Tajikistan Fortifies Its Borders in the Face of Instability in Afghanistan

Today, the Islamist terrorist movement Taliban (banned in Russia) completely controls the Afghan side of the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The government of Tajikistan, a small Central Asian country with a population of 9 million, has every reason to worry about peace and security in its borders, as the tense situation in Afghanistan becomes a greater threat every day. For the past few months, the Tajik authorities have been taking measures to reinforce their troops.

On July 5, 2021, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon ordered Defense Minister Lieutenant General Sherali Mirzo to mobilize 20,000 reserve troops into the armed forces. The emergence of a major trouble spot forced the state authorities to begin strengthening the country’s defense capabilities.

Before the destabilization of Afghanistan, the Tajik army had only 8,500 soldiers. Such a low military strength can be explained by the fact that, first, the state can hardly be called economically stable, and thus is not able to maintain too many military facilities. Second, before the Taliban took over Afghanistan, Tajikistan had no potential adversaries in the region threatening its statehood. In May 2021, Tajikistan had a territorial dispute with Kyrgyzstan, which led to a border conflict that claimed the lives of several dozen people. However, hostilities quickly ceased, and by and large the conflict seemed to be local in nature and of no strategic importance to the national security of the two countries. Third, Tajikistan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and in case of any serious threat, Tajikistan can count on the help of its allies.
The Armed Forces of Tajikistan are facing an acute shortage of professional personnel. Private and sergeant officers are predominantly citizens fulfilling the compulsory two-year military service. The reason for the exceedingly low number of contract servicemen is the small defense budget. It is easier for the authorities of the country to staff the army through conscription, since it costs drastically less to maintain conscripts than it does to maintain professionals.

Unfortunately, the Tajik army is currently equipped with outdated equipment. The state does not have a developed military-industrial complex, and its arsenal is represented either by imported combat vehicles or significantly obsolete weapons left in the country since Soviet times.

Sanitary and material provision of most military units is also far from satisfactory. As a result, many Tajik youth are trying to avoid conscription by all means. Many conscripts are forced to pay for their own uniforms.

Tajikistan’s geographic features play an adverse role in strengthening its defense capabilities. Most of Tajikistan’s territory is covered by mountains, which impairs the efficiency of the logistics infrastructure. Weak logistics prevent the full supply of military units and significantly increase the cost of military services.

The most combat-ready military formation in Tajikistan is the 201st Russian military base with more than 8,000 personnel. It is staffed exclusively by professional servicemen who have had a positive track record while serving in the Russian Federation. This unit of the Russian Armed Forces is equipped with the latest models of equipment and weapons. This is largely due to the fact that the Russian Defense Ministry pays increased attention to its military facilities abroad, and the Tajik-Afghan border area is one of the most dangerous places where such facilities exist.

On August 16, 2021, CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas stated that the organization will do everything possible to help Tajikistan in case of a threat from Afghanistan. Zas also reported that at the moment the Tajik leadership is in full control of the situation on its side of the border and does not need urgent help from its allies. However, the CSTO leadership is closely monitoring the situation on the Tajik-Afghan border and, if necessary, is ready to immediately activate the Collective Forces of the Organization.

On August 23, 2021, 201st Military Base personnel conducted training exercises with attack and transport helicopters in mountainous terrain. The Russian military command is aware of the high risk of escalation of the conflict in the Central Asian region, and has therefore ordered the military to increase the level of combat training.

On August 24, 2021, the press service of the Central Military District of Russia, which includes the 201st base in Tajikistan, reported that the base was equipped with Kornet modern anti-tank missile systems. In the light of recent events, the Russian authorities decided to reinforce their military units stationed near Afghanistan.

One would hope, however, that the Taliban would not try to attack Tajikistan. The Taliban want the world to stop regarding them as terrorists. The Taliban hope that sooner or later the international community will recognize it as the new government of Afghanistan.

But even if the Taliban do not aim to attack other states, this still does not make the situation any less stressful. Afghanistan faces unprecedented levels of tension, and there is a possibility that at some point new terrorist movements could emerge within its territory and try to change the balance of power both at home and in other countries. In the country recently overrun by the Taliban, there are many weapons left over from the US to the now defunct Afghan army. If the aggressive formations gain access to US weapons, the situation could deteriorate dramatically.

Summarizing the above, we can assume that Tajikistan will probably not have to face a full-fledged war, yet the country still needs to remain vigilant: there is a high probability that conflicts will break out in the border areas. The authorities of Tajikistan should also be prepared for the fact that illegal armed groups, including those planning to destabilize the state and sabotage the armed forces of the country, may try to infiltrate their lands. And in this regard, an undoubted positive factor for Tajikistan is its focus on strengthening the combat capabilities of its army and continuing close cooperation with Russia and other members of the CSTO.

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