

Medvedev Extends Tajik Base Deal

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From left, Karzai, Rakhmon, Medvedev and Zardari in Dushanbe. **Nozim Kalandarov**

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Russia agreed with Tajikistan on Friday to extend the deployment of its military base in the country, a move likely to boost Moscow's influence in Central Asia after the pullout of NATO troops from Afghanistan.

The expiry of Russia's current 10-year base lease deal with Tajikistan in 2013 would have dealt another blow to Moscow's clout in its former imperial backyard ahead of the planned 2014 NATO pullout from next-door Afghanistan.

But President Dmitry Medvedev said after talks with Tajik leader Emomali Rakhmon that they had agreed to extend the presence of Russia's military in the country by 49 years.

"We have paid significant attention to the issues of security of our countries, to regional security," Medvedev said during a visit to Tajikistan. He said the new base deal would be signed in the first quarter of 2012.

The military base in Tajikistan, formerly known as the 201st division, has about 6,000 servicemen and is the Russian army's biggest deployment abroad.

Medvedev and Rakhmon also oversaw the signing of a separate agreement on cooperation in guarding Tajikistan's lengthy and porous border with Afghanistan — a source of Moscow's concerns over an influx of heroin and radical, Taliban-style Islam.

No details of the document were available.

Russian border guards left Tajikistan in 2005, ending a Soviet-era deployment and handing over all power over to local authorities.

NATO combat troops are expected to leave Afghanistan by the end of 2014, after handing over to Afghan security forces, raising concerns among regional powers about a power vacuum or a worsening security situation that could spill across borders.

Russia has ruled out sending troops to Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union lost some 15,000 soldiers in a 1979-89 conflict that ended with a humiliating army pullout.

But Moscow has courted Kabul ahead of a gradual withdrawal of NATO troops. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has welcomed such overtures amid persistent tensions with the West.

Russia has also sought better ties with Pakistan, a Soviet-era enemy seen as a key to stability in Afghanistan.

Speaking alongside Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Karzai and Rakhmon, Medvedev told reporters: "I believe all of my colleagues are united on one issue: the responsibility for what is happening in our region will in the final account inevitably rest with our countries — Russia, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan."

The four signed a joint statement agreeing to combat jointly terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking and organized crime in the region.

They urged U.S.-led troops "to increase efforts for training and arming Afghan national security structures."

Medvedev said Friday that the fate of Afghanistan and surrounding nations should be decided by regional powers, an apparent call for reduced U.S. engagement.

The remarks appear to mark a new effort by Moscow to make strategic and economic inroads in Afghanistan at the expense of the United States, whose relations with Karzai have become strained.

"What is happening in Afghanistan in the security sphere ultimately lies on our shoulders, so we need to strengthen cooperation within regional organizations," Medvedev said.

(Reuters, AP)

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