The Moscow Times
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Russia Holds Military Drills in Tajikistan Amid Taliban Offensive

By AFP

July 14, 2021



Moscow is closely watching the offensive, concerned about the security of countries in ex-Soviet Central Asia where it maintains military bases. **Collective Security Treaty Organization / TASS**

Russia on Wednesday launched military exercises in Tajikistan as the Taliban continue their blistering offensive in neighboring Afghanistan.

The militants in recent weeks have brought huge swathes of the country under their control as foreign troops withdraw, including Afghanistan's main Shir Khan Bandar border crossing with Tajikistan.

Moscow is closely watching the offensive, concerned about the security of countries in ex-Soviet Central Asia where it maintains military bases.

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Border

On Wednesday, about 1,000 troops at Russia's 201st military base in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe took part in drills, Russian news agency Interfax reported.

The agency cited a statement by Russia's Central Military District as saying the exercises were meant for unit commanders and combat chiefs to get ready for "combat operations in a dynamically changing situation."

Interfax reported that the exercises will run until the end of the week.

Russia's defence ministry said in a statement carried by the news agency that servicemen stationed at the military base had "repelled a massive missile strike by a simulated enemy" during the drills on Wednesday.

201st base

The 201st base is one of Russia's most important foreign bases and has the aim of helping maintain stability in Central Asia and providing support for Tajik troops.

Set up in 2005 and made up of three separate installations, the base houses about 5,500 troops.

In 2012, Tajikistan gave Russia an extension on the base through 2042 so it could help police its border with Afghanistan.

'Deep concern'

Ex-Soviet Tajikistan is a member of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes Russia.

Foreign ministers of SCO countries met in Dushanbe on Wednesday and issued a joint statement expressing their "deep concern over the growing tension in the northern provinces of Afghanistan."

"We urge all parties involved in the conflict in Afghanistan to refrain from using force and actions that could lead to destabilization and unpredictable consequences in the areas of Afghanistan's borders with the SCO member states," the statement said.

Earlier Wednesday the Kremlin's envoy to Tajikistan, Zamir Kabulov, told Russian news agency RIA Novosti that Moscow was "closely monitoring" the situation at Afghanistan's borders with Central Asian countries.

But he added that the Taliban had confirmed and reconfirmed that it would not launch attacks on Afghanistan's neighbors.

The group's offensive has seen a stream of Afghans make their way across the border into Tajikistan.

Tajikistan's national security committee said in a statement distributed to local media on

Wednesday that 77 Afghan civilians had crossed into the country "to save their lives due to the threat posed by the Taliban."

Earlier this month, more than 1,000 Afghan troops fled to Tajikistan after the Taliban seized Shir Khan Bandar. They were flown back to Afghanistan last week.

The Taliban is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

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