

# The Dragon's Footprint: China's Military Expansion in Tajikistan and its Consequences

---

## Introduction

In recent years, China's burgeoning military presence in Central Asia has sparked apprehension among its neighbouring countries, with India being particularly vigilant. A pivotal development in this context is a media report of a clandestine military base in Tajikistan, a nation situated at the epicentre of Central Asia.

According to the report by The Telegraph, satellite images show that China has been building a secret military base in the Central Asian country for almost a decade.<sup>[1]</sup> “The facility, carved out of mountains that rise 13,000 ft high, has look-out towers and troops from both countries, which now hold regular joint military drills shown on Chinese state media”, the article says. The Telegraph also posted several satellite images, taken in different years.<sup>[2]</sup> This enigmatic base, veiled in secrecy, could have far-reaching implications for India's national security and the regional geopolitical landscape. Though denied by China and Tajikistan, reports still suggest that there is significant evidence of Chinese military presence in Tajikistan.

In addition, the Washington Post in 2019 had reported that China has an operating military base in Tajikistan, confirming earlier accounts of this base and opening a window on China's interests and strategic developments across Central Asia.<sup>[3]</sup>

## The Base: A Strategic Vantage Point

The Chinese military base in Tajikistan based on media reports, is nestled in the Pamir Mountains, proximal to the town of Murghab, and in close proximity to the Chinese border. This strategically located base is likely to provide China with a foothold in the region, enabling it to survey the activities of its neighbouring countries, including India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. It is likely to be equipped with cutting-edge surveillance systems, radar, and communication equipment, allowing China to maintain a hawk's eye on the region, thereby bolstering its military prowess and regional influence.

The Chinese Embassy in Dushanbe on 15 Jul 2024 denied media reports that Beijing is building a military base in Tajikistan, calling the reports ‘Groundless’. The embassy responded to a story in The Daily Telegraph showing satellite photos of buildings and what the report claimed is a shelter for helicopters in the Shaymak region of Tajikistan, near the Afghan border. The Tajik Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Dushanbe and Beijing are “Actively cooperating on issues of resistance to challenges and threats”. The statement said the countries are cooperating on controlling cross-border organised crime, drug trafficking, and cybercrime, but denied the existence of the base.<sup>[4]</sup>

China may be sensitive about its military expansion in Central Asia, particularly in a region that is traditionally seen as Russia's sphere of influence. By denying the presence of a military base, Beijing may be trying to avoid provoking Russia or other regional powers.

Tajikistan too does not officially recognise the existence of the military facilities shown in the Telegraph article. The Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs denies that there are any Chinese military bases in the country. “China does not have a military base on the territory of Tajikistan. This issue is not on the agenda of bilateral relations”, a statement published on the ministry's website reads.<sup>[5]</sup>

Tajikistan may be concerned about maintaining its sovereignty and independence in the face of the Chinese military presence. By denying the base, Tajikistan may be trying to assert its control over its own territory and avoid being seen as a client state of China.

Based on satellite images generated by Maxar Technologies, a space technology company, the military base is equipped with helipads, perimeter walls, access roads and observation towers. The military facility also has look-out towers for both China and Tajikistan and is built at a strategic location, about 4,000 metres in the mountains near the Afghan borders. According to a report by the Economic Times, the “Counter-terror” base was built following an agreement that was signed between the two countries in 2021.<sup>[6]</sup>

Dodikhudo, the Dushanbe-based correspondent for Iran International states in her report that the Chinese facility was opened in 2016 under the name *Sitod*, which is Tajik for ‘Headquarters’. She describes the outpost as being specifically intended to forestall the prospect of ethnic Uyghur militants trickling across from Afghanistan into western China.<sup>[7]</sup>

These bases also reflect China’s non-military objectives and its threat assessment. As China is pouring billions into Central Asia as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a desire to guard its investment naturally gains more prominence in policymaking, especially as Beijing has long held that economic development in Xinjiang and Central Asia is the answer to the threat of Islamic self-assertion or Uyghur ethno-national mobilisation. China’s concurrent Orwellian crackdown on Islam and the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and even upon Kyrgyz and Kazakh nationals apparently aims to eradicate their Islamic identity using techniques first honed in Stalin’s Gulag, Mao’s Cultural Revolution and Communist China’s long-standing Laogai system of concentration camps for political dissenters. This campaign has grown along with China’s interest in projecting military power into Central Asia. Thus, economic, political, and ethnic considerations have become inextricable from the impetus to build military bases, especially as Islamist terrorism continues to flourish in Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **Advantages for China in the Secret Military Base in Tajikistan**

The secret military base in Tajikistan could confer upon China a multitude of strategic advantages, solidifying its position as a preeminent power in Central Asia. By establishing a foothold in the region, China gains a vantage point to monitor the activities of its neighbours, including India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, thereby, enabling it to detect potential security threats and respond promptly to emerging situations. The base’s proximity to the Chinese border also allows for strengthened border security, preventing potential incursions or terrorist activities in a region historically plagued by instability and extremism. Furthermore, the base provides China with access to Central Asia, enabling it to project power and influence, promote its economic and strategic interests, and develop the BRI. Tajikistan’s rich natural resources, including oil and gas, also enhance China’s energy security and reduce its dependence on other regions. The base’s strategic location allows China to monitor the activities of its rivals, including the United States and India, and serves as a deterrent to potential adversaries, demonstrating China’s military capabilities and willingness to project power. The base is expected to generate significant economic benefits, including access to new markets, resources, and investment opportunities, contributing to China’s economic growth and development. Additionally, the base enhances China’s regional influence, allowing it to shape regional security dynamics and promote its interests in Central Asia, while also providing it with a platform to combat terrorism and promote regional stability. Ultimately, the base confers upon China a long-term strategic advantage, enabling it to maintain a permanent presence in

the region and respond to emerging security challenges, thereby, reinforcing its position as a dominant player in Central Asia. The base would enable China to protect its infrastructure investments in Tajikistan, including roads, bridges, and energy projects, which are critical to the success of the BRI.

