S.-Uzbek Relations. Uzbekistan was the only Central Asian state that joined the "coalition of the willing" in February-March 2003 that endorsed U.S.-led military operations in Iraq (Kazakhstan joined later).⁵ However, U.S.-Uzbek relations became strained in 2004-2005. A partial U.S. aid cutoff in FY2004 because of Uzbek human rights violations and President Karimov's growing fears that the United States was fostering democratic "revolutions" in Soviet successor states added to these strains. Among other strains, Uzbek officials complained about what they considered delayed and inadequate compensation for use of K2, including a 2003 U.S. "reimbursement of services" payment of \$15.7 million in coalition support funds for the use of K2 through December 2002. Congress in May 2005 approved \$42.5 million in military construction funds (FY2005 Emergency Supplemental Appropriations, P.L. 109-13, H.Rept. 109-72) for upgrading runways and taxiways at K2, but the project was delayed by increased strains in relations.

The Termination of the SOFA. Although the Administration initially responded cautiously to civil violence in May 2005 in Uzbekistan's city of Andijon — where many

² An Oct. 12, 2001, U.S.-Uzbek statement on combating terrorism called for both sides to consult in the event of a threat to Uzbekistan's security. During Uzbek President Islam Karimov's Mar. 2002 U.S. visit, a Declaration on Strategic Partnership reaffirmed this vague pledge and a U.S. pledge to boost military cooperation, to include "re-equipping the Armed Forces" of Uzbekistan.

³ Deborah E. Klepp. *The U.S. Needs a Base Where? How the U.S. Established an Air Base in the Kyrgyz Republic*, National Defense University, 2004. Perhaps in contrast to the more visible air operations, Uzbekistan more readily accommodated less visible special operations. See Senate Armed Services Committee. Subcommittee on Emerging Threats. *Statement by General Charles R. Holland, Commander, Special Operations Command*, Mar. 12, 2002. Uzbekistan also provided a base for German units at Termez and a land corridor to Afghanistan for humanitarian aid via the Friendship Bridge at Termez. Tajikistan provided U.S. overflight as well as emergency landing and refueling privileges and a base for a small French unit.

⁴ U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan. *Press Release*, Sept. 7, 2005; Elizabeth Wishnick, *Strategic Consequences of the Iraq War*, U.S. Army War College, May 2004; *Air Force Print News*, Mar. 16, 2005. According to Master Sgt. Orville Desjarlais, tents at K2 were being replaced with "dorm-style billets" in late 2004. *Airman*, Nov. 2004.

⁵ According to RAND, K2 provided some unspecified operational assistance for Operation Iraqi Freedom. RAND, 2005.

witnesses and others claimed that the Uzbek government killed hundreds of unarmed civilians — the State Department soon endorsed international calls for a credible investigation of the killings. This and other U.S. criticism of human rights abuses in Uzbekistan appeared to contribute to restrictions placed by the Karimov government in mid-June on night flights and on C-17 and other heavy cargo lift out of K2. Nonetheless, the United States reportedly hoped to continue talks with Uzbekistan about possibly designating K2 as a cooperative security location (CSL; a military facility with few or no U.S. troops, but which may contain pre-positioned equipment and contract personnel).⁶

On July 5, 2005, the presidents of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan signed a declaration issued during a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO; a regional security body composed of Russia, China, and all the Central Asian states except Turkmenistan) that called for coalition members supporting operations in Afghanistan “to decide on the deadline for the use of the temporary infrastructure and for their military contingents’ presence in those countries.” The language seemed to target U.S. and coalition bases in Central Asia. On July 14, Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, criticized this language, stating that “it looks to me like two very large countries [SCO members Russia and China] were trying to bully some smaller countries.” According to some reports, Karimov had pushed for the language.⁷

Despite signing the SCO declaration, none of the Central Asian countries that hosted U.S. and other coalition bases called for their immediate closure, and some observers speculated that the states were seeking higher rents for the bases. However, the day after refugees who fled from Andijon to Kyrgyzstan were flown to Romania on July 28, 2005, Uzbekistan delivered a demarche to the U.S. embassy in Tashkent requesting that U.S. use of K2 end within six months. Besides anger at the United States for supporting the moving of the refugees, Uzbek legislators in late August contended that U.S. operations at K2 should end because they attract international terrorism, damage the environment, and are no longer necessary since Afghanistan is stable. They also accused the United States of fomenting the overthrow of the Uzbek government and of failing to reimburse the country for \$168 million spent to support K2. This anger extended to other countries and organizations that supported moving the refugees and an international inquiry, including the United Nations, the European Union, and NATO.⁸

Implications for Uzbekistan and Regional Security

Many observers judge that Uzbekistan’s security relations with the United States appear seriously set back by its decision to terminate the K2 basing agreement and to curtail other military cooperation with the United States. According to a 2004 U.S. Defense Department assessment, Uzbek Defense Minister Qodir Gulomov had been “very

⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2005. For details, see CRS Report RS22161, *Unrest in Uzbekistan*.

