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Russia conducts military drills in Central Asia and China as US completes troop withdrawal from Afghanistan

Against the backdrop of the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is set to be completed by the end of August, and the rapid take-over of large parts of the country by the Taliban, Russia began military drills with Turkmenistan on Friday, July 30, that are set to run until August 10.

Russia also began 10-day-long military drills on August 1, together with the Tajik armed forces and the armed forces of Uzbekistan. The drills will take place at the Harbmaidon training ground on the Afghan-Tajik border. Tajikistan and Afghanistan share a 800-mile-long (1,303 kilometers) frontier, which has been effectively taken over by the Taliban.

The deeply impoverished country hosts a Russian military base. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu expressed alarm this week about a strengthening of ISIS in Afghanistan amid the US troop withdrawal. He said that Russia was strengthening the military capabilities of its base in Tajikistan and ramping up the training of Tajik forces.



Tajik National Army troops (Image credit: Russian Ministry of Defense CC BY 4.0)

On July 22, Tajikistan held its largest military readiness drills since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, involving around 100,000 servicemen, 130,000 reserve troops and 1,000 armored vehicles. According to Eurasianet, Tajik military recruitment officers have been touring the country, drawing up lists of young people who could be called up as wartime reservists.

From August 9-14, Russia will also conduct its first joint military drills with China since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a joint statement published by Moscow and Beijing on Thursday, “The exercise is aimed to consolidate and develop the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination in the new era, deepen the practical cooperation and traditional friendship between the two militaries, and further demonstrate the two sides’ resolve and capability to fight against terrorist forces and jointly safeguard regional peace and security.”

The drills in the northern Chinese Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region will involve some 10,000 troops along with aircraft, artillery and armored equipment. Both militaries are set to establish a joint command center to oversee the drills. The statement said, “The two sides’ participating troops will be mixed into teams to make plans jointly and conduct training together, in a bid to verify and improve both troops’ capabilities of joint

reconnaissance, search and early warning, electronic information attack, and joint attack and elimination.”

The military drills come as the US has resumed bombing Afghanistan in support of government troops that have been rapidly losing territory to the Taliban amid the US troop withdrawal. The Kremlin has also been concerned about news reports suggesting that the US is seeking to establish a military base in one of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia.

As talks between the Taliban and the official Afghan government have stalled and preparations for the military drills were underway, both Moscow and Beijing welcomed Taliban delegations in July.

On Wednesday, Beijing welcomed a delegation led by the Taliban’s deputy head, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, for a two-day visit. It was the highest profile visit so far by the Taliban to China. Beijing declared that the Taliban would play “an important role in the process of peaceful reconciliation and reconstruction” of the country. China is particularly concerned about the potential bolstering of Uyghur separatist organizations, which have long-standing ties to the Taliban, going back to the CIA-orchestrated war against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul in the 1980s. At the time, China supported the US involvement in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. However, the Afghan war also turned out to be central for the training and arming of Uyghur separatist and terrorist organizations, which to this day maintain close ties with US imperialism .

By now, the Taliban have seized much of the Afghan province that directly borders China’s Xinjiang province, which is home to the majority of the Muslim Uyghur population in China and is claimed by Uyghur separatists as “East Turkestan.” The Taliban has earlier published statements, welcoming Chinese investments and assuring Beijing that it would not intervene in China’s domestic affairs. A spokesman for the Taliban’s political office, Mohammad Naeem, stated on Wednesday that it had again “assured China that Afghan territory will not be used against the security of any country.”

Earlier in July, Taliban delegations visited Turkmenistan’s capital Ashgabat, as well as Moscow. The visit by a Taliban delegation to Moscow on July 7-8 was, in fact, the third such visit this year. Although the Taliban has been banned in Russia as a terrorist

organization since 2003, the Russian government has for many years been in relatively open contact with the Taliban.

According to Russian press reports, at the July meeting the Taliban promised that it would not allow Afghanistan to become a staging ground for attacks on Russia since it had “very good relations” with Moscow. The Taliban also assured Moscow that it would not violate the Afghan-Tajik border or any other border with Central Asian countries.

Speaking to Gazeta.Ru, Vladimir Dzhбаров, a member of Russia’s Federal Council and the ruling United Russia party, emphasized, “We will cooperate with any lawfully established [Afghan] government. If the Taliban become the lawful government, of course, we will establish relations with them, but under the condition that they will not be hostile toward our country.” He added that Russia “hasn’t had the kind of openly negative relationship with them [the Taliban] as the Americans did.”

A political expert, Stanislav Pritchin, cautioned that the Taliban was a very heterogeneous organization and that its central leadership could make no credible promise about the actions of its forces in Afghanistan’s north since they were recruited from various groups, some of which have their own political agenda. Andrei Kazantsev from the Moscow Higher School of Economics also speaking to Gazeta.Ru, stressed that Russia’s main concern was to prevent ISIS from consolidating its position in Afghanistan.

In recent months, Russian foreign policy think tanks have increasingly focused on analyzing the impact of the US troop withdrawal on Central Asia and discussing Russia’s own foreign policy strategy. Fyodor Lukyanov, who is Russia’s leading foreign policy pundit and maintains close ties to the Putin regime, recently wrote in the think tank journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, that the withdrawal marked the “end of an epoch in American and world politics.” He noted, “To some extent, Washington doesn’t care about what will happen now in Afghanistan and Iraq. Biden speaks a lot about democracy and freedom, but he understands that America’s possibilities are limited and that priorities have to be set. His choice is clear: the opposition to China by means of uniting the ‘free world’ against it. To keep the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan without any hope of achieving any real success will not further this goal.”

Also writing for *Russia in Global Affairs*, Timofei Bordachev stressed that the Kremlin should approach the troop withdrawal from the standpoint of its implications not just for regional but for world politics. While stressing that in terms of immediate security threats that Russia should work closely with the Central Asian states to bolster defense capacities, he wrote, “If the Taliban were to come to power or plunge the country into a new civil war, it would not damage major Russian projects.” He continued, “[t]he new reality in Kabul is not a threat, but an opportunity to adjust the existing formats of relations with partners—regional and not only.

“Much more important” for Moscow than the immediate regional implications, he emphasized, was “how the new situation in Afghanistan will affect Russia’s position in relations with China, India, Turkey, Iran, even with the United States and Europe.” Particular attention should be paid, Bordachev continued, to a possible involvement by Turkey in Afghanistan; the impact of the situation on China’s position in Pakistan and South Asia in general and its implications for India’s foreign policy strategy.

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