

War Fever Unnerves Tajikistan

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Tajikistan concerned over possible fall-out from US war against Taleban

Tajikistan is becoming increasingly nervous as the US prepares retaliatory strikes against Osama bin Laden and the Afghan Taleban movement. Its anxiety has been heightened by contradictory reports about whether Washington will use the Central Asian republic as a launch pad for attacks on its southern neighbour.

Dushanbe has been inundated by foreign journalists and delegations of top Russian military officials, including the Chief of Staff of Russia's armed forces, General Anatoli Kvashnin, the secretary of its Federal Security Council, Vladimir Rushailo, and the chief of the Federal Border Guard, General Nikolai Reznichenko.

Russia is worried about mounting tension on the southern borders of the former Soviet Union. Tajikistan is just as apprehensive. With Afghanistan as the prospective target of US military strikes, its neighbour fears being hit by stray missiles and being overwhelmed by Afghan refugees.

Much confusion has surrounded Tajikistan's role in the conflict since the Tajik foreign minister, Talbak Nazarov, announced on September 18 that his country was "ready to join forces with any nation, including the United States, in fighting international terrorism".

Nazarov said the security situation had deteriorated since Ahmed Shah Massoud, leader of the anti-Taleban Northern Alliance, was killed earlier this month in what the foreign minister described as "a prelude to the terrorist attacks on the United States".

On September 24, the Russian media reported that both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan would offer the US airspace and airports for strikes, while American newspapers reported that military transport planes had already landed in Kulyab airport, in southern Tajikistan, and at a military airport in Uzbekistan.

The Russian defence minister Sergei Ivanov also confirmed on September 25 that Tajikistan would allow the US to use the airport in Dushanbe for bomb attacks.

But Dushanbe and Moscow have since denied the reports. The Tajik defence ministry said neither the US nor Russia had even asked Tajikistan to provide logistical support. The minister, Sherali Khairullaev, also denied a military build-up was underway.

The interior minister, Khumdin Sharipov, would only admit that the authorities were on a state of heightened alert since the New York bombings. "In the light of the possible US military strikes against Afghan-based terrorists we must keep our borders safe and ensure security inside the country," he said.

General Kvashnin, who visited Tajikistan on September 19 to assess the state of readiness of a Russian motorised infantry division, stationed in Tajikistan, said his forces were prepared for all contingencies and that there was no need to deploy extra manpower in Tajikistan.

However, the Tajik president, Emomali Rakhmonov, did not rule out increasing the numbers of Tajiks

drafted into Russian military units in Tajikistan.

The president and his Russian military visitors toured a Russian border guard detachment stationed in the Pyandj district and the headquarters of a motorised infantry division on September 20.

After their field trip, the president and his Russian guests said a concerted effort to combat terrorism at the southern borders of the former Soviet Union would be successful and Russian border guards on the Afghan frontier were under orders not to let in any refugees.

President Rakhmonov said the joint field-trip was proof of Russia's concern about the global terrorist threat and that the two nations were taking serious steps to safeguard Tajikistan's southern border, the southern frontier of the Commonwealth of Independent States, CIS.

The president added that he hoped US strikes would not be directed against civilians and that they would be precision-targeted to hit terrorist bases in Afghanistan. The message was that while Russia and Tajikistan gave their blessing to the US anti-terrorist operation, they would prefer not to get involved.

Tajikistan was the poorest country in the former Soviet Union and the 1,500-kilometre border with Afghanistan is a source of constant threat to security. The republic's defence is effectively in Russian hands and Dushanbe takes no security decisions without prior consultation with its partners in the Collective Defence Treaty - Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Armenia.

Tajik nerves are not only related to fears about a tidal wave of refugees. Only a short time has elapsed since Tajikistan's civil war, 1992-1997, in which Afghan mujahedin and fighters from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, took part against forces loyal to the secular Dushanbe government.

At least 10 hard-line Tajik opposition fighters are reported to have stayed in the IMU after refusing to return from Afghanistan following the June 1997 peace accord.

Many people said they wanted to see the terrorists punished, but feared missile strikes would harm civilians more than Bin Laden and his army. "This could be the beginning of World War III, or the end of the world," said Abdullo Khamatov, an engineer.

Russian journalist and military expert Alexander Ramazanov said full-scale military intervention by the West would be highly unwise. "It could easily lead to a global military stand-off," he said. "We cannot tell what may happen on the southern CIS border if such military action unfolds. Russia and Tajikistan need to think ahead and co-ordinate steps."

Some local politicians, meanwhile, remain deeply suspicious of US motives. Sulton Khamadov, of the Party for the Islamic Restoration of Tajikistan, PIRT, said the operation was not aimed solely at Bin Laden's terrorist empire but at installing a pro-American puppet government in Afghanistan, which would host US military bases at the border with the former Soviet Union.

Khamadov backed Tajikistan's official stance on the operation, saying, "While international terrorism is a matter of primary concern, Tajikistan needs to coordinate with Russia and the other CDT member nations before taking any action."

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