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Russian Commandos Join Pakistan in Rare Military Drill

9/23/2016

More than 70 Russian army commandos have arrived in Pakistan to participate in the first-ever joint military exercises between the two countries, officials announced Friday.

A Pakistani army spokesman said the two-week-long drill is scheduled to begin on Saturday and conclude on October 10.

The exercises, called "Friendship 2016," will involve around 200 military personnel of both the countries and take place in Cherat, a security official told VOA.

The northwestern mountainous region is the headquarters of the Pakistani commando forces, or Special Services Group. The drills are expected to focus on "high altitude warfare."

India, which enjoys close ties with Russia, had conveyed its concerns to Moscow that part of the military exercises will be conducted in the northern region of Gilgit-Baltistan, which is part of the divided region of Kashmir, where Indian and Pakistani troops face off along mountain peaks on the Line of Control.

Russian officials, however, are reported as saying they have informed New Delhi the drill will be conducted far from the disputed territories.



Russian troops on board an Ilyushin Il-76 military transport plane landed at a Pakistan military base in Rawalpindi, Sept. 23, 2016.

The joint exercises are yet another sign of warming of ties between Islamabad and Moscow.

“This [military drill] obviously indicates a desire on both sides to broaden defense and military-technical cooperation,” Pakistan's ambassador to Moscow, Qazi Khalilullah, told Russia’s TASS news agency.

Both of the countries were on opposing sides during the Cold War era. Russia severed all ties with Pakistan because of Pakistan's involvement in the U.S.-funded Afghan insurgency against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The two countries are now trying to overcome those tensions and signed a military cooperation agreement in 2014, lifting a years-long ban on the sale of Russian arms to Pakistan. It also paved the way for concluding another deal for the sale of four Russian Mi-35M attack helicopters to Pakistan.

The military exercises come as tensions between Pakistan and India have escalated after a September 18 militant attack on an Indian military base, in the disputed Kashmir region, that killed 18 soldiers.

Islamabad has denied Indian allegations it was linked to the deadly raid. The tensions have fueled speculations of another war between the nuclear-armed rival nations.