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

name redacted

Specialist in Russian and Eurasian Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

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 left the base by late November 2005. 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 (name redacted).

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. Uzbekistan reportedly made a number of requests during SOFA negotiations, 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 No U.S. base monetary reimbursements were specified.³ 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, problems in negotiating the Uzbek SOFA further spurred the United States to seek alternative airfield access at the Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan.⁴

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 departed and landed at K2 since late 2001, according to the U.S. Embassy.⁵

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).⁶ 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 had expected ample compensation for use of K2 and complained that such compensation was delayed and inadequate, 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,

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 According to Lt. Col. Kurt Meppen, the terms of the SOFA were "vague," permitting broad U.S. leeway on the use of air fields, airspace and soil. U.S.-Uzbek Bilateral Relations: Policy Options, in *Anatomy of A Crisis*, Silk Road Paper, February 2006.

⁴ 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 easily accommodated special operations. See Senate Armed Services Committee. Subcommittee on Emerging Threats. *Statement by General Charles R. Holland*, 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.

⁵ U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan. *Press Release*, Sept. 7, 2005. Lt. Col. Meppen mentions "over 10,000" Air Force sorties. He states that "U.S. aircraft would overfly Europe, refuel mid-air over the Black Sea with U.S. tankers flying from Romania, cross the Caucasus states of Georgia and Azerbaijan, span the Caspian Sea north of Iran, then cross into Central Asia.... After offloading cargo at Bagram, the C-17's would fly to [K2], refuel, and ... retrac[e] the original ingress route.... The air corridor ... became the key to maintaining combat capability in Afghanistan, and [K2] was the critical refueling and logistics nexus."

⁶ According to RAND, K2 provided some unspecified operational assistance for Operation Iraqi Freedom. RAND, 2005.

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.⁷

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 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 K2.⁸

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.”⁹ Despite signing the declaration, none of the Central Asian countries that hosted U.S. and other coalition bases called for immediately closing them, 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 refugee move, 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 government and of failing to reimburse the country for \$168 million spent to support K2.¹⁰

On November 21, 2005, the United States officially ceased anti-terrorism operations (to support Afghanistan) at K2. The Uzbek government reportedly also informed Belgium, Spain, Netherlands, and Sweden in mid-November that their basing and overflight privileges would be suspended, after the European Union denied travel visas to Uzbek officials who were implicated in violence in Andijon. In January 2006, Uzbekistan reportedly threatened to end the German role at Termez, including because U.S. troops were transiting through the base, and demanded more foreign assistance from Germany (the country is said to pay 3 million euros per year for basing privileges).

⁷ Beginning in late 2003, the Uzbeks submitted six draft leases for K2, according to Lt. Col. Meppen. He states that “U.S. negotiators were mystified by Uzbekistan’s repeated attempts to extract monetary concessions, particularly after explaining ... that in other theaters, sovereign nations paid ... for American troops to stay on their soil.” After rejecting these draft leases, CENTCOM and the Air Force decided in April 2005 that alternatives to K2 might be necessary.

⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2005. For details, see CRS Report RS22161, *Unrest in Uzbekistan*.

⁹ *Washington Post*, July 15, 2005, p. A19.

¹⁰ *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.” *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.

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, then-Uzbek Defense Minister Qodir Gulomov had been "very intent upon Westernizing" the armed forces, including increasing interoperability with NATO forces, building a non-commissioned officer corps, and restructuring recruitment and retention.¹¹ However, such plans appeared scuttled in recent months as Uzbekistan solidified ties with Russia and China as the predominant suppliers of equipment and training that bolsters Karimov's rule. This trend was bolstered after the European Union on October 3 imposed arms export and visa sanctions on Uzbekistan. In mid-November 2005, Russia and Uzbekistan signed a Treaty on Allied Relations that calls for both sides to have access to each other's military installations and for mutual defense consultations in the event of a threat to either party. Gulomov was replaced as defense minister in late 2005 by an intelligence official.¹²

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.¹³

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."¹⁴ 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 (a military facility with few or no U.S. troops, but which may contain pre-positioned equipment and contract personnel) in the region, but has urged Congress to seek further

¹¹ 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>].

¹² *Eurasia Insight*, Nov. 15, 2005.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Deputy Assistant Secretary B. Lynn Pascoe, Presentation at the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, Sept. 20, 2002.

inter-agency vetting of “what constitutes vital U.S. interests in the area that would require [a] long-term U.S. presence.”¹⁵

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 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. Uzbekistan not only requested that K2 be vacated, but curtailed other anti-terrorism cooperation, including military-to-military exchanges and training. These programs also aimed to inform Uzbek troops about civil-military relations in a democracy. Uzbekistan suspended other U.S.-funded democratization programs, including those carried out by the Peace Corps, the U.S.-funded International Research and Exchanges Board, and the Eurasia Foundation.

The Defense Department argued that the closure of K2 created some logistical problems but did 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 were transferred to Manas and some to Bagram, Afghanistan.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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

¹⁵ Commission on Review of the Overseas Military Facility Structure of the United States. *Interim Report*, May 9, 2005.

¹⁶ *Washington Post*, Sept. 17, 2005, p. A18; *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 2005, p. 3.

¹⁷ *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, Sept. 26, 2005; *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 16, 2005.

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 were withheld because of lack of progress in democratization and respect for human rights.¹⁸

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 to “pay the bill” for the use of K2 from January 2003 through March 2005. In response, Senators Biden, DeWine, Graham, Leahy, McCain, and Sununu sent a letter to Defense Secretary Rumsfeld urging that this planned payment be disbursed only after Uzbekistan renewed 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, 2005, called for suspending the payment and for U.S. support for trying Karimov in the International Criminal Court. On October 5, 2005, an amendment to Defense Appropriations for FY2006 (H.R. 2863) was approved for a one-year hold on the payment. In introducing the amendment, Senator 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.”¹⁹ Despite this concern, the Defense Department transferred the payment in November 2005. The amendment later was removed in conference (H.Rept. 109-360; P.L. 109-359). Among other legislation, the Military Quality of Life and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act (P.L. 109-114) rescinded funds for repair of runways at K2. In addition, the conferees (H.Rept. 109-305) called for Congress to be informed of changes to the USCENTCOM Master Plan for basing U.S. forces within USCENTCOM’s Area of Responsibility.

¹⁸ In contrast, P.L. 107-314 (Sec. 1306) gave the president authority in FY2004-FY2005 to waive conditions on Comprehensive Threat Reduction assistance (one condition is a requirement to observe internationally recognized human rights). In both years, the President explained that Uzbekistan’s human rights problems necessitated a waiver. P.L. 109-163 (Sec. 1303) indefinitely extends this presidential authority, renewable annually.

¹⁹ *Congressional Record*, Sept. 29, 2005, p.H8643; Oct. 4, 2005, p. S10918; Oct. 5, 2005, p. S11077.

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