

Tajikistan Agrees to Russian Base Deal to Curb Militant Threat

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The  **Moscow Times**

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Russia has negotiated a deal to extend its lease on a military base in Tajikistan for at least 20 years in exchange for discounted weaponry and training for the Central Asian state's armed forces, two sources close to the talks said Friday.

The lease extension will end recriminations over a delayed deal to reinforce Russia's military presence on the southern fringes of the former Soviet Union before NATO troops begin withdrawing from neighboring Afghanistan in 2014.

More than 6,000 Russian soldiers are stationed across three towns in Tajikistan in the 201st base, Russia's largest troop deployment abroad. The current 10-year lease on the base expires Jan. 1.

A high-ranking source in Tajikistan's government who took part in the negotiations said an extension of 20 to 29 years had been approved. A Russian diplomatic source said a period of 29 years had been agreed upon in principle.

"This could move a little, plus or minus five to seven years, but no more," the Russian source said. Both sources spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of talks.

They said a formal agreement was expected to be signed in October by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Imomali Rakhmon of Tajikistan.

"The agreement has no financial aspect," the Tajik source said. "In return, Tajikistan will receive a discount on Russian arms and its officers will be trained in Russian military academies."

Moscow had wanted to extend the lease for 49 years, while Tajikistan's opening offer was 10 years, the Russian source said.

Rakhmon's government was always likely to extend Russia's lease, analysts said. As well as protection against the risk of Taliban-inspired militancy, a Russian troop presence is a lever for Tajikistan against its powerful regional neighbors.

Uzbekistan, with a population nearly four times the size of Tajikistan's, has periodically criticized its neighbor for pursuing hydroelectric projects that would dam rivers needed to irrigate Uzbek farmland downstream.

"Russia's military base serves as an umbrella protecting Tajikistan from the influence — or aggression — of other nations," said Dushanbe-based political analyst Jamshed Kadyrov. "It would be suicidal to remain without at least the nominal protection of 'Big Brother.'"

Tajikistan's border service said Friday that an Uzbek soldier on horseback was spotted on Tajik soil filming footage on a mobile phone, The Associated Press reported. An attempt to detain the soldier elicited a volley of gunshots from Uzbek troops, the border service said.

In a separate incident, Tajik authorities said one of its citizens was forcibly detained by Uzbek soldiers on Sept. 1. His current whereabouts are unknown.

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