

America eyes up Georgia as a base to launch attack on Iran

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GEORGIA'S President Mikheil Saakashvili is involved in high level negotiations with members of the United States government on the construction of American military bases in the South Caucasian country, according to a representative of a Georgian opposition party.

Nestan Kirtadze, of the Georgian Labour Party, said last week that President Saakashvili is offering Washington thousands of hectares of land rent free on which to build military bases.

Mrs Kirtadze appealed to American planners and policy-makers not to turn Georgia into a theatre for confrontation between the two superpowers – a reference to US-Russia rivalry in the former Soviet republic.

The accusation made by Mrs Kirtadze will fuel suspicions in the Kremlin that the US is intent on encircling Russia. It will also provide an opportunity for Russian hawks to argue to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin that the Russian army should have toppled the government of President Saakashvili during the war in South Ossetia last year, and that something still needs to be done about the staunchly pro-Western Georgian leader.

Discussions concerning American bases in Georgia will also bring to the surface again the possibility of Washington launching pre-emptive air strikes against Iran.

Last year Russia's envoy to Nato, Dmitri Rogozin, argued that the US wants to use the strategically-placed Caucasus country as a base for military operations against the Islamic republic.

Focus will soon shift to incoming US President Barack Obama regarding Washington's stance on Georgia and Iran. He has repeatedly called for accession to Nato for Ukraine and Georgia, referring to Russia as a "21st century superpower" behaving like a "20th century dictatorship". When Russian tanks were on the outskirts of Tbilisi last year, vice president-elect Joseph Biden was the first US politician to visit Georgia and express support for the country's leadership.

On the subject of Iran, Mr Obama has given mixed messages about what approach the US should adopt. In 2004 he appeared to imply that he would support military action against Iran as a last resort but during last year's American presidential campaign he said that while no option was "off the table" an Obama administration would employ "tough, direct presidential diplomacy" with Tehran as the best means "to make progress".

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