

Uzbekistan demands Withdrawal of US Forces from its Territory

By [Global Research](#)

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The recent letter of Uzbek Foreign Ministry officials to the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent as well as the recent calls for the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the Khanabad air base in southern Uzbekistan have been widely covered by both regional and U.S. media outlets.

The Washington Post reported the incident by declaring that Uzbekistan had expelled the United States from an air base in the country.

U.S. officials initially made no response, but the Pentagon spokesman finally announced that the Uzbek government had informed the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent that U.S. forces should leave the Khanabad air base as soon as possible.

According to unconfirmed reports, Tashkent has given the United States 180 days to vacate the air base.

At a recent Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting held in Kazakhstan, for the first time Uzbekistan agreed with the other SCO members on the necessity of U.S. forces vacating all military bases in the region, including the Khanabad air base.

It is highly significant that there were renewed calls for U.S. forces to withdraw shortly after U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's recent visit to Central Asia for consultations with regional countries on the continuation of the U.S. military presence in the region.

During his trip to Central Asia, Rumsfeld visited Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to discuss military cooperation with the United States, but no stop in Uzbekistan was on his itinerary.

In light of the fact that the Khanabad air base was the first and most significant military base given to the so-called anti-terrorist forces, Uzbekistan's demand that U.S. forces evacuate the base indicates that Washington-Tashkent relations have gone from warm to icy almost overnight.

Relations between Uzbekistan and the United States deteriorated rapidly after the Andijan massacre, when the U.S. government asked Tashkent to heed the international community's calls that independent international organizations be allowed to investigate the Andijan incidents.

Uzbek leaders reacted angrily to the U.S. pressure. In fact, due to the nature of their relations with the United States over the past few years, Uzbek officials did not expect the U.S. to support the demands for an independent investigation of the issue.

However, with its own record being questioned by human rights organizations, the United States felt obliged to support the demand.

Although the recent uprising in Kyrgyzstan did not spin totally out of control, largely due to Russia's wise decisions, regional leaders have been concerned that the United States is following a policy of instigating so-called colored revolutions in other former Soviet republics through its military presence and support for humanitarian and nongovernmental organizations in the region.

Regional leaders became even more concerned after the Andijan incidents, and the U.S. consensus with European organizations.

With almost all Western political analysts assessing Rumsfeld's recent visit to Central Asia as a great success, reality has slapped the U.S. neoconservatives in the face as Uzbekistan bites the hand that feeds by insisting on the withdrawal of U.S. forces from its territory and joining China, Russia, and the other SCO states in challenging the U.S. military policy in the region. The stakes have indeed been raised in Great Game 2.

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