

Top US general visits Uzbekistan for security talks

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Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov met Tuesday with US General David Petraeus, the US embassy said, underlining that the strategic Central Asian state seeks closer ties with Washington, AFP reported.

In a statement, the US embassy said Petraeus discussed with Karimov “key regional security issues” focusing on the situation in nearby Afghanistan, but did not provide details.

Petraeus also met senior officials from Uzbekistan’s national security council and the ministries of defence and foreign affairs here, the statement said.

Karimov said afterwards that Uzbek-US ties were improving.

“Uzbekistan attaches great importance to further development of relations with the United States and is ready to expand constructive bilateral and multilateral cooperation based on mutual respect and equal partnership,” he was quoted by the state news agency UZA as saying.

Speaking on state television later, he added: “Relations between our countries are developing in an upwards direction. The fact we are meeting again shows that the both sides are interested in strengthening the ties.”

Uzbekistan possesses extensive railway links to Afghanistan and earlier this year permitted the United States to use its territory for delivery of non-military and humanitarian cargo to US forces in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan allowed the United States to open an airbase near the Afghan border to support action against the Taliban following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

The Uzbek leadership however subsequently evicted the United States from the base when relations with Washington became strained over criticism of the Uzbek government’s handling of an armed uprising in the eastern city of Andijan.

The United States and Russia have in recent years vied for influence in Uzbekistan and Tashkent’s relationship with Washington has recently begun to warm again while ties with Moscow have waned.

Uzbekistan recently blasted a proposal from Russia to set up a second military base in neighboring Kyrgyzstan near the Uzbek border, saying such a move would upset the balance of power in the vital region.

It was a stinging rebuff for the Kremlin from a one-time close ally and former Soviet republic,

and experts say diplomatic tension between Uzbekistan and Russia is presently at levels not seen in years.

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