



## The Importance of Foreign Military Bases for Russia

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*Outside its borders, Russia has military bases in the post-Soviet space and in Syria. The main goal is to increase Russian military security and political influence in countries in which these bases are located. Despite economic difficulties related to the drop in oil and gas prices and the costs of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia will maintain its network of bases, which it considers an important element of influence.*

**Foreign Military Bases.** Russia has military bases and facilities in Syria and five countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)—Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—as well as in the separatist territories of Abkhazia (Georgia), South Ossetia (Georgia), and Transnistria (Moldova). It also has a [significant military component in annexed Crimea](#) and its troops are [present in Donbas](#) (Ukraine). Almost all the military bases and facilities used by Russia are the legacy of the USSR.

In Armenia, Russia has the 102<sup>nd</sup> military base, which is under the command of the Southern Military District (MD). There are 3,300 troops there and that number can be increased to 5,000. Their task is to protect the southern border of Russia in cooperation with the armed forces of Armenia.

In Belarus, there is a radiolocation station in Hancevichi (near Baranovichi) that monitors outer space in the western direction, as part of the Russian system of early warning against missile attacks, and a centre to communicate with nuclear submarines in Vileyka (Minsk province). Both bases, leased for free, host about 1,450 Russian soldiers.

Three Russian military facilities are located in Kazakhstan. The most important is the Sary Shagan test range, where mainly missiles are tested (fired from Kapustin Yar, a rocket launch and development site in Russia). The others are the 49<sup>th</sup> radar station near Balkhash Lake, another part of the Russian early warning system, and the 929<sup>th</sup> experimental aviation centre. In 2016, Russia was paying \$3 million annually for the right to use these bases.

There are four Russian military facilities in Kyrgyzstan. The most important is the 999<sup>th</sup> Kant air base, which is part of the aviation component of the CSTO rapid-response forces (KSOR). The others are: the naval testing ground at Issyk-Kul Lake, the 338<sup>th</sup> naval communications facility “Marevo”, enabling contact with ships operating in the Indian and Pacific oceans, and a seismic control point allowing the detection of nuclear tests carried out by other countries. Russia annually pays Kyrgyzstan \$4.5 million for the lease of the Issyk-Kul training ground and communications centre. In total, about 500 Russian military personnel are stationed in Kyrgyzstan.

In Tajikistan is the 201<sup>st</sup> military base, which is also used for KSOR forces, hosting up to 9,000 soldiers (currently around 5,000). In the Pamir mountains, there is “Okno” (“Window”), a space-monitoring complex that is part of the Russian space control system.

In Abkhazia, Russia has its 7<sup>th</sup>, and in South Ossetia, its 4<sup>th</sup> units. Both belong to the Southern MD. Mechanised troops are stationed in both and each has 3,500 soldiers. In turn, two military groups are

dislocated in Transnistria. The first, numbering 400 troops, serves as a peacekeeping force. The second, numbering about 1,100 troops, forms the Operational Group of Russian Forces. In annexed Crimea, according to Ukrainian estimates from December 2019, there were 31,500 Russian troops.

Outside the territory of the former USSR, Russia has only [two military bases, both in Syria](#). One is the 720<sup>th</sup> Navy Material-Technical Support Centre in the port of Tartus, and the other is Khmeimim Air Base, developed for the needs of Russia's participation in the military operation in that country.

**Military and Political Significance.** Most of the bases in the post-Soviet space contain key installations related to the Russian nuclear arsenal. Thus, they are fundamental to the credibility of Russia's deterrence potential and directly translate into the ability to defend its territory.

Russia uses its military presence in Central Asia to maintain military cooperation with those countries, conduct regular exercises with them, and improve the operational capabilities of the CSTO forces. Thus, it protects this region and its territory against real and potential threats (terrorism, organised crime), originating mainly from Afghanistan. It is also an element of informal competition with China for influence in the region.

With the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the threat to Tajikistan from Afghanistan, the Russian military presence is crucial for the Armenian and Tajik authorities. Russia uses this to influence them and maintain a favourable political and military situation in those countries.

To maintain military control over Belarus, [whose authorities do not want an increase in the number of Russian military facilities](#) on their territory, Russia uses the [Regional Forces Group](#) (created by the armed forces of the Russian Western Military District and the Belarusian army) and an agreement on joint protection of the airspace of the Union State of Russia and Belarus.

In turn, bases located in the separatist territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, as well as the military component deployed to Crimea and Donbas, are the main tool of influence over Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The Russian military presence is key to maintaining the status quo of frozen conflicts in these countries. It makes them unable to regain control of their entire territory and causes economic losses, delayed reforms, and social conflicts. Moreover, in the face of the constant threat, Georgia and Ukraine must maintain a high level of expenditure on their armed forces and keep them in constant, increased combat readiness. All this prevents them from making progress in Euro-Atlantic integration, a goal of Russia's, which is seeking to stop NATO and EU enlargement.

At the same time, the bases in Syria allow it to participate in military operations in that country. They also enable Russia to increase military control over the Mediterranean (and especially its [eastern basin](#)) as well as military cooperation with Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Iran. Officially, the presence of Russian troops in this country is also intended to reduce the terrorist threat from radical Islamists. It also enables Russia to influence both Syrian internal policy and the activities of international actors, including Western European countries and the U.S., engaged in stabilising Syria.

**Conclusions and Perspectives.** Regardless of the financial difficulties caused by the [crises on the oil market](#) and [COVID-19 pandemic](#), Russia will maintain a network of military bases and facilities outside the country. This serves not only to strengthen its own security but also to limit the possibilities of cooperation of most Eastern European countries with the EU and NATO. Although in terms of the number and size of military bases and facilities abroad, Russia cannot match the potential of the strongest NATO country, the U.S., which has about 800 bases in 70 countries, Russia's bases are an important element of its concept of maintaining its sphere of influence, which it includes almost the whole area of the former USSR. In future, Russia will try to locate new facilities of this type in key regions for U.S. political and security interests to obtain additional political influence on American foreign policy, as it did in Syria.

The obstacles will be the financial limitations and lack of key equipment, including ships and parts needed to service them. Nevertheless, in the next few years, Russia will strive to establish at least one new base. Its priority will be to locate it in the Mediterranean, specifically in Egypt, with which, however, talks on the issue conducted since 2016 have not yielded results, or in [Libya](#), which was to be the subject of an agreement between the Russian authorities and Gen. Khalifa Haftar, who aspired to rule this country.

Russia's existing base network, especially in Syria and Crimea, is a challenge for NATO. It may allow Russia to potentially obstruct the Alliance's maritime exercises and operations, as well as future stabilisation and peace operations. The growing Russian potential in the southern strategic direction must be increasingly considered in NATO's operational and defence planning.