

The Luftwaffe and American military equipment in Uzbekistan

Józef Lang

On 30 January Germany's ambassador to Uzbekistan, Neithart Hoefer-Wissing, officially confirmed that a small German air base in Termez in Uzbekistan will continue to function. The Termez base has been in operation since 2001 and, since the American Karshi-Khanabad air base closed in 2005, it has become the only Western military base in Uzbekistan. Since 2008 it has also been used by other NATO states with contingents in Afghanistan. Earlier, on 22 January, Deputy Assistant Secretary at the US Department of State Daniel Rosenblum announced that the United States was going to donate 328 MRAP-type armoured vehicles to Uzbekistan.

Commentary

- The extension of the operation of the German base in Termez is mainly connected with securing the logistics of the mission in Afghanistan, which remains NATO's largest external involvement. As part of the training-advisory operation Resolute Support 12,500 NATO soldiers (including 850 from Germany) will be stationed in Afghanistan until 2016. Additionally, approximately 10,000 American soldiers are taking part in Operation Freedom's Sentinel which also contains a combat component (counter-terrorism actions).
- In spite of the reduction of the involvement in Central Asia (e.g. closing the American Manas base in July 2014) the West is trying to maintain a limited presence in the region. Apart from its considerable logistical importance, the Termez base has a political function – it can be used by other NATO states (mainly the USA) and it is also the only NATO base on CIS territory. The scale of the America's recent military assistance for Uzbekistan has been unprecedented and the USA has announced that similar assistance might be granted to Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. These countries have already considered the possible American assistance for Uzbekistan as a change in the balance of power in the region.
- In the security sphere Uzbekistan has consistently distanced itself from close cooperation with Russia, and utilised its cooperation with the West for this purpose. Since 2012, when Uzbekistan suspended its membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the relations between Tashkent and Moscow have further cooled. Since then Russia has been trying to reinforce its influence in Uzbekistan, using both

negative and positive actions for this purpose. Examples of the former include: a donation of military equipment and weapons worth US\$ 1.5 bn to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and fuelling the potential separatist mood in Karakalpakstan. While President Vladimir Putin's visit to Uzbekistan in December 2014 (during which Russia announced it had agreed to unconditionally cancel US\$ 826 million of Uzbek debt) provides an example of the latter. Uzbekistan's acceptance of American military assistance and the continued NATO military presence on its territory have demonstrated that Tashkent's policy has become confrontational towards Moscow. Russia considers Central Asia to be in its zone of influence; a particularly exclusive one in terms of security. Uzbekistan's assertive approach has been evident particularly in the context of Russia cranking up its reintegration ambitions in CIS territory over the past year (including the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas and the creation of the Eurasian Union).