### **Benefits for Tajikistan**

The establishment of a Chinese military base in Tajikistan would yield a multitude of benefits for the country, including substantial economic gains through infrastructure investment, job creation, and revenue generation. The base would also foster enhanced security cooperation between the two nations, facilitating joint military exercises, training, and counter-terrorism operations to combat threats from extremist groups like the Islamic State. Moreover, the base would bolster Tajikistan's regional influence, serve as a deterrent to potential adversaries, and provide access to China's vast markets, enabling the country to diversify its trade relationships. Additionally, the base would solidify the strategic partnership between the two countries, enabling closer collaboration on security, economic, and cultural issues, and provide an opportunity for the Tajikistan military to enhance its capabilities. Ultimately, the base would contribute to regional stability, enabling Tajikistan to play a more proactive role in maintaining peace and security in the region.

### **Implications for India**

The establishment of the Chinese military base in Tajikistan has far-reaching implications for India's national security. The base, combined with China's existing military presence in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Nepal, effectively encircles India from the north, compromising its military strategy and operational secrecy by providing China with a vantage point to monitor Indian military activities in the region, including those in the disputed territories of Jammu and Kashmir. Furthermore, Tajikistan's rich natural resources, including oil and gas, make China's presence in the region a threat to India's energy interests, particularly in the context of the proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. Ultimately, China's growing military presence in Central Asia, including in Tajikistan, challenges India's influence in the region, limiting its ability to promote its economic and strategic interests in Central Asia and undermining its position as a key player in regional affairs.

### **Regional Dynamics**

The Chinese military presence in Tajikistan could also have profound implications for regional dynamics, precipitating a seismic shift in the regional balance of power as China emerges as a dominant player in Central Asia, potentially triggering a re-alignment of regional alliances and partnerships. The base has also raised concerns among other countries, including Russia, which has traditionally been the dominant power in Central Asia and may lead to a re-evaluation of Russia's relationships with China and other regional players. Furthermore, the base could exacerbate military tensions in the region, particularly between China and India, potentially destabilising regional security and undermining efforts to promote peace and stability, thereby, creating a volatile and uncertain environment that could have far-reaching consequences for the entire region.

China's interest in bolstering its military presence across its borders, including in Indian territory within the Himalayas, has been evident. Concerns are mounting that Beijing's increasing ties with Tajikistan could signal similar expansions in neighbouring countries. With Russia,

Tajikistan's traditional economic and security partner, deeply involved in the Ukraine conflict, China's influence in the region is growing unchecked.[9]

## Conclusion

The clandestine military base of China in Tajikistan constitutes a pivotal development with profound ramifications for India's national security and regional dynamics. The base provides China with a strategic vantage point to monitor the activities of its neighbours, including India, and enhances its military capabilities, economic influence, and regional influence. It is imperative for India to conduct a meticulous assessment of the implications of this development and respond with alacrity to safeguard its interests in the region. This may entail fortifying its relationships with other regional stakeholders, including Russia and the Central Asian republics, and implementing a more robust defense and security strategy in the region. Ultimately, the establishment of the Chinese military base in Tajikistan serves as a stark reminder of the necessity for India to remain perpetually vigilant and proactive in promoting its interests in a rapidly evolving regional landscape, where strategic agility and adaptability are essential for ensuring national security and region

---

[1] China denies that it's building secret military base in Tajikistan, not far from PoK, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/china-secret-military-base-tajikistan-13793733.html>

[2] Tajikistan Denies Report of Secret Chinese Military Base, <https://timesca.com/tajikistan-denies-report-of-secret-chinese-military-base/>

[3] China's Military Base in Tajikistan: What Does it Mean?, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13569-chinas-military-base-in-tajikistan-what-does-it-mean?.html>

[4] China Denies Building Military Base In Tajikistan , <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-china-military-base-satellite-photos/33037344.html>

[5] Tajikistan Denies Report of Secret Chinese Military Base, *ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Tajikistan: Secret Chinese base becomes slightly less secret, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-secret-chinese-base-becomes-slightly-less-secret>,

[8] China's Military Base in Tajikistan: What Does it Mean?, *ibid.*

[9] China builds secret military base in Tajikistan amid Taliban threats and regional tensions, <https://daryo.uz/en/2024/07/12/china-builds-secret-military-base-in-tajikistan-amid-taliban-threats-and-regional-tensions>

**Maj Gen Sanjeev Chowdhry (Retd)** is a veteran with over 37 years of commissioned service. A graduate of the DSSC Wellington, and College of Defence Management during his career, the General officer has served in all types of terrain and environment while on command, staff, and

instructional duties. He specialises in the subject of Net Assessment and is presently the Director Editorial at the USI.

**Article uploaded on 19-08-2024**

**Disclaimer :** The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India.