⁷ *Washington Post*, July 15, 2005, p. A19.

⁸ *FBIS*, September 19, 2005, Doc. No. CEP-27220; *The Independent (London)*, Sept. 30, 2005. NATO in late May issued a statement that it “condemn[s] the reported use of excessive and disproportionate force by the Uzbek security forces,” and “expects all its Partners to fulfill their commitments” to respect human rights. *Press Release*, May 24, 2005. Karimov subsequently accused NATO of complicity in events in Andijon and warned that “it is trying to get into and strengthen its presence in Central Asia.” *FBIS*, July 5, 2005, Doc. No. CEP-8002.

intent upon Westernizing” the armed forces, including increasing interoperability with NATO forces, building a non-commissioned officer corps, and restructuring recruitment and retention.⁹ However, such plans appeared scuttled in recent months as Gulomov has solidified ties with Russia and China as the predominant suppliers of equipment and training that bolsters Karimov’s rule. This trend appeared strengthened after the European Union on October 3 imposed arms export and visa sanctions on Uzbekistan. Examples of closer Uzbek-Russian security ties include joint military exercises and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov’s visit to Uzbekistan. Some Russian and Chinese media have alleged that a Russian unit was deployed near K2 after the base closure was announced, signaling Russia’s intention to re-establish a presence there after the U.S. withdrawal.¹⁰

Like Russia, China has backed Uzbekistan fully in declaring that events in Andijon are a matter of Uzbekistan’s internal affairs, and hence off-limits to international inquiry. Examples of closer Uzbek-Chinese ties include Karimov’s visit to China in late May and the signing of an accord on Chinese investment in the Uzbek energy sector. Perhaps marking growing security cooperation, China and Russia held their first military exercises in China in August 2005, which were observed by Uzbekistan and other Central Asian members of the SCO. Some observers question the capabilities of Russia and China to adequately address terrorist threats in the region, given their inadequate efforts before U.S.-led coalition operations began in Afghanistan.¹¹

Implications for U.S. Interests

U.S. Policy. Since signing cooperative security agreements with the Central Asian states, the Administration has averred that the United States seeks no “permanent” basing presence in the region. However, it also has argued that regional access will be needed as long as “conditions in Afghanistan require it,” as well as “for future contingencies and to be involved in training and joint exercises ... for the long term.”¹² The Overseas Basing Commission (OBC), in its May 2005 Report, concurred with the Administration that existing bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have been useful for supporting OEF. The OBC has considered that there could be some possible merit in establishing CSLs in the region, but has urged Congress to seek further inter-agency vetting of “what constitutes vital U.S. interests in the area that would require [a] long-term U.S. presence.”¹³

Democratization and the Global War on Terrorism. According to the Administration, recent events in Uzbekistan brought two policies the United States has pursued in tandem — combating global terrorism and supporting democratization and

⁹ Department of Defense. *Background Briefing on Uzbekistan*, Feb. 24, 2004. See also the Uzbek government’s *Looking toward the Future, The Armed Forces*, [<http://www.uzbekistan.uz>].

¹⁰ *ITAR-TASS*, Sept. 22, 2005; *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, Sept. 23, 2005, p. 5; *FBIS*, Sept. 12, 2005, Doc. No. CPP-73.

¹¹ In August 2002, Karimov had praised the U.S. role in reducing the terrorist threat, as opposed to “our allies who were turning a blind eye.” *FBIS*, Aug. 31, 2002, Doc. No. CEP-45.

¹² Deputy Assistant Secretary B. Lynn Pascoe, Presentation at the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, Sept. 20, 2002.

¹³ Commission on Review of the Overseas Military Facility Structure of the United States. *Interim Report*, May 9, 2005.

human rights — into conflict. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns on August 2, 2005, asserted that the Administration “made a clear choice, and that was to stand on the side of human rights,” even though the Administration “knew” that the Uzbek government would then demand that K2 be vacated. Other observers suggested that the Administration appeared less prepared for the Uzbek demand.

According to some reports, Uzbekistan has not only requested that K2 be vacated, but has curtailed other anti-terrorism cooperation with the United States and NATO, including military-to-military exchanges and training. These programs also aim to inform Uzbek troops about civil-military relations in a democracy. Uzbekistan has suspended many other U.S.-funded democratization programs, including those carried out by the Peace Corps and the U.S.-funded International Research and Exchanges Board. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense James McDougall, and National Security Council member David Merkel visited Uzbekistan (and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) in late September in an apparent attempt to re-start some cooperative programs. Fried reported that “serious” talks with Karimov broadly covered U.S.-Uzbek relations, but that he did not appeal to Karimov to reverse the K2 base closure.¹⁴

