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<http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/russia-and-tajikistan-stage-large-antiterrorism-drills/>

Russia and Tajikistan Stage Large Antiterrorism Drills

Moscow and Dushanbe are getting a lot of practice in.

By Catherine Putz
March 12, 2016

More than 50,000 troops will engage in anti-terrorism drills in Tajikistan's Khatlon region in the coming week. The Tajik ministry of defense, according to TASS, said the joint drills began Thursday and would include armored vehicles and aircraft in addition to 50,000 soldiers. *Asia-Plus* says the drills are scheduled to take place from March 15-20, but that some events have already begun. The exercises are geared toward repelling "external terrorist threats" as well as practicing "coordination and interaction in combat missions in mountains."

Faridun Makhmalizoda, a spokesman for the ministry, commented that this will be the first time "in the history of military cooperation between Tajikistan and Russia" that joint drills have included soldiers from Russia's Central Military District, not just troops from the 201st Motor Rifle Division stationed in Tajikistan.

The 201st division, estimated at about 7,000 troops, has been based in Tajikistan (mostly stationed at a facility outside Dushanbe, but also in Qurgonteppa and Kulob) since the Soviet era. Although last year Russia stated an intention to increase its troop presence in Tajikistan to 9,000 by 2020, this year began with news that that plan had been shelved. Russian forces in Tajikistan are apparently to be reorganized from a division to a brigade.

The joint drills, per *TASS*, will include 2,000 Russians plus 50,000 members of the Tajik army and reserve forces. The drills will take place at five training grounds in southern Tajikistan. Moreover, *Asia-Plus* says 950 armored vehicles will also participate.

The star participants, however, are likely to be the aircraft joining from the Russian side. *Asia-Plus*' report cites the Russian Central Military District as saying that among the aircraft taking part are Su-25 jet fighters, Mi-24 and Mi-8 helicopters, and Tupolev Tu-22M3 long-range bombers. The aircraft flew to Ayni airbase in Tajikistan from Novosibirsk in Russia and Kant in Kyrgyzstan.

Sputnik quoted an aid to the commander of Russia's Central Military District as saying "[Bomber] crews will practice airstrikes using 500-kg [1,100-lb] bombs against camps of illegal armed groups at military [training] grounds in the foothills of Eastern Pamir [Tajikistan]."

Russia and Tajikistan have been very vocal about the risk they see in militants coming across the Afghan border. Last year, Russia engaged in several military drills with the Tajik military—mostly under the auspices of the CSTO. And in late February, *TASS* reported about another anti-terrorism drill in which another Russian Central Military District spokesman, Nikolay Berkalov, said reconnaissance teams from the 201st participated in a join drill with the Tajiks simulating an attack on terrorist headquarters. Those drills involved "drones and automatic weapons with silencers."