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The New York Times

Afghan Leader Says U.S. Bases Depend on Neighbors

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The possibility of the United States retaining long-term bases in Afghanistan could only be addressed once peace has been achieved and must take into account the country's neighbors, the Afghan president said on Saturday.

Russia has urged the United States not to establish long-term military bases in Afghanistan, suggesting that even discussing the subject could undermine peace efforts and anger Afghanistan's neighbors.

Often-uneasy ties between Afghanistan's government and its main Western backers have become even more tense of late over a bank corruption scandal, a ban on private security contractors, election fraud and decision by the Afghan government to take over the running of women's shelters.

That deteriorating relationship comes at the same time as Russia tries to increase its influence in Afghanistan, where Soviet troops fought a disastrous Cold War conflict that was followed by civil war in Afghanistan and contributed to the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991.

"Some American officials have suggested the U.S. government wants permanent bases in Afghanistan in the framework of enduring and strategic ties between the two countries," Afghan President Hamid Karzai told a news conference.

"I have heard about Russian concern. We are not living in an island in which its surroundings are empty, we live in a restive region with major neighbors," he said.

Karzai suggested any decision about long-term U.S. military bases would have to be discussed by parliament or a loya jirga, or traditional gathering of elders.

"Any agreement between Afghanistan and U.S. ties on the issue of bases must first result in peace in Afghanistan," Karzai said.

U.S. President [Barack Obama](#) has promised to begin drawing down U.S. troops in Afghanistan from July, with Afghan forces to take over security responsibility by 2014.

The pace and scale of that drawdown has not yet been determined and will depend on conditions on the ground.

With the start of the transition only months away, violence across Afghanistan remains at its highest levels since the [Taliban](#) were ousted in 2001, despite the presence of about 150,000 foreign troops.

[NATO](#)-led forces are frantically trying to train enough Afghan police and soldiers to meet Karzai's 2014 deadline, which was agreed to at a summit of NATO leaders last December.

Karzai has repeatedly said what he calls "parallel structures" -- private security firms protecting international agencies and civilian/military reconstruction teams -- must also hand over to Afghan institutions.

This has caused some anger among Afghanistan's Western backers, who have poured billions of dollars of aid and other assistance into Afghanistan.

"The parallel structures should be removed and there should be no excuse for the transition in 2014 not to take place," Karzai told the news conference at his heavily fortified palace.

Washington has said the U.S. role in Afghanistan will continue beyond 2014, with Defense Secretary Robert Gates saying he would favor joint facilities in Afghanistan for training and counter-terrorism operations.

Russia has helped U.S. and NATO forces fight the Taliban-led insurgency by providing supply routes and weapons for Afghan forces, but has ruled out sending troops and says the campaign must not be indefinite.

The Kremlin also wants the United States out of an airbase in the ex-Soviet Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan once the Afghanistan mission is over.