

Tajikistan Closer to Russian Bases Deal

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Russia Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov **Denis Grishkin**

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Russia and Tajikistan are getting closer to a deal that would extend the presence of Russian troops in the Central Asian nation beyond 2014, Russia's foreign minister said Tuesday.

It is expected that the lease for the three Russian-controlled garrisons will be extended by 49 years — a prospect first floated by outgoing Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in September.

The deal would allow Russia to maintain a stronghold in the volatile Central Asian region.

Tajikistan has been dragging its feet over the lease for the Russian garrisons in the hope of securing enhanced financial terms.

Tajikistan's ambassador to Russia hinted this week that his government would seek \$300 million annually in cash or equivalent in military assistance for the bases. Moscow is expected to seek a much lower fee.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters that no date for the deal's signing has been set yet, but added that Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon had given the necessary instructions to "speed up the negotiation process."

Lavrov said he also discussed security in Afghanistan during talks in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, with Rakhmon and other senior officials.

He reiterated his concerns that Afghan security forces would not be up to the task of maintaining order by the time that NATO forces withdraw in 2014. Tajikistan and other Central Asian neighbors of Afghanistan fear a spillover of violence in the event of a renewed outbreak of civil conflict.

The Russian 201st Motorized Rifle Division deployed in Tajikistan numbers 7,500 servicemen and is the largest current deployment of Russian troops abroad. It is based in three garrisons — near Dushanbe and in the southern cities of Kulyab and Kurgan-Tube.

Russia's military presence helped negotiate an end to the five-year civil war that devastated Tajikistan in the 1990s.

Moscow has been strongly pressuring Tajikistan to allow it to revive an old arrangement that placed Russian border guards on the Tajik-Afghan border. Rakhmon's government has resisted those overtures fearing it could erode the country's sovereignty.

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