The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia, Tajikistan Start Large-Scale Military Exercises On Afghan Border

By Joshua Kucera

March 16, 2016



This article was originally published by EurasiaNet.org

Russia and Tajikistan have begun large-scale military exercises to practice defending against an invasion by Islamist extremists into Central Asia.

The exercises will take place over six days along more than 1,000 kilometers of the Tajik-Afghan border, which is the site of much speculation about a possible incursion of Islamist extremists from Afghanistan into Central Asia. (The total length of the border is about 1,400 kilometers.)

"Joint groups of paratroop forces from Tajikistan and Russia are being airlifted to possible points of incursions by terrorist groups on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border," said Faridun Makhmadalizoda, spokesman for Tajikistan's Ministry of Defense.

There are several features that make these exercises appear more significant than the other,

relatively frequent, exercises that Russia and Tajikistan carry out. For one, they're involving 50,000 troops from Tajikistan and 2,000 from Russia. Russian forces and equipment will include not only those from Russia's 201st military base in Tajikistan, but others from elsewhere in Russia's Central Military District, the first time that has happened. In addition, Russia has deployed two strategic bombers to the exercise to practice exchanging data with officers on the ground in Tajikistan. Other planes were deployed from Russia's Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan.

"The personnel of the Russian and Tajik armies will practice cohesion, common approaches for neutralizing illegal armed formations, destroying bases, depots and other facilities of a simulated enemy," reported the TASS news agency, citing the Russian Ministry of Defense. "During the drills, the army aviation will provide reconnaissance and cover for the routes of military hardware convoys, support motor rifle units and special forces, airdrop a tactical paratrooper task force in hard-to-access mountainous terrain and practice the evacuation of wounded personnel."

The exercise comes at a time of heightened tension around the border: groups of armed men with unclear motivations reportedly crossed in to Tajikistan from Afghanistan last week.

It also comes at a time when Tajikistan appears to be expanding its roster of military allies, with recent high-level visits by Pakistani and Chinese military officials as well as the announcement of substantially expanded U.S. military aid.

Interestingly, Russian Central Asia analyst Alexander Knyazev suggests that the exercises are meant as a message from Russia to Tajikistan. Knyazev, in a piece in Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta, documents a number of security cooperation activities China has recently undertaken in Tajikistan, as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan, and suggests that Beijing is trying to sideline more established regional security structures (the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) in favor of some new, nascent, structure.

"In this context it can't be excluded, that the military exercises taking place in Tajikistan, aside from their primary significance, also have a demonstration and preemptive character, from Russia to China and Tajikistan," Knyazev concludes.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/03/16/russia-tajikistan-start-large-scale-military-exercises-on-afghan-border-a52179