The Defense Department argues that the closure of K2 creates some logistical problems but will not markedly affect coalition operations in Afghanistan or other aspects of the Global War on Terrorism. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld made a sudden trip to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on July 25-27, 2005, and announced that he had obtained assurances that these countries would continue to support coalition operations in Afghanistan, thus seemingly highlighting the flexibility of a “lily pad” approach to foreign military basing and the continuation of major U.S. influence in the region. Some operations at K2 are being transferred to Manas and some to Bagram, Afghanistan, with the latter airbase slated to play a greater role when upgrades begun some time ago are completed.¹⁵ At the same time, Secretary Rumsfeld reportedly discussed enhanced support for economic and political development in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The United States may even gain regional influence, according to some observers. They point to recent statements by U.S. and Kazakh officials about boosting bilateral ties as evidence that Kazakhstan continues to vie with Uzbekistan for regional dominance. They also argue that the United States may gain more moral credibility in the Islamic world.

Other observers are less sanguine that the closure of K2 will have minimal effects on U.S. strategic interests. They argue that the future of U.S. and coalition basing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan may not be assured, including because both the states had endorsed the July 2005 SCO call for Afghanistan-related bases to be closed. They warn that the closure of K2 might thus mark the first success of a Russian and Chinese push to consolidate their influence and largely eliminate the U.S. security presence.¹⁶

Congressional Concerns. Many in Congress long have voiced concerns about how U.S. assistance is used by the Uzbek government. Since FY2003, annual foreign

¹⁴ *Washington Post*, Sept. 24, 2005, p. A18; Sept. 29, 2005, p. A14.

¹⁵ *Washington Post*, July 30, 2005, p. A1; Sept. 17, 2005, p. A18; *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 2005, p. 3.

¹⁶ *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, Sept. 26, 2005; *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 16, 2005.

operations appropriations acts have disallowed aid to the government of Uzbekistan unless the Secretary of State reports that Uzbekistan is making substantial progress in democratization and respect for human rights. In FY2004, the State Department indicated that up to \$18 million in military and economic aid to Uzbekistan could be withheld because of lack of such progress. International Military Education and Training (IMET) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) programs, which are conditioned on respect for human rights, were among those affected. The State Department reprogrammed or used notwithstanding authority to allocate some of the affected aid, so that about \$8.5 million was ultimately withheld. During an August 2004 visit to Uzbekistan, Gen. Myers criticized the cutoff of IMET and FMF programs as “shortsighted” and not “productive,” since it reduced U.S. military influence. Reportedly, he stated that Defense Department nonproliferation aid would amount to \$21 million in FY2004 and pointed out that fourteen patrol boats worth \$2.9 million were being transferred. For FY2005, reportedly about \$20 million in foreign operations appropriations could be withheld because of lack of progress in democratization and respect for human rights.¹⁷

Among recent legislative proposals, some in Congress support cutting off all aid to Uzbekistan, while others call for increasing aid to non-governmental organizations that carry out democratization and human rights activities. H.Con.Res. 187 (Ros-Lehtinen) and H.R. 3189 (Christopher Smith) call for conditioning aid on democratization and respect for human rights, and the House Appropriations Committee has urged that no FMF aid be provided to Uzbekistan (H.Rept. 109-152, H.R. 3057). H.R. 3545 (Delahunt), introduced in late July 2005, calls for amending the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to add conditions on aid to Uzbekistan. The bill also restricts arms exports and visas for Uzbek officials involved in human rights abuses.

In September 2005, the Defense Department informed Congress that it intended to provide Uzbekistan \$23 million in coalition support funds to “pay the bill” for the use of K2 from January 2003 through March 2005. In response, on September 19, 2005, Sens. Biden, DeWine, Graham, Leahy, McCain, and Sununu sent a letter to Defense Secretary Rumsfeld objecting to this planned payment, and urging that it instead be disbursed only when Uzbekistan renews antiterrorism cooperation with the United States. They also warned that a quick payout might give the impression that the United States “overlooks massacres” and rewards a “dictator” who evicts U.S. forces. H.Res. 475 (Delahunt), introduced on September 29, calls for suspending the payment and for the United States to support trying Karimov in the International Criminal Court. On October 5, an amendment to Defense Appropriations for FY2006 (H.R. 2863) was approved to place a one-year hold on the payment. In introducing the amendment, Sen. McCain called it a means to censure Uzbekistan for terminating U.S. access to K2 while “our troops in Afghanistan are still fighting the Taliban [and] our mission [is] clearly unfinished.”¹⁸

¹⁷ In contrast, the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2003 (P.L. 107-314, Sec.1306) provides for a national security waiver of conditions on Comprehensive Threat Reduction aid (one condition is a requirement to observe internationally recognized human rights). In Dec. 2003 (for FY2004), and Dec. 2004 (for FY2005), the President explained that Uzbekistan’s human rights problems necessitated a waiver.

¹⁸ *Congressional Record*, Sept. 29, 2005, p.H8643; Oct. 4, 2005, p. S10918; Oct. 5, 2005, p. S11077.