

## **Tajikistan: Putin and Rahmonov Make Progress**

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First face-to-face meeting between the two presidents appears to signal thaw in relations between their countries.

A recent meeting between Russian president Vladimir Putin and his Tajik counterpart Imomali Rahmonov resulted in surprisingly swift agreement on a series of long-standing points of contention.

The June 4 summit – first announced immediately after a brief May 31 meeting between Rahmonov and the Russian security council head Igor Ivanov, who many speculate was instrumental in bringing the two heads of state together – took place in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi and lasted little more than three hours.

It was the first face-to-face meeting between the two presidents in almost two years, and appeared to signal the end of a period of cool relations between the two countries.

The presidential delegations addressed a number of key issues, which have long proved to be awkward sticking points.

Rahmonov said Russia will be allowed to establish a permanent military base in Tajikistan and take over the Nurek space surveillance centre. And Putin agreed to consider keeping border guards in Tajikistan longer than planned to help patrol the Afghan frontier. The leaders also settled on a scheme to assist Dushanbe with repayment of its 300 million US dollar debt to Russia.

Moscow has long hoped to turn its 201st motorised rifle division, which is stationed in Tajikistan, into a permanent military presence there.

At the latest talks, Rahmonov finally agreed that Russia will be given enough land - free of charge and with no time limit - to establish a military base. He also said the Moscow government will be given ownership of land it is currently using for military training in Tajikistan.

A colonel of the 201st division told IWPR that he was pleased with the decision. "It is good that our presidents have finally reached an agreement," he said. "Things have been up in the air lately – many servicemen were literally forced to take vacations, as if they were being prepared to be sent back to Russia."

The agreement is also likely to prove popular amongst Tajiks who have signed up to work for the Russian military in Tajikistan. Dushanbe resident Safar Turaev, who is a sergeant in the 201st division, told IWPR, "I simply didn't know what I would do if the division was withdrawn. I receive a good salary [over 200 US dollars].. my family is not needy... I have many friends among the Russian guys. Thanks to Allah that everything is solved – now I won't lose my job and friends!"

Previous attempts by Russia to negotiate such an agreement have failed. During talks in March, Dushanbe demanded that if Moscow was to establish a base in Tajikistan, it would first have to drop Tajikistan's huge financial debt and would also be required to allow Rahmonov the right to take command of any Russian troops stationed in Tajikistan in an emergency situation, if it were in the national interest to do so. Moscow refused to even discuss such terms.

Rahmonov's decision to withdraw his previous tough conditions might well be linked to a recent declaration by the Russian government that it would begin to implement an earlier agreement to withdraw Russian troops from the 1300-kilometre border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan over the coming year.

The move had caused alarm in Russia, because the Tajik military is so poorly equipped to combat the flow of drugs out of Afghanistan.

But in Tajikistan the issue is even closer to home, and it is bound to have given Moscow extra leverage in its dealings with Dushanbe.

The Russian-run border service is in fact mostly made up of Tajik soldiers, so besides effectively maintaining security in the region, it also creates well-paid jobs for locals who sign up. Wages are 100 times higher than those paid to conscripts in the Tajik frontier forces.

On May 27 residents of Khorog, an administrative centre in the Mountainous Badakhshan autonomous region bordering Afghanistan, staged a protest against the withdrawal of Russian border troops.

Eyewitnesses say some women were even shouting that they would “lie under BTRs [armoured personnel carriers] to prevent Russians from leaving”.

At the summit, the presidential delegations discussed the issue of border guards, and settled on a compromise.

Putin’s assistant Sergey Prikhodko maintained that “work on transfer to the Tajik side of the sections of border, that are now guarded by Russian border guards, will be systematically continued”.

But the Russian delegation agreed to consider Rahmonov’s request to postpone the date of complete withdrawal until the end of 2006.

Prikhodko also told journalists after the meeting, “By a mutual agreement, an operative group of Russian border forces will be created which will, jointly with Tajikistani colleagues, counteract the drug traffic, prevent possible infiltration of fighters and solve other tasks as agreed on with the Tajikistani partners.”

Also discussed was the issue of the Nurek space surveillance centre, a unique facility 80 km east of Dushanbe, equipped with ten automated multi-purpose telescopes capable of searching and automatically positioning objects at distances of up to 40,000 km. Construction of the facility began in 1979, but it only went into military service in 2002.

Moscow has long considered ownership of the Nurek complex to be very much tied in with the issue of establishing a military base on Tajik soil. “We would want to create a military base in Tajikistan on the basis of the 201st motorized rifle division stationed there,” said defense minister Sergey Ivanov in the spring of this year. “But this issue should be solved together with retaining of the Nurek complex.”

In the latest round of talks Rahmonov agreed to pass Nurek into Russian hands.

The presidents also agreed on a scheme to help Tajikistan repay its huge financial debt to Russia. Dushanbe will invest part of the money in several major projects, including speeding up lagging construction work on the Sangtudin hydroelectric power station.

Moscow agreed not to charge Tajikistan interest on the sum – in return, Russia will receive a package of shares in the power station. The joint stock company United Energy Systems of Russia, RAO EES Rossii, will also participate in the project.

“Cheap electric energy... will be advantageous not only for Tajikistan but also for other countries in the region, including Russia,” Putin said.

Reactions to the meeting and its results have been broadly positive.

One of the officials who attended as part of the Tajik delegation, but who asked to remain anonymous, told IWPR, “We are very satisfied with the results of the negotiations that were very effective for us.”

Political scientist Rahmon Ulmasov agreed that the Tajik government has reason to be pleased.

“If the agreement on the military base and borders were not achieved in Sochi, it is clear that in Russia the already ambiguous attitude towards Tajik labor migrants could have deteriorated,” he told IWPR.

He also expressed optimism about an upcoming visit to Tajikistan by Sergei Shoigu, chair of the Tajik-Russian commission on trade and economic cooperation.

“I think that during the commission’s sessions, other trade and economic issues of our cooperation will be solved as well,” he said.

It seems the latest summit could signal the beginning of increased cooperation between Moscow and Dushanbe.

As agreements based on the outcomes of this meeting are prepared, Prikhodko said, “We will start preparing an official visit by Vladimir Putin to Tajikistan, which will take place before the end of this year.